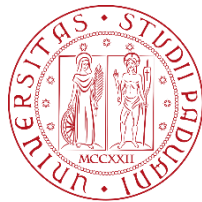


# UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA

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## Master's degree in European and Global Studies



## Between Continuity and Change: Turkey's Middle East Policy Reassessment in the Wake of the Syrian Crisis

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# Table Of Contents

<b><i>ABSTRACT</i></b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b><i>INTRODUCTION</i></b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b><i>EVOLUTION OF TFP IN THE CONTEXT OF MIDDLE EAST AFTER WWII</i></b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Turkish Foreign Policy Before the JDP Era</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Key Events Shaping Turkey’s Role in the Middle East</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>The Turkish Foreign Policy During the JDP Era</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Policy Objectives, Alignments and Key Initiatives of TFP During the JDP Era</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b><i>PARADIGM SHIFT OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: FACTORS AND DRIVERS</i></b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>Regional Dynamics and Geopolitical Changes</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>Regional Shifts and Conflicts Influencing Turkish Foreign Policy</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>The Impact of Arab Spring on Turkey’s Approach</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>Domestic Political, Social and Economic Factors Effect Turkish Foreign Policy</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>The Impact of Economic Interests and Trade on the TFP Shift</b> .....	<b>44</b>
<b>Case Study: Syria, In depth Analysis of Turkey’s Approach Towards Syria</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b><i>WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THE TFP SHIFT POST-2011 ERA?</i></b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>Changing Priorities and Alliances</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>Security and Counter-Terrorism</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<b>Considerations and Challenges for Turkey After the Policy Shift</b> .....	<b>65</b>
Economic Considerations .....	65
Social Dynamics .....	66
<b>Challenges After TFP Shift for Turkey</b> .....	<b>67</b>
<b><i>CONCLUSION</i></b> .....	<b>71</b>
<b><i>Bibliography</i></b> .....	<b>73</b>

# ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, Turkey's foreign policy approach toward the Middle East has undergone a significant transformation, particularly during the Justice and Development Party (JDP) era. This master's thesis aims to delve into the intricacies of Turkey's Middle East policy by conducting a comprehensive comparative analysis between the policy trends of the JDP's rule before and after the Syrian Civil War. By scrutinizing the underlying motivations, strategic objectives, and outcomes, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Turkey's evolving role in the region.

Before the Syrian Spring, marked by a combination of pragmatic diplomacy and the quest for a "zero problems with neighbors" policy, Turkey was positioned as a mediator and facilitator in various regional conflicts. Close economic ties, cultural affinities, and cooperation agreements were the cornerstones of this period's foreign policy approach. However, shifting geopolitical dynamics, regional uprisings, and the emergence of new challenges prompted a notable shift in Turkey's stance.

The post-2011 era witnessed a recalibration of Turkey's Middle East policy, characterized by a more assertive and independent posture. This shift was exemplified by Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict, its engagement with various non-state actors, and the diversification of diplomatic partnerships. The interplay of factors such as the Syrian civil war, the rise of ISIS, changing alliances, and evolving global power structures contributed to Turkey's reevaluation of its role and objectives in the region.

Through an in-depth examination of primary sources, policy statements, and official documents, this thesis uncovers the driving forces behind Turkey's policy evolution. The study also assesses the impacts of these policy changes on Turkey's regional influence, its relationships with key Middle Eastern actors, and its broader foreign policy objectives.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Turkey, Middle East, Foreign Policy, Soft Power

# INTRODUCTION

Turkish foreign policy has gone through different phases and progressed with different policies since the establishment of the republic. In this process, the objectives of Turkish foreign policy and the influencing factors have been in constant change. Due to its geopolitical location, it has served as a bridge between East and West in every field. The importance of the region has also created security risks. This security problem has caused changes and developments in the policies of the countries in the region. This research examines how Turkey's Middle East policy was shaped after the Second World War, the path and principles followed in foreign policy by the AKP, which has been in power since 2002, how the Syrian crisis changed and affected Turkish foreign policy and its relations with local and international powers in the region. The difficulties Turkey experienced after the change in foreign policy and his new relations will be discussed.

This research will be carried out in three parts, and the first of these three parts describes the development of Turkish foreign policy starting from the post-World War II period to the foreign policy principles of the AKP. Also in this section, the Neo-Ottomanist line followed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as the foreign minister of the period, in foreign policy, the theory of strategic depth, and the implementation of Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors" policy will be explained. This section is important to show the historical development and general principles of Turkish foreign policy. Because Turkey has been forming its policies in line with some core principles since its foundation, and after the Second World War, imperialist states in the Middle East withdrew from direct rule and were replaced by new national governments. This situation required the relations with the new emerging states to be reviewed from time to time. In addition, the number of unrests and conflicts in the region increased after this period, and successive military coups, civil wars, and clashes between states in the region created a need for constant revision. Finally, this section is important for a better understanding of the complexity of interstate relations in the region and the relations caused by Turkey's bridge function, both geographically and politically.

In the second part, the change in Turkey's foreign policy and the factors and drivers that caused this change will be discussed. While examining this process, the changes

experienced in the region after the Syrian crisis began, changing alliances and conflicts, and the political, cultural, and economic reasons that caused all these changes will be discussed. This section is the most important section for the research and clearly shows the transformation of Turkish foreign policy. In this section, which will show what point Turkey's effectiveness in the region has reached diplomatically, and how the main principles explained in the previous section can be reversed in times of crisis, under the influence of the changes in the center-periphery dynamics since the beginning of the 21st century. It is also explained how Turkey has moved from a proactive to an active position. In addition, it is an important chapter to see how bilateral and trilateral relations have become under the influence of regional dynamics and how Turkey has become an enthusiastic interventionist actor in the region from a reluctant position in terms of interventionism. (Özpek, 2014, 17) And finally, in this section, the Syrian crisis, which caused all dynamics in the region to be reconsidered, was discussed as a case study. This section will specifically describe the historical development of Turkey-Syria relations over the years and the depth and direction of the relations at this point. In this section, where this case will be analyzed in depth, the developments in Turkey's approach and the factors that caused this will be discussed.

In the last section, Turkey's changing priorities and newly established/revised alliances after the change in its Middle East policy will be examined. It will be explained how the newly established alliances and conflicts in the region after 2011 affected the security of the region and how these effects progressed in terms of the fight against terrorism. After this, it will be discussed what kind of difficulties Turkey has dealt with after its policy change and what caused these difficulties, some of which still continue. Additionally, this section will be the last part of the research and will be followed by the conclusion section.

While conducting this research, some questions regarding the change experienced in Turkey's foreign policy are necessary for the analysis and correct understanding of the subject. These research questions, which will be tried to be answered throughout the research, are both guiding and important to look at from different perspectives. In addition, the answers to these questions, which are important for measuring the effectiveness of Turkish foreign policy, will be sought in the continuation of the research.

The first question to be answered in this research is, how has Turkey's historical involvement in the Middle East shaped its contemporary foreign policy priorities and objectives? Turkey's historical involvement in the Middle East has deeply influenced its contemporary foreign policy priorities and objectives. With a legacy rooted in the Ottoman Empire's expansive reach across the region, Turkey has inherited a sense of responsibility, hegemonic ambitions, and interest in Middle Eastern affairs. This historical involvement has shaped Turkey's perception of its role as a regional power and its approach to key issues such as stability, security, and economic cooperation in the Middle East.

Second question is about to be answered while delve into the Turkey's policy foreign policy shift, what are the key drivers behind Turkey's reassessment of its Middle East policy in the aftermath of Syrian Crisis? This is important to see the reasons behind the shift. The Syrian Crisis has served as a catalyst for Turkey's reassessment of its Middle East policy, driven by various factors. One key driver is the significant influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey, which has strained resources and heightened security concerns. Additionally, the rise of extremist groups like ISIS and the escalation of violence in Syria have posed direct threats to Turkey's national security, compelling Ankara to reevaluate its approach to the region.

Another question that needs to be answered in order to look at the relations in the region from a more general perspective is, what are the major changes in Turkey's Middle East policy resulting from the Syrian Crisis, and how have these changes impacted its relationships with neighboring countries? The Syrian Crisis has brought about major changes in Turkey's Middle East policy, particularly in its stance towards the Assad regime and its involvement in the conflict. Turkey's support for Syrian opposition groups and calls for Assad's removal have strained its relationships with neighboring countries like Syria, Iran, and Russia, which back the Assad government. These changes have led to tensions and shifts in alliances in the region, impacting Turkey's diplomatic and security dynamics.

Then, the domestic policy dynamics, which have an important place in determining Turkey's foreign policy, and the impact of these dynamics when determining policy will be examined. For this, how do domestic political dynamics influence Turkey's decision-making processes regarding its Middle East policy? It is important to answer the question because,

Domestic political dynamics exert significant influence on Turkey's decision-making processes regarding its Middle East policy. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership style and the policies of the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) play a crucial role in shaping Turkey's approach to regional issues. Erdoğan's emphasis on Turkish nationalism and his vision of Turkey as a regional power influence the country's assertive stance in the Middle East.

Relations with Russia and the USA, which have had a great influence on the region since the Cold War even though they are not present in the region, are also necessary to analyze the change in Turkish foreign policy. In this direction answering this question is also important for the research, what role do regional and international actors, such as the US and Russia, play in shaping Turkey's strategic calculations and policy changes in the Middle East? Regional and international actors, such as the United States and Russia, play pivotal roles in shaping Turkey's strategic calculations and policy changes in the Middle East. Turkey's relationship with the US is multifaceted, with areas of cooperation and disagreement, particularly regarding US support for Kurdish groups in Syria. Meanwhile, Turkey's evolving relationship with Russia involves cooperation on some issues and competition on others, such as the conflict in Syria, influencing Turkey's strategic decisions in the region.

And finally, the impact of Turkey's policy change on regional dynamics and counter-terrorism issues is the last question to be answered throughout this research. The question is, what are the implications of Turkey's revised Middle East policy for regional security dynamics, including the fight against terrorism? Turkey's revised Middle East policy has significant implications for regional security dynamics, including the fight against terrorism. Turkey's efforts to address security threats emanating from Syria, such as ISIS and Kurdish militant groups, have shaped its approach to counterterrorism. Additionally, Turkey's interventions in Syria and its support for various opposition groups have contributed to the broader geopolitical landscape of the region, impacting ongoing conflicts and power struggles, and ultimately affecting regional security dynamics.

While answering the questions above, document and case analysis, which are qualitative research techniques, will be used. In the research that will proceed through academic articles, such as "Turkish Policy Towards War in Syria" by Adam Szymanski for better

understanding the process of change and its circumstances and “The New Turn in Turkey’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities” by Meliha Altunışık to demonstrate the regional and global effects of the shift. It will be seen that many academic articles will be analyzed and, when necessary, comparative analysis will be made until the conclusion is reached.



# EVOLUTION OF TFP IN THE CONTEXT OF MIDDLE EAST AFTER WWII

The evolution of Turkey's foreign policy in the post-World War II era has been shaped by various internal and external factors, including its strategic location, being a crossroads between Eurasia, Russia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe, domestic political dynamics, still active effects of transition from Empire to Republic and different cultures living together, and its aspirations for regional and international influences. TFP, since the republic's establishment has two fundamental characteristics as Sheharyar Khan mentions, these are "status quo" and "westernization. The strategy adopted by Turkey aimed to preserve the existing regional balance and protect its territorial integrity. After the First World War, the focus remained on upholding the established order in the area. The policy also involved embracing Western economic and scientific practices and fostering strong connections with the West. These two key elements distinguished Turkish foreign policy from that of other regions. (Khan, 2015) Similar to Khan, Dinç and Yetim mentions "*The Republic turned its face to the West and declined the Islam-dominated multicultural Ottoman heritage.*" (Dinc and Yetim, 2012, 2) Also new republican cadres consisting of Kemalists<sup>1</sup> had strong leaning on Secular-Nationalist Westernized country and see Middle Eastern countries as reactionary and Islamist according to their regimes, culture, and roots. (Dinc and Yetim, 2012) Furthermore, the emphasis primarily revolved around domestic policies to safeguard the nation's independence. This essay aims to trace the significant developments and milestones that shifted and shaped Turkish Foreign Policy and the key factors that have influenced its (r)evolution since the end of World War II.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Turkey, under the leadership of President İsmet İnönü, pursued a policy of neutrality and non-alignment, aiming to maintain a delicate balance between the two superpower blocs of the Cold War. This policy, known as the "peace at home, peace in the world" doctrine, sought to safeguard Turkey's territorial integrity and promote stability in the region. However, the onset of the Cold War and the emergence of the Soviet threat in the region compelled Turkey to reassess its foreign policy priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Kemalism is an ideology that defines who follows the path of founder father of "Turkish Nation" Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his principles of nation building towards democratic, secularist, westernized and governed by the rule of law.

The pivotal moment in Turkey's foreign policy evolution came with its decision to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952, aligning itself with the Western bloc and solidifying its strategic alliance with the United States. As Dinc and Yetim remarked its significance, Turkey sent troops to the Korean War in 1950 to show its side at the time of Cold War period. (Dinc and Yetim, 2012) This marked a significant departure from its previous policy of neutrality and marked the beginning of Turkey's active participation in the global security architecture. Turkey's alignment with the West was driven by its desire to ensure its security against potential Soviet aggression and to foster economic and military cooperation with its Western allies.

Simultaneously, Turkey sought to balance its Western alignment with a policy of engagement with its neighbors in the Middle East and the Balkans. For that purpose, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan has signed Baghdad Pact in 1955. As Khan describes, Turkey needs to shape its foreign policy towards west-oriented according to security concerns against USSR in the region. However, the eventual dissolution of the Baghdad Pact in 1959 highlighted the challenges Turkey faced in balancing its regional and global interests. (Khan, 2015)

The 1970s witnessed a shift in Turkey's foreign policy approach, with a growing emphasis on economic and diplomatic engagement with the Middle East and the Arab world. This was underscored by Turkey's efforts to build closer ties with countries in the region, particularly through economic cooperation and cultural diplomacy. However, the 1974 Turkish Invasion of Cyprus and the subsequent division of the island strained Turkey's relations with Greece and Cyprus, leading to a period of diplomatic isolation and regional tension. The Cyprus issue has also resulted in the West and the USA being skeptical in TFP according to Turkey felt betrayed by the West as also Khan mentioned. Because of the USA sanctions applied on Turkey due to the Invasion, Turkey reviewed its foreign policy and gave signals of rapprochement with Arab countries and the Soviets. (Khan, 2015)

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union presented Turkey with new opportunities to redefine its foreign policy priorities. In the 1990s, Turkey actively sought to diversify its diplomatic and economic partnerships, emphasizing its role as a bridge between East and West and as a key player in regional security initiatives. It fostered closer ties with the European Union, signaling its commitment to European integration and reforms aimed at aligning with European norms and standards. During this period, Turkey's Middle East policy

was of strategic importance for Europe and the West. Due to both border security and economic agreements, Turkey became a strategic partner for the western bloc after the cold war. (Khan, 2015)

Moreover, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed Turkey's efforts to assert itself as regional power, particularly in the context of the Middle East and Mediterranean. In recent years, Turkey's foreign policy has faced new challenges, including strained relations with some Western allies, geopolitical shifts in the Middle East, and domestic political transformations. The increasing assertiveness in its foreign policy, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria, has led to tensions with regional actors and has prompted a reassessment of Turkey's role in the broader international arena.

Turkey's foreign policy has undergone significant transformations since World War II, shaped by complex geopolitical dynamics, regional conflicts, and domestic political considerations. From its initial policy of neutrality and non-alignment to its alignment with the Western bloc and its subsequent efforts to diversify its partnerships and assert itself as a regional power, Turkey's foreign policy evolution reflects its aspirations for security, stability, and influence in an ever-changing global landscape. However, ongoing challenges and regional complexities continue to shape Turkey's foreign policy priorities, underscoring the need for strategic recalibration and diplomatic engagement to navigate the complex geopolitical realities of the 21st century.

## **Turkish Foreign Policy Before the JDP Era**

Before the Justice and Development Party (Turkish abbreviation AKP) came to power in Turkey in 2002, the country's foreign policy was characterized by several key features that shaped its approach to international relations. Notably, Turkey's foreign policy was anchored in the principles of secularism, non-interventionism, and a focus on maintaining good relations with both Western and Eastern powers. Under the leadership of various governments and political parties, including the Republican People's Party (Turkish abbreviation CHP) and the True Path Party (Turkish abbreviation DYP), Turkey's foreign policy can be understood through several distinct phases.

During the early years after founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey pursued a policy of neutrality and non-alignment, seeking to maintain its independence and security in a volatile international environment, because as international environment, at that time, the Turkish Republic, like other post-imperial states, faced a precarious situation. The governing principles of Kemalism, the founding ideology of the Republic, emphasized secularism, nationalism, and modernization. Turkey, aligning with the Western bloc during the Cold War, actively participated in the Korean War, joined NATO in 1952, received Marshall Aid, established NATO bases within its borders, and cultivated strong connections with the United States and European nations.

Throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Turkey faced challenges in its relations with neighboring country Greece, Cyprus, and its allies in the West, which at times strained its foreign policy. Disputes with Greece over issues such as territorial claims in the Aegean Sea and Cyprus Issue were recurrent themes, impacting Turkey's regional diplomacy and leading to periods of tension and instability in its foreign relations.

