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GEOPOLITICAL AND STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF THE SYRIAN PROBLEM AFTER REGIME CHANGE

Kürşad Emrah YILDIRIM[*] & Murat ERCAN[**]

Abstract

The Syrian crisis emerged as an extension of the popular uprisings that began in 2011 under the influence of the Arab Spring and quickly turned into an international conflict. In this process, global actors—including Iran, Russia, the United States, and the European Union—intervened in the Syrian civil war, each pursuing distinct strategic objectives. Turkey, on the other hand, has been directly affected by the developments in Syria due to its geographical proximity and historical ties, and has developed security-oriented policies in the face of this crisis. Turkey's policies have ranged from cross-border military operations to humanitarian aid initiatives, from diplomatic efforts to the management of the refugee crisis. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024 affected not only Syria's internal equations, but also regional and global geopolitical dynamics. This study, titled "Geopolitical and Strategic Analysis of the Syrian Question after the Regime Change," analyzes the historical development of the Syrian crisis, the positions of regional actors, and Turkey's strategic moves in this process. It analyzes the regional security implications of Turkey's policy in Syria and assesses the interests of the United States, Russia, and Israel in this process. Finally, the article offers future prospects for Turkey in the context of the opportunities and challenges it faces in Syria.

Keywords: *Syria Crisis, Turkey's Syria Policy, Bashar al-Assad, Geopolitics, Strategic Analysis.*

REJİM DEĞİŞİKLİĞİ SONRASI SURİYE SORUNUNUN JEOPOLİTİK VE STRATEJİK ANALİZİ

Öz

Suriye krizi, 2011 yılında Arap Baharı'nın etkisiyle başlayan halk ayaklanmalarının bir uzantısı olarak ortaya çıkmış ve kısa sürede uluslararası boyuta taşınan bir çatışmaya dönüşmüştür. Bu süreçte İran, Rusya, ABD ve Avrupa Birliği gibi küresel aktörler farklı stratejik hedefler doğrultusunda Suriye iç savaşına müdahil olmuştur. Türkiye ise hem coğrafi yakınlığı hem de tarihsel bağları nedeniyle Suriye'deki gelişmelerden doğrudan etkilenmiş ve bu kriz karşısında güvenlik odaklı politikalar geliştirmiştir. Türkiye'nin politikaları sınır ötesi askeri operasyonlardan

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insani yardım girişimlerine, diplomatik çabalardan mülteci krizinin yönetimine kadar geniş bir yelpazede şekillenmiştir. Beşar Esad rejiminin 2024 yılının sonlarında yıkılması, yalnızca Suriye'nin iç dengelerini değil, aynı zamanda bölgesel ve küresel jeopolitik dinamikleri de etkilemiştir. "Rejim Değişikliği Sonrası Suriye Sorununun Jeopolitik ve Stratejik Analizi" başlıklı bu çalışma, Suriye krizinin tarihsel gelişimini, bölgedeki aktörlerin pozisyonlarını ve Türkiye'nin bu süreçteki stratejik hamlelerini analiz etmektedir. Türkiye'nin Suriye'de izlediği politikaların bölgesel güvenlik üzerindeki etkileri ele alınırken, ABD, Rusya ve İsrail'in bu süreçteki çıkarları da değerlendirilmektedir. Son olarak, makale Türkiye'nin Suriye'de karşılaştığı fırsatlar ve meydan okumalar bağlamında geleceğe yönelik öngörüler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Suriye Krizi, Türkiye'nin Suriye Politikası, Beşar Esad, Jeopolitik, Stratejik Analiz.*

Introduction

Syria has historically been one of the most critical geopolitical and strategic regions of the Middle East. The country's civil war, which started in 2011 under the influence of the Arab Spring, has turned into a crisis that has radically shaken not only the Syrian people but also the regional and international balances. While the conflict has completely disrupted Syria's internal stability, it has also posed major security, political and humanitarian challenges for neighboring countries and global actors. The displacement of millions of people, the refugee crisis, the rise of radical organizations, and proxy wars between major powers have brought Syria to the center of international politics.

