

Turkish intervention strategy in Northern Syria (2011-2023 AD)



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Abstract This study aimed to explore Turkish intervention strategies in northern Syria from 2011 to 2023. It addressed motives, stages, forms of intervention, and dimensions. This study examined the reasons behind the convergence between Turkey and Syria since late 2021. This study utilized descriptive, analytical, and decision-making methodologies. The findings indicate that the Turkish intervention in northern Syria was part of a Turkish strategy based on considerations and interests. Intervention was a means to achieve these interests, which included immediate and long-term goals. These goals encompassed dispelling risks and concerns related to border and national security, particularly concerning the potential establishment of a Kurdish entity in northern Syria.

Keywords: border security, kurdish entity, Northern Syria, turkish intervention strategies

1. Introduction

Turkish intervention in northern Syria deviated from other interventions and forms of international influence and pressure during the Syrian crisis. It involved direct military intervention by the Turkish army and engagement with Syrian opposition entities, providing various forms of support (Al-Hilu, 2021). This intervention was driven by several factors and considerations, notably geographical factors and the extensive border spanning more than 800 km between Turkey and Syria. According to Dapkus (2016), northern Syria's security was directly linked to Turkish national security, as the emergence of a Kurdish political entity posed a direct threat. Such an entity could destabilize wide areas of Turkey, straining its security and economy, much like during the 1980s and the 1990s, in confrontations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Luerdi & Hakim, 2020).

All of this turned Turkey's response to the Syrian crisis, especially the developments in the northern Syrian regions, into a multidimensional affair. This response continues to evolve, and its ultimate consequences are yet to be definitively determined.

1.1. Objectives and questions of the study

This study aimed to explore the Turkish intervention strategy in northern Syria, its motives, and its dimensions from 2011 to 2023 by answering the following questions:

1. What are Turkey's priorities and interests in Syria, particularly in its northern region?
2. What are the stages in the evolution of Turkish interventions in northern Syria?
3. What are the dimensions and forms of Turkish intervention in northern Syria?
4. What are the goals and agendas of Turkish interventions in northern Syria?
5. What are the motives behind the convergence between Turkey and Syria since late 2021?

1.2. Statement of the study problem

The problem lies in Turkey's engagement with the Syrian crisis in ways that differ from those of other nations. This includes involvement at various forms and levels, from direct military intervention to political interventions affecting the Syrian opposition in its political and military entities. This complex nature of intervention was driven by multiple factors and motivations, leading Turkey to respond to the Syrian crisis in this manner. Moreover, the consequences of this intervention could have had profound and lasting effects on Syria.



1.3. Study hypothesis

This study is based on the hypothesis that Turkish intervention in northern Syria is part of a Turkish strategy driven by Turkish considerations and interests. This intervention serves to achieve these interests, extending beyond immediate objectives and encompassing long-term goals.

1.4. Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its examination of a complex model of intervention by a country, specifically Turkey, in one of the most prominent international crises of the past decade, the Syrian crisis that erupted in 2011. This intervention occurred across multiple levels and dimensions and was driven by various interests and motives. It serves as a crucial model for studying the background and processes of foreign political decision-making in contemporary international crises, particularly in the Middle East. This study provides an analytical model for contrasting responses.

1.5. Scope of the study

- Timeframe: From the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011 to 2023.
- Geographic Scope: Northern Syria, specifically the provinces of Al-Hasakah, Raqqa, Aleppo, and Idlib.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. This study employs two methodologies:

2.1.1. Description–analytical method

This method involves describing the phenomenon with precision and objectivity, analyzing its components and essential elements, distinguishing, and categorizing them, and examining the relationships and connections among them (Slatniyah & Al Jilani, 2012). This method has been applied in this study to trace the evolution of Turkish intervention forms in northern Syria, analyze these stages and forms, unveil their dimensions, investigate their motives, and attempt to anticipate their significant implications.

