



A Comparative Study of Türkiye's Foreign Policy towards Kurds of Iraq and Syria in the Post-Arab Uprisings*

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Abstract

The Arab Uprisings initiated a new phase of security order in the Middle East. In light of these developments, Türkiye is regarded as one of the players who set the stage for shifting its regional stance. Moreover, the Kurds in northern Iraq and Syria were able to express their desire for independence, which led to new geopolitical developments in the North Middle East. In this regard, the attitudes of Turkish politicians toward the Kurds in northern Iraq and Syria demonstrate their different views of the aforementioned Kurdish territories in the years following the beginning of the Arab Uprisings. Now the question here is why the Turkish government behaved differently toward the Kurdish areas of Iraq and Syria both during and after the Arab Uprisings. The Turkish government's divergent actions seem to be caused by two factors: on the one hand, its security concerns regarding the autonomous territories of the Syrian Kurds in the south of Türkiye; and on the other hand, its economic gains from the Kurdish territories of Iraq, including oil concessions. Put simply, the contradictory behavior of Turkish statesmen toward Syrian and Iraqi Kurds in the post-Arab Uprisings is influenced by existential security concerns as well as economic and political interests. This paper aims to use the defensive realism theory to address the double standards of Türkiye towards the Kurds of Iraq and Syria in the post-Arab Uprising era.

Keywords

Arab Uprisings; Türkiye; Defensive realism; Iraqi Kurds, Syrian Kurds

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Introduction

The Arab Uprisings, which began in Tunisia in December 2010, eclipsed all Arab governments as well as non-Arab entities (such as Türkiye and Israel). Because of these developments, the regional order has entered a new phase and is sometimes referred to as the “New Middle East”. Some of the long-standing actors in the region, such as Egypt and Syria, now play a secondary role in this new order. On the other hand, despite having intrinsic weaknesses like a small area or low population, some other actors, such as the UAE and Qatar, joined the group of powerful regional actors. Meanwhile, the three great powers of West Asia (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye) have faced slightly different challenges. The Arab Uprisings paved the way for Iran's sphere of influence in the region to expand from Syria to Yemen. Saudi Arabia, as a regional rival of Iran, was primarily concerned with preventing the revolutionary wave from spreading to its lands and other member states of the (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council. In addition, Saudi Arabia supported Salafist and extremist Islamist organizations and groups in order to curb Iran's regional influence. In this new period, Türkiye focused on an amalgamation between threats and opportunities (Altunışık & Martin, 2023: 87-8).

Due to changes brought about by the Arab Uprisings, Türkiye faced three main threats: Iran's growing regional influence; risks from radical Islamist currents expanding their activities into Türkiye's borders; and the possibility of Kurdish groups based in northern Syria and Iraq, Türkiye's southern neighbors, engaging in independence-seeking activities. However, some of the most advantageous opportunities that have emerged for this country under the new circumstances included the revival of Türkiye's leadership role in the region within the framework of the Ottoman Empire's nostalgia, the foundation for exporting Turkish unique governance model—a blend of economic liberalism and Islamic ideology—to other nations, which at the time enjoyed significant popularity in the Arab world, and, lastly, the return of this country to regional equations after a 90-year hiatus. The culmination of these cases is evident in the attendance and remarks made in Turkish by Türkiye's then Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, during the foreign ministers' summit of the Arab League in Cairo in September 2011. This was the first time since the establishment of the Arab League in 1945 that a non-Arab figure addressed a non-Arabic language at the meeting of the foreign ministers of the League in Cairo (Jones, 2011).

Regarding the topic of this paper, the Arab Uprisings changed the way Türkiye' treated the Kurdish territories on its southern borders. The autonomy of Kurdish political institutions in northern Iraq and Syria following the Arab Uprising was viewed in this framework as a new facet of the developing regional order, at least initially. As stated above,

these major developments both put Türkiye's national security and regional objectives in jeopardy and provided its leaders with new chances to elevate the country's standing in the region. Under these circumstances, the Turkish government took the first moves toward breaking its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and overcoming its political isolation in the Middle East. However, in the decade preceding the beginning of the Arab Uprisings, factors such as the stability of the political system brought about by the Justice and Development Party's continued rule, Türkiye's newfound approach within the framework of the zero problem policy with its neighbors, the shift toward democratization of the political structure, and the de-securitization of politics and culture had established the groundwork for this country's transformation in the new millennium (Esen & Gumuscu, 2020: 1).

