

## CHAPTER 6

# THE TURKISH-RUSSIAN “COALITION OF INTERESTS”, IN SYRIA: AN ANALYSIS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF NEO REALIST THEORY

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### ABSTRACT

Turkish and Russian (Soviet Union) relations before the Cold War, were moderate in certain proportions. During the Cold War bilateral relations were at a low level due to reasons such as Turkey taking sides with the Western bloc against the threat of communism and becoming a member of NATO, and because of the Soviet Union’s territorial claims against Turkey. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, bilateral relations remained in a competitive dimension and improvements were observed in some areas towards the end of the 1990s. In the early 2000s a change in power in both countries, and the abandonment of the negative legacies of the Cold War had a positive impact on the development of bilateral relations. During this period, various partnerships were established in areas such as politics, economics and energy. The fact that the two countries have different perspectives on the situation brought about by the Syrian crisis has caused the deterioration of the strategic relations established in the early 2000s. Subsequently, both countries have approached each other in the context of their national interests. In this study, it is argued that the process of rapprochement in developing bilateral relations on the subject of Russia’s and Turkey’s intervention in the Syrian crisis should be evaluated within the framework policies of the neorealist theory “balancing through alliances” and “attack-defence balance”.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Russia, Syria Crisis, National Interests, Neo-Realism

## **1. Theoretical Context: Neo Realism / Structural Realism**

According to neorealists a security threat does not arise from the desire of revisionist states to gain power, but from the concept of “self-help”, which is revealed by the anarchic structure of an international system. In classical realism, the anarchic structure resulting from a lack of effective authority in the international system facilitates wars and conflicts, while in neorealism it is the main cause of wars and conflicts, namely security threats (Schweller, 1996).

According to the concept of self-help, every state is per command. When a state uses force against another state, since there is no authority to judge and prevent it, a state can always use force against another state, and as a result the state may face the problem of survival. (Waltz, 1979). In order to overcome this problem, the states experiencing the survival problem aim to get rid of the security threats arising from the anarchic system on their own through using some methods such as increasing their power and military capacities in the system (Ayдын, 2004). This is where the security dilemma emerges. According to Waltz, the security dilemma is a vicious circle that arises from the fact that one state increases its military capacity because it is unsure of the other state’s intentions. In other words, increasing the military capacity of a state in the name of security would be a source of distrust for another state and this would continue mutually (Waltz, 1979).

In general, the reason for states experiencing a security dilemma is the uncertainty arising from state behavior. Butterfield summarises the uncertainty in the security dilemma as follows; A state may not want to harm another state, but uncertainty arises because it cannot fully know the intentions of the other state. This uncertainty raises security concerns. (Butterfield, 1951). Collins’s illustration supports this; When State A increases its military capacity, State B may not understand A’s intentions. Even if State A did not intend to pose any threat to State B, State B cannot rely on it and acts in the worst case scenario that A will attack it. In this case, because of the anarchic structure, state B is obliged to take care of itself to stop state A (Collins, 1997).

Considering all of this, we can say that neorealism almost ignores the policies of power of revisionist states. At the same time, Waltz’s theory ignored the purpose of the revisionist states and to what extent they would exert power. The shortcomings in Waltz’s structuralist theory in the context of revisionist states tried to be overcome by other structuralist realists after the 1980s (Açıkmeşe, 2008).

### 1.1. Defensive Realism

Defensive realists have sought to cover the deficiencies of neorealism, especially with the idea that revisionist states may pose a security threat. In this case, in addition to the uncertainties brought about by the concept of security dilemmas originating from an anarchic structure of system of neorealists the concept of attack-defence balance was adopted. In defining the international system, the concept of the balance of attack and defence tries to answer the questions as to why the states put forward the military and diplomatic policies followed and how and in what way a security dilemma arises, whether the relations will turn into conflict or cooperation. In this respect, in defensive realism, there is no possibility of not experiencing the security dilemma, but there is a possibility of transformation into cooperation (Açıkmeşe, 2008).

In the balance of attack-defence, if the attack is more advantageous, that state can pursue aggressive policies and even invade the other state in order to gain superiority over it. In other words, if a state's self-defence is at a disadvantage compared to the occupation of another state, that state can attack the other state. In this context, even any status quo state can become a revisionist state. In the offensive-defence balance, if defence is more advantageous, states can reduce the likelihood of an attack by trying to increase their military capacity, failing to avail cost, and maintaining their status quo. Thus, the ambiguity of the anarchic structure disappears and wars do not emerge. At least, the defending state tries to be prepared for the attacks that may come to it, in this case it does not pose a threat to the security of the opposing state and the chance of cooperation increases (Jervis, 1978).

According to Jervis, technology is the main determinant of the attack-defence balance. Geography, alliances, doctrines are generally underestimated and are excluded from analysis. In this context, especially the development of military technology is very important for providing security for states (Jervis, 1978: 183). It makes more sense to concentrate on technology only in three respects, ignoring other imaginable variables; firstly, attack is the main determinant technology in the defence balance and has references in the work done in this understanding. Secondly, defining another variable with the concept makes the situation more complicated, making it difficult to calculate the balance of attack defence, and finally the third, is the fact that technological developments have changed the international system. While such factors such as various beliefs, a sense of nationality, and internal policy balances vary from state to state, technology affects the entire system (Lieber, 2000). In short, on the attack-defence balance, if the pointer is on the attack side, the security dilemma will increase, otherwise the security dilemma will decrease and the possibility of cooperation will emerge.