Furthermore, Turkey's relations with its Eastern neighbors, particularly the Soviet Union and later Russia, were influenced by the broader context of the Cold War. Although Turkey maintained a cautious approach towards the Soviet Union, it was wary of potential threats to its territorial integrity, particularly in the relation to the Turkey's Armenian and Kurdish issues. At that time, Turkey struggled with two different armed militant organizations they were ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia), and PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party). Struggle with PKK were Turkey's one of the most concerned policies which is still important today and it was before. Especially Turkish-Syrian, Turkish-Iraqi, and Turkish-Iranian relations were influenced by PKK issues from time to time. Kurdish population in Northern Iraq, Northern Syria, and Western Iran have been Turkey's foreign policies that have become internal security problems because these organizations concentrate their influence in this region within the dense Kurdish population in those regions. (Sinkaya, 2011) PKK terrorism, which started in the mid-80s and continues until today, occupies a large place in Turkey-Middle East relations. On the other hand, ASALA, rather, they brought Turkish-Armenian relations to the level of rupture with their attacks on Turkish senior bureaucrats abroad, whose influence we see in Turkish foreign policy. ASALA, a terrorist organization that sought to recognize the events of 1915 as a genocide and to take revenge on the Turks for this, continued its activities between 1975 and 1994, and today their armed actions

seem to have given up. Today, it aims to achieve its goals through powerful Armenian lobbies in western states. Especially the strong Armenian lobbies in the USA have a great influence on the shaping of Turkish-American relations, and their lobbies in Europe have a great influence on France and Turkish-European Union relations. (Barkey, 2012)

Economic and trade relations were also a crucial aspect of Turkey's foreign policy before JDP came to power. The country actively sought to diversify its economic partnerships, expanding its trade networks, and fostering economic cooperation with various countries in Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Regarding to that in early 80s with the reflection of neoliberal policies on foreign policies Turgut Özal, the president and prime minister of the period, took relations with neighbors to another level with economic cooperation agreements. (Sinkaya, 2011) In this context, in addition to increasing its effectiveness in the Economic Cooperation Organization, along with Pakistan and Iran, Turkey has also increased its investments and strengthened cooperation in the member states of the region to strengthen its place in the Islamic Development Organization. (Sinkaya, 2011) Turkey, which does not want to completely turn away from the West in commercial terms, has stepped up its relations with the European Community in this period, so to speak, and continued its initiatives to apply for "full membership". Turkey, which has become a reliable partner both in its relations with the Middle East and with the West, became an important ally for the USA in the Gulf War, which broke out in the early 90s. NATO bases established during this period showed that it was on the side of the allies with the cooperation in military operations and the logistical support it provided, and at the same time, it requested assistance from the USA to meet the regional governance desires of the Northern Iraqi Kurds, who had become an internal threat to itself. However, the embargoes and sanctions imposed after the war caused Turkey to be in a worse situation than before the war. Moreover, although it took an active role in the Gulf War, its expectations in its own affairs were not met and an "autonomous" Kurdish administrative region was established in Northern Iraq.

As we approached the end of the 90s, although Turkish-Israeli relations were an important step towards rapprochement with the Western world, they were not welcomed by the Arab world and the powerful partners in the region. Turkey, which has suffered reputational damage, especially from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, has also gone through difficult times in domestic politics due to its relations with Israel. (Sinkaya, 2011) As we entered the new millennium under the leadership of the Virtue Party and the Welfare Party,

which were founded by the "Political Islam" circles and "National Outlook"<sup>2</sup> ideology that were slowly rising in domestic politics, Turkish foreign policy began to turn its face to the Middle East, with the effect of being a detrimental party in its relations with the western states.

Overall, before the JDP assumed power, Turkey's foreign policy was characterized by a pragmatic approach that emphasized maintaining strategic alliances, safeguarding national security interests, and promoting economic cooperation. While the country remained firmly aligned with the West, it also sought to foster diplomatic and economic relations with neighboring countries in the region, reflecting its geographical position as a bridge between Europe and Asia. However, it was the JDP's tenure in power that marked a significant shift in Turkey's foreign policy priorities, leading to notable changes in its regional and global engagements.

## **Key Events Shaping Turkey's Role in the Middle East**

In line with the processes mentioned above, Turkish foreign policy contains certain cornerstones in the pre-JDP period. Turkey with its geo-political importance on Eurasia, has played a significant role in the complex and dynamic politics. Over the decades, various key events have shaped and influenced Turkey's engagement and position in the region, reflecting its foreign policy priorities, security concerns and aspirations for regional leadership.

One of the defining moments in shaping Turkey's role in the Middle East was the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk's vision of modern Turkey emphasized secularism, nationalism, and Westernization which shaped the early foundations of Turkish foreign policy in the region. Turkey's efforts to maintain stability and build diplomatic relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors were guided by its desire to establish itself as a secular and modern nation-state in a predominantly Muslim region. (Altunışık, 2020)

The aftermath of World War II and the onset of the Cold War marked another critical phase in Turkey's role in the Middle East. The country's strategic alliance with the United

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<sup>2</sup> It is a movement and ideology that driven by series of Islamist parties in Turkish politics inspired by Necmettin Erbakan.

States and its membership in NATO positioned Turkey as a key player in the Western Bloc, influencing its regional policies and security dynamics. The 1950s saw Turkey actively participating in regional security initiatives such as Baghdad Pact, reflecting its commitment to countering Soviet influence and fostering stability in the Middle East.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War significantly impacted Turkey's regional role. The conflict heightened tensions in the region and led to a refugee influx into Turkey, posing significant challenges for the country. In addition, jihadist radical Islamist organizations, which began to gain strength in Iran after the Islamic revolution, posed a threat to Turkey in terms of security due to presence of Islamist groups in Iran and Turkey. (Khan, 2015) The revolution in Iran continued with the fueling of the Islamic movement under the leadership of Erdogan in Turkish domestic politics and the increase of reactionary activities. On the other hand, as mentioned above, Turkey is fighting against PKK terrorism, which has already become a problem in Northern Iraq, both within the country and through extraterritorial operations. (Sinkaya, 2011) Turkey sought to balance its relations with both Iran and Iraq, emphasizing the importance of stability and security in the region while maintaining its Western alignment. Additionally, the 1990-1991 Gulf War underscored Turkey's role as a key regional player, particularly in facilitating Western military operations and maintaining regional stability.

The Arab Spring of 2011 marked a turning point in Turkey's approach to the Middle East. The uprisings and subsequent conflicts in countries such as Syria and Libya prompted Turkey to reassess its regional policies, leading to a more proactive and assertive role in supporting certain opposition groups and advocating for political change. As Barkey stated, "*The "Arab Spring" was perhaps the single most important development that shook Turkish assumptions and forced it to change its calculations.*" (Barkey, 2012, 2) Turkey's support for opposition forces in the Syrian Civil War and its hosting of millions of Syrian refugees significantly influenced its relations with regional actors and major powers, reshaping its position in the Middle East.

Furthermore, Turkey's direct military intervention in Syria, beginning with Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016 and subsequent operations, aimed to counter Kurdish militias and establish a buffer zone along its southern border, underlining its determination to safeguard its security interests and prevent the emergence of a Kurdish autonomous region along its borders.

Moreover, Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in relation to natural source exploration and maritime boundary disputes, has shaped its role in the region. Tensions with countries like Greece and Cyprus over territorial claims and access to energy resources have underscored Turkey's pursuit of its interests and its ambition to assert itself as a regional power.

To sum up, Turkey's role in the Middle East has been shaped by significant events that underscore its changing foreign policy objectives, security considerations, and aspirations for regional dominance. Turkey positions itself differently from other countries in the region by gaining its independence during the founding of the republic, and in this respect, it has undertaken the task of "leading" the regimes in the region. Gürzel explains that as "... *"Turkish model" rhetoric has been present since the beginning of the Turkish Republic after the Turkish independence war, when "unlike the other countries of the region, Turkey was born out of a determination not to accept the post-WW I settlement that was imposed on it by the winners of the war."* (Gürzel, 2014, 3) Beginning with its initial steps to foster diplomatic ties with neighboring countries and continuing with its active participation in regional conflicts and emergencies, Turkey's involvement in the Middle East has been marked by a careful equilibrium between its alignment with the West and its drive to establish influence and safeguard its national security in a region characterized by intricate geopolitical complexities and enduring difficulties. These difficulties, as mentioned above, can be summarized as the fact that the interests of the western states, which are Turkey's natural allies, are not in line with the internal security issue, which is the center of Turkey's Middle East policy, and therefore, the effort to create an independent policy in the region rather than being on the side of one of the western or eastern powers. In addition, the political uncertainty that Turkey experienced in the pre-JDP period, short-lived coalition governments and the economic crises of 1994 (The Turkish lira was devalued as a result of the decline in central bank reserves due to excessive public expenditures and the rapid appreciation of the dollar against the Turkish lira overnight) and 2001 (Following the political tension between the then president Ahmet Necdet Sezer and the prime minister Bülent Ecevit at the National Security Council meeting, there was a sudden decline in the stock market and a 7500% increase in interest rates. It is known as the 2001 Constitutional Crisis in Turkish Politics because President Sezer threw a constitutional booklet at Prime Minister Ecevit during the meeting) played a decisive role.



## The Turkish Foreign Policy During the JDP Era

The Justice and Development Party's (JDP or AKP) ascent to power in Turkey in 2002 marked a significant turning point in the country's foreign policy trajectory. (Gürzel, 2014) Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey experienced a notable shift in its approach to international relations, characterized by an emphasis on proactive diplomacy, greater engagement with the Middle East and Africa, and the pursuit of a more assertive and independent foreign policy stance. One of the primary features of Turkish foreign policy during the JDP era has been its multidimensional and proactive approach to diplomacy. Turkey sought to diversify its international partnerships beyond its traditional alliances, emphasizing the importance of cultivating strategic relationships with countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. This was exemplified by its efforts to strengthen economic cooperation, increase diplomatic exchanges, and promote cultural ties with countries in these regions, aiming to enhance Turkey's global influence and economic interests. (Barkey, 2012)

Additionally, the JDP era witnessed Turkey's active engagement in regional conflicts and crises, particularly in the Middle East. Turkey played a significant role in facilitating negotiations and mediating disputes in the region, emphasizing its commitment to promoting peace, stability, and conflict resolution. Acting as a mediator in regional conflicts is a stated objective of the AKP's foreign policy, which they use to bolster their perceived influence in the region. Turkey previously played a mediating role in the indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria that commenced in 2007. However, these talks were postponed by Syria in September 2008 due to impending Israeli elections. Following the Gaza War and the Davos incident, Turkey's role as a mediator was questioned by senior Israeli officials. Despite efforts to resume negotiations, the Turkish-Israeli relationship was significantly strained, leading to the cancellation of joint military exercises by Turkey in October 2009. This decision was attributed to the influence of public opinion, as stated by Erdogan, the Turkish Prime Minister. (Köprülü, 2009)

Furthermore, Turkey's pursuit of a more independent foreign policy agenda during the JDP era was characterized by its willingness to challenge established regional and global power dynamics. Turkey wanted to become "soft power" in the region after region itself saw decades of wars and conflicts. As Köprülü clearly mentions "*Turkey makes ambitious claims about*

*being an “insider” and having soft power in the Middle East and Eurasia.”* (Köprülü, 2009, 12) As he also states that, unlike the previously influential powers in the region, the USA and Russia, it has undertaken to this role as an actor from within the region as a mission in the foreign politics of the JDP period. In addition, the density of Arab and Muslim countries in the region was an important factor in the JDP's early foreign policy tendencies and choices. This was evident in its approach to issues such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, where Turkey sought to position itself as a vocal advocate for Palestinian rights and a critic of Israeli policies, thereby enhancing its visibility and influence in the Muslim world and beyond. (Köprülü, 2009)

Moreover, Turkey's efforts to strengthen its role in international organizations, including the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, reflected its aspiration to assume a more prominent role in shaping global governance and addressing key international challenges, such as climate change, terrorism, and refugee crisis.

The JDP era also witnessed a “recalibration” of Turkey's relations with its traditional Western allies, particularly the United States and the European Union. While maintaining its NATO membership, Turkey asserted its regional interests and autonomy, leading to occasional tensions with its Western partners over issues such as human rights, democratic values, and security concern. These tensions have at times strained Turkey's foreign policy goals with the principles of Western democracy and governance. Köprülü mentions that “recalibration” as *“The perception that the West, and in particular the United States, employs double standards has existed in Turkey for many years and provides a foundation for the shift in foreign policy.”* (Köprülü, 2009, 6) He also mentions in the same page about anti-US sentiments reciprocated in public sphere in Turkey;

*“In light of these forecasts and assumptions, anti-Americanism is not deemed a harmful trend by the government. Nor is this viewpoint uncommon. Anti-U.S. sentiment is shared by members of the military, media, and rising business interests; across the entire elite sphere this trend is combined with skepticism about the West in general”* (Köprülü, 2009 6)

In conclusion, Turkish foreign policy during the JDP era has been characterized by a multidimensional and proactive approach, emphasizing greater engagement with the Middle

East and Africa, active participation in regional conflicts, and a more assertive and independent stance in global affairs. While promoting its economic interests and regional influence, Turkey has sought to balance its relations with traditional Western allies and assert its role as a significant player in shaping regional and global security, stability, and governance. However, ongoing regional conflicts domestic political challenges, and evolving geopolitical dynamics continue to shape Turkey's foreign policy priorities and present both opportunities and constraints in its pursuit of a more influential and assertive role on the international stage.

## **Policy Objectives, Alignments and Key Initiatives of TFP During the JDP Era**

Since coming to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in Turkey has pursued a foreign policy agenda aimed at promoting regional stability, enhancing Turkey's global influence, and fostering economic development. The Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) during the JDP era has been characterized by a multidimensional approach between Western Allies (The EU and The USA) and Eastern Neighbors, especially Arab countries in the region, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, marked by a combination of strategic objectives, diplomatic alignments, and key initiatives that have sought to position Turkey as a significant player, as Gürzel states "Big Brother", "A Natural Leader" of the region (Gürzel, 2014, 1), in the region and global affairs.

One of the primary policy objectives of the TFP during the JDP era has been the "diversification" (Dinc and Yetim, 2012, 10) of Turkey's international partnerships and the cultivation of closer ties with countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. This objective has been underpinned by the aim of expanding Turkey's economic interests, fostering cultural exchanges, and promoting diplomatic engagement in these regions by trade agreements with Libya, economic relationships with Iran, political agreements with neighboring countries. This strategic objective has led to the implementation of various key initiatives, including the establishment of bilateral trade agreements, exchange programs, and diplomatic dialogues for cooperation and strengthening Turkey's global network of partnerships.

One of the key initiatives in this regard has been Turkey's involvement in diplomatic efforts to mediate conflicts and promote dialogue among conflicting parties. Notably, turkey

has played a significant role in facilitating peace talks and negotiations in regional conflicts, such as the Invasion of Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Syrian Civil War, and various intra-Arab disputes. These initiatives have underscored Turkey's commitment to promoting stability, security, and conflict resolution in the region.

Due to its location in the region, Turkey's long-standing relations with NATO and Western countries have been hampered by diplomatic disappointments it has experienced both in this period and in the past, by being left in the middle after the Gulf War and by not taking a stance against terrorist organizations that threaten its internal security, and due to JDP's party agenda, with non-Western states, China and Russia, increased their cooperation during this period. Furthermore, the TFP during the JDP era has witnessed a recalibration of Turkey's relations with both Western and non-Western countries, reflecting its efforts to balance its strategic alignments and pursue a more independent foreign policy agenda. While maintaining its NATO membership and strong ties with the United States and European countries, Turkey has also sought to strengthen its relations with emerging powers, such as Russia, China, and various countries in the Middle East and Africa. This approach has allowed Turkey to diversify its diplomatic partnerships. This transformation and the increase in relations with non-Western states, the effort to get closer to neighbors in the region, the transformation of the JDP, and the foreign policy that started and progressed along a Kemalist line at the beginning of the republic, was replaced by a Neo-Ottomanist<sup>3</sup> policy. (Taspinar, 2008, 32) The meetings and dialogues held in Ankara with the Muslim leaders and opinion leaders of the countries in the region from time to time since JDP took office are an indication of this. The visit of the then Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal in 2006, the diplomatic visit of the Saudi King Abdullah for the first time in 40 years in 2006, the diplomatic visit of Turkey leaving the orbit of western states and taking a stance in its own line, and this line was also followed by the government. It was observed that it was oriented towards the East due to its tendency. (Taspinar, 2008) this approach has allowed Turkey to diversify its diplomatic partnership, expand its economic interests, and enhance its geopolitical influence in a rapidly changing global landscape.

One of the most important foreign policies of JDP is the "zero problems with neighbors"

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<sup>3</sup> It is the neoliberal, irredentist, interventionist Turkish foreign policy axis that was first adopted by the president of the period, Turgut Özal, in the early 1990s from the westernism policies and secularism axis idealized by Kemalism. He played an important role in Turkey's foreign policy in pursuing more effective policies in the Balkans and the Middle East, where the Ottoman Empire dominated.

policy to ensure stability in the region. In this direction, agreements have been made with neighboring countries to increase economic, touristic, and diplomatic relations. As Barkey states, *“Under the rubric of “zero problems with neighbours”, Ankara established new sets of relationships with its neighbours, encouraging trade and tourism and much closer political cooperation.”* (Barkey, 2012, 1) In addition, benefiting from economic diplomacy, TFP increased its power in the region and became an important actor in the region with the relations it established with the USA, Russia, and Iran, which were previously influential in the region, and played an important role in ensuring a balance between powers. As also Barkey describes Turkey’s role in the region, the first phase of TFP between 2002-2007 Turkey has been *“The Conciliator”*. (Barkey, 2012, 2) Rather than taking proactive steps due to this role, Turkey has continued its way with softer discourses and actions to consolidate its power in the region. In this way, it tried to strengthen its relations with the EU and planned to take concrete steps towards membership, while also acting in accordance with the interests of the USA and pursuing more passive policies in the Iraq issue, such as the use of bases and logistical support. JDP, which was approached with suspicion when they took office due to the political agenda in which its leaders were raised, showed that it was more modern, secular, and conciliatory with the foreign policy moves it implemented. Turkey, which is trying to strengthen its place in foreign policy not only with political moves but also with economic moves, has taken important steps towards achieving this with the investments of medium-sized enterprises called *“Anatolian Tigers”* in the Middle East and Africa. (Barkey, 2012, 2) Thus, we see that JDP has *“mediation in conflict resolution”* as another TFP objective.