Türkiye generally employs a combination of double standards in its foreign policy toward the Kurdish territories in its southern region. While the Kurdish regions in northern Iraq and Syria openly and covertly call for independence, Türkiye has prioritized economic concerns over security concerns in its relations with the former, whereas it has adopted an aggressive and inflexible stance toward the latter in the new millennium. This paper aims to analyze Türkiye's differing stances toward these two Kurdish entities and provide an explanation for this dual standard. For this, a literature review will also reveal the difference between this paper and similar ones in this field. In the Theoretical Framework, the different facets of the defensive realism theory will be articulated as the theoretical foundation for Türkiye's dual policy toward the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. The body of the paper is also dedicated to explaining the reasons for Türkiye's different foreign policy towards the discussed entities. Finally, the results of this study will be presented to readers.

1- Literature review

Although many books and articles have been published about the Arab Uprisings and its consequences, the effects of these developments on Türkiye's political behavior towards the Kurds of Iraq and Syria have been less addressed in the literature. Here, the most prominent works related to this subject will be briefly reviewed. Jordi Tejel's book "Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society (Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies)" explores how political-social consciousness has evolved in Syria throughout the nation's historical developments up to the present. In addition to providing ethnographic contexts for the Syrian Kurds' existential realities, the book analyzes the movement of Syrian Kurds theoretically and focuses on understanding the characteristics of the contemporary Syrian Kurds' existential reality in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings (Tejel, 2016). The book

“Geography of Iraq with Emphasis on Geopolitical Issues” by Nami and Mohammadpour, released by Porseman Publication, is another important resource in this area. This book discusses the Kurds' position within the Iraqi political system, their history, and how they compare to other groups. The writers claim that the Kurds have a sizable independent armed force and occupy several prominent positions in Iraq, which has enhanced their influence in Iraq's political system (Nami & Mohammadpour, 2009).

The relationship between the Turkish government and the Kurds is the subject of a brief article by Mohammadali Dastmali titled “Türkiye and the Kurdish Challenge”. The author concludes that the Republic of Türkiye has adopted two distinct strategies in response to the political, social, and economic developments of Kurds in Iraq and Syria in recent years. These strategies differ in that, at times, they can be so blatantly apparent that one could initially assume that Türkiye has made rash and confused decisions regarding the Kurds. He also points out that the Turkish government treats the Kurds of Iraq and Syria in a commanding and purposeful manner, depending on its specific political plans and goals (Dastmali, 2016). Regarding the issue of Kurds in Turkish politics, one of the important works is the article "Typology of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East" by Hamed Yaqoubifar. The author states that while Türkiye's foreign policy in the 2000s was successful in mitigating neighborly conflicts with Syria, the 2011 events took Türkiye in a different direction. The desire to be on the path of regional developments prompted Ahmet Davutoglu, Türkiye's then-foreign minister, to propose a value-oriented strategy for the situation after zeroing out the problems. Türkiye seeks to uphold democratic values and protect its interests, but as long as the Syrian crisis, issues with the Kurdish population, the unstable economic situation, domestic conflicts within the nation, and ultimately the influx of refugees at Türkiye's shared borders with Syria persist, these will all have an impact on Türkiye's national interests. Meanwhile, the Kurdish enigma will continue to be a major factor in Türkiye's national security policy, and it cannot be solved militarily (Yagoubifar, 2012).

Although there are many outstanding English works on this subject, only a few of them will be mentioned here due to character limits. The seventh chapter of the book “Turkey–West Relations: The Politics of Intra-Alliance Opposition”, written by Oya Dursun-Özkanca, deals with Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria and Iraq. Analyzing the consequences of Türkiye's foreign policy in Syria and Iraq in the light of Türkiye-US-NATO relations, this chapter posits that a major source of friction between the US and Türkiye was the US support for Syrian Kurds fighting the Islamic State (ISIS). This claim is corroborated by Türkiye's long-term resistance to cooperating with the US in the fight against ISIS, its tenuous hold over its border with Syria, and the fact that the US was not granted full control