Based on technology, Jervis analysed the attack-defence balance over the 1973 Arab-Israeli War as follows (Jervis, 1978);

*“The initial analyses of the 1973 Arab Israeli war indicated that new anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons have restored the primacy of the defence. These weapons are cheap, easy to use, and can destroy a high proportion of the attacking vehicles and planes that are sighted. It then would make sense for a status-quo power to buy lots of \$20,000 missiles rather than buy a few half-million dollar tanks and multi-million dollar fighter-bombers. Defence would be possible even against a large and well-equipped force; states that care primarily about self-protection would not need to engage in arms races.”*

In the attack-defence balance, defence is more advantageous in many cases, even if war and occupation arose when the pointer showed the attack. If a state acts aggressively or in a revisionist manner, it cannot avoid a balance of power against itself. It is seen that a state trying to be a hegemon in history has had attempts to be balanced by other states and there has been a strong resistance in case of attack. In this case, the best way would be to monitor minimal security in a moderate way (Walt, 2002).

### **1.2. Offensive / Attack Realism**

Attack realism emerged as the result and necessity of articulating the revisionist states mentioned in defensive realism but that had been previously ignored. The pioneer of attack realism, Mearsheimer summarised his theory with five assumptions (Mearsheimer, 2001);

- The international system is anarchic, but it does not mean that it is chaotic or irregular. The source of the anarchy stems from a lack of authority over the rulers.
- The great powers naturally possess aggressive military skills, which allow them to destroy each other in a barbaric way. This makes each state potentially dangerous to another state.
- A state can never be sure of its intention in relation to another state. In other words, a state cannot be sure that the other state will not carry out its first attack, but that does not mean that these states have absolutely hostile intentions.
- For states, survival is the main goal. In particular, it is important to maintain and ensure territorial integrity and autonomy in domestic politics. States may have other aims, but their main purpose is to be safe.

- States are rational actors. They are aware of the international environment and produce strategies accordingly. They think about what other states think and form vital strategies for how their ideas are perceived from the other side.

In attack realism, states' desire to gain power ends only when they become a hegemon. Here, in the race to become a global and regional hegemon, a state only continues its desire to gain power either by preventing a state from becoming a regional / global hegemon or until it becomes a hegemon. In the system, only states that have succeeded to become regional hegemons can behave as status quo, otherwise no status quo is found (Mearsheimer, 2001).

**Figure 1.** Differences in the Realist Theory of Power Struggle (Mearsheimer, 2001).

BASIC REALIST THEORIES			
	Human Nature Realism Classical Realism	Defensive Realism	Attack Realism
<b>What causes the power race of states?</b>	States' desire to gain power.	Structure of System (Anarchic Structure)	Structure of System (Anarchic Structure)
<b>How much power does the state need?</b>	As much as possible Their main goal is to increase power until they become hegemon.	No more than they have. Their main goal is to maintain the balance of power.	As much as possible Their main goal is to increase power until they become a hegemon.

The attack realism, when it is accepted as a critique of Waltz's theory (including the critique of defensive realism), there is in fact a return to classical realism with only one difference. In classical realism, the revisionist behaviours of states have the essence of human nature, while in attack realism there is an anarchic structure to the system. In this case, classical realists are volitional, structuralist attack realists. (Waltz, 2002).

## 2. Russia's Policy Towards the Syrian Crisis

### 2.1. Historical Background

Russia's relations with Syria contain historical data from the Soviet Union. Diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Syria were established in 1944. A non-aggression pact was signed between the two states in 1950 and a gun agreement was signed in 1954 (Yılmaz, 2016). During this period the main dynamics of the policies of the Soviet Union in Syria were as follows (Howard, 1974):

- As Israel was allied with the US, Syria had to be allied with the Soviet Union. In this case, if Israel had been allied with the Soviet Union, it would have been allied with the US in Syria.

- The fact that the Syrian Communist Party was one of the most active parties in the Middle East made it close to the Soviet Union.
- Given Syria’s geopolitical position (geostrategic); in terms of its proximity to Turkey and Iraq it was considered an important element. This position of Syria was considered to be extremely important in order to prevent the political containment policy applied by the US to the Soviet Union.

During the Soviet Union, the Russians tried to gain as many allies in the Middle East as possible. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 their policies towards the Middle East were weakened as they were engaged in various economic problems, internal conflicts and local separatist movements. During this period, the US consolidated its position in the region (Mankoff, 2009).

In the new era, which started with Putin’s election as president in the early 2000s, Russia began to play a more active role in the Middle East again. With the help of rapidly increasing trade relations, high level political contacts with the countries of the region, military and diplomatic support provided to countries such as Iran and Syria, and observer membership in the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, Russia has become an important player in Middle Eastern geopolitics again. The Arab uprisings that erupted in such a period, in which the influence of the region increased, caught Russia unprepared like many other countries. In this context, Russia followed with concern the changes in power as a result of popular demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt in the first months of 2011 (Erşen, 2016).

## **2.2. Russia’s Interventions in the Syrian Crisis**

We can say that Russia’s bilateral relations with Syria were riveted especially during the Soviet Union period, and it was interrupted after the Cold War period, and in the mid-2000s, bilateral relations with the Putin administration strengthened again. In this period, when the Arab uprisings created a domino effect in the region, the last conflict area was Syria. The causes of the Syrian crisis that broke out in March 2011 can be listed as follows; economic disturbances, sectarian conflicts, authoritarianism of governance, influence of global and regional powers.