After its period of strengthening until 2007, TFP has now established itself as a leading leader in the region and started to make moves in this direction. Turkey, which has shown in the international arena that its attitude is clearly in favor of Palestine, especially on the Israel-Palestine issue, has made it known to the international community that the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's hand was strengthened with his *“One Minute!”* speech against the then Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum held in Davos in 2009. has shown. With the *“Mavi Marmara”* incident that took place 2 years later, relations with Israel came to a breaking point. Then, the Turkish side and Erdogan, who clearly stated their attitude in this conflict through negotiations with Hamas, caused Arab countries to see them as the *“Favorite Leader”* who could oppose Israel in the future. (Barkey, 2012) After 2011, JDP has been trying to become one of the great hegemony in the region. We observe that the Justice and Development Party (JDP) has solidified its objective of becoming a dominant force in the

region. This shift is notably evident in its altered approach towards Libya, Egypt, and Syria, catalyzed by the Arab Spring. The party has adapted its stance regarding public uprisings and protests deposed leaders. The recalibration is underscored by significant developments such as international trade agreements with Libya and Egypt, as well as Turkey's involvement in the Syrian civil war. This multifaceted strategy has propelled Turkey into a position of increased influence in the region, standing alongside traditional powers like the USA and Russia. During this transformative period, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs, played a pivotal role in shaping and bolstering Turkish foreign policy on the international stage. (Barkey, 2012)

The EU membership process has also been an important objective in the TFP at the beginning of the JDP period. Although Turkey has taken great steps in this regard after they took office in 2002, the EU membership process has been disrupted and has come to a halt today due to the negotiations and bilateral relations with Arab countries, especially on Iran and Palestine, as it turned its face to the east rather than the west and to become a great power in the region. As Gürzel states “*Turkey has puzzled countries by its uncertain foreign policy and most of its former Western allies have lost trust in Turkey.*” (Gürzel, 2014, 8) At this point, the decisions taken by the JDP in the second term, the Nuclear Power Plant Project with Russia, the supply of air defense systems and the negotiations to purchase 5th generation warplanes from Russia instead of F-35 aircraft, caused Turkey's relations with its western allies, especially NATO and the USA, to be soured and its relations to be questioned has happened. “*The only priority AKP seems to have been to stay in power and consequently change the regime in Turkey. The 2023 Vision (AK Party, 2012) of the government is to become one of the emerging powers and seek to be almighty as the Ottoman Empire.*” (Gürzel, 2014, 9) We can see that Turkey has slowly begun to "turn its face from peace to the east" in foreign policy, and that the Neo-Ottoman understanding has a large share in this change.

Another issue that shaped the TFP during the JDP period is energy security. In this regard, although it is working to ensure the security of existing lines and corridors and to continue their operation, it is the desire to strengthen its hand in case of a possible energy crisis that may occur in the coming years, as in the 70s, with drilling and exploration activities for new natural gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Black Sea.

As mentioned before, the fight against terrorism and cultural diplomacy have also been

driving factors for TFP. At this point, negotiations and operations with Iran and Iraq within the scope of the fight against PKK and Hezbollah organizations prove this. Particularly, within the scope of the "Solution Process" initiated in 2013, the meetings held with the Kurdish administration officials of Northern Iraq and the start of Kurdish broadcasts on TRT, Turkey's state channel, in order to strengthen bilateral relations, the meetings and rallies held with the leading Kurdish leaders have rapidly progressed this process. However, when PKK terrorism started to take lives again in 2015, the solution process was interrupted and the return to the past in the following period caused the JDP, which was trying to follow a peaceful path in the fight against terrorism, to give up this path. Regarding cultural diplomacy, in the post-2007 period, efforts were made to get closer to Arab countries and to establish good relations with Muslim countries under the influence of the Ummah mentality.

Finally, as a result of the Syrian civil war and the Arab Spring in Syria, which will be examined in detail in the following sections of this paper, the differences between the JDP's attitude before and after 2011 are striking. Erdogan-Assad relations, which almost reached the "family-friendly" level before 2011, were drawn differently from Turkey's attitude during and after the Syrian business war and continued in that way. The transformation of Turkish-Syrian relations in the context of Middle East after 2011, which is the main subject of this article, concerns neither Turkey nor Syria alone. This transformation is important in changing Turkey's decisions, tendencies and alliances in the region, the projection of foreign policy into domestic policy, and the face of the Middle East as a whole. To sum up the chapter, the goals, alliances, and major undertakings of Turkish Foreign Policy during the JDP era have demonstrated Turkey's ambitions to establish itself as a prominent player both regionally and globally. The implementation of a diverse foreign policy agenda, marked by a mix of diplomatic involvement, conflict resolution, economic collaboration, and the promotion of democratic principles, highlights Turkey's dedication to fostering stability, security, and prosperity in the areas it engages with. In maneuvering through intricate geopolitical challenges and shifting international dynamics, Turkey has endeavored to maintain a careful equilibrium between its strategic partnerships and its pursuit of an autonomous and influential role on the world stage.

In the next chapter, along with a more in-depth examination of the changes in JDP's policy, the reasons for the shift in Syria policy specifically, the impact of the changes in the region on this shift, and the impact of the dynamics in domestic politics on foreign policy will be analyzed in depth.

# PARADIGM SHIFT OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: FACTORS AND DRIVERS

In the tumultuous landscape of the Middle East, nations often find themselves at the crossroads of complex geopolitical dynamics, their foreign policies shaped and reshaped by the ever-volving regional landscape. Turkey, a pivotal player in the region, has undergone a profound paradigm shift in its Middle East policy following the tumultuous aftermath of the Syrian Civil War. İnaç and Hadji describe the complex relationship between Turkey and the Middle East as follows “*Turkey's relationship in the Middle East is highly problematic, as it is schizophrenic, "rejected" and "required" at the same time, rejected in its republican and perhaps sultanistic life in its recent eras, and required with its cultural and symbolic ties*” (İnaç and Hadji, 2022, 1) This definition shows that these two carry deep traces of unity and separation from the past. This depth shows that just as a Middle East cannot be imagined without Turkey, Turkish foreign policy cannot be imagined without the Middle East.

This shift, marked by a reevaluation of alliances, strategic objectives, and diplomatic approaches, has left scholars and policymakers alike grappling with the multifaceted factors and drivers that underpin this transformative evolution. Turkey, which is restructuring its alliances, is turning its face from west to east under the influence of the Islamic roots it had during the JDP period, and the background of the party founders mentioned before. The Middle East policies of the United States, its longest-term strategic partner in the formation of this de-westernization phenomenon, are in an effort to establish an independent Kurdish state, and Turkey has seen this situation as a threat to itself for many years. Balcı and Monceau explain this situation as follows, “*In the Turkish view of the regional issues, the United States' strategy of relying on the Kurdish organizations linked to the PKK in Syria might eventually lead to the forming of a Kurdish state and that would present a threat to Turkey's security.*” (Balcı and Monceau, 2021, 9)

The Syrian Civil War, which erupted in 2011, served as a catalyst for redefining the geopolitical calculus of the Middle East. Turkey, once a staunch supporter of the Syrian opposition against the Bashar al-Assad regime, found itself entangled in a web of complexities as the conflict unfolded. As the war took on increasingly sectarian dimensions and attracted the



involvement of various regional and international actors, Turkey faced the challenge of recalibrating its approach to the region to safeguard its national interests and navigate the shifting geopolitical sands.

In this section, Ahmet Davutoğlu, one of the founders of the party who had a major share in the formation of JDP's foreign policy and who served as minister of foreign affairs, stands out. Davutoğlu underscored several principles, including the concept of strategic depth, the New Ottoman theory, fostering harmonious relations with neighbors through the 'zero problems' approach, embracing 'soft power' strategies, and prioritizing diplomacy and trade alliances over confrontations with regional powers. Davutoğlu's "strategic depth"<sup>4</sup> doctrine of Turkey's foreign policy refers that proactivity in the regional events and systems in full context. (Szymanski, 2018; Taşpınar, 2008; Almuedo, 2011) That engagement not only refers political engagement, but it also enables cultural, economic, and social engagement. He also ground his doctrine according to his neo-Ottomanist background and roots. (Murinson, 2006; Szymanski, 2018; Akram, 2010) Another aspect that defines Davutoğlu's doctrine is "Neo-Ottomanism" as Alekseevich defines that term,

*“Neo-Ottomanism is a virtual concept that combines a range of foreign policy beliefs and their practical implementation. The major elements of the Neo-Ottomanism system are Neo Pan-Turkism, Pan-Islamism, Turkish Eurasianism, and cooperation with Arab, Balkan, Asian, and African countries. Though it is being exercised through each of the mentioned above elements, Neo-Ottomanism has a general goal of shaping the supranational identity of new Ottoman imperialism that alludes “involvement” and “inclusion”, both carried out by means of “soft power”. (Alekseevich, 2018, 4)*

As mentioned above Neo-Ottomanism defines Turkey's efforts to reach the legacy of the Ottoman Empire's geographical inclusion and conservation of heritage in 21<sup>st</sup> century in every aspect. That ideology is aiming not only the Middle East, in all regions where Ottoman heritage can be found, Balkans, Caucasus, and Africa. (Balcı and Monceau, 2021; İnaç and Hadji, 2022; Taşpınar, 2008; Nouredine, 2008) With that definition of the term Neo-

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<sup>4</sup> The 'strategic depth' doctrine calls for an activist engagement with all regional systems in the Turkey's neighborhood.

Ottomanism we can also define “being soft power” principle of Davutoğlu. The reason that principles occur and connected with Neo-Ottomanism is, it has been seen in practice as a compensation for the impoverishment of the Ottoman policy of the state administration. And lastly, we need to mention “zero problems with neighbors” principle. (Sinkaya, 2011, 15) This principle is one of the tools to reach the other principles, because region itself has too much potential for unrest and conflicts. In accordance with this principle, important steps have been taken in Turkey’s foreign policy. Steps have been taken to solve the problems that have been going on since the early 90s regarding Syria and PKK support and the use of the Euphrates and Tigris. In this regard, the relations between the two countries, which reached the level of hot conflict in the late 1990s with visa-free travel agreements, high-volume trade agreements and official and unofficial meetings of the country leaders, reached the "Friend Assad" point during the JDP period. Turkey's relations with Iraq, another important neighbor and one of the influential countries in the region, have remained tense for a long time due to the "Kurdish issue". As mentioned before, during the JDP period, efforts were made to find a solution using diplomatic means with the "Kurdish Initiative" movement. In this regard, the "TRT Şeş"<sup>5</sup> channel broadcasting in Kurdish on the national channel, the visits of JDP staff in the Southeastern Anatolia region and the infrastructure and superstructure investments made by the state, and the meetings and dialogues established with the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government leader Barzani and Talabani tribes are the examples of that normalization and rapprochement. (Sinkaya, 2011; Akram, 2010; Cook et al., 2014; Aydın, 2013; Almuedo, 2011)

One of the primary factors contributing to the paradigm shift in Turkish Middle East policy is the changing nature of alliances and partnerships. Traditionally aligned with Western powers and emphasizing its commitment to secular governance, Turkey found itself at odds with some of its longstanding allies as the Syrian conflict unfolded. After the change in Turkish foreign policy, the policy of "zero problems with neighbors" was later replaced by the policy of "precious loneliness"<sup>6</sup> described by İbrahim Kalın, the chief foreign policy advisor to the presidency of the period. This loneliness, as defined by Kalın, Turkey's pursuit of a multi-faceted policy in the international arena due to its stance on Syria policies, its mediation and in the Astana and Sochi talks with Russia and Iran for the solution of the Syrian problem, has contradicted the interests of its western allies, largely the USA, and in this direction, it has

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<sup>5</sup> Six in Kurdish

<sup>6</sup> The idea of “precious loneliness” was introduced to international relations literature by İbrahim Kalın, in order to describe the much criticized state of Turkey’s Middle East policy in August 2013

contradicted the interests of both the state and the state. At the social level, the USA and NATO have become questionable both in social circles. (Szymanski, 2018; Balçı and Monceau, 2021) These conflicts of interest and multi-dimensional policies have resulted in a "redistribution of cards" in the Middle East, so to speak. Concurrently, the emergence of new regional dynamics, including the rise of non-state actors and the influence of external powers, compelled Ankara to reassess its relationships and forge new strategic alliances to assert its interests in the post-war Middle East.

Economic considerations also played a pivotal role in reshaping Turkey's Middle East policy. The Syrian conflict not only destabilized the region but also created economic challenges for Turkey, from the strain stemming from the large influx of Syrian refugees into Turkish territory to disruptions in trade routes. As a result, economic imperatives became a driving force behind Ankara's efforts to adapt and seek new opportunities for regional cooperation. The Turkish government's pursuit of economic diversification and its emphasis on soft power instruments emerged as integral components of its post-Syrian Civil War strategy.

Furthermore, the complex interplay of sectarian tensions and the regional struggle for influence has significantly influenced Turkey's recalibration of its Middle East policy. Before JDP, sectarianism in the Middle East took place as a power race between Saudi Arabia, the Sunni leader of the region, and Iran, the Shiite leader. However, in line with its Islamic roots, JDP's rise in the eyes of "Arab Street" in its policies and its upright stance against Israel on the Israel-Palestine issue have made Turkey one of the Sunni leaders of the region with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. (Altunışık, 2020) In this case, Turkey, apart from its complex and "intertwined" relations with other countries of the region, has entered an effort to increase sectarian leadership and influence in the region with Iran. Turkey had initiated a sectarian approach in the Middle East, evident in its backing of the Sunni Muslim community in Iraq and later supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. This support played a role in the strained relations between Turkey and certain Gulf countries, as well as Egypt following a change in its regime. Similar sectarian policies were observed in the Syrian context. (Szymanski, 2018) In this regard, Çetinsaya divides the region into two as "Shia Crescent" and "Sunni Crescent". Apart from the two sects, Çetinsaya mentions the "Kurdish Crescent" as another social and political faction in the region. These three social forces play a decisive role in the region.

The Shiite crescent exerts influence on the region under the leadership of Iran and in proportion to the Shiite population in the countries in the region. The emerging Iraq appears to be a nation where Shiite Arabs can exert dominance over both the central government and foreign policy through the federal and democratic processes outlined in the constitution. Inevitably, this situation will grant Iran a substantial advantage. The economic, social, cultural, and religious ties between the two countries, previously hindered by the Ba'ath regime, are poised to intensify in this new era. These interactions may raise concerns among other regional stakeholders who fear the formation of a "Shiite crescent" spanning from Pakistan to Lebanon. With Shiite populations comprising significant percentages in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon, some analyses extend this crescent to include Zaydis in Yemen (constituting 73 percent of the population) and the Nusayris in Syria, who adhere to a distinct form of Shiite Islam outside the Twelver tradition. This geopolitical-religious crescent also doubles as an "oil crescent" under Shiite influence, encompassing Iran, Bahrain, the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, and southern Iraq. Beyond these geopolitical, economic, and religious factors, the repercussions of social and cultural changes resulting from the globalization process within the Shiite world should also be anticipated. (Çetinsaya, 2008)

Another power, Sunnis, exerts its influence in the countries in the region through political parties called "Muslim Brotherhood". The Muslim Brotherhood parties, which are especially influential in Egypt and Palestine, see the Baath parties in Iraq and Syria as their sectarian rivals. The recent developments in the Middle East have seen the emergence of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties in various areas of the region. These political groups, aligning with the ideologies of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in terms of politics, society, and religion, are progressively gaining influence within Sunni Arab politics. In instances where democratic elections were permitted, such as in Palestine, these parties secured victories. In contrast, in countries like Egypt and Jordan, where democratic elections were restricted, they assumed prominent roles as opposition parties. (Çetinsaya, 2008)

Finally, the Kurdish population, which we encounter densely in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, among the countries in the region, also affects the countries they live in politically, economically, and socially. Especially the federal Kurdish administration in the north of Iraq has been effective in shaping regional policies as the most important Kurdish political power in the region. The developments occurring in northern Iraq are bound to exert political, social,

economic, and cultural influences on the Kurdish populations residing in neighboring countries like Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Both in the immediate and distant future, these nations will experience the repercussions of the establishment of the "Kurdish Federal Region" in northern Iraq. The inclination towards independence and a broader pan-Kurdish movement is likely to gain traction, particularly among the generations born after 1991 in northern Iraq. Beyond political ramifications, there will also be notable social, cultural, and economic interactions due to robust tribal and religious connections spanning across borders. Cultural exchange will take on broader dimensions facilitated by the opportunities presented by globalization, encompassing avenues like news media, universities, print publications, literary works, and internet resources. Substantial economic collaboration is also anticipated within this region, particularly between Turkey and northern Iraq. (Çetinsaya, 2008)

As traditional fault lines deepened and new fault lines emerged, Ankara was compelled to navigate the intricate balance between its own domestic dynamics, with a predominantly Sunni population, and the broader regional context characterized by Shia-Sunni rivalries.

