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Türkiye's National Security and the Middle East

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Abstract

This study analyzes the evolution of the practices and policies of national security in Türkiye. It examines how the understanding of national security in Türkiye has evolved since its establishment with a particular focus on the place of the Middle East. The study first reviews existing definitions and scholarly work on national security. Second, it analyzes the evolution of national security conceptions by focusing on how policymakers understand and implement this concept. To achieve this, it identifies local and global political events that have influenced the way national security is understood and practiced in Türkiye. The paper then narrows its focus to trace the construction of national security understanding over the past decade, highlighting its transformation following conflicts in the Middle East. It concludes that after the uprisings in the MENA, as conflicts in the region intensified, the Turkish government began redefining the state's national security framework in relation to geographies beyond its borders, shaping the state's security narrative accordingly.

Keywords: National Security, Türkiye, Security Studies, Cold War, Arap Uprisings, Middle East

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Türkiye'nin Ulusal Güvenliği ve Orta Doğu

Öz

Bu çalışma Türkiye'deki ulusal güvenlik uygulama ve politikalarının gelişimini analiz etmektedir. Kuruluşundan bu yana Türkiye'de ulusal güvenlik anlayışının nasıl geliştiğini Orta Doğu bölgesinin yeri ve önemine odaklanarak araştırmaktadır. Çalışmada öncelikle ulusal güvenlik kavramına ilişkin mevcut tanımlar ve çalışmalar gözden geçirilmektedir. İkinci olarak, politika yapıcıların bu kavramı nasıl anladığı ve uyguladığına odaklanarak ulusal güvenlik anlayışlarının evrimi analiz edilmektedir. Bunu yapmak için, Türkiye'de ulusal güvenliğin anlaşılmasını ve uygulanmasını etkileyen yerel ve küresel siyasi olayları tanımlamaktadır. Daha sonra makale, Orta Doğu ve Kuzey Afrika'daki ayaklanma ve iç savaşlar sonrasında geçirdiği dönüşümü görmek için son on yılda ulusal güvenlik anlayışının dönüşümünü izini sürmek üzere odağını daraltmaktadır. Arap Ayaklanmaları sonrasında bölgedeki çatışmalar yoğunlaştıkça Türk hükümetinin, devletin ulusal güvenlik tanımını kendi sınırları dışındaki bu coğrafyalara da referansla genişletmeye ve devletin güvenliğine ilişkin söylemi buna göre şekillendirmeye başladığı sonucuna varılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ulusal Güvenlik, Türkiye, Güvenlik Çalışmaları, Soğuk Savaş, Arap Ayaklanmaları, Orta Doğu.

1. Introduction

The national security understandings and policies of the states are influenced and transformed by domestic, regional and global changes in a historical process. Türkiye's national security policies have also been shaped by changing considerations of security and threat, and transformed significantly especially in the Cold War period. This study analyzes changes in the national security policies of Türkiye with a particular focus on the place and significance of the Middle East in these understandings and strategies. It aims to contribute to the existing literature on Türkiye's security policies in two ways. First, it provides a comprehensive historical analysis of Türkiye's national security transformation, offering a structured overview of its evolution from the establishment period to the present day. Second, it examines a significant shift in Türkiye's Middle East policy, a development that remains highly relevant in contemporary politics. By analyzing these aspects, the study enhances our understanding of how Türkiye's security policies have adapted to changes in regional and global politics.

The article argues that the significance of the Middle East in Türkiye's security and foreign policy started to increase in the post-Cold War period. However, following the Arab Uprisings, the place of the region in Türkiye's national security policies has further increased in a way that was not experienced before. The uprisings and civil wars in the region have carried Türkiye's understanding of national security beyond its borders, making the conception of national security more intertwined with regional developments. This transformation was not merely a strategic reaction to the crises and emerging threats, but also a reflection of the Turkish government's vision of becoming a regional leader and a humanitarian actor in the region which Türkiye shares historical and cultural ties. As such, national security has been framed as inseparable from the country's broader regional role.

In this context, the study reveals how Türkiye has expanded its national security definition in the last decade and reshaped its security policies according to regional dynamics. It first presents an overview of how security studies and the concept of national security have evolved. Second, it analyzes how national security is understood and practiced in Türkiye, with a focus

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on policy makers. It examines Türkiye's national security policies by dividing into three: the history of policies, post-Cold War Period, and post-Arab Uprisings period. In this context, the internal and external dynamics influencing the country's security policies and the fundamental breaking points of the national security understanding are analyzed from a historical perspective.