The civil war in Syria has deepened the conflict between the authoritarian regime of Bashar al- Assad and the people on the one hand, and intensified power struggles in the region on the other. While Iran and Russia provided support to the Assad regime, the US and some Western countries backed the opposition groups, turning Syria into a theater of international conflict of interest. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Turkey has been one of the countries directly affected due to its geographical proximity and historical ties.

Turkey's policies towards Syria have a multidimensional structure ranging from security concerns to humanitarian aid initiatives, from cross-border operations to diplomatic efforts. While the threat of terrorist organizations in northern Syria poses a serious risk to Turkey's border security, the influx of refugees has been one of the most important issues challenging Turkey's socioeconomic structure. In addition, the US support for the YPG and Russia's alliance with the Assad regime have made Turkey's room for maneuver in the region more complex and limited.

This study aims to analyze the historical context and geopolitical dynamics of the Syrian crisis and to analyze Turkey's policies, challenges and strategic steps taken in this process. While assessing the impact of the Syrian

conflict on regional security, the study will also examine the repercussions of this crisis on the global power struggle. Understanding the impact of the Syrian conflict and its aftermath on the region is of vital importance not only for Syria but also for the entire Middle East. In the geopolitical and strategic analysis of the Syrian conflict, articles and reports published by senior US diplomats and Zionist think tanks on Syria and the Middle East will be examined to analyze Turkey's strategies in Syria and the region. In this framework, the analyses and reports of Michael Rubin of the Enterprise Institute, Henri Barkey of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Steven Cook of the same organization and Morton Abramowitz, US Ambassador to Ankara, on Syria and Turkey will be analyzed.

1. THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS

While the Ba'ath Party was shaped as a political formation in which Sunnis and Alawites participated together with other social groups in the first years of its establishment, in the following periods, with the increasing influence of the Alawite population, it turned into a more Alawite- dominated structure (Özkoç, 2008, p. 116). Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970 led to an escalation of social tensions between Sunni and Alawites, which paved the way for the rise of Sunni opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. These widespread popular tensions posed a threat to the Alawite rule, and in an attempt to calm the unrest, the government tried to ensure that the head of state would be a Muslim through constitutional amendments (Babahanoğlu, 2023, p. 409). However, this measure offered only a short-term solution and Syria's long-established tradition of autocratic rule, dating back to the French Mandate period and reinforced by increasing military coups, regained strength. Opposition movements have been limited by intense state repression and violent interventions, with a nationwide state of emergency declared to brutally suppress resistance and widespread arrests and torture.

During his 30-year rule, Hafez al-Assad established a strong security and intelligence apparatus in Syria and effectively suppressed the opposition. After Hafez al-Assad's death, his son Bashar al- Assad, who took over the power in 2000, promised to carry out liberal reforms (Gürbüz, 2020, p. 194) but failed to fulfill these promises. Bashar al-Assad continued the governance approach he inherited from his father and did not take concrete steps towards reforms contrary to the expectations of the people. Thus, Bashar al- Assad has been inadequate in dealing with the economic and political crises in Syria, which has led to dissatisfaction among large segments of the society. Moreover, this situation was influenced by the Arab Spring in 2011, which led to popular protests and uprisings. In this context, the Syrian conflict emerged as an extension of the popular uprisings that started with the Arab Spring in 2011 and soon became an international crisis. The harsh suppression of the anti-regime demonstrations in Syria by the Assad regime plunged the country into civil war and the scale of the conflicts rapidly expanded. Since the

beginning of the civil war, Syrian territory has become the center not only of internal conflicts but also of regional and global power struggles (Babahanoğlu, 2023, p. 410). In this process, international actors such as Iran, Russia, the United States, Turkey and the European Union have tried to have an impact on the crisis in Syria in line with different strategic objectives.

The civil war in Syria has caused serious humanitarian, economic and political crises not only within the country's borders but also at the regional level. Millions of Syrians have been displaced and turned into refugees, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives and the country has been devastated. In particular, the refugee problem has become an important issue directly affecting many countries, especially Turkey, which borders Syria. In this process, Turkey has become one of the countries hosting the largest number of refugees in the world and this situation has led to radical changes in the socioeconomic structure of the country.