In the early years of the Syrian crisis, Russia supported the Assad regime, and at the same time pursued a “wait-and-see” policy stating that the crisis was an internal conflict and that any country should avoid intervention (Freire and Heller, 2018). The overthrow of Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian regime since the summer of 2011 has become almost the sole goal of Syrian policy for all states opposing the regime. Despite the tens of thousands of opposition militants trained to overthrow Assad and the billions of dollars spent on them, attempts to

change the regime have failed. In this context, since March 2011, almost every policy that looks like a military and political opposition to Syria has not yielded the expected results in Syria. Undoubtedly, behind this failure Russia's full and solid support for the Damascus administration has played an important role (Isyar, 2013).

On September 30, 2015, Russia realised that the activities of radical terrorist elements and anti-regime groups in Syria were increasing and that Assad could not stand up against it (Valenta and Valenta, 2016). Although this intervention was greeted as a surprise internationally (Freire and Heller, 2018), Russia's engagement in Syria was the third military intervention following the invasion of Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014) (Mason, 2018). The main dynamics of Russia's intervention in the Syrian crisis can be listed as follows;

- Experiences in the Libyan crisis.
- Balancing the US (both in the region) and establishing "great power" status.
- To prevent radical terrorist groups from spreading to their territory.
- Providing activity in the Mediterranean Sea within Tartus Port.

#### **A. Libyan Crisis: From Error to Experience**

The Arab uprisings started in Libya in February 2011 have been one of the main reasons why Russia has made its policies and military intervention towards Syria more effective. Following the increase in armed conflicts in Libya, the Resolution No. 1973, which authorised "the creation of prohibited flight zones for the protection of civilians" brought up by the UNSC in March 2011, was approved as a result of abstaining votes under the Medvedev administration in Russia and the PRC. Following the decision, an international coalition, led by France, the United States and the United Kingdom, launched a military operation called humanitarian aid. Then the Gaddafi administration was overthrown and a new administration was established. The impact of these developments on the position of Russia in the region can be listed as follows;

- Historically, the relations between Russia and Libya, which date back to the Soviet Union, have been damaged.
- The fact that the people of the region perceived Russia as a cooperating state with the West damaged the perception of the alternative system actor. This situation has the capacity to affect the relations in every plane that is the countries of the region in the future.
- Russia has suffered a political defeat.

Russia’s policy of acting together with the international community in the Libyan crisis has brought Russia great losses. In this context, the negative data output of the liberal and moderate policies in the real world has led Russia to pursue more realist policies, which do not hesitate in military interventions in order to protect its national interests. Therefore, it is possible to say that one of the fundamental dynamics of Russia’s policies in the Syrian crisis is the mistake made in the Libyan crisis. In this respect, Russia’s determination to prevent Syria from becoming “another Libya” is quite clear (Katz, 2013).

Considering the fact that Russia had been deceived in the matter of Libya, the UN Security Council said that they vetoed the sanction decisions they had prepared on 4 October 2011, 4 February 2012, 19 July 2012, 29 May 2013, 28 August 2013 and 22 May 2014. Thus, they tried to preserve the existence of the Assad administration in Syria. (Yılmaz, 2016).

### **B. The U.S. Balance: Great Power Politics**

Russia’s approach to global power policy is more generally stated in the National Security Strategy Document published in 2015 as follows (RFNSS, 2015: 7):

“A solid foundation has now been established to further increase the economic, political, military and spiritual potential of the Russian Federation and to strengthen its role in shaping a multi-centre world.”

From this point of view, we can say that Russia is struggling with power in the context of national interests and tends to increase power to achieve this. In addition, with an emphasis on the multi-polar international system, it can be said that the unilateral policies of the United States are not accepted and strategies for balancing the USA are being formed.

The Middle East has different meanings for the two countries. In its simplest form, the US sees the region as an area to preserve its current status quo, while Russia sees it as an area to compete with balance the US. The Syrian crisis is at the centre of these narratives. In addition, Russia’s direct military intervention in the Syrian crisis is indicative of its intention to become a decisive force not only in the Middle East, but also in global politics. Russia’s behaviour is no surprise in an anarchic international system (Samoylov, 2018).

In the Syrian crisis, Russia sees every failure of the US as a gain. In this context, in order to undermine the policies and strategies established by the USA on the current situation, it tries to establish more activities in the region by focusing on various partnerships (Yılmaz, 2016). We can define Russia’s policies in the region as a strategy to prevent the US from spreading in the region without prejudice to all official cooperation mechanisms with the US.

This prevention strategy offers Russia the opportunity to balance the US and remain a system player in the region. In this context, Russia's appeasement tactic on issues related to Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah, which challenges the American-centred Middle East system, is a case that supports Russia's prevention strategy that includes the desire to become a major actor in the Middle East (Samoylov, 2018).

From all Middle Eastern countries, including the Arab monarchies, Russia has a goal of economic interest. To achieve this goal, Russia has to maintain the image and status of a major actor in the region. For Russia, being a major actor brings partnerships with its allies in the region. This situation obliges Moscow to actively participate in the mechanisms for resolving regional conflicts. In other words, although Russia opposes the US-based status quo in the Middle East, it also wants to have some areas of action to prevent the US over-empowerment in the region (Shumilin, 2009). In this context, Russia sees Syria as a field of operations. The biggest achievement of Russia in Syria is the ability to create its own perception as a problem solver in the international system.

