



Rebordering Syria: Critical Geopolitics of Türkiye's Border Discourse, 2019–2025

Suriye'nin Yeniden Sınırlandırılması: Türkiye'nin Sınır Söyleminin Eleştirel Jeopolitiği, 2019–2025

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation of Türkiye's discourse on its border with Syria between 2019 and 2025. Its aim is to analyze how the border has been reconceptualized not only as a tangible security frontier but also as a symbolic instrument reflecting national identity and regional strategic influence. The period was selected due to the post-Assad process, the redefinition of the Kurdish issue and significant shifts in regional power dynamics. The analysis is conducted within a critical geopolitical framework, employing discourse analysis of statements by Turkish political elites, policy documents and public pronouncements. Findings indicate that borders are not merely physical lines, but dynamic geopolitical constructs shaped by political narratives, identity formation and strategic objectives. Türkiye's reconstruction efforts in Syria, through infrastructure, social services and development projects, have transformed the border into a multidimensional space where security, political influence and economic tools intersect, reflecting efforts to maintain regional stability and strengthen strategic coordination.

ÖZ

Bu makale, Türkiye'nin Suriye sınırına ilişkin söyleminin 2019–2025 döneminde geçirdiği dönüşümü incelemektedir. Çalışmanın amacı, sınırın yalnızca somut bir güvenlik hattı olarak değil, aynı zamanda ulusal kimliği ve bölgesel stratejik etkiyi yansıtan sembolik bir araç olarak nasıl yeniden kavramsallaştırdığını analiz etmektir. İncelenen dönem, Esad sonrası süreç, Kürt meselesinin yeniden tanımlanması ve bölgesel güç dengelerinde yaşanan önemli değişimler nedeniyle seçilmiştir. Analiz, eleştirel jeopolitik bir çerçeve içinde yürütülmüş; Türk siyasi elitlerinin açıklamaları, politika belgeleri ve kamusal söylemleri üzerine yapılan söylem analizine dayanmaktadır. Bulgular, sınırların yalnızca fiziksel çizgiler olmadığını; politik anlatılar, kimlik inşası ve stratejik hedefler tarafından şekillenen dinamik jeopolitik kurgular olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Türkiye'nin Suriye'de altyapı, sosyal hizmetler ve kalkınma projeleri aracılığıyla yürüttüğü yeniden inşa faaliyetleri, sınırı güvenlik, siyasal etki ve ekonomik araçların kesiştiği çok boyutlu bir mekâna dönüştürmüştür; bu durum, bölgesel istikrarı sürdürme ve stratejik eşgüdümü güçlendirme yönündeki çabaları yansıtmaktadır.

Keywords

Türkiye, Suriya, Border Discourse, Critical Geopolitics, Post-Assad Era

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Türkiye, Suriye, Sınır Söylemi, Eleştirel Jeopolitik, Esad Sonrası Dönem

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INTRODUCTION

Türkiye occupies a geostrategic position at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa, within the Mediterranean Basin. Most of its territory lies in Anatolia, while the Thrace region is located in Europe. This dual continental identity has continued throughout its history. Since the establishment of the Republic, Türkiye has sought to distance its geopolitical identity, at least in part, from the Middle East. At the same time, it has presented itself as both an Asian and a European actor. The Republic's foreign policy has traditionally been based on status quo orientation, Westernization and the priority of domestic stability. Border policies, shaped by security, national unity and secularism, have reinforced internal order. They have also protected the nation-state by constructing an "other" beyond its borders. During the Cold War, Türkiye became a strategic partner against Soviet expansionism through its integration into NATO. In this period, its geopolitical discourse was largely influenced by Western perspectives.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Türkiye's strategic importance for the West declined relatively in the early 2000s. At the same time, new relations developed with the Turkic republics of Central Asia, and broader regional changes occurred. These developments created an identity dilemma for Türkiye. The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP or Ak Party) represented continuity with certain traditional policies. However, it also marked the beginning of a gradual transformation in geopolitical discourse and a more proactive effort to expand Türkiye's regional role.

Syria, located to Türkiye's southeast, shares its longest land border with Türkiye, stretching 911 kilometers. Relations between the two countries have historically fluctuated due to unresolved territorial, water-related and security disputes. After Syria gained independence in 1946, bilateral relations were shaped by the Hatay issue, disagreements over the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and concerns about terrorism (Kodaman, 2007). The Hatay question, rooted in the 1921 Ankara Agreement and subsequent League of Nations decisions, continued to affect relations even after Hatay joined Türkiye in 1939. Similarly, disputes over the Euphrates and Tigris created long-term tensions. Türkiye emphasized sovereign rights over transboundary waters, while Syria referred to principles of international water law and downstream rights (Altunışık & Tür, 2006).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Türkiye's Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) and related water policies added new tensions to bilateral relations. During the same period, Syria's support for the PKK and other terrorist organizations pushed relations to a critical stage. This crisis led to the Adana Agreement in 1998 after strong diplomatic pressure. With this agreement, Syria recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization and committed to ending its activities (Gökcan, 2018).

