YEDİTEPE UNIVERSITY
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TÜRKİYE'S PERCEPTIONS OF THREATS AND POLICIES AGAINST THE SEPARATIST TERRORIST ORGANIZATION PKK-PYD/YPG IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS

İsmail ALAGÖZ

İstanbul - 2026

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İstanbul - 2026

DECLERATION OF ORIGINALITY

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ABSTRACT

The incorporation of Kurdish ethnic separatism, under foreign support and patronage, into the problems in the Middle East, which has been plunged into chaos by conflicts and traumatic events from the past to the present, has further deepened the chronic instability in this region. Resolving Kurdish ethnic separatism, which has become a significant problem in the region, through a realistic and correct approach is essential for the establishment and continuation of peace and tranquility in the Middle East. In this respect, the issue of Kurdish ethnic separatism is also of great importance for the security and political futures of four neighboring countries that host Kurds. This study examines the rise of the PYD/YPG organization, the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK, in the power vacuum created by the Syrian crisis that began in 2011, and the multidimensional effects of this situation on Türkiye's national security. The thesis builds its theoretical framework on the theoretical foundations of the concept of security, specifically on the Copenhagen School's Securitization Theory and Learning Model. PYD/YPG's political, military, and sociodemographic gains, achieved by exploiting regional power vacuums, along with its attempts to alter the demographic structure under the guise of "autonomous administration" in northern Syria and create a terrorist corridor extending to the Mediterranean, have been perceived by Türkiye as a vital existential threat. The organization's protection by global actors such as the US and Russia has led to a strategic shift that has forced Ankara to move from soft power elements to proactive military interventions in its security strategies. The study comprehensively evaluates the military reactions within the scope of the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring, and Spring Shield operations, discussing their contributions to Türkiye's long-term policy framework of ensuring border security and contributing to regional stability. Ultimately, the thesis offers a comprehensive assessment of how Türkiye's security approach to Syria-related threats has been shaped within the context of the international political conjuncture.

Keywords: Military Operations, National Security Threats, PYD/YPG Structure, Syrian Crisis, Turkish Foreign Policy

ÖZET

Geçmişten bugüne yaşanan çatışmalar ve sarsıcı olaylarla kaosa sürüklenen Ortadoğu'daki sorunlara dış destek ve himaye altındaki Kürt etnik ayrılıkçılığının eklemlenmesi bu coğrafyadaki kronik istikrarsızlığı daha da derinleştirmiştir. çözülmesi gereken önemli Bir sorun alanı olarak bölgeye yerleşen Kürt etnik ayrılıkçılığının gerçekçi ve doğru bir yöntemle çözüme kavuşturulması, Ortadoğu coğrafyasına huzur ve barışın yerleşerek sürmesi için vazgeçilmez bir koşuldur. Bu açıdan Kürt etnik ayrılıkçılığı sorunu, coğrafyalarında Kürtleri barındıran birbirlerine komşu dört ülkenin güvenlikleri, siyasi gelecekleri bakımından da büyük önem taşımaktadır. Bu çalışma, 2011 yılında başlayan Suriye krizinin yarattığı otorite boşluğunda, bölgesel terör ağı yapılanması PKK/KCK'nın Suriye kanadı PYD/YPG yapılanmasının yükselişini ve bu durumun Türkiye'nin ulusal güvenliği üzerindeki çok boyutlu etkilerini incelemektedir. Tez, güvenlik kavramının teorik temellerinden hareketle, teorik çerçevesini Kopenhag Okulu'nun Güvenlikleştirme Teorisi ve Ders Çıkarma Modeli üzerine inşa etmektedir. PYD/YPG'nin bölgesel güç boşluklarından yararlanarak elde ettiği siyasal, askeri ve sosyodemografik kazanımlar ile kuzey Suriye'de özerk yönetim adı altında demografik yapıyı değiştirme ve Akdeniz'e uzanan bir terör koridoru oluşturma girişimleri, Türkiye tarafından hayati bir beka tehdidi olarak algılanmıştır. Örgütün ABD ve Rusya gibi küresel aktörler tarafından himaye edilmesi, Ankara'nın güvenlik stratejilerinde yumuşak güç unsurlarından proaktif askeri müdahalelere geçişi zorunlu kılan stratejik bir değişime yol açmıştır. Çalışma, Türkiye'nin düzenlediği askeri harekatlar kapsamındaki reaksiyonları ayrıntılı bir şekilde değerlendirerek, bu operasyonların Türkiye'nin sınır güvenliğini sağlama ve bölgesel istikrara katkı sunma yönündeki katkılarını tartışmaktadır. Sonuç olarak tez, Türkiye'nin Suriye kaynaklı tehditlere yönelik güvenlik yaklaşımının uluslararası politik konjonktür bağlamında nasıl şekillendiğine dair bütüncül bir değerlendirme sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Askeri Operasyonlar, PYD/YPG Yapılanması, Suriye Krizi, Türk Dış Politikası, Ulusal Güvenlik Tehditleri

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work, accomplished through long and arduous effort, to: my beloved mother, whose affection continues to warm my heart; my father, who bore the weight of a life lived with honor; and my brother Mustafa, whose light faded too soon, yet whose cherished memories endure despite the passage of time.

The absence of each of them has only deepened the significance of their presence. This enduring absence has also shaped and matured me.

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Finally, I embrace with indescribable love my beautiful daughters, Tuğçe and Ecrin, who grew up innocently while following the path of the time I could not spend with them.

TABLE OF CONTENT

DECLERATION OF ORIGINALITY iii

ABSTRACT iv

ÖZET v

DEDICATION vi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vii

TABLE OF CONTENT viii

LIST OF FIGURES xi

LIST OF TABLES xii

SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATED TERMS xiii

1. INTRODUCTION 1

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK 8

2.1. What is Security? 8

2.1.1. Realist Conception of Security 14

2.1.2. Critical Security Approach 19

2.1.3. Constructivist Security Understanding 23

2.1.4. Postmodern Security Understanding 26

2.2. Conceptual Perspective on the Nation-State, Nationalism, and Ethnicity 29

2.2.1. The Nation-State System as a Modern Concept and Its Relationship with the Ideology of Nationalism 30

2.2.2. Separatist Nationalism and Its Changing Nature in the Relationship Between Nation and Ethnic Group 36

2.2.3. The International System Dimension of the Ethnic Separatism Problem and Related Approaches 43

2.3. The Right to Self-Determination and the Demand for Secession 49

2.3.1. The Demand for Self-Determination 50

2.3.2. Secessionist Self-Determination and the Demand for the Right to Secede . 58

2.4. The Phenomenon of Separatist Terrorism in the Nation-State and Ethnic Identity/Group Equation 62

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 72

3.1. The Copenhagen School and Securitization Theory 72

3.2. Lesson-Drawing Model 82

4. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SYRIA AND THE KURDS 88

4.1. Origins and Expansion of the Kurds in the Middle East 88

4.2. The Kurdish Presence in the Geography of Syria in the Historical Process 97

4.3. The Place of Kurds in Political Life from the Formation of Modern Syria to the 2011 Civil War 114

5. SEPARATIST KURDISH MOVEMENT AND SPHERES OF INFLUENCE IN THE 2011 SYRIAN CIVIL WAR 128

5.1. Emergence and Development of PYD/YPG, the Syrian Branch of the Regional Terror Network PKK/KCK 128

5.1.1. The Formation Process of the Terrorist Organization PKK–PYD/YPG in the Political-Historical Background of Syria 129

5.1.2. The Emergence of the Terrorist Organization PKK–PYD/YPG as a Local Actor in the Syrian Crisis 147

5.2. The Historical Gains and Rise of Kurdish Separatism in the PKK–PYD Axis .. 160

5.3. Politicization and Independence Efforts of the Kurds in Post-2011 Syria 175

5.3.1. Interaction of Separatist Kurdish Groups within the Ranks of the Opposition during the Syrian Civil War 176

5.3.2. The Politicization and Independence Efforts of PYD/YPG as a Local Actor 194

6. PROBLEM AREAS ORIGINATING FROM PYD/YPG IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS: TÜRKİYE'S THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND POLICIES 206