*“Geopolitically, breaking the anti-Turkey alignment in the Eastern Mediterranean and offsetting Iran’s influence are the chief concerns of present-day Turkish foreign policy. Domestically, Turkey is heading for an election in 2023 in the midst of an economic maelstrom. To win the election, the government needs to address this predicament, which necessitates a recalibration on the foreign policy front.” (Dalay, 2022, 2)*

Like many academics, Balcı and Monceau also touch upon this issue. *“Although most of the population are Sunni Arabs, there are sizeable ethno-religious minorities, such as the Kurds, the Christians, the Druze, and of course the Alawite”* (Balcı and Monceau, 2021, 5) The existence of different cultures and religions in the region creates difficulties in balancing policy. It is an expected practice for Turkey, which is the leader of the region in terms of population, to pursue a multilateral foreign policy in this "cultural mosaic". This delicate balancing act has shaped Turkey’s engagement with various actors in the post-Syrian Civil War era, as it seeks to position itself as a mediator and influencer in the region.

In this chapter, it will be delved into the nuanced factors and drivers that have propelled

Turkey towards a paradigm shift in its Middle East policy. By examining the impact of changing alliances, economic imperatives, and the intricacies of sectarian dynamics, its aim to unravel the complex tapestry of Turkey's evolving role in the post-Syrian Civil War Middle East and shed light on the implications for regional stability and global geopolitics.

## **Regional Dynamics and Geopolitical Changes**

The Syrian Civil War, which erupted in 2011, marked a turning point in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, prompting a significant paradigm shift in Turkey's foreign policy. The regional dynamics and geopolitical changes that unfolded as a consequence of this conflict have played a pivotal role in reshaping Ankara's approach to the Middle East. In this chapter it will be explored the intricate web of factors and drivers that underpin the evolution of Turkish Middle East policy, focusing on the changing alliances, economic imperatives, and sectarian dynamics that have propelled this transformative shift.

One of the foremost factors contributing to Turkey's paradigm shift has been the changing nature of its alliances. Historically aligned with western powers and a proponent of secular governance, Turkey found itself at odds with some traditional allies as the Syrian conflict unfolded. The divergent interests and strategic objectives of key actors in the region, including the United States and European powers, strained Turkey's alignment with the western bloc.

Simultaneously, the emergence of new regional dynamics, such as the increasing influence of Russia and in Syria, compelled Ankara to reassess its alliances. The strategic realignment witnessed in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war saw turkey engaging in closer cooperation with Russia, particularly through the Astana process alongside Iran. This shift not only altered the geopolitical calculus of the region but also positioned turkey as a key player in shaping the post-war order, transcending its previous roles within the western-centric framework.

The economic fallout of the Syrian civil war became a driving force behind Turkey's recalibration of its Middle East policy. The conflict generated a multifaceted economic impact on Turkey, from the burden of hosting millions of Syrian refugees to disruptions in trade routes

and economic ties with neighboring states. As a result, Ankara sought to leverage its economic capabilities to adapt to the changing regional landscape.

Turkey's emphasis on economic diversification and the pursuit of soft power instruments emerged as integral components of its post-Syrian war strategy. Through economic engagement, including trade agreements and infrastructure projects, Turkey aimed to foster stability and enhance its influence in the region. The economic imperative became a tool for Ankara to navigate the complexities of the post-war Middle East, as it sought to capitalize on new opportunities and mitigate the economic challenges posed by the conflict.

The complex interplay of sectarian tensions has significantly influenced Turkey's recalibration of its Middle East policy. The Syrian conflict, with its sectarian dimensions, exacerbated existing fault lines and created new dynamics in the region. Turkey, with a predominantly Sunni population, faced the challenge of balancing its domestic demographics with the broader sectarian context of the Middle East. (Szymanski, 2018; Çetinsaya, 2008)

As Sunni-Shia rivalries intensified, Turkey sought to position itself as a mediator and influencer, engaging with various actors irrespective of sectarian affiliations. This delicate balancing act aimed to preserve Turkey's regional interests while avoiding entanglement in sectarian conflicts. Ankara's engagement with both Sunni and Shia actors, including its diplomatic overtures to Saudi Arabia and Iran, reflected a pragmatic approach to navigate the complex sectarian dynamics that emerged post-Syrian Civil War.

The paradigm shift in Turkish Middle East policy post-Syrian Civil War is a complex interplay of changing alliances, economic imperatives, and sectarian dynamics. As Turkey adapted to the evolving regional landscape, the realignment of alliances, economic considerations, and the delicate balance of sectarian tensions emerged as key drivers. Understanding these factors provides valuable insights into the geopolitical changes that have shaped Turkey's role in the post-war Middle East and underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges and opportunities facing Ankara in the region.

## **Regional Shifts and Conflicts Influencing Turkish Foreign Policy**

The Syrian Civil War unleashed a wave of regional power shifts and conflicts and reverberated across the Middle East, significantly influencing Turkish foreign Policy (TFP). As Turkey sought to navigate the complexities of the post-war era, it had to grapple with evolving power dynamics, emerging conflicts, and the strategic realignments of key actors. This analysis delves into the regional power shifts and conflicts that have shaped TFP, highlighting the key geopolitical factors that influenced Turkey's foreign policy decisions.

There have been power struggles in the Middle East since the early 2000s. The US military intervention in Iraq and the resulting influence of state and non-state actors in the region at different periods have led to these changes in power. The aims and directions of these changes are sectarian and ideological based within the dominant Arab population in the region, and although they are not present in the region, they have become the "backyard" of Russia and the USA, so to speak, after the cold war, whose influence has been seen since the second half of the 19th century. The Syrian people, inspired by the Arab Spring that originated in North Africa and driven by their desire for social change, reacted against the Assad administration. This reaction ultimately drew Syria into a protracted civil war. And this civil war caused the alliances and turmoil in the region to resurface. This period, in which we observed the conflicting interests of some allies and some enemies becoming allies in line with common interests, made it difficult to maintain an environment of stability and trust in the Middle East. Turkey stands out as being ahead democratically and economically among the countries in the region. For this reason, it suddenly found himself at the center of what was happening and left the passive and peaceful nature of this "zero problems with neighbors" policy to an "interventionist" and more active foreign policy due to realpolitik reasons and the security problem in the region.

The Syrian conflict contributed to the rise of new regional power centers, most notably Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Both Russia and Iran played pivotal roles in supporting Assad regime, on the other hand Turkey, as a secular democratic pioneer in the region, supporting Free Syrian Army against Assad regime. Turkey's recalibration of its foreign policy took into account the enhanced influence of these regional actors. Iran, Russia, and Turkey became prominent states due to their relations with Syria in order to ensure peace and restore security in the region in



the period after the Syrian civil war. In this regard, Iran, Russia, and Turkey held a series of meetings in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. These talks, which were held under the supervision of the United Nations, aim to re-establish security in Syria and create demilitarized areas. As Akram states Turkey's importance and significance in the region, Turkey has the potential to positively contribute to the region, having earned the trust of key regional stakeholders, particularly through its mediation efforts in resolving disputes between rival nations. This positions Turkey to significantly impact Middle Eastern politics, and its reputation as a reliable peace mediator holds promise for the country's future benefits. (Akram, 2010) Addition to that Turkey needed to make these bilateral relations between influential countries in the region for itself and also the sake of the region. Ankara is actively working to enhance its connections with the Middle East, demonstrated by its initiatives to strengthen bilateral ties, boost trade, and facilitate easier private travel for residents between Turkey and certain Middle Eastern nations. (Akram, 2010) The Astana process, a trilateral mechanism that involving Russia, Iran, and Turkey, exemplifies Ankara's pragmatic approach to engage with these newfound power dynamics, reflecting a recognition of the evolving regional order. And how the Astana Process ended will be explained and analyzed in more detail in the final chapter.

The other perspective that shaped Turkish stance is Kurdish population in Northern Syria and Northern Iraq. Kurdish population in Syria played huge role on igniting "Syrian Spring" as much as other Sunni population in Syria. The conflict in northern Syria, particularly along the Turkish-Syrian border, became a focal point influencing TFP. Because as it said before security issues and Kurdish question has been the center of TFP until the establishment of the Republic. In Northern Syria, Kurdish population has established political party Democratic Union Party (DUP)<sup>7</sup> in 2003, it was Syrian branch of PKK. As Ankara saw PKK as security threat for years, PYD has also seen as threat from Turkish side. During the Syrian Civil War, PYD established its own protection units, the "People's Protection Units" (YPG). And naturally these two formations seen as security threats for TFP because their deployments on Turkish-Syrian borderline in Northern Syria and the support they get from the USA for fighting against Assad Regime in Syria created a conflict of interests between Turkey and the USA, which they are naturally allies by membership of NATO. The involvement of Kurdish groups, perceived by Turkey as extensions of the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party), created a

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<sup>7</sup> PYD in Kurdish "Partiya Yekitaya Demokrat"

complex security dilemma. (Szymanski, 2018) That conflicts of interest between TR-USA one of the causes of shift in TFP. Because Turkish authorities felt that even if we, as a Turkish side, were allies with western powers, we can be abandoned in the middle as like the situation after invasion of Iraq. And that makes reshaping the alliances and multilateral diplomacy inevitable for TFP. These developments in Syria, the formation of armed Kurdish groups on the Turkish border of Syria, the weakening of the regime and the unstable situation in Syria encouraged the Turkish side to use the option of military intervention, which will be discussed in more detail later. This appears as a concrete example of the transition from being a "soft power" to an "interventionist" state in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's military inventions, such as Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch, were responses to perceived threats emanating from the Syrian conflict. The management of these conflicts with Kurdish groups influenced Turkey's relations with both regional and international actors.

Another issue that should be mentioned when talking about the change in TFP is the power conflicts and sectarian interests in the region. The Syrian Civil War evolved into a proxy conflict involving various regional and global powers, each supporting different factions based on their strategic interests. Sectarian tensions, particularly between Sunni and Shia groups, as it mentioned before, further complicated the regional landscape. While many different cultures live together in the region, some act in line with each other's interests and some are in conflict. This situation turns the region, which is already in chaos due to current events, into an impasse that is more difficult to resolve. The Kurds in northern Iraq maintain connections with fellow Kurds in Syria, Turkey, and Iran. Shiite Arabs forge relationships with both Arab and non-Arab Shiites in Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. Sunni Arabs establish ties with Sunni Arabs in Syria and Jordan, as well as with Islamic movements across the Arab world. Meanwhile, the Turcomans maintain affiliations with Turkey. Additionally, neighboring, and regional countries express interest in and have connections with these various groups and entities within Iraq. (Çetinsaya, 2008) These relationship networks make it difficult to control and open to conflict at any time. Even though the region has a predominantly Muslim and Arab population, many countries with ethnic differences are also strong and influential. Turkey, Israel, and Iran can be given as examples of these countries. In these examples, Israel is seen as a radically different rival in the region, and as we have witnessed recently, the region can act together and oppose it from time to time. Apart from state actors, effective non-state actors also affect the changeable structure of the region. Operating with their own armed militias, they engage in conflicts alongside national armies and pose challenges to established states.

(Çetinsaya, 2008) Islamist factions also exist in the region, and the influence of "Islamism" or "Political Islam" is expected to grow as a political force. This trend encompasses both armed and unarmed groups, spanning both Shiite and Sunni affiliations. A shift in the strategic power dynamics of the Middle East is underway due to the significant weakening of Iraq's robust military and its diminishing "Arab identity" in the area. With Iraq, once a potent Arab nation, now sidelined in the regional equation, Iran, Israel, and Turkey are poised to fill the resulting strategic void. The transformed Iraq, characterized by military vulnerability and political instability, alters the regional balance of power, particularly to the detriment of the Arab world. (Çetinsaya, 2008) Turkey, with its predominantly Sunni population, had to carefully navigate these changes and connections that have already established, to safeguard its interests. The emergence of Sunni-Shia rivalries and the influence of sectarian dynamics on regional conflicts influenced Turkey's diplomatic engagements and alliances.

The Syrian conflict led to one of the largest refugee crises in recent history, with millions seeking shelter in neighboring countries, including Turkey. This humanitarian dimension of the crisis not only strained Turkey's resources but also influenced its foreign policy decisions. We see that one of the factors that changed the structure of the region and thus Turkey's foreign policy is the refugee crisis that emerged after the Syrian civil war and the humanitarian concerns associated with it. According to United Nations data, more than 13 million Syrians had to be displaced by the end of 2019. (UNHCR, n.d.) While half of the people who had to relocate had to settle in different countries, more than half of this number resides in Turkey. With the humanitarian aid of Turkey and Lebanon in the region, as well as the European Union and the United Nations, Syrian citizens who needed assistance were evacuated and placed in refugee camps. TFP incorporated efforts to address the humanitarian impact of the conflict, aligning with regional and international partners to manage the refugee crisis and contribute to stability in the war-torn region.

Another indicator of the change experienced by Turkish foreign policy was the transformation of the alliance with the USA and NATO in the process and therefore the rapprochement with Russia. Turkey's traditional alliance with NATO underwent scrutiny and adjustment in the post-Syrian Civil War period. Divergent interests and priorities between Turkey and its Western allies, particularly the United States, led to tensions and strained relations. Both the logistical and political support of the USA to the Kurdish organizations in the region in the fight against ISIS were decisive in the formation of this situation, because

ISIS is common enemy for Turkey and the USA but for the Turkish side Kurdish organizations are also seen as enemies and that difference between interests created clash between traditional allies the USA and Turkey. The US's indifferent attitude towards the Kurdish issue, which has been seen as the number one problem for Turkey for many years, has caused this alliance and mutual trust to be shaken. The fact that the Kurdish Regional Government of Northern Iraq, which was established after the US military intervention in Iraq, has increased its influence in the region over the years, poses a potential security problem for the Turkish side, with the concern of granting such autonomy to the north of Syria in the post-Syrian civil war period. In addition, Turkey, which was getting closer to Russia with the Astana summit and subsequent negotiations, was excluded from the F-35 project, despite being a NATO ally and one of the participating and producing countries, at the end of all these processes, and thus Turkey's trust in NATO and its traditional ally, the USA, was severely damaged. Turkey's increased engagement with Russia in areas like defense cooperation, most notably the purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems, underscored the shifting dynamics within NATO and the broader geopolitical context. (Yeltin, 2021)

The post-Syrian Civil War period has witnessed a dynamic interplay of regional power shifts and conflicts that have significantly influenced Turkish Foreign Policy. From the rise of new regional powers to the intricacies of proxy conflicts and sectarian tensions, Turkey has had to navigate a complex geopolitical landscape. As Ankara continues to adapt to these changes, the evolving regional dynamics will undoubtedly shape the trajectory of Turkish foreign policy, reflecting the intricate balance between national interests, security imperatives, and diplomatic pragmatism. In the rest of this section, the impact of the Arab Spring on Turkey's approach and its connections with the shift of TFP will be examined.

## **The Impact of Arab Spring on Turkey's Approach**

The Arab-Spring, a series of pro-democracy uprisings and social movements that swept through several countries in Northern Africa and Middle East in the day 2010s, had a profound impact to the region. Turkey had intense relations with Libya, Egypt, and Syria among be touched countries. In addition, in the scenario where we see the Republic of Turkey as the successor of the Ottoman Empire, the geographies mentioned were under Ottoman rule for years and therefore there is a historical connection. This situation is especially important for

Turkey governed by JDP, because both their background and views are shaped by a "Neo-Ottoman" perspective. As a nation with historical ties to the Middle East and aspirations of regional leadership, Turkey under the leadership of then- Prime Minister (and later President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded to the Arab Spring with a combination of diplomatic initiatives, political engagement, and public discourse.

In this section, the changes in Turkey's Middle East foreign policy and the issues that have an impact on the Arab Spring will be discussed. These issues are the effects of Turkey's position and importance in the region. The first of these is that Turkey is a democratic example for the states in the region, and for this reason, it has served as a kind of "democracy promoter" in the countries where the Arab Spring was effective and has been a supporter of democratic demands and change expressed by the people against the existing regimes. Turkey initially positioned itself as a supporter of the democratic aspirations of the Arab Spring protesters. The ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) saw parallels between the demands for political change in the Arab world and Turkey's own experience with political transformation. Ankara expressed solidarity with the people seeking greater political freedoms, social justice, and democracy in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Turkey, which naturally assumed this role, was seen as a power among the countries in the Middle East that was trying to run westward on the eastward Middle East train, both due to its long-term alliance with the West and the steps it took democratically. As Almuedo also mentions,

*“Turkey sees itself as the legitimate spokesperson of the region, even in the position of acting as a mentor for its neighbours. The Arab uprisings taking place from the beginning of 2011 is a very good example. Countries that had risen against their dictators and asked for a democratic regime looked towards Turkey to draw some lessons from its democratic experience.”*

*(Almuedo, 2011, 6)*

In countries where the Arab Spring was effective, Turkey was seen as a pioneer with its support for pro-democracy protests and the westernization and democracy-oriented steps taken by the JDP until 2011 and received social support with the start of protests in Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Almuedo also ensured that this "power vacuum", created by the distorted and uncertain relations in the Middle East and the rapid and constant change of dominant powers, caused Turkey's soft power policy to turn into a more active and interventionist policy with the

authority vacuum that emerged in the region. (Almuedo, 2011) This vacuum has paved the way for Turkey to become more effective and powerful in the region. Ankara has initiated efforts to serve as a mediator in conflicts involving regional actors, while also actively supporting the development of institutions and fostering economic interdependence. This collaborative approach is motivated by its pressing security concerns. (Almuedo, 2011)

The Arab Spring has brought security concerns, which are one of the important factors determining Turkey's foreign policy, back to the agenda. The security issue has been one of the most important issues of Turkey's foreign policy for years. Particularly Middle East policies have generally been shaped around security concerns. The shifting network of factors once more took center stage, with the Arab Spring aligning temporally with challenges in implementing Turkey's foreign policy doctrine. The endeavor to maintain "zero problems with neighbors" and rely solely on soft power tools proved challenging for Turkey, given existing conflicts and disputes with numerous neighboring nations (excluding, notably, regional Kurdish authorities in Northern Iraq). This circumstance further underscored the prominence of the security factor in Turkish foreign policy. (Szymanski, 2018) We clearly see that, under the influence of the Arab Spring, the "zero problems with neighbors" policy has now been shelved and had to be shelved. Because now there was a possibility that a proactive policy would not work in both domestic and foreign policy and would cause Turkey to remain ineffective in the region. With the transformation of Turkey's Middle East policy, the JDP has both strengthened its position in domestic politics and given it the chance to show itself as a strong actor in the international arena. Cross-border operations have been the concrete example of this transformation, as will be explained in the following sections.