2.1.2. Decision-making method

This method operates on the premise that the political elite is responsible for crafting and determining a state's foreign policy directions, authorized by law to do so. Consequently, the decisions made by these decision-makers are influenced by various factors at three levels: the psychological environment level, including the beliefs and experiences of the decision-maker; the internal environment level, encompassing demographic and geographical determinants within the state; and the external environment level, encompassing the variables and determinants of regional and international systems (Al Fadi, 2013).

2.1.2.1. Chapter 1: Turkish priorities in Syria

Turkish interests and considerations in Syria are diverse, with security and border protection at the forefront. This challenge emerged with the onset of the crisis in Syria in 2011, which was accompanied by the presence of extremist fighters, including those affiliated with Al-Qaeda. They initially operated under the umbrella of "Jabhat al-Nusra" before later transforming into "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham." Terrorist threats escalated as the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS), also known as "Daesh," gained control over significant areas in Syria, including regions near the Turkish border. This was particularly notable between 2013 and 2017, which had repercussions for Turkey's domestic security. The number of terrorist attacks within Turkish territory, especially during 2015 and 2016, increased significantly. In 2016 alone, Turkey experienced more than 15 terrorist incidents, leading to substantial economic damage, notably in the tourism sector (Adwan, 2019).

Concerns related to national security were also prominent. The Syrian crisis posed a direct threat to Turkey's national security by challenging its territorial integrity. This stemmed from the presence of Kurdish fighters who gained control over areas in northeastern Syria belonging to the "People's Protection Units" (YPG). Turkey considers the YPG an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a group designated a banned terrorist organization. Turkey has engaged in prolonged armed conflict with the party since 1978. From Turkey's perspective, any form of Kurdish entity in Syria, whether an independent state, federal region, or Kurdish self-administration zone, would likely inflame conflict and reignite Kurdish separatist and independence aspirations within Turkey. Consequently, Turkey's strategic objective in Syria revolves around containing and undermining the YPG's activities, even if it entails direct military intervention, as observed since 2016 (Adwan, 2019).

The third significant consideration for Turkey revolves around the Syrian refugee crisis. By 2019, Turkey had estimated the number of Syrian refugees within its borders to be approximately 3.7 million. The refugee crisis triggered various challenges in Turkey, including economic pressure and political tensions regarding the Syrian refugee stance. Opposition factions accused the ruling Justice and Development Party of naturalizing refugees as part of a scheme to increase electoral support. Turkey's strategic considerations extend to exploiting and utilizing Syrian refugees in its foreign policy, particularly concerning

negotiations and disputes with the European Union. Refugees have become leveraged for Turkey to pressure the EU by threatening to flood it with refugees (Çağaptay & Yalçın, 2018).

2.1.2.2. Chapter 2: Stages of Turkish intervention in northern Syria

First Issue: Indirect Intervention

Following Kurdish fighters' attempt to control the border town of Ras al-Ain in late 2012, Turkey supported factions known as the "Free Syrian Army" to repel and push them away. This effort resulted in clashes, eventually leading to Kurdish fighters' control of the city in July 2013. From that point onward, Turkey started to actively sense the threat of a Kurdish entity forming directly on its southern border (Adwan, 2019).

Starting in 2011, Turkey provided shelter to defectors from the Syrian Army. By October 2011, approximately 70 defectors, including Riad al-Asaad, the leader of the Free Syrian Army, had been accommodated. Turkey established a camp known as the "Camp of Free Officers" to protect and support these defectors. As opposition factions were formed in Syria, Turkey provided them with various forms of support, particularly logistical assistance. Turkish territory consistently served as a corridor for fighters and weapons to cross these opposition factions within Syria (Zanotti, 2013).