### **C. Radical Terrorist Groups**

Russia sees the international system as anarchic / unstable. In all security documents published after 2000 (Military Doctrine, National Security Strategy Document) one of the most important elements that make the international system anarchic and unstable is international terrorism. In this context, the fight against international terrorism is important to ensure the national security of Russia.

Apart from global and regional interests, another factor affecting Russia's Syrian policy is that Moscow is skeptical about the social dimensions of the radical changes in the Arab geography. According to Russia, the Arab uprisings did not bring more democracy to the Middle East as some countries claim; on the contrary, radical terrorist groups gained power thanks to the developments in the region (Erşen, 2016).

This situation can be considered as a three-dimensional security issue for Russia; firstly, ISIS, which gained strength in Syria, is threatening the interests of Russia by groups such as al-Qaeda and al-Nusra. As Russia supports the Assad regime, these groups also see Russia as their enemy. In this context, "Port of Tartus" and threats to other economic issues are pushing Russia to take precautions against these groups. At the same time, considering the situation of Syria after the crisis, the formation of a stakeholder mechanism with these groups at any point of the new administration; might lead to a lack of solid relations with Syria. Therefore, Russia might struggle much in the future.

The second dimension is the danger of radical terrorist groups spreading to the Caucasus and Central Asia region. Russia thinks that in the Caucasus, especially, the radical groups relations with the groups that were in conflict in the past will pose a great threat. As a matter of fact, the organisation called “Caucasus Emirate”, which is active in the North Caucasus region of Russia, took the name of the “Caucasus Province” in 2015 by swearing allegiance to ISIS (Erşen, 2016). The spread of these groups in the Central Asian region, especially in Muslim-Turkish states, which Russia has described as being a close environment in the past, may create instability in the regional context. In addition, as a result of the spread of radical terrorist groups in the region, Russian-led, Eurasian Economic Union, Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation may be damaged.

The third dimension is the danger of radical groups spreading to Russia’s internal hinterland. The greatest danger at this point is the risk of the Muslim population of Russia’s inner regions participating in the actions of any radical terrorist group. This could be a direct matter of survival for Russia. In the last period moderate and unifying policies especially on the Muslim population of Russia, can be interpreted as a precaution against these threats.

#### **D. Port of Tartus**

One of Russia’s most important national interests in Syria is the protection of Tartus Port. Since 1971, the port has been used as a supply and maintenance base by the Soviet Union. This port is the only naval base used outside former Soviet geography. The port has been continuously expanded and transformed into a large military base by Russia, especially since 2010 (Yılmaz, 2016).

The most important feature of Tartus Port is that it is the key to Russia’s presence in the Mediterranean. In the “Maritime Doctrine” published by Russia in 2015, the importance of the Mediterranean Sea is stated as follows (RFMD, 2015):

- pursuing a determined policy to transform the region into a zone of military-political stability and goodwill
- To ensure the permanent (sufficiently) marine presence of the Russian Federation in the region
- Expanding cruise access from the ports of the Crimean and Krasnodar region to the Mediterranean basin countries.

In this context, considering the importance given by Russia to the Mediterranean, the protection of the Assad administration can be seen as equivalent to the protection of a port of

nearly fifty years. The strategic importance of Port of Tartus can be listed as follows (Nazır, 2017):

- The Black Sea Fleet's provides access to the world's oceans
- Possibility to strengthen the Mediterranean fleet with the Northern Fleet
- Ensuring military presence in the Middle East and protecting most of the Syrian coast
- Ensuring the safety of marine traffic in the Horn of Africa
- The port of Tartus is 6-7 days away from the strait of Gibraltar. (The point of departure to the Atlantic Ocean and the operational exiting region of Russia's Baltic and Northern fleets)
- Establishing the infrastructure for foreign intelligence and electronic intelligence activities.

### **3. Turkey's Policy Towards the Syrian Crisis**

#### **3.1. Historical Background**

On the subject of Turkey- Syria relations; the water problem has often been tense under certain issues such as the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the Hatay issue. Nevertheless, to discuss cooperation in the fight against terrorism, the delegations of Turkey and Syria met 19-20 October 1998 in Adana. With the Adana Agreement signed between the parties, an important psychological barrier was overcome and a new period started with Ahmet Necdet Sezer's visit to Hafez Esed's funeral in June 2000 (Yeşilyurt, 2013).

Thanks to former Foreign Minister Ismail Cem's efforts before 2002, the acceptance of Justice and Development Party's (AK Party) expansion into neighbouring regions policy by the new government in Syria, and relations until 2011, cooperation has developed in a positive direction. As a result of the developing relations, the two countries signed a free trade agreement in 2004, the trade between the two countries reached 250 million dollars in 2010 and bilateral relations were started to be defined as a strategic partnership. Apart from economic cooperation, cooperation in the field of energy (establishment of a joint oil exploration company) in 2010 and a joint military exercise in 2009 increased the field of security. Along with the developing economic, energy and security alliances, solutions and cooperation regarding the PKK, water problems and the status of Hatay, which have become historically important problems between the two countries, have been approached. As a result of all these developments, "High Level Strategic Cooperation Council" was established in 2009 (Çağlar).

In March 2011, bilateral relations deteriorated with the crisis that broke out in Syria because the views of the two states on the Syrian crisis were different. Therefore, this situation can be expressed as an interstate dispute about the definition, reasons, content and solution of the developments in Syria (Çağlar, 2012).