6.1. The Patronage of the PYD/YPG as a Source of Tension During the Civil War . 206

6.1.1. The United States' Support and Patronage of the PYD/YPG During the Syrian Civil War 207

6.1.2. PYD/YPG's Search for Cooperation with Russia in the Civil War 221

6.1.3. Efforts to Unite Separatist Kurdish Actors Within the Syrian Opposition Under a Single Umbrella 228

6.2. The Impact of the PKK–PYD/YPG Presence on Türkiye's Security and Foreign Policy 238

6.2.1. The Emergence and Activities of PYD/YPG as a Source of Threat 239

6.2.2. Regional Security Problems Originating from PYD/YPG and Their Impacts on Türkiye 246

6.2.2.1. Composite Threats Arising from the Spillover of Conflicts, Separatism, and Demographic Pressure 246

6.2.2.2. The Paradox of National Identity and Border Security as a Form of Socio-Political Instability 253

6.2.2.3. Realpolitik Dilemmas in the Regional Security Architecture and the Risk of Diplomatic Isolation 257

6.3. Türkiye's Threat Perceptions and Reactions Originating from the PYD/YPG in the Syrian Crisis 268

6.3.1. Türkiye's Threat Perceptions in the Syrian Crisis 273

6.3.2. Türkiye's Reactions to the Threats Emerging in the Syrian Crisis 289

6.3.2.1. Operation Euphrates Shield 289

6.3.2.2. Olive Branch Operation 297

6.3.2.3. Operation Peace Spring 308

6.3.2.4. Operation Spring Shield 318

7. CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION 331

REFERENCES 335

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Securitization process....74
Figure 2. The Geographical Distribution of the Kurdish Population in the Middle East....92
Figure 3. World Oil and Natural Gas Reserves by Middle East Countries (%) 120
Figure 4. Spread of the Syrian Civil War Within the Country (March-May-December 2011-March 2012)....129
Figure 5. Active Forces in Syria (2013) 150
Figure 6. Active Forces in Syria (2014) 166
Figure 7. Active Forces in Syria (2015) 168
Figure 8. Active Forces in Syria (2016) 171
Figure 9. Active Forces in Syria (2017) 172
Figure 10. Active Forces in Syria (2018) 174
Figure 11. Syrians Under Temporary Protection by Year 282
Figure 12. Fırat Kalkanı Harekatı haritası (31 Mart 2017)....294
Figure 13. Map of Olive Branch Operation (18 March 2018)....302
Figure 14. Map of Operation Peace Spring (23 October 2019)....312
Figure 15. Map of Operation Spring Shield (6 March 2020) 324

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. The Effects and Consequences of the Kurdish Issue on Turkish Foreign Policy 271

SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATED TERMS

AK-47	Avtomat Kalashnikova (Infantry rifle)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DAEŞ	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
DShK	Degtyaryova-Shpagina Krupnokaliberny (Doçka)
ENKS	Kurdish National Council in Syria (Kurdish name: Encûmena Niştimani ya Kurdi li Sûriyê)
ETA	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna
EU	European Union
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GAP	Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi (Southeastern Anatolia Project)
HDP	Halkların Demokratik Partisi
HPG	Halk Savunma Güçleri (The armed wing of the PKK)
ICSR	International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence
IED	Improvised explosive device
IRA	Irish Republican Army
KCK	Koma Civakên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Communities Union)
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KONGRA-GEL	Kongra Gele Kurdistan (Kurdistan People's Congress)
KPU	Kurdistan Patriotic Union
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KUK	Kürt Ulusal Konseyi
KVK	Political Council, Kurdish Democratic Coalition, Coordination Committee
MİT	Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı
MLKP	Marxist–Leninist Communist Party

MLRS	Multiple Launch Rocket System
MSB	Milli Savunma Bakanlığı
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OBO	Olive Branch Operation
OES	Operation Euphrates Shield
OPS	Operation Peace Spring
OSS	Operation Spring Shield
PÇDK	Partî Çareserî Dîmukratî Kurdistan (Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party)
PJAK	Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Free Life Party)
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PKS	Pulemyot Kalashnikova Stankovıy
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)
RPG	Rocket-Propelled Grenade (Rocket Launcher/Anti-Tank Weapon)
RPLP/F	Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SİHA	Silahlı İnsansız Hava Aracı (Armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles)
SNC	Syrian National Council
SNRC	Syrian National Revolutionary Coalition
TBMM	Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi
TEV-DEM	Tevgera Civaka Demokratik (Movement for a Democratic Society)
TOW	Tube Launched-Optically Tracked-Wire Command Link Guided
TSK	Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USA	United States of America
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Defense Units)
YPJ	Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Protection Units)

1. INTRODUCTION

In the discipline of international relations, the concept of security is a dynamic one that necessitates redefinition in the context of historically changing threat perceptions and actors. The nation-state centralist approaches that form the basis of the traditional understanding of security have proven inadequate in the face of transnational threats that emerged particularly in the post-Cold War period, the rise of non-state actors, and the complex dynamics brought about by globalization. In this context, this study examines the rise of the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK, in the power vacuum created by the Syrian crisis that began in 2011, and its multidimensional effects on Türkiye's national security. Within this complex transformation of the global system, new dimensions such as economic, environmental, social, and cyber security have come to the fore in national security agendas, alongside military threats. Terrorism continues to be one of the most critical elements of this new security paradigm, and terrorist organizations operating at the global level play a critical role in the security policies of states not only within national borders but also at the international level. The Republic of Türkiye has long been struggling with the internal and external threats posed by the ethnic separatist terrorist organization PKK, and with the deepening of the Syrian crisis, this threat has emerged as a new geopolitical risk area through the PKK's Syrian extension, the PYD/YPG. The political, military, and sociodemographic gains of the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK/KCK structure, have been achieved by exploiting regional power vacuums. The organization's efforts to change the demographic structure under an "autonomous administration" in northern Syria and its attempts to create a terrorist corridor extending to the Mediterranean have been perceived by Türkiye as a vital existential threat. This perception has pushed Türkiye toward a strategic shift, forcing it to move from soft power elements in its security strategies to proactive military interventions. This study provides a comprehensive assessment of how Türkiye's security approach to threats originating in Syria has been shaped within the context of the international political conjuncture.

When defining the terms and scope of the subject, the concept of security, which is central to the study, has historically been approached in different ways by Realist, Critical, Constructivist, and Postmodern approaches in the discipline of international relations. The traditional Realist understanding views the international system as anarchic and defines

security as the capacity of the state to protect its territorial integrity, sovereignty, and national interests through military capabilities. This approach is based on the security dilemma (the efforts of one state to increase its security pose a threat to others). However, this study is based on contemporary theories that do not view security as solely a military dimension, but rather focus on its social and discursive dimensions. While the concept of the nation-state refers to a structure that derives its legitimacy as the fundamental political unit of the modern world from the nation, nationalism has been an important instrument for the sustainability and social cohesion of the nation-state. Ethnicity is a social organization that individuals accept as a 'given' condition from birth, expressing itself through a shared origin myth, language, traditions, and cultural unityIn this context, ethnic issues, which are intrinsically linked to the structure of the nation-state, can be the source of conflicts that threaten national and international security. Separatist nationalism emerges when an ethnic group begins to draw political boundaries for itself and seeks to establish an independent state by exercising its right to self-determination. In the context of this study, the PKK-PYD/YPG structure is defined as an actor that threatens Türkiye's national identity, sociopolitical stability, and sovereignty by operating as an extension of the PKK/KCK regional terrorist network in northern Syria. The ultimate goal of this organization is to establish a Kurdish democratic confederal structure that transcends Türkiye's borders by developing a confederate struggle in four countries (Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, Syria).

To summarize and assess the current situation, the Syrian civil war that began in 2011 has gradually turned into a multidimensional and complex security crisis with the intervention of actors with interests and spheres of influence in the region. Popular uprisings against the Assad regime's oppression and corruption quickly escalated into armed conflict, creating a power vacuum in the north of the country. In this power vacuum, the PYD/YPG rapidly expanded its areas of control as the Assad regime tactically withdrew its forces, and it embarked on an effort to establish de facto administration in northeastern Syria. During this process, the organization gained international legitimacy by being promoted as the most effective ground force in the fight against ISIS, which has further complicated the threat from Türkiye's perspective. The protection of the PYD/YPG by global actors such as the United States (US) and Russia has supported the organization's efforts to become a regional political actor and achieve independence. The US has sought to turn the PYD/YPG into a proxy war actor by providing it with weapons, training, and logistical supportThis process

has provided the US with a legitimate justification for implementing its “Kurdish Corridor” project, which it planned with the aim of controlling energy resources and securing control over their routes. By declaring three cantons—Afrin, Cezire, and Kobani-and creating a historical geographical claim with the term “Rojava,” the PYD/YPG gained the ability to negotiate simultaneously with regional and international actors. Türkiye assessed these developments as a geopolitical risk area where the terrorist threat emerging just outside its borders had become permanent. Türkiye’s fundamental threat perceptions include: the PYD/YPG’s organic ties to the PKK and its potential to inspire separatist movements in Türkiye; efforts to create a terrorist corridor extending to the Mediterranean; claims of demographic change through irregular migration and refugee influx; and the resulting creation of national identity and sociopolitical instability. The support given to this organization by major powers, including NATO allies such as the US and Russia, has created the potential for Türkiye’s security and foreign policy spheres to narrow and for realpolitik contradictions and impasses in the regional security architecture. Türkiye has pursued diplomatic initiatives against these threats but, failing to achieve results, has turned to proactive military operations by exercising its legitimate right to self-defense under international law. These operations aim to contribute to Türkiye’s long-term policy framework of ensuring border security and contributing to regional stability. Türkiye’s operations have disrupted the global and regional plans of terrorist organizations that create chaos in the region..

