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**ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**NEOCLASSICAL GEO-STRATEGIC ANALYSIS  
of TÜRKİYE's MILITARY OPERATIONS in  
SYRIA and IRAQ TILL ASSAD's FALL**

Kanan AHMADZADA\*

Ramazan SAFA\*\*

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**Abstract**

This article examines and evaluates the reasons, strategic logic, outcomes, and effectiveness of Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria and Iraq until Assad's fall in 2024 as part of its campaign against Kurdish militant factions, particularly the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Adopting a neoclassical geo-strategic framework, paper treats environmental realities and elite perceptions of the threats and opportunities associated with them as central factors explaining elites' strategic decisions. In this way, it explores the evolution of Türkiye's military confrontation with PKK and associated groups along with Justice and Development Party (JDP) elites' perceptions of threats and opportunities and ideological leanings of neo-Ottomanism and Turkish-Islamic nationalism. Relying on extensive examination of primary and secondary data, the

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article argues that Türkiye's operations in Syria and Iraq are mainly a calculated response to an insecure border reality marked by the expansion of PKK, the humanitarian crisis in Syria, and regional instability amid the Arab Spring. Thus, it is argued that these operations are the results of a preventive strategic logic aimed at countering separatism and terrorism threats, under the imperative of "better now than later" in both Syria and Iraq.

**Keywords:** Neoclassical Geostrategy, Turkish Military Operations, PKK, Neo-Ottomanism, Preventive Strategy

## **Esad'ın Düşüşüne Kadar Türkiye'nin Suriye ve Irak'taki Askeri Operasyonlarının Neoklasik Jeo-stratejik Analizi**

### **Öz**

Bu makale, Türkiye'nin 2024 yılında Esad'ın düşüşüne kadar Suriye'nin ve Irak'ın Kuzey'inde yürüttüğü askeri operasyonların nedenlerini, stratejik mantığını, sonuçlarını ve etkinliğini, başta Kürtistan İşçi Partisi (PKK) olmak üzere militan Kürt gruplarla mücadele bağılamında incelemekte ve değerlendirmektedir. Neoklasik bir jeo-stratejik çerçeveyin benimsendiği bu çalışmada, çevresel gerçekler ve bu gerçeklere bağlı tehdit ve fırsatlara ilişkin elit algıları, elitlerin stratejik tercihlerini açıklamada merkezi faktörler olarak ele alınmaktadır. Vaka çalışması, Türkiye'nin PKK unsurlarıyla askeri çatışmasının evrimini, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) elitlerinin tehdit ve fırsat algıları ile yeni Osmanlıcılık ve Türk-İslam milliyetçiliği ideolojik eğilimleriyle birlikte incelemektedir. Birincil ve ikincil verilerin geniş incelenmesine dayanarak makale, Türkiye'nin Suriye ve Irak'taki operasyonlarının, PKK bağlantılı grupların genişlemesi, Suriye'deki insanı kriz ve Arap Baharı sırasında yaşanan bölgesel istikrarsızlıkla şekillenen güvensiz bir sınır gerçekliğine verilmiş, esas olarak hesaplanmış bir yanıt olduğunu savunmaktadır. Bu operasyonların hem Suriye hem de Irak'ta "şimdi olması sonrasında iyidir" zorunluluğu altında, bölücülük ve terörizm tehditlerine karşı çıkmayı amaçlayan önleyici bir stratejik mantığı yansittığı tespit edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Neoklasik Jeostrateji, Türk Askeri Operasyonları, PKK, Neo-Osmanlıcılık, Önleyici Strateji

## Introduction

Since the 1980s, Türkiye has confronted and fought against the forms of Kurdish militant factions in both the political and military spheres, particularly the insurgent PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), who worked toward separatism, and has adopted various adaptive measures, including both military and soft tools (Zanotti & Thomas, 2019b). Turkish authorities, the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA) designate the PKK as a terrorist organisation (UK Home Office, 2023, pp. 12-13). After talks with the PKK failed in 2015, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government initiated military operations in northern Syria and northern Iraq, primarily targeting the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG) as well as PKK fighters. Since 2016, Türkiye has launched four large-scale operations in Syria and two in Iraq (Pierret 2021; Duman 2024). As of late 2024, the Turkish military exercises control over territories in northern Syria, including Jarablus, al-Bab, Afrin, the corridor between Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad, and parts of Idlib Province, which serves as a buffer zone along the border. Similarly, Zap, Metina, Hakurk, and Sinat-Haftanin in northern Iraq are under Turkish military control and form a 15–30 km-deep buffer area that curtails PKK corridors and facilitates the targeting of their bases near the Qandil Mountains (Table 1).

The purpose of this article is to examine how the post-2011 geostrategic reality of Türkiye and JDP elites' perceptions and regional vision impacted the decision of military intervention in Syria's northern areas and northern parts of Iraq. It also evaluates the effectiveness of these interventions—both operationally and strategically—toward advancing Türkiye's vital interests and the JDP's vision for the Middle Eastern geopolitical order. It presents a case study whose scope is limited to: (a) the extent of Türkiye's conflicts with non-state actors pursuing Kurdish nationalist agendas beyond its borders up to the end of 2024; and (b) the geopolitics of these campaigns within the security order of the Northern Middle East and their strategic implications.

The central tenet of the research is to address these issues from a geographic and military strategic point of view, following a neoclassical geostrategic model proposed by (Morgado, 2020, 2023). The model, together with objective geopolitical realities, uses threat perceptions of the political elite as explanatory variable for concrete strategic behaviours. In essence, threat perceptions are the elite's subjective readings of rival actors' capabilities and intentions. The article tracks them through JDP leaders' speeches and other governmental

statements. It then charts, in chronological order, the evolution of the JDP's security policies and Türkiye's cross-border campaigns against Kurdish insurgent factions. This method also helps to uncover the elites' threat perceptions. From the examination, the study arrives at these key conclusions:

- a) Türkiye's military operations in Syria and Iraq since 2016 are driven by a geostrategic rationale to manage a perceived unfavourable geosystem in the Northern Middle East, with the ultimate goal to shape the border regions to its advantage;
- b) The key geostrategic logic behind Türkiye's operations in Syria and Iraq is similar and consistent, which is the countering terrorism and armed separatist activity;
- c) The JDP's military actions stemmed from Türkiye's ontological concerns regarding sovereignty, survival, and security.