In shaping its policies on the Syrian crisis, Turkey has taken into account both regional security and humanitarian perspectives. While taking measures against terrorist organizations and irregular migration waves that threaten border security, it has also engaged in humanitarian aid and diplomatic initiatives for the Syrian people. However, Turkey's policies have been complicated by the conflicting interests of international actors and geopolitical dynamics in the region. In particular, the US support for the YPG, Russia's military assistance to the Assad regime and Iran's efforts to increase its influence in the region have narrowed Turkey's room for maneuver in Syria. In addition, Israel's security concerns and the European Union's policies towards the migration crisis have further complicated the Syrian problem. In this process, Turkey has tried both to protect its national security through cross-border operations and to ensure regional stability through diplomatic efforts.

These conflicts, which lasted for nearly 13 years, ended on December 8, 2024 when Bashar al- Assad, the last representative of the 61-year Baathist regime, fled the country and sought refuge in Russia as a result of the mobilization of anti-regime groups at the end of November 2024. The overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime deeply affected not only the domestic balance and structure but also regional security. The end of the Baathist regime has created new strategic scenarios both at the domestic and regional level, and remains unclear how the post-regime order in Damascus will be shaped and how the transition process will work.

2. POST-REGIME SYRIA ASSESSMENT

The overthrow of the 13-year Assad regime in Syria in just 13 days has raised the question of who are the actors behind this process. While some circles considered this development as a strategic move by Turkey, others claimed that the toppling of the Assad regime was carried out in line with the plans of the US and Israel. In fact, this process can be considered as a

combination of the strategic interests of both actors. Over the last year, Turkey has taken various steps to prepare the society for these developments. For example, messages against the PKK, peaceful rhetoric towards the Kurds and emphasizing that Turkey is Israel's next target have all been part of this preparation process.

The overthrow of the Assad regime by opposition groups in Syria in a short period of time has led to suspicions that this was a planned operation. The fact that this operation was led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is on the list of terrorist organizations of the US and Turkey, made the process even more remarkable. This is because the leader of HTS, Ahmed al-Sharqa, was initially recognized as an affiliate of DAESH, but he left his radical line and founded Jabhat al-Nusra and then formed HTS by adopting a more moderate stance. Therefore, the emergence of Ahmad al-Ashar shortly before the overthrow of the regime and the overthrow of the regime in a short period of 13 days raised suspicions about the influence of the US and Israel in this process.

However, recent analyses by Zionist think tanks such as the Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFRsuggest that it is premature to draw any firm conclusions about the final outcome of the process. For example, Michael (2024) Rubin of the US-based Enterprise Institute wrote in his analysis, "Assad must go, but how the vacuum left in his wake will be filled is crucial. Few will shed a tear if Assad flees to Iran, Russia or hangs from a lamppost in Damascus. But leaving the post-Assad vacuum to Turkey could be a generational mistake that could jeopardize the United States, Israel, Jordan and the Middle East in general. Instead of ridding Syria of terrorism, this could turn victory into defeat by merely changing sponsors", summarized the future of the process. In his analysis, Rubin tried to express that if Syria is left to Turkey, instead of clearing the region of terrorism, only the sponsors of terrorism will change. Another similar analysis was written by Henri Barkey of the CFR. As a former CIA advisor, Barkey analyzed Turkey's role in the Syrian civil war. Barkey (2024) analyzed that "...the fate of the Kurdish region in Syria depends on Washington. Ankara may be hoping that the incoming administration of Donald Trump will decide to withdraw its 900 troops from Syria and end support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). After all, Trump tried to do so twice during his first term, only to be persuaded by his advisors to back down. Today, however, the consequences of an American withdrawal could be much more serious: there are more than 40,000 Daesh and pro-Daesh detainees in SDF-run prisons, such as al-Hol. If released, it is quite possible that some or many of these detainees could join HTS, strengthening it or causing chaos in northern Iraq and beyond. Even without the current insurgency, the withdrawal of American troops would be inadvisable. This is because it could be perceived as a victory for Iran and its allies. Ultimately, Iran continues to encourage Iraq to reduce the American military presence. In addition to preventing the resurgence of Daesh,

American forces are also watching for Iranian supplies and support to its allies such as Hezbollah" In fact, Barkey tried to warn Turkey about the YPG by stating in his analysis that Turkey is trying to purge the US-controlled YPG, but when the YPG loses its power, tens of thousands of imprisoned DAESH fighters will be released, thus deepening the chaos in Syria. In his analysis, Barkey implied that a jihadist state could be established in Syria and that this state would have seriously dangerous consequences for both the US and Israel.

