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**TURKISH DOMESTIC FACTORS AND ANKARA'S MILITARY  
OPERATIONS IN SYRIA: KURDISH THREAT AND EXPANSIONIST  
AMBITIONS\***

***Abstract:** The Syrian conflict became one of the most important directions of Turkey's regional security policy, playing a key role in the redefinition of Ankara's security policy and the expansion of Ankara's power projection area and tools. The military operation "Euphrates Shield" in August 2016 thus became the first attempt at the massive use of the military in regional policy after 1974, which justified the vitality of aggressive initiatives among the ambitious Turkish elite and had a unique domino effect. The purpose of the article is to highlight the domestic factors that supported and conditioned Turkish military operations in Syria, as well as the main objectives pursued. The article contains a case study, the focus of which is Turkey's military operations on Syrian territory and the military-political goals pursued by them. Furthermore, the Turkish domestic factors and transformations that enabled and aided in the implementation and expansion of these military operations are revealed.*

***Keywords:** Turkey, Syrian crisis, military operations, regional and security policy, strategic culture, PKK/PYD.*

**Introduction**

Turkey's military-centered power projection has evolved into the primary element that effectively defines its current regional security policy. The core tenets of Turkey's foreign and regional security policy now include military engagement in regional conflicts, the deployment of military bases abroad, the support and patronage of various Islamist proxies, and increasing militarization trends. Today, Turkey, which has become a driving force for instability and conflict in its geographical proximity, is not hesitating to pursue its aggressive and expansionist ambitions. The escalation of Turkish-Greek tensions in the Aegean Sea has given rise to aggressive moves in the Eastern Mediterranean, military engagement and operations in the Syrian and Libyan conflicts, cross-border operations, and the expansion of military bases and posts in Iraq. Its full support for Azerbaijan's aggression against the

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Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) and its increasing military and political influence in the Caucasus clearly demonstrate the militarized and aggressive features of Turkey's regional policy. Turkey's militarized and securitized regional policy is accompanied by expansionist political discourse and aggressive initiatives aimed at reversing the status quo in neighboring regions. The strategy, based on military power, is designed to serve the regional ambitions of the current ruling elite.

Such security policy behavior, undoubtedly, is conditioned by the processes and transformations in the international system which constrains but at the same time gives opportunity to maneuver and seek new possibilities to carry out its ambitions. Over the past two decades, Turkey has undergone significant internal, state, ideological, and social transformations that have equally influenced and conditioned Ankara's behavior in foreign and security policy.

The Syrian conflict became one of the most important directions of Turkey's regional security policy, which was the key factor in the redefinition of Ankara's security policy and the expansion of power projection areas and tools. The "Euphrates Shield" military operation in 2016 thus became the first attempt at the massive use of the military in regional policy after the occupation of the northern part of Cyprus in 1974, which justified the vitality of aggressive initiatives among the ambitious Turkish elite and had a unique domino effect. The aim of the article is to reveal the domestic factors that supported and conditioned Turkish military operations in Syria and also highlight the main pursued goals. In the article, a case study has been done, the core of which is the military operations carried out by Turkey in the territory of Syria and the military-political goals pursued by them. Besides, the domestic factors and transformations in Turkey, especially in the fields of the civil-military relations and the strategic culture, that made possible and contributed to the implementation and further expansion of these military operations are revealed.

### **Domestic determinants: civil-military relations and strategic culture transformations**

By achieving control and, moreover, monopolizing the domestic and foreign policy decision-making systems, the AKP's foreign and regional policy took a sharp turn toward securitization, making international behavior deriving from the identity and ideological preferences of the elite more pronounced. One of the goals of the transformation of the domestic sphere and the weakening of the role of the military was not only to strengthen the power of the AKP but also to define and implement a foreign policy based on preferences arising from its identity, for which the Kemalist military-bureaucratic system, led by the military, would be a major obstacle. Turkey's foreign policy became conflict-provoking and threatening after the AKP established supremacy in the foreign policy decision-making mechanism (Özpek and Yaşar 2018,

