

The Impact of US Withdrawal from Middle East on Turkish Foreign Policy in the Region

Amerika'nın Orta Doğu'dan Çekilmesinin Türkiye'nin Orta Doğu Politikası Üzerindeki Etkisi

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Abstract

The Doha Agreement signed between US and Taliban can be seen as a beginning of the decreasing US influence in Middle East. This evolving landscape is especially important for Türkiye as a pivotal regional power. Although Türkiye's relations with the region have been unstable, the decreasing role of US in Middle East creates opportunities for Turkish diplomacy to pursue its regional leadership. This article explores its adaptation to shifting dynamics and argues that Türkiye's focus shifted from regional military operations to country-specific diplomacy. US influence on Türkiye's foreign policy remains at the same level but redirected towards the Aegean Sea.

Keywords: Türkiye's Foreign Policy, Middle East, Regional Diplomacy, US Withdrawal, Doha Agreement

Öz

ABD ve Taliban arasında imzalanan Doha Anlaşması ABD'nin Ortadoğu'daki azalan etkisinin başlangıcı olarak görülebilmektedir. Bu gelişme kritik bir bölgesel güç olarak Türkiye için de özellikle önemlidir. Türkiye'nin bölgeyle olan tarihsel ilişkileri oldukça istikrarsız olsa da ABD'nin Ortadoğu'daki rolünün azalması, Türk diplomasisinin bölgesel liderlik rolünü sürdürmesi için fırsatlar yaratabilir. Bu makale, Türkiye'nin bölgedeki değişen dinamiklere adaptasyonunu incelemekte ve Türkiye'nin bu süreçte odağını bölgesel askeri operasyonlardan ülke bazlı diplomasiye kaydırıldığını savunmaktadır. ABD'nin ise Türkiye'nin dış politikası üzerindeki etkisinin aynı seviyede kalmaya devam ettiği ancak odağını Ege Denizi ve uluslararası organizasyonlara kaydırıldığı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Dış Politikası, Orta Doğu, Bölgesel Diplomasi, Amerikan Çekilmesi, Doha Anlaşması

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Introduction

With the Doha Agreement signed between the US and Taliban in February 2020, the US's pivotal role in the Middle East (ME) has started to decrease gradually. In fact, while many scholars started to see this transition as a partial withdrawal of US forces in the region, countries started to reconsider their ME strategies without the dominant US existence. While it is still debatable among scholars whether US will actually withdraw from the region or how we should understand this decrease of US' military investments, it is clear that the dynamics are changing, and countries should adopt their policies based on the new conditions in order to maintain their power. In fact, in the wake of the US's withdrawal from the region, Türkiye has strengthened its role as a pivotal player. Although Türkiye's relations with ME have been unstable and challenging throughout the history, the new conjuncture with the withdrawal of US might create a power vacuum for the Turkish diplomacy to further accelerate its desire of being the regional leader as it also celebrates its 100th anniversary of the founding of the Republic and seeks a new vision of foreign policy. Understanding the changes in Turkish foreign policy in ME requires a deeper analysis within the current conjuncture. This article will delve into Türkiye's changing foreign policy in ME after the US withdrawal from the region. As there is still no agreed definition of withdrawal, the essay will only cover the most classical examples of US intervention to ME, i.e. Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, the withdrawal of US from the region will refer to the decrease of US military investment and presence in these countries although it should be noted that many scholars still agree that a full withdrawal is not expected. This article argues that with the withdrawal of US from ME, Türkiye started to focus more on diplomacy with a more separate country dynamics in mind rather than regional-oriented military operations. One potential reason for this is the lack of an efficient regional and transnational institution in the region. In other words, the only organization that has some potential of efficiency, i.e. the Arab Union, is not offering any influential potential. Regional oriented diplomacy might not be an efficient strategy. Therefore, Türkiye's goal of pursuing a more country-oriented diplomacy is an understandable choice. However, US's influence over the general foreign policy of Türkiye remains at the same level as the political influence of US over Türkiye has just geographically shifted from ME to the Aegean Sea and to the field of international organizations.

Withdrawal of US From Middle East

Analyzing the US withdrawal from the ME cannot be fully covered without adequate background information of US intervention. If one would like to summarize the relations of US with the region, the following referring phrases by Wechsler would be useful; The US is an old state with a short memory, whereas Gulf states are young states with longer memories (2019). Contrary to the common belief among people, US's existence in the region started well before the September 11 attacks. In fact, the conflicts in the ME were already recognized as a security threat since the Second World War (WW2) and this recognition could remained consistent throughout the different administrations from Carter to Biden (Wechsler, 2019). Yet, the degree and the perception of the threat itself changed after the September 11 attacks, organized by Al-Qaeda. Despite the consistency of the threat perception, the perceived enemies have been changing. The scholars mostly