In another CFR analysis, Steven Cook (2004) stated that "Russia was one of the biggest supporters of the Bashar al-Assad regime. A takeover by HTS could cause Syria to lose its bases along the Mediterranean coast. The collapse of the Assad regime is a major blow for Iran, which supported the regime and used Syria as a transit route to send arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan tacitly supported the violent overthrow of Assad and seized the opportunity to shape the new regime in Damascus. Israel will welcome this change as it weakens Iran's position in the region, but a HTS-led Syria may be more directly hostile than the Assad regime. The US has long taken a stance against the Assad regime, but at the same time recognizes HTS as a terrorist organization. Leaders advise the US to stay on the sidelines in this process". In his analysis, Cook states that Turkey has the opportunity to shape Syria and tries to include Iran and Russia in the process alongside the US and Israel. He also emphasized that the HTS, which has seized power, has the potential to display a more hostile attitude towards Israel. In this context, it can be said that Israel's strikes on ammunition depots and critical points, which were not targeted during the Assad regime, immediately after the HTS took control of Damascus support Cook's assessments. Again, Israel's bombing of Syria's intelligence building immediately after the opposition groups took control of Damascus can be considered another indicator of the accuracy of this assessment. It is also noteworthy that Israel targeted Syria's chemical facilities, which the Assad regime did not take into consideration during the Assad regime's rule. Barkey's statements on this issue support Cook's assessments. "The emergence of a jihadist state in Syria would lead to unprecedented uncertainty and could trigger new cycles of violence involving external actors such as the US, Israel and Iraq. The biggest concern about the regime's collapse is the possibility of the chemical weapons arsenal falling into the hands of HTS or other jihadist groups". Barkey argued that if chemical weapons fall into the hands of radical groups, they could pose a serious threat to regional and global security, in other words, to Israel and the United States.

Although the future strategic choices of HTS are uncertain from the US and Israel's perspective, it is clear that these two actors play important roles in the developments in Syria. The US has aimed to weaken Russia's influence in Syria, and to this end, it has significantly weakened Moscow in the war in Ukraine. Israel, on the other hand, weakened Iran's influence in the region through its war with Hezbollah, causing the Assad regime to lose its two most critical sources of support. In any case, the new US President Donald Trump

is expected to cooperate with Russia to end the conflict in Ukraine in line with Moscow's interests and the war in Syria in accordance with Washington's strategic goals. This is similar to the strategic approaches proposed by former US Secretary of State and US presidential advisor Henry Kissinger in May 2022. In the past, Kissinger emphasized "international recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea in order to establish peace in Ukraine". In parallel with Kissinger's proposal, it is thought that a new order will take shape in Syria and the world in general, and that Russia and Iran will weaken in this process, leading to the collapse of the Assad regime, while the influence of the US and Israel in the region will strengthen. Turkey, on the other hand, seized this transformation as a strategic opportunity and aimed to strengthen its regional interests and maximize its gains (BBC, 2022).

This process may inevitably lead to certain consequences. The most critical of these consequences is the possibility of a confrontation between Turkey and Israel. As a matter of fact, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said in a statement, "After Palestine and Lebanon, our homeland will be the place where the Israeli administration, which acts with the delusion of the promised land, will set its eyes on. Netanyahu is adding Anatolia to his dreams. I address to those who say Turkey should be neutral, to those who say Hammas is a terrorist organization; we are not facing a state but a pack of murderers who feed on blood", he warned the public. Shortly after these statements, the Assad regime was toppled, Israel moved to gradually take control of Syria from the south, and the PYD, which it supported, started to pose a strategic threat on the Turkish border.