The significance of the proposed research stems from its in-depth analysis of the impact of a non-state actor (PYD/YPG) emerging in a complex, multi-actor conflict zone such as the Syrian crisis on the national security of Türkiye, a NATO member, and the policies Türkiye has developed in response to this situation. The study analyzes, from a security perspective, the serious contradictions and dilemmas that have emerged in Turkish foreign policy due to the security threats posed by ethnic separatist Kurdish nationalism along the PKK-PYD/YPG axis. It is essential to reveal the implications of these threats for Türkiye’s domestic and foreign policy and future scenarios, as well as to determine the roles of regional and global actors. Furthermore, this thesis builds its theoretical framework on the Copenhagen School’s Securityization Theory and Learning Model, based on the theoretical foundations of the concept of security. The Securitization Theory provides a critical tool for analyzing how a particular issue (the existence of PYD/YPG) is presented as an existential

threat and how this threat legitimizes extraordinary measures (military operations). The emergence of the terrorist organization PYD/YPG as an actor in Syria has been framed by Türkiye as a threat to national identity and sovereignty, and military interventions have been carried out based on this discourse. The Lesson Learning Model examines what lessons Türkiye has drawn from its long historical experience in the fight against the PKK and from regional crises (particularly the Kurdish uprising in northern Iraq), and how these lessons have shaped its Syria policy, thereby helping to understand whether Türkiye's reactions are based on rational grounds. Indeed, in the context of Türkiye's security concerns regarding the PYD/YPG, the Learning Model provides an analytical lens through which other countries' counterterrorism policies (Spain's approach to ETA, Britain's approach to the IRA) can be examined, adapted, and incorporated into Türkiye's strategy. The use of these theoretical approaches provides a comprehensive and in-depth assessment of how Türkiye's security policies are shaped within the context of the international political conjuncture.

The research problem is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the multidimensional effects of the rise of the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK, on Türkiye's national security. Within the framework of this fundamental problem, the following research questions will be addressed: (1) What are the PYD/YPG's emergence as a local actor during the Syrian crisis that began in 2011 and Türkiye's fundamental perceptions of the threat posed by the PYD/YPG's gains in northern Syria? (2) Why have the political, military, economic, and sociodemographic gains of the PYD/YPG been considered an "existential threat" to Türkiye's national security, and how can this threat perception be analyzed within the framework of Security Theory? (3) How have the policies of global actors, primarily the US and Russia, to protect the PYD/YPG forced a change in Türkiye's security strategies (from soft power to proactive military interventions), and how can this change be evaluated in light of the Lessons Learned Model? (4) To what extent have Türkiye's military reactions within the scope of the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring, and Spring Shield operations contributed to Türkiye's long-term policy framework of ensuring border security and contributing to regional stability in the face of the PKK-PYD/YPG threat? (5) What kind of theoretical conflicts and dilemmas has the PKK/KCK-PYD/YPG threat caused in Türkiye's foreign policy based on realist, liberal, and constructive approaches?

The objectives and goals of this research are to provide comprehensive answers to the above research questions and to explain Türkiye's security strategies in the Syrian crisis on a theoretical basis. The aim is to comprehensively reveal the formation of the PYD/YPG threat, how Türkiye perceives this threat, and the military and diplomatic policies (including operations) it has developed in response. The objectives include detailing the PYD/YPG structure's position within the regional terrorist network and its ideological/operational ties, analyzing the effects of global actors' (US, Russia) analyze the effects of the conflicting policies of global actors (the US, Russia) towards the PYD/YPG on Türkiye-West relations, and finally, to present a comprehensive assessment of how Türkiye's long-term national security policy has been shaped in the context of the international political conjuncture. The study also aims to reveal the tension between realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches in Türkiye's foreign policy caused by the PKK-PYD/YPG threat This study contains a hypothesis: The political, military, and sociodemographic gains achieved by the PYD/YPG structure, the Syrian branch of the PKK/KCK, in the context of the 2011 Syrian crisis, were perceived by Türkiye as a vital existential threat to national security. This situation forced Ankara to abandon its traditional security approaches and adopt a proactive security strategy focused on conducting comprehensive military operations in the region and ensuring long-term border security.

The order of the sections in the thesis follows a structure that complies with academic requirements. The study consists of an introduction, followed by five main sections and a conclusion. The second of these sections forms the Conceptual Framework of the thesis. This section examines the theoretical foundations and historical development of the concept of security based on Realist, Critical, Constructivist, and Postmodern approaches. In addition, fundamental concepts that help understand the PKK-PYD/YPG issue, such as the nation-state, the ideology of nationalism, ethnicity, the right to self-determination, and the phenomenon of separatist terrorism, are explored. Understanding the theoretical background of security policies is essential for better analyzing Türkiye's threat perceptions and policies against the PYD/YPG in the Syrian crisis. The concept of security has evolved throughout history from an individual and social dimension to a nation-state-centered structure after the Treaty of Westphalia, but in the 21st century, it has transformed into a multidimensional structure including cyber security, energy security, and terrorism. The conceptual framework examines the role of ethnic identities in the construction of the nation-state, the international

system dimension of ethnic separatism, and how the demand for self-determination has transformed into a demand for the right to secession.

The third chapter consists of the Theoretical Framework. This chapter examines in detail the Security Theory and the Learning Model of the Copenhagen School, which form the fundamental analytical tools of the study. The Securitization Theory examines security as a discursive practice, looking at how an issue becomes depoliticized, politicized, or securitized as an existential threat. By addressing threats in five different sectors—military, political, economic, social, and environmental—the theory allows for an analysis of the multidimensional nature of the threat posed by the PYD/YPG to Türkiye. The Learning Model, on the other hand, examines how policymakers draw conclusions from past experiences and how these are reflected in security policies in the context of the PKK-PYD/YPG. This model will be used to understand how Türkiye adapted its military and political strategies in Syria based on its previous crisis experiences in the region.

The fourth chapter examines the topic of Syria and the Kurds from a historical perspective. This chapter explores the origins and spread of the Kurds in the Middle East, their historical presence in the geography of Syria, and their position in political life from the formation of modern Syria to the 2011 Civil War. This historical background is critical for understanding how the Syrian regime, particularly since the era of Hafez al-Assad, has provided protection to the PKK and how the organization has taken root in Syria.

Chapter Five covers the emergence and spheres of influence of Kurdish separatism in the 2011 Syrian civil war. This chapter focuses on the emergence and development of the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK. The rise of the PYD/YPG as a local actor in the Syrian crisis, the political historical background of the organization, the historical gains of Kurdish separatism on the PKK-PYD axis, and the efforts of the Kurds towards politicization and independence in Syria after 2011 (the concept of Rojava, canton declarations) are examined in detail. This section addresses the PKK's strategy of developing a confederate struggle (KCK structure) that transcends Türkiye's borders since the early 2000s and its organic link to the founding of the PYD.

The sixth and final section examines the areas of concern stemming from the PYD/YPG in the Syrian Crisis, Türkiye's threat perceptions, and its policies. This is the main analytical section of the study. First, it examines how the PYD/YPG was protected by global actors

such as the US and Russia during the civil war and the problems this caused. The multidimensional effects of this protection on Türkiye's security and foreign policy (terror corridor, demographic risks, national identity, and narrowing of domestic/foreign policy areas) are discussed. Subsequently, Türkiye's reactions and policies in response to perceived threats originating from the PYD/YPG are comprehensively evaluated, particularly within the scope of the Euphrates Shield Operation, Olive Branch Operation (OBO), Peace Spring Operation, and Spring Shield Operation military operations. This section also discusses Türkiye's principle of non-interference in sovereignty and internal affairs/the border security paradox and the potential for realpolitik contradictions in the regional security architecture.

Finally, in the last section, Conclusion and Evaluation, the main findings of the study are summarized, a general evaluation is made in light of the answers to the research questions, and policy recommendations for the future are presented.