## **Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Geo-strategic Model**

Geopolitics is one of the leading theories of international relations, which concentrates on the impact of geographical elements and configurations on a state's foreign relations. Its specific branch, geostrategy, accounts for the security behaviour of international actors through an examination of the ways in which strategic choices are impacted and shaped by geographical settings (Cohen, 2015, pp. 15-16; Criekemans, 2022, pp. 13-15; Mütercimler, 2018, p. 374). Besides being a model for comprehending complex relations, geostrategic analysis is also a blueprint for policymakers in the way they utilise geography to their advantage (Sloan, 2017, p. 2; Morgado, 2020, p. 131). Here, geography is of a physical and human nature, such as positions and locations of states and regions, boundaries, climate, topography, size and shape of states, resources, economic activity, population, and culture (Criekemans, 2022, p. 15; Spykman, 1938a; Spykman, 1938b). Historical experience also matters, since rivalries tend to have their origins in earlier conflicts that happened in particular spatial configurations (Criekemans, 2022, pp. 41-47; Spykman, 1938b; p. 213). Although it is not always rendered explicit, geography is inevitably implicated in international interactions, and each of them involves processes of projecting political demands across space from one place to another (Sloan, 2017, pp. 6-7). Geostrategy demonstrates, therefore, how global politics are conditioned by territoriality (Criekemans, 2022, p. 97). Here, the underlying assertion is that a state's immediate

environment or how statesmen perceive it conditions relations with foreign actors (Spykman, 1938a; Spykman, 1938b; Kelly, 2016, p. 72; Kelly, 2019, p. 44; Morgado, 2020). In this context, states are incentivised to pursue reasoned and responsive actions to satisfy their interests (Yarger, 2006, p. 7).

Geography is conceived as having a dual effect on a state's foreign conduct. First, environmental factors such as extension, size, shape and configuration of the territory place objective constraints on decision making, and secondly policymakers act on their perception of these factors (Morgado, 2020; Sprout & Sprout, 1960, pp. 147-148; Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 59). Hence, geopolitical circumstances create conditions under which states must pursue core interests and goals, whether they are aware of it (Spykman, 1938a, p. 30). A state's relative position to others is equally decisive as it shapes both its security and its external behavior. It is a critical part of geopolitical configuration (Kelly, 2016, p. 74; Kelly, 2019, p. 49). This suggests that the proximity of a state's location to other actors and the real interaction configurations between them in domains such as security, economy, and culture shape the course of strategic decisions.

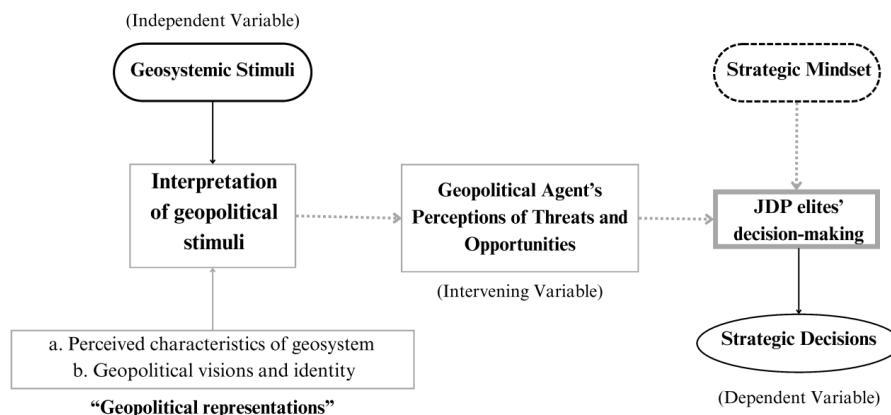
In geopolitical understanding, the distribution of power or capabilities among states is a default regulatory pattern that shapes their conduct (Wu, 2018, p. 791; Mazès, Troulis, & Domatioti, 2021, pp. 13-17). Reasonably, the drive for power is directly linked to the perceived strategic benefits or "value considerations" which could be obtained through controlling geographical space (Criekemans, 2022, p. 17). According to this classification, value considerations are related to the following factors (Criekemans, 2022, p. 17):

- security as the condition of safety (Mearsheimer, 2001)
- natural resources and wealth (Spykman, 1938a, p. 31).
- strategic factors, such as certain locations offering specific operational advantages in the way of realization of key policy objectives. *Buffer zones*, for instance, can function as neutral territories that reduce the likelihood of rival states going to war with each other and as a location that allows one state to pursue insurgents without technically violating the sovereignty of another state (Beehner & Meibauer, 2016, p. 4).

- *geographical representations*, which can be cognitive elements like ideas, values, and mindset associated with a particular geographic space;
- “motivation for regrouping the same identity groups,” which indicates uniting populations of the same ethnic or religious group that are divided by political boundaries.

In this regard, states must adopt carefully crafted and adaptive strategies to address their value considerations (Yarger, 2006, p. 7). Broadly, strategy can be defined as the process of generating and coordinating capabilities in order to realise long-term policy goals in accordance with geopolitical considerations of value (Stephens et al., 2009, p. 24; Gray, 2013, p. 13). This signifies the interconnectedness of geography, politics, and strategy, since everything in politics and strategy has geographical referents (Gray, 2004, p. 164). Therefore, “all politics is geopolitics” and “all strategy is geostrategy” (Gray, 2004, p. 163). Geography, hence, defines the playing field on which strategy is conceived and executed (Sloan, 2017, p. 12; Mütercimler, 2018, p. 378).

The literature offers few precise models for analysing particular security strategy, explicitly from a geopolitical perspective. Yet this can be achieved by drawing on the common assumptions of classical geopolitical theory. This paper builds a geo-strategic analysis model using Morgado's neoclassical geopolitics as the primary explanation for why states make certain strategic choices (Morgado, 2023; Morgado, 2020). Through this model, the foreign behavior of a state (dependent variable) is causally connected to the geosystemic variables (independent variables) and to the geopolitical agents' perceptions of threats and opportunities derived from that system as an intermediate variable (Figure 1). Geosystemic factors may shape actors' goals and room for manoeuvre within a given spatial configuration in the first place, but they do not mechanically determine the strategic plan. Instead, they function as both constraints and enablers in the design and execution of policy (Sloan, 2017, p. 18). Besides, the geopolitical system itself is understood as an anarchic spatial setting in which actors continually compete for power and influence, striving to secure value considerations such as security, sovereignty, homeland defence and economic stability (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, pp. 35-38).