agree on the two reasons of US involvement in the region after WW2 until 2001; US's concern regarding the global energy production security and the growing support to communism with the potential of Soviets to be dominant in the region. Since the Carter Doctrine in 1980, the US justified itself to intervene the Gulf in the name of protecting the Arabian oil, and the protection of the states from the communist dreams. At the State of the Union in 1980, Carter targeted Soviets' "radical and an aggressive new step" by using military against a "defenseless nation" of Afghanistan, which he argued, possess "the most serious threat to the peace since WW2" (Carter, 1980). It is clear that whether it's a direct or indirect influence, the US always kept the ideological fight in consideration and promote the liberal international order to shape the region. Yet, the September attacks showed that US also needs to protect its own borders. For the first time, a threat from far away could harm its civil people and make administrators notice that a more effective strategy was needed. That's when the commonly known US intervention into the region started. Bush administration focused on anti-terrorism warfare and nation building in the region and the main targets were Al-Qaeda and Taliban. In fact, Bush's demand from Taliban to extradite the Al-Qaeda leader was rejected, and it led to the declaration of war on terrorism in Afghanistan by the Bush administration. Among many, the Operation Enduring and Operation Anaconda were among the most influential ones and could overthrow Taliban until it gained power again in 2006 (Ayalon et al., 2022). After the overthrow, the US attitude shifted from warfare to nation building. The Bush era could successfully but temporarily overthrow Taliban but what has been more important was the integration of the US personnel to the Afghan army and governance to build a nation. Bush era can be understood as shifting the war into an intelligence-based perspective. Because the war has been labeled as a global war on terrorism, the Bush administration could take a strong global support, which later allowed it to promote liberal order into the newly built governments in the region. His successor Obama shifted the war understanding from global war on terrorism to one against violent extremism. The Obama era can be seen as adding more actors to the picture and strategy of killing targeted names. In 2010 and 2011, it is estimated that 100,000 US troops were deployed to the region (Carter, 2019). It was only May 2011 that US could kill the main target of US, the Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and started to slow down sending troops and to conduct peace talks with Taliban. Although Obama were seeking to prevent terrorism from spreading in the region by addressing core issues of the unstable governance of the countries under corruption and poverty, the appearance of the Arab Spring, including the rise of Islamic states and civil wars in Yemen, Syria and Iraq, further caused the creations of more extreme groups. When Trump was elected in 2016, he highlighted his main principle, America first. The previous president's principles not to shift from the traditional understanding of US presence in ME has been challenged by Trump. In fact, he publicly stated the US presence in the region as the worst decision of their country's history and saw the war in Afghanistan as a wasted effort (The Independent Uganda, 2019). He accepted that US "totally destabilized the ME" and with the same amount of money they spent, they "could have rebuilt" their country (Schwartz, 2016). Yet, he didn't change the US perception of seeing radical Islamism as a threat to US security. He continued Obama's policy of targeted killings. Trump's characteristic attitude was about seeing all threats equally and eliminating them as a whole. Therefore, he had the same promises regarding terrorism as previous but instead of focusing only on military means,

he just unified all the means he has in his hands to damage the perceived enemy. Founding of the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center (TFTC) in 2017 together with the Gulf states can be given as example. Trump also targeted infrastructural and financial basis of Taliban and Taliban-like organizations in the region. But when the Taliban agreed on Doha Agreement, the dynamics started to look more similar to those we observe today. When Joe Biden took the office, the estimated costs of the war were 1 trillion USD as a direct expense together with 2,448 fatalities and more than 20,000 wounded (The White House, 2021). Biden believed that they did not need those troops in the region and said, he will “bring them to home” (Carter, 2019). What Biden first noticed was the decentralized nature of the threat that is spread throughout Arabian Peninsula. The withdrawal was completed in August 2021. In fact, the evacuation of the American citizens and the Afghan citizens who have helped the Americans during the war was as painful as the war itself and that tragedy had been all watched live on TV around the world.

Many scholars see US’s foreign policy on ME as a failure. Focusing on current crises rather than long term calculations or having no workable grand strategies over the region are among the reasons of such a claimed failure (Cordesman, 2020). The reasons can be further discussed among scholars. Yet, regardless of their reasons, it is clear that US’s military presence in the region is decreasing since the Doha Agreement. Declaration was referred as a “comprehensive and sustainable peace agreement” and aimed “a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire” (Joint Declaration). Also included a “timeline for the withdrawal of all US and coalition forces” (Joint Declaration, 2020, emphasis by the author). Yet, a crucial question appears here; how to understand the withdrawal? Should we limit the measurement of withdrawal only by military or should we take any other factor into account while perceiving the US’s attitude or future objectives regarding the region? This is a difficult question even for the US authorities, most of which have no clear expectation on how far the withdrawal can go. Two key aspects can be seen in the limited literature. First argues that the US is completely withdrawing from the region both in terms of physical existence and abstract geopolitical objectives. In other words, US withdraws because it is either no longer interested in the region or it does not possess any direct threat to them anymore (Yom, 2020). This argument can be further accelerated by the creation of a global leadership rivalry between US and China. It is agreed by most of the scholars in the field that US created a geopolitical concept of Indo-Pacific (compared to the pure geographical definition of Asia-Pacific) in order to create a new playground for its global political strategies. The most powerful actor in the region, i.e. China, is therefore at the focus of US’s policies in the region. To prevent any other actor to take the global leadership role, US is ready to shift its political focus geographically. In other words, together with the changes in the regional dynamics, US’s decreasing interest in ME can also be associated with its increasing interest in Indo-Pacific. This aspect emphasizes the creation of a power vacuum in the region that can be filled by other major actors like Russia, China or even Türkiye. The second covers the current dynamics of the global politics more detailly by considering local actors. It argues that US is withdrawing only materially but it will continue to sustain its presence in the region by other means, through local actors. This perception of withdrawal does not argue that US actually withdraws. On the contrary, they will just continue to possess their strategies by other means than the direct military of US Army. In other words, it may not be easy for other

major powers to be more dominant in the region than US if they fail to provide more to the states or the non-state actors than US provided.

For the purposes of this article, a nuanced approach of both arguments by arguing that the decrease of US's presence of military is the first and the most important reference of the withdrawal and that US's interest in the region decreased. However, it should not mean that we will ignore the future relationships between the US and the regional actors like the first approach tends to do. In fact, those relationships will continue to have a crucial importance for the new design of the regional dynamics and will affect how the regional and global powers will adopt their policy to these dynamics. One regional actor, whose policy was affected greatly by US policy over its direct neighboring region, stands out as Türkiye. Therefore, the next section will discuss Türkiye's ME policy over the last 10 decades to provide a background for further analysis.