This comprehensive structure will enable the study to achieve its fundamental objective and provide an opportunity to analyze Türkiye's policies regarding the PYD/YPG threat in depth and based on theoretical foundations. In this context, the thesis aims to examine the rise of the PYD/YPG in the context of the international political conjuncture and securitization practices, revealing the reasons for and consequences of Türkiye's military and diplomatic reactions.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the discipline of international relations, the concept of security is dynamic, necessitating redefinition in the context of historically changing threat perceptions and actors. In this context, the conceptual framework of this study focuses on the theoretical foundations of the understanding of security and examines its relationship with phenomena such as the nation-state, nationalism, and ethnicity. Understanding the theoretical background of security policies is essential for better analyzing Türkiye's threat perceptions and policies against the separatist terrorist organization PKK-PYD/YPG in the Syrian crisis. This section will first address the definition and historical development of the concept of security; then, various approaches to security will be discussed within the theoretical framework.

2.1. What is Security?

The concept of security has evolved over time, acquiring various meanings and definitions as one of humanity's fundamental needs throughout history. Etymologically, the Turkish word "güvenlik," derived from "güven" (trust), conveys the meanings of 'safety' and "protection." In Old Turkish, this concept was used in relation to terms such as "itimat" (trust) and "huzur" (peace) (TDK, 2025). In Western languages, the Latin word 'securitas' stands out; the prefix "se-" carries the meaning of freedom or freedom from worry, while the word "cura" expresses anxiety and worry. Therefore, etymologically, security refers to a state of "freedom from worry" (Neocleous, 2000, p. 42). The meaning of this concept in different civilizations has varied depending on various historical and cultural conditions. In the medieval Arab world, "emniyet" meant protection at both the individual and societal levels, while in Europe, the concept of "security" has generally been associated with the functions of states in maintaining order and authority (Bakan & Şahin, 2018, p. 137).

Linguistic derivatives and shifts in meaning clearly reveal how the concept of "security" has been perceived and defined across different civilizations. From ancient Greece to Rome, from the Islamic world to Chinese and Indian civilizations, and finally to modern Western societies, each civilization has interpreted and redefined this concept according to its own socio-political and cultural conditions. In this regard, it is possible to say that in ancient times, security emerged from individuals' efforts to protect their lives and property, and was

generally evaluated in conjunction with social order, the justice system, and administrative stability. In ancient Greece, security was generally associated with the protection of the state and the welfare of the people. During this period, the security of the state encompassed not only protection from external threats, but also the maintenance of internal order and social peace. In this context, ancient Greek thinkers viewed security as a social necessity. In his work The Republic (Politeia), Plato argued that security, along with justice, was one of the cornerstones of social order. Plato argued that the purpose of the state is to ensure the welfare of society and the just living of individuals, stating that security is possible only through the establishment of justice (Platon, 2004). Aristotle, on the other hand, addresses the concept of security on a more pragmatic level in his work Politics. According to him, the fundamental duty of the state is to protect its citizens from internal and external threats that endanger their lives and to maintain order in society. Aristotle linked security to both internal and external threats, stating that the elimination of evils and threats is the guarantee of state security. Aristotle also emphasized the importance of preserving the social structure for the happiness and virtuous life of individuals, presenting the concept of "polis" as a model of political community where order and security are ensured (Aristotle, 2017, p. 499). In ancient Greece, this approach demonstrated that security was not only physical but also related to the stability of the moral and legal order. Philosophers such as Epicurus and the Stoics viewed individual security as a result of inner peace and virtue. Epicurus argued that people would feel a sense of security by achieving inner peace rather than by protecting themselves against threats from the outside world. According to him, individual security should be achieved through inner tranquility rather than through the physical protection provided by the state (Armstrong, 1997, p. 325). The Stoics, on the other hand, associated security with being in harmony with the universal order of nature. According to the Stoics, people achieve inner peace and security by complying with the laws of nature. This is a fundamental approach to both individual and social security (Russell, 2009, p. 254). Ancient Greek understandings of security laid the foundations for modern concepts of security and have continued to influence many aspects of our world today. In particular, the relationship between internal and external state security remains valid today. Furthermore, the relationship between social order and justice and security is also debated in contemporary political philosophy. Plato and Aristotle's understanding of security has had a significant impact on modern state theories, international relations, and security strategies.

Security in Rome was largely associated with the protection of the empire's borders and military measures taken against external threats. Rome's military power played a critical role in ensuring security. Rome aimed to secure the empire's safety, particularly in border regions, by constructing fortified borders known as "limes" (Dilbaş, 2022, p. 163). These structures were not only a military defense line but also a symbol that reinforced Rome's sovereignty and order. Historians such as Tacitus have extensively discussed Rome's struggles against threats to its borders. In Tacitus' work *Germania*, Rome's military strategy against the Germanic tribes and the effects of this strategy on the security of the empire are explained in detail. Tacitus emphasized Rome's strategy of creating strong borders and defending the local population loyal to Rome (Tacitus, 1944). During the Roman period, security became even more closely linked to the legal system. The concept of "Pax Romana" (Roman Peace) referred not only to the peace, tranquility, and order of Roman citizens, but also to all communities within the empire's borders. During this period, the security of individuals was considered one of the fundamental duties of the state, and Roman law provided an important framework for the protection of individual rights and the maintenance of social stability (Azimov & Ravshanov, 2021, p. 284).

The Islamic world has also offered a unique interpretation of the concept of security. In Islamic thought, security (eman) is approached holistically, encompassing not only the provision of physical security but also fundamental principles such as the protection of faith, property, and the preservation of the lineage. For example, in his work El-Medinetü'l-Fazıla (The Virtuous City), the Islamic thinker Al-Farabi describes the ideal state structure, presenting the provision of security and justice as a condition for the existence of a virtuous society (Farabi, 1990). Ibn Khaldun, in his work Mukaddime, states that the main reason for the existence of the state is to protect society from internal and external threats, thereby ensuring the continuity of public order and welfare (Ibn Khaldun, 2004, p. 239). Similarly, in Eastern civilizations, especially in the Chinese world, the concept of security has taken shape with different meanings. In Chinese thought, within the framework of Confucius' understanding of social order, security is linked to the fair maintenance of hierarchical relationships, the virtue of rulers, and adherence to the principles of "li" (ritual, order). According to Confucius, the virtuous attitude of rulers will increase the people's trust in the state and ensure social peace (Fettahoğlu, 2004, p. 312). Similarly, thinkers such as Mencius

have stated that true security is not possible in an environment where social harmony and justice cannot be achieved (Dy Jr, 2015, p. 154).

In medieval Europe, security emerged as a concept largely shaped by the feudal system. During this period, the security of individuals fell under the responsibility of feudal lords. Feudalism entrusted the task of protecting individuals' lives and property to landowners, in return demanding loyalty from individuals. On the other hand, the church, as the central authority of spiritual security, played an important role in maintaining social order (Özdemir, 2014, p. 845). During this period, when the feudal structure was dominant, the need for protection of individuals was met by feudal lords, and this situation was closely related to economic and social conditions. In the Middle Ages, when agricultural societies were predominant, the concept of security meant not only protection from physical threats for peasants, but also ensuring the continuity of basic life resources. Thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas approached the concept of security in the Middle Ages not only as a worldly necessity, but also with a metaphysical approach, evaluating it as a reflection of divine order. Aquinas viewed human life and social order as an integral part of a divine plan and, in this vein, defined security within a moral and religious context. This approach demonstrates that security does not merely mean protection from physical threats, but is a broader concept aimed at ensuring the spiritual peace of individuals and social justice. According to Aquinas, social peace and justice were prerequisites for meeting individuals' need for security. In this context, justice could be achieved not only through law and order but also through the preservation of moral and religious values. Arguing that neither individual nor social security could be sustainable in a society without justice, Aquinas therefore closely linked the concept of security to moral virtues. According to him, individuals' need for security had to be satisfied physically, spiritually, and morally. For example, it was not enough for an individual to be free from physical threats; they also needed to have spiritual balance and a life in accordance with the divine order in order to live peacefully. In Aquinas's thinking, the relationship between security and the divine order is particularly noteworthy. The divine order is not only a force that shapes people's lives, but also the cornerstone of social order. In this context, security is provided through individuals' faith in God and the social structures shaped by this faith (Kömür, 2019, p. 173).

Modern security thinking gained prominence as the concept moved beyond its individual and societal dimensions and adopted a state-centric character in the modern era. The Peace

of Westphalia, signed in 1648, laid the foundation of the nation-state system and made security one of the state's primary responsibilities. During this period, security largely referred to protection against external threats, supported by military strategies and foreign policy considerations. In his seminal work Leviathan, Thomas Hobbes defined security as the very raison d'être of the state, arguing that individuals escape the chaos of the state of nature by relinquishing certain rights and obeying a sovereign authority (Hobbes, 1992, p. 127). Hobbes posited that individuals must submit to a higher authority in order to be protected from the disorder inherent in the natural condition, thereby framing the need for security as the legitimate basis of the modern state. This state-centric understanding of security gained widespread acceptance within the discipline of international relations and was further reinforced by realist theories. The protection of national borders, military strengthening, and the principle of deterrence in foreign policy constituted the fundamental security strategies of the modern period.