The period between 1998 and 2011 is often described as the most cooperative phase in Türkiye–Syria relations. Diplomatic rapprochement was supported by growing economic ties, improved border security and joint military exercises. A major milestone was Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s visit to Ankara in January 2004. This visit laid the foundation for stronger political and economic cooperation. Later that year, the Free Trade Agreement further institutionalized economic relations and placed bilateral ties on a friendly basis (Kirişçi, 2005). During this time, Türkiye followed a diplomacy of peace and cooperation in line with its ambition to act as a regional game-setter. It actively participated in regional and global platforms under the zero problems with neighbors policy.

The protests that began in Tunisia in 2010 quickly spread across the region and became known as the Arab Spring. While regime changes occurred in Libya, Yemen and Egypt, Syria did not experience a similar transition. In 2011, opposition movements in Syria intensified, especially after security forces opened fire on civilians in Deraa. The situation escalated rapidly. These developments increased instability within Syria and forced neighboring states, including Türkiye, to reconsider their security approaches and foreign policy strategies.

The prolonged Syrian conflict reshaped the Middle East’s geopolitical landscape. Regional powers had to reassess their security doctrines and foreign policy discourses. In this context, Türkiye stands out because of its significant shift in its approach to the Syrian border. Previously, Ankara emphasized soft power diplomacy and the zero problems narrative. After 2019, however, official discourse increasingly highlighted territorial sovereignty, border security and strategic autonomy. This transformation occurred alongside cross-border military operations and migration management policies. Together, these developments created a strategic framework through which Ankara aimed to strengthen its influence in the context of a potential post-Assad order and Syria’s reconstruction.

This study contributes to the literature on critical geopolitics and Turkish foreign policy by examining Türkiye’s changing border discourse in the Syrian conflict from 2019 to 2025. It emphasizes the interaction of discourse, identity and spatial politics, showing that borders are not only physical lines but also symbolic and political spaces. Drawing on the theoretical framework of critical geopolitics, this study applies discourse analysis to explore how Turkish policymakers have reconceptualized the Syrian border. The border is examined both as a concrete security frontier and as a symbolic instrument for expressing national identity and projecting strategic influence. The study relies on policy statements, official speeches and strategic documents. It shows that Türkiye’s approach to its southern border has been reshaped through a process of rebordering. In this process, the Syrian border is framed not only as a physical boundary



but also as a central space for national security, geopolitical projection and identity construction. This perspective extends beyond traditional cartographic lines. It includes the redefinition of cross-border spaces, actors and institutional arrangements. The period between 2019 and 2025 thus represents a critical juncture. During these years, Türkiye reconceptualized the Syrian border through the lenses of security, influence and identity. This transformation provides an important reference point for understanding the country's broader regional strategic shift.

Critical Geopolitics: Rethinking Space, Power and Representation

The mid-twentieth century marked a turning point in geographical thought. Scholars began to connect the physical and social dimensions of space more closely. Earlier studies had focused mainly on mapping spatial relations, such as the location of cities and patterns of interaction. They paid limited attention to the social and political aspects of space. This gap contributed to the emergence of political geography and later geopolitics as distinct academic fields. Before becoming institutionalized, geopolitics drew on philosophy, history and geography to explain the relationship between territory, human activity and spatial dynamics.

Etymologically, geopolitics combines the Greek *geo* (earth, place) and *politics* (governance). In its classical sense, it refers to the political management of geographic space. This understanding reflects the assumptions of traditional geopolitical theory. Critical geopolitics, however, rejects the idea that geography determines politics. It argues that geopolitical claims are discursive constructions shaped primarily by power relations and political authority, rather than by fixed geographic realities. As a form of power/knowledge, geopolitics emerged during the period of imperial rivalry between the 1870s and 1945, especially in Europe and particularly in Britain. It became institutionalized alongside colonial expansion and industrial modernization. This era was not only a regional transformation but a global restructuring of power. In addition to Britain, other major powers—including Russia, France, Italy, the United States, Germany and later Japan—developed their own strategic and bureaucratic interpretations of geopolitics.

Classical geopolitical thought, grounded in realist assumptions, introduced key concepts such as threat and danger. It structured foreign-policy discourse around binary distinctions, including inside versus outside, strong versus weak and anarchy versus security. As David Campbell (1998) shows in his analysis of the Gulf Crisis, threats are not objective facts but political constructions. When George H. W. Bush announced the deployment of U.S. forces to Saudi Arabia, he linked American identity directly to the presence of danger. This example illustrates that threats are defined through interpretation. States secure their identities by representing certain actors or situations

as dangerous. In this sense, the construction of threat becomes central to foreign-policy practice.