During the Arab Spring, Turkey engaged in humanitarian and diplomatic efforts, particularly in Syria. As the conflict in Syria escalated, Turkey opened its doors to Syrian refugees, and Erdoğan became an outspoken critic of the Assad regime. As the conflict continues, this policy named as "open doors policy", and the Syrian refugees that settled in Turkey became "guests". This status is different from being a refugee and immigrant in legal terms. Because refugees or immigrants have legal rights and responsibilities. But on the other hand, when they named as "guests" they are neither given refugee status nor immigrants and it caused legal definition problem in Turkey and in Turkish society. This policy also caused a problem about register, when a country opens its borders to everyone who want to escape the Civil War in Syria that caused irregular migration flows and unregistered groups of people who

came from Syria. Even if they were mostly just innocent people who escaped from the war, there were also members of radical Islamist armed organizations. Turkey supported the Syrian opposition forces against Assad regime and called for international intervention to address the humanitarian crisis. However, the Syrian Civil War also posed significant challenges to Turkey, with the conflict spilling over its borders and creating security concerns.

Another aspect about the Arab Spring that affected Turkey's foreign policy shift is economical concerns and failure of "soft power" diplomacy. Turkey sought to leverage its economic strength and cultural influence in the region as part of its response to the Arab Spring. Economic initiatives, trade partnerships, and cultural exchanges were used to strengthen ties with emerging governments and position Turkey as a regional model for political and economic development. Turkey's economic initiatives in the countries that affected by Arab Spring, especially in Libya and Syria, not only increase Turkey's economic capabilities but other countries' capabilities also increased democratic spirit on these countries with the way of cooperation and economic liberalization by diplomatic talks and trade agreements between states. This was the way of Turkey for being a model and democracy promoter in the countries that governed by authoritarian regimes. These efforts were largely due to the contribution of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, to Turkish foreign policy. His strategic depth theory was a tool for become independent as economically in the region and that policy helped to develop as a region with that much cooperation. (Almuedo, 2011) The comparison of Turkey's trade volumes with the West and the East in the early days of the AKP period also proves how effective this cooperation, diplomacy and conciliatory policy were. Turkey has observed a close correlation between the consistent expansion of its foreign trade and robust economic growth. The country is now enthusiastic about broadening its market reach and boosting export volumes. Notably, Muslim, and Middle Eastern nations have emerged as lucrative markets, with Turkey's trade share with the Middle East nearly doubling from 9% in 1996 to 19% in 2008. During the same period, the European Union's share has declined from 56% to 44%. This shift does not signify a rejection of the West but rather underscores the attractiveness of Turkey's relationships in the Middle East. (Almuedo, 2011) This soft power approach aimed to enhance Turkey's influence in the changing political landscape of the Middle East.

Over time, the evolving dynamics of the Arab Spring and its aftermath posed challenges to Turkey's approach. The rise of instability, the entrenchment of authoritarianism in some

countries, and the failure of the Arab Spring to consistently lead to democratization forced Turkey to reassess its strategies. Tensions with key regional actors, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, underscored the complexities of navigating the post-Arab Spring Middle East. The Arab Spring contributed to shifts in Turkey's regional alliances. While Turkey maintained its support for certain Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, its relations with traditional allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia strained. The divergent paths that various countries took in the aftermath of the Arab Spring influenced Turkey's geopolitical positioning in the region.

To conclude the effect of Arab Spring to Turkish Foreign Policy, the Arab Spring significantly impacted Turkey's approach to the Middle East. While initially supportive of the movements for political change and democratic governance, Turkey faced challenges and had to adapt its strategies in response to the complexities and divergent outcomes of the Arab Spring in different countries across the region. The experience of the Arab Spring continues to shape Turkey's regional policies and its role in the broader Middle East landscape because of its' relationship with the refugee crisis after Syrian Civil War, ongoing conflicts on the region between regional and global powers.

## **Domestic Political, Social and Economic Factors Effect Turkish Foreign Policy**

Turkish foreign policy has been greatly influenced by Turkey's internal dynamics throughout history. In Turkey, where social dynamics and social movements are very influential, the change in foreign policy after 2011 was also affected by some factors. Some of these factors are the social perception of the ruling party, some are social reasons, and some are general factors that are not specific to this period. In this section, this transformation of foreign policy will be tried to be explained from another perspective, using the sources and sections where many academics explain how Turkey's domestic policy dynamics are effective in the formation of the change in foreign policy. The shift in Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East after 2011 can be attributed to a complex interplay of domestic factors and drivers. This period witnessed significant changes in a regional dynamic, particularly with the Arab Spring, and Turkey, under the leadership of then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, sought to reposition itself as a key player in the evolving geopolitical landscape.



One of the primary domestic factors shaping Turkey's foreign policy shift was the ideological orientation of the ruling Justice and Development Party led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The AKP, rooted in political Islam, sought to pursue a more assertive foreign policy that aligned with its Islamic values. Faced with criticism from Kemalists that Turkey was being "Middle Easternization" by the improved relations and negotiations with Muslim countries under the leadership of the AKP, the AKP administration adopted a foreign policy in line with its roots of "national outlook" ideology. The Neo-Ottomanist steps previously explained, in line with the Islamic roots and ideological agenda of the JDP, are activities that also have a reflection in local politics. The AKP, which wants to reclaim the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and unites the society in the understanding of a Turkish-Islamic unity along the lines of Sunni Islam, has been winning elections with high voting rates since its foundation and continues its one-party regime in Turkey, which has been ruled by coalition governments for a long time, into its 21st year. This shows that the AKP has been able to mobilize society around the idea of a Turkish-Islamic synthesis and that its policies are supported by the public. This ideological shift influenced Turkey's approach to the Middle East, the reason of that influence is more than ideological its quite religious. Because middle eastern countries are Muslim countries, except Israel, and that situation seen as if a central powerful country will be rise in the middle of the region it would dominate and became a regional leader. And the aim to engage with like-minded political entities, such as Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Development Association, and support movements that reflected its own conservative values. As Kirişçi suggests that Islamization movement in Turkey, "*...there seems to be a consensus in the literature that it would be exaggerated to claim that there is an "Islamization" of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP Government.*" (Kirişçi, 2009, 8) As it is clearly seen here, the JDP's foreign policy and the desire to increase cooperation with Islamic countries has been very effective in turning its face from the west to the east. The influence of the then foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu on this situation is quite high. Because Davutoğlu's career as an academic and his political background was shaped along Islamist and neo-Ottomanist lines.

One of the local factors affecting Turkish foreign policy is the economy. Economic considerations played a crucial role in shaping Turkey's foreign policy toward the Middle East. The Turkish economy has experienced both rapid and stable growth locally due to the JDP's policies prior to 2011. Having overcome the crises and economic uncertainty experienced by the Turkish economy in the early 2000s, the Turkish economy showed good growth between 2002 and 2008 as Barkey also mentioned that booming economic initiatives, "*Turkey,*

*interested in maximizing commercial opportunities for its booming industrial economy...*" (Barkey, 2012, 5) However, in 2008, due to the global economic crisis, the Turkish lira depreciated rapidly against the US dollar and the euro. The problems experienced in domestic politics during this period and the subsequent coup attempt caused the Turkish economy to face a major foreign exchange crisis. After 2011, Dalay also mentions the change in Turkish foreign policy and its economic impact in his article, as he mentioned "*Turkey's economic downturn is partially an outcome of its foreign policy and geopolitical activism.*" (Dalay, 2022, 7) After a brief introduction, the importance of Turkey as an economic partner in the Middle East can be explained as follows: the trade agreements with the countries of the region during the JDP period to develop the Turkish economy were important steps to increase cooperation and partnership in the region. The region presented significant economic opportunities for Turkey, especially in terms of trade, investment, and energy cooperation. In particular, the activities carried out through the construction sector make it possible to see structures built by Turkish contractors and builders in most countries in the Middle East. In addition, in terms of infrastructure, Turkey has invested heavily in the countries affected by the Arab Spring, particularly Libya and Syria. All these deals have had a positive impact on the Turkish economy, as evidenced by the stable and relatively high growth rates sustained until 2011. Strengthening economic ties with Middle Eastern countries became a key driver, as Turkey sought to diversify its trade partners and reduce dependence on traditional markets in Europe. (İnaç and Hadji 2022; Khatib, 2021; Szymanski, 2018; Akram, 2010; Nouredine, 2008; Cook et al., 2014; Almuedo, 2011)

Another domestic factor is security concerns. As mentioned above, security concerns have been one of the most important factors determining Turkish foreign policy. This is since the Republic of Turkey went through very painful processes during its establishment and the importance it attached to border integrity and peaceful environment. The famous quote of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, "Peace at home, peace in the world" was adopted as a philosophy. However, in modern times when security is not easily ensured, countries have had to take their own measures. During this period, Turkey took some steps to find a solution to the Kurdish problem. These steps are referred to as the "solution process" or the "Kurdish initiative" in the literature. During this process, both infrastructure and superstructure investments such as dams, bridges and water plants were made by the state in the southeastern Anatolia region, and socioeconomic development was aimed in the region, which had been left behind in terms of investment for a long time. The AKP government

realized that it needed to follow a more moderate and negotiating path with the Kurds in order to assume the role of the playmaker it wanted to assume in the region and aimed to achieve this through its efforts in this direction. In this context, in addition to negotiations and talks with the regional Kurdish administration in Northern Iraq, it has also tried to prevent further conflicts at home. (Coşkun, 2014)

For this purpose, "Wise Men" committees consisting of artists, scientists and opinion leaders were established. Although these delegations have been active in all regions of Turkey, they have been more active in the south-eastern Anatolian region and have organized various reports in an effort to minimize security concerns in the region. In line with the report of the wise men, some conclusions have come to light, especially for the south-eastern Anatolia region. Although these conclusions could not be extended to the whole country, the committee made some determinations in accordance with the purpose for which it was formed. These conclusions centered especially on the intensity of the PKK's influence in the region and the almost non-existence of public services and public assets. In addition to the PKK, other political and non-political formations in the region have also followed the PKK's example over time, leading to schism in the regional society. This schism is at the sociocultural level and has led to the formation of a highly polarized society. (Coşkun, 2014) In this period, AKP continues to act in line with the principles of soft power in both domestic and domestically effected foreign politics.

Religious and cultural ties have become the party vision for the AKP administration. In this period, these ties have played a decisive role for the AKP, which has been pursuing a soft power approach to stabilize the region. In this regard, cultural ties and historical ties and connections with domestic actors such as sects and communities. The improvement of relations with these sects and communities strengthens Erdoğan's power and effect on Arab World. The AKP government, which seen as a model for Muslim world as successful combination and coexistence of Islam and democracy together, attempt to reach the untouched parts of society. Government and its roots need to take these steps to fulfill its historical "not be able to succeed". Educational exchanges, cultural events, and media outreach in Turkey and in the region were used to foster a positive image of Turkey on the perspective of region countries and Muslim World.

Another domestic factor influencing AKP foreign policy is nationalism. Nationalism

has been an important part of Atatürk's principles and reforms since the foundation of the republic and has always been embraced by the Turkish society. In the pre-AKP period, nationalism has become increasingly influential due to the coups in Turkey and the subsequent administrations. However, the AKP government synthesized Turkish nationalism with Sunni Islam and pursued policies along the Turkish-Islamic line in domestic politics. AKP nationalism is a neo-Ottomanist nationalism based on patriotic discourses. But the goal of that policies and Turk-Islam discourse is to position Turkey as a key player in shaping the future of the Middle East and became a core power rather than periphery state. (Szymanski, 2018)

In conclusion, the shift in Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East after 2011 can be attributed to a combination of political, economic, security, and cultural factors. The complex interplay of these domestic drivers shaped Turkey's approach to the region, as it sought to capitalize on opportunities, address challenges, and assert its influence on the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. To summarize the impact of domestic factors and dynamics on Turkish foreign policy, the TFP has largely been shaped by the security concerns and economic opportunities of the society. However, in domestic politics, the concern for votes and support has also manifested itself through discourses along the Turkish-Islamic line, a combination of Sunni Islam and Turkish nationalism. In the next section of that chapter, it will be examined economic ties, cooperation, and trade networks as a factors and drivers that affect Turkish policy shift.

## **The Impact of Economic Interests and Trade on the TFP Shift**

Economy is an important issue in Turkey's foreign policy due to its geopolitical position. As a bridge between Europe and Asia, Turkey's Anatolian territory has historically been a link between Europe and important trade routes such as the Silk Road and the Spice Road. due to its important geopolitical position, Turkey has needed close economic links with both Asia to the east and the European Union to the west. Since the beginning of the 21st century, with the AKP coming to power, south-north trade has gained importance along with east-west trade. Turkey has achieved high export and import figures with the Arab Middle Eastern states to its south. It has also expanded its trade volume with Russia in the north through co-operation on energy security and energy transfer. Trade with Russia in the context of energy needs plays a crucial role on reducing Turkey's energy needs. On the other hand, Russia needs

Turkey's agricultural products such as tomatoes, cucumber, banana etc. That mutualist relation also increases the cooperation between two states as being only states that named as "Eurasian" Economic ties have been a pivotal factor influencing the paradigm shift in Turkey's Middle East policy, particularly in the aftermath of the Syrian Civil War. The evolving economic dynamics in the region have contributed to the recalibration of Turkey's foreign policy, shaping its diplomatic engagements and strategic alliances, even trade routes and trade alignments. In this part of the chapter, it will be explored the intricate relationship between economic interests, trade, and the evolution of Turkish foreign policy, by examining how these dynamics influence the nation's diplomatic decisions and global positioning.

Economic interests are one of the fundamental drivers of foreign policy, because of how nations interact and create networks with the international community and actors. In the case of Turkey, economic considerations have become increasingly intertwined with its foreign policy objectives as like other aspects and fields on politics. With the increasing power of the JDP government, economic relations have increased rapidly with the oil-exporter countries. This situation has positive impact because these countries are relatively rich countries and the agreements that conducted with Turkey and these states are high volume. As Barkey also indicates that new trade routes of (New)Turkey, also he mentions that how Turkish investors, especially in construction sector, increased their activity and enterprises,

*"Whereas many in the Arab world - save for the oil exporting countries - appeared stuck in an economic and political morass, Turkey under the AKP has moved ahead. It became assertive in international politics, engaged with the Middle East, a region it had hitherto ignored, and its entrepreneurs began to show up everywhere." (Barkey, 2012, 1)*

As he also mentions, the pursuit of economic growth, job creation, and the overall well-being of its citizens has boosted Turkish holding companies to increase domestic wealth and GDP. These initiatives are not only economic also it has propelled Turkey to strategically align its foreign policy with the usage of means of economy and state's economic interest. Turkey also started to show off its economic might during this time. Due to a significant economic reorganization that started in the early 1980s, Turkey's economy took off and its exports started to surpass all previous records. More significantly, Turkey's export push and economic growth came from a more inclusive, national effort rather than being the exclusive province of one or

two areas. Provinces on the outside of Anatolia started to take part in and even lead new initiatives in Africa and other regions of the world. Founded by conservative and devout businesspeople, the medium-sized businesses known as the “Anatolian tigers” would later form the core of the AKP coalition. (Barkey, 2012)

Energy security is one of the important examples of Turkey’s economic interests that shaping foreign policy agenda. Given Turkey's expanding population and developing economy, the country's energy requirements have increased dramatically. As a result, the country has been pursuing diplomatic attempts to secure a variety of dependable energy sources. Energy-rich countries like those in the Middle East and Central Asia are partners and signatories to accords that highlight Turkey's strategic foreign policy choices to protect its economic interests. Turkey's economy is based mostly on international trade because of its geographic location, which acts as a bridge between Europe and Asia. The demands of the dynamics of international trade have shaped the country's foreign policy. Turkey's foreign policy alignment has been largely fueled by its involvement in international commercial accords, such as its Customs Union with the European Union. Not only have trade alliances and agreements for economic cooperation reinforced Turkey's economic connections, but they have also shaped its foreign policy. Turkey has endeavored to augment its worldwide clout and utilize economic interdependence as a mechanism for diplomatic outreach through the promotion of commercial ties.