This research presents the historical evolution of the subject matter within a narrative framework. In addition to existing literature, key sources such as leader speeches and official reports have been reviewed, and the findings are organized in a chronological form. I narrate the historical process with an effort to contextualize discourses and policies within their respective time periods. The research examines how Türkiye's national security narrative and policies have been repeatedly reconstructed throughout this historical process. Rather than conducting extensive archival research, it synthesizes information from the literature and key documents to outline main developments and transformations in Türkiye's national security practices and policies.

2. Security Studies and National Security

Since its establishment as a field of study after the World War II, security has been defined and studied in multiple ways. The traditional understanding of security that focuses on military threats to the state as the main referent object of security had dominated the field through the end of the Cold War. By the 1980s, critiques of this approach started to manifest themselves, which researchers of security later labeled as the critical approaches (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). They challenged traditional security in multiple ways, starting from its positivist research program, state-centrism, and extensive focus on military threats.

The realist paradigm therefore conceptualizes security mainly in terms of military threats to nation-states (Baylis et al., 2008). Security of the state, or as it is widely referred to, national security refers to a sovereign state's security and defense. It is a state's ability to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity, population, economy, and institutions from both external and internal threats as well as to provide "freedom from foreign dictation" (Lasswell, 1950, in Romm, 1993). It is the responsibility of a government to safeguard the state and nation's security through multiple means such as military, law enforcement, diplomacy, and intelligence. Thus, national security refers to the obligation of securing "the survival of a nation's independence, institutions, and inhabitants" (Sorensen, 1990, p. 3). The definition of national security may also comprise the protection of critical infrastructure, the rule of law, as well as responding to multiple forms of crises and disasters. Assets such as political independence and a balanced social development or a state's ability to provide basic functions for its society have also been included in the concept (Hewedy, 1989). In other words, national security may directly refer to the survival of a state, as well as to that state's capability "to overcome multi-dimensional threats to the well-being of its people at any given time" (Paleri, 2008). For instance, as early as the Cold War period, non-military issues such as environmental degradation, economic crisis, and the possibility of losing the technology race have been considered threats to the security and well-being of the United States (Sorensen, 1990, p. 7).

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The term 'national security' was collocated first around the Second World War and took its place in the 'strategic dictionary' together with traditional concepts such as external policy, military affairs, etc. (Grizold, 1994, p. 40). The traditional approach of the Cold War emphasizes the central role of power and military threats in determining the definition and policy of national security (Leffler, 1990, p. 143). Although national security as a concept and a policy has a particular meaning that applies to different contexts according to traditional security approaches, it is a social and dynamic concept that changes and evolves in time and space. Even in the Cold War environment when realist understanding dominated the field, some scholars emphasized that national security was not to be understood in completely objective terms.

Wolfers (1952, p. 481) argued that, the concept of national security might not mean the same thing to all, or it may even not have any precise or particular meaning at all. While some states exaggerate the same type of threat, others might underestimate its significance. Defining national security, he argued that if one talks about an objective understanding of the term, refers to the absence of threats to values. In a subjective sense, though, it refers to a situation in which there is no fear that these values will be attacked (Wolfers, 1952, p. 485). If national security refers to threats of any kind to the state, the probability of an upcoming attack cannot be measured in an objective sense; so, it always remains "a matter of subjective evaluation and speculation" (Wolfers, 1952, p. 485). Similarly, Leffler (1990) argues that threats to national security can be related to 'real dangers' as well as ideological perceptions, mistaken images, and cultural symbols.

Therefore, the concept of national security, as well as the policies shaped around it, are not fixed; they are constantly being reconstructed based on the actor producing them, the specific period, the geographical context, and prevailing political and social conditions, among others (See Chul, 2009). This variability highlights the dynamic nature of national security, which is deeply influenced by the changing priorities and perspectives of policymakers, as well as the conceived challenges and opportunities of the era. Understanding these shifts and analyzing the elements that define them are significant for comprehending a state's overall political landscape and the decisions that drive its governance.