Political leaders often rely on geographical narratives in their rhetoric. They construct geopolitical discourses rooted in specific spatial realities. These narratives shape how space is imagined and help consolidate power and legitimacy. Drawing on the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, critical geopolitics challenges such narratives. It argues that borders and territories are not fixed or objective. They are dynamic mental constructs that are continually reshaped by those in power. From this perspective, geopolitics concerns symbolic landscapes embedded in human perception. Borders are drawn as much in the mind as on the map. Gearóid Ó Tuathail identifies three shared principles within critical geopolitics. First, geopolitics is discursive and context-dependent. Second, it operates through an ocular-centric system of power/knowledge. Third, it is inherently subjective and functions as a strategic resource for states and policymakers (Ó Tuathail, 1996).

Critical geopolitics developed from the broader tradition of Critical Theory in international relations. This tradition is rooted in the Frankfurt School and combines theoretical analysis with historical inquiry. It focuses on capitalism, socialism, labor movements and historical materialism. By the 1980s, postmodern critiques increasingly challenged the state-centric determinism of classical geopolitics. They reframed geopolitics as an ideologically loaded mode of analysis rather than a neutral science. Early critiques, such as Karl Wittfogel's intervention in 1929, argued that geopolitics served imperialist capitalism and anticipated its future needs, challenging deterministic thinkers like Karl Haushofer (Dalby, 1991). During both World Wars, geopolitical reasoning was used to legitimize territorial expansion and warfare. The Cold War later divided the world into ideological blocs: the East, the West and the Third World. Metaphors such as Winston Churchill's (1946) Iron Curtain speech reinforced these binary identity constructions and supported strategies such as NATO's containment policy and the Truman Doctrine.

In the post-Cold War period, the concept of security changed significantly. NATO's 1991 Strategic Concept recognized the declining nuclear threat but emphasized instability in resource-rich regions considered vital for Western prosperity. The 9/11 attacks further demonstrated how geopolitical narratives are constructed around spatial and identity-based threat perceptions. Concepts such as terrorism became central to foreign-policy discourse.

French geographer Yves Lacoste (2012) argues that spatial awareness has weakened in modern societies. As public understanding of territorial boundaries declines, it becomes easier for power structures to control space. Lacoste defines



geopolitics as a two-stage process of spatialization. The first stage involves the political rewriting of space through interconnected operations. The second stage includes deconstruction, which removes established meanings, and regionalization, which reconstructs space with new ideological content.

Political actors frequently build their discourses on geographical reasoning. In doing so, they produce specific geopolitical narratives grounded in their spatial context. Through these narratives, policymakers develop strategies that consolidate power and legitimacy. This process is subjective and shaped by interests. It contrasts with classical geopolitics, which treats geography as fixed and uses it to stabilize actor identities. Lacoste's argument that geography becomes a form of knowledge that legitimizes political power—and thus turns into a political instrument—captures this dynamic clearly.

Border as a Discourse: Security, Identity and Symbolicity

In critical geopolitics, language and discourse are central. Geopolitical imaginaries are created and maintained through discourse. Within this perspective, the concept of the border is especially important. A border is not only a physical line. It is also a symbolic tool through which security, identity and political meaning are expressed.

Before analyzing the border as a discursive construct, it is useful to recall the tripartite typology developed by Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby in *Rethinking Geopolitics* (Dalby & O'Tuathail, 1998). They identify three types of geopolitics. First, formal geopolitics is produced by state institutions, think tanks and strategic research centers. Second, practical geopolitics is evident in the speeches, decisions, and policies of political leaders and bureaucrats. Third, popular geopolitics is disseminated through media, literature, cinema and other cultural channels. Together, these three dimensions shape perceptions of identity, danger and security. Formal geopolitics plays a key role in constructing the self/other distinction by assigning security and threat to particular regions or cultural areas. Practical geopolitics turns these ideas into foreign policy actions and discourse. Popular geopolitics reinforces them through mass communication and cultural representation.

Building on this framework, John Agnew argues that geopolitical discourse cannot be separated from the transnational political economy (Agnew, 2002). The Westphalian model treats the state as a sovereign and self-contained territorial unit. However, Agnew contends that states are deeply embedded in global economic structures. They cannot be analyzed in isolation. By referring to institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, he shows that power today is not only territorial.

Geopolitical agency increasingly depends on forms of collective power that go beyond traditional state borders (Nye, 2004).

From this perspective, the international political economy is not a fixed or geographically predetermined system. It is socially constructed. Critical approaches reject the realist claim that the international system is naturally anarchic. Instead, they see it as a discursive and practical field shaped by great powers to legitimize their hegemonic interests (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995). The division of the world into territorial states is therefore neither inevitable nor natural.

Borders are closely linked to statehood and sovereignty. They play a foundational role in forming and maintaining political identities. A border is more than a line on a map. It is imagined and reimagined in both collective and individual consciousness. In this process, identity is continuously reshaped. According to Anderson (1996), borders have four main dimensions. First, they function as instruments of state policy. Governments attempt to redefine borders to serve their interests. Second, borders indicate the limits of state control. Maintaining border integrity is essential for sovereignty. When this control weakens—through uncontrolled flows of people, goods or information—the authority of the state is questioned. Third, borders act as markers of political identity. They are powerful ideological symbols connected to nationalism, myths of territorial unity and beliefs about the state's natural integrity. Fourth, borders are discursive constructions. Their meaning depends on the narratives surrounding them, and these narratives change according to the ruling's interest. Legal, diplomatic and political discourses each interpret borders differently.