### **3.2. Turkey’s Interventions in the Syrian Crisis**

Turkey’s policy towards Syria adopted during the period between 2002-2011 was to have “zero problems with neighbours” and “to be the core country (in the region)” was created within the framework of such policies. In this context, the Assad administration was asked to carry out various democratic reforms. The positive relations that continued until the Syrian Civil War changed during the crisis and caused the parties to adopt a stern attitude. Turkey’s Syrian policy in subsequent periods was founded on the collapse of the Assad regime and the resolution of the crisis through diplomatic means. In this context, Turkey has supported the group against Assad’s regime. With the US involvement in the crisis, solutions were sought through international organisations such as the United Nations. Russia’s involvement in the crisis and support for the Assad regime changed many balances in Syria. In this respect, Turkey and Russia were faced with the crisis in Syria. At the same time, ISIS’s terrorist attacks in Turkey and the US’s support of the PYD-YPG terrorist organisation, Turkey was caused to suffer a serious national security issue (Kiraz, 2018). All in the wake of these developments, Turkey’s military intervention in Syria has become inevitable.

The fundamental dynamics of Turkey’s military intervention in Syria are closely associated with threat perception for the country’s security. These dynamics can be listed as follows:

- Preventing threats from Syria
- Fight against radical terrorist groups
- To eliminate the PKK terrorist organisation in Syria (PYD-YPG).

#### **A. Threats From Syria**

Turkey, following the outbreak of the crisis in Syria, produced various policies at a diplomatic level and, to keep things from getting bigger, avoided harsh discourses. At the same time, the regime in Syria continued its connections with opposition groups. The Assad administration, against these policies, has tried to ensure the cessation of contacts with opposition groups by performing actions that threaten the security of Turkey.

An RF-4E fighter aircraft belonging to the Turkish Air Force departing from Malatya Erhaç 7<sup>th</sup> Main Jet Base Command at 10.30 am on 22 June 2012, South of the district of Samandağ in Hatay, was shot down on the grounds that the Mediterranean was in violation airspace 8 miles off Syrian territorial waters (Sabah, 2012).

After this development Turkey has followed policies against Syria, which have been evaluated by the national and regional security dimensions. The first reason for the change in Turkey's policy towards Syria, is the failure of the Assad regime to fulfil democratic reforms. A second reason is that Assad did not withdraw from the use of weapons by continuing with hard interventions against the people. The third reason is that Russia took an attitude in favour of Syria after the Turkish warplane was shot down. Together with the security vulnerability occurring in the south of Turkey and Russia's support of Assad, Turkey has both national and regional level security threats. Therefore, Turkey has revealed a security approach that prioritises the southern border (Erdağ, 2018).

The incident of a Turkish fighter plane being shot down, was interpreted as a result of the support given to opposition groups. Ankara, on the other hand, did not increase the tension by acting calmly against this incident.

On 3 October 2012, mortar shells fired in the clash in the Tel Abyad district of Raqqa, fell into the Akçakale district of Şanlıurfa, 200 meters from the border. Five civilians lost their lives. After the incident, the Turkish Armed Forces took action and responded immediately. Turkey was perceived as a threat to the national security of this event (Aljazeera Turk, 2012).

On May 11th 2013 by means of two bomb explosions in the Reyhanlı district of Hatay, terrorist attacks were carried out. The statement reported that 53 people, including 5 children, were killed and 155 injured. The Assad regime denied these allegations, although it was quite strongly evident that the attack was made by sources linked to the Assad administration. The regime has continued to use a policy of denial as in previous events (BBC News, 2013).

After all these developments Turkey has continued to pursue liberal policies avoiding military intervention. In this context, it was assumed that the security of the country could be ensured through NATO and the UN. However, ISIS and the Syrian branch of the PKK PYD-YPG have increased security threats.

## **B. Radical Terrorist Groups**

In 2013, ISIS gained strength in Syria and Turkey has struggled with organising different methods to deal with the situation. A new dynamic has emerged in the region when Abu Bakr Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, came to Syria from Iraq and started asking for allegiance

from Syrian’s opposition groups, especially Salafist-jihadi names. Baghdadi first forced to swear allegiance to their own organisation by suppressing opposition groups. In this regard, Baghdadi’s biggest goal has been that Turkey support opposition groups. From the moment of access to operational capability in Syria, he organised the assassinations of leaders of opposition groups, ISIS have seized the territory they control and in the north have become the dominant power in Syria. (Ulutas, 2016).

In the first period, in Syria against ISIS targets, Turkey’s national interest policies were created in accordance with the spirit of the time. During this stage, which might be called as “struggle through proxies”, Turkey has given support to opposition groups clashing with ISIS, but did not choose the way a direct conflict with ISIS. In the second stage, ISIS has continued to increase its threat in Turkey. In this context, Turkey, within “the rules of engagement” would begin a large-scale fight against ISIS he said. Therewithal, operations within the “rules of engagement” were extended to include PYD / YPG elements. Turkey with artillery and howitzer shot, has hit the boundary line controlled by ISIS. In this context, Turkey has contributed to the fight against ISIS by using FSA groups within the framework of the struggle through proxies strategy. Thus, between Turkey and ISIS, the transition to the third stage without a high level of military conflict began. ISIS, while maintaining their offensive against opposition groups on the one hand, began to concentrate acts of terrorism in Turkey on the other hand. In this context, Turkey has pursued a strategy within security and political dynamics. (Ulutaş and Duran, 2016).