Among the early forms of indirect intervention, Turkey supported armed factions in looting and dismantling industrial facilities in the Aleppo Governorate, Syria. By 2013, approximately one thousand factories had been dismantled, with the oversight of Turkey. These factories, including manufactured goods, raw materials, and machinery, were then transported to Turkey. The Syrian Foreign Ministry sent messages to the President of the United Nations Security Council and the UN Secretary-General, accusing the Turkish government of facilitating the theft and transfer of Aleppo's factories. This act was labeled unlawful, akin to piracy, and was a hostile act targeting Syrians' livelihoods and economic well-being. Additionally, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg accepted a complaint against the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in April 2014. The complaint alleged his involvement in facilitating the theft of Aleppo's factories and participating in the destruction of Syria's economic infrastructure (Sayed & Mohy El Din, 2020).

2.1.2.3. Second issue: Direct military operations

After the United States's decision in October 2015 to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), known by its abbreviated "QSD" in Arabic, led primarily by units of the Kurdish People's Protection Units and heavily relied upon in the war against the "Islamic State" organization, the American military command requested that the SDF forces cross the Euphrates River in the spring of 2016 to confront Islamic State fighters in the town of "Manbij." This resulted in Kurdish fighters gaining control of Manbij by August 2016. This move conflicted with the Turkish vision and stirred concerns about the Kurdish project in northern Syria. The American military leadership promised that Kurdish fighters would withdraw, a promise that was not fulfilled. In response, Turkey launched the "Euphrates Shield" operation, ostensibly aimed at expelling Islamic State fighters from the city of "Jarabulus" and the northern countryside of Aleppo. However, the main goal was to push Kurdish fighters away from the western Euphrates region and prevent them from establishing a military presence (Adwan, 2019).

In January 2018, another Turkish military operation was launched under the name "Operation Olive Branch," with the goal of removing the remaining Kurdish forces from the city of "Afrin" and its surroundings, which are located west of the Euphrates. Subsequently, Turkey sought to establish a "safe zone" in northern Syria and began coordinating with the American side to plan its creation. Turkey aimed to distance Kurdish fighters from its borders and resettled Syrian refugees in designated areas. With the delay in the American response, the Turkish military initiated the "Operation Peace Spring" in October 2019, aiming to drive out SDF forces and establish a safe zone extending 30 km deep into the Syrian territory (Diab, 2019).

2.1.2.4. Third issue: Military positioning and deployment

The "De-escalation Zones" agreement from the fourth round of the Astana negotiations in May 2017 included the establishment of observation points in the northern Syrian "de-escalation zones". The number of agreed-upon Turkish observation points initially reached twelve. However, with the "Operation Olive Branch" and "Operation Peace Spring", Turkey increased the number of these points to fifty-seven military points. The increase was not only numerical but also saw the Turkish military reinforcing these points, gradually transforming some of them into military bases (Al-Halaw, 2020).

In the northern countryside of Aleppo, there are twenty-one Turkish military points distributed near major cities and along contact lines with both the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian regime forces. In the Afrin region, Turkey established 12 military bases, in addition to numerous points along the contact lines with SDF forces. In the "Operation Peace Spring" area, Turkish forces are positioned at two military points in the city of Ras al-Ain and at three military points in Tell Abyad. Moreover, there are two main military bases in the Tell Abyad area, along with several observation points near the international highway (M4) (Al-Halaw, 2020).

With the signing of the Moscow ceasefire agreement between Turkey and Russia on March 5, 2020, Idlib Province agreed to conduct joint military patrols along part of the M4 highway within the province. With these deployments and military

positions, the number of Turkish forces and equipment in northern Syria has increased significantly, reaching over four thousand soldiers (Al Hurra, 2022).

2.1.2.5. Chapter 3: Long-term plans

First Demand: Structuring Pro-Turkish Military Factions

Turkey not only reinforced its direct military presence but also organized Syrian armed opposition factions loyal to it, incorporating them into what is known as the "Syrian National Army". Turkey has also established a civilian police force operating in the northern Aleppo countryside. After the "Euphrates Shield" operation and securing control over most areas and towns in the northern Aleppo countryside, Turkey began assembling Syrian opposition factions under the "Syrian National Army" banner, comprising three corps. It was officially launched on May 30, 2017 (Al Hurra, 2020).