**Figure 1:** The Neoclassical Geo-strategic Model for Explaining States' Strategic Decisions.

In this context, strategic choice can be understood as a country's response to the stimuli of the geopolitical system—a set of opportunities and dangers. These stimuli arise from how power is distributed within a geographic setting and how that distribution changes, inducing decision-makers to act (Morgado, 2023, pp.15-16). These can include attempts by rival states or non-state actors to seek relative gains, revisionist regional foreign policies, militant action by aspiring non-state actors in regional power vacuums, or separatist political and military movements (Lobell, Ripsman, & Taliaferro, 2009, pp.60-64). Yet, threats alone do not dictate strategy. Intervening variables—above all how elites perceive and interpret threats—play a decisive role (Morgado, 2023). Here, perceptions can be seen as elite mental images or understandings resulting from the recognition and interpretation of political developments through sensory experience (Stein, 2023, p.393). Conceptually, perception acts as the bridge linking the external environment to a state's security choices.

There are multiple factors that may shape agents' perceptions of actions, intentions, and motives of other actors, as well as the threats and opportunities associated with them. One of them is geopolitical representations or imaginations which are the images and meanings attributed to geographical entities—countries, regions, places, and networks. Agnew (2003, p.15) describes them as “the predominant ways world politics has been represented, talked about, and acted on geographically by both major actors and commentators...”. These representations usually carry subjective dimensions, rooted in national myth, symbols, religion, and narratives of history. They create “mental maps” that form the shared

mindset of human collectives and play a central role in the mindset of actors involved in geopolitical rivalry (Flint, 2022, p.38; Criekemans, 2022, pp.34-36; Morgado, 2023, pp.17-18). Closely related to this, the geopolitical vision has a normative mental picture of how geographic space is supposed to be organized through political relations. This reflects the missionary mentality of the geopolitical agent and ties closely to the identity it projects to others (Atmaca & Torun, 2022, p.115). As Gray (2013, p. 117) observes, “the physical features that constitute world geography comprise the material stage upon which humans contrive their several grand narratives.”

## **Türkiye’s Geo-Strategic Circumstances: Regional Relalities and Representations**

Türkiye’s geostrategic standing gives it a distinct edge over neighbouring countries. It enables it to exert its influence over world politics that exceeds its country size, population, and economic capacity. Although the relative importance to other actors has fluctuated over time, Türkiye’s geographic position has retained its strategic value in the face of its undergoing major transformations since the 1920s (Aydin, 2021, p. 212). Notably, Türkiye is a country that behaves like a natural bridge between Asia and Europe. This is a circumstance that has tended to strengthen its integral role in regional and global politics. Furthermore, it is an energy transit centre that transfers oil and gas from the Middle East and the natural resource-abundant Caspian Basin to Europe's developed lands. Türkiye is also a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and its close geographical proximity to areas of armed conflicts in the Middle East and South Caucasus has therefore made Türkiye irreplaceable for elites in Western capitals (Pierini, 2023). While having some divergent priorities between its ruling JDP and the fellow NATO partners, Türkiye still has geostrategic value owing to its territories that easily enable the deployment and transport of cargo, manpower, and weaponry by the USA and NATO (Zanotti & Thomas, 2024, pp. 8-9). Aktürk (2021, p. 105) concludes that Türkiye and the USA share broadly common interests across the Middle East and South Caucasus and mutual purposes in containing the growth and consolidation of Iranian and Russian dominance there. In furtherance, being a majority-Muslim state with liberal democratic processes, Türkiye qualifies to be considered an exemplary nation in dealing with religious extremism (Oğuzlu & Han, 2023, p. 71).

Even though having numerous political and economic advantages, Türkiye's geopolitical condition is equally considered to be a source of instability, with external forces and internal assistants being accused of plotting to destroy and weaken the Republic (Aydin & Ereker, 2013, pp. 13-17). Turkish perceptions toward external threats can be traced before World War I through its War of Independence and early years of the Republic with periodic crises reinforcing these attitudes. These experiences fostered a lingering suspicion of outsiders and insular feelings, enshrined in the guise of *Sèvres-phobia*, "the conviction that the external world is conspiring to weaken and divide up [Türkiye]" (Mufti, 1998, p. 42). Such scepticism of its neighbours has fostered a popular—and dominant—opinion that its regional placement, encircled by hostile actors, mandates that Türkiye must be strong and stable (Aydin & Ereker, 2013, p. 8).

With regard to understanding the origins of borders, institutions, identities, and collective memories in Anatolia and neighbouring territories, the recognition of the Ottoman legacy has been said to play an instrumental role (Schlaepfer, Bourmaud, & Hassan, 2020; Hintz, 2022, pp. 563-564; Walker, 2009; Jung, 2003; Neep, 2021). First, the identity of the Republic of Türkiye conveys it as being the natural heir of the Ottoman Empire. Its position as the home of the former caliphate, which yields a cultural capital for Türkiye as a soft power tool in the region, grants it legitimacy to engage closely with regional issues as the leader of the Middle East (Walker, 2009, pp. 504-505; Hintz, 2022, p. 564). Such self-perception has been accepted for its own sake as part of Turkishness, especially in the time of JDP rule. In addition to that, such identity has evolved with an Islamic edge, while JDP has been asserting the responsibility to protect Muslim interests both within Türkiye and across surrounding regions (Atmaca & Torun, 2022, pp. 120-121). Second, the Middle Eastern geopolitical and geo-cultural landscape has been immensely influenced by the Ottomans' efforts in integrative governance and transformative infrastructural reform across the 19th century. As historiography suggests, the origins of 21st-century sectarian identities in the region can be traced back to developments during the period of Tanzimat reforms (Neep, 2021; Schlaepfer, Bourmaud, & Hassan, 2020).