208-209), destroying the domestic system of checks and balances by establishing a personal authoritarian rule. Due to the neutralization of the role of the military domestically as a restraining factor, a counterbalancing factor led to the self-confidence of the AKP in the country's domestic and foreign policies (Hovsepyan 2018, 34-36). Kirişçi notes that the process of widespread civilianization and demilitarization that began in the 2000s was crucial in understanding various aspects of the AKP's "new" foreign policy, from the Cyprus and Northern Iraq issues to active engagement in the Middle East, which differed significantly from traditional foreign and security policy (Kirişçi 2006, 49). Haugom, considering changes in foreign policy during Erdogan's presidency, among other factors, emphasizes the "disappearance" of the military from the process of decision-making and implementation of foreign policy, which facilitated the projection of military force as a foreign policy tool. Because, traditionally, the military has been extremely cautious about the issue of military engagement in other countries and surrounding conflicts (Haugom 2019, 214). Although the latter considers the military's withdrawal from the foreign policy implementation process as the result of the 2016 failed military coup, that process had already taken place earlier, when in institutional and legislative terms the military was pushed to the margins of the definition of the security agenda.

Along with the weakening of the positions of the military in the state, the AKP felt stronger and consolidated its potential both in the state and on the international stage. It managed to initiate processes, including in the foreign policy, which were previously rejected (Barkey 2012, 3). Turkey's foreign policy agenda reflects the nature of the AKP itself, whose Islamic, populist, and authoritarian tendencies were more quickly and clearly manifested after the military and Kemalist bureaucratic system emerged on the political margins (Özpek and Yaşar 2018, 202).

Neutralizing possible challenges and insuring itself against possible military coups, the AKP began to implement its ambitious domestic and foreign political agenda, particularly its Islam-centric policy in the Middle East (Bokhari & Senzai 2013, 180). The transformation of the AKP's revisionist, hegemonic ambitions based on "autonomous expansionist" regional policy became more bellicose, especially after the 2016 coup attempt (Taş 2022, 7-9). After the failed coup, the aim of the government's policy on Syria was to finally reshape civil-military relations in its favor and to restore public trust toward the army, which had been continuously shaken as a result of Erdogan's consistent steps. The political orientation of the army also changed, of course, in favor of Erdogan (Siccardi 2021).

One of the most striking examples was Turkey's military engagement in the Syrian crisis. The command of the Turkish army objected and voiced concerns regarding such a decision. Security expert Gurcan stated in this regard that the only means to restrain the authorities was the army, which set controls and counterbalances

against Erdogan (BBC 2016). However, the subsequent processes in the Syrian issue clearly showed that the army's capabilities to restrain the authorities have been extremely limited and exaggerated. One of the analysts remarkably notes that the acting generals who were not deposed and survived after the 2016 failed coup were so afraid of Erdogan's anger and revenge that "they rolled their troops inside Syria—a prospect they once resisted without a whimper" (Jacinto 2017). The Chief of General Staff, Hulusi Akar, who was considered loyal to President Erdogan, was unable to resist Erdogan's "war game" in Syria (ibid). Akar was more interested in serving the Erdogan agenda.

The Turkish invasion of Syria took place following the botched military coup, which was due to the fact that high-ranking military officials who clearly opposed it had been removed or arrested. The same applies to Erdogan's plans to establish close military-political cooperation with Russia, which were again opposed by the military until mid-2016 (Kenez 2019). By the middle of 2012, the possibility of military intervention in Syria had started to be discussed. The National Intelligence Organization (MIT) was requesting interventions, but the Turkish military leadership, however, was reluctant to launch any military operations in Syria (Cantener and Kozera 2022). The plan to provoke a war with Syria was discussed in March 2014 at a secret meeting of Turkish high-level officials. Erdogan's government was making every effort to find pretexts and justifications for invading Syria. At the same meeting, head of the MIT Hakan Fidan proposed fabricating a pretext for war by "directing a missile attack on Turkey by its agents." (Cumhuriyet 2014) At that time, MIT was under the full control of Erdogan (Hovsepian 2013, 51-63) as it was headed by his confidant Hakan Fidan, so a military involvement was the AKP government's assertive preference.