Then how and by whom are threats to national security are constructed? According to existing approaches, states determine their national security policies through a complex and multifaceted process in which multiple actors are involved including governments, interest groups, and public experts on policy-making and practice of security. Yet, most studies focus on political leaders and experts as the actors that are influential in determining national security definitions and policies (Sorensen, 1990, p. 2). Looking at the sources of national security policies, the literature cites many different possible factors including internal and external threat assessments of the governments; strategic interests constructed by state organs linked to economic, political, and military factors; international relations of a country; public opinion; and legal and ethical considerations including international law, human rights, domestic laws, and regulations.

As seen, national security conceptions and policies encompass both domestic and foreign factors (Leffler, 1990, p. 143). As Zelikow (2003, p. 17) suggests, "all national security strategies

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start with a mental image of the world." As such, the determination of national security policies generally depends on the constitution of domestic and international threats. One significant source in the construction of national security is domestic politics, stemming from factors such as public opinion, interest groups, the military's role in politics, etc. Secondly, national security conceptions and policies also depend on the international relations of that particular country. For instance, Wolfers (1952, p. 487) argues, even in the 1950s that "nobody can reasonably contend that Canada is threatened to the same extent as countries like Iran or Yugoslavia…" According to this argument, geopolitics has a significant role in the determination and definition of threats, and national security. However, national security is constructed in relation to both global and regional political developments, and the actors defining it. The 'risks and threats' that are posed by internal and external sources are filtered through the actors' cognitions, namely values, ideologies, worldviews, and personalities. These core values may change from one person/group to the other, which may alter the conceptualizations of national security or the strategies for pursuing security policies (Leffler, 1990, p. 145).

If the understanding of national security and policies shaped around it change in time depending on transformations in political context and also actors that construct it, it can be argued that the Turkish government's vision of being a humanitarian actor and playing a leader role in MENA have shaped its security policies. The Turkish policy makers have positioned the state not only as a nation-state, but also as an actor with historical and cultural ties to societies in the Middle East and have reconstructed its national and regional security policies accordingly. The aim to act independently in its relations with 'the Western world' and the effort to construct its own security paradigm have also shaped Türkiye's security vision and policies. As such, official security discourse has intertwined with regional security narratives and has become part of national security understanding. Especially after the elimination of the limiting impact of the Cold War, Türkiye started to follow more active policies in the Middle East. However, with the deepening of regional crises and uncertainty emerged after the Arab Uprisings, domestic and regional security discourses have become increasingly intertwined, gaining a different dimension.

3. Türkiye's National Security: A History

Since the establishment of the Republic, Türkiye has been a "security-conscious" actor that puts various external and internal security threats at the top of the political agenda of the state (Lesser, 2010, p. 258). The Atatürk era (1919-1939) was marked by the independence, sovereignty, and unity of state. The national security strategy of the time emphasized peace and status-quo, which aimed to keep the state back from offensive security policies and, hence, to protect Türkiye from prolonged war while maintaining stability in and around the state. The Turkish state respected international norms and law and intended to remain a sovereign and respected member of international society. It followed a security policy that had been ongoing since the 18th Century Ottoman that could be named 'defensive realpolitik' (Karaosmanoğlu, 2000). This conservative and defensive orientation in foreign relations is also linked with what is named 'the Sevres Syndrome' which referred to Türkiye's "geopolitical paranoia" of being

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invaded by great powers of the time after the legacy of the World War I and the following War of Independence (Lesser, 2010, p. 9).

In terms of internal security concerns, the Turkish state followed a policy of homogenization of society during the nation and state formation process, which targeted to provide and maintain a society that was made up of Turkic and Muslim populations triggered by the anxiety that non-Turkish populations may pose a threat to the state's external and internal security (İçduygu et al., 2008, p. 372). This policy started to change shortly after the establishment period and gave way to a policy of Westernization. That is, the Atatürk period's aim "to reach the level of contemporary civilization" was already associated with the European civilization (Sula, 2021, p.12) and Türkiye started a series of reform processes targeting the sociopolitical structure of the country after the immediate establishment period. Quoting from Atatürk himself, "This Western direction in domestic and foreign policies played a key role in the country's modernization attempts" (Atatürk, 2006b in Sula, 2021). The Turkish elites also had a distrust of the Soviet Union mainly because of its communist regime that they considered to be a threat to Türkiye's newly consolidating regime (Karaosmanoğlu, 2000, p. 203). This policy of Westernization led Western powers and societies to be identified as friends rather than threats to national security.