A central insight of critical geopolitics is that borders separate not only territory but also ideas. They mark the boundary between the "secure inside" and the "anarchic outside." The distinctions between "here" and "there," and between the "domestic" and the "foreign," are both material and mental. Their meanings are constantly redefined.

In the era of globalization, borders increasingly move beyond their geographic form and acquire symbolic and abstract meanings. The Berlin Wall is a classic example. Although it was a physical structure, its deeper significance lay in its symbolic division of political identities. As globalization challenges the homogenizing logic of the nation-state, borders become contested spaces. In these spaces, political authority, identity and sovereignty are negotiated. Drawing or blurring a border is, therefore, not only a spatial act but also a way of producing meaning and projecting power. The process of spatializing an area within borders also entails defining the subjects inhabiting it. In this sense, assigning identities to subjects becomes central to the formation of the space's own identity. This, in turn, plays an active role in shaping economic relations, security issues, and both domestic and foreign policy.



The emergence of the state is closely connected to the concept of the border. In addition to natural boundaries, mental boundaries also shape the state. These mental boundaries refer to the symbolic and cognitive meanings attached to space. The knowledge produced through these meanings allows those in power to exercise authority over territory and to legitimize it publicly. Changes in borders, therefore, depend largely on the political priorities and strategies of ruling elites.

Reimagining the Syrian Border: Türkiye's Strategic Discourse in Transition

Situated at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa, Türkiye holds a highly strategic position in the Mediterranean Basin. It is often described as the meeting point of the "Old World" continents. Most of its territory lies in Asia (Anatolia), while a smaller part lies in Europe (Thrace). This geography has created a dual continental identity. Since the Republic's founding, Türkiye has sought to distance itself from a Middle Eastern geopolitical identity. Instead, it has presented itself as both Asian and European.

Historically, Turkish foreign policy has been shaped by two main pillars: protection of the status quo and Westernization. In the early Republican era, the state focused on internal consolidation and stability. It adopted a cautious approach toward regional politics and aligned itself with Western political norms. Security concerns strongly influenced this period. The Kemalist geopolitical vision centered on territorial integrity, national unity and secularism. Borders were crucial to all three principles. They clearly separated the nation-state from the outside world. While they reinforced internal homogeneity, they also constructed an external "other." This understanding shaped Türkiye's regional posture and its perception of external issues.

During the Cold War, Türkiye became firmly integrated into the Western bloc. It joined NATO and positioned itself as a strategic ally against Soviet expansionism. Western identity frameworks largely shaped its geopolitical discourse. Within this perspective, Türkiye was portrayed as a bridge, an ally and a military partner of the Euro-Atlantic community.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye faced an identity dilemma. Without the Soviet threat, its strategic importance for the West became less clear. In *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington described Türkiye as neither fully Western nor fully Middle Eastern. He suggested that Türkiye might redefine its identity by strengthening ties with the newly independent Turkic republics of Central Asia (Huntington, 1998). The rise of the AKP in 2007 marked both continuity and gradual change. Many traditional policies remained, but geopolitical discourse slowly shifted. After 2009, Türkiye expanded its engagement with regions such as Africa and Latin America. At the

same time, it deepened relations with neighboring countries, including Syria, Iraq and Iran.

Institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) became more active as tools of socio-cultural diplomacy. Public diplomacy also gained importance. State-supported media outlets like TRT Avaz, TRT Arabi, and TRT World began broadcasting Türkiye's international narrative more widely. These platforms aimed not only to promote Turkish culture and policy but also to legitimize Türkiye's proactive regional role. As President Erdoğan stated in his 2008 Address to the Nation, Türkiye was entering a multi-dimensional transformation and aimed to become an influential global actor (Erdoğan, 2008).

By the late 2000s, official discourse described Türkiye as a "rising star" and later as a "powerful Türkiye." The country portrayed itself as a multi-dimensional actor with influence across several regions. This shift is often seen as a balancing strategy. Türkiye emphasized its Islamic identity in relation to Western alliances, while also invoking historical ties with the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East.

This revisionist phase of foreign policy was based on principles such as "zero problems with neighbors," model partnership, the use of historical heritage, multilateral diplomacy and rhythmic diplomacy. Borders were no longer framed only as security barriers. They were also presented as gateways for regional engagement. The traditional metaphor of Türkiye as a "bridge country" was gradually replaced by the idea of a "central country." In this vision, Türkiye aimed to act as a proactive geopolitical hub rather than a passive connector.