These army corps include all active Syrian military formations in northern Syria, including opposition factions relocated from Damascus, its suburbs, Homs, Hama, and Daraa. Theoretically, the "Syrian National Army" is subordinate to the Ministry of Defense in the "Syrian Interim Government," the executive branch of the "Syrian National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces." However, practically speaking, the "Syrian National Army" receives all forms of logistical and material support from the Turkish military. According to the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, forces numbered approximately sixty thousand fighters upon their formation. Notably, Turkmen factions have a significant influence within the "Syrian National Army," particularly the "Sultan Murad" and "Hamza" divisions, both of which are significantly supported by Turkish authorities (Tala', 2019).

Notably, the "Syrian National Army" has not engaged in any battle against the Syrian Army or its allied forces. It fully adheres to battles decided upon by Turkey, whether within Syrian borders or other countries. This portrayal makes it appear as a "guardian" of Turkey's southern borders and a protector of Turkish national security interests. Turkey assigns the Syrian factions within this army to execute fierce confrontations against Kurds from "Afrin" to "Ras al-Ain." Turkey depended on the "Syrian National Army" to track and suppress its Kurdish adversaries in northern Syria, even designating it to establish dedicated prisons for this purpose, thus shielding itself from direct involvement in human rights violations.

Turkey has also utilized factions from the "Syrian National Army" to recruit hundreds of elements and send them to fight beyond its borders through the Turkish security company "Sadat," whether alongside the Government of National Accord Forces in Western Libya or alongside Azerbaijan against Armenia in the "Karabakh" region.

Second Demand: Demographic Change Policies

On March 24, 2018, approximately two months after the launch of the "Olive Branch" operation, Turkish forces and allied Syrian factions managed to take control of the Syrian city of Afrin, which had a predominantly Kurdish population. Turkish authorities subsequently initiated a demographic change process in the city by resettling populations from the Turkmen minority, primarily comprising Turkmen refugees from Homs and Latakia. These operations also involved the transfer of Arabs from Syrian refugees to Turkey and placing them in the city, along with displaced Syrian individuals and fighters loyal to Turkey. Concurrently, Kurdish residents were prevented from returning home. As a result, the Kurdish population decreased from approximately half a million before the Turkish offensive to approximately 150,000 in April 2019 (Al-Hilu, 2019).

Following the "Peace Spring" operation, Turkey repeated the same demographic policy in "Ras al-Ain," a city inhabited by Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and Arab tribes. The total population of the city before the Peace Spring operation was approximately 30,000, including approximately 5,000 Kurds. After the military operations were concluded, only approximately 10% of the previous population returned to the city, mostly from temporarily displaced Arab tribes. In contrast, nearly two thousand families of "Syrian National Army" fighters from the northern Aleppo countryside were relocated to Ras al-Ain after military operation and were settled in Kurdish neighborhoods to the south and east of the town (Al-Hilu, 2019).

The plans for demographic change in northern Syria coincided with Turkey's initiative to repatriate Syrian refugees back into Syria. In this context, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated on December 9, 2019, in an address to the ministers of social affairs of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, "Turkey has begun work to settle a million Syrians in the Syrian cities of Ras al-Ain and Tel Abyad, among the Syrian refugees in Turkey." In 2020, official Turkish statements indicated the return of more than four hundred thousand Syrian refugees from various Turkish provinces to northern Syria (Hoffmann, 2019).