It is stated that what Israel wants to realize in the region is the Greater Middle East Project (BOP) and that the region is the promised land for this reason. The BOP is an initiative that came to the agenda under US President George W. Bush and was included in leaked secret documents. Initially, the project aimed to promote democratic reforms in the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, etc., but later the process was different. On July 25, 2006, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced in Prague that the US was actually aiming for a major change in the Middle East rather than a ceasefire. Shortly after this statement, Rice met with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jerusalem and emphasized that the struggle against Hezbollah could reshape the Middle East and introduced what they called the "New Middle East Project". Rice and Olmert stated that a possible ceasefire should not allow Hezbollah to maintain control over southern Lebanon. At the same meeting, Rice (2006) said: "In addressing the current circumstances, we must always keep in mind the kind of Middle East we are trying to build. The time has come for a new Middle East," Rice said, adding that the US wanted a lasting solution that would support the forces of democracy and peace in the region. After this statement, nothing was the same in the Middle East, and soon the Arab Spring began, paving the way for a transformation process in the direction envisioned by the project.

In fact, the foundation of this New Middle East Project was laid in 1982 by Oded Yinon, an advisor to former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. According to the so-called "Yinon Plan", in order to ensure Israel's security, many Middle Eastern and North African countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Egypt should be divided into several parts on ethnic and sectarian grounds (Matio, 2024). The Yinon plan is in line with the long-term strategic approach of the Zionist movement, which is shaped in line with the goal of the "Promised Land". However, for this plan to be implemented and for the US to intervene in the Middle East and North Africa, a valid justification is needed. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in the United States targeting the twin towers provided the US and Israel with this opportunity. The US invaded Iraq in 2003, citing the September 11 terrorist attacks as justification. A year before 9/11, a report was prepared by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a think tank founded by officials who had played a role in the US invasion of Iraq. The PNAC report stated that "...the process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, can be a long one unless some catastrophic and catalyzing event - another Pearl Harbor, for example - occurs" (PNAC Report, 2000, p. 51). This statement indicates that there is a need to prepare for a radical transformation in the region and that an event such as the Japanese air attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor on the Hawaiian island of Oahu on December 7, 1941 is needed for this and that such an event would accelerate the process. The attack shaped in PNAC's report took place exactly one year later, and the 9/11 attack paved the way for the US invasion of Iraq and the establishment of influence in the Middle East, as well as Israel's Promised Land strategy in the region. Accordingly, the US first invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003 with "Operation Iraqi Freedom" and overthrew Saddam Hussein on April 9, 2003. Shortly after the invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring overthrew Tunisian leader Ben Ali, Yemeni leader Saleh, Libyan leader Gaddafi and Egyptian leader Mubarak.

Syria is next in line for the continuation of the project. The disintegration of Syria became a strategic focal point, especially before the Arab Spring. During this period, a pipeline project to transport gas to Europe via Qatar, Syria and Turkey was put on the agenda and it was envisioned that the gas that this pipeline would direct to Europe would constitute an alternative to Russia's gas exports and thus threaten Russia's interests. Taking this into account, Bashar al-Assad rejected the project. The Assad regime's rejection of this project changed the balance in the region and paved the way for Syria to enter a process of partition with Russia rather than the United States. This decision placed Syria at the center of the international conflict within the framework of global energy policies and geopolitical struggles, and Syria's disintegration became inevitable at the end of the process. This process and the civil war seriously affected Turkey as it borders Syria. Turkey started to take measures against possible threats on its border. In this framework, a solution-oriented process was initiated in 2013 and diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives were increased. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