Türkiye's Middle East Policy Evolution in Pre-Withdrawal Era

When analyzing the Turkish relations with ME, the history provides a turbulent timeline with a lot of downs and ups. Despite the abolition of the caliphate by Türkiye and the shares of historical heritages from the Ottoman Empire caused some discussions among Arabic and Islamic countries, the relations with ME during the early republic era under Atatürk could be seen as the golden age (Yeşilbursa, 2023). While 1950- 1970s faced declining relations expect the 5 years period between 1965-1970, between 1980 and 1990 the relations developed not just politically but also in terms of economic and military cooperation. The 1990s were the most important years for the ME as the highlighting years of problems. Within that period, as a close neighbor, Türkiye was drawn into the regional problems, and it was a start of a long journey of turbulent interactions that still continue today.

During early periods until 1950, the relations were established and developed while the border disagreements were also solved. The relations could be successfully developed with agreements. In fact, the most important development was the signing of Sadabad Pact between Türkiye, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. The similarities of the common enemies and the negative attitude against imperialism during the era both by Türkiye and other Arab countries also accelerated the enhancement of the political relations. Additionally, Türkiye could provide them a case study for a path to escape from imperialism and to protect their own sovereignty just like Türkiye could do during Misak-ı Milli era. Atatürk's special emphasizes and support on self-determination also inspired other ME countries. For İnönü, the international dynamics were more influential in shaping the policy decisions of Türkiye. The perception of Soviets as a threat on the North led Türkiye to adopt a more friendly attitude towards the ME countries to ensure the safety on the South. However, together with the WW2, the Turkish perspective adopted a more Western-oriented approach and got closer to the West while getting away from the Arabic countries. Although Türkiye first tried to follow a wait and see approach towards Israel, it recognized the Israeli state on 24th of May 1949 (Topçu, 2018; Official Gazette of Republic of Türkiye no 7171, 1949). The Petroleum crises in 1973 was another challenge. Due to the internal industrialization policy of Türkiye, the need of oil has been increased. Together with the political dynamics of the region, it caused Türkiye to design its policies towards Arabic countries with a more Western attitude (as cited by Sırım, 2018).

Especially when Türkiye became the first Muslim country to recognize Israel in 1949 and when it stayed on the same side with England on their petroleum crises with Iran, the relations with Arabic countries declined. The 1950s were a period for Türkiye to face some negative reactions towards its preference of the West over the East. During 1950s, Türkiye set up its foreign policy mostly based on the framework within a NATO understanding and with a perception of the West. In fact, some scholars argue that Türkiye was acting like a representative of NATO in the ME (Yeşilbursa, 2023). Therefore, the foreign policy of Türkiye within that period was seen as an active but also as an unsuccessful one that created more negative outcomes for Türkiye's national interest in the near future. The relations with the Western neighbors of Türkiye could be successfully developed also thanks to the Western support. However, regarding the relations with ME, the only success stands out as the Baghdad Pact with Iraq in 1955. The Baghdad Pact could also change some dynamics. Türkiye had to get closer with Arab states, which it was mainly avoiding since the establishment of the republic with the desire of being a part of the Western world. However, one should note here that this staying away policy was not an "policy of enemies" but rather a "policy of non-interest" (Serbest, 2016). Yet, the Pact cannot be said to be respected or welcomed by many Arab countries (Aydın, 2020). In fact, when General Kasim came to power in Iraq with a coup, even Iraq, as a founding member, withdrew from the Pact. With joining of US, the Pact later changed its structure and transformed into CENTO, which could only last until the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

The relief of the tension between Soviets and US in 1960s provided international dynamics and states opportunities to soften their policies and have some internal changes. Türkiye, in that sense, could save itself from the label of being the representative of the West in the region and could follow a more multidimensional foreign policy. Especially Türkiye's support to the UN Resolution 242 on Palestine allowed Arabic countries to see clear steps of Türkiye towards East. Thanks to Türkiye's concrete attempts on international era to side by Arabic countries, Arabic countries started to support the rights of the Turkish people in Cyprus for the first time. Although the internal dynamics of Türkiye created a more unstable period between sides after the 1971 Coup by Memorandum, it could not affect the relations for the long term. Türkiye played the role of a constructive player in Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and did not have any sudden shift from that. Yet, the relations with Syria and Iraq experienced turbulence. The policy of 1980s can be defined as an active, risky and dull of dilemmas due to the developments in global system and the considerations on bilateral relations. In fact, the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and the US's desire to use the military bases in Türkiye caused the strategic role of Türkiye to increase. Yet, the neutralization and balancing strategy of Türkiye on Iran-Iraq war and the increasing threat from the terrorist organization PKK were the main factors shaping Türkiye's foreign policy towards ME. During the Cold War era, Türkiye has been pulled into the problems of ME and this led the perception of security to shape the policies (Yeşilbursa, 2023). The terror problems can also be said to transform from a regional problem into an international one and affected the bilateral relations with the ME countries. When AKP came to power in Türkiye, the policy towards ME was mainly shaped by the Strategic Depth vision of the former Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. In fact, he was arguing that Türkiye should have good relations with the neighboring countries, and he supported his argument