Turkey's efforts to encourage the return of Syrian refugees to Syria came after the reduction of assistance provided by the European Union to refugees, coupled with economic pressures and internal political ramifications caused by their presence. These pressures were highlighted by the increasing discourse within the Turkish opposition groups advocating for their return to Syria. Turkish efforts to promote the return of Syrian refugees can be divided into three primary objectives:

- The economic burdens resulting from their presence are alleviated, especially amid Turkey's economic decline.
- Easing political pressure on the Turkish president and party from the opposition opposes their presence.
- The returnees were utilized to achieve demographic changes in Afrin, Ras al-Ain, and along the Syria-Turkey border strip.

From the Turkish perspective, the resettlement of non-Kurds in Kurdish areas would eliminate the possibility of Kurdish governance while retaining substantial political influence over northern Syria. Turkey dismantled the Kurdish human block

through long-term policies as essential for thwarting the Kurdish entity project. Turkey relies on replacing Kurds with Turkmen and Arab populations to protect its national security in the event of future troop withdrawals.

2.1.2.6. *Third demand: Establishment of local governance structures*

With the aim of maintaining significant political influence in northern Syria in the long term, Turkey sought to support the Syrian opposition in building local governance structures immediately after military operations ended. This support was provided under the supervision of the Turkish bordering provinces adjacent to the operational areas. The provinces of "Kilis" and "Gaziantep" oversee the northern Aleppo countryside, while the province of "Hatay" oversees the Afrin region, and the province of "Urfa" oversees both the Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain areas. Although the local councils theoretically follow the "Interim Syrian Government," the Turkish Ministry of the Interior directly supervises these councils, and the interim government does not play an effective role (Içduygu & Nimer, 2020).

There are ten local councils in the "Euphrates Shield" area: Jarabulus, Al-Bab, Azaz, Al-Rai, Mare', Akhtarın, Sawran, Qabasin, Biza'a, and Ghandoura. In Afrin, after the "Rescue of Afrin Conference" in Gaziantep in April 2018, four main local councils were formed, which later increased by three to make a total of seven councils. Turkish authorities appointed representatives for each of these councils to act as intermediaries between the councils and the Turkish province associated with them. Locally, they are referred to as the "Turkish Governor," even though they hold the official title of "Assistant Governor" (Içduygu & Nimer, 2020).

2.1.2.7. *Fourth demand: Path of rapprochement: Backgrounds, reasons, and outcomes*

The indications of rapprochement between Turkey and Syria have grown, suggesting a shift toward a different trajectory from the escalation, disputes, and tensions that have characterized their relationship since the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011, lasting until late 2021. Turkey became entangled in conflict with the central Syrian government by supporting armed opposition groups, particularly by providing logistical support through its territory, as well as endorsing, supporting, and hosting Syrian political opposition structures.

From a Syrian perspective, rapprochement and understanding with a neighbor as significant as Turkey is an inevitable choice. This allows the state to regain control and reestablish sovereignty over all Syrian territories while minimizing casualties and losses. Crucially, this involves collaborating with Turkey to eliminate armed groups by discontinuing their support. Rapprochement and cooperation with Turkey also serve to thwart the Kurdish separatist threat and undermine any projects related to establishing autonomous governance in northeastern Syria, which Syria strongly opposes and rejects.

The indications for Turkish-Syrian rapprochement have intensified since late 2021. In October 2021, foreign ministers of Turkey and Syria held a meeting on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement Conference in Belgrade. In August 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan revealed that "Putin proposed cooperation with Damascus during a meeting in Sochi" (Al Sharq Al Awsat, 2022). The number of positive reciprocal statements increased, particularly on the Turkish side. In August 2022, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stated, "We must achieve an agreement between the opposition and the regime in Syria in some way." He added, "Those who were forced to leave their homes must return, including those residing in Turkey." He also revealed that "the Russian side has expressed interest in meetings between the Turkish and Syrian sides" (Al Hurra, 2022).