ISIS first attacked security teams conducting road controls in the Ulukışla district of Niğde on March 20, 2014. Three ISIS terrorists, a German citizen Benyamin Xu, a Swiss citizen Çendrim Ramadani and a Macedonian citizen Muhammad Zakiri opened fire with long-barrelled weapons on the Turkish Gendarmerie. (CNN Türk, 2014). On June 10, 2014, ISIS was declared as a terrorist organisation by Turkey after taking control of the whole of ISIS Mosul. After this event, on June 11, ISIS attacked Turkey’s consulate in Mosul and took hostage 49 consular officers.

ISIS increased its activities in 2016; such as, in Sultanahmet Square on 12 January, on İstiklal Street on 9 March, Gaziantep Police Station on 1 May, Atatürk Airport on 28 June, Henna Night on 20 August and New Year’s Day in İstanbul to Reina massacre. By the ISIS terror organisation, 14 major terrorist attacks in Turkey were carried out (10 live bombs, 1 bomb attack, 3 armed attacks). A total of 304 people, including 10 police officers and 1 soldier, were killed and 1,338 people were injured (62 police officers and 7 soldiers) (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior, 2017).

Turkey has made changes in policies towards Syria because of the terrorist attacks of the ISIS terrorist organisation. The first period of crisis, on behalf of to ensure Turkey's national security; the policies such as "acting on a liberal level with the international community and seeking solutions with multinational organisations" have failed. Therefore, Turkey moved to a more realistic line to ensure national security, in the context of the neorealist "attack-defence balance" it began military intervention by selecting the direction of attack.

### **I. Operation Euphrates Shield**

Operation Euphrates Shield has been done to eliminate the threat to national security of Turkey. These security threats can be listed as follows (Yeşiltaş et al., 2017):

- The arrangement "live bomb attacks" by ISIS in Turkey's cities.
- Controlling of a border line of approximately 100 kilometres in the Azez-Jarablus region in northern Syria. In this boundary line, ISIS through domination founded might target provincial and military points in Turkey's borderline, especially in Kilis, which has seen as a possible state by ISIS.

As a result, with the maturation of condition in the both Syria and Turkey and in regional conjuncture, on August 24, 2016, Turkey's struggle with ISIS entered into a direct intervention phase and the Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) began. In this context, it is needed to specify that Turkey, on the basis of Article 51 of the Treaty of the United Nations, to fight against ISIS, has launched a legitimate operation (Ulutaş and Duran, 2016).

Turkey's "Operation Euphrates Shield" followed by a gradual strategy in fighting simultaneously with the dominant three security issue at stake is planned as follows briefly (Yeşiltaş et al., 2017):

- Eliminating the armed force of the PKK by military means and other means.
- Military intervention to eliminate the ISIS threat.
- Restoring the strategic flexibility by freeing the state from "Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation" (FETO) elements.

First of all, the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which cleaned the Jarablus, Çobanbey and Azez borderlines from terrorists, moved to the south and in the last months of 2016 seized the town of Dabık, which has ideologically great importance for the ISIS terrorist organisation. The next target was al-Bab. As a result of intense clashes, the city was completely cleared of terrorist elements on 30 March 2017. In this direction,

the operation lasted 216 days; Al-Bab has been possessed, ISIS has been expelled to 40 kilometres away and the PKK-PYD terror corridor is divided. The operation was concluded in the provision of a safe zone at a depth of 40 kilometres and a length of 90 kilometres (Sensoy and Duman, 2017).

### **C. The Syrian Branch of the Pkk: Pyd-Ypg**

In 2016, one of the main factors determining Turkey’s Syria policy was still PYD-YPG’s activity in the region. The PKK’s Syrian branch the PYD-YPG, took advantage of the crisis in Syria and continued to portray itself as a legitimate actor against ISIS. In the Iraq-Syria borderline, which is very important from a geopolitical perspective the organisation aimed at controlling the linking of Rabia-Sinjar expanding and the activities of in this area, has increased the threats posed to Turkey. PYD-YPG, which was able to establish dominance in such large areas for the first time since its establishment on October 17, 2003, continued its military engagement with the Assad regime, US and Russia in order to increase the regions it controls in northern Syria (Acun, 2016).

Turkey has been fighting against the PKK terrorist organization for nearly 50 years. In this context, PKK’s Syrian branch the PYD-YPG’s of structuring in Syria, constitutes a major national security threat to Turkey. At the same time, the establishment of a hostile Kurdish state beyond Turkey’s southern border could lead to the emergence of another security threat in the long term. Turkey’s southern border (Syria) has a direct connection with the Arab world. In this border “Kurdish” elements deployed in it can cause rupture between Turkey and Arab lands.

Another of the turning points in Turkey’s Syria policy, is the US approach to PYD-YPG. The terrorist organisation PYD-YPG perception of the US as an ally against ISIS and the “militarisation” of PYD-YPG, caused bilateral relations to deteriorate. In this case, it has been inevitable for rapprochement between Turkey and Russia. In this context, in order to ensure national security, Turkey cooperated with Russia to balance the US and strengthen its hand in military intervention.