of Incirlik Air Base until July 2015 (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019). Another important work in this field is the article "Türkiye's multiple problems around Syrian and Iraqi Kurds and internal issues; how they are related and where they might lead" written by Bill Park. The author believes that Ankara is currently grappling with the "Kurdish issue" because of the Kurdistan Regional Government's shift to a quasi-governmental position in northern Iraq, the growing political and economic ties between this regional government and Ankara, the unrest in Syria that has resulted in the establishment of autonomous Kurdish regions in this country, and Türkiye's ongoing efforts to resolve its issues with the Kurds. These issues are more interconnected, cross-border, complex, and overlap than they have ever been. This paper addresses a variety of potential outcomes while tracing the connections between these various, transient aspects of the Kurdish issue in Türkiye. Additionally, it aims to contextualize the policies and issues that Türkiye's Kurdistan region faces within regional and global dynamics (Park, 2013). Although the Arab Uprisings began more than ten years ago and caused major developments in Kurdish lands, a few studies have compared Türkiye's policies on the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. This paper aims to somewhat bridge this research gap.

2- Theoretical framework: defensive realism

One of the primary subsets of neoclassical realism is defensive realism, which is represented by theorists like, among all, Stephen Walt, Jack Snyder, and Charles Taliaferro. The international system is viewed as anarchic by defensive realists, but they believe that anarchy is not as dangerous as aggressive realists believe. Violence in the international environment only arises in dreadful circumstances or when governments exhibit irrational evilness. This is because governments can counteract external threats by establishing a balance of power. As a result, from the perspective of defensive realism, governments' foreign policies primarily involve peaceful responses to systemic issues. The relationship between anarchy and the requirements of the international system, on the one hand, and the behavior of governments, on the other, is another topic that defensive realists focus on. They perceive greater complexity in this relationship. Defensive realists make the supposition that, since global anarchy is essentially "benign," security is not that uncommon. Governments that are aware of this will therefore not act aggressively; instead, they will only respond aggressively when they perceive a threat to their security. Such a response is usually restricted to maintaining balancing and containing the threat. Conflicts will only escalate into more serious responses when the security issue gets much worse. Furthermore, they do not regard international anarchy from Hobbesian perspective or as a malignant thing in any way; rather,

they believe that it is difficult to comprehend and that it is up to statesmen to assess the level of threat in each specific situation (Moshirzadeh, 2020: 133).

Defensive realists argue that governments are not particularly motivated to look for new ways to consolidate their power because of the way the international system is set up. Rather, the international system's structure helps them to preserve the balance of power. According to them, governments should seek to preserve power rather than expand it. Aggressive realists, on the other hand, contend that governments are strongly motivated by the international system to look for ways to outbid rivals for dominance, particularly when the benefit outweighs the cost, and that this is why the pro-status quo powers are rare in international milieu (Mende, 2022: 7).

Security dilemma is one of the key concepts in defensive realism that helps to explain foreign policies of governments. A security dilemma occurs when a government's efforts to fortify its security end up undermining the security of other governments. With the relative distribution of power, anarchy breeds uncertainty about the present and future objectives of other governments. Accordingly, governments attempt to strengthen their position and security by adopting self-help policies. However, this causes other governments to become uneasy and attempt to fortify their own borders, leading to an unresolved competition for security. As a result, a government's power-seeking initiatives to boost security ultimately lead to security reduction. Here is where resolving the security dilemma enters the foreign policy analyses of defensive realists through attaining a proportionate share of power, attention to other actors' perceptions, separation of capabilities from offensive and defensive policies, and so forth. Since defensive realism assumes that the anarchic structure of the international system has a more lenient influence on foreign policy behaviors of governments, they usually seek to maximize their security rather than their power. When it comes to the concept of security dilemma, any aggressive behavior can reduce the security of governments. Therefore, governments adopt defensive, cautious, and considerate actions, instead of aggressive ones, in order to increase their security. Consequently, international politics frequently deals with governments that uphold the status quo rather than revisionist ones (James, 2022: 451).

As one of the first commentators on the concept of security, Ernst Hirsch claims that defensive measures and abilities are typically interpreted as aggressive behavior and that measures taken by governments seeking to maintain the status quo are ambiguous and frequently cannot be distinguished from preparatory measures for aggression. The reaction of threatened states can set off a chain reaction of increasing hostility that everyone would rather avoid. This is the catastrophe in international relations, not its evil. Unpleasant events

happen because governments are in challenging circumstances (Smith & Dawson, 2022: 177).