characterized the solution process as a national project and attached special importance to this emphasis. This is because before the solution process, the US demobilized the PKK and launched the Kurdish initiative. Moreover, this process was carried forward in accordance with the David Lee Phillips report published in 2007. In his report "Disarming the PKK", David Lee Phillips, who served as a senior executive in the US State Department and the United Nations organization, wrote: "The PKK problem cannot be solved by military means. The organization should be granted amnesty for its members if they adopt a peaceful stance. It is important for democratic development that Turkey refrains from cross-border operations against the PKK; otherwise, such steps could increase social polarization and lead to regional problems. Moreover, such operations could damage Turkish-American relations and jeopardize Turkey's EU membership. The democratization process is a priority for resolving the PKK problem. A civilian constitution and comprehensive political reforms should be important steps in this process. The abolition of Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code and the Anti-Terror Law will also support the process. The Democratic Society Party is expected to condemn terrorism and respect Turkey's territorial integrity. At the same time, the party's role as a mediator could contribute to the settlement process. The Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq should cut financial support to the PKK and take over control around Qandil. Turkish public concerns about Kirkuk joining the Kurdish region are misplaced as the Kurds would prefer integration into the EU with Turkey. Turkey should realize that a stable Iraqi Kurdistan is in its interest in terms of regional balances. The United States should exert more pressure on the Iraqi government and the Kurdish administration." The report stated that Turkey is not strong and independent enough, and that the state's internal tutelage mechanisms are attempted to be influenced (Evren, 2010) through closure cases and rumors of a coup attempt.

Turkey started this process in line with the demands of the US. However, after a short period of time, it took it under its control and started to direct the process itself. In order to prevent foreign states from using the so-called Kurdish problem to serve their own interests, Turkey tried to solve the problem with its own will. In this process, the US, together with its proxy organizations, made plans to dismember seven countries in the Middle East. Speaking about this, US General Wesley Clark said in a program on CNN that he had learned that the US had a military intervention plan targeting 7 countries such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Iran. In his speech, Clark emphasized that with this plan, the US aims to achieve its strategic goals in and around the Middle East, but that it will create long-term instability. He also stated that terrorist organizations are used in proxy wars in the region and that groups such as DAESH are indirectly supported by US allies (CNN, 2016). The US-backed DAESH started to organize attacks against the PYD on Syria's border with Turkey and the US decided to support the PYD under the pretext of "fighting DAESH". With this strategy, the US aimed to establish a terror corridor on the Turkish border. At that time, it was

observed that all organizations considered to be linked to the US and Israel targeted Turkey. In this period of intense attacks, Turkey tried to ensure social peace within the country with the solution process on the one hand, and on the other hand to reduce the impact of anti-Turkey propaganda in the Western media by narrowing the conflict fronts.

In the same period, Russia entered Syria and started military interventions and reached a kind of agreement with the US, with which it was once at odds, to share its influence over Syria. Russia launched airstrikes in Syria on September 30, 2015, at the same time as the US suspended its train-and- donate program for Syrian opposition groups. On September 10, 2015, the US terminated this program completely and the organization "Syrian Democratic Forces (ANA, 2017) in order to openly support the YPG. The reason for this was the fact that under these names, the PKK/PYD terrorist organizations could not be at the table in processes such as Geneva and Astana, where the future of Syria was being discussed (BBC, 2015). On the other hand, the Pentagon decided to abandon its strategy of supporting the opposition in Syria in favor of supporting the PYD, which is supposedly fighting against DAESH. In early 2016, this led to a war between Pentagon-backed militias and CIA-backed militias (Bulos et al., 2016). This development revealed the fact that there is no single central strategy in US foreign policy, but rather conflicting policies of different interest groups.

Turkey ended the solution process in 2015 after the PKK increased its attacks and started to continue its fight against terrorism in a decisive manner. This process led to strained relations with the United States and then with Russia after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane. While Turkey was experiencing a tense process both internally and externally, the US-backed FETÖ attempted a coup attempt on July 15, 2016. However, after the coup attempt failed, Turkey dealt a major blow to the BOP project with its military operations against the PYD and DAESH. For example, when Turkey carried out Operation Peace Spring against the PYD, US President Trump threatened, "...As I have strongly stated before, if Turkey does something that I think crosses the line in my wonderful and unprecedented logic, I will completely destroy Turkey's economy" (Sözcü, 2019). Against all odds, Turkey has carried out operations against terrorist organizations in Syria. However, Turkey had to pay the price for these operations and the US started to impose sanctions on Turkey. Turkey's economy was negatively affected by these sanctions