with the historical and religious heritages Türkiye had. According to him, Türkiye lies at a unique geopolitical location that requires it to balance its historical depth with strategic depth and realize it within the geographical depth framework (Davutoğlu, 2012). Especially with the US intervention to Afghanistan and Iraq and when the US's desire to utilize the military bases in Türkiye for its operations in Iraq were rejected by the Turkish Parliament at the first voting on March 1st, the relations with US were challenged greatly and came to a point of break (Council on Foreign Relations, 2005; Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, 2003). Erdoğan's argument with the Israeli President during the DAVOS Summit in 2009 and his strong reaction was welcomed greatly both by the Turkish people and the Arab countries and increased Erdoğan's political charisma. In fact, the night Erdogan returned back to his country, there were thousands came to the airport to welcome him and even the airport subway train hours have been extended until 3.00 am in the morning to accommodate the transportation of the people from the airport (Güler, 2010). The relations with Israel worsened by Mavi Marmara attacks by Israeli government that have killed 9 crews in a Turkish board in 2010. The core problems with neighboring countries still continues. Yet, especially after 2015, Türkiye followed a broader policy that is not only focusing on the neighbors and instead enhances the relations with other ME countries that it has not paid attention before. Morocco, Libya, Yemen and Egypt are among those countries that are having better relations with Türkiye compared to most of the direct neighbors. The most important policy change has been seen in the combination of the economy with politics. In fact, Gulf countries started to be the player of the most important external investment source for Türkiye. This economic enhancement can be seen more concretely by the FDI. According to the latest data in January 2024 released by the Central Bank of Türkiye, the FDI to Türkiye from Asian continent is 63 billion USD in 2022. Türkiye's biggest political and economic partner in the ME region, Qatar, makes up the half of the continental investment by 33 billion USD by itself alone. While other non-neighboring countries like UAE records 5 billion, Kuwait 2 billion and Saudi Arabia 864 million USD; the direct neighbors in which Türkiye still had problems can make only a small contribution with Syria 5 million and Iran 90 million USD (Central Bank of Türkiye, 2024).

While countries like Syria and Israel had their own bilateral conflicts with Türkiye, i.e. terrorism activities in Syria and diplomatic crisis with Israel, the foreign policy regarding the other countries had been shaped by Türkiye's choice of either being on the Eastern or Western side throughout its history. The recent 20 years could provide a more independent approach regarding the choice of side, but it still could not prevent Türkiye to have problems with directly neighboring countries. One critical aspect to analyze the relations lies on the fact that almost since the beginning of the relations, there has been a non-regional player of US that was changing the dynamics significantly. So, the question appears that when US is so called 'withdraw' from the region, will the policy change? In what way? That is a question to be answered in the following chapter.

Changes in Turkish Middle East Policy After the Withdrawal

When the recent trends are analyzed in the Turkish foreign policy, three core changes can be analyzed as follows. First, it has been observed that the high-level focus given to Türkiye's military operations is gradually decreasing while the importance of non-military diplomatic tools has gain acceleration, signaling a shift from military to

diplomacy. Secondly, the recent historical attitude of Türkiye regarding having different perceptions for each ME country separately rather than having a whole regional understanding and policy has becoming stronger. In fact, it can be argued that compared to Türkiye's attitude towards other regions like Latin America, Africa or Europe, ME provides a more country-based policy. With the withdrawal, this trend continues with a little shift from the desire to develop relations in all fields with every country to a desire that assigns unique roles for each ME countries. Thirdly, US's role has been just changing its geographical focus on Türkiye's foreign policy. In other words, US can now influence Türkiye less in ME or in other words, they can challenge themselves under equal conditions of diplomacy now compared to the superior position of US in the region before due to its military existence. However, they have found a new region to maintain the general pressure over Türkiye with the help of Greece. Therefore, Türkiye has to adjust the new role of US in a different region for its policy.

Shift from Military to Diplomacy

In the post US withdrawal period Türkiye started to seek to focus more on diplomacy in ME with major actors rather than continuing its military presence. In fact, the most concrete demonstration of this can be seen by looking at the decrease in the military operation and presence of Türkiye in the region. Although no clear data has been shared with public, based on the open sources, the military investment of Türkiye in the region has been decreasing. Due to the lack of the official statistics, this analysis can be done based on the analysis of the released papers and speeches from officials. In fact, after the withdrawal, and especially after the formation of the new cabinet after the elections in 2023, the focus has been seen to given to military cooperation rather than conducting the direct military operations. As the most important symbol of military cooperations, the increase in the number and scope of Türkiye's recent joint military exercises can be analyzed. For neighboring regions, joint exercises with Qatar, UAE, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan can be given as examples (Anadolu Agency, 2021, 2023b, 2024b; Ministry of Defense of Republic of Türkiye, 2021, 2024a, 2024b). Additionally, the recent acceleration of the Turkish national defense systems, including but not limited to the national military aircrafts, air defense systems or national military cruises, opened a new path for Türkiye in two ways. First, it could reduce its dependence on the major actor of US in the military equipment market worldwide. In fact, Türkiye's share of global arms exports has risen from 0.7% between 2014-2018 to 1.6% between 2019-2023 (Stockholm International Peace Research institute, 2024). This is important for us to analyze Türkiye's attitude and policy change to the region after the withdrawal because back then, Türkiye had to calculate potential military sanctions that might come from US if they have done anything in conflict with them. Now, both with its own potential national military with reduced US dependence in this field and with the physical withdrawal of US from the region, Türkiye could set up a more independent military policy. Secondly, developing its own military market also allowed Türkiye to access new markets and cooperation with relatively small or less developed countries, mainly from ME and Africa. Between 2019 and 2023, the biggest three importers of Turkish arms have been UAE with 15% of exports followed by Qatar with 14% and Pakistan with 11% (Stockholm International Peace Research institute, 2024). With this the potential of creating a bigger regional power by bringing small countries together against the US

existence in the region showed itself. These allowed them to focus on military cooperation rather than military operations. Of course, Türkiye's military production is still on its premature stages, but it already started to have an influence on its policy towards the region. With the withdrawal of US, this became even more visible.

Besides the shift from military operations to cooperation, the shift from military to diplomacy perception also stand out. Türkiye started to consider the option of solving the problems through diplomacy rather than military even more due to the lack of such a dominant power of US on the table. In fact, without the existence of the US, and whether it's because of its strategy or its long historical experience, Türkiye appears as the strongest regional actor on the ME policy. The withdrawal of US just highlighted this.