Since the USA's invasion of Iraq in 2003, Türkiye's primary concerns have increasingly stemmed from neighbouring territories and have related more and more to conventional security issues, i.e., preserving the country's territorial integrity (Oğuzlu, 2022, p. 504). The chaotic

landscape of the region—with decentralised states and the proliferation of militant semi-state and substate actors—potentially contained various types of dangers. Accordingly, persistent civil turmoil since 2011 in Iraq and Syria, around Türkiye's borders, has made Türkiye's threat perceptions more robust over Kurdish separatist movements (Kazan, 2005, p. 590; Aydin, 2021, p. 213; Hintz, 2022; Zanotti & Thomas, 2024). Another spillover effect of the Syrian civil war has been the refugees heading to the country, as more than 3 million of them had been living in Türkiye by 2024 (UNHCR, 2024). Although Ankara was relatively uninvolved in most of these conflicts, mounting PKK activism and regional ties made it play a bigger role in those conflicts (Zanotti & Thomas, 2024).

## **JDP's Security Policy and Threat Perceptions in Regional Context**

Since the JDP's rise to power in 2002, Türkiye has intervened both directly and indirectly in crises of the Middle East and South Caucasus and, occasionally, followed a highly activist security policy. This activism has not followed one or a consistent strategic direction, however. Ankara's actions have, instead, demonstrated strategic adaptability and pragmatism, with a relative shift in priorities and methods in response to evolving geosystemic stimuli (Oğuzlu & Han, 2023; Oğuzlu, 2022; Akkoyunlu, 2021; Mehmetcik & Çelik, 2022, p. 27). Moreover, it can be argued that irrespective of the evolution of the JDP's foreign policy across different phases, all along it has maintained an identity-centred agenda, albeit to varying degrees. At first, for example, JDP's domestic identity was pro-Western and pluralistic, but it grew Islamist and neo-Ottoman nationalist with Ottomanist Islamism enduring and gaining in saliency (Yavuz, 2022, p. 3; Duran, 2022; Köse & Bingöl, 2023). Against this background, the security policy traits of the JDP administration can be characterised in three phases, namely from 2002 to 2011, the period between 2011 and 2015, and the timeframe ranging from 2016 to 2024.

In the first period of unrivalled Western power preponderance in global power dynamics, Ankara's strategic interests were integrated with those of its Western allies' regional visions. That meant supporting, for instance, the USA-funded Greater Middle East Project, because Türkiye was to become an important player in turning the region from a Hobbesian to a Kantian security zone. Despite tensions over USA's support for Iraqi Kurds, Ankara's importance to Washington grew in the post-9/11 era. Namely, JDP had

asserted that Türkiye is a bridge between Islam and Europe and supports liberal democratisation. In that time, the President G. W. Bush of the USA promoted Türkiye as the "moderate" antidote to political Islam in the "War on Terror" (Oğuzlu & Han 2023, pp. 68-71; Oğuzlu, 2022, pp. 508-512; Akkoyunlu, 2021, pp. 247-248).

The second period—roughly from the 2011 Arab uprisings to Russia's intervention into the Syrian civil war in late 2015—saw Türkiye become more assertive both in the region and in ideological spheres. Initiated by an ever more multi-power geo-reality with emerging China, Russia and the Global South, Ankara diverged from Western priorities and went further to preserve its 'strategic autonomy' (Oğuzlu & Han 2023, pp. 72-73). This trend found its shape in changing Ankara's normative agenda, namely with a neo-Ottomanist vision that blends pro-Islamism and Turkish identity. In its extent, neo-Ottomanism envisions Türkiye to be the successor to the Ottoman Empire and hence envisages it in a more determinant supervisory function over the surrounding geography. Accordingly, this geography is perceived as part of Islamic civilisation, and thus, it deems the presence of the West and Russia as unnecessary there (Yavuz, 2022, p. 6; Atmaca & Torun, 2022, pp. 120-121; Hintz, 2022, p. 564). Consequently, the Erdoğan-Davutoğlu duo greeted the Arab Spring with open arms and then provided complete support to Sunni opposition groups in Syria along with pro-Islamic groups of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. JDP politicians hoped the Arab Spring would bring political unity among Muslim nations under Türkiye's supervision and mediation (Yavuz, 2022, p. 3; Atmaca & Torun, 2022, pp. 120-121; Akkoyunlu, 2021, p. 252; Hintz, 2022, p. 579).

However, Türkiye's regional ambitions declined as the Arab Spring failed to bring about the desired outcomes. Since 2016, Türkiye's proactive transformational stance has receded and begun "to demonstrate a more defensive and security-orientated character" (Oğuzlu, 2022, p. 504; Schenkkan, 2024). Turkish rulers realised the wide gap between their expectations and capabilities and made a strikingly pragmatic turn (Oğuzlu & Han, 2023, p. 73; Akkoyunlu, 2021, p. 258). Now, for Türkiye, the choice had been between the conflicting interests of the local powers—Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel—and also the fierce intervention of outsiders—Russia and the USA. As these parameters developed, Türkiye's ability to shape events on the ground became lesser (Oğuzlu, 2022, pp. 504-516). This period is also characterised by increasing stagnation in Türkiye's ties with Western nations, coupled with the deepening of a

pragmatic partnership with Russia (Coşkun et al., 2024, pp. 6-8). Türkiye's foreign policy became zero-sum and almost openly transactional (Stein, 2022). On the domestic side, the failed coup attempt in July 2016 intensified threat perceptions of the President Erdoğan's administration that Türkiye was facing an intervention from external forces to oust the JDP government from power (Withnall and Osborne, 2016). Moreover, the ongoing economic crisis and internal social and political polarisation left Ankara with little room to pursue transformational policies (Oğuzlu, 2022, p. 516; Pierini, 2024).

Nonetheless, such circumstances didn't result in Türkiye's withdrawal of its footprints from the region at all or giving up on maintaining its strategic autonomy from the West. Nor did it demonstrate the JDP's abandonment of Islamist and neo-Ottoman elements in its self-image. On the contrary, on the ideational side, the period saw an increased sense of being in a state of ontological danger, known as "problem of survival", in addition to the rise of anti-Americanist discourse and ideological resentment against USA involvement in regional matters fuelled by tendencies of Islamic nationalism (Atmaca & Torun, 2022; Yavuz, 2022). This tendency is reflected in the increasing militarisation of the Turkish security policy (Mehmetcik & Çelik, 2022). In the past years, through comparatively new priorities, Türkiye intervened in the militaries of Syria, Iraq, and Libya directly or indirectly and assisted in Azerbaijan and Ukraine (Daily Sabah, 2024a; Outzen, 2022b, December 22). In addition to that, Türkiye expanded its military presence through bases in Iraq, Somalia, Northern Cyprus, and Qatar, and outposts in Syria and an observation centre in Azerbaijan [until April, 2024] (Outzen, 2022b, December 22).