This policy of constructing close relations with the 'Western world' also went hand in hand with the Turkish elites' determination to protect the borders defined by the Misak-ı Milli (National Pact) (Icduygu, 2004). Türkiye's decision-makers believed that the path to ensure national security was to develop good relations with the world while also protecting the country against 'potential threats' that might arise from the East and South. As such, on the way to the World War II and the Cold War, Türkiye made its decision to align with the Western Powers, while also trying not to provocate any other states including the Soviet Union and its allies.

During the first decades of the Cold War Period, while aligning the state with the so-called Western camp, the Turkish policy makers aimed to keep the state aloof from the instability in the MENA as these states were struggling with independence issues. In the 1960s and 1970s, Türkiye, for the first time in the history of the Republic, reconsidered its security agenda and Middle East policy and tried to follow a comparatively independent policy in the region. This slight change was result of a series of events that caused disappointment, such as the Cyprus issue, Cuban Missile Crisis, and finally the Johnson Letter (See Republic of Türkiye MFA, n.d.a; U.S.A Department of State, 1962; U.S.A Department of State, 1964). However, until at least the end of the Cold War, Türkiye maintained its distance from the region since policymakers of the time had decided that this was the way to ensure Türkiye's national security. As such, this policy of alignment with the West while avoiding war and conflict continued throughout the Cold War. Even if the Middle East appeared in Türkiye's security agenda, political elites have primary considered the Middle East as a security problem rather than merging the state's security with that of the region.

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4. The Post-Cold War Era

The political environment in which Türkiye operated was transformed by the end of the Cold War and the elimination of the threat coming from the Soviet Union for the Western camp. This development led the Turkish policymakers to reevaluate national security definitions and priorities. Following the Cold War years, the state changed its focus from its traditional military focused approach to national security and decided to prioritize political and economic reforms that had already started in the 1980s (Kirişçi, 1997). The governments started to focus more on improving the conditions of democracy, providing human rights, and recovering economy both because the elites considered these factors as key in ensuring its long-term stability and security, and also with the impact of the governments' bid for EU membership. Such opening up after the Cold War further influenced the country's vision regarding foreign policy and its behavior, as it started to seek a multidirectional policy through closer ties with neighbors and other countries that are mostly closer to its region. The idea of playing a more active role in regional and global politics was also a product of this period.

Türkiye could not completely abandon its traditional national security understanding though, due to 'new security challenges' in the period following the Cold War brought, including regional instability, terrorism, and organized crime. The governments continued to increase their energy and investment in the state's military capabilities and enhanced cooperation with its allies, NATO member states being in the first place (White Paper, 2000).

Starting from the late 1980s to date, PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) terrorism has been one major source of security challenge for the Turkish governments. Organized mainly in the southeastern part of Anatolia, PKK has had various and transforming goals and demands from the Turkish state such as seeking an independent Kurdish state partially within Turkish territories, autonomy, and a wide range of political, social and cultural rights for Kurdish people who live in Türkiye. This internal security threat has been linked to a couple of neighboring states, which also influenced the state's foreign relations. Policy makers as well as the public linked this threat to the neighboring states of the Middle East, especially Syria and Iraq, which occasionally caused tense relations with these states. Türkiye's ongoing war with terrorism has been on its national security agenda since then, influencing the state's relations with not only neighbors from East and South but also the US and the EU countries. This internal security concern and its links with Türkiye's foreign and security policy became stronger in the 2000s after the US-led coalition's war in Iraq, which was a sign that PKK terrorism remained on Türkiye's national security agenda (Lesser, 2010).

Another traditional domestic source of Türkiye's post-Cold War national security policy, especially throughout the 1990s, had been Islamic fundamentalism. This concern got stronger after the Refah Party-led government, which led to the 'post-modern coup' that started after the National Security Council meeting of 1997. This started the February 28 process in which political Islam was highly securitized and many state and non-state institutions started to fight Islamic fundamentalism through discourses and practices of security (Lüleci-Sula, 2020). The post-modern coup ended the Refah-Yol government, and three 'secular' political parties of the assembly established the 55th government, which eased concern about the dominance of political Islam in the country.