Prior to the military invasion of Syria, the supply of weapons to the armed groups and jihadist proxies was carried out by the Erdogan-sponsored Special Forces commander Zekai Aksakalli and the MIT, often bypassing the leadership of the General Staff. Aksakalli was the commander who authorized secret missions in Syria (Bozkurt 2021). It is noteworthy that, according to some publications, the brigadier general of the Special Forces Command, Semih Terzi, who opposed Aksakalli's adventures and Turkey's engagement in the Syrian war, submitted reports to the General Staff about Aksakalli and MIT's underground operations. On the night of the 2016 military coup attempt, according to some testimonies, General Terzi was shot dead by a non-commissioned officer of the Special Forces Command by order of Aksakalli (Bozkurt 2021). The same Aksakalli took command of Turkey's "Euphrates Shield" military operation in Syria and later was appointed the commander of the Second Corps of Land Forces (CNN Türk 2017).

Tziarras rightly notes that after the 2016 coup attempt, the AKP's control over state institutions, especially the army and security system, accelerated and deepened. As a result of this and the continued dominance of Erdogan's consistent policy and official discourse, an "imperial strategic culture" based on expansionism and regional leadership was institutionalized (Tziarras 2022, 82). Also, the weakening of the role of the military institutionalized the new imperial strategic culture because the military was at the root of the formation and maintenance of the Kemalist strategic culture under the conditions of the military-political bureaucratic system. In general, it is accepted that Turkey's foreign policy was mostly based on the principles of caution, passivity, and maintenance of the status quo (Mufti 1998), which were part of the strategic and security culture of the military-bureaucratic dominant elite. In contrast to the Republican strategic culture's defensive stance on regional matters, the AKP government adopted an aggressive, adventurous, and revisionist attitude to the challenges that surfaced during the "Arab Spring" processes and the Syrian crisis. That is a risky foreign and security policy to increase Turkey's influence and realize ambitions in the Middle East (Tziarras 2022, 57-58).

Changes in Turkish foreign policy, particularly its primary focus on the Middle East, were heavily caused by a shift in the state elite's geopolitical worldviews and identities. Turkey's active engagement in the Middle East and the Islamic world in general was more of an outcome of identity politics than of the post-Cold War anarchy (Warning and Kardas 2011, 128). The Republic of Turkey's "founding philosophy," which was based on Westernism, secularism, and caution in foreign policy, started to alter after the 2000s. AKP's security thinking does not see Turkey as an entity divorced from the past but rather as a continuation of the Ottoman socio-political legacy. This security thinking interprets Turkey's foreign and security interests not only in Anatolian terms but also in terms of the vast geographical scope of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey's historical obligations and roles therein (Oğuzlu 2020).

After the active phase of the armed resistance, the PKK and Kurdish separatism have been the principal challenges defining national security in the Republic of Turkey. This has steadily increased militarization and consolidated the concept of the "national security state", resulting in the securitization of domestic politics and foreign policy (Sarlap 2020). The emergence of the PKK and subsequent armed struggle strengthened not only the role of the military in the state but also instrumentalized the PKK in a unique way. The instrumentalization of the PKK in Republican Turkey was primarily motivated by domestic concerns, including a desire to preserve the military's dominance in politics and its exclusive right to define national security policy and discourse. This type of instrumentalization was carried out from the defensive strategic culture position, through the prism of the dominant

Republican "Sèvres syndrome" (Hovsepyan 2020, 17-29) mentality. Turkish Republican security culture was mainly defensive, based on caution and fears emanating from historical experiences due to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of a nation-state.