These foregoing trends of militarisation go hand in hand with Türkiye's buildup of its domestic military-industrial complex with indigenous systems since 2015. On this, the impressive performance of local UAVs, such as the Bayraktar TB2, in operations in Iraq, Syria, and Azerbaijan has put Türkiye at the forefront in exporting such products (Egeli et al., 2024, pp. 23-24). In 2025, Türkiye plans to spend a record \$47 billion on defence and security, according to the new government budget proposal (Soylu, 2024). This shows Türkiye adopting realpolitik values: self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and strategic autonomy to deter neighbouring hostile actors and preserve internal stability in Türkiye (Oğuzlu & Han, 2023, p. 74; Mehmetcik & Çelik, 2022, p. 25; Egeli et al., 2024, pp. 25-26; Zanotti & Thomas, 2024, pp. 6-7).

## Armed Conflict with PKK and Its Allies Within and Alongside Borders of Türkiye: Geo-historical Context



**Figure 2.** Kurdish Population in West Asia (Zanotti & Thomas, 2019a).

The Kurds number approximately 30 million across West Asia. The majority of them reside in Türkiye, Syria, Iraq, and Iran (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). In Türkiye, it is reported that Kurds number close to 19% of 85 million inhabitants (CIA, 2024). Most of them are related to Sunni Islam. In politics, although no nation state represents Kurdish identity exclusively, in Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq various political groups and regional non-state authorities—by far a majority of whom are secular—carry affinity with or representation of Kurdish identity (Zanotti and Thomas 2019a). Their demands are focused on achieving greater recognition of their identity and more opportunities for self-determination. Some of them are, to varying degrees, linked to the aspiration of establishing a pan-Kurdish state, despite strategic and ideological differences and competition among them (Şar, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024; Harris, 2018, pp. 104-107). Thus, as might be anticipated, efforts to align Kurdish populations with a separatist vision have become a source of intense threat perceptions in the three states of the post-Ottoman Middle East—Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq—as well as in Iran (Çalışkan, 2020, pp. 66-67). The Kurdish issue has thus acquired a transnational dimension, entailing dynamic links between the Kurdish organisations across those countries.

Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire, early Kurdish activism with a distinct political agenda was reason for keen alarm regarding Türkiye's territorial integrity and political cohesion. Anchored in the normative vision of “one nation, one flag, one state” (Tachau, 1963), the state perceived Kurdish activism as not only a sovereignty threat but also a challenge to

its homogenising national ethos (İçduygu et al., 1999). As such, Kurdish movements had been interpreted as posing a disruptive effect on Türkiye's integrative national self-understanding—the Turkish identity—in addition to having a disruptive potential on state sovereignty. The 1980s saw more organised Kurdish uprisings, emerging in extremist forms, notably the PKK—a militant organisation, which began its armed insurgency in 1984.

In the 1990s, armed activity by the PKK was at its peak, with sporadic ceasefires until 1998 (Zanotti & Thomas, 2019b). The 1990s witnessed an expansion from rural insurgency to Türkiye's cities with the employment of guerrilla warfare and indiscriminate attacks upon Turkish forces, state authorities, and anti-PKK Kurdish forces in the southeastern part of Anatolia. In exercising its own might, the organisation also attacked civilians and social spaces to inflict fear and to portray the state as powerless. In this time, its vision of "victory" was to establish a free Kurdish state, with little focus for political activity or cohesive programme (Ünal, 2016, p.40; UK Home Office, 2023, pp.20-21; Yeşiltaş, Özdemir, & Koru, 2022, pp.209-212). After the 1991 Gulf War, the PKK consolidated its bases in the northern part of Iraq too. Turkish authorities perceived these activities as a serious threat and feared that separatist demands would threaten stability in the southeastern part of the country, risk its territorial integrity, and propagate insecurity by attacking from the geographies beyond Türkiye's own borders (Kiran, 2001).

Consequently, Türkiye responded with launching extensive counter-insurgency operations, supported by aviation units, to contain the PKK both at home and across the northern part of Iraq. For the Turkish Army, the geostrategic conditions were comprised of the mountainous terrain of southeastern Anatolia, as well as the porous borders with Iran, Iraq, and Syria, where the PKK was conducting operations and receiving foreign support. Since 1983, Ankara had launched a series of cross-border campaigns to strike PKK strongholds. These began with air raids in 1983, followed by ground operations approved by Baghdad in 1986–87 and a major airstrike on the Hakurk camp in March 1992. In 1995, Türkiye launched Operation Twilight, with the deployment of 35,000 troops along a 220 km front to disrupt PKK operations and destroy hideouts. The operation ended in late April 1995, with large quantities of PKK ammunition seized. After 1991, Türkiye decided to maintain a military presence in the northern part of Iraq and thus stationed 2,000–2,500 troops and set up liaison offices in key cities of the northern part of Iraq to monitor and counter PKK activities

(Keskin, 2008, pp. 61-63; Antonopoulos, 1996, pp. 33-34). Losing battles against Türkiye's campaigns, the PKK implicitly acknowledged its military defeat in 1994 (Ünal, 2016, p. 38). The conflict's first phase closed in 1998 with the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the group's unilateral declaration of a ceasefire (Zanotti & Thomas, 2019b).

In parallel, JDP's rise to power in 2002 became an unambiguous ideological reversal of Türkiye's policy on the Kurdish problem. It started to become relatively accommodative on the basis of cultural pluralism but preserved an anti-separatist stance. Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's 2005 speech while on a visit to Diyarbakır confessed mistakes of the state in addressing Kurdish question and supported Kurdish cultural rights in Türkiye's unitary structure (Sabah, 2009). In 2009, JDP made early reforms, called the Kurdish Opening or Solution Process, with initiatives such as introducing Kurdish-language television and radio broadcasting, revitalising indigenous names for villages, and appointing Kurdish-speaking individuals to official positions. In parallel, the discourse around Kurdish identity has evolved from an ethnic categorisation to a culture-centred concept, aligning with broader Turkish identity over Sunni interpretation of Islam. Such a discourse of Muslim solidarity was hoped to blur of ethnic frontiers and reinterpretation of Kurdish identity (Köse & Bingöl, 2023; Duran, 2022; AK Parti, 2019, March).

