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## **KURDISH FACTOR IN TURKEY’S FOREIGN POLICY IN SYRIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this article, the problem of the Kurds in Syria is in the foreign policy of Turkey, which is considered one of the leading actors in the Middle East region and Turkey’s military operations aimed at preventing Kurdish separatism will be covered in detail.

### **KEYWORDS**

“Peshmerga”, “Syrian Kurdistan”, “Euphrates Shield”, “Olive Branch”, “Peace Spring” and “Claw Sword”.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Today’s Turkey is becoming an actor playing an important role not only in the Middle East, but also in world politics. The issue of the Kurds has become one of the important and priority directions in Turkey’s Middle East policy, and it will continue to be so in the future. The fact that the Kurdish problem is a factor influencing Turkey’s foreign policy, and its intransigent attitude towards this ethno-political issue, is unlikely to cause a number of problems for official Ankara in the future.

The Kurdish factor in Turkey’s foreign policy is not defined only by the Kurds living in Turkey. The issue of the Kurds occupies a large place in the current volatile situation in Syria. The influence of the Kurds in Syria on

Turkey’s national security, as well as the assessment of the Syrian Kurds as a terrorist and separatist movement, reflect Ankara’s foreign policy views. If the situation in Syria worsens, there is a possibility that the Kurds will have a large sphere of influence in the country, as in Iraq. In this case, the sphere of influence of the Kurds in the Middle East may expand and pose a great threat to the territorial integrity of Turkey.

According to the latest data, the total number of Kurds in Syria is estimated to be around 2.5 million. A third of them live in the foothills of the Taurus Mountains north of Aleppo, and an equal part along the Turkish border in Jazira. Another 10 percent can be found near Jarabulus, northeast of Aleppo, and 10-15 percent in

Hayy al-Akrad (the Kurdish quarter) on the outskirts of Damascus .

Unlike the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, the Kurdish ethnic minority in Syria has not historically been involved in violent conflicts with the central government. According to some analysts, the Syrian government planned to use the Kurds to put pressure on Turkey. In particular, in the 1990s, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was used by the regime of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad as a tool to fight against Turkey. Indeed, Syria has had a very contentious relationship with Turkey over control of the Tigris and Euphrates waters and old Cold War disputes between the two opposing blocs. Damascus, the capital of Syria, became a base and a safe haven for Ocalan in his attacks against Turkey . Even so, the Adana Agreement signed between Turkey and Syria in 1998 limited foreign aid to the Syrian Kurds. Professor Umar Guksel Ishyar writes that “this signed agreement was literally equivalent to a disaster for the Kurdish military groups in Syria and the Middle East in general” . By the decision of the Syrian government, Ocalan was expelled from the country. This incident led to the escape and arrest of the PKK leader, first to Russia, then to Italy, and the Italian government extradited him to Turkey. In February 1999, the Turkish authorities arrested Ocalan in Kenya, while he was being taken from the Greek Embassy in Nairobi to the Kenyan capital's airport. The path of the PKK in the 1990s reflects the fact that the Kurds were at the center of regional interests, which were interests outside of the Kurdish issue . At the same time as Syria supported the Kurdish partisans against the Turks, it was the country with the most unfavorable living conditions for the Kurdish minority. In fact, 200,000 Syrian Kurds did not even have citizenship and lived as stateless people from 1962 until the start of the civil war in 2011. As mentioned above, the Middle East often consists of

conflicting interests rather than political actors and alliances. Thus, a few years after the events related to Ocalan's arrest, when the Syrian civil war began, Bashar Assad's regime decided to use the Syrian Kurds. He promised to grant them citizenship, thereby encouraging them to oppose the rebel groups that formed them. In fact, Syrian Kurds have become one of the main actors in the civil conflict that has ravaged Syria, taking advantage of the atmosphere of partial subordination with the anti-Islamic State regime to form a regional Kurdish self-governing body in 2016. It was called Rojava Kurdistan. Naturally, the establishment of such a self-governing body served as a foundation stone for the establishment of an autonomous region in Syria as well as in Iraq. Rojava Kurdistan would appear not only as an element of the weak statehood that arose during the civil war in Syria, but also as a factor endangering the prospects of Turkey's territorial integrity. Moreover, the emergence of an autonomous region in neighboring Syria meant that Turkey's rivals in the region would consider Ankara a foreign policy defeat.

The establishment of the autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq and the continuous continuation of the civil war that started in Syria began to cause major changes in the activities of the Syrian Kurds. At first, the Syrian Kurds were in opposition to Bashar Assad's regime. Because the existing civil war should have created ample opportunities to protect their socio-economic and political rights in the country and ensure the creation of an autonomous region in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) region of Syria as well as Iraqi Kurdistan. In this way, the number of Kurdish political organizations increased in Syria. Kurdistan Democratic Union (PYD) took the main role in these actions of Syria. The fact that the geopolitical situation in Syria is extremely complicated and the appearance of ISIS fighters in the territories of this country was not in the interest of the

Kurds in the region. Therefore, the Kurdish military “peshmerga” in Syria and Iraq remained the only force against the influence of ISIS in these areas. Detachments of Syrian Kurdish volunteer soldiers - the People’s Protection Unit (YPG) and the Women’s Protection Unit (YPJ) - used by the KIP in the fight against ISIS militants in the north of Syria.