The instrumentalization of the PKK during the AKP's rule underwent certain methodological and discursive transformations. De-securitization of the Kurdish issue was initially started by the AKP, which is best explained by its intention to consolidate its power and increase its influence in security decision-making by reducing the influence of the military and military-bureaucratic system. That was an interim and tactical move serving the other main goals of the AKP authorities. The instrumentalization of the PKK changed along with the re-securitization and militarization of the AKP's foreign and security policies. With the institutionalization of the "Imperial strategic culture" championed by Erdogan, the instrumentalization of the Kurdish threat, and especially the PKK, in addition to defensive strategic perceptions, was moved to the sphere of more aggressive and ambitious foreign and regional policy. It was considered and served as a tool to legitimize and justify the military-centered, aggressive, and ambitious security policy in the region. To support Turkey's expansionist regional aspirations for Aleppo, Mosul, and other territories, the paradigm of the PKK's instrumentalization was shifted. Erdogan's instrumentalization of the PKK serves to realize the ambitions in the region arising from his own geopolitical vision and preferences.

### **Military operations: Kurdish threat and expansionist ambitions**

During the late 2000s, foreign policy rearrangements were noticeable, as Ankara intended to become one of the leading political players in the world and the definite leader in the Sunni Muslim world. These transformations were indisputable in the relationship with Syria, which became a unique testing ground for the AKP's foreign policy doctrine. (Murariu and Anglițoiu 2020, 140). Turkey's policies and actions in the Middle East in general and particularly in Syria were mainly influenced by ideological motivations and the ambitions of the ruling elite rather than the critical, existential necessity of eliminating security threats. Moreover, the perception of security risks and their neutralization were smartly combined with the AKP's neo-Ottoman ambitions.

Along with the Syrian crisis, Turkey's regional expansionist ambitions became more realistic and assertive. The importance of the Kurdish factor has increased dramatically in the context of regional shifts as well as within reshuffled geopolitical centers of power. Kurdish expanding ambitions outgrew into a severe issue for Ankara. The formation of another Kurdish autonomy near its borderline has dramatically disturbed the Turkish authorities; hence, they coordinated all the

military-political potential and tools to disrupt the process of the consolidation of the Syrian Kurds. It was obvious that the Kurdish ambitions to have autonomy in Syria were incompatible with the interests of both internal and external players involved in the crisis.

In the early stages of the Syrian crisis, Ankara took the initiative to strengthen its pressure on President Bashar al-Assad. Ankara tried to place the "Muslim Brotherhood" organization that is under its patronage in the ruling elite of Damascus (Salt 2018, 88), which would enable it to direct and control the domestic political developments in Syria and keep it in a manageable orbit. Failing its plans to expand its position in Syria with political pressure, Ankara went for another way to actualize its political interests and ideologically driven ambitions. It provided military-technical, material, and financial support to the Syrian opposition and various Islamic extremist groups and even established camps of the Free Syrian Army in its territory (Demirtaş 2013, 117). These later became the primary servants of Erdogan's expansionist ambitions in Syria.

In contrast to Ankara's initiatives to support the Syrian opposition, Damascus, as a lever of counteraction, restarted the "Kurdish Card", returning to its old "partner", the PKK. The cooperation between the Syrian authorities and the PKK was interrupted in 1998. It was restored on March 17, 2012, in Qamishli, based on an agreement between the Syrian special services and the military leadership of the PKK. According to this agreement, the Syrian side promised to provide the PKK with complete military and financial support in exchange for the group carrying out terrorist activities in Turkey, specifically in Syrian refugee camps (Balmasov 2012). The reappearance of the PKK in the military-political arena of the Kurdish cantons bordering Turkey later became the best basis for the legitimacy of Ankara's armed operations.

Early in 2012, by the decision of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian army left the Kurdish regions, handing over de facto power to the Kurdish forces. (Ivanov 2016, 39) .It was a forced decision that worked well politically. All echelons of local government came under the control of the Kurds in the Kobanî, Afrin, Darik, Amuda, and Jindires settlements bordering Turkey, where the Kurds gradually established autonomous local units to govern their territories (Crisis Group Middle East Report 2013, 3). Strengthening their position, the Kurdish forces, the Syrian Kurdistan People's Council, were formed in cooperation with the Democratic Union Party<sup>1</sup> (Kurdish; Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat PYD) and the Kurdish National Council, declared Afrin Canton autonomous in January 2014 (Schmidinger 2019, 50). For the security of the areas newly taken over, the PYD founded the People's Protection Units (Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), which were assembled by an