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When it comes to global politics, Turkish political elites abandoned the state's non-involvement policy and started a more proactive approach in the neighboring regions, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the Central Asia, Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Black Sea (Karaosmanoğlu, 2000, p. 210). Türkiye began to be interested in regional security, multilateralism in foreign affairs, and more security and economic cooperation with its neighbors. This opening in foreign policy influenced national security policies because it gave the policymakers new issue areas to focus on and new security challenges to deal with. Türkiye's involvement in the Gulf War was the first of these challenges after the Cold War, which changed old patterns of security and foreign policy behavior. The Özal government of the time sided with the anti-Iraqi coalition and the UN which led Türkiye to cooperate with the West through taking part in allied operations. According to the 'White Paper' of 2020, Türkiye further supported NATO and the UN by participating in operations in the Balkans and Adriatic throughout the 1990s (Neal and Gardner, 2024). Thus, although there was an opening in foreign policy towards different regions, Türkiye remained closed allies with the Western powers and actors for at least another decade.

The Özal Government's new foreign policy decision-making mechanism and Türkiye's involvement in the Gulf War further influenced domestic politics by being an early sign of changes in civil-military relations. The Chief of General Staff resigned due to Özal's "unconventional way of engaging with the Gulf War" (Karaosmanoğlu, 2000, p. 211) which some circles in politics and media welcomed as a sign of democratization in domestic politics. According to the military circles, Özal's foreign policy decision was a sign of deterioration in bureaucratic practices because he did not consult high military officials. This small step in minimalizing the role of the military in politics would later be strengthened by a change in the structure of Türkiye's National Security Council (NSC) which was and still is a constitutional advisory body. NSC operated under the chairmanship of the president and was made up of the prime minister, ministers of foreign affairs, internal affairs, and defense, the chief of general staff, as well as the commanders in chief of the army, gendarmerie, navy, and air force. This changed in the 2000s due to the JDP (Justice and Development Party) government's aim to civilize domestic and foreign policy making (Aknur, 2013). Considering Türkiye's past with several military coups, both political elites of Türkiye and the EU actors welcomed this change on Türkiye's road to membership that was accelerated in 1999.

The change in civil-military relations was also possible due to a change in understandings of domestic threats to national security. PKK terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism were two major internal security concerns of the Turkish governments that the public and state bureaucracy relied on the military to solve. Put it differently, the military was considered the protector of the sovereign, indivisible, and secular state. However, in the 2000s, as discussed in the next section, traditional threats of both PKK terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism started to decrease due to certain developments. By the end of the 1990s Türkiye came into the wage of conflict with the Syrian government over their support for the PKK. 1999, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was caught and imprisoned after Türkiye decided to force the Syrian government to expel him during an NSC meeting in 1998 (Republic of Türkiye MFA, n.d.). After that, PKK violence in Türkiye decreased for almost five years, which also influenced the

consideration of the threat to national security, which gave the government a window of opportunity to reconsider the military's strong existence in politics.

The second of these internal threats, Islamic fundamentalism, also started to lose significance. The Turkish Armed Forces had been a major actor that contributed to the securitization of Islamic fundamentalism throughout the 1990s. As specified by the Ministry of National Defense in its White Papers for 1998 and 2000, secularism, defined as 'the independence of the state from religious rules' had a priority in terms of preserving the state's national security (Cizre, 2003, p. 216; White Paper, 2000). As Islamic fundamentalism was defined as a threat to the unity and integrity of the state, the military had become the main actor that was responsible for providing the endurance of secularism as the official ideology of the state. Yet, especially by the 2010s, the declining significance of the Islamic fundamentalist threat went hand in hand with changes in civil-military relations initiated by the JDP government.

The JDP succeeded in the elections in 2002 and started the era of single-party rule following the coalitions period in Turkish politics after the Cold War. In the years under the JDP government, Türkiye's national security strategy has evolved to encompass a range of priorities related to domestic, regional, and international politics. There were changes but also continuities with the past especially in the first decade of the 2000s. Domestically, the effort to counter the threat posed by PKK, particularly in southeastern Türkiye prevailed, while Islamic fundamentalism started to lose its significance as a national security threat began to lose significance in the policy makers' regard. PKK's presence in Iraq after the war and its terrorist actions in Türkiye in the first decade of the 2000s, as well as Al Qaeda's terrorist actions particularly in Istanbul kept the threat of terrorism alive in Türkiye's national security policies. As a result, the Turkish state conducted a cross-border military operation in Iraq in 2007 targeting PKK bases as part of its fight against terrorism (Khan, 2015). Meanwhile, the Turkish government also tried to at least develop peaceful relations with the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq mostly as a continuation of the state policy of constructing zero-problem relationships with neighbors (Hale, 2009; Zafar, 2012). The impact of Türkiye's new foreign policy vision was also significant for its developing relations with Iran in this period, which correlates with Islamic fundamentalism's desecuritization in domestic politics (Lüleci-Sula, 2020). National security is defined by the actors that have norms and identities that shape the process of the construction of security understandings and policies (Katzenstein, 1996; Cho, 2009). The identity of the JDP elites also played a central role in fundamental Islam and Iran - as a country associated with it- is no longer being perceived as a threat to the national security of Türkiye as a state policy (Altunışık and Martin, 2011).