Dissatisfied with JDP's reconciliatory steps, in 2004, again, the PKK launched its insurgency from bases in Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-held territories in the northern part of Iraq. From 2004 to 2013, in order to garner political responses rather than military victory, the organisation attacked with asymmetrical tactics, such as targeted assassinations, bombings, and kidnappings (Zanotti & Thomas, 2019b; Ünal, 2016, pp. 43-44; Yeşiltas, Özdemir, & Koru, 2022, pp. 219-223). In response, from 2007 to 2008, Türkiye again launched several operations against PKK militants in the northern part of Iraq, which involved airstrikes and a ground operation with 10,000 troops (Keskin, 2008, pp. 69-72; Tavarnise & Arsu, 2008).

When civil war erupted in Syria in 2011, the PKK expanded its geographical influence further with its Syrian partner, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), in order to exploit the power vacuum created by the civil war. The PYD soon established the People's Protection Units (YPG) as its armed wing and seized control of territories located in the north of Syria. By 2013, they declared the Rojava region as an autonomous unit, which, in turn, intensified the Turkish perceptions regarding the PKK's regionalisation of the Kurdish

issue (Harris, 2018, p. 120). This rise coincided with the emergence of threats from the Islamic State (IS). With the USA's airstrikes supporting the YPG's defence of Kobani in 2014–2015 against IS, the PYD gained the opportunity to enhance its international recognition (Çağaptay, 2020, pp. 120–123; Sadri Alibabalu, 2022, pp. 157–158; Çalışkan, 2020). Facing this, Türkiye saw PYD's expansion and legitimisation efforts along its borders, coupled with the USA's cooperation with them, as a catastrophic threat to the core value considerations (BBC News, 2014; Schenkkkan, 2024).

Remarkably, in 2012, Türkiye started actively supporting the Syrian uprising against Assad forces by helping anti-regime Islamist rebels as proxies and allowing them to use Turkish soil as a base. This support was instrumental, as Syrian defectors from the army established the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was headquartered in Türkiye, where its operations were coordinated with Turkish intelligence. Hence, Türkiye provided a logistical hub in the flow of military aid, with weapons and equipment flooding across its southern border into Syria. Still, the FSA failed to expand its political influence on the Syrian scene in the initial years of the war. Meanwhile, Assad counter-moved in 2012 by withdrawing troops from Kurdish-majority border areas and allowed the PKK-linked YPG to fill the void. This allowed PYD to become more active against Türkiye's support for the rebels (Çağaptay, 2020, pp. 117–118, pp. 120–121; Pierret, 2021, pp. 60–62). YPG, whom Turkish authorities perceived as the proxy of the PKK, consolidated its grip on strategic positions, including the capture of Kobane in 2015 and the establishment of semi-autonomous Kurdish cantons in the northern part of Syria. In response, Türkiye began to adopt a more confrontational stance against Kurdish advances.

This was the time when Türkiye's interactions with the KRG gained a particular importance. Relations, in fact, were initially strained as a result of PKK activities on KRG-held territory but began to improve in 2007 on the levels of energy contracts and cooperation on PKK activity. The KRG subsequently became of economic interest to Türkiye through its trade routes and energy exports. Note that relations saw short stagnation when the KRG of President Barzani started a vote for independence in 2017. This angered Ankara, and it cut off connections and halted flights between Istanbul and Erbil with the fear that possible independence would strengthen Kurdish movements known as YPG operating in Syria and PKK targeting Türkiye. But by 2018, JDP's pragmatist orientation prevailed, and relations restarted. Today, under the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the KRG opposes the PKK and regards

Türkiye as critical to its autonomy. (Okuducu, 2024; Çağaptay, 2020, pp. 199-203).

In the course of time, the USA-Türkiye alliance eroded firstly because of differing Syria policies and Türkiye's growing ties with Russia. The breakdown began in 2013, when JDP leaders perceived USA's support for the YPG as betrayal. Ankara was worried that Kurdish militants were moving toward the northern part of Syria and reaching out to Türkiye's borders. When violent activities of the PKK expanded, President Obama's 2015 decision to arm forces of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) further heightened Turkish alarm. In 2017, these strides pushed Türkiye to purchase Russia's S-400 missile defence system, which many analysts consider a gesture of Ankara's pivot to Moscow. The USA responded to such a gesture by sanctioning Türkiye and excluding it from the coveted F-35 programme. Secondly, the political repercussions of the military coup of 2016 in Türkiye became another reason that pushed JDP elites to further pivot to Russia. Here, despite differences, Türkiye and Russia could manage to coordinate pragmatically against the IS and Kurdish forces in Syria. They established the Astana platform together with Iran in 2017, and it provided an opportunity to normalise Türkiye's military operations internationally in the northern part of Syria. Türkiye, then, used the Astana process to assert control over areas near its southern border (Çağaptay, 2020, pp. 106-110, pp. 127-131; Coşkun et al., 2024; Siccardi, 2021, pp. 15-19; Stein, 2022).

It is important to mention that the 2013-2015 Türkiye-PKK peace process and ceasefire impeded when PKK and its partners was empowered in the war against the IS in Syria and Iraq. Kurdish gains in Syrian territory (Rojava) and Sinjar with the help of USA-YPG cooperation cemented Turkish fears about a "PKK corridor" threat to national security. Furthermore, the 2014 Kobane crisis which is marked by Türkiye's refusing to support Kurdish fighters against the IS, eroded trust between parties during the peace process. Perceiving PYD presence as a game-changer capable of radically altering the PKK position, Türkiye abandoned peace talks and pushed for military action to disintegrate PYD local rule (Savran, 2020; Centre for Preventive Action, 2023).