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<sup>1</sup> Turkey claims that Democratic Union Party (PYD) is a Syrian branch of the PKK.



experienced cadre of the People's Protection Forces (Hêzên Parastina Gel, HPG), the PKK guerilla army, under its commander Murat Karayılan (Schmidinger 2019, 48). In the spring of 2016, a situation had already been created when the Kurdish forces controlled the majority of the regions of northern Syria bordering Turkey, except for the Azaz region, where Turkish-sponsored opposition groups, including the Jabhat Al-Nusra Front, were deployed (Balanche 2015). On March 17, Kurdish forces, led by the PYD, announced the formation of the "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria" in areas under their control, which they called "Rojava" (Schmidinger 2020, 16). Generally speaking, at the beginning of the crisis in Syria, the PYD, both in the Kurdish community and in international discussions, began to exploit the idea of Kurdish democratic autonomy (sometimes also confederation) on the territory of Syria, which was the vision of the last period of the PKK (Kamran 2019, 1076).

In response to expanding Kurdish ambitions, on June 29, 2015, the Turkish National Security Council meeting confirmed that the Eastern bank of the Euphrates River is a "red line" for Turkey. Moreover, in case the Kurdish forces try to cross the river and connect the two cantons of Afrin and the areas west of Kobanî under their control, the Turkish military will intervene (Çelikaşlan 2021, 378). "Kurdish terrorist threat" became tangible for Turkey in 2015-2016. During this period, the YPG, backed by the US-led international alliance, achieved military success in the fight against IS, liberating Tel Abyad (then crossing Ankara's declared "red line"), Manbij, and reaching Jarablus. Considering the strategic importance of these areas and the Jarablus-Azaz road, it became imperative for Turkey to prevent the Kurdish military from advancing. On August 20, 2016, a terrorist attack in Gaziantep, which Turkey blamed on IS, was well-timed and provided a convenient excuse to launch a military operation and gain support from the international community.

It should be noted that the necessity and expediency of a military intervention in Syria were constantly debated among Turkey's military and political elites in early 2012. The intervention was justified by the importance of establishing a security zone to control the flow of refugees and protect the tomb of Süleyman Shah<sup>1</sup> (27 kilometers deep). However, since the Turkish military leadership at that stage was directly involved in the decision-making processes, it was still possible to prevent the intention of a military operation (Cantenar and Kozera 2022, 353). As previously stated, following the July 15 failed coup, Turkey's decision-making and internal

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<sup>1</sup> Süleyman Shah (1178–1236) was the grandfather of Osman I, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, whose grave is in Syria, on the bank of the Euphrates River.

"The tomb of Süleyman Şah and the land surrounding it is our territory. We cannot ignore any unfavorable act against that monument, as it would be an attack on our territory, as well as an attack on NATO land," Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said in a televised interview late Aug. 5 (Hürriyet Daily News 2012). Already in February 2015, Turkey carried out its first military campaign, "Shah Euphrates," in Syria under the pretext of saving the tomb from attacks by the Islamic State (Aktar 2015).

power centers shifted fundamentally (Kaynar 2022). The former military-bureaucratic system of security policy decision-making and implementation lost its influence and leverage in favor of President Erdogan's hegemonic and undisputed autocracy. Since then, the National Security Council has turned into a structure that ratifies Erdogan's decisions. One essential priority was redefining the scope of the army's "missions" (Hovsepyan 2018, 34-37).

Barely a month after the coup attempt, on August 24, 2016, Turkey declared that it was exercising the right of self-defense enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter and initiated the "Euphrates Shield" codenamed military invasion of Syria (Kasapoğlu and Ülgen 2017, 2). Referring to the beginning of that invasion, it should be mentioned that the Erdogan propaganda machine was thoroughly preparing for it for a long time. From time to time, the news was spread about the bombarding and shelling of Turkish settlements from the border areas that were under the control of IS, and the victims among the civilian population, giving Turkey a "legal right" to invade northern Syria and forming a "security zone" (Kasapoğlu and Ülgen 2017, 1).