Traditionally, Türkiye's border policy was shaped by security concerns and threat perceptions. It reflected a statist geopolitical understanding based on the idea that geography determines destiny. The main goal was to preserve existing territorial arrangements. However, during the Davutoğlu era, official geopolitical thinking underwent significant change. This shift was often described as an "axis shift" (Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011). Some argued that Türkiye was moving away from the Transatlantic system toward the Middle East and Asia. Yet this did not mean abandoning the West. Rather, it aimed to strengthen economic and commercial ties in multiple directions (Kardaş, 2011). For this reason, many scholars describe the process not as an axis shift but as axis diversification.

Türkiye did not cut ties with the West. Instead, it brought its Islamic identity more clearly into its foreign policy discourse while maintaining Western ties. It emphasized that it was both part of the West and an active actor in the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus. This produced a layered, complex foreign policy identity that was not confined to a single ideological framework. In this context, the flexibility and



permeability of borders became important conceptual elements supporting this broader identity narrative.

As Türkiye sought to position itself as an active regional power, it increasingly used transnational and supranational narratives rather than traditional nation-state rhetoric. Through the concept of geo-culture, Ankara aimed to reinterpret national boundaries and challenge narrow understandings of its periphery. Border security and regional influence were framed not only in geographic terms but also through cultural, historical and geopolitical connections.

Consequently, Türkiye adopted a foreign policy characterised by flexible maneuvering among its multiple geopolitical identities. The following chapter examines how this approach unfolded in the broader Middle East, with particular attention to its implementation in the Syrian case.

Era of Security and Policy Reconfiguration

Between 2009 and 2015, Türkiye's foreign policy orientation underwent a notable transformation, particularly regarding the Middle East and Syria. During this period, the concept of the border moved beyond the classical nation-state framework. It acquired a transnational and ideological character. The border was no longer only a territorial line. It became an instrument for expanding regional influence through an Islamic civilizational imaginary (Yeşiltaş, 2014).

As nation-state narratives became less pronounced and ummah-based discourses gained prominence, the AK Party government sought to construct a form of "pan-Islamic geopolitics." This approach was especially visible in its policies toward Syrian refugees. Over time, however, growing economic and social pressures generated significant criticism of this orientation. This geopolitical imagination positioned itself as an alternative to Western-centric civilizational paradigms. It prioritized representing the Islamic world and advocated for a more pluralist international order. Although Türkiye continued its engagement with the West, it increasingly described itself as the West's ally in the East rather than of the West.

In this context, borders came to represent more than instruments of security and territorial defense. They were framed as geopolitical markers of cultural-historical continuity and Ottoman heritage (Yalvaç, 2016). Through neo-Ottomanist discourses in its Balkan and Middle Eastern policies, Türkiye aimed to strengthen its regional leadership aspirations. It reinterpreted its borders through cultural and Islamic spatial imaginaries. Symbolic gestures reflected this discourse in practice. For example, banners stating "New Ottomans are in Lebanon" (Erdoğan, 2010) appeared during Prime

Minister Erdoğan's 2010 visit. Similarly, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's statement, "One day we will pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque" (Davutoğlu, 2014), illustrated how this geopolitical narrative was publicly articulated.

Beginning in 2013, deteriorating relations with the United States and the European Union reshaped Türkiye's perception of Westernization. This shift contributed to the securitization of its regional policies. Developments in Syria and rising security concerns along the border before 2015 pushed Türkiye toward a more assertive, hard-power-oriented foreign policy. This transformation became especially visible in border-related cases. Classical geopolitical logic is increasingly blended with foreign policy discourse.

The Arab Spring, and particularly the escalation of the Syrian uprising into a full-scale civil war in 2011, marked a critical turning point. Türkiye experienced significant economic losses. It faced an unprecedented influx of refugees and direct security threats along its southern frontier. The growing autonomy and secessionist aspirations of Kurdish groups in northern Syria intensified Ankara's threat perceptions. By 2015, Türkiye adopted a zero-tolerance posture toward developments along the Syrian border. It initiated military measures to secure the frontier.

During this period, Türkiye shifted from a liberal, diplomacy-oriented posture to a nationalist and security-driven paradigm. Cross-border operations launched in 2015 were framed in a security threat narrative. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs began referring to the Syrian government solely as the "regime." This terminology deliberately avoided formal recognition and signaled political discontent. Domestically, the government attempted to reduce public opposition to its Syria policy. It framed the reception of Syrian refugees in religious and moral terms. The *ensar-muhacir* (host-migrant) discourse became central in this framing. While government actors celebrated the Syrian presence as an act of moral hospitality, opposition groups criticized the policy through populist narratives targeting both the refugees and the ruling party.

Internationally, Türkiye justified its military actions through multiple arguments. It invoked the right to self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. At the same time, it used civilizational identity claims, humanitarian responsibility narratives, and anti-Western moral positioning. From a critical geopolitics' perspective, these justifications demonstrate how states construct discursive legitimacy frameworks to enable and rationalize the use of hard power.