While relations with most countries in the Middle East took a positive turn in the first decade of the JDP rule, Türkiye's bilateral relations with the state of Israel started to deteriorate following The Davos Crisis of 2009 and the Mavi Marmara incident of 2010. However, these conflicts and diplomatic tensions were not constructed as a direct threat to Türkiye's national security while the next decade's security policies were marked by issues manly posed by the uprisings and civil wars in the region.

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5. The Post-Arab Uprisings Era

The Arab Uprisings led to significant political transformations in the MENA and transformed the understanding and practices of security in the region. Ongoing instabilities in the region forced many states to reconsider national security policies (Grizold, 1994). Policymakers of Türkiye also started to change the national security strategies of the state. The civil war in Syria, the terrorism threat especially perceived from PKK and ISIS, mass mobility and migration from the region, and the instability in various states in the Middle East resulted in more proactive foreign and security policies for Türkiye. Accordingly, this period has been marked by the understanding that measures to maintain security within the national borders are not enough, and only if cross-border security is ensured, national security can be provided.

Starting from the outbreak of the uprisings, Türkiye's political elites have increasingly aligned the state's territorial or national security with the Middle East region as a continuation of the government's foreign policy vision of actively engaging the state in the region. Starting from the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings, government elites sided with the opposition forces and the suffering societies rebelling against the regimes. This positioning was result of not only the policy of protecting the suffering people of the civil wars, but also to ensure Turkish territory and population's well-being and security. In 2016 Türkiye started a series of direct transborder military operations in the region, which can be considered the sign of a new era of militarization in Turkish foreign policy (Mehmetcik & Çelik, 2022). Türkiye's military engagement in the region influenced the government's discourse and Türkiye's policies and practices of national security. According to the national security concept defined in November 2016,

> Türkiye's fight with terrorism is not limited to its own territory. Due to the transborder nature of terrorism, Türkiye's fight is continuing in a wide area. The operations we make in Syria and Iraq are [...] because sources of threat towards our country are there. We tried to tell the Westerners [...] a secure zone cleared from terrorists [is needed]. No one can stop our attempts to establish a secure zone in Syria. The issue of Syria and Iraq is [...] a matter of survival for us (Erdogan, 2016b).

As such, survival of Türkiye has been directly linked to the security of its close neighborhood. Through its policy of fighting against terrorism, which is defined and encountered as a transnational threat, the Turkish policy makers have broadened the state's territorial zone of security through its close neighborhood, especially the Middle East. This period is marked by an understanding that if security is not ensured in the neighboring regions, it cannot be ensured and maintained in Türkiye either. As a result, the understanding and policies of national security started to encompass Türkiye's immediate surroundings, especially the states experiencing uprisings.

At this point, it is significant to also note that Türkiye's involvement in the region is further presented as its "growing power, influence, and ability" in the Middle East and the globe (Erdoğan, 2015a). Thus, beyond security, involvement, and influence in the region are considered to be a sign of prestige. Erdoğan stated in 2015 that Türkiye had spent "more than 6 billion dollars while the total funding from the world was 363 million dollars." According to

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the President Erdoğan, this was very significant because it showed Türkiye's current place in the world (Erdoğan, 2015d). Türkiye's fight against transborder terrorism in the Middle East has also been seen and promoted as an indication of its ability and power (Erdoğan, 2016; 2016a; 2016b). While Türkiye conducted military operations to secure the territories beyond its national borders, policymakers, Erdoğan being in the first place, invited the international community to help Türkiye in its fight against terrorism and to secure Türkiye and Syria's borders and territory from terrorists, as well as to guarantee a safe zone and provide voluntary repatriation of Syrian immigrants (Erdoğan, 2019; 2019a). What is also necessary to note is that overthrowing the then regime and creating a safe zone in Syria, especially in the North were defined and presented as Türkiye's national security needs, which, according to the government, 'the Westerners' did not support (Erdoğan, 2015).