Turkey's foreign policy is particularly influenced by the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area because of its historical and geographical closeness. Turkey has adapted its approach to regional dynamics to suit its economic goals, which include trade alliances, investment possibilities, and energy cooperation. Securing economic and strategic interests is frequently used as a justification for the country's involvement in crises like those in Syria and Libya, because Turkish economics begin to dependent on external investors from oil-rich Arab countries. Additionally, Turkey's efforts to diversify its trading relationships demonstrate the economic component of its foreign policy. Turkey has attempted to deepen its connections with developing economies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in an effort to lessen its reliance on established markets. The overarching objective of assuring economic stability and broadening Turkish influence globally is in line with this diversification plan.

Despite the fact that trade and economic concerns have greatly influenced Turkish

foreign policy, difficulties and disputes have occurred. Complex diplomatic situations have occasionally resulted from political difficulties with specific commercial partners, geopolitical developments, and differing economic interests. For Turkish politicians, striking a balance between geopolitical stability and economic interests continues to be a difficulty.

Regards to these economic factors and drivers that shaped and affect Turkish Foreign Policy shift, it can be said that main components are economic cooperation with the countries that are non-European and especially Middle Eastern, energy security for country's future well-being and development, increase national interest and fostering the influence on trader countries in the region, and usage of economics and trade agreements as "soft power" and using diplomatic ways rather than direct influence and present in those countries. To conclude that part of the chapter, it has demonstrated the importance of economics for foreign policy and the fact that the two are fields that constantly and bidirectionally affect each other. And the last part of that chapter will be about a case study. That case study will be Syria and Turkey's foreign policy shift with the aftermath of Arab Spring in Syria in 2011.

## **Case Study: Syria, In depth Analysis of Turkey's Approach Towards Syria**

Due to its multicultural structure, the Middle East has witnessed various conflicts for a long time and has been a geography where the dominant powers have constantly changed. The dominant powers in the region are constantly changing and relations are, so to speak, "fluid". The Middle East, which is home to a dense Arab population, besides Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Iranians, and Israelis have been living in these lands for centuries. This complexity has made the Middle East a mosaic, but the situation of being multicultural creates lots of different interest between cultures. The vast majority of these conflicts constantly confront cultures due to natural resources and borders. Although there are many Arab countries in the region, the dominant powers may differ. In particular, Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are the most prominent regional powers, both politically and economically.

The Arab Spring, which started in 2010, was first launched in Tunisia and Algeria by the people demanding democracy, freedom, and human rights against the existing governments. Over the course of a year, the protests led to different outcomes in different Arab

countries and led to changes of government in some of them. These democratic demands are protests and uprisings against the kings, princes, authoritarian, and totalitarian leaders of the Arab countries, demanding Islamic democracy and the democratic and human rights that people see in the West. Under the influence of these protests and uprisings, protests against the Assad regime in Syria started in 2011. As a result of the protests, Syria was dragged into a civil war, which is still ongoing today. The Syrian civil war has had major impacts and perhaps irreparable damages due to its regional and global effects. Although it started largely against the authoritarian rule of the Assad regime, it was supported and embraced by the Kurdish population in the region and the anti-Assad Sunni population. Turkey has increased its influence and power in the region since the establishment of the republic. As mentioned before, the problem of stabilization in the Middle East geography, Turkey is trying to take advantage of this gap and become an effective power in the region. To this end, the AKP government's foreign policy until the Syrian civil war has been based on "soft power" in order to improve relations and increase cooperation with its neighbors in the region. However, the change and transformation of the regional ecosystem after the Syrian civil war has led to the need for Turkish foreign policy to be more interventionist and "hard power" to address the "power vacuum" problem that has emerged in the region. Turkey-Syria relations in the post-Cold War period have progressed with ups and downs. In the early 1970s, Turkey's construction of dams and hydroelectric power plants on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers as part of the "Southeastern Anatolia Project" caused problems for other countries that used these rivers for irrigation and energy production. In particular, the problems with Syria over the use of the Euphrates River led to aggressive behavior on both sides. This "water problem" had mentioned by many scholars such as Szymanski and Akram. The water problem occurs because of both countries claimed rights on usage of Euphrates as Szymanski mentions, "*The problem intensified in the 1980s when Turkey planned to implement a development project in South-Eastern Anatolia. from the Syrian point of view the Turkish undertakings concerning the waters was a reflection of sovereignty claims over the rivers*" (Szymanski, 2018, 5) Also Akram as well mentions the problems occurred at that time about usage of these rivers, "*Discord between the two countries increased in the 1970s when the Turks started the construction of the GAP (South eastern Anatolia Project), the large dam project on the Euphrates River, and eventually the Tigris, which, when completed, restricted the water flow into Syria*" (Akram, 2010, 8) At the end of the 80s, Turkey started an armed struggle against the PKK armed organization. During this period, Syria protected Abdullah Ocalan, the number one name and founder of the PKK, within Syrian borders. The Syrian response of supporting the organizations which Turkey considers



as enemies also mentioned in the literature. Szymanski says about Syrian decision for that counter action as “...it decided in the 1970s to host the militants of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)<sup>8</sup> as well as the members of Armenian Secret Army for the liberation of Armenia and representatives of the Turkish radical left.” (Szymanski, 2018, 5) This attitude of the Assad regime was seen as a move against the existing water problem, and the problems experienced in the two countries throughout the 90s due to Turkey’s deployment of troops to the Syrian border and its clear expression of its position on this issue resulted in the signing of the “Adana Agreement” (Szymanski, 2018) in 1998 and Syria’s expulsion of Abdullah Öcalan. This agreement clearly showed that Turkey would not compromise on some issues in foreign policy. After this incident, relations between Turkey and Syria have entered a process of improvement. (Almuedo, 2011) Mutual diplomatic visits increased economic co-operation and friendly attitudes of the countries evolved into a friendship between Erdoğan and Assad under the AKP administration. Until the Syrian civil war, this friendship has risen from the level of countries to the level of family friendship. However, as the civil war affected everyone and everything in the region, it also affected these good relations badly and the “old enemy”, “new friend”, became “notorious enemy” again. Almuedo describes this radical change in Turkish-Syrian relations as follows, “Once the conflict with Syria was over, it moved from enemy to friend” (Almuedo, 2011, 16)

Before the eruption of the Syrian conflict, Turkey, under then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s leadership, pursued a foreign policy approach known as “zero problems with neighbors.” This policy aimed to foster friendly relations and enhance economic cooperation with neighboring countries, including Syria. The two nations enjoyed warm ties, exemplified by joint cabinet meetings, visa-free travel, and growing economic interdependence. (Szymanski, 2018) As İnaç and Hadji defines Davutoğlu effect on TFP on Middle East,

*“The great and rapid transformation in Turkey's foreign policy was represented by the adoption of the vision of "Ahmed Davutoglu", which aims to redefine Turkey's role in the region, which he formulated in the concept of strategic depth. With the policy of zeroing conflicts emanating from this vision, a revolution took place in a number of Turkish foreign policy, as Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East became based on a set*

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<sup>8</sup>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê in Kurdish

*of principles pertaining with the security for all, zero conflicts, political openness, peaceful cultural coexistence and interdependence Economic.”*  
(İnaç and Hadji,2022, 6)

They defined clearly how Turkish side used diplomatic ways to create new ties or repairing existing ties with the regional neighbors.

The Arab Spring, which began in the late 2010, brought about widespread political upheavals across the Middle East, challenging existing power structures. As the Syrian conflict unfolded, Turkey found itself confronted with a complex set of challenges. The initial Turkish response to the Syrian uprisings reflected a cautious attempt to encourage democratic reforms. In the post-2011 period, Turkey ended its friendly policies with the start of the Syrian civil war. (Szymanski, 2018) The reason for this situation is that Turkey, which is the pioneer of democracy in the region, supports the people's demand for democracy and shows its stance against the Assad regime. In addition, Turkey provided training to the soldiers of the "Free Syrian Army", an armed organization formed by high-ranking soldiers who left the army against the Assad regime and took military action to overthrow the Assad regime through joint exercises and operations. (Szymanski, 2018) However, the post-war environment has become fraught with security concerns for Turkey, as the conflict escalated into a full-scale civil war, Turkey faced growing security concerns. The Kurdish community in the north of Syria embraced the uprising and, like the Free Syrian Army (FSA), formed the armed YPG organization, which launched attacks against Turkish targets, which was seen by the Turkish Side as the Syrian branch of the PKK, and Turkey found itself in a completely different conflict. One of the key drivers behind Turkey's changing approach towards Syria was the evolving security landscape. The emergence of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), in northern Syria raised concerns in Ankara due to alleged affiliations with a Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkey perceived the PYD/YPG as a threat to its national security and sought to prevent the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish entity along its southern border. (Altunışık, 2020) As the conflict progressed, security concern intensified, especially with the rise of extremist groups. The emergence of Kurdish forces in northern Syria, affiliated with the PKK, increased the concern of Ankara about national security because of the desire for autonomous administration. This security imperative led to a recalibration of Turkish policy towards Syria, with a shift from initially supporting various opposition groups to a more assertive stance against Kurdish

entities in northern Syria. (Szymanski, 2018) The sectarian dimensions of the Syrian conflict, with Sunni-Shia rivalries intensifying, Syria as a country which Sunni majority ruled by a Shia minority, posed a delicate challenge for Turkey, a predominantly Sunni country as well. Balancing domestic sentiments with regional dynamics became a key consideration in Ankara's evolving approach.

Besides, Turkey's support for the opposition also had security implications, as the conflict created a power vacuum and fueled the rise of extremist groups. The spillover effect, with violence crossing the border, heightened Turkey's security concerns. Politically, Turkey threw its weight behind the Syrian opposition, viewing the removal of the Assad regime as a critical step towards regional stability. This support extended to diplomatic efforts, where Turkey actively lobbied for international intervention and supported the Syrian National Council.

Another dimension of the security crisis that emerged from the start of the Syrian civil war is the refugee crisis in the post-war climate. The Syrian conflict triggered one of the largest humanitarian crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with millions of Syrians seeking refuge in neighboring countries, including Turkey. After the post-war turmoil and ongoing conflict in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, in particular, host about 5.5 million refugees. This particular situation, which has become more than a regional crisis due to humanitarian concerns in the process, has been the stage for the struggle of migrants forced to live in neighboring countries due to both geographical and cultural proximity. The influx of refugees strained Turkey's resources and infrastructure, leading to a reevaluation of its approach towards Syria. Turkey hosted millions of "guests" with its "open door" policy at the beginning of the migration problem. (Szymanski, 2018) However, demographic, socio-cultural, and economic problems have arisen over time due to lack of legal designation, irregular and intense migration, and the inability of immigrants to be homogeneously placed in the country's geography. At this point, migration has become a problem in Turkey, and one of the main reasons for this is uncontrolled and irregular migration.

Turkey, which plays a more active role in Syria along with its changing foreign policy in the process, has clearly demonstrated a more militant attitude towards the Assad regime in the struggle that began as a civil war, and has undertaken a series of military operations that are still underway in this regard. While initially advocating for a political solution, Turkey eventually became more involved in the conflict, actively supporting certain opposition groups

and participating in military interventions, such as Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016 and Operation Olive Branch in 2018. The military operations have been an indication of a clear change in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's foreign policy, previously dominated by diplomacy and peaceful solutions, has now taken a more aggressive stance, using military operations and direct intervention. It can be said that the Kurdish formations in northern Syria are widely viewed by the Turkish side as a security threat. (Altunışık, 2020) But not only these formations, but also the presence of the ISIS and his actions in Turkey have been the main reasons for the Turkish launching military operations in Syria since the beginning of 2015. (Szymanski, 2018) The Syrian case has become a major problem for Turkey. Because confusion has become multi-layered. It has become a main enemy of the Assad regime, with which it was friendly before the civil war had begun. This hostility has since become more tangible with both logistical and military support for the forces fighting against the regime. The Syrian Kurds, which has strengthened in the unstable political environment resulting from the weakening of the regime, is a new threat to Turkey. At the same time, facing both the PYD/YPG and Turkey as well as the Assad regime, when we look at the emerging picture of Syria as the final one, ISIS has come into a phase of alliances and conflicts where it is unclear who is the enemy and who the friend. Among the military operations organized by Turkey, the most important are Operation Euphrates Shield, which began in August 2016 and continued until March 2017, and Operation Olive Branch, which took place between January 2018 and March 2018. These two military operations are of great importance to Turkey. This is because the Euphrates Shield Operation has reduced the threat posed by both ISIS and YPG targets to Turkey's borders and secured border security. In the Olive Branch Operation, YPG troops in the region have been evacuated to ensure security in Gaziantep, Kilis, and Hatay, Turkey's border cities. (Altunışık, 2020; Szymanski, 2018)

Ankara aimed to exert pressure on the Assad regime through a multi-faceted strategy, driven by four key considerations. Firstly, Assad was perceived as a destabilizing force posing a threat to Turkish national security. Secondly, the Syrian conflict presented an opportunity to indirectly challenge Iranian influence. Thirdly, there was a conviction in Ankara that Turkey should play a significant role in post-Assad Syria. Lastly, the pressing humanitarian issues associated with the Syrian conflict were a crucial factor. Despite the validity of these assessments, Turkey encountered difficulties in formulating a coherent Syria policy. The initial decision to ignore and later facilitate the movement of jihadists to join the Syrian conflict had serious repercussions for Turkish security. Additionally, Ankara's alignment with the Syrian

Muslim Brotherhood caused tensions with Gulf partners who, despite sharing concerns about Assad and Iran, had divergent reasons. In essence, Turkey's Syria policy underscored the limitations of its regional influence. The Turks failed to compel Assad to change course and struggled to provide leadership or coherence to the Syrian opposition. In hindsight, these tasks were deemed unattainable, contrary to the expectations during the AKP era, leading Turkey to become embroiled in another nation's civil war, contributing to sectarian tensions and promoting transnational jihadism in the process. (Cook et al., 2014) The perception of the Assad regime has changed so much for Turkey that the words of Turkish politicians have begun to change in this direction. Szymanski describes this situation as follows, *“It was even reflected in changing the pronunciation of the Syria leader’s name by the AKP politicians and state media from “Esad” to “Esed”* (Szymanski, 2018, 8) Although this change of speech is seen as a simple change in behavior and policies, it simply summarizes the change the Assad regime is experiencing from the perspective of Turkish decision-makers.

In general, it is possible to say that Turkish-Syrian relations have been turbulent due to different reasons from the past to the present. Turkey's undefined, inadequate, and irregular migration policy in a situation of uncertainty that emerged after the outbreak of the civil war caused the humanitarian crisis that was supposed to be solved to be divided into different layers. Humanitarian issues are presented by Turkey's open-door policy and the millions of Syrian refugees it has hosted. The size of the refugee crisis overwhelmed available resources, posing problems for the host country's infrastructure, social structure, and economy. The ramifications touch the global community as well, emphasizing how crucial burden-sharing is to be solving the refugee problem. The example of Turkey highlights the necessity of coordinated measures to assist countries that are hosting sizable refugee populations. Turkey responded to security concerns and the need to manage the refugee issue proactively by advocating for safe zones in northern Syria. The goal of creating safe zones was to provide a secure environment for Syrian refugees while also promoting stability in the region. Safe zone implementation, however, also brought up difficult geopolitical issues and required cooperation with a range of parties, including the international community and local players. The fact that Turkey perceived the Syrian issue as a direct security threat and as a result of this, it started to fight against the PYD/YPG forces supported by its traditional ally, the US, in line with its own interests, is a concrete indication that it feels more powerful and free to act independently from its allies in the international arena. Turkey's military involvement, including Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch, were motivated by its worries about the security dangers arising

from the Syrian crisis. These operations targeted extremist organizations operating close to Turkey's borders as well as Kurdish elements seen to pose security dangers. The military operations emphasized the interdependence of foreign policy choices and security dynamics, underscoring the necessity of strategic deliberation in tackling security issues in the area.

Turkey's Middle East policy shift in the case of Syria presents a rich tapestry of implications for both the refugee crisis and military interventions. The humanitarian challenges of hosting millions of refugees have tested Turkey's capacities while also highlighting the global need for collaborative solutions. Simultaneously, the recalibration of alliances and a pragmatic approach to diplomatic engagements have reshaped the landscape of military interventions, emphasizing the importance of nuanced, region-specific strategies.

As Turkey navigates these complexities, the case of Syria stands as a critical case study in the dynamic interplay of humanitarian considerations, security imperatives, and geopolitical realignments. The implications resonate not only in the context of Turkey's foreign policy but also hold broader lessons for addressing the multifaceted challenges of conflicts in the Middle East.

## **WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THE TFP SHIFT POST-2011 ERA?**

The Syrian crisis has undeniably reshaped the geopolitical landscape, alliances, priorities, and roles of countries of the Middle East, and Turkey, as a key regional player, has not been immune to these transformative forces as well. As explored in the preceding chapters, the conflict has prompted a reassessment of Turkey's Middle East policy. As we have seen in the previous chapters, "zero problems with neighbor" policy replaced with more defensive and interventionist policy and Turkey become more active in the region rather than being proactive. Turkish foreign policy has gone through certain processes, reevaluated, and reassessed to a certain point, and has taken its current shape. The final chapter delves into the changing priorities and alliances that have emerged in the wake of the Syrian crisis and their implications for Turkey's strategic positioning in the region. In this final chapter, the changes in Turkish foreign policy priorities and alliances, security concerns and control-terrorism will be discussed. The chapter will then conclude with the consequences, limitations, and obstacles of this change.