The 20th century is notable as a period in which the concept of security was addressed within the framework of national interests and military strategies. During the Cold War, within the context of realist theories, the concept of national security became synonymous with the protection of states against external threats. During this period, power balance policies between blocs, defense strategies, and military technologies were at the forefront (Buzan, 1983, p. 44). In the post-Cold War era, however, other dimensions such as economic, environmental, and human security came to the fore, and it was recognized that security was not solely state-centered and that individuals also have security needs. Barry Buzan discussed this new understanding in his work People, States and Fear, arguing that security is a multidimensional concept (Buzan, 1983, p. 22). By the 21st century, the concept of security has evolved into a multidimensional and comprehensive structure. Globalization, technological developments, and transnational threats have expanded its scope, bringing new areas to the forefront. Cybersecurity, energy security, and environmental threats are among the leading areas of concern today. At the same time, terrorism has emerged as one of the most critical issues in states' security policies (Önen & Jane, 2023, p. 57). The role of international organizations (such as the United Nations and NATO) has also gained importance in shaping security policies, while the pursuit of solutions tailored to regional conditions has increased the complexity of this field.

Today, security is approached within a multidimensional framework. The traditional understanding of national security has expanded to include broader approaches such as human security, economic security, and environmental security. This modern perspective necessitates more flexible and pluralistic policies aimed at enhancing the quality of life for individuals and communities. At the same time, rapidly evolving technological infrastructures and the process of globalization have increased the dimensions and complexity of security. In particular, cyber threats emerging alongside digitalization have significantly transformed contemporary security perceptions. These threats, ranging from the protection of personal data to interstate information warfare, compel both individuals and institutions to continuously develop new defense mechanisms. Cyberattacks are now considered among the factors threatening national security, prompting many countries to establish cybersecurity units and strengthen preventive measures in this domain (Karasoy & Gezici, 2023, p. 177). In addition, environmental threats such as climate change and natural disasters are also reshaping the concept of security. Issues such as the depletion of water resources, the endangerment of food security, and the destruction of natural habitats have highlighted the necessity for states to develop strategies not only against military threats but also against environmental risks. Consequently, environmental security has become an area that necessitates both national policies and international cooperation.

Terrorism, which is also the main focus of this thesis, continues to be one of the most critical components of the contemporary security paradigm. Globally active terrorist organizations create security vulnerabilities not only within national borders but also at the international level. The threats posed by terrorism involve not only violence but also economic instability and societal fear. Therefore, inter-state cooperation and regional security agreements play a key role in combating terrorism. Terrorism can be defined as a phenomenon that directly threatens human security. Terrorist acts violate fundamental human rights, endanger the physical safety of individuals, generate fear and anxiety within society, disrupt social stability, and negatively affect everyday life (Abubaker, 2021). Strict security policies implemented by states in the context of counterterrorism may sometimes restrict individual rights and freedoms, thereby negatively impacting human security. Consequently, adopting a human security approach in counterterrorism efforts is crucial for the protection of fundamental rights and liberties.. In this context, human security represents another important dimension of modern security. The need to protect individuals' fundamental rights

and freedoms, and to address threats in areas such as health, education, and economic well-being, has brought the concept of human security to the center of international security discussions (Okolie, 2022, p. 251). This approach moves beyond the traditional state-centered view of security, placing individuals and communities at the core of security policies. As a result, security has become one of the most debated concepts in the discipline of international relations, defined in various ways by different theoretical approaches. Traditionally, security was evaluated as a state's capacity to protect its territorial integrity, sovereignty, and national interests against external threats (Wolfers, 1952, pp. 485–486). This perspective interprets security primarily through military capabilities, deterrence strategies, and the survival of the state. However, after the Cold War, the field of security began to be assessed in a broader spectrum that goes beyond the military dimension, including economic, environmental, societal, human, and cyber security (Buzan, 1983, pp. 19–20).

As noted above, according to Barry Buzan, the expanded concept of security involves countering or mitigating threats directed at a specific referent object—most often the state, but also society, individuals, or ecological systems. Within this approach, security ceases to be a unidimensional concept and becomes a multilayered field of analysis (Buzan, 1983, pp. 26–27). Accordingly, the theoretical foundations of security studies have also broadened, drawing from various theoretical frameworks, including realism, critical security studies, constructivist approaches, and postmodern perspectives.

2.1.1. Realist Conception of Security

The realist approach to security originates from realism, one of the fundamental theoretical approaches in the discipline of international relations. According to this approach, the international system is anarchic in nature, and states must ensure their security in order to protect their own existence. The fundamental assumptions of realism are strongly presented in Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan, which argues that human nature is self-interested and competitive. Hobbes paints a pessimistic picture of the basic characteristics of human nature, arguing that individuals are inclined to pursue their innate interests and compete with others. This situation brings with it a "state of nature" in which individuals live in a constant environment of conflict and insecurity (Hobbes, 1992, pp. 102-103). Hobbes' views express

that even if individuals are rational, they are constantly striving for protection and superiority due to their distrust of one another.

Hobbes' famous statement succinctly summarizes this situation: "Man is wolf to man" (homo homini lupus) (Hobbes, 1992, p. 11). This statement reveals that human nature has the potential to pose a threat both to oneself and to one's surroundings, and therefore individuals must always act cautiously. According to Hobbes, in the state of nature, people cannot be certain of either the intentions of others or the consequences of their actions (Hobbes, 1992, p. 93). This uncertainty forces individuals to live in a constant state of conflict, and escape from this environment is only possible by submitting to a powerful authority—Hobbes's "Leviathan." Hobbes' understanding of the "state of nature" argues that individuals are compelled to accumulate power not only to survive physically but also to ensure their own security. In this context, power is used as a tool both to protect oneself from attack and to deter others. The accumulation of power is directly related to individuals' innate survival instinct, creating a constant sense of competition and threat.

Hobbes' predictions largely coincide with the fundamental views of realism in international relations theory. According to realism, the anarchic structure of the international system, i.e., the absence of a central authority, pushes states into a situation similar to the conflict and insecurity experienced by individuals in the state of nature (Tokatlı, 2022, p. 137). Just as individuals strive to survive by accumulating power, states also seek to accumulate power and maximize their own interests in order to ensure their security. This situation gives rise to an international system in which states cannot trust each other, interests clash, and war is sometimes inevitable.

Realism prioritizes the security needs of states as the primary concern. According to this perspective, the anarchic international system, due to the absence of a central authority, holds states responsible for their own security. States can use any means, including force, to maximize their interests and ensure their security against external threats. In this context, Hans Morgenthau emphasized the central role of power and interests in international politics. Morgenthau explains how states act to maximize their interests through the concept of "power politics" (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 14). According to Morgenthau, international relations are a system based on power struggles, and accumulating power is essential for survival in this struggle. From this perspective, the state of anarchy in the international system is accepted as an insoluble reality. Morgenthau's views on this subject argue that

security is a state-based struggle for interests and that foreign policy can be reduced to a quest for power. In an anarchic system, states must create self-sufficient power because they cannot trust any other authority. Therefore, he believes that international conflicts and war are inevitable. Morgenthau's view that security has become the fundamental goal of foreign policy for the protection of a nation's interests is a very critical point.

The realist approach considers the anarchic structure of the international system as a given and argues that it is inevitable for states to rely on their own power in the struggle for survival. The nature of the anarchic system necessitates strategic alliances based on the balance of power. Hans Morgenthau's assertion that "the preservation of the balance of power is a critical mechanism for preventing war" highlights the central role of realism in efforts to maintain international peace and stability. Kenneth Waltz, on the other hand, made a significant contribution to international relations theory by reshaping realism and developing the structural approach known as neorealism. Neorealism focuses on the structural characteristics of the international system, explaining state behavior based on the nature of the system rather than the preferences of individuals or leaders. Waltz emphasized the determining role of the anarchic structure and the distribution of power in the international system on security dynamics, thereby deepening the analytical framework of international relations (Waltz, 1979, p. 188).According to neorealism, the anarchic nature of the international system—that is, the absence of a central authority—is the fundamental factor shaping state behavior. Anarchy leaves states solely responsible for their own security, creating a constant potential for competition and conflict in international relations. In Waltz's view, understanding state behavior requires focusing exclusively on the structure of the international system. In this context, the distribution of power within the system directly affects the alliances states form, the methods they employ, and the security strategies they adopt.