On August 22, before the start of the operation, the Turkish military began bombarding Kurdish positions in Manbij, and already on August 24, the special force units of the Turkish Armed Forces, with the support of the air forces, began the ground attack in the Jarablus area.

Justifying the need for a military operation, Erdogan announced in his speech at the Grand National Assembly in July 26 that he was going to "eliminate terrorism from Syria" (Bouvier 2019). He exceptionally emphasized the danger of Kurdish "terrorism" for Turkey's security environment. Furthermore, he declared that he aims to stop "the advance and ambitions of the Kurds, to prevent the creation of a corridor connecting the two Kurdish associations that have emerged in the territory of Syria, so they will not be able to unite" (Bouvier 2019).

Nevertheless, to strengthen his status as a "player" in the international arena and to appear as a pioneer in the fight against terrorism, Erdogan established the following justifications for military action.

- secure the border of Turkey and neutralize IS threats and attacks,
- ensure the possibility of Syrian refugees returning to their country,
- ensure the security of the northern regions of Syria.

During the "Euphrates Shield" operation, Ankara tested indigenous Bayraktar TB2 combat UAVs (Kasapoğlu and Ülgen 2017, 9), which proved their effectiveness in mountainous terrain and rugged terrain, greatly influencing the course of combat operations. Turkey carried out its military incursions into Syria using a hybrid war model, combining Turkish regular military forces and Syrian opposition militias Sunni Arab and Turcoman groups (Ahrar al-Sham, the Sultan Murad Division, Jays al-Tahrir, Al-Mutasim Brigade, Hamza division etc) that were under Turkish control

from the beginning of the crisis. Their total number would reach around 5,000 men during the later days of military operations (Cantenar and Kozera 2022, 353).

The successful conclusion of operations was announced by Turkey's National Security Council on March 29, 2017. It was stressed that, nevertheless, Turkish military units will remain in Syria to "counter" Kurdish terrorism in Afrin and Manbij (Sözcü 2017). With this statement, Ankara outlined its ambitions. Nevertheless, if we try to assess the final result of the "Euphrates Shield" operation, conducted by Turkey in Syria, we can state that, although it did not have a dividing line of pre-declared ambitions, the Turkish military managed to take control of the cities Jarablus and al - Bab. According to Turkish sources, Turkish Armed Forces liberated 2055 sq km area from IS control in the aftermath of the operation (Koparan and Özcan 2022). Turkey is unceasingly positioning itself in the territories that are now under its control, although this time by using soft power tools: mainly educational, cultural and religious<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, it is hard to imagine that Ankara would launch a military invasion of Syria without prior multilateral agreement. It is evidenced by the fact that neither the Syrian government forces nor the international coalition forces led by the US and the Russian military did anything to stop the invasion by leaving the Kurdish forces alone to confront the Turkish aggression.

On January 20, 2018, the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces announced the start of the "Olive Branch" military operation in the Afrin region in northwestern Syria. This invasion was right before Washington's announcement on January 15, 2018, about the intention of forming a border guard corps of 30,000 of its sponsored Arab and Kurdish troops and deploying it in northern Syria (Malbrunot 2018).

Ankara protested this initiative, countering that it directly threatened the security of its borders since the YPG fighters would be mainly involved in the border guard corps. Perhaps this became the much-needed "motive" for the second military invasion of Syria, disguising the enterprising ambitions of the Turkish aggression to take control of Afrin. The necessity of the "Olive Branch" campaign was once again based on the urgency of the fight against terrorism, particularly the "Kurdish" PKK/PYD/YPG.

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<sup>1</sup> Turkey played a key role in the opening of nearly 700 schools that were renovated or rebuilt, enabling around 300,000 students to attend schools in the region. Meanwhile, Gaziantep University, located in Türkiye's southeastern Gaziantep province, also carries out higher education activities in the Syrian regions of Jarablus, Al-Bab and Azaz. The Turkish Ministry of Health carries out activities to normalize life in the areas cleared of terrorists, to provide health services needed as part of humanitarian and technical assistance, and to minimize patient referrals from Syria to Türkiye. In the town of Al-Rai, a medical faculty affiliated with the Turkish University of Health Sciences was established. A total of 280 mosques were restored and 253 new mosques were built in the region as part of the efforts led by Turkey's Directorate General of Foundations and Diyanet Foundation (Koparan and Özcan 2022).