As a result of all these developments, Turkey is focused on changes in international relations and new strategic goals, anticipating future developments. To better understand this situation, it is necessary to look at how policies are evolving around the world. In 2019, the US think tank RAND published a report titled "Levant Integration", which highlighted the contribution of increased trade relations between countries in the Levant to the development of the region. The report envisions a comprehensive free

trade agreement that eliminates tariffs, lowers investment and non-tariff barriers, and eliminates visa requirements. It also suggests that the per capita gross domestic product of the Levant countries could increase by 3 to 7%. This economic expansion would likely create between 0.7 million and 1.7 million new jobs, thereby reducing unemployment rates in the region by between 8- 18%. These estimates are based on a potential free trade agreement between Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey - the six main countries of the Levant (Egel et al., 2019). In fact, the main objective of the report is to bring the countries of the region closer to Israel and to consolidate Israel's influence in the region. To this end, US President Trump and his Jewish son-in-law Jared Kushner have initiated efforts to improve relations between the Gulf countries and Israel. The attack carried out by Hamas on October 7, 2023, while the Palestinian issue was completely off the agenda and the Palestinian territories were being offered to Israel, disrupted the plans of both the US and Israel. The Hamas attack halted the normalization processes between the Gulf states and Israel and complicated the balances in the region once again. This situation has brought the Palestinian issue back to the forefront of the international agenda and made it more difficult for the US strategic moves in the Middle East to succeed. The Hamas attack, coupled with the questioning of Israel's normalization policies in the region and the cautious approach of the Gulf countries in their relations with Israel, damaged the US's long-term integration projects. This development not only made it more difficult for the US to achieve its geopolitical goals in the Middle East, but also opened the door for powers such as Iran and China to gain more influence in the region. The US has had to adapt to this new equation and reconsider its disrupted strategic plans.

However, the most important strategic threat for the US has been the rising influence of China. In this context, it is of great importance for the US to keep Europe on its side. In line with this goal, the US succeeded in distancing Europe from Russia by breaking Russia's energy dependence on Europe during the Russia-Ukraine war. However, it has become imperative for the US to provide alternative sources to meet Europe's energy needs. This necessity has made it inevitable for the US to implement a strategy of establishing a stronger control over the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. In this framework, neutralizing Iran and Russia in these strategic areas has become one of the main objectives of the US in order to secure the energy resources and trade routes in the region. Within the framework of this strategy, the US has worn down Russia in the Russia-Ukraine War and weakened Iran's regional influence through Hamas through Israel. However, the main strategic goal of the US is to limit and prevent Chinese influence in the region. While China challenged the economic and political power of the US with the "One Belt One Road Project", the US announced the "India, Middle East and Europe Economic Corridor" (IMEC) in 2023 as a counter move to this project. In this project, the US has planned its route to reach Europe via Israel, leaving Turkey out.

Turkey responded to the US move to exclude it with the "Development Road Project" from the Persian Gulf to Europe. With this project, Turkey aimed to create an alternative to Israel's Suez Canal and the US IMEC initiative. However, there were two main obstacles to the realization of the Development Road Project: The PKK terrorist organization and Iran's influence in the region. Turkey reached an agreement with the Baghdad government on the elimination of the PKK and dealt a heavy blow to the PKK with Operation Claw-Lock in northern Iraq. Similarly, Iran's declining influence in the region and its withdrawal from Syria have removed another obstacle to the project. China, on the other hand, has developed a plan to combine Turkey's Development Road Project with its own Silk Road initiative and has committed to a $10 billion investment in Iraq. However, Iraq suspended the deal due to US pressure. This situation reveals that the competition and political pressure of the great powers in the region over economic projects continues. In other words, the US does not want to leave the Development Road Project to either China or Turkey. To this end, the US has not refrained from using all kinds of strategies and political tools.

Conclusion

A new era has begun in Syria in the post-Bashar al-Assad era. A new process is underway that will reshape the geopolitical balance in the Middle East and alter strategic alliances and security architectures. With the collapse of the Baath regime, the status quo has been severely disrupted. At the same time, a sensitive, fragile and uncertain political environment has emerged in which many actors are trying to redefine their roles and interests. In this process, Turkey stands out not only as a country bordering the region with historical and cultural ties, but also as one of the strategic actors in a high-risk international arena.