In September 2022, Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkish intelligence, held several meetings with his Syrian counterpart Ali Mamlouk, proposing the possibility of a meeting between Turkey and Syria's foreign ministers. In November 2022, President Erdogan suggested the possibility of re-evaluating its relationship with Syria after the 2023 elections. In January 2023, President Erdogan stated, "We have initiated a trilateral process involving Russia, Turkey, and Syria. Our foreign ministers will meet, and depending on developments, our presidents will also meet" (DW, 2023).

The trajectory of rapprochement culminated at the end of 2022, with a high-level security meeting on December 28th. A trilateral meeting took place between the defense ministers of Turkey, Russia, and Syria, initiating concrete steps to begin reducing the Turkish military presence in northern Syria. This was manifested by Turkey's withdrawal starting in early February 2023 from the southern section of the "Aleppo-Latakia" international highway (M4), including the evacuation of one of its points (Al Sharq Al Awsat, 2023).

These developments can be interpreted within various dimensions and contexts of Turkish-Syrian relations, including the increasing alignment between Turkey and Russia. This alignment, coupled with the growing level of relations between the two countries on various levels, especially during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, underscores Russia's role as a key supporter of rapprochement and conflict resolution between Turkey and Syria.

The approach comes from the Turkish perspective to resolve the ongoing crisis with Syria, which has lasted for 12 years, as part of the efforts to address the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey. This crisis has become evident, lacking anticipated solutions, and its impact has intensified within Turkey owing to the shifting public sentiment toward the Syrian refugee issue. It has been transformed into an electoral card against President Erdogan and the ruling Justice and Development Party. With opposition parties initiating plans for refugee repatriation, this is particularly pronounced as Turkey's economic crisis deepens.

Therefore, a significant common interest emerges for both Syria and Turkey: the cessation of the Kurdish separatist project and the elimination of the Kurdish threat. This includes thwarting attempts to establish a separatist Kurdish entity or self-governing entity in northeastern Syria. From Turkey's perspective, the "Syrian Democratic Forces," comprising Kurdish People's Protection Units, are viewed as a terrorist group and as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

Turkey is driven by other strategic motives to alter its relationship with Syria. This is prompted by escalating tensions and disagreements between Turkey, the United States, and the European Union. These tensions have heightened in recent years due to Turkey's acquisition of Russian S-300 missiles, disputes with countries such as Cyprus and Greece, and conflicts with the European Union over the rights to explore and invest in Eastern Mediterranean gas.

Agreements with Syria could enhance Turkey's position and competitiveness in the context of the Eastern Mediterranean gas investment conflict. Notably, since neither Syria nor Turkey is a member of the "Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum," this could facilitate collaboration between them to demarcate shared maritime boundaries.

These Turkish considerations and interests have gained prominence as an upcoming Turkish election approach in May 2023. President Erdogan has sent messages to Turkish people who Syrian refugees are on their way back to Syria. The Syrian refugee issue has played a significant role in Turkey's domestic context.

Given all the above, Turkey is keen on normalizing relations with Syria. This is expected to come at the expense of the Syrian opposition, which views Turkey as its primary ally and supporter. The opposition has two choices: aligning with Turkey's normalization, leading to the loss of its foundations and goals, or rejecting it, resulting in a collision course with Turkey, potentially leading to Turkey withdrawing its support, sidelining the opposition, and ultimately its dissolution.

On the other hand, Syria's stance toward Turkish rapprochement has been cautious, demanding that Turkish statements be translated into actual steps. Syria asserted the necessity of complete Turkish withdrawal from Syrian territories.

While Syria emphasizes the need to end the Turkish presence on Syrian soil and avoid interfering in its internal affairs, Turkey asserts that its military presence in northern Syria serves as a deterrent against Kurdish militant threats. Turkey does not believe that the Syrian side is capable of border control. The Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, stated, 'We will not accept any preconditions, nor will we accept withdrawing our forces from Syrian territories as a condition for negotiations, as it would leave us vulnerable to terrorist threats again' (Al Sharq Al Awsat, 2023).