Waltz's neorealist thought clarifies two fundamental structures within the international system: bipolar and multipolar systems (Waltz, 1979, p. 163). In a bipolar system, power is shared between two main actors, resulting in a more stable structure. Waltz argued that bipolar systems reduce uncertainty and provide a more predictable balance of power due to the limited number of major actors (Waltz, 1979, p. 163). The Cold War period can undoubtedly be considered an example of a bipolar system, in which the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union was clearly defined. During this time, the

international system being dominated by two major actors increased stability and contributed to the prevention of direct conflict. In contrast, multipolar systems are characterized by the presence of several major powers, which makes the international system more complex and fragile. Alliances in multipolar systems tend to shift more frequently, and the balance of power continuously evolves in an environment of uncertainty. Such systems create conditions that increase the risk of conflict. For instance, the multipolar system in 19th-century Europe can be considered a significant factor contributing to the outbreak of World War I..

In Waltz's theory, anarchy and the distribution of power within the international system play a fundamental role in determining states' security strategies. As a consequence of the anarchic structure, states are compelled to act according to the principle of self-help to ensure their own security. This implies that states cannot rely on other actors and must assume full responsibility for safeguarding their own security. Waltz argued that the structural characteristics of the international system influence state behavior more significantly than individual choices. Therefore, understanding international relations cannot be achieved solely by examining states' domestic politics or the personal inclinations of their leaders; rather, the overall structure of the international system and the distribution of power must be analyzed. For instance, in a bipolar system, a state's position relative to the other major power constitutes the primary factor shaping its foreign policy and security strategy (Kocs, 1994)..

The explanatory power of neorealism is particularly evident in the context of the Cold War. During this period, the international system was characterized by a bipolar structure based on the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. The bipolar system prevented direct conflict and created a relatively stable environment through the mutual balancing of the two superpowers. Waltz explained this balance by emphasizing the more predictable and controllable nature of bipolar systems. In contrast, it has been argued that in multipolar systems, maintaining a balance of power is more difficult, rendering the international system more fragile (Yalçın, 2015, pp. 213–214). In this context, large-scale conflicts caused by multipolar systems, such as the First and Second World Wars, support the explanatory power of Waltz's theory..

Although neorealism provides a strong theoretical framework for the discipline of international relations, it has also been subject to criticism. Critics argue that Waltz

overlooks the internal dynamics of individuals and states, and therefore cannot fully account for the complexity of international relations. For instance, a state's domestic politics, ideological preferences, or leadership structure can significantly influence its foreign policy and security strategy. However, Waltz chose to focus on the structural characteristics of the system rather than individual or domestic factors, offering a broader, systemic analysis. In this context, neorealism continues to emphasize the determining impact of the structural features of the international system and the distribution of power on state behavior. Waltz's neorealist framework holds a significant place in the study of international relations, particularly for understanding critical historical periods such as the Cold War and its aftermath.

At the core of the realist understanding of security lies a security dilemma in which states' struggle for survival is central. According to this dilemma, a state's efforts to enhance its own security may be perceived as a threat by other states (Tang, 2009, p. 594). For instance, an arms buildup by one state can trigger similar measures in neighboring states, leading to a regional arms race. This situation results in a mutual weakening of security (Jervis, 1978, p. 169). Realism therefore emphasizes the strategic importance of military alliances and defense expenditures. In this context, international military alliances such as NATO hold a significant place within realist theory. The realist approach to security also posits that states often act in a domain where their interests conflict with those of other actors. This necessitates the maintenance of a balance of power in international politics. According to Morgenthau, balancing policies play a critical role in preventing violent conflicts within the international system (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 131). This understanding of security particularly shaped much of the international security policies during the Cold War. During this period, the strategic balance between the United States and the Soviet Union demonstrated the practical significance of realist theory.

Critiques of realism argue that the theory is overly state-centric and neglects the security of individuals. These criticisms emphasize that the concept of security should not be considered solely within the framework of states' struggle for survival but should also encompass the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals. Despite such critiques, the realist understanding of security continues to maintain its relevance, particularly during periods of crisis highlighted by the anarchic nature of the international system. The prominence of realist theory during major conflict periods, such as the Cold War, demonstrates its

continued centrality in the international system. However, feminist, critical, and postcolonial approaches seek to situate realist theory within a broader framework, advocating for a multidimensional and inclusive understanding of security.

2.1.2. Critical Security Approach

The critical security approach emerged in the second half of the 20th century as a response to criticisms of traditional security approaches and has since become an important paradigm within the discipline of international relations. This approach challenges the conventional security paradigm by arguing that security is subjective and multidimensional. Particularly following the end of the Cold War, it emphasizes that the concept of security should be addressed from a broader perspective. While traditional approaches typically focus on states' efforts to protect their national borders, critical security theorists argue that this perspective neglects the interests of individuals and communities. This approach asserts that security cannot be considered solely in terms of military threats or national interests, but requires a much broader analytical framework. The theoretical foundation of this approach was shaped in the 1980s by critical schools such as the Copenhagen School and the Welsh School, contributing to its academic development. Barry Buzan, one of the founders of the Copenhagen School, argued that security discussions cannot focus exclusively on the interests of the nation-state and that social, economic, and environmental threats must also be considered (Buzan, 1983, p. 25). According to Buzan, a narrow definition of security is insufficient for understanding the international system and overlooks the insecurities experienced by individuals. Ole Wæver, drawing attention to social construction processes, emphasizes that what is considered a security issue is often a subjective process determined by political leaders and elites (Wæver, 1995, pp. 57–58). For Wæver, when an issue is securitized, it is defined as a crisis for society, allowing the state to exercise extraordinary powers. This approach exposes the subjective nature of security policies and reconsiders the social and political role of security..

Today, the critical security approach aims to address security issues within a comprehensive framework that goes beyond traditional perspectives. The multidimensional view proposed by thinkers such as Buzan and Wæver extends security beyond the military domain to encompass the interests of individuals, communities, and ecosystems. Central to this

approach is the question of for whom or for what security should be provided. Unlike traditional approaches, it places individuals and communities at the center of security policies. Ken Booth of the Welsh School, drawing attention to human security, argued that security should aim to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of people. According to Booth, state-centered security neglects individuals' welfare and basic human needs, thereby undermining the true meaning of security (Booth, 1991, p. 319). The critical security approach thus seeks to enhance individuals' quality of life and ensure that societies can live in a violence-free order.

The Copenhagen School examines the social construction (securitization) processes of security, emphasizing that the identification of security issues is entirely subjective. The school suggests that security can be manipulated through state and elite power politics. According to Wæver, the transformation of an issue into a security problem occurs within the framework of societal debate (Wæver, 1995, p. 51). Consequently, security is not only concerned with neutralizing threats but also closely linked to the production and perception of threats.

At the core of the critical security approach is a challenge to traditional state-centered security perceptions. Richard Wyn Jones argued that the concept of security should be de-hierarchized and redefined at the individual level. According to Wyn Jones, existing international security frameworks prioritize hegemonic and violence-based approaches, which fail to address the insecurity experienced in people's everyday lives (Jones, 1999, p. 114). Critical security has further expanded under the influence of feminist and postcolonial approaches. Feminist theorists argue that traditional security approaches are male-centered and thus insufficiently address the unique insecurities experienced by women. Cynthia Enloe contends that security has been shaped from a male-centered perspective and that security policies are insensitive to the economic, social, and political insecurities faced by women. Issues such as war, militarization, and international conflict are often addressed while overlooking women's roles and experiences (Enloe, 2014, pp. 31–32). Feminist security studies aim to deepen the analysis of such conditions, including the impacts of militarization on daily life, women's positions in the labor market, and experiences of sexual violence during conflict.

Similarly, Laura Sjoberg notes that feminist security studies aim to reveal the security threats faced by women in a male-dominated international system. Sjoberg highlights the

differentiated impacts of war and conflict on women, which are often excluded from traditional security policies (Sjoberg, 2013, pp. 47–48). Gender-based violence experienced by women during both peace and conflict periods constitutes a core theme of feminist security theory. These approaches underscore that women's security needs differ from those of men, and that these differences must be recognized in international policy.

Feminist critiques serve as a call to reconsider the influence of gender on security policies. For example, Ann Tickner points out that international security studies are structured as a male-dominated discipline, and women's experiences are insufficiently represented. According to Tickner, security cannot be achieved solely through states' military capabilities; rather, it requires a broader understanding encompassing individual welfare, equality, and social justice (Tickner, 1992, p. 28)..

Postcolonial feminist perspectives further deepen these critiques. Gayatri Spivak argues that the security needs of women in the Global South are often overshadowed by Western-centric security approaches. She contends that security threats faced by women in postcolonial societies stem from imperialist policies and their continuing effects (Spivak, 1988, p. 288). These perspectives advocate for a more inclusive and equitable restructuring of international security studies. Feminist security studies, in this sense, analyze traditional security approaches through a gender lens, foregrounding the security needs of women and marginalized groups. They aim not only to highlight women's issues but also to understand the roles and needs of all disadvantaged groups, calling for a more inclusive conceptualization of security.