## **II. Operation Olive Branch**

Because of the PYD-YPG’s increasing efficiency and United States’s careless attitude towards Turkey’s security concerns, Turkey has been brought back to the point of military intervention. Turkish Armed Forces and National Army elements on January 21 2018 at 10:30 to Afrin launched a seven-point land invasion from the border with Turkey (Özçelik and Acun,

2018). In this context, the causes of “Operation Olive Branch” can be listed as follows (CNN Türk, 2018):

- Preventing US support for terrorism
- To ensure the continuity of security established by Operation Euphrates Shield
- Preventing PKK from seeking to reach the Eastern Mediterranean
- To ensure that an area of 10,000 square kilometres is under the control of FSA units.
- To end the possibility of cutting the bond between Turkey and Arab countries geographically.
- To end the PKK-PYD’s from Amanos Mountains attempts to infiltrate Turkey
- To establish the Syria-Turkey border security
- Preventing terrorist structures from opening to the Mediterranean Sea and from this region to the world
- To establish the domination of Tel Rıfat and its vicinity and to ensure that the people return to their homes.

The operational dimensions of the Olive Branch Operation are divided into three phases; The first is the removal of terrorist groups from Afrin centre, the second is the removal of terrorist elements from the urban countryside, and the third is the reconstruction and public order stability of Afrin. In addition, “Operation Olive Branch” has been combined with other operations areas in Syria and operational preparations for possible terror targets have been planned. Within the framework of the operation, a great success was achieved in terms of the preparation and execution of the political and military grounds, and the city centre and rural areas of Afrin were cleared of PKK-YPG elements within 58 days. In this regard, it is among the most successful military operations in the history of Turkey’s cross-border operations (Ozcelik and Acer’s 2018).

#### **4. Turkish-Russian Coalition of Interest in Syria**

Turkey and Russia (Soviet Union) relations during the Cold War were moderate in certain proportions. During the Cold War, for reasons such as Turkey taking sides with the Western bloc against the threat of communism, becoming a member of NATO and Soviet Union’s territorial claims against Turkey, bilateral relations have remained at a low level. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, bilateral relations remained in a

competitive dimension and improvements were observed in some areas towards the end of the 1990s. In the early 2000s change in power in both countries, and the abandonment of the negative legacies of the Cold War had a positive impact on the development of bilateral relations. During this period, various partnerships were established in areas such as politics, economics and energy.

The fact that the two countries have different perspectives on the situation brought about by the Syrian crisis, which has caused a deterioration of the strategic relations established in the early 2000s. In particular, as a result of the shooting down of a Russian Air Force Su-24M by Turkish Air Force F-16 jets, on November 24th 2015, mutual relations have become almost completely broken. Thus, the plane crisis experienced in Turkey-Russia relations, revealed the necessity of revising the relationship qualitatively (Tanrısever, 2016).

Following the fighter jet crisis with Turkey, Russia continued to increase its military presence in Syria and closed Syrian airspace to Turkish jets using its S-400 air defence missile system deployed at the Khmeymim base in Latakia. Moscow also began to improve its political and military relations with the Syrian Kurds –most notably the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing the People’s Protection Units (YPG), which are both viewed by Ankara as the extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). It also tried hard to exclude Turkey from the Syrian peace process and launched extensive anti-Turkish propaganda operations claiming that Ankara had been supporting ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria (Erşen, 2017).

At the end of June 2016, Turkey took steps to resolve the existing problems with Russia and the reciprocal ice has melted. In this context, successive steps have been taken in the fields of tourism, trade, energy and security. During the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the giving of support by Russia to the Turkish government has contributed significantly to the improvement of relations. On August 9 2016 the President of the Republic of Turkey R.T. Erdogan made his first overseas trip to Russia following the coup attempt (Kocak, 2017). In this context, the softening of bilateral relations was reflected in the policies regarding the Syrian crisis.

The fact that became an important point in the crisis, was the influence of ineffective US policies in the Syrian crisis, and through strengthening, military intervention was a successful result of Russia’s strategy of balancing the USA. In this context, Turkey’s struggle against terrorist organisations such as, ISIS, PYD-YPG fails to receive the support that is expected from the US and thus Turkey sought rapprochement with Russia. In this regard, relations with Russia were seen as a key factor in the balance strategy against the United States.

On this subject, it can be said that Russia's opening of "Syria's airspace" to Turkey has been a turning point in bilateral relations behalf. Thus, Turkey has realised Operation Euphrates Shield more comfortably. Russia's support for Turkey; the historically to pro-Western and NATO member Turkey, can be interpreted as an attempt to attract it into their own ranks. In this context, Russia has become the main actor in Syria and has shown to the international system that any intervention towards Syria can be carried out as a result of its own support. Turkey has achieved success in the operation in a short time and showed its power to the international system. At the same time, Turkey was able to establish an alternative balance against the US and the West in the context of national interests. In this respect, it can be said that "the through alliances balancing policy" proposed by the neorealist theory is valid in both countries.

The military relations established with Operation Euphrates Shield became the pioneer of political relations. For the solution of the Syrian crisis; "Astana Process" began, under the leadership of Russia, Turkey and Iran. On December 20 2016, Iran, Russia and Turkey published the "Moscow Declaration" after the adhesion of the foreign ministers meeting in Moscow (Çelikpala, 2019). The full text of theirs, which includes the measures agreed to restart the political process to end the Syrian crisis is as follows (Sputnik News, 2016):

- Iran, Russia and Turkey reiterate their full respect for sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, non-sectarian, democratic and secular state.
- Iran, Russia and Turkey are convinced that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. They recognise the essential role of the United Nations in the efforts to resolve this crisis in accordance with the UNSC resolution 2254. The Ministers also take note of the decisions of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). They urge all members of the international community to cooperate in good faith in order to remove obstacles on the way to implementing the agreements contained in these documents.
- Iran, Russia and Turkey welcome joint efforts in Eastern Aleppo allowing for the voluntary evacuation of civilians and the organised departure of armed opposition. The Ministers also welcome partial evacuation of civilians from Fuaa, Kafraia, Zabadani and Madaya. They commit to ensure the completion of the process without interruption in a safe and secure manner. The Ministers express their gratitude to the representatives of the ICRC and the WHO for their assistance in conduction of the evacuation.