The most concrete demonstration of this shift can be seen by looking at the recent relations of Türkiye with Iraq, which had problematic history. Türkiye has been conducting military operations in North of Iraq for a long time now. Although still continues, the focus and the number of operations has been gradually decreasing as the cooperation with Iraqi government increases. At first, two governments started to share the burden of such operations. But when the slight changes in the post-withdrawal era are analyzed detailly, gradual shift from military cooperation to diplomacy gains more power. In fact, the most recent official meeting between the foreign affairs ministers of Türkiye and Iraq highlighted the cooperation between two countries with a new vision for sustainable and long relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Türkiye, 2024a). In fact, Development Pathway Project (Kalkınma Yolu Projesi) can be given as a very concrete example of the shift and a good example to analyze how military cooperation turns into an infrastructural cooperation for long term stability. With Erdoğan's visit to Iraq after 13 years, the agreements of the project have been signed (BBC Türkçe, 2024). The Project aims to connect a long line from Iraq to London through railways and highways and expected to be concluded by 2030.

Although almost all the official statements from authorities focused on the economic benefits of the project, the Development Pathway Project also allows us to analyze the change of Türkiye's policy towards the terrorism activities on the Eastern Turkish border. Instead of having direct military operations, by creating an economic trade zone in the region, Türkiye might seek to put Iraqi government under the responsibility to maintain stability and peace in every aspect in the region because at the end of the day, the corridor will create a win-win cooperation for both countries, making both countries responsible to protect the order in the part of the corridor within their own territory. This can be seen as a smart move from Turkish government to share the burden of the costs of fighting with terrorism while also gaining economic benefits. It also highlights that Türkiye started to utilize its military knowledge on the diplomacy table in the post US withdrawal era.

But with this shift, the question of "Who will manage this shift from military operations to diplomatic negotiations?" appears. And we have seen that according to Erdoğan, the answer should be someone who can balance military and diplomacy together.

When the new cabinet of Erdoğan was announced in mid-2023, the appointment of the former Head of National Intelligence Agency (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı- MİT), Hakan Fidan, to the office of Minister of Foreign Affairs grabbed the attention of many. He has been known for his deep knowledge on terrorism and intelligence agency operations

thanks to his experience under MİT over 20 years, 13 years as being the Head. In fact, over the recent decades, most of MİT's counterterror operations took part either on the border with ME countries or in Syria and Iraq specifically, which gives the current Minister Fidan an immense knowledge about the region's dynamics and an advantage to be used not on the operational battlefield but on the diplomatic roundtable. In fact, after appointed as minister, in an interview he had with a Turkish TV, he clearly stated that he was traveling to many countries but mentions Iraq specifically as frequently visited in a silent way (CNN Türk, 2024). During his early career, in an interview, he stated that Türkiye focused too much on the domestic intelligence and depended on NATO for the foreign intelligence (CNN Türk, 2024). Therefore, it can be argued that throughout his 13 years as the head of the agency, he conducted reforms on accessing the foreign intelligence more independently and gained a valuable insight on the region.

The fact that the former Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has been approved by many politicians and the Turkish people always seen him as a great successful Minister. Therefore, it was an unexpected change when Fidan was appointed to replace him. In that sense, although there was not any urgent need of any change, Erdoğan wanted to see a new foreign policy initiative under a new figure of Fidan. This new foreign policy is expected to be shaped mainly by choosing diplomacy over military but protecting the advantageous position on the diplomatic table at the same time thanks to their military experience. In other words, Çavuşoğlu was already increasing the diplomatic attempts during the recent years and was preparing the ground for his successor. Yet, with the Fidan, it also appeared that it will not be only a diplomatic knowledge and experience that will be used in on the negotiations but also with the military expertise Fidan has. One can argue that Fidan was already an important part of most of the delegations with Erdoğan during official visits abroad. In his own words, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was already somewhere he knew detailly (CNN Türk, 2024). Yet, with his civil title now, he is expected to reflect his military knowledge to negotiations and foreign policy of Türkiye more by using the tools of diplomacy. This is especially important for Türkiye's upcoming foreign policy on ME due to his specialized experience on the region. In other words, he might continue to rely on his advisors and his ministry's official servants for other regions, but he has well enough knowledge not to just rely on other people in the ministry to make any decision regarding ME. Because during his intelligence years, his biggest success was to monopolize the intelligence in his hands especially on counter-terror activities that mostly took part in ME.

Lastly, with the gradual military withdrawal of US from ME, it can be argued that US is also expected to utilize diplomacy over military in the region. Therefore, this shift from military to diplomacy in ministry can be seen as a parallel movement from the Turkish perspective. Assuming that US will also need to utilize diplomacy means more than the military, Türkiye's movement to assign the former head of intelligence to the MFA was a smart choice to ensure Türkiye will both play the game according to the new dynamics as well as maintaining its military-based superior information and regional power on the diplomacy table. In fact, number of diplomacy summits held in Türkiye increases. As a brand event that was promoted by Çavuşoğlu, Antalya Diplomacy Forum plays the most significant and global role within this regard. Although there have always been diplomatic events in Türkiye, the Antalya Diplomacy Forum is the most global and widely

recognized one with hundreds of country leaders and diplomats directly attend to discuss the global issues. In fact, in 2022, more than 3.000 representatives, 19 of which are head of states with 80 ministers and 19 representatives of international organizations, from 75 country attended the summit (Anadolu Agency, 2024a). Another shifting towards diplomacy attempt of Türkiye has been made between Russia and Ukraine. In fact, Türkiye stands out as the most neutral country that can have a conversation with both and could successfully convinced them to sit on the same diplomacy table set up in İstanbul. The attempt was successful and the potential global crises for the increase of wheat prices could be prevented thanks to Türkiye's efforts. Yet, it should be noted here that for the potential attempts regarding ME, Türkiye's diplomacy attempts might need some more experience in the region. In fact, US's withdrawal makes the region more open to diplomacy but not all countries in the region can provide a neutral stance to conduct a successful diplomacy. To demonstrate it with a recent example, every country states that Palestinian-Israeli conflict should be immediately solved, and ceasefire should be agreed. Yet, no possible agreement could be done so far. Although US withdrew from the region, it still holds some control over the use of Israel in the region. Therefore, from Turkish side, a relative success of Russia-Ukraine mediating diplomacy cannot be expected regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict due to the diplomatic history Türkiye had with Israel before.