Following the collapse of the normalisation process, the conflict between the PKK and Türkiye extended beyond traditional grounds in the southern part of Türkiye. The escalation of 2015-2016 included urban violence and PKK terrorism (Palmer & Holtz, 2023). International Crisis Group's (ICG) visual explainer of 20 September 2024 tells us that, since 2015, over 2,130 Turkish civilians and security officials have

been murdered in the course of the conflict against the PKK (International Crisis Group, 2024). To curb the PKK insurgency, Türkiye has launched multiple massive military interventions and operations within northern parts of Syria and Iraq (Table 1). As of December 2024, in Syria there is a low-level military conflict between Türkiye, along with opposition forces, and the SDF (Reuters, 2024, December 19); in Iraq, Operation Claw-Lock by Türkiye also persists (Şimşek, 2024a; Ağaçyetiştiren & Şimşek, 2024).

Military Action/Start/Location	Operational Goals	Operational Outcomes
Operation Euphrates Shield Date: 24 August 2016 Location: Northern part of Syria, al-Bab region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To prevent the establishment of a YPG-controlled zone in al-Bab region.</li> <li>To clear the IS from the border region, particularly in key towns such as Jarablus and al-Bab (Pierret, 2021; Ülgen &amp; Kasapoğlu, 2017).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cleared IS forces from the towns of Jarablus and al-Bab.</li> <li>Deterred the PYD-YPG forces, and thus, disrupted their efforts to connect eastern territories of the northern part of Syria under their de facto control with Afrin in the west (Pierret, 2021; Ülgen &amp; Kasapoğlu, 2017).</li> </ul>
Operation Olive Branch Date: 20 January 2018 Location: Northern part of Syria, Afrin canton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To take control of Afrin from PYD-YPG forces to weaken their consolidation in a border area with the northern part of Syria</li> <li>To reinforce the geo-strategic gains made during Operation Euphrates Shield (Bekdil, 2018; Aliriza &amp; Yekeler, 2018; Çevik, 2022; Erkuş, 2018).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Afrin was effectively captured by Turkish forces and Syrian rebel allies after a two-month campaign and significantly boosted Türkiye's military and political influence in the northern part of Syria (Bekdil, 2018; Aliriza &amp; Yekeler, 2018; Çevik, 2022; Erkuş, 2018).</li> </ul>
Operation Peace Spring Date: 9 October 2019 Location: Northern part of Syria (Between Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To establish a 30 km (19 miles) safe zone inside Syria and to push YPG fighters back (Reuters, 2019, October 6; Tziarras &amp; Ioannou, 2019; Zanotti &amp; Thomas, 2019b; Uras, 2019; Çevik, 2022).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Achieved rapid territorial gains, extending from Tell Abyad to Ras al-Ayn. It effectively pushed YPG forces further away from the border area (Reuters, 2019, October 6; Tziarras &amp; Ioannou, 2019; Zanotti &amp; Thomas, 2019b; Uras, 2019; Çevik, 2022).</li> </ul>
Operation Spring Shield Date: 28 February 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To stop Assad regime's advances in order to protect its non-state rebel allies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Halted the Assad regime's advance, with the rebel forces successfully reclaiming some territory.</li> </ul>

<p>Location: Northern part of Syria, Idlib province</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and potential refugees' further influx into Türkiye (Pierret, 2021).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The critical M5 highway (linking Damascus to Aleppo) remained under the Assad regime's control, marking a partial setback for Turkish objectives (Pierret, 2021).</li> </ul>
<p>The Claw Series &amp; Claw-Lock (Claw 1-3, Lightning, Thunderbolt, Eagle 1-2, Lock) Date: 27 May 2019 – Present Location: Northern part of Iraq</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To diminish PKK's capability for conducting terror attacks that originated from the northern part of Iraq and thus, to strengthen Türkiye's border security.</li> <li>To clear the border areas in Northern Iraq from PKK fighters under the strategic slogan of "eliminating terrorism at its source".</li> <li>To take control of bases established by the PKK.</li> <li>To disrupt and weaken the logistical networks of the PKK and push it southwards and away from the border.</li> <li>To reduce cross-border movements within the Türkiye-Iraq-Syria triangle (Ministry of Defence; Morrow &amp; Alhas, 2019; Outzen, 2022a; Şimşek, 2024a; Şimşek, 2024b; Duman, 2024).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Created a buffer zone to protect Turkish territory from PKK infiltration and attacks.</li> <li>Established a network of bases and operational capabilities which allows to reach deeper into areas previously regarded as PKK safe havens.</li> <li>With Operation Claw-Lock, Türkiye expanded the buffer zone (approx. 15-30 km deep), with Zap, Metina, and Hakurk cleared of PKK presence.</li> <li>Weakened PKK infrastructure in the northern part of Iraq (Hakurk, Sinat-Haftanin) and severed critical logistical corridors linking Iraq and Syria.</li> <li>Cut off PKK's access to key rear bases in Iraq's Qandil mountains (Ministry of Defence; Morrow &amp; Alhas, 2019; Outzen, 2022a; Şimşek, 2024a; Şimsek, 2024b; Duman, 2024).</li> </ul>

**Table 1:** Chronology of Türkiye's Key Military Operations in Syria and Iraq since 2016.

It is worth considering that many states and international organisations, like the USA, Russia and also the United Nations (UN), condemned Türkiye's offensive in northern Syria. But most of that was only verbalised and didn't translate into de facto deterrents, interventions, or sanctions. Such a disparity is best illustrated by Washington's approach. The Trump and Biden administrations both declared that Ankara's actions endangered the fight against IS and destabilised the region (Outzen, 2024). Additionally, when Washington withdrew its forces from the northeastern part of Syria in 2019, it threatened to sanction Türkiye if its offensive

got out of hand (Gunter & Yavuz, 2020). Later, under Biden, the USA restrengthened its presence in Syria and sharpened rhetoric against Ankara but infrequently took the further step in action (Outzen, 2024). In the end, it seems that Türkiye's clout in NATO and its enhanced strategic value were the reasons which stopped Washington from acting in any manner that would have unpleasant consequences (Arkan, 2021). Moscow, for its part, behaved with cautious pragmatism. Similarly, it condemned Türkiye's outright unilateral intervention and advocated respect for Syrian territorial integrity but did little that could be considered confrontationist. All it did was to arrange buffer zones and enable truce arrangements with Ankara (Yue & Zhao, 2020). On the other hand, the UN put stress on the human suffering and sent out alarms of civilian casualties, mass displacement, and increasing instability (Asharq Al Awsat, 2020). Yet, the Security Council avoided deciding on binding resolutions and thus, limited itself to calling for political talks to resume.