- The Ministers agree on the importance of expanding the ceasefire, unhindered humanitarian assistance and the free movement of civilians throughout the country.
- Iran, Russia and Turkey express their readiness to facilitate and become the guarantors of the prospective agreement being negotiated between the Syrian Government and the opposition. They invited all other countries with influence on the situation on the ground to do the same.
- They strongly believe that this Agreement will be instrumental in creating the necessary momentum for the resumption of the political process in Syria in accordance with the UNSC resolution 2254.
- The Ministers take note of the kind offer of the President of Kazakhstan to host relevant meetings in Astana.
- Iran, Russia and Turkey reiterate their determination to fight jointly against ISIL/DAESH and Al-Nusra and to separate them from armed opposition groups.

Following the first meeting in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, on January 23-24, 2017, in addition to the regular Astana meetings, the three guarantor countries of Astana have met five times so far at the level of Head of State (<http://www.mfa.gov.tr>). (Sochi, 22 November 2017; Ankara, 4 April 2018; Tehran, 7 September 2018; Sochi, 14 February 2019; Ankara, 16 September 2019), and also five times at the level of Foreign Ministers (Astana, 16 March 2018; Moscow, 28 April 2018; New York, September 26, 2018; Geneva, December 18, 2018; New York, September 25, 2019). Russia and Turkey, which had almost come to the brink of war about a year ago, placed the Syrian issue on the agenda of their relations, this time under a completely different discourse and content. That is a key point in terms of showing the fluctuations in relations. During the process, the parties addressed a myriad of matters such as facilitating talks between the Syrian government and the armed opposition, ensuring the permanence of the ceasefire declared and establishing monitoring mechanisms, identifying and drawing the borders of de-escalation zones and leaving them to the control of guarantors, establishing coordination between them, identifying the elements that would contribute to the drafting of a new constitution to shape Syria's future, and developing trust-building measures between the parties (Çelikpala, 2019).

The two countries have raised their image with the “Astana Process” in the international system as problem-solving actors on the diplomatic ground. In this context, bilateral relations can be interpreted as a coalition created by requirements rather than necessity.

## Conclusion

We could say that the relationship between Turkey and Russia have seen ups and downs over the last three decades, that it was tense at the outbreak of the Syria crisis in particular and that the relations were on the verge of breaking off due to the shooting down of the Russian jet. The efforts of Turkey towards making the conditions normal by making concessions were successful and a moderation in mutual affairs was experienced. It is noticed that the desires to affect the regional balances and even to determine global balances clearly force these two countries that have sufficient experience in terms of not trusting each other to build an alliance which is not obligatory and necessary but fragile and sensitive. The main axis determining the course of the affairs and the speed of the alliance is the cooperation of these countries with the Europe-Atlantic World throughout history and the relations centred upon competition.

In terms of Russia's political approach towards the Syrian crisis, it is possible to see the experiences of the mistakes which Russia made in the Libyan crisis. In this respect, it is significant for Russia to perform a military intervention in terms of its national benefits in order to decrease the efficiency of the USA and to balance the Syria crisis in particular. International terrorism, which the unstable conditions caused by the anarchic structure of the international system, is evaluated as one of the basic threats of the national security. For that reason, Russia, eager for becoming an actor in terms of a global and regional scale, has formed politics towards this aim by contemplating that the area in which the USA is seen as unsuccessful as an opportunity for them. However, it has formed partnerships at certain rates with the regional power Turkey (along with Iran, of course) because it does not have the capacity to balance the USA by itself.

The basic motivations of Turkey for the politics towards the Syrian crisis have been shaped around the threats to national security. In the first years of the crisis, a liberal policy was followed; however, too many casualties due to the activities of ISIS within the country and in Turkey as well, caused Russia to change its policies towards the Syrian crisis. At the same time, the strengthening of the terrorist organization PYD-YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK, has been perceived by Turkey as a survival problem. In this context, the first period of crisis, Turkey's priority was to ensure national security; "on a liberal level, search for solutions to multinational organisations with the international community" such its policies have failed. For that reason, Turkey moved to a more realist line in order to build its national security and chose the offensive side in the balance of the "offence-defence" balance of the neorealism, and then initiated a military intervention. Along with Russia's opening of Syrian air-space, Turkey

both showed its power and proved that it could form an alternative balance for the USA and the West for their national interests through the success in its military intervention in a short time. Along with the Russia’s support for the military intervention of Turkey, it could be said that the policy of “balancing through alliances”, which the neorealist theory suggests, is valid for both countries.

Though the policies of Turkey and Russia followed during the interventions were similar to each other (within their power capacities), their national interests and the perceptions towards security threats differed in certain ways. These differences manifested themselves essentially in the sensitivity of Turkey to the issue of PYD-YPG, the Syria extension of PKK, and in the efforts of Russia towards bringing Turkey and the Assad administration together in order to solve the Syrian crisis. The two countries showed in the international ground that they are problem solvers and the main actors in the Syrian crisis through both military and diplomatic ways. In this respect, we could express that mutual affairs are shaped around the policy of “balance through alliances” within the framework of the national interests of these two countries, beyond the conflicts and the fragile structure of the interest coalition.

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