Another important event that happened before also directly impacted Turkey's decision to initiate the second invasion. It was in 2017. The Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum on September 25 seriously worried Ankara, as Kurdish ambitions were already more evident, threatening Turkey's internal security environment. The presence of two Kurdish autonomies rich in energy resources on its border was perceived as a serious threat to Turkey. In the case of their independence, the threat would have become more grievous several times. It was imperative for Ankara to disrupt the Kurdish plans, to stop the possibility of unification and access to the Mediterranean Sea. On the other hand, the active and direct involvement of foreign power players in both Iraqi and Syrian military-political processes significantly increased the vulnerability of the security environment; hence, maintaining order became extremely hard for Ankara.

Regarding the choice of Afrin, it should be noted that Ankara considers it its natural territory, like the neighboring Hatay province (Sanjak of Alexandretta), and the occupation of Afrin fits perfectly with the expansionist perceptions of the reunification of the Ottoman titular nation and its vassal vilayets.

The "Olive Branch" military invasion ended on March 18, 2018, with the utter defeat of the Kurdish forces. The occupation of Afrin gave Turkey the opportunity to establish control over the region, show its real capabilities and ambitions to Western partners, and secure a decisive voice at the negotiating table on Syria's future. President Erdogan even compared the strategic importance of this operation to the Battle of the Dardanelles, saying, "We used to teach a lesson to those who tried to defeat us at Gallipoli. Today, we do the same with those who question our independence and future by trying to create a terrorist state at our borders" (YeniBirlik 2018).

After the events surrounding Afrin, it is clear that Turkey has no intention of returning Afrin to Syria. Since late 2018, Afrin has been under the Turkish occupation administration and a coalition of Sunni Islamist groups (Schmidinger 101-103). In addition to the displacement of the Kurdish population (about 350,000 (Von Hein 2019), Turkey has organized the mass relocation, mainly of Arab jihadists, of many foreign mercenaries and their families (including slaves) from Ghouta, Deir ez-Zor, and Aleppo. Through demographic engineering, Turkey tries to change the demographic picture of the region with the clear intention of redrawing it. From Afrin, news began to spread of the violent treatment of the local Christian and Yezidi populations, including abductions, extrajudicial executions, and widespread destruction and looting (Schmidinger 2019, 109). Turkey's long-term plans for Afrin are also evidenced by the introduction of the Turkish model into local governments, religious expansion, Turkish flags and photographs of Erdogan, and Turkish educational programs in all educational institutions (Schmidinger 2019, 110). Turkish

state and non-state institutions were actively engaged in the reshaping of social and demographic domains in northern Syria. Diyanet, which "essentially evolved as Erdogan's signature institution on par with Turkey's MIT", demonstrates the ideological motivation behind Turkey's Syria policy that goes far beyond security considerations (Tziarras 2022, 84).

On October 9, 2019, Turkish President Erdogan announced the beginning of the third military operation, "Spring Peace" in Syria. It was again a joint force of the Turkish Air Force, the Turkish-sponsored Syrian National Army, and other Islamist armed groups. The PKK and its affiliates, the PYD/YPG Kurdish "terror" group, were once again targeted. This time, the likelihood of sending 3 million 400 thousand refugees back to Syria and the pressing need to establish a "security zone" were advanced as reasons for the need for a military intervention (Sabuncuoğlu et al. 2020).

At the planning stage of operation "Spring Peace," the US tried to prevent or at least delay the Turkish military invasion by signing (perhaps also taking into account the severe consequences of the two previous incursions on the Kurdish forces) an agreement with Turkey to establish the "safe zone" in early August. It provided for the withdrawal of PYD/YPG personnel and military equipment from the Turkish border (Dadouch 2019). Before that, on June 5, 2018, Turkey managed to force the Kurds to cede Manbij. As per the US-Turkish agreement to govern Manbij, the Kurdish armed forces have left the city.