Postcolonial approaches generally aim to move the concept of security beyond a Western-centric perspective and to develop it as a more inclusive framework. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism argues that the West typically positions less developed societies as the "Other" and formulates security policies that disregard their interests (Said, 1978, p. 58). According to Said, such policies are shaped by a perspective that centers exclusively on Western security concerns while excluding the socio-economic and cultural contexts of the Global South. For example, counterterrorism policies have often resulted in military interventions and repressive measures that damage the economic and social structures of communities in less developed countries. Within the postcolonial security framework, Gayatri Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" further deepens postcolonial security critiques. Spivak contends that Western hegemonic security approaches fail to understand the security

needs of postcolonial societies because they ignore the inequalities shaped by historical colonial contexts (Spivak, 1988, p. 271). In this regard, she argues that Western-centered security policies constitute a continuation of imperialism and neglect the development and social stability needs of the Global South. For instance, environmental policies implemented by the West have often adversely affected agricultural production and local economies in less developed countries.

Homi Bhabha has contributed to postcolonial security approaches through his concept of "hybridity." According to Bhabha, the interdependence between the West and the East necessitates that security policies take cultural and social differences into account. However, existing Western-centric policies often suppress these differences, attempting to create a homogeneous understanding of security (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). In this context, Bhabha's approach advocates for a rethinking of security policies in a more flexible manner that is responsive to local dynamics.

Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" extends postcolonial critiques of security to a new dimension. According to Mbembe, Western security policies often have a repressive structure that violates the right to life of communities in certain regions. Necropolitics argues that security policies are used as a tool to serve Western interests in determining which lives are deemed worth protecting (Mbembe, 2003, p. 29). For example, immigration policies and border security measures have restricted the freedom of movement of specific communities in the name of Western security. In short, postcolonial approaches call for redefining security not merely as a tool serving Western interests but as a concept that promotes global equality and justice. These critiques emphasize that security is not only a military issue but is also directly connected to economic, social, and environmental justice. Postcolonial theorists maintain that Western-centered security policies must be critically assessed in the context of historical colonialism and contemporary global inequalities. Consequently, critical security perspectives argue that security should not be understood solely as a military matter but should encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from individuals and communities to ecological systems. This approach underscores the need to approach security from a more inclusive and pluralistic perspective, inviting a reevaluation of traditional understandings.

2.1.3. Constructivist Security Understanding

Constructivist security understanding is based on the fundamental assumptions of social constructivist theory, which emerged in the discipline of international relations particularly in the last quarter of the 20th century as an alternative to traditional theories. This approach argues that the international system does not possess a fixed, unchanging, and objective structure; rather, it is continuously reshaped through the perceptions, identities, and mutual interactions of international actors. The concept of security is also treated as part of this dynamic structure, and Constructivist theory maintains that understanding security solely through objective threats and military power balances is insufficient. By emphasizing that security is a phenomenon constructed through social and cultural processes, this approach highlights the critical role played by normative structures, ideological contexts, and historical experiences in determining security policies (Birdişli & Başurgan, 2017, p. 62).

One of the most prominent contributions of Constructivist theory to international security studies is Alexander Wendt's 1992 article titled "Anarchy is What States Make of It." In this work, Wendt argues that the anarchic structure of the international system is shaped by how states perceive and respond to it, presenting a strong alternative to the structure-based analyses of realism and liberalism. According to Wendt, anarchy is not an immutable feature of the system but a structure that gains meaning through states' interactions and perceptions. Within this framework, dynamics such as friendship, cooperation, or hostility in interstate relations are shaped not only by material power balances but also by social norms, identities, and historical contexts (Wendt, 1992, p. 417).

Constructivist security understanding does not limit the concept of security to military threats alone; instead, it asserts that security is constructed through social and cultural interactions. This approach argues that security threats are not merely physical but also shaped by societal perceptions, norms, and identities. A state's perception of another state as a threat cannot be explained solely by military capacity or power balance; such perceptions depend on how historical relations between the two states have evolved and how social norms and identities shape current interactions (Güner, 2008, pp. 13–14). Emanuel Adler's emphasis on this issue is significant. Adler defines security not only as a balance of military forces but also as a reflection of social norms and identities (Adler, 1997). This observation demonstrates the need to go beyond traditional analyses in security studies and

develop a more comprehensive understanding informed by other branches of the social sciences.

Norms and identities form the core components of Constructivist security understanding. How states position themselves in the international system, how they define themselves, and how they structure their relations with others play a central role in shaping security policies. For example, NATO's post–Cold War enlargement can be interpreted not only as a military strategy but also as an expression of Western identity. Shared values, norms, and identities among NATO members have become fundamental elements shaping the alliance's security understanding. In this context, NATO's enlargement has functioned not only as a military security strategy but also as a mechanism reinforcing shared Western norms and identity. The argument that threat perceptions are not fixed but can vary based on social and ideological contexts is one of the key claims of Constructivist theory (Ercan & Altındağ, 2023, p. 154). A state's perception of another state as a threat often depends less on its military capacity and more on its ideological and historical positioning. The threat perception between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War was clearly not based solely on military power balances; it was constructed through deep ideological differences and historically evolved hostility. Even after the end of the Cold War, the persistence or evolution of certain threat perceptions reveals the continuing influence of ideological and historical contexts. Likewise, global threat perceptions regarding terrorism are shaped not only by violent acts but also by the identities and ideological objectives of terrorist groups and by how the international community interprets these threats.

Wendt argues that states with similar identities and shared norms exhibit lower levels of threat perception toward one another. In this context, the low level of threat perception among European Union member states results from deeply institutionalized common identities and norms. The European integration process has formed a security community built on shared values and norms, fundamentally transforming the security understanding among EU members. Thomas Risse evaluates the EU integration process as one of the best examples of the transformative impact of norms and shared values on security (Risse, 2010, p. 37). According to Risse, peace and stability in Europe are grounded not in military deterrence but in normative cooperation and identity-building. This example illustrates how Constructivist security theory explains the influence of normative structures on international security policies.

Constructivist security understanding argues that norms and identities guide states' foreign policy behaviors and shape interactions within the international system (Küçük, 2009, p. 776). Norms serve as fundamental guidelines for how states act in international relations. For example, respect for human rights has increasingly become an important international norm influencing state security policies. A state's stance toward human rights violations is not merely a moral position but also a reflection of international norms, and this can shape security policy decisions. The European Union's external security policies—formed around normative values—serve as a strong example of this dynamic.

Dialogue and cooperation also lie at the heart of Constructivist security understanding (Mikail & Aytekin, 2016, p. 343). This approach argues that conflicts in the international system can be resolved not only through military means but also through normative interactions and diplomatic processes. Post–Cold War arms reduction agreements between the United States and Russia represent clear examples of such normative interactions. Similarly, negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program reflect the Constructivist emphasis on international cooperation and dialogue. Constructivist theory asserts that conflicts cannot be resolved solely through the use of force; instead, long-term solutions can be achieved through diplomatic processes structured around shared norms and values. Therefore, normative cooperation and diplomacy are increasingly emphasized within international security studies.

In conclusion, Constructivist security understanding offers a perspective that argues the concept of security in international relations is shaped through social and cultural interactions. Shaped significantly by Alexander Wendt's works, this understanding highlights that security is not a fixed phenomenon but one continuously constructed through social norms, identities, and interactions. This approach provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding international security policies and generating more inclusive solutions. Constructivist security theory broadens the analytical perspective in security studies by enabling states to reconsider their roles and relationships within the international system, drawing attention to the importance of norms, identities, and cultural interactions in achieving international peace and stability.

2.1.4. Postmodern Security Understanding

The term postmodernism first emerged in the 1930s, but it began to be used more widely in the 1950s and 1960s to explain the cultural transformations taking place in the Western world. By the late 1970s, the concept had gained a firm place within social theory and attracted increasing academic interest (Yılmaz, 2023). Postmodernism presents a critical stance toward the objective and definitive scientific methods that form the foundation of traditional scientific understanding, particularly in the social sciences. This perspective argues that reality is not an absolute and universal phenomenon; rather, it can be perceived differently depending on context, cultural structures, and prevailing conditions. The term postmodernity became more clearly defined with Jean-François Lyotard's report published in 1979, which had a significant impact on academic literature. In this work, Lyotard asserted that the grand narratives (meta-narratives), universal ideologies, and utopian approaches characteristic of the modernist period had lost their validity. According to Lyotard, the postmodern era represents a shift away from such comprehensive and totalizing discourses toward a period defined by fragmented, pluralistic, and localized narratives (Lyotard, 2013, p. 17). His definition became a central reference point in postmodernism studies and remained at the core of academic debates for many years. However, there is still no academic consensus on how postmodernism and postmodernity should be defined. These concepts are interpreted and used differently across various disciplines and theoretical approaches. One of the most striking features of postmodernism is its radical critique of modernism's understanding of knowledge and scientific methods (Yurdakul, 2020, p. 15). This approach foregrounds uncertainty, pluralism, and relativism rather than the pursuit of absolute accuracy and certainty in the processes of knowledge production. This perspective opened the door to new debates across both the social sciences and other academic fields, encouraging the search for alternative paradigms.