For these reasons and intentions, Türkiye started to adopt a proactive security policy and to interfere directly with cross-border threats. The national security policy has been transformed in a few significant ways. First, cross-border operations have become significant in the fight against terrorism. Second, although in official discourse the issue of migration has been referred to as a humanitarian matter, in practice mass mobility and migration have become a matter of security. Third, regional policies have started to gain a security component supported by military and defense capacity. Overall, as part of this expansion in the understanding of national security, border security, and military operations have started to take primacy. A closer examination of these points is essential.

First, instabilities in the Middle East region after the Arab Uprisings have led Türkiye's policymakers to reconsider and reshape the state's strategies to fight terrorism. Especially the developments in Syria and Iraq paved the way for increased terrorist activities in and around these countries. As a result, Türkiye has started to act more proactively and adopted preventive measures. It targeted the presence of terrorist groups and practices in the areas closer to its borders through a series of cross-border operations to prevent them from crossing the borders. Operation Euphrates Shield (Fırat Kalkanı Operasyonu) and Operation Olive Branch (Zeytin Dalı Operasyonu) operations, which were realized as part of the policy of fight against terrorism and to create safe zones beyond the borders, are concrete outcomes of this policy (See Yeşiltaş et. al, 2017; Kaya and Kayar, 2023, Baysal & Lüleci-Sula, 2025).

Türkiye also increased practices of cooperation and intelligence sharing in the region, as part of expanding its national security beyond borders. Conducting operations together with neighboring states and international coalitions, the Turkish government aimed to cut financial sources of terrorist organizations and logistical support to them from different sources, and also to neutralize the leadership cadres. Signing regional and international agreements, Türkiye also played a more active role in the fight against terrorism in the global arena. Its current national security policy is also supported by domestic security measures. To prevent terrorist attacks, especially in metropoles, security measures have been strengthened, practices of intelligence units' have been intensified, and operations have been conducted on terrorist cells. Moreover, to prevent online terrorism propaganda, digital security measures have been activated. All of these policies and practices aimed to fight terrorism as a transborder threat, which linked Türkiye's national security to the Middle East region.

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Second, mass migration and the displacement of millions of people were brought on by civil wars and instability during and after the Arab Uprisings. Due to its geographic location and governmental political choices, Türkiye has been among the most affected countries. Türkiye currently hosts around 4 million people, most of whom migrated from Syria (UNHCR, n.d.). This development has had an impact on Türkiye at multiple levels, including politics, economy, social life, and demography.

When the uprisings started and the first group of immigrants entered Türkiye, state officials as well as most circles in the society framed the issue in terms of a humanitarian crisis and responsibility. This framing was in line with Türkiye's foreign policy vision since the 2000s, which combined "hard power-based military assertiveness and humanitarian norms" (Çavuşoğlu, 2017; Keyman, 2017). However, when the number of immigrants increased significantly in a short period, the discourse and policies about migration started to change. The discourse was transformed from a humanitarian issue to a burden, political economic, and challenge, if not a matter of security. The change in how migrants are framed influenced the policies and practices though.

The Turkish government aimed to establish a safe zone beyond the borders and transborder operations have been justified with reference to this defined need. These safe zones do not only aim to strengthen border security but also to encourage voluntary repatriation. Infrastructure works, housing projects, and the provision of basic services in these regions have become part of Türkiye's regional security policies and have evolved into an approach that considers cross-border stability as a necessity for national security. Türkiye's actions have reinforced the idea that national security cannot be fully protected without cross-border stabilization and security.

Another indication that Türkiye has started to define its national security in conjunction with the Middle East is that regional crises have been treated not only as a foreign policy issue but also as a direct threat to internal security. Demographic changes, especially in border regions, and the economic, political and social effects of migration have blurred the boundaries between external and internal securities. This situation has led to the expansion of Türkiye's security policies to include cross-border elements, establishing the understanding that instability in the region directly affects Turkey and therefore preventive interventions are inevitable. As a result, Türkiye's cross-border security policies and refugee management strategies mark a fundamental transformation in the country's security perception. Türkiye now considers its security not only within its borders but also in conjunction with regional stability and directly links developments in the Middle East to its national security. In this context, every step taken across the border is considered not only as a regional arrangement but also as part of Türkiye's strategy to protect its internal security.