In the meantime, the US State Department, in order to ease the tensions caused by PYD/YPG's support for Turkey, officially announced on November 6, 2018, the "award" for three PKK leaders: Murad Karayılan (\$5 million), Cemil Bayik (\$4 million), and Duran Kalkan (\$3 million) in exchange for any information (Koru 2018). However, it was later revealed that the agreement contained unspecified and controversial elements, which did not make it a reality. Uncertainty continued until US President Trump announced that the US was withdrawing its armed forces from northeastern Syria. This controversial decision allowed Turkey to launch a military invasion, which was announced by President Erdogan in a tweet (Sabuncuoğlu et al. 2020). Although one of the main goals of this military campaign was the return of Syrian refugees, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, about 300,000 people (mostly Kurds) were forcibly displaced during Operation "Spring Peace" (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights). It is clear that Turkey is attempting to change the demographics of Kurdish communities once more by establishing a "safe zone" for the settlement of Syrian refugees through military force. A few days after the military invasion, a representative of the US State Department arrived in Ankara for talks with Erdogan. As a result, a cessation of hostilities was agreed on October 17 (TRT Haber 2019). The agreement signed between Turkey and Russia in Sochi on

October 22 confirmed a new regrouping of forces in north-eastern Syria. As a result of operation "Spring Peace" Russia has deployed military units and military equipment on the Eastern banks of the Euphrates River, outside the territory of its presence and control. Russia's approach to the Kurdish issue was obviously influenced by Russian-Turkish relations as well as agreements reached between these countries in other conflict zones, including Artsakh, as a result of the 44-day war. As a result of military incursions, Turkey increased its military and then economic and ideological presence in Syria, which is at the core of Turkey's neo-Ottoman policy. It also prevented the possibility of unifying the "Kurdish autonomous regions" on its southern borders, which was also a serious opportunity for the Kurds of Iraq, providing access to the Mediterranean.

### **Conclusion**

Turkey's foreign and regional policies became conflict-provoking and threatening after the AKP established supremacy in foreign policy decision-making, destroying the domestic system of checks and balances by establishing a personalist authoritarian rule. Because the military's role as a restraining, counterbalancing factor was neutralized domestically, the AKP gained confidence in the country's domestic and foreign policies. The Turkish invasion of Syria followed the botched military coup, which was caused by the removal or arrest of high-ranking military officials who opposed it. The acting generals who were not deposed and survived after the 2016 failed coup were so afraid of Erdogan's anger and revenge that they did not resist Erdogan's risky military operations.

The military's diminished role institutionalized the new imperial strategic culture because the military was central to the formation and maintenance of the Kemalist strategic culture under the military-political bureaucratic system. In general, it is accepted that Turkey's foreign policy was largely based on the principles of caution, passivity, and status quo maintenance, which were part of the military-bureaucratic dominant elite's strategic and security culture. In contrast to the Republican strategic culture's defensive stance on regional matters, the AKP government adopted an aggressive, adventurous, and revisionist attitude to the difficulties that surfaced during the "Arab Spring" processes and the Syrian crisis.

For a long time after the "Arab spring" Ankara tried to find opportunities and make pretext to carry out a military invasion into Syria, which became a reality in August 2016, almost a month after the botched military coup. Later, Ankara expanded the geography and scope of its military operations. On August 20, 2016, a terrorist attack in Gaziantep, which Turkey blamed on IS, was well-timed and provided a convenient excuse to launch a military operation and gain support from the international community. Following the military operations, Turkey increased its

military, economic, and ideological presence in Syria, which is central to Turkey's neo-Ottoman regional policy. It also prevented the possibility of unifying the "Kurdish autonomous regions" on its southern borders, which would have provided a significant opportunity for Iraqi Kurds to gain access to the Mediterranean. Erdogan, thus, smartly used the Kurdish threat to achieve its ambitious goals, ensuring its military-political presence and influence in Syria and Iraq.

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