Therefore, US withdrawal from ME also allowed Turkish authorities to see the opportunity to seek diplomacy rather than the military means. Although Türkiye already started to utilize diplomatic means, the government is still aware that they will not be equally successful with all the countries in the region. In other words, they tend to utilize different diplomatic means and tools for each regional country separately, which leads us to the next discussion.

Shift from Regional to Country Level of Foreign Policy

As mentioned in the previous section regarding Türkiye's ME policy in the last century, Türkiye's bilateral relations with ME countries vary significantly due to various factors. Historical ties, for instance, contribute to Türkiye's relatively warm relations with Iraq and Syria, rooted in shared Ottoman history. Yet, the terrorism-related problems are also strong enough to prevent any visible bilateral development. Economic interests drive Türkiye's extensive trade and investment partnerships with Gulf countries like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Conversely, ideological differences, notably Türkiye's secularism versus the religious conservatism of some ME nations, strain relations, as seen in Türkiye's strained ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE over regional policy divergences. Moreover, geopolitical dynamics influence Türkiye's relations, evident in its involvement in the Syrian civil war. Türkiye's cooperation with Qatar during the blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt underscores geopolitical alignments, with Türkiye providing military support and economic aid to Qatar amid the crisis.

Despite occasional tensions, Türkiye tries maintaining pragmatic ties with regional countries, reflecting its efforts to navigate regional dynamics and pursue its interests. Yet, ME countries are perceived differently as they also have very different dynamics among each other. This leads Türkiye to follow a more country-based policy in the region rather

than having a general ME perception as it normally does for other regions of the world. In other words, normally, Turkish foreign policy can be divided into several categories based on the regions, like Asian, Latin American or European Policy. In fact, with the anniversary of the 100th year of the founding of the Turkish Republic, a new political initiative has been announced by President Erdoğan, covering many areas from economy to space market, from foreign policy to international organizations. The Foreign Policy in the Century of Türkiye, released by MFA has been the guiding source highlighting the core principles of Türkiye's foreign policy in the new era. But when analyzed, it also highlighted the categorization and the perception of the Turkish authorities regarding the countries worldwide. In the document, there has been only 8 countries' names clearly stated as a name of a separate chapter and 5 of them are directly ME countries. All the other countries have been put under specific regional categories based on their geographical location. To demonstrate better following list is the exact contents stated on the document (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024b);

- East Mediterranean and Aegean
- Cyprus
- Greece
- European Union
- European Countries
- Russian Federation
- Russia-Ukraine War
- Balkans
- North America
- Syria
- Iraq
- Iran
- Israel-Palestine
- Gulf Countries
- North Africa
- South Caucasian
- Central Asia
- South Asia
- Asia-Pacific
- Africa
- Latin America- Caribbean
- (non-geographical other headlines regarding the policy)

As seen above, many countries are put under categories usually based on their locations. Even the major powers like US or China have not been given a separate chapter. Yet, most of the ME countries like Syria, Iraq, Iran, Israel etc. are all detailly explained under different sections. Because for the ME, Türkiye's policy towards each regional country differs too much that they cannot be put into a one unified clear category of being ME. Here it should be noted that one crucial factor shaping today's Türkiye's understanding is mainly national security, especially borders.

Here, to prevent any misunderstanding, two aspects should be noted from the beginning. Firstly, referring as general policy towards regions does not mean that Türkiye does not take specific characteristics into account when deciding on the policy towards it. Yet, the degree of the shift and differences of policies towards countries in non-ME regions are so small that the differences between the policies towards ME countries stands out as an extreme difference. To demonstrate this argument with real life examples, one can barely see a clear-cut differences among policies and relations of Türkiye towards, for instance, France and Germany. Both follows a specific path and differs slightly based on the countries' dynamics. If one will counter argue this and assume it's because they are both EU countries so it's related to EU's general framework, then the example of Africa can also be given. Türkiye's policy towards different African countries' also do not differ at a great level. Yet, for ME, there are both countries with close relations as well as those that Türkiye even had military conflict. Secondly, and just as the first aspect, arguing that Türkiye considers ME countries separately rather than regionally does not ignore regional balancing tactics, but even highlights this fact. Therefore, the following sections will argue there is a level difference between regional perceptions of Türkiye but will not argue that it doesn't have either regional or individual perception at all.

Therefore, Türkiye's bilateral relations with ME countries are shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies as well as economic interests, ideological differences, cultural affinities, national security understandings and geopolitical dynamics and it leads us to perceive this policy as a more multifaceted one. It led Türkiye to pursue a more independent policy towards each country separately rather than having a general policy for the region and then shaping bilateral based on that general policy.

Although it is not expected to see a complete change in this aspect of the policy, there can be observed a change regarding sub-categorizing the regional countries based on the specialization or the purpose of the diplomatic attempts. Rather than a complete ME policy, it might be expected from Türkiye to create specific objectives for each country in the region. Contrary to other policies that are regional based, this type of policy does not mean that the whole picture will provide every sub-aspect like economic cooperation, political power balancing or energy security in the region. On the contrary, it may provide great opportunities to develop economic cooperation with the region while having no actor to improve energy security issues for instance. To demonstrate more clearly; Qatar turned out to be an economic partner of Türkiye in the region, while enhancing political relations with them may not bring much benefit compared to other regional actors. Therefore, Türkiye may put Qatar under the sub-category of economic cooperation in the region while it may not focus too much on developing political relations with Qatar but focus to develop with UAE. For national security concerns, it might turn to Iraq to ensure the border security, but they might expect to improve economic relations with them.