Third, civil wars, terrorism, and power vacuums and shifts in the Middle East caused Türkiye to merge its national security with that of the region while allowing it to intervene in regional instability through diplomatic, economic, political as well as military means. Türkiye has not only defended state borders but also became an actor that aimed to shape regional security.

One concrete example of this new security understanding is the increase in Türkiye's cross-border military presence. Military operations in Syria and Iraq started with a motivation to

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provide border security but eventually became part of the long-term regional policies of the state. These operations indicate that Türkiye has adopted a security perspective beyond its borders and linked its national security directly with those of certain parts of the Middle East. Similarly, Türkiye's military bases in Qatar and Somalia reflect the state policy of becoming a significant power in the security policies of the MENA while also illustrating that national security is understood and practiced through its links with regional security (Kasapoğlu, 2017). Investments in the defense industry can also be read as part of this new security understanding. National and domestically produced defense projects result in not only more independent security policies but also strengthened operations in the region. This increasing military capacity has become a tool that supports Türkiye's aim to become a significant security actor in the MENA.

In the diplomatic arena, Türkiye has also reshaped its international alliances by defining its security policies in a regional context. The Astana Process established with Russia and Iran on the Syrian issue revealed Türkiye's desire to become an actor that directly determines the security structure of the Middle East (Cengiz, 2020). Initiatives regarding maritime jurisdictions and energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean have also been an extension of this security approach, showing that Türkiye considers regional security as a whole.

As a result, Türkiye's post-Arab Spring security approach has moved beyond national borders and made it necessary for Turkey to consider regional stability as a direct part of its national security. Cross-border operations, military bases, defense industry investments, and diplomatic initiatives show that Türkiye has shaped its security policies not only within its borders but also in the context of the entire region.

6. Conclusion

This study analyzed the transformation of national security definitions and policies in Türkiye in a historical process. It specifically focused on the increasing significance of the Middle East in these policies following the Cold War. It argued that the place and importance of the Middle East in Türkiye's foreign and security policy started to increase in the post-Cold War period. However, following the Arab Uprisings, the region's significance in Türkiye's national security policies further increased. Traditional national security understanding in Türkiye that was shaped around protecting national borders and combating terrorism became more intertwined with the MENA region after the Arab Uprisings. These events created an atmosphere of constant insecurity around Türkiye's borders, leading to a security perspective increasingly intertwined with cross-border dynamics. The main finding of the article is that national security has started to be defined not only within its borders but also in relation to regional security.

The instabilities following the Arab Uprisings influenced Türkiye's security policies significantly. Especially the civil war in Syria and the activities of terrorist organizations at the borderlands have been the main factors that directed Turkish policy makers to transborder operations. In this period, Türkiye's security policies have moved beyond a purely defensive approach, assuming a role in ensuring and shaping regional security. This transformation has increased Türkiye's influence in the region while also bringing new challenges and assumed responsibilities. In the post-2010 period, policymakers in Türkiye sought greater engagement

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in Middle Eastern political developments by supporting the peoples of the region who revolted against authoritarian regimes. While adopting a protector role for the state to provide security and shelter, Turkish elites also aligned the state's security with that of neighboring countries, presenting Türkiye as a force combating both oppressive regimes and terrorism threatening its borders.

The analysis of this transformation in Türkiye's national security understanding and policies contributes to IR literature by illustrating how the national security strategies of regional powers change reacting to regional crises and conflicts. Moreover, the analysis highlights the increasing intertwinement of national and regional security, presenting a potential area for future research to engage with within the theoretical debates in security studies. It shows that Türkiye's efforts to shape its national security has gone beyond its borders which reflect a dynamic strategy that moves beyond traditional security concepts.

As a result, the transformation of Türkiye's national security understanding and policies offers a significant area of study within both the country's security framework and the broader literature on IR and security studies. As Türkiye's national security policies become more closely integrated with regional security, they present a subject in need of deeper analysis in future research. This study seeks to contribute to academic discussions by exploring these transformations within a historical context and through a structured analysis.

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