It should be noted that the civil war and territorial divisions in Syria are highly likely to lead to the strengthening of Kurdistan’s autonomy in the north of this country. In addition, the regular support of the Syrian Kurds by some Kurdish military-political organizations in Iraq and Turkey may strengthen the establishment of the independent region of “Syrian Kurdistan” and eventually turn this region into the second stronghold of the Kurds in the Middle East.

Such processes with the Kurds in the region are seen as a threat to the territorial integrity and national security of Turkey. If the situation in Syria worsens, the Kurds may have a large sphere of influence, as in Iraq. Therefore, Turkey’s foreign policy is based on the drastic reduction of separatist and terrorist activities on the border of the two countries. In particular, Turkey’s operations such as “Euphrates Shield”, “Olive Branch”, “Peace Spring” and “Claw Sword” were aimed directly at destroying Kurdish movements in Syria.

Operation “Euphrates Shield”. On August 24, 2016, Turkey announces that it is using the right of self-defense provided for in Article 51 of the UN Charter and starts Operation Euphrates Shield on the border with Syria. In the press statement of the National Security Council (November 30, 2016), the purpose of the operation is to ensure border security within the framework of the UN Charter and fight ISIS terrorism, it is also emphasized that the PKK terrorist organization and its affiliate PYD/YPG will not be

allowed to establish a terror corridor on the border of Turkey.

Operation “Euphrates Shield” was carried out in the area between the Euphrates River in the east and the rebel-held area around Azaz in the west. The goals to be achieved through the operation “Euphrates Shield” can be listed as follows: 1) to push ISIS terrorists from the borders of Turkey in order to stop the attacks on the territory of Turkey; 2) supporting the anti-terrorist operations of the anti-ISIS coalition forces; 3) establishment of a safe zone 91 km wide and 50 km deep inside Syria; 4) Push PKK/YPG terrorists from Manbij district to the east bank of the Euphrates River. In this way, Turkey will prevent PKK/YPG expansionism along its border and thus create difficult obstacles for the PKK/YPG corridor in the region and bypass it.

In the operation launched to create a safe zone, the areas located on the Azaz-Jarablus line of Jarablus province were completely cleared from ISIS and PYD and control was achieved. As part of Operation Euphrates Shield, 243 settlements and an area of approximately 2,015 km<sup>2</sup> were taken under the control of the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army supported by the Turkish Armed Forces after 198 days. The operation started on August 24, 2016 lasted 7 months and 5 days, and on March 29, 2017, at the meeting of the National Security Council headed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, it was announced that the Euphrates Shield operation, which was the first stage of cross-border operations, was successfully completed.

Operation “Olive Branch”. On January 20, 2018, the Turkish Armed Forces launched Operation Olive Branch. This operation was undoubtedly carried out as a result of the actions of terrorist organizations such as PKK, PYD, ISIS, which threaten the people in the region and the Republic of Turkey. Operation “Olive Branch”

was launched in accordance with the United Nations Article 51 of the Bill of Rights and the United Nations Security Council resolutions against terrorism. Like the Euphrates Shield, this operation aims to eliminate the desired terrorist corridor on the southern border of Turkey, to end the pressure of terrorist organizations in the region, and to restore peace in the region.

Operation Olive Branch (Turkish: Zeytin Dalı Harekati) is a cross-border military operation by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian National Army (SNA) against the People's Protection Units (YPG) in the Kurdish-majority Afrin district of northwestern Syria. Afrin is an area in northwestern Syria, 57 km north of Aleppo and 30 km from the Turkish border. Afrin is located between two strategic areas under the control of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA): Azaz and Idlib .

This operation started on January 20, 2018 and will continue for 57 days, and on March 18, 2018, the military operation was completed and the Afrin area was cleared of terrorism. As a result of the operation, more than 200 residential areas were cleared of terrorists and control was established over an area of 2,000 square kilometers. Explosives planted by terrorists were also destroyed under the actions of the Turkish Armed Forces. On the one hand, traces of terrorism in the region were erased, on the other hand, social life was reorganized.

Operation "Peace Spring". As a result of threats to Turkey's security and increased hostility, on October 9, 2019, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring in northeastern Syria within the framework of international law and the right to self-defense regulated by Article 51 of the UN Convention by the Turkish Armed Forces . Operation "Peace Spring" is a cross-border military operation conducted by the Turkish armed forces and the Syrian National Army

against the Syrian Democratic Forces and later the Syrian Arab Army in northern Syria. The purpose of the operation was to ensure border security, prevent the creation of a terror corridor in the south, and ensure the return of displaced Syrians to their homes.