3- The Kurds of the Middle East and Türkiye's policies towards them

The Kurds, who are mainly Sunni and constitute the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, have long been important to the region. The Kurds are estimated to be about 35 million who are sporadically distributed throughout Iran, Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria. Although there is no official Kurdish government in the Middle East, the Kurds are increasingly tied to the policies of countries in the region. This role of Kurds is not a new issue, as their political, cultural, historical, and even combat aspects have influenced regional political trends. The events that followed World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire are what gave rise to the tensions that have persisted over the Kurds and the countries in the region ever since. They had the chance to realize their long-held dream of forming an independent Kurdistan following the war and the fall of the empire. In this context, at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the Kurdish delegation led by Sherif Pasha proposed the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in a region that is now part of Iran, Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria. However, the idea was never carried out because the proposed borders were opposed by the winners of World War I. Consequently, the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) superseded this proposal; however, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) subsequently replaced the above-mentioned treaty, thereby depriving the Kurds of their nation-state (Ahmadi, 2023: 103). Due to their dispersion throughout Iran, Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria, Kurds have different views on cultural, social, and political matters, and as a result, they constantly strive for varying degrees of independence in each of the aforementioned countries. For example, the Kurds living in Tehran or Istanbul do not want an independent Kurdistan, whereas those in their motherlands, such as western Iran, southeastern Türkiye, or northern Iraq and Syria, support independence movements.

Türkiye was more willing to work with the governments of Europe, the US, and the West in general before the Justice and Development Party took power. However, once this party took office, this nation's foreign policy shifted significantly, and for the first time since the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, this country defined and adhered to regional policy in an effort to become recognized as a Muslim nation in the Middle East. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurdish regions were divided into four parts and placed in separate countries (Iran, Iraq, Türkiye, and Syria), as per the secret agreements between England and France, particularly the Sykes-Picot Agreement. As a result, Kurdish people are living in each of these countries' neighborhoods. Because of their lengthy histories in

statehood, Iran and Türkiye—two of these four countries—had never experienced a mandate system of the League of Nations. By contrast, Iraq and Syria went through a stage of transition to independence under the mandate system of Britain and France, respectively. Notwithstanding the above-mentioned dual classification, each Kurdish ethnic group had a unique experience with their respective governments. The Kurdish crowd in Iran has experienced the least tensions with the central government because of their shared identity, language, and cultural heritage. Nevertheless, despite a sizable Kurdish population (over 20 million people) in Türkiye, severe repression has prevented them from achieving fundamental rights over the last century (Christofis, 2019: 251; Koolae & Hafezian, 2017: 74-5).

As previously stated, the Syrian government emerged under French tutelage. The Kurdish situation in Syria differed from that of other countries with a Kurdish minority. The Syrian Kurds called for autonomy during the early years of France's mandate, but this dream did not come true. After a republic was established in this country, Türkiye's Kurdish intellectuals moved to Syria, where they successfully united a sizable portion of the Kurdish tribes to secure autonomy. In August 1928, a memorandum was submitted to French authorities based on the mandate system principles and later on the tutelage government's commitments in favor of local autonomy. The memo included demands for teaching the mother tongue in the Kurdish areas, hiring native workers there, organizing a group of Kurds to guard Syria's northern borders exclusively, and so on. These requests were opposed not only by the French government, as the mandate of Syria at the time, but also by Syrian nationalists and Turkish authorities (Tejel, 2016: 51).

The Kurds did not succeed politically even through the most powerful Kurdish independence movements in Iraq until the 1990s, when Saddam Hussein's regime was challenged by the imposition of a no-fly zone. However, following that, they were granted an autonomous political identity, which occasionally included independence aspirations,¹ under the auspices of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Türkiye's foreign policy towards the Iraqi Kurdistan Region until 2010 was based on the red line policy approach; this means that Türkiye opposed the independence of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and managed its relations with Iraq as a unified political entity only through the central government of this country. The following sections of this paper will deeply focus on Türkiye's foreign policy towards Iraqi Kurds and Syrian Kurds during the post-Arab Uprisings.

¹. Here, this refers to the referendum of KRG in 2017 within the territory under its control regarding the independence of the Iraqi Kurds from the central government of Iraq.