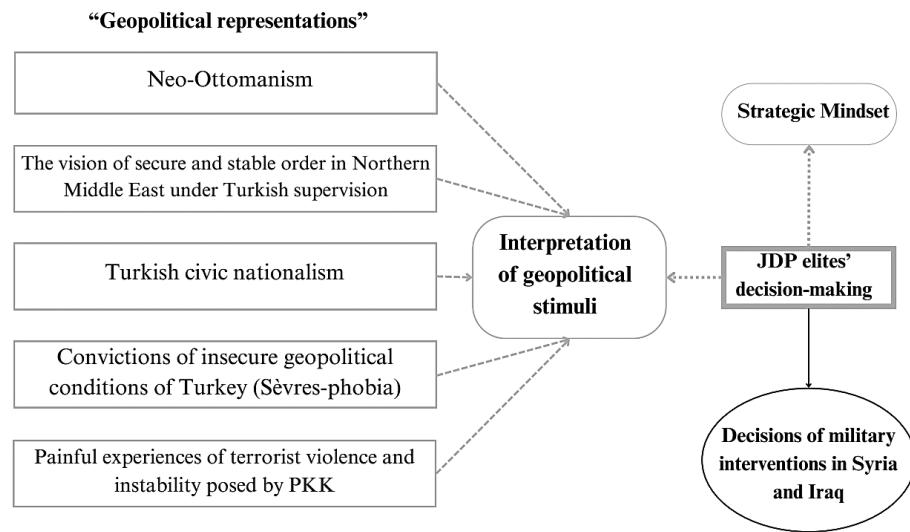
## Discussion

Our theoretically informed observations indicate that upon the failure of Türkiye-backed Syrian opposition forces to expand their influence in the early phase of the Syrian conflict and the breakdown of the ceasefire with the PKK, Türkiye faced an unstable reality along its borders with Syria and Iraq. We consider the following points as triggers of military interventions: a) prospects of greater autonomy for the PKK and linked groups in the northern part of Syria; b) the PKK's resuming insurgency combined with terrorist actions since 2015; c) the PKK's sustained "infrastructure" in the northern part of Iraq and its control of a corridor from Aleppo to Mosul; d) unfavourable conditions for prospective economic infrastructure in Iraq; and e) humanitarian catastrophe in Syria with the potential for spillover into Türkiye. Applying a neoclassical geostrategic analysis also showed that these components formed the basis of the strategic options available to Turkish decision-makers.

But more importantly, what counts in this situation is how the elite understood and framed the encountered state of affairs and used such a mental construct to exert the will (Morgado, 2020; Morgado, 2023). Accordingly, it is revealed that Türkiye's military interventions in Syria and Iraq since 2016 were also shaped by a confluence of JDP's perceived ontological threats and strategic opportunities (Figure 3). In this respect, first, the perceived danger of the PKK and related groups establishing a state or autonomous entity, often framed as "Terroristan", was

conceived as a big danger (Daily Sabah, 2024b). Ankara's concerns particularly intensified when the PKK was creating a corridor toward the Eastern Mediterranean that would connect the organisation to global networks through the local logistical links (Erkuş, 2018). Second, Turkish political elites thought that military presence and establishment of transitional order in Syria would give Türkiye the opportunity to set the country's post-conflict trajectory in a more favourable direction. Third, it is apparent that Türkiye aspires to establish a land corridor—the 'Development Road Project'—that connects Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria to facilitate the trade and investment network with potential investments of \$17 billion. To secure this route through Mosul, just 30 km from Gare in Iraq's north, was crucial to severing the PKK's logistical links and stabilising the region against IS-sourced threats (Yıldırım, 2024; Okuducu, 2024). Therefore, it can be argued that the geostrategic rationale behind Türkiye's military operations and its subsequent presence in Syria and Iraq since 2016 is about dealing with a fragile geosystem, with the ultimate aim of configuring the conditions of the border regions to its favour. It also has a preventive character that intends to forestall more adverse shifts by PYD-YPG in Syria and PKK forces in the northern part of Iraq through motivations of "better now than later" and "eliminating terrorism at its source" (Levy, 2011, pp. 87-89). Namely, greater future advantages for the PKK and PYD-YPG troops would increase their margin of victory in subsequent stages of the conflict and, perhaps, strengthen their bargaining leverage in post-civil war settings.

We also found that perceptions of threats and opportunities are also shaped by the JDP's geopolitical representations and visions (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** JDP Elites' Processing the Geopolitical Stimuli and Deciding on the Decisions of Military Interventions

JDP elites arguably incorporate Turkish-Islamic nationalism in the form of one that is not ethnic but civic and also, neo-Ottomanism. In the neo-Ottomanist glance, Kurdish insurgency is framed as a threat to both territorial integrity and the vision of Muslim solidarity, often employing the concept of “fitnah” (the discord among brothers) in official discourse. Because JDP's neo-Ottomanist aspirations consider Türkiye as a diplomatic, cultural, and economic leader of security and economic-cultural cooperation in the Northern Middle East and South Caucasus. Particularly with the fact that the Arab Spring did not bring about the expected outcome until 2016, such a neo-Ottoman vision became milder to some extent. Conceptually, it is now a normative basis for interdependence among the nations of the region in the eyes of JDP elites. Therefore, it would be an overestimated diagnosis to characterise the Turkish military actions as a direct expression of the JDP's military expansionism and irredentism.

If one asks, how effective then is Türkiye's military intervention strategy? It can be said that apparently, since 2016, Türkiye's embracing of a preventive action in Syria and Iraq has resulted in strategic gains in an operational and strategic sense. Turkish forces effectively disrupted the PKK and linked groups' logistical chains. Also, buffer zones were created in Syria and Iraq, which is the rationale for securing Türkiye from ontological threats outside of borders. As geographic boundaries, they also shield Türkiye from yet another wave of refugees. Meanwhile, Türkiye's military presence in Syria—which was solidified by its control of proxies who initially

assumed command within the post-Assad reality, worked in cohesion with Ankara and governed large pieces of Syrian territory—gave it the leverage of controlling the future of Syria vis-à-vis the USA, Russia and Iran. But certainly, there remain other tasks to be accomplished for Türkiye to address the Kurdish question constructively at home and in the geostrategic landscape of the new post-Assad period in the Northern Middle East.

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