As mentioned above, Türkiye is in a difficult geographical region that has both advantages and disadvantages signaling the importance of a detailed geopolitical calculation for the foreign policy. The fact that these chains of dynamics are much complex in ME, makes the ME policy much important and dangerous at the same time. In these situations, Türkiye has witnessed a shift from regional to country level policy. But especially after the withdrawal of US, this country-based politics has also been sub-

categorized based on the specific advantages or disadvantages countries have rather than choosing a country to improve relations in every area.

Changing position of US in Turkish Foreign Policy

Although there has been no clear definition of withdrawal of US from the region, one can clearly argue that the regional countries, including Türkiye, are now freer to decide their policies without taking the direct influence of US. Or to put it in another way, US will now be able to sit on the same table of diplomacy with other actors take part in the region contrary to its prior position of almost being an internal actor to conduct diplomacy. With the case of Türkiye specifically, Türkiye had to calculate which actors it needs to contact, in which way, with what perception and then with which US perception more detailly. But now with the withdrawal Türkiye starts to consider US's influence less for its ME policy but more for its Aegean Sea and international organizations diplomacy.

Although one can easily argue that US's decreasing direct role in ME will also automatically decrease the US pressure over the general foreign policy of Türkiye, that is not the case. In other words, although the US withdrawal from ME and it significantly decreased the scope of their direct imposed threats in the region over the Turkish policy, there still exist an important region that carries the potential of being the second ME case: the Aegean Sea. In fact, US started to support Greece, i.e. the problematic neighbor of Türkiye, both politically and most importantly militarily in the recent years. One can easily argue that this fact has nothing to do with the US withdrawal from ME and Turkish foreign policy of the region. Yet, the extreme coincidental timing of this increased support, followed by the recent developments in international diplomacy signals some parallelism regarding the effects of the developments of ME over Aegean Sea policy of both Türkiye and US. For one to understand the use of Aegean Sea by US over Turkish foreign policy, it is also necessary to briefly underline the main dynamics and problems regarding the bilateral relations between the two neighbors of Türkiye and Greece.

The longstanding tensions between Türkiye and Greece have shown itself mostly in political and military aspects and have been subject to a wide scholarly analysis in the literature. The territorial sovereignty and the marine boundaries are the most critical sources of conflict between the two. Scholars have underlined the main concepts of historical grievances, nationalist sentiments and competing claims to sovereignty as the main topic on the diplomacy table (Turan, 2018; Triantaphyllou, 2006). The Cyprus issue is yet another source of tension between neighbors which remains unresolved despite decades of diplomatic efforts and international mediation. The division of Cyprus into Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities, along with the presence of Greek and Turkish military forces on the island, has fueled mistrust and animosity between Ankara and Athens. Scholars have examined the complex dynamics surrounding the Cyprus problem and its implications to analyze the Greek-Turkish relations (Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Theophanous, 2017). Furthermore, the broader geopolitical context in the Eastern Mediterranean, including competition over energy resources, regional power dynamics, and involvement of external actors, has exacerbated political and military tensions (Grigoriadis, 2020; Sözen, 2019). The militarization of the islands of Greece in the region against the international agreements signed before by both is perceived as a direct military threat by Türkiye. In fact the agreements of 1913 Treaty of London, 1914 Decision of Six

Powers, 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty, 1936 Montreux Convention and 1947 Paris Peace Treaty are all the legitimate sources with both countries' approval to demilitarize the islands. Even the fact that both Türkiye and Greece are NATO members are not seeming enough to overcome these turbulent relations between them.

With this brief overview of multifaceted bilateral relations, those who are familiar to US's political strategy to counter-use the conflicting countries towards each other in the regions they want to control, can start to relate the topic to US. Especially after US decided to abandon, or at least decreased the importance of, its ME card on the table with Türkiye, it needed another player to balance the situation on its policy towards Türkiye. Greece in that sense, appears as a great case for US to counterbalance the removal of US pressure over Turkish foreign policy regarding ME and ensuring the maintenance of the influence over the general Turkish foreign policy by using Aegean region through Greece. This aspect does not only depend on a brief historical analysis of the tensions but also supported by very recent political moves of both countries on the diplomacy table. According to the MFA of Türkiye, "the demilitarization of Eastern Aegean islands was due to the overriding importance of these islands for Türkiye's security.....despite the protests of Türkiye, Greece has been violating the status of the Eastern Aegean Islands by militarizing them.....These illegal acts of Greece have increased considerably over the last years" (n.d.). In fact, after the withdrawal of US from ME, there has been a sharp increase on the militarization of the Greek islands obviously by American the army. Especially with Greek Parliament approving the Greek - American Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA) on May 13, 2022, US has gained access to three more military base in Greek islands. Yet many scholars criticize these actions of Greece and argues that by Greece allowing the high-level access of US to the region, it will lead US into bigger problems in which it may face either with Russia or China in the long run. In fact, According to Erkan, US is inclining more towards Greece and that is seen much more under the Biden Administration (Anadolu Agency, 2022). In fact, as of recent situation, US has 9 bases in Greek islands and regularly conducts relevant diplomacy with the Greek parliament to request more. One crucial recent example was the discussion of F-16 planes that Türkiye wanted from US and even became part of the production. Although Türkiye was also among the producers of these planes and all the required payment has been done to US, the US Congress had been creating excuses and did not approve the decision to send them to Türkiye for years. Obviously, the reaction from the Turkish government was requesting the removal of such a barrier. President Erdogan even stated that US is supposed to send the planes to Türkiye as it has already completed the payment; yet, if they don't send them, let Türkiye take the payment back and it can find better alternatives to purchase (referring to the Russian made SU-35 and SU-57). Despite the diplomatic attempts, US Congress did not approve the sending of the F-16s to Türkiye until a very concrete and recent development has been seen, the approval of the Sweden and Finland into NATO by the Turkish government. The use of international organization diplomacy of US over Turkish foreign policy will be mentioned more detailly in the next paragraph but what makes it related to our discussion of the use of Greece by US is the following fact. Upon the request of Türkiye officially submitted on October 2021, US Congress approved the sending of 40 F-16s together with 79 block modernization kit in exchange of 23 billion USD on January 2024; whereas; it also approved the sending of 40 F-35s together with some additional systems to Greece in exchange of only 8.6 billion