4- Türkiye's relations with Iraqi Kurds in the post-Arab Uprisings

As mentioned above, KRG was established in 1991 when the UN declared a no-fly zone over the north and south of Iraq. However, the KRG entered a new phase following Saddam's overthrow in 2003. This event allowed KRG to actively participate in the constitution's drafting while exerting influence over Iraq and leveraging its ten years of governing experience. The issue of the Kurdistan Region's independence from Iraq has the potential to influence not only the nation's internal political stability and security but also the external and regional security of the surrounding nations. That is why the Turkish government has paid close attention to the political climate in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Türkiye's foreign policy toward the Kurdistan Region changed following the victory of the Justice and Development Party, in general, and the Arab Uprisings aftermath, in particular. Since the effects of the Arab Uprisings aftermath on the Kurdistan Region, as well as the major orientations of other regional and international actors towards the Kurds, were not considered a security threat to Türkiye, this country attempted to establish friendly relations with the KRG, focusing on economic and political benefits. In other words, the effects of the Arab Uprisings on Türkiye's foreign policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan and the diplomatic ties between the parties caused Türkiye to stop the red-line policy toward the region and marked the beginning of a new era in their reciprocal relations (Toraby & Taherizadeh, 2012: 12). Here two dimensions of these relations will be discussed briefly.

4-1- Türkiye's relations with the Iraqi Kurds based on economic considerations

Following the Arab Uprisings, the Iraqi central government was unable to maintain control of the country's oil wells in Kirkuk Province. Under these circumstances, the Kurdistan Region was granted access to these energy reserves in the north of Iraq to manage this region. Energy is considered the most important economic element improving Türkiye's relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan during the post-Arab Uprisings era. To keep up with the demands of the production engine of Türkiye's expanding economy, Turkish leaders made the strategic decision to forge positive ties with Iraqi Kurdistan. In fact, Türkiye's increased focus on the Kurdistan region of Iraq resulted from the US embargo on Iran's energy resources, on the one hand, and Türkiye's reluctance to rely more on Russian fossil resources, on the other. Additionally, Türkiye constantly considers how crucial it is to preserve its position and remarkable profit as a bridge for the transfer of energy from the East to Europe (Aziz, 2022).

With over 20 years of autonomy experience, the KRG found itself in a delicate position with respect to its neighbors in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. This point is demonstrated by the Turkish government's approach. Even though Türkiye's relations with

the Kurds were not much warm during the first ten years of their autonomy, Türkiye eventually made considerable investments in Iraqi Kurdistan. These investments were split between building large-scale infrastructure and bolstering communication networks to take advantage of Kurdistan's privileged transit location. In this regard, due to its proximity to Iran and Türkiye, Haji Omeran is considered one of the strategic areas of Iraqi Kurdistan. This is because it generates revenue equivalent to the Region's oil sales. Furthermore, Türkiye takes the desolate and simultaneously barren market of the Kurdistan Region as an ongoing revenue stream in which it ought to establish a distinct position by preventing the entry of products from its rivals—Saudi Arabia and Iran—into this market. In short, Türkiye recognized that it could not overlook the opportunities presented by Kurdistan's autonomy. Consequently, it attempted to view the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a close government and monitor its policies distantly (Balanche, 2023: 3).

4-2- Kurdistan Region as a compromise between Türkiye and the central government of Iraq
Türkiye's policies towards the Iraqi Kurdistan region fundamentally changed during the Arab Uprisings. Although Türkiye always doubted the independence of the Kurdish lands in Iraq and viewed them as a security threat, it has shifted its political stance toward the KRG since the early 2010s and took Kurdistan as an independent entity. The Kurdistan Region's growing regional importance, which could influence Türkiye's economic, geopolitical, and security interests, was the cause of this fundamental shift. Türkiye expanded its direct diplomatic relations with the KRG through the establishment of the Turkish Consulate in Erbil in 2010 and organizing frequent meetings with the KRG officials. Tensions between Baghdad and Istanbul have escalated as a result of this cooperation. Before 2014, Baghdad controlled a pipeline that carried oil from Iraq and Kurdistan to Türkiye. Baghdad attempted to exert pressure on the Kurds during this time, occasionally preventing them from exporting oil. Eventually, the Kurds began constructing a new pipeline and struck separate agreements with Türkiye. Baghdad has opened arbitration cases against Türkiye at the International Chamber of Commerce in Paris and has consistently denounced this process. In these cases, the Iraqis highlight the breach of the 1973 oil export agreement between Ankara and Baghdad. Türkiye has been recently sentenced to pay Baghdad \$1.5 billion in one of these arbitration cases. While other arbitrations were in process, Türkiye tried to stabilize the situation during the sensitive period of the recent presidential election by suspending oil imports from the region. Türkiye hoped to avoid further conflicts during this period by achieving official agreements with Baghdad regarding Kurdistan's oil exports (Ayvazyan, 2023).