The Davutoğlu doctrine guided Türkiye's foreign policy until May 2016. After Ahmet Davutoğlu resigned as prime minister in 2016 and Binali Yıldırım was appointed, a new phase began. Yıldırım described this shift as a policy of having "more friends than enemies" (Yıldırım, 2016). The earlier discourse of "precious loneliness" (Kalın, 2013)



and the later emphasis on reducing enemies both reflected the difficulty Türkiye faced in translating its ambition to act as a regional game-setter into stable geopolitical outcomes (Çelik, 2016). As a result, Türkiye moved away from a game-setting identity and became more deeply involved in ongoing regional conflicts.

The new approach established a security-centered paradigm. It emphasized flexibility and maneuverability in a challenging regional environment (Örmeci & Işıksal, 2015). Accordingly, Türkiye recalibrated its Syria policy around local and micro-level strategic objectives. The normalization of relations with Russia after the jet crisis expanded Türkiye's diplomatic and operational space in Syria (NTV, 2016). Domestically, as the political system increasingly took on authoritarian features, Türkiye distanced itself from the prospect of EU membership. It pursued economic and military cooperation with Russia and China as part of its broader security strategy. The 2017 purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system caused concern within NATO and the United States and led to a deterioration in bilateral relations.

During this period, Ankara maintained a balanced relationship with the West. At the same time, it attributed the roots of ethnic and sectarian fragmentation in Syria to colonial border practices imposed by Western powers. Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş argued that villages along the Syrian border had been drawn with a ruler, dividing communities along ethnic and sectarian lines (Habertürk, 2016). Türkiye also justified its cross-border interventions through civilizational narratives. Officials stated that “the third major geography of Islam begins once again from Anatolian lands” (Anadolu Ajansı, 2017b).

The strategy of “more friends than enemies,” grounded in regional multilateralism, enabled Türkiye to expand its diplomatic outreach. It strengthened its influence along the Syrian border through engagement with multiple states. In 2017, for example, Türkiye and Israel normalized relations, and Minister of Culture Nabi Avcı visited Tel Aviv (Anadolu Ajansı, 2017a). Prime Minister Yıldırım visited Iraq (Aljazeera, 2017), and Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu held talks with Gulf states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2017). By 2018, cross-border military operations had become routinized. Türkiye pushed perceived threats beyond its borders and began constructing safe zones. This process combined regional leadership ambitions with a neo-Ottoman understanding of historical continuity. It generated unease among regional actors, including Iran and Saudi Arabia. By 2019, Türkiye increasingly relied on military force in shaping its relations with both Eastern and Western actors (Mehmetcik & Çelik, 2022).

In the Syrian context, the border gradually ceased to function merely as a geographic marker. It evolved into a symbolic and ideological instrument of regional

intervention. After 2019, policies toward the Syrian border expanded beyond traditional territorial security concerns. They began to build a political and administrative order across the border, aligned with Türkiye's national interests. The foundations of Türkiye's aspiration to act as an agenda-setting actor in a post-Assad Syria were laid during this period. Issues related to institutional reconstruction, including education and governance, are examined in the following section.

New Geopolitical Positions

The launch of Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016 marked a turning point in Türkiye's Syrian policy. For the first time, Ankara pursued an assertive, autonomous, and proactive military strategy. It aimed not merely to react to developments on the ground but to shape them.

This trajectory continued with Operation Olive Branch in 2018 and Operation Peace Spring in 2019. From 2019 onward, a series of Claw-Lock Operations followed. In 2020, Operation Spring Shield further consolidated this course. The naming and framing of these operations reflect Türkiye's dual objectives. On the one hand, Ankara sought to safeguard its border security. On the other hand, it aimed to position itself as a regional actor promoting peace and stability.

These developments also signal a vision of ummah-centered foreign policy. This vision leverages cultural and religious solidarity to strengthen Türkiye's leadership role in the Islamic world. Understanding Türkiye's role in shaping Syria's post-regime order requires close attention to evolving alliances and battlefield dynamics.

While Washington shared the objective of toppling the Assad regime, Ankara's security concerns were complicated by U.S. support for the YPG. Türkiye designates the YPG as a terrorist organization. This difference created direct zones of tension between the two allies. One clear example was the 2019 Turkish military operation against the YPG. The operation was halted only after intensive diplomatic intervention by U.S. Special Envoy James Jeffrey.

Despite these frictions, Türkiye maintained a balanced yet tense alliance with the United States. At the same time, it managed its relations with Russia and Iran. Concurrently, Ankara engaged in UN-related diplomatic processes, such as the Geneva and Astana processes, which aimed at a political transition in Syria (MFA, 2018). A critical juncture occurred with the pragmatic ceasefire agreement in Idlib reached with Russia. This agreement illustrated Türkiye's diplomatic flexibility (Soldatkin & Kiselyova 2020). Analysts note that Türkiye's strategic relationship with Russia was not pursued as a replacement for its ties with the West. Rather, it served as a complementary mechanism for navigating complex regional dynamics.