The most significant threat to the evolving relationship between Turkey and Syria is the stance of the United States, which opposes this rapprochement. Washington repeatedly reaffirms the necessity of implementing UN Resolution 2254 in Syria, which calls for a pathway to change the Syrian government system before recognizing and legitimizing it. The American efforts to obstruct Turkish-Syrian rapprochement are motivated by the fact that the U.S. is the greatest loser in this convergence. It enables Damascus to regain control over its entire territory, eliminate its key allies such as the "Syrian Democratic Forces," and increases the risk of American forces in Syria imperiling U.S. oil activities in Syria. This development also diverted Syria and its allies to renewed confrontations with Israel, which the U.S. always pledged to safeguard.

On the other hand, the United States refused to make any concessions to Russia in any international arena, especially in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. This refusal is characterized by increased rigidity and an unwillingness to negotiate or make concessions. This is evident in the United States' rejection of efforts to rehabilitate the governance system in Syria unless it changes according to the form that aligns with its interests. Hence, the United States continues to enforce the "Caesar Act," imposing sanctions on Syria and anyone engaging in financial activities and investments with it. This threatens the rapprochement path between any country and Syria.

Furthermore, the United States continues to use the pretext of combating the Islamic State Organization (ISIS), justifying its ongoing presence in northeastern Syria. It also maintains its support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), particularly because it lacks alternative options to impose its agenda in Syria. In general, these actions suggest that Turkey's pursuit of rapprochement with Syria would lead to further distancing between Turkey, the United States, and the West.

In contrast, Russia's stance has centered around aligning the perspectives of Turkey and Syria, especially since the initiation of the "Astana process" in 2017. Russia played a crucial role in persuading Turkey to engage in Syria. This is aimed at achieving stability in its allied Syrian state, preserving its territorial integrity, resolving the issue of refugees and displaced persons, and redirecting efforts toward the goal of removing U.S. forces from Syria. This aligns with the objective of reducing American influence in the vital Middle Eastern region, which is of great importance for Russia.

The shift in the Turkish-Syrian relationship aligns with concurrent developments in the Syrian-Arab relationship. This was highlighted in March 2023 when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced the reestablishment of its relations with Syria, including reopening consulates and diplomatic representation. Multiple visits between Syrian and Saudi foreign ministers occurred in both capitals in April 2023. This convergence aligns with Saudi Arabia's strategy of addressing and resolving conflicts in the Middle East.

Turkey intervened in northern Syria to pursue various interests, including dispelling risks related to border and national security concerns. This was especially relevant for the potential establishment of a Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Turkey employed various strategies, such as forming and supporting opposition factions against the Kurds, implementing demographic change policies, and fostering closer ties with Syria, all aiming to mitigate this risk and secure broader gains.

Turkey's objectives in northern Syria extended beyond the threat of Kurdish. They encompassed the creation of subordinate regions within the Syrian territory, ultimately linked to Turkey in security and economic terms. However, these goals could conflict with international law and lead Turkey to confront the international community.

Turkey's approach in northern Syria also capitalized on its intervention, leveraging the involvement of Syrian opposition fighters in various conflicts, from Azerbaijan to Libya. Additionally, Turkey aimed to repatriate Syrian refugees to Syria, particularly after the reduction in assistance from the European Union, using their return as part of demographic change policies in northern Syria.

3. Final Considerations

The most notable development from late 2021 until the end of this study was the emerging trend of rapprochement between Turkey and Syria, facilitated by Russian mediation. This aligns with Turkey's strategic motivations in the Syrian crisis, including countering the risk of a Kurdish entity supported by international powers, primarily the United States and European Union. This process of rapprochement emerges within the broader context of Turkey's evolving relations with Russia and, to a lesser extent, with Iran, the prominent regional competitor. It is part of Turkey's strategy to explore new opportunities, such as maximizing its chances in the competitive race for gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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