On the other hand, due to disputes between the KRG and the central government, Iraqi

Kurdistan now wants more autonomy and privileges, ultimately aiming for full independence. However, instead of doing this, the central government attempts to restrict KRG. To deal with the restrictive measures of the central government, KRG is trying to expand its relations with the Turkish government, which has serious differences with the Iraqi government, and to manage its political and economic relations independently of the Iraqi central government. Some of the KRG's measures in this regard are the conclusion of oil contracts with Türkiye, Russia, and international companies and diplomatic meetings with high-ranking officials of other countries without the permission of the central government of Iraq (Bartu & MacEachern, 2023: 183-202).

5- Türkiye's relations with Syrian Kurds in the post-Arab Uprisings

Once the Arab Uprising spilled over into Syria, Kurd inhabitants in this country, who had previously only been searching for an ethnic identity, commenced to view these events as a catalyst for the emergence of their own political and social currents. The Kurdish areas of Syria were divided into three autonomous cantons in 2011, including Afrin, Kobani, and Jazeera. Turkish statesmen were concerned about the movements of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK)¹ in northern Syria, as well as the possible formation of a Kurdish structure or Syria disintegration. After the Assad government refused Erdogan's recommendations to engage in dialogue with protesters and eventually suppressed them, Türkiye adopted a new policy, allowing Syrian government opponents to cross its borders and bring weapons into Syria. In contrast, as unrest in Syria grew, the Assad government handed over the administration of the Kurdish regions to Syrian Kurds on July 19, 2012, in order to counteract Türkiye's new policy. This increased Türkiye's security concerns about the Syrian Kurds (Siccardi, 2021: 8). Here we review some aspects of Türkiye's security policies towards the Syrian Kurds.

5-1- PYD; a new security challenge for Türkiye

Although the Iraqi branch of the P.K.K was not able to attract specific domestic and international support due to the relative success of the Regional Government, its Syrian branch or Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD)² was able to support the idea of Greater Kurdistan. The PKK, particularly its branch in Syria, took advantage of the instability in Syria to repatriate some of its members and groups to Kurdish regions. Ankara was

¹. The Kurdistan Workers' Party

². Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat

concerned about the formation of a new Qandi¹ in northern Syria due to regional developments along Türkiye's southern borders. The autonomy of the Kurdish regions in northern Syria following the Arab Uprising made them a haven for PKK activities in Türkiye. In other words, Turkish politicians were concerned about the PKK resuming organized attacks in their country because of the close ties that the Syrian Kurds had with the PKK and the growing influence of the PYD. The process of developments and PYD's actions demonstrated that Türkiye's concerns regarding the new circumstances were warranted. In fact, the PYD aimed to provide conditions conducive to terrorist activity within Turkish borders, thereby aiding secessionist endeavors (Holmes, 2021: 2-3).

For example, the perpetrators of the March 2016 suicide attack in Ankara at a bus station, which left 37 dead and 125 injured, were trained in the Kurdish regions of Syria. Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan (TAK)², a branch of the PKK, claimed responsibility for this and other similar attacks. Such incidents demonstrated the rise of nationalist movements among the Syrian Kurds and alarmed Turkish officials regarding the resurgence of Kurdish nationalism in this country's southeast. As a result, Türkiye became concerned about its Kurdish currents imitating Syrian Kurds. For instance, the rise of the PYD to power gave PKK feelings of self-assurance, and this circumstance served as the impetus for the failure of Türkiye's peace negotiations with PKK. Inspired by the developments in northern Syria, PKK forces sought to occupy small towns on the Turkish-Syrian border and encourage the population of Kurdish cities in Türkiye to rebel. Therefore, Türkiye is extremely concerned about the political developments in Syria and the future of the Kurds in northern Syria (Khaddour, 2017).

5-2- Concerns about Syrian Kurds' access to open waters

Fear of the Syrian Kurds' access to open waters is undoubtedly a major factor in Türkiye's differing policy towards them. Because of its strategic location on the north bank of the Euphrates River and its abundance of oil resources, Raqqa is one of Syria's most strategically important cities. This city was initially captured by Assad's opponents during the Syrian upheaval, and ISIS forces quickly took control of it. Then the US provided weapons to the Syrian Kurds against Türkiye's wishes to retake this city from ISIS. This US action allowed the Syrian Kurds to carry out their plans for accessing open waters and ending

¹. Qandil is one of the mountains of the Zagros mountain range and one of the snowiest mountains in Iran with natural glaciers on the border of Iran and Iraq. This area has served as a refuge for various Kurdish party groups, including the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the P.K.K., the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK).