Postmodern security understanding adopts a critical perspective toward traditional and modern approaches within international relations and security studies, arguing that the concept of security does not possess a fixed, universal, or objective meaning. This understanding is shaped by the theoretical contributions of postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman, Jacques Derrida, Achille Mbembe, and others. Postmodernism, particularly in the second half of the 20th century, became influential in

many areas of the social sciences and evolved into a significant paradigm within international relations. Foucault's postmodern perspective is shaped by questioning traditional knowledge and power relations. Rejecting the totalizing discourses of modernity, he emphasizes the interaction between knowledge and power. According to Foucault, power is pervasive across all areas, particularly through language and disciplinary mechanisms, and it shapes processes of subject formation. From a postmodern standpoint, instead of fixed and universal truths, the existence of multiple realities grounded in local and historical contexts is emphasized (Foucault, 2015, pp. 173–174). Bauman defines postmodernism as a social order characterized by uncertainty and fluidity arising from individuals' mistrust of rigid social structures and norms. The hallmark of postmodernism is the rejection of absolute truths and grand narratives, and the elevation of temporary and multiple realities. In this era, individuals continuously reconstruct their identities and meanings, while social structures become more fragmented and fluid. According to Bauman, individuals in postmodern society seek freedom and identity but must confront uncertainty and a sense of disorientation in the process (Bauman, 2011). Within this framework, security is no longer understood solely as the protection of state borders and sovereignty but as a broader concept encompassing the security of individuals, communities, and even environmental elements.

One of the fundamental propositions of the postmodern understanding of security is the role that security plays in the reproduction of power structures. The works of Michel Foucault have been instrumental in shaping this perspective. Foucault treats security as a technique of governance and analyzes how security policies are used by states to regulate society and increase control over individuals. His concept of "biopolitics" provides a critical framework for understanding how modern states manage and supervise the lives of individuals. While biopolitics refers to the ways in which the state administers and regulates the population, security policies emerge as one of the main instruments within this biopolitical framework (Birol, 2024). Through security policies, states regulate individuals' bodies, movements, and living spaces; in this process, security appears on the one hand as a tool for protecting society, while on the other hand it transforms into a mechanism that restricts individual freedoms. For instance, areas such as migration policies, public health measures, quarantine practices, and urban planning constitute biopolitical interventions that restrict individuals' living spaces on the basis of security concerns. Such interventions generally aim to maintain

social order, control elements perceived as potential threats, and reinforce the legitimacy of state power.

In addition to Foucault, Jacques Derrida's concept of aporia refers to a philosophical impasse—an irresolvable duality (Derrida, 1982, p. 43). In the context of security, aporia reveals the contradictory approaches to defining security, as security is a concept that carries both the potential to protect and the potential to threaten, thereby generating constant ambiguity. This contradictory structure not only deepens the internal tensions of the strategies and policies employed to ensure security but also underscores the persistent tension between security and freedom. This paradox brings to the forefront the delicate balance between security and liberty and questions the impact of security policies on social justice (Derrida, 2005, p. 46). Derrida's approach shows that security is not merely a concept limited to the elimination of external threats but must also be understood as a reflection of internal power relations. Questions such as how security policies shape individuals' living spaces, which groups are deemed worthy of protection, and which groups are marginalized lie at the heart of the postmodern understanding of security.

Postmodern security understanding asserts that security is shaped by social and historical contexts. Security policies are influenced not only by current threats but also by historical processes, colonial legacies, and societal dynamics (Kryvyzyuk et al., 2021, p. 89). For example, counterterrorism policies in Western countries are not only aimed at eliminating terrorism; they also function to maintain control over certain ethnic, religious, or cultural groups. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, such practices spread rapidly across the Western world, leading to the systematic targeting of marginalized groups such as Muslim communities. This demonstrates that security policies respond not only to physical threats but also serve as tools of societal control and marginalization. Mbembe's concept of necropolitics questions state practices that marginalize specific groups especially within the contexts of war, border policies, and migration (Mbembe, 2003, p. 27). For instance, the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean illustrate how Western border security policies affect human life. In this respect, border security policies function not only to ensure national security but also to ignore, devalue, or endanger the lives of certain groups. Necropolitics conceptualizes security as a dividing line between life and death and shows how this line becomes a tool of political power.

Postmodern security understanding emphasizes that traditional security policies often overlook the security needs of marginalized groups. In this regard, the postmodern approach interacting with feminist and environmental theories—seeks to conceptualize security within a more inclusive and multidimensional framework. As noted in earlier discussions of critical security studies, feminist security research argues that security has predominantly been analyzed from a male-centered perspective and that women's experiences have been neglected. Environmental theories argue that security cannot be understood solely as a human-centered concept. Issues such as climate change, global warming, environmental disasters, and depletion of natural resources represent risks that must be reconsidered within the postmodern security framework. Environmental security concerns not only the security of states and individuals but also the sustainability of ecosystems and the planet itself. Simon Dalby argues that environmental security policies should aim not only at protecting the environment but also at ensuring sustainable development for societies (Dalby, 2008, pp. 185–186). In this context, environmental threats should be analyzed not only as ecological issues but also within the framework of social justice and human rights. For example, people displaced due to climate change are classified as "environmental migrants," creating a new category of security concern and opening new areas for inquiry regarding how international security policies respond to environmental dynamics.

In conclusion, postmodern security understanding argues that security is not merely about eliminating threats but also about protecting social justice and individual freedoms. Security policies must be implemented without violating fundamental rights and liberties. Thus, the balance between security and freedom lies at the heart of postmodern security understanding. For instance, the USA Patriot Act introduced after the September 11 attacks expanded surveillance and monitoring mechanisms over individuals' private lives, illustrating how freedoms can be restricted in the name of security. Postmodern security understanding criticizes such practices and advocates that security policies must be evaluated within the framework of social justice and human rights.

2.2. Conceptual Perspective on the Nation-State, Nationalism, and Ethnicity

Before analyzing separatist Kurdish movements, it is essential to examine the concepts that give meaning to this phenomenon. Each of these concepts—while containing certain

inherent contradictions—constitutes key elements for deciphering the roots of the Kurdish separatist issue. When the interconnected nature of these concepts is considered, beginning with the notions of nation and nation-state is necessary. When the nation-state is examined as a sociopolitical phenomenon, the presence of shared symbols within its structure is of great importance for its acceptance in social, political, and economic dimensions. The nation-state, by uniting various groups under a single political authority, embodies elements such as one state, one nation, one flag, and one homeland. In addition to these, the presence of a common language and shared collective symbols is crucial for ensuring the resolution of societal instability, political challenges, and social issues within the framework of societal harmony.

2.2.1. The Nation-State System as a Modern Concept and Its Relationship with the Ideology of Nationalism

When examining the emergence of the nation-state, two fundamental elements stand out as especially significant. The first is the transformation of political allegiance into a new form of authority; the second is the process through which the individual, shaped by modernization, acquires a political nature and becomes a citizen (Jeanniere, 2000, p. 100). From this perspective, the nation-state model can be regarded as an important milestone in the institutionalization of representative democracy. In this model, individuals who come together under a national identity as citizens combine their individual wills into a single "general will" that represents the collective will in the public sphere (Ağaoğluları, 1991, pp. 22–23). Thus, the nation-state, conceived as a reflection of the common will of individuals, is based on a legally rational authority approved by the nation. Furthermore, the nation-state emerges under different and unique conditions for each society. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to claim that all nation-states undergo similar processes or possess similar structures. However, when the formation processes of nation-states from the French Revolution to the present are examined, it becomes possible to identify certain shared foundational components. One such component is the presence of a centralized administration composed of elites (Karpat, 2012).

Another key component is that the nation constitutes territorial boundaries. These borders embody the political, historical, and cultural identity constructed through national identity.

For this reason, every construction of national identity inherently contains a boundary (Hülür & Akça, 2007, p. 22). A further component is the imposition of the national identity constructed by the national state upon all individuals residing within the borders. This imposed national identity is defined by the nation-state through linguistic, cultural, and ethnic categories (Hülür & Akça, 2007, p. 16). Another common component, as emphasized by Hobsbawm and Ranger, is the construction of a national language by making it obligatory within the boundaries of the state (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2006, p. 160).

However, these common components contain inherent challenges. Each stage of this formation has produced counter-reactions and movements stemming from these reactions. Because the process of constructing national identity often