Along the border, Türkiye combined military control with political and administrative initiatives in opposition-held territories. Since ISIS's defeat in 2017, three main areas have emerged. The first is the Northeast Syria Autonomous Administration, controlled by the U.S.-backed SDF. The second is Idlib, under the administration of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The third is the Euphrates Shield Zone, which Türkiye secured between 2016 and 2017.

In the Euphrates Shield Zone, Türkiye invested heavily in reconstruction, public services, security infrastructure, and local governance. While Ankara sought to manage its borders tightly in order to prevent new refugee flows, migration has remained an ongoing challenge.

These developments demonstrate that Türkiye's Syrian policy has moved beyond a purely anti-regime orientation. Ankara appears committed to establishing a sustainable administrative, security, and socio-economic sphere of influence along the border. In this way, it reinforces its role in Syria's post-Assad reconstruction.

This approach has been critiqued as a form of semi-administrative tutelage. In this model, Türkiye consolidates legitimacy through local actors. It functions both as a security buffer and as a platform to project influence. For this reason, Türkiye's presence in northern Syria is increasingly understood not as a temporary military intervention but as a long-term, institutionalized reconstruction project.

From Security to Constructivism: The Withdrawal of Assad

The post-2019 period marks a major discursive and strategic shift in Türkiye's Syria policy. Ankara has continued its cross-border operations and security-focused interventions. At the same time, it has developed a more constructivist discourse aimed at preparing for a post-Assad political environment. This shift has broadened Türkiye's objectives. Policy goals now extend beyond counterterrorism and border protection. They include the construction of a "stable neighboring Syria" based on social, economic and institutional reconstruction.

In official discourse, concepts such as "borders of the heart" and "civilizational geography" have become more visible. In practice, this has been accompanied by infrastructure investments, the creation of local governance structures and plans for voluntary refugee return. Türkiye's interventions are no longer presented only as defensive actions. They are increasingly framed as efforts to restore state capacity and protect Syria's territorial integrity.

Tensions between Türkiye and the United States since 2018 have largely centered on Washington's cooperation with the YPG/SDF in northern Syria. President Recep

Tayyip Erdoğan stated that a “terrorist army” would not be allowed along Türkiye’s southern border. This statement was followed by a warning from U.S. Lieutenant General Paul Funk and Erdoğan’s symbolic response referring to an “Ottoman slap.” These exchanges illustrate the symbolic dimension of the crisis. Türkiye’s classification of the YPG and PYD as extensions of the PKK has reshaped its alliance with the United States into a security dilemma. This discursive escalation has influenced both military operations and diplomatic relations over time.

The Geneva process sought to achieve a political solution to the Syrian conflict. However, it failed as opposition demands for Assad’s removal clashed with the regime’s military consolidation, supported by Russia and Iran. Although the regime strengthened its position on the battlefield, key issues such as reconstruction and refugee return remained unresolved. This situation reinforced perceptions of limited Western engagement.

Direct talks between Turkish and Syrian officials began in 2023 and signaled a diplomatic shift. Initial meetings produced limited results. Nevertheless, President Erdoğan repeatedly expressed his willingness to normalize relations with Assad throughout 2024 (Sabah, 2024). This reflects Ankara’s broader crisis management strategy. First, it seeks to gain leverage on the ground through hard power. Then, it aims to consolidate these gains through diplomacy in order to establish a more sustainable order.

Türkiye’s military presence in Syria has been described by some regional actors and by opposition groups within Türkiye as an occupation or a violation of sovereignty. Ankara rejects this view. It argues that its operations target non-state armed groups, not the Syrian regime. Official statements emphasize that Türkiye does not seek territorial annexation. Instead, it claims to support the restoration of legitimate state authority and to reduce threats to its national security.

This shift from a purely security-centered discourse to a more constructivist one represents an important change in Türkiye’s geopolitical approach. Military operations are now embedded in a longer-term stabilization strategy. This strategy combines security concerns with political dialogue and institutional reconstruction. From a critical geopolitical perspective, the meaning of the border has also changed. The border is no longer seen only as a defensive line. It is increasingly framed as a space for cooperation, integration and shared stability.

Before Assad’s removal, Türkiye’s Middle East policy was often interpreted through the lens of neo-Ottomanism. Some scholars treated this as a serious analytical framework, while others dismissed it as an exaggeration. The discourse became more visible in recent years. In December 2024, Erdoğan told AKP members that cities such



as Aleppo, Idlib, Damascus and Raqqa would be like provinces such as Gaziantep, Hatay and Şanlıurfa (İletişim Başkanlığı, 2024). This statement reflects a neo-Ottomanist perspective in framing developments in Syria.

At the same time, highly assertive policies risk clashing with Syrian nationalism and Israel's security concerns. For now, Ankara appears satisfied with remaining Syria's most influential neighbor rather than turning the country into a de facto protectorate. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's remarks at the NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting in April 2024 emphasized that Syria belongs to the Syrians themselves. The sustainability of this policy also depends on spatial priorities. Israel concentrates on the south of Syria, while Türkiye focuses on the north. Both Ankara and the new Syrian administration seek to prevent the reemergence of Iran-linked structures.