### **Changing Priorities and Alliances**

For the major states in the region, the Syrian crisis has been both a security challenge and an opportunity to become a central power in the region. The Middle East which has become a "playground" for states that want to become more dominant in the region, has become more complex with non-state actors that have made stronger and more effective both logistically and operationally by other powers. The security concerns arising from this complexity have been perceived as a threat by Ankara. In addition to these security concerns, the migrant crisis after the civil war has caused a new concern for the host countries in the region and they have been caught unprepared by rash policies against the migrant influx. Turkey, as the country hosting the largest number of migrants since the beginning of the crisis, has also been affected by this crisis, and although more than a decade has passed since its onset, its effects and debates are still ongoing. One of the security concerns that led to Turkey's foreign policy shift has been that the void and uncertainty created by the war-torn power vacuum in the region has created a potentially unsafe environment. This has become a security concern for both the region and Turkey. The protracted conflict in Syria has posed multifaceted security challenges for Turkey. The rise of extremist groups, the influx of refugees, and the potential for spillover violence

have forced Ankara to recalibrate its security priorities. Border security and counter-terrorism also gained importance at that time. These two facts have been central for TFP already but after the Syrian crisis these traditional threats have gained renewed significance. Overall, this shift influenced Turkey's engagement with regional and international actors according to its own interest.

Another issue that the Syrian crisis has affected and changed Turkish foreign policy is the transformation of Turkish-Western relations and conflicts of interest with NATO and the US, Turkey's traditional ally. The Syrian crisis has led to a reassessment of Turkey's regional alliances, prompting a departure from previous alignments. The strained relations with allies in the West, coupled with the changing dynamics in the Middle East, have compelled Ankara to seek new partnerships, such as Russia and Arab countries. Diplomatic rapprochement with Russia began concrete with the talks in Astana and Sochi, mentioned in the previous chapter. At this point, Turkey, which faces the US on Syria and is closer to Russia in diplomatic and commercial terms, as well as relations with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran have been recalibrated under the influence of the 2011 Arab Spring and supported groups. As Altunışık mentions that recalibration over time, the AKP administration was cautious to build partnerships with all regional players before to the Arab revolutions and was particularly hesitant to take part in the primary competition in the area between Saudi Arabia and Iran. But with the Arab upheavals, aggressive tactics by all the regional countries resulted in fierce rivalry for dominance and influence, and this time Turkey joined the polarization of the area. Turkey's efforts to gain a regional hegemonic position and its funding of Muslim Brotherhood activities in the area caused relations with the Saudi-led axis, which mostly consists of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, to deteriorate. (Altunışık, 2013) As the author describes that sectarian politics and activities of supported groups in the countries that have affected by Arab uprisings had impact on relations between major countries.

The competition between the Saudi-Emirati alliance and Turkey has been noticeable in various areas of the region, particularly in the civil conflicts in Libya and Syria, as seen through the lens of Turkey's collaboration with Qatar in the Gulf and the polarization within Tunisia's domestic politics. In addition, the two sides competed to strengthen their positions in the Horn of Africa by offering political and financial support in exchange for basing privileges. Turkey's conflict with Iran, the head of a different pole, has been confined to Syria and to some extent Iraq, but its rivalry with the Saudi-Emirati axis has spread over the whole region. Ankara



supported the rebels in Syria, while Tehran supported the regime. However, they prevented rivalry in Syria from leading to the complete disintegration of current relations. But in the years after 2016, more points of disagreement surfaced. Turkey was troubled by Iran's growing activism and its militias' assistance for the government in regions near Turkey, while Iran was uneasy about Turkey's military actions in Syria. (Altunışık, 2013) As author describes the Arab-Turkish relations dimension, it is important for both sides but from the Turkish point of view it is more economically beneficial because of economical struggles that Turkey faced post-2011 era.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, actors in the region have sought to find a solution. This is a complex issue with players on both a regional and international level. Global and regional powers have intervened in this situation to find a solution. Russia and the United States are the world heavyweights in crisis resolution, but Turkey and Iran are without a doubt the most potent regional players. These forces have frequently convened on a global scale to look for answers to the issue since its inception. Turkey is a significant player in the solution-seeking process. It has been aware of the events in Syria, its neighbor to the east, from the beginning of the conflict. Turkey started negotiations with Iran and Russia to find regional and international answers. It has carried out a successful diplomatic effort in this regard. Turkey's efforts with Iran and Russia have developed into global cooperation. On this, several meetings and conversations have taken place. From this angle, the Astana Process is without a doubt the most ongoing effort to find a resolution to the Syrian issue. This time around, Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, remained a hub for peace negotiations and diplomacy. The first Astana negotiations have persisted and developed into a process. The goal of the Astana Process, which runs simultaneously to the Geneva Conferences, is to bring an end to the Syrian crisis and establish a sustainable peace. On December 30, 2016, it succeeded for the first time with a ceasefire accord thanks to tight coordination between Turkey and Russia. The primary goal of the Astana negotiations, which got underway on January 23 in 2017, is to strengthen and maintain the cease-fire between the opposition and the government. The process that has started in the direction of this objective is mostly the responsibility of Turkey and Russia. These two governments have taken up the role of guarantor with Iran. The Syrian opposition took part in negotiations with Iran alongside the group loyal to the Syrian administration. Groups that Turkey supports are among the adversaries. (Ayvaz, 2020) Nevertheless, in spite of these issues, the two nations joined the Astana process—which Russia started in December 2016—and the Sochi process, which is a connected system of leadership summits that aims to

coordinate interactions between the three superpowers in Syria. Even in Iraq, the two nations avoided open conflict and direct confrontation in spite of their competing interests and claims to power. Despite the two nations' 2020 military confrontation in Idlib, Syria, Turkey saw the Trump administration's May 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, often known as the Iran nuclear deal, as an “unfortunate step” and carried on with talks with Iran. In the end, unlike Turkey's relations with the Saudi-Emirati axis, Turkey's relations with Iran followed the traditional route of collaboration and rivalry, rather than becoming a zero-sum game. But in tandem with the events taking place in Syria, hostilities with Iran have lately risen once more in the region of Idlib in 2020. (Altunışık, 2013) As a result of the last Astana talks in 2020, cooperation between Turkey and Russia to resolve the crisis is important, although it supports different sides, and has produced some significant results. Turkey and Russia have different goals regarding the Syrian crisis. This difference is related to the continuation of the Assad regime. Russia has been a constant supporter of the Assad regime. The regime is vital for Russia to protect its influence and interests in the region. On the other hand, Turkey follows a policy that clearly expresses its opposition to the Assad regime and declares its support for anti-regime groups. The outcome is that, although Turkey and Russia have different objectives on Syria individually, they both play a major role in solving the problem that is involved here. At this point, Turkey and Russia are successfully implementing the co-operation mechanism, the common goal is surely Syria's territorial integrity, and a military solution will not yield results. Both countries agreed that the solution would be a political process, and the belief that a political solution would lead to the continuation of bilateral and multilateral, regional and international talks. As seen in previous stages, these talks will be complementary, with Idlib forming the most important part of the Syrian crisis in the recent period. That is why Turkish-Russian relations have become important in terms of co-operation as well as the issue of Idlib, and ultimately the Syrian crisis has forced Turkey, Russia, and Iran to join and cooperate, and this has largely happened with the Astana Process. (Ayvaz, 2020)

Economic interests play a crucial role in shaping foreign policy, and Turkey is no exception. The Syrian crisis has had economic repercussions for the region, influencing trade routes, energy dynamics, and investment patterns. As Turkey navigates these economic challenges, its partnerships and rivalries are increasingly influenced by economic considerations. This section explores the interplay between economic interests and foreign policy decisions, shedding light on Turkey's pragmatic approach to regional engagements.

Beyond military and economic dimensions, soft power diplomacy has become a significant aspect of Turkey's evolving Middle East policy. Cultural ties, humanitarian efforts, and diplomatic initiatives have been employed to garner support and influence regional dynamics. This chapter examines how Turkey's soft power initiatives contribute to its redefined role in the Middle East and the implications for its global standing. While the reassessment of Turkey's Middle East policy presents new opportunities, it also brings forth challenges. Regional rivalries, shifting alliances, and the complexity of the Syrian conflict pose ongoing dilemmas for Turkish policymakers. This section discusses the challenges ahead and outlines potential scenarios for the future of Turkey's engagement in the Middle East.

Besides Turkey's relations with Russia as a result of the Arab Spring, relations with the Gulf Muslim countries of Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been affected both positively and negatively. These relations, which have developed around the Muslim Brotherhood movement, have been deepened by political changes and events in Egypt and Syria. Egypt has felt the effects of the Arab Spring on several occasions, and the administration has changed several times. The protests, which began under the influence of the Arab Spring, had just completed their first month, and the government was dissolved in Egypt in 2011, which faced a very rapid gaps in administration following the resignation of Husnu Mubarek, who has served as Egyptian president for 30 years. With the election of Muhammad Mursi in 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood's influence in Egypt has increased considerably. One of the main reasons for this is that Morsi is the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood party, which is legally eligible for the post-2011 elections. The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in the first half of the 20th century and has a wide-ranging social movement and organization with political and social implications, in the surrounding Arab countries. The Muslim Brotherhood's activity in the geography of the Middle East has increased with the Arab Spring protests, the overthrow of long-standing Cold War dictators in their countries and the organization of protests and actions in line with society's demands for democracy. Many scholars have mentioned about that increasing influence on Middle East politics of Muslim Brotherhood. One of these scholars is Birol Başkan, he describes the movement and its effect as, *“The Arab Spring swept away old autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, the political parties and figures affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood came to acquire a new prominence. In Egypt, the Brotherhood’s political gains reached a peak. More spectacularly, the Brotherhood-affiliated Muhammed Morsi became elected in June 2012 to the presidency of Egypt.”* (Başkan, 2019, 9) As he describes the significance and power of the movement in the countries that have been affected

by Arab Spring, the movement found the right time to gain strength. The fact that they were previously opposition parties in the states in the region provided them with the opportunity to take advantage of the power vacuum in the countries. In this way, the current leaders have brought names close to them to leadership as the number one natural candidates in the countries that have been resigned or overthrown. This clear transformation of Turkey's foreign policy after the Arab Spring has been clearly seen after developments in Egypt. This transformation is described by many scholars and Alper Dede examines the effects of coup d'état in Egypt in three dimensions, first, the military overthrow of Morsi alienated Turkey by removing a key regional ally; second, more broadly, it relieved other monarchs and autocrats and made it more difficult for Turkey to carry out its prior policies; and third, it undermined other pro-democracy organizations throughout the region. (Dede, 2013) In the cases of Egypt, Israel, and Syria—previously seen as the main achievements of Turkey's foreign policies—zero problems with the neighbors/regimes become troublesome with nearly no discussion under Davutoğlu's multifaceted and principled approach. Additionally, Turkey's actions indicate goals based on interests and distort the ideational picture. Following the coup, Turkey once more demonstrated no desire for goodwill in addition to contesting the legitimacy of the government and severing its relations with Egypt. (Karşıyaka and Karşıyaka, 2017) Özdamar, Halis and Sula framing that shifting policy as, “One of the harshest criticisms is that Turkey has moved from a decade of so-called “*zero problems with neighbors*” to “*zero neighbors without problems*”, referring to increasing tensions...” (Özdamar et al., 2014, 15)

Along with the Egyptian issue, as the Muslim Brotherhood movement grew in recognition, its supporters and opponents in the region began to emerge. Turkey and Qatar are among the countries that have expressed their support for the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Iran, Palestine, and Libya are among the other supporters of the move. Iran is a major supporter of the movement in the region, both economically and militarily, despite its tribal differences, although the movement is largely on the Sunni Islamic line. On the other hand, there are forces that are significantly opposed to the move, and it is important to mention these countries, because this also emphasizes their importance. Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Russia have declared the Muslim Brotherhood movement a terrorist organization. They also showed support for the opposition. One of the examples of this opposition is the overthrow of the elected Egyptian president Morsi by the army with the support of Saudi Arabia. As a result of the coup, the movement has lost considerable power in Egypt and the diplomatic gap between Turkey and Egypt has been laid, owing to the support of Abdulfettah al-Sisi, who has assumed

office. The state of affairs that followed the coup was explained by Başkan as follows,

*“Fortunately for Saudi Arabia the Egyptian military staged a coup and overthrew Muhammed Morsi in early July 2013. When the Brotherhood refused to acknowledge the coup, the military initiated a brutal crackdown: many Brotherhood leaders were jailed and many others escaped Egypt. Turkey openly and harshly criticized the coup and the ensuing brutal crackdown on the protesters. Turkey’s continued criticisms led even to a total collapse in Turkey’s relations with Egypt: in late November 2013, Egypt declared Turkey’s ambassador persona non grata and asked him to leave Egypt and also reduced the diplomatic representation in Turkey to chargé d’affaires level. Turkey also welcomed a number of the Brotherhood leaders who escaped Egypt and even let them run TV channels inside Turkey.” (Başkan, 2019, 9)*

This passage clearly shows us that Turkey is a tangible supporter of the movement and that it can take steps to sacrifice its diplomatic relations if necessary. The coup in Egypt has shifted bilateral relations between Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia to a different dimension. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia has declared its political recognition of the post-coup administration, which clearly supported the coup, and on the other hand, it is one of the two major supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood movement and even protects the leaders of the government and movement that had been overthrown after the coup at the country's borders. Following the coup, Turkey and Qatar developed a unique partnership based on their shared positions. In late 2014, they decided to establish a High-Level Strategic Council and inked an agreement for military cooperation. The fact that President Erdoğan visited Turkey twice in 2014—in September and December—in response to Sheikh Tamim's, which is emir of Qatar, four visits is indicative. However, when the Kingdom and two other Gulf nations, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in March 2014, ties between Saudi Arabia and Qatar eventually disintegrated. (Başkan, 2019)

Despite their differences of opinion on Egypt, the three countries have continued to provide logistical and economic support to the Assad regime in Syria and to support anti-regime groups. They kept giving money and weapons to the rebels in Syria; in fact, Saudi Arabia started giving more powerful weaponry to rebels it deemed to be moderate as early as

2013. Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia collaborated during this time to increase pressure on the armed rebel groups to unite and form larger organizations like the Islamic Front and the Syrian Revolutionary Front in order to better combat ISIS, which was now posing an even greater threat to the rebel groups than the Assad regime. (Başkan, 2019) The fight against ISIS has been an important foreign policy element for both Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar. The leaders of these countries have deepened the fight and taken concrete steps with the statements they needed, as well as with their support for the Free Syrian Army. Even Sheikh Tamim, President Erdogan, and Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Saud-el Faisal verbally mentioned about ISIS threat and needed to fight against regime in Syria. These explanations are as follows: “*The main cause of all this is the regime in Syria and this regime should be punished.*” said by the Sheikh, “*there is a terrorist organization [the ISIS], but there is also Assad who spread state terror. It is not possible that an approach that does not take a stand against the Assad regime... can fight ISIS*” said by Erdogan, and “*there is an urgent need to strengthen the forces of moderation represented in the Syrian free army and all other moderate opposition forces.*” Said by the Saudi Minister. (Başkan, 2019, 11) Despite disputes and conflicts over Egypt, the three countries have met again on the same page on the Syrian issue. The relationships quickly healed. For instance, the seven-month-old conflict was resolved when Saudi Arabia dispatched its ambassador back to Doha in November 2014. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Turkey, traveled to Saudi Arabia to attend King Abdullah's burial two months later, in January 2015. Since his previous visit to Saudi Arabia in 2012, Erdoğan has never before traveled there. In late February 2015, a month after the burial, Erdoğan returned to Saudi Arabia as part of a prearranged visit. (Başkan, 2019) This common point on Syria has opened new pages for inter-country relations, and thus Turkey has acquired allies in its foreign policy in the Middle East, at least for now, whose interests are aligned.

Relations with Saudi Arabia, however, soon came to a break with the assassination of Saudi opposition journalist “Jamal Khashoggi” at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Khashoggi, who opposed the Saudi government's anti-freedom of expression practices and censorship shortly before the assassination and who has been promoting projects on social media, has been to have disappeared in Istanbul to collect documents for his private life, before he went to the consulate and was later announced by officials, he was killed in the consulates. In addition to the assassination, Saudi Arabia's support for the YPG together with the USA, which is fighting the terrorist regime in northern Syria, recognized by Turkey as a terrorist organization, and ISIS, during the same year, was a prelude to the point where relations between the two countries

are coming. As Başkan also mentions that situation, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia were already at odds, and their differences were growing more profound. Take into consideration that in May 2018, Saudi Arabia began communicating with the YPG, a terrorist organization identified by Turkey<sup>1</sup>. Three months later, Saudi Arabia even promised to provide the US \$100 million to use in the YPG-controlled Northeast of Syria. (Başkan, 2019)

## **Security and Counter-Terrorism**

As stated before, the fight against terrorism and security have been one of the most important determining factors for Turkish foreign policy. Border security and the fight against armed groups are of great importance in its relations with Iran, its neighbors in the Middle East, Syria, and Iraq in particular. The climate of uncertainty that has emerged in the region as a result of the Arab Spring protests, the changing governments, protests in many countries, and even the Syrian Civil War, has allowed pre-existing non-state actors to become more prominent and begin to expand their spheres of influence significantly. The political environment does not always paint a clear or optimistic image, but there is some underlying truth to the issue of what will happen to the Arab Spring. On the one hand, most people agree that the worst is not yet over. The future of these nations is gloomy given the emergence of non-state actors, cross-border reterritorialization, the hunt for state-like entities, sectarian conflicts, proxy wars, and state collapse. However, a new psychological threshold has emerged for opposing authoritarian control, and a collective consciousness is growing to alter the political landscape in favor of improved democratic rights and decent administration. (Aras and Keyman, 2015) Another scholar who analyzed Turkey's increased concerns about terrorism after the Syrian Crisis is Muhammed Kashif Aslam and he defines that as, *"The civil war in Syria created many challenges for the Turkish government; the revival of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) negatively affected Turkey's security. The terrorist activities of so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) further increased the cost of the Syrian crisis."* (Aslam, 2019, 3) As Aslam pointed out, with the beginning of the civil war, the presence of ISIS, which is now a security threat to both the region and Turkey, has been very influential in the dynamics of the region.