². The Kurdistan Freedom Hawks

their land blockade. This infuriated Türkiye even more. The US then declared that Raqqa and other cities along the Euphrates River to Deir ez-Zur would be liberated with the help of Kurdish forces. The Syrian Kurds planned to break through Türkiye's economic blockade by taking advantage of commercial and economic opportunities once they reached open waters. This goal was pursued within the context of removing the blockade of the great Kurdistan region in northern Iraq and Syria, as well as southern Türkiye. The key city of Afrin, which was 100 kilometers from the Mediterranean Sea and considered essential to the Syrian Kurds, provided the path for the Kurds to arrive at this location (Siccardi, 2021: 4-11).

Türkiye occupied this city in 2018 to stop the integration of the Kurdish regions in the northern part of Syria due to security concerns about the autonomy and independence-seeking activities of the Syrian Kurds. Considering the large size of the Kurdish population in Türkiye, the realization of the aforementioned goal would put Türkiye's security at risk. However, since the Turkish government did not consider the occupation of Afrin adequate, it moved its military forces to Idlib in the south of Afrin to ensure the neutralization of the Kurds' plan. To stop the creation of the desired Kurdish corridor, Türkiye organized Operation Olive Branch, which would employ military force to divide the regions controlled by the PKK and the PYD (Khiri & Tagylu, 2021: 77-8). Türkiye undoubtedly pursued specific anti-Kurdish intentions in its fight against ISIS. Following the attacks by ISIS in Türkiye, this country revised its non-violent approach towards them and planned Operation Euphrates Shield; a military operation that involved entering Syria and using anti-Kurdish tactics to seize control of the border region between Syria and Türkiye. Additionally, Türkiye put more pressure on Kurdish organizations, particularly PYD, by seizing cities like Jarabulus and Al-Bab. In 2016, Türkiye also threatened to conduct direct and wide-ranging operations against PYD, if they persisted in their anti-Turkish activities. The dream of Kurdistan's territorial integrity and its connection to the open waters of the Mediterranean Sea was destroyed when Türkiye's operations against ISIS resulted in the areas that ISIS had taken over falling into the hands of the Turkish government before being handed over to the Kurds (Zanotti, 2023: 19-22).

Conclusion

The Turkish government adopts different foreign policies toward Kurds inside Türkiye and its neighbors due to security concerns. Türkiye even has a different approach to dealing with the Kurds in northern Syria and the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Furthermore, it has become deeply involved in these two countries' crises in order to advance national interests and

effectively contribute to the region. As previously mentioned, Türkiye does not hold the same views about Kurds in Syria and Iraq. This can be explained by several factors, such as the influence of central governments in Kurdish regions, their demand for independence, their economic interests, and their role in advancing Türkiye's regional ambitions. Turkey's foreign policy towards the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been growing, so that the Kurdistan Region is considered one of Turkey's main allies today. The relatively large and expanding Kurdistan Region market, the substantial oil and gas resources of Iraqi Kurdistan in Kirkuk, the absence of threats from regional autonomy among all are some of the factors that have improved their diplomatic relationship. However, because of its unique circumstances about the autonomy of the Kurdish cantons that follow independence, Türkiye has a very different perspective on the Syrian Kurds. This is primarily caused by PYD's collaboration with PKK, on the one hand, and the lack of unity between the Syrian Kurds and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, on the other. Since the Turkish government has failed to adopt a cooperative policy towards the Syrian Kurds like the Iraqi ones, they had no choice but to follow an aggressive foreign policy towards the Syrian Kurds. In this context, Türkiye's security concerns and fear of the possible establishment of a Kurdish state in its southern region are manifested in measures such as the occupation of Afrin and Idlib in the Kurdish regions of northern Syria and the displacement of large human populations by bringing Arabs and Kurds into these regions. Accordingly, Türkiye's security concerns are the driving force behind the government's dual policy towards the Kurds in northern Iraq and Syria. Türkiye will establish relationships with the populations residing in these countries, all within the context of political and economic interests, as long as there is no threat from the Kurdish regions. However, as the threats posed by the independence activities of Kurds have intensified and have the potential to compromise Türkiye's territorial integrity; Turkish leaders have adopted a policy based on the balance of threat theory.

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