As a result of the "Peace Spring" operation in northeastern Syria, 605 settlements were cleared of terrorists, and about 200,000 Syrians returned to their countries and villages safely and voluntarily. Mines/IEDs, shelters and tunnels that endangered the lives of civilians were destroyed one after another. 35,000 students started and continue to study in schools repaired by Turkish soldiers. More than 250,000 Syrian citizens will be examined through public hospitals and mobile health units launched .

Operation "Winter Eagle". On February 2, 2022, the Ministry of Defense of Turkey, in accordance with the norms of international law, Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, and the resolutions of the UN Security Council on the fight against terrorism, against the so-called terrorist groups in the areas of Malikiyya, Sinjar and Karajik, which are using Iraq and northern Syria as bases. He started the "Winter Eagle" operation. About 60 aircraft participated in the operation, and about 80 targets in Derik and Sinjar, Karajik regions in northern Syria and Iraq were destroyed .

According to the Ministry's statement, the operation aims to neutralize PKK/KJK/YPG terrorists, eliminate terrorist attacks targeting civilians and security forces from northern Iraq and Syria, and ensure border security .

Operation "Claw Sword". On November 20, 2022, the Turkish Air Force launched a series of airstrikes against the positions of the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian Army in northern Syria (Aleppo, Raqqa, al-



Hasaka) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party in northern Iraq (in Turkish: Pençe-Kılıç Operasyonu). As part of the operation, targets in Tel Rifat, Kobane and its surroundings, Derbesiyeh, Maranez, Malikiyeh, Ain Isa, Ain Dagne, Qandil, Sulaymaniyah and Sinjar in northern Iraq were struck.

During the operation, many weapons warehouses belonging to the PKK were destroyed. In addition, 12 SDF militants besides the PKK were neutralized by an air operation in the Tel Rifat region. Targeting Kobani, Turkish planes hit PKK/YPG bases 8 times. It was also reported that the PKK suffered high losses.

After the start of the operation, many PKK commanders and the representative office of the HDP in Europe issued a statement and asked to stop the operation. The Ministry of National Defense declares that the operation was carried out in accordance with the right of self-defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter.

Naturally, Turkey's deployment of troops and military operations in Syria, as if it were its own home, is considered a violation of the principles of state sovereignty and border inviolability from the point of view of international law. According to the local scientist H. Azimov, according to the conclusion of a number of analysts and researchers, Turkey aims to expand its military presence in Syria through its operations on the border with Syria and at the same time aims to strengthen its position in the processes of diplomatic trade with the USA, Russia and Iran regarding the Syrian crisis. Former Turkish Foreign Minister M. Cavusoglu once emphasized that his country "must be strong both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table". In fact, Turkey's military operations opened the way for serious pressures to be applied against Bashar Assad's regime for military and diplomatic measures. According to Salih Yilmaz,

director of the Institute of Russian Studies in Ankara, the fundamental importance of the situation in Idlib is that based on the control established in certain parts of Syria, Turkey has an opportunity to strengthen its demands for constitutional reforms from the Syrian government. Not only the US and Israel, but also Iran and leading Arab countries have sharply criticized Turkey's operations. In particular, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu assessed Turkey's operations on the border with Syria as "ethnic cleansing" of the Kurdish people in Syria. He stated in his statement: "Israel strongly condemns Turkey's invasion of Kurdish areas in Syria, and calls on Turkey and its units to abandon the policy of "ethnic cleansing" of the Kurds". After the "Peace Spring" operation began, the foreign ministers of the League of Arab States on October 12 accused Turkey of gross violations of international law. Unlike other Arab countries, only the emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Tony, announced that he agrees with Ankara. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif called on the Turkish side to respect the territorial integrity of Syria and adhere to the 1998 Adana Agreement .

Nevertheless, the fact that Turkey's military operations in Syria do not contradict the principles of international law, and that they are carried out on the basis of UN norms of self-defense and the fight against terrorism, shows Ankara's firm position. The main reason why the West does not impose any sanctions against Turkey's actions is that, firstly, Turkey is a member of NATO, and secondly, Western countries plan to use the oil of Iraqi Kurdistan through Ankara. In addition, the place and role of Turkey in the region will be given special attention.

## CONCLUSION

In general, today's official government of Ankara is following the path of realism in domestic and foreign

policy related to the Kurds. The fact that the Kurdish issue is a sensitive issue related to the territorial integrity of the country is particularly noteworthy as it encourages Ankara to take military measures when the time comes. Turkey's foreign policy on the issue of the Kurds in Syria has been implemented on the basis of the principle of hard power, while in its foreign policy in Iraq, it uses both hard and soft methods. The disobedience of a number of organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan to the central government of Iraq, the increasing need for alternative energy in the eyes of Western countries as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war, caused Turkey to increase its opportunities to mediate in the transfer of oil from Iraqi Kurdistan to Europe.

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