Turkey's response to the Syrian crisis, characterised by cross-border security operations, refugee management and multi-layered diplomacy, protects its national interests. It also demonstrates its will to influence the future of the region. The changing roles of global actors such as the US, Russia, Israel and Iran, and the rise of others such as HTS, have created a multidimensional and complex structure in the new Syrian equation. Once again, with deepening ideological and strategic rivalries, Syria has become not only an area of clashing regional interests, but also the crossroads of energy security, global hegemony and transnational control struggles.

In such a competitive environment, Turkey's strategic choices have become a serious factor for regional peace and stability, beyond ensuring its national security. For Turkey, new opportunities have come with great responsibilities. The fragile alliances in the region, the unstable and complex structures of armed groups, and the continuing threats from radical elements require Turkey to strike a delicate balance between military resolve, diplomatic restraint and economic integration. Moreover, new power

struggles, shaped by global-scale projects such as the Greater Middle East Project, the IMEC Corridor and Turkey's Development Road Project, have transcended traditional geopolitical rivalries and expanded into areas such as energy routes, technological superiority and ideological expansionism. From this perspective, Syria is no longer a battlefield where interests clash, but a strategic crossroads where the global order is being reshaped.

Today, the future of Syria and the Middle East depends on the extent to which regional actors can move away from sectarianism, ideological polarization and zero-sum politics. For Turkey, this process is not just about protecting its borders. Turkey needs to play a constructive leadership role that promotes regional integration, prioritizes ethnic peace and is based on sustainable peace. The coming years will test whether Turkey can be a stabilizing actor, balancing between great power competition and local turbulence. Ankara's ability to properly assess these challenges and turn them into strategic gains will determine both its power position in the region and its place in the new multipolar world order.

The transformations taking place around the world present both great opportunities and serious threats for Turkey. Turkey's geopolitical position makes it an intersection point of energy routes and trade corridors, further increasing its importance. The fact that all energy resources, starting from Russia and Azerbaijan to the Eastern Mediterranean and Qatari natural gas, pass through Turkey, as well as the fact that many strategic routes from the Silk Road to the Development Road center on Turkey, increases the country's potential to become both a regional and a global actor. However, these geopolitical advantages also make Turkey a target for conflicts of interest between great powers. While Israel is expanding its sphere of influence in Gaza and Lebanon, it is also attempting to invade Syria from the south of the region various pretexts. At the same time, Israel's support for the PYD's statehood efforts on Turkey's border raises tensions in the region. However, Turkey is resolutely responding to these attempts by clearing its borders of terrorist organizations such as the PYD and YPG against threats emanating from the US and Israel. This situation ensures Turkey's regional security while at the same time creating a balance in the north against threats from the south.

In this context, Turkey's regional policies are shaped by its efforts to adapt to the transformation process in Syria. In particular, moves to strengthen the Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood, which aims at solidarity in the region, are being pursued with determination. Terrorist organizations trying to weaken the Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood act as Israel's apparatus in the region and these elements must be eliminated from the region. Historically, the Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood has been an important pillar for the stability of the region. In this respect, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's statement "We are the protector of the Kurds in our east and south, history is like this" (Gazete Duvar, 2024) reaffirms Turkey's historical ties with the Kurds and its protective role in the region. The increasing imperialist and Zionist threats in the region make

it imperative to recall and strengthen historical ties and fraternal relations. From Somalia to Palestine, from Libya to Syria, Turkey continues to be a source of hope and a center of stability for humanity. This situation emerges as a requirement of Turkey's historical responsibilities to ensure the peace and prosperity of the peoples of the region. In this framework, the peoples of the region have two basic options in front of them: Either to show the will to live in an environment of peace and brotherhood under the leadership of Turkey on the basis of common history and culture, or to jeopardize this common ground of peace and stability by falling for the misleading promises offered by imperialist powers. This choice will be decisive for the future of the region and the fate of the peoples.

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