There are many organizations in the region that are supported by the great powers that are influential. Different dynamics and different indicators influence the formation and development stages of these organizations. Organized communities and movements in this direction have been more effective as the region has a densely populated Muslim Arab

population. The influence of both Shiite and Sunni communities in different times and countries is due to the multi-cultural and multi-denominational structure of the region, as it mentioned earlier. ISIL stands out among these non-State armed actors, both because it has a wider scope of influence and because it organized itself very quickly and effectively after the Syrian civil war. Since its inception, ISIL, a radical Islamist, and al-Qaeda-backed organization, has been gaining power very rapidly since 2013, in northern Syria. The organization calls its fighters “mujahid” and with guerrilla attacks according to the jihadist concept. While continuing to operate more actively in Iraq in the pre-2013 period, they campaigned against the post-war Assad regime that erupted in Syria and sought to establish an Islamic state. Turkey's security concerns began painfully in 2013 with a bombing in Hatay's Reyhanlı district. Nearly 200 people were injured in the bombed vehicle attack, and Turkey's fight against ISIL has begun tangibly at this point. And again, in this direction, the organization has been included by Turkey on the list of terrorist organizations since 2014. (Yeşiltaş and Duran, 2018)

In the ongoing process, Turkey has conducted a series of operations over northern Syria, as previously mentioned, to take control on ISIS' activities in the northern Syria and border security. But the objective of the operations was not only to clear ISIS targets out of the region, but also to provide security in the region against the armed group YPG, seen as the Syrian branch of PKK, which is an armed organization that aiming establish an independent Kurdish state in the region and Turkey has been struggling with it for nearly 50 years. (Yeşiltaş and Duran, 2018) With the YPG becoming active, the conflict in the region has become more stratified and the number of groups fighting for domination has increased. The YPG, the FSA (Free Syrian Army), and ISIS are the non-state armed groups vying for dominance in the area. Turkey's security concerns have led to the YPG being the most confronted organization among the organizations it is fighting against. Attacks on the directly border area and even domestic targets in Turkey, which are considered to be the equivalent of the long-running PKK struggle, have led to this. As this struggle continues, Turkey has, as has already been mentioned, fallen into disagreements, and weakened relations with an important ally. This ally is the United States. The US has decided to support the YPG in its fight against ISIS and has provided ammunition, logistics, and financial support. This has led Turkey to take more pragmatic decisions in foreign policy and to take decisions that are more independent of its alliances. Turkey plays a prominent and influential role in Arab World, thanks to its extensive knowledge of the region because of its Ottoman heritage and long-standing relationship. This makes



Turkey a highly capable and important player in regional matters. (Khalifa, 2017)

In conclusion, the Syrian crisis has been a watershed moment for Turkey's Middle East policy, prompting a comprehensive reassessment of priorities and alliances. As the region continues to grapple with geopolitical uncertainties, Turkey finds itself at a crossroads, navigating a complex landscape of strategic choices. This chapter offers insights into the evolving dynamics, shedding light on the intricacies of Turkey's recalibrated Middle East policy and its implications for regional stability and global geopolitics.

## **Considerations and Challenges for Turkey After the Policy Shift**

The change and transformation of Turkish foreign policy and the subsequent developments have, of course, brought some challenges and considerations to Turkey. While these are the consequences of new relations with its neighbors, the region's completely changing political and social climate has also contributed. It is important to evaluate the impact of changes in Turkey's foreign relations on its internal affairs. Because these two concepts are constantly in mutual relationship. And a change in one affects the other, which sometimes leads to unexpected results. For this reason, the change in foreign policy had some economic and social outcomes for Turkey. In this chapter, first we're going to talk about economic considerations and after that social considerations will be mentioned according to TFP shift.

### ***Economic Considerations***

The Turkish economy has been in a fragile structure since the 2008 economic crisis, very rapidly and heavily affected by external factors. External dependence and foreign exchange replacement have played a major role in this development, but excessive privatization by internal factors has also been effective. The economy, which needs foreign exchange reserves, is expected to remain resilient in the face of a global crisis, and the accumulation of industrialization in specific geographical centers and sectors makes the economy vulnerable to such dangers. Confusion in the geography of the Middle East in particular can lead to a sudden loss of value of the Turkish lira in the already vulnerable Turkish economy. (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021) This vulnerability and external dependence have also greatly affected Turkish foreign policy and its decisions. Turkey, which had good economic relations and investment during the pre-2011 period (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021), had political problems with key business partners

such as Libya, Syria, (Szymanski, 2018) and the United States during this period. Barkey also pointed out the connection between economic interest and foreign policy as, “Turkish leaders explained their foreign policy objectives and successes as the amalgamation of a soft-power policy designed to win friends and influence by maximizing on Turkey’s strategic position, its historical connections to its many diverse neighbourhoods, cultural links and economic wellbeing.” (Barkey, 2012, 2) Even though he mentions about pre-2011 era, this is a principle that still in progress on post-2011 era. Also, as evidence about how the situation was before global economic crisis and Arab Spring, Barkey mentions Turkey’s increasing growth, the JDP to use its own economic development and stability as a counterexample to the problems facing the EU. The Arab world lacks a leader to lead it through these volatile times, let alone a feeling of togetherness. (Barkey, 2012)

Alongside these effects, the Arab Spring has created a dilemma for Turkey. This is due to the need for strategic depth, one of the pre-2011 foreign policy principles, to maintain relations with existing regimes and, on the other hand, to create a regional climate of peace and support for protesters who oppose the anti-democratic practices of current regimes. According to Szymanski, “Turkey had established good relations with the Middle Eastern regimes, but after the beginning of the “Arab Spring”, it had a dilemma – whether to keep up the developed economic and political ties with the governments (which was in accordance with the strategic depth doctrine) or start to support the people in their protests (democracy promotion was also among the Turkish foreign policy principles)” (Szymanski, 2018)

To conclude this chapter Arab Spring and its consequences on TFP has had economic consequences, as expected. This is still unreversible today, but the negative effects continue to increase and the value of the Turkish lira against the dollar and the euro is falling day by day. This causes costs to increase in the import-based Turkish economy.

### ***Social Dynamics***

The impact of the change in Turkish foreign policy on social dynamics has emerged in general lines with the immigration crisis and beyond. The climate of uncertainty and increasing work that emerged after the Syrian trade war began has led to both regular and irregular migration from northern Syria to Turkey. In the towns on the southern border of Turkey, where

the refugee camps are dense, the increasing refugee population has overwhelmed the native population over time, and this has occasionally caused problems between two different cultures. (Szymanski, 2018) In addition, immigrants from already densely populated cities (Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir) due to the fact that migration has not been controlled by the Turkish government have increased the problem of urbanization and demobilization, which has been a long-standing problem for these cities. Again, Szymanski remarked, “Many refugees chose to go to other parts of Turkey, including the biggest cities such as Istanbul or Ankara.” (Szymanski, 2018) Turkey's open-door policy, and the rapidly increasing irregular migration that has resulted in it, has caused a massive influx of immigrants not only from Syria, but also from Iraq and Afghanistan. And this has caused the situation to get out of control and the opposition to immigrants in society to emerge. The issues surrounding the refugee crisis mostly affect non-camp residents, with camp residents being less of a worry. Formal-institutional, socioeconomic, security, and cultural-ethnic concerns are the different categories of problems. (Szymanski, 2018)

It's also true that some Turks benefited from the construction of camps for Syrian refugees, especially in some areas. They have worked in camps as administrative personnel or in Syrian-only facilities like grocery stores, laundry rooms, health, and education centers, etc. However, the expenses of providing relief to the refugees as well as upkeep of the camps and their amenities are always rising. In addition, a number of social and economic issues cause tensions, disputes, and even physical altercations between Syrians and Turkish nationals. Turkish legal wage earners are now facing competition from Syrians working illegally for extremely low rates, which is detrimental to the latter. The cost of living and housing costs are growing in tandem with the influx of more people, both for buying and renting. 2014 saw a threefold increase in rent and a twofold increase in property prices in Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Kilis. (Szymanski, 2018)

## **Challenges After TFP Shift for Turkey**

The obstacles and challenges were occurred after Turkey has changed its foreign policy on Middle East. It also plays a major role in dealing with these challenges, including its shift in the alliance axis, relationships with its supportive groups, and being more active and participatory than a proactive position in the Middle East. These challenges can be summarized

as the diplomatic isolation on the international stage, the economic vacuum in which it has entered, and its allies who have failed to meet their expectations.

It is the result of the decisions taken in the international arena that Turkey has faced. Turkey, which has been actively pursuing politics in an adventurous manner following the protests in the Middle East, has caused Erdogan to venture into different searches as he is isolated at the same time as he uses the populist and harsh rhetoric phrases, he uses in local politics internationally. According to Bieniek Turkish-Western relations became a problematic situation. Also, he suggests that the basic current question is about the future paradigm of Turkish foreign policy in general. While the country's relations with the EU are actually frozen, the relations with Turkey's traditional partner, i.e. the United States, have seriously deteriorated due to Erdoğan's adventurous foreign policy. Donald Trump's victory only accelerated existing tensions and led to the situation when Turkey is described as a "frenemy" – neither a friend nor a foe (Bieniek, 2021) Turkey's 2016 coup attempt and the US support of Fethullah Gülen, the leader of the "FETO" organization that planned the coup, have caused severe damage to Turkish-American relations. According to Bieniek about TR-USA relations, "The mentioned mistrust is even enhanced by President Erdoğan's harsh rhetoric as he often blames the US for supporting Fethullah Gülen and alienating Turkey in general and also by his political choices." (Bieniek, 2021, 6) This isolation policy is a multi-layered challenge. This is due to the mutuality and complexity of the causes and consequences of the situation we are facing. But the first step in this situation can be seen as US support for the PYD. The tensions that followed have reached their final point, with the two sides making blasphemies and harsh statements. That went as far as Turkey eventually got closer to Russia and signed a defense system agreement. Even more significant is the plan to purchase Russian S-400 air defense weapons, which seriously jeopardizes Turkey's standing as a NATO member. Additionally, relations with Russia have been reestablished by Turkey. (Bieniek, 2021)

There have been other challenges posed by Turkey's policy change after the Syrian crisis. Altunışık talks about these difficulties as follows, early in the war, the Assad administration renewed its assistance for the PKK in retaliation for Turkey's backing of the Syrian opposition, demonstrating the influence of the Syrian crisis on the Kurdish problem in Turkey. As a result, the PKK was able to solidify its position and start attacking both military and civilian targets in Turkey. Concurrently, the PKK emerged as the most significant Kurdish

movement in Syria with the founding of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). At first, Turkey attempted to thwart this trend by collaborating with Masoud Barzani and making use of his clout among Syria's Kurdish population. In the end, the AKP administration in Turkey initiated a peace process with the PKK with the aim of resolving the Kurdish issue. The administration just made the decision to communicate with the PYD as well. But the unpredictability of events in Kurdish areas and Syria diminishes the government's negotiating position and makes things more difficult. (Altunışık, 2013) As she also mentioned about relations with Kurds in the region, Turkey has difficulties that have become worse than before. And fighting with PYD created another dimension in Kurdish question for Turkish point of view. The author also mentions refugee crisis and challenges for Turkey as,

*“The refugee issue has been another consequence of the escalation of the Syrian crisis. At the beginning of the crisis Turkey announced that it would welcome anyone who was escaping the brutality of the Assad regime. By September 2013 Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey has exceeded 500.000. About half of these are living in 20 camps that were built mainly in border towns. In addition to its economic costs, the refugee issue has already disturbed the social and political balances in these areas and at times has led to tensions between different communities.”* (Altunışık, 2013, 7)

It shows that the problems that Turkey faced were not only diplomatic. They had social dimension as well.

Turkey has faced significant hurdles as a result of the crisis’s regional and global ramifications. The region’s division has grown as a result of the Syrian conflict. Conflicting interests in Syria have led to tensions and rivalry in Turkey-Iran ties. As a result of Turkey’s growing cooperation with Qatar and Saudi Arabia in this process, many have questioned Turkey’s involvement in the developing sectarian divide in the region. Due to its strong backing of the opposition in the Syrian crisis, Turkey has found itself in conflict with other foreign players, including Russia. (Altunışık, 2013) And finally, after the civil war in Syria began, support for the protesters and the anti-regime FSA, who have voiced democratic demands

against the Assad regime, has caused Erdogan and Assad, who were previously very close friends, to become part of the emerging new conjuncture. Eventually, Turkey may be drawn into the Syrian conflict as a result of its policies toward Syria and the fighting's intensification in the interim. One significant event in this respect was Syria's downing of a Turkish F-4 fighter in June 2012.<sup>12</sup> Over fifty people were murdered when two vehicle bombs detonated in Reyhanlı, Hatay, on May 11, 2013. The assailants, Turkish nationals with suspected ties to Syrian intelligence, were apprehended by Turkey. This incident caused a stir throughout the nation and illustrated the difficulties Turkey was facing as a result of the Syrian conflict once more. (Altunışık, 2013)

To summarize this section, as a result of the attitude taken by Turkey according to the dynamics of the region and its own interests, it damaged the good relations that it tried to establish as a result of great efforts, and also provided the environment for creating new bilateral relations in the region. In addition, we see that some issues affecting its domestic policy have deepened with the developments in its foreign policy and have caused new economic, social, and political difficulties.

## CONCLUSION

The findings and analysis of this thesis, have conducted a thorough analysis of Turkey's reevaluation of its Middle East strategy in the wake of the Syrian crisis, emphasizing comprehension of the complex interactions between continuity and change. This study has illuminated the intricate dynamics influencing Turkey's regional strategy by carefully examining policy papers, expert interviews, quantitative data, and historical context. According to the results of our analysis, Turkey's conventional foreign policy aims and goals in the Middle East were reevaluated as a result of the Syrian crisis. Turkey's persistent commitment to regional peace and security was clearly in line with previous strategies. Still, there were also notable shifts in reaction to the changing geopolitical environment and security threats brought on by the Syrian crisis. It was discovered that there were several factors influencing policy change, including foreign interventions, regional power struggles, and internal political dynamics. Turkey had to manage the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, maintain its national security objectives, and navigate intricate partnerships with regional and international players while responding to the Syrian crisis. Turkey's Middle East policy has shown resilience and adaptation in the face of the challenges provided by the Syrian crisis, as proven by its aggressive involvement in diplomatic initiatives, humanitarian relief operations, and military actions. The success of Turkey's redesigned strategy is still up for discussion, though, as the continuous hostilities in Syria, Iraq, and the surrounding area underscore the difficulties of regional politics and the boundaries of outside engagement.

This research shows that Turkey's foreign policy has clearly changed after 2011. The differentiation in Turkey's relations with its western allies, its neighbors and other countries in the region has played a major role in observing this change. In the post-2002 period, close relations with the European Union and the United States and the developments in the European Union membership process were replaced by the complete freezing of relations with the European Union and conflicts arising from conflict of interests with the United States. Although relations with its neighbors and other countries in the region were initially moderate and peaceful in line with certain principles of the AKP, they gave way to disagreements due to the general unrest in the region after the Syrian civil war and the point at which Turkey positioned itself in its Middle East policy. As mentioned before, this change has taken place from "zero problems with neighbors" to "zero neighbors without problems". As another result of this thesis, we observe that Turkey's passive and conciliatory attitude in the region has turned

into a dominant and interventionist attitude. The reason for this is that Turkey wants to make itself a regionally central country in world systems theory. We also see that Turkey, which has historically positioned itself as the successor of the Ottoman Empire that ruled the region for a long time and tried to expand its sphere of influence with neo-Ottoman policies in this direction, has been politically isolated both in the region and internationally as a result of this attitude. Especially after the Arab Spring, what happened in the region required long-term solutions, and as a result of Turkey's policies implemented with sudden and daily decisions instead of long-term and well-designed policies, Turkey paved the way for new disagreements and problems instead of finding solutions to the conflicts in the region.

Based on the information and analysis obtained as a result of the research, we can say that it is necessary for Turkey to make its policies focused on diplomacy, both in order to soften the general climate of the region and to improve its bilateral relations. Turkey, which is one of the most influential countries considering its sphere of influence and capacity in the region, should realize its importance for the region and act accordingly in order to promote democratic principles and ensure proper integration between east and west. In this regard, it should give up aggressive attitudes and undemocratic practices in local politics, especially in the field of censorship and press freedom, and obtain more objective results regarding policy measurements. Failure to criticize policies that go wrong and the fear of them increases the problems qualitatively and quantitatively, instead of removing Turkey and the region from the unrest that emerged in the region as a result of the Syrian civil war.

One of the future predictions for the change and transformation in Turkey's Middle East policy is that if it does not soften its relations with its direct neighbors and influential countries in the region and continues its aggressive attitude and does not pursue multilateral diplomacy, a new crisis that will emerge in the region, like the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict, will put Turkey in a more difficult situation. Moreover, when we consider its regional influence, it is possible to say that this uncontrolled foreign policy may have greater consequences.



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