USD upon their request submitted in June 2022 (Savunma Sanayi ST, 2024). This fact provides us three key aspects. Firstly, Greece had been prioritized over Türkiye as the request submission was much earlier for Türkiye, but they were both approved the same day. Secondly, the access to more advanced US technology has been enabled for Greece with a lower price compared to what was offered to Türkiye. Thirdly, US Congress could approve the agreement only after the officially signed original document to approve Sweden's controversial membership application to NATO by Turkish Parliament and President Erdogan has been physically send to the US Government and that US could ensure their membership. Therefore, US-Greece relations in the post-withdrawal period provides us several concrete and non-coincidental examples to analyze the use of the Aegean Region as the second ME by US towards Türkiye's general foreign policy. Yet, the last example regarding the Sweden and Finland's NATO membership leads us to the next discussion of US's second means of influencing Turkish foreign policy in the post-withdrawal era.

Especially with the increasing tension in Eastern Europe due to the Russia-Ukraine crises, Finland and Sweden started to feel the need of a secure international shelter in case of the spread of the crises on their border. Therefore, they both submitted their membership applications to NATO with a strong support of the leading NATO member of US. It was comparatively smoother for Finland to make all NATO members approve their membership application. However, as for Sweden, they had to conduct more diplomatic relations specifically with two important NATO members of Türkiye and Hungary. As for Türkiye, both President Erdogan and other officials from the government clearly stated that they will not approve any country that was behaving in conflict with Türkiye's security issues of terror-related activities in Europe to be a NATO member (Anadolu Agency, 2023a). What they were referring mainly was the fact that the recent years have witnessed a strong support to PKK, which is a terrorist organization according to Türkiye, by Sweden. In other words, Türkiye's reservations regarding Sweden's NATO membership were greatly influenced by Sweden's stance on issues related to terrorism, particularly its approach to the PKK. The PKK, designated as a terrorist organization by Türkiye, has conducted numerous attacks within Türkiye and has been engaged in a long-standing insurgency against the Turkish state. Therefore, Sweden's perceived leniency towards the PKK, including its tolerance of PKK sympathizers and its hosting of Kurdish separatist organizations, has been a source of contention between Ankara and Stockholm. In addition, despite numerous attempts by Ankara from Stockholm, Sweden was always hesitant to stay loyal to the extradition of the offenders and did not show the same sensitivity with Türkiye. When Sweden's membership application required Türkiye's approval, Türkiye could use this card to claim back its terror related requests from the past until the US involved in the picture and used the F-16 card that was mentioned above as a counter balancing factor to convince Türkiye to approve the membership application. US tried to pressure Turkish authorities to approve the Sweden membership before the NATO Summit in July 2023 despite the fact Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan stated that they do not approve the use of time as a pressure mean (Yeni Şafak, 2023). Yet, in every potential opportunity, the US officials encouraged Turkish authorities to support Sweden's membership application thanks to the card of F-16 in their hands (The Guardian, 2023). Therefore, US also started to increase its Aegean and NATO diplomacy pressure over Türkiye while decreasing ME pressure in the post-withdrawal period.

Conclusion

With the Doha agreement countries started to make policy adjustments to their foreign policies in order to catch up the latest developments in the global politics regarding the so-called withdrawal of the US from ME. There has been no agreed definition of withdrawal of US from the region among scholars and a full withdrawal does not seem so realistic. Türkiye's relations with the region, one the other hand, has always been so unstable.

This article analyzed the foreign policy changes of Türkiye in the post US-withdrawal era. It argued that three core main policy changes had been observed. Firstly, Türkiye's policies pay more attention to diplomatic attempts and strengthening the economic relations with the regional powers rather than making more investment to the military presence. Diplomatic efforts, decreasing interest in military operations, Development Path Project and new Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan are all among more diplomatic attempts from Türkiye. Assuming that US also prioritizes diplomatic means over military at the same table with Türkiye, it can be said that Türkiye will both play the game according to the new dynamics US set in the region as well as maintaining its military-based superior information and regional power on the diplomacy table. Secondly, Turkish authorities considers the policies based on the countries separately rather than taking the whole region as a one player. This has been an important and distinctive feature of Türkiye's relationships with ME compared to its relations with other regions. Especially after the US withdrawal, this country-based policy attitude also started to be shaped around policy objectives. For instance, Qatar's economic cooperation with Türkiye puts the country under economic objectives, while improving relations with UAE could be put under direct political benefits. Lastly, it has been observed that although the US influence on Türkiye's policy in ME is expected to decline due to its reduced existence in the region, its presence in general foreign policy of Türkiye will continue to exist. The F-16 deal between US-Türkiye and US's policy to pressure Türkiye to approve the membership of Sweden into NATO were provided as case studies to observe the reflection of such policy and dominance shift of US over the general foreign policy designing of Türkiye.

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