Uncertainty about the ability of HTS to control extremist factions remains a serious concern for Türkiye's future role. The reported deaths of approximately 1,500 Alawites in March intensified these concerns. Although large-scale violence has temporarily decreased, tensions continue. Local uprisings or interventions by radical groups or Iran could reignite conflict. At the same time, it is essential to convince Syria's diverse communities—Druze, Kurds, Alawites and Christians—that they have a stake in the country's future. The stability of a Sharia-influenced administration will depend on whether regional reintegration and sanctions relief can lead to real economic recovery.

U.S. cooperation with the YPG/SDF has played a central role in Türkiye's security discourse. It has justified cross-border operations and deepened tensions with the West. Ankara views U.S. support as strengthening de facto autonomous structures near its border. This perception has increased public skepticism toward the United States within Türkiye.

Statements by former U.S. officials, combined with domestic political developments, suggest overlapping strategic interests between Türkiye's security policies and Washington's regional diplomacy. At the same time, nationalist rhetoric within Türkiye—especially the MHP's "terror-free Türkiye" narrative (Anadolu Ajansı, 2025)—has helped legitimize policy adjustments at home. It has also reduced resistance to limited Kurdish autonomy in a post-conflict Syrian context.

Overall, the post-Assad period reflects a softening of Türkiye's earlier security-centered discourse. The PKK/YPG is no longer framed solely as an existential threat. Instead, it is increasingly described as a manageable actor within Syrian politics. This shift allows Ankara to move beyond a single-focus security paradigm and to present itself as a reconstructive actor in post-conflict Syria. However, this approach may have implications for Türkiye's unitary state structure. Accepting limited Kurdish political

autonomy abroad could shape domestic expectations and challenge traditional conceptions of the nation-state.

The ongoing “terror-free” process in Türkiye is closely linked to developments in Syria and to relations with the United States. Even small domestic policy shifts can affect dynamics on the Syrian front. Security discourse has therefore become a key tool not only for counterterrorism but also for broader cross-border governance and stabilization. This constructivist strategy, based on carefully crafted narratives and legitimized policy actions, remains fragile.

State-building and reconstruction require significant resources. Türkiye’s engagement is not driven solely by rhetoric. By leveraging its strong construction and infrastructure capacity, Ankara aims to gain economic benefits from Syria’s reconstruction. It has adapted quickly to the transitional period. Through security and intelligence cooperation with HTS and affiliated groups, and by integrating the Syrian Interim Government and the Syrian National Army into emerging governance structures, Türkiye has developed a lasting sphere of influence (Kardaş, 2025). Geographic proximity, economic capacity and control of key supply routes further strengthen its position in shaping developments in Damascus. For this reason, Ankara’s strategy resembles what Kardaş (2025) calls a “sphere of interest” approach. This strategy is based on interdependence, pragmatic engagement and risk management rather than on a classical model of direct control.

CONCLUSION

According to official statements, disarming the YPG and integrating SDF-controlled areas into the Syrian state are seen as measures to end the conflict and promote regional stability. However, these policies are not driven solely by security concerns. They are also shaped by strategic economic calculations aimed at consolidating Türkiye’s regional influence. Security and humanitarian narratives provide legitimacy, while economic tools function as instruments of long-term positioning.

The integration of Syrian refugees into Türkiye is officially framed as a humanitarian and social cohesion policy. Yet it also carries strategic implications. Language acquisition, labor market participation, and demographic management align with broader security and economic objectives. This dual framing illustrates how domestic and cross-border policies operate within the same strategic logic.

Similarly, Türkiye’s role in Syria’s reconstruction—through infrastructure projects, social services, and development initiatives—is presented as a contribution to post-conflict stabilization. At the same time, these engagements reinforce Ankara’s regional leverage and shape its relations with the United States. Constitutional debates,



refugee return mechanisms, and negotiations over local versus central authority are framed as technical or humanitarian matters. In practice, they are embedded in a broader strategy of influence management.

By combining military power and diplomatic engagement, Türkiye has redefined the Syria–Türkiye border. It is no longer portrayed solely as a defensive security line. Instead, it has become a multidimensional space where security, political authority, and economic instruments intersect. The border functions as a platform of managed influence rather than simple territorial protection.

From a critical geopolitical perspective, this transformation reflects a process of rebordering. Sovereignty is not expanded territorially but rearticulated discursively and institutionally beyond formal boundaries. Economic resources do not replace security priorities; they reinforce them. The durability of this strategy depends less on economic capacity alone and more on sustained regional stability and calibrated coordination with the United States.

In sum, the Türkiye–Syria border can be understood as a site where security imperatives, strategic influence, and economic governance converge. This case demonstrates how contemporary border politics in the Middle East are shaped not only by military concerns but also by narrative construction, institutional adaptation, and pragmatic interdependence. By conceptualizing this shift as a form of discursive rebordering, the study contributes to broader debates on sovereignty, intervention, and spatial governance in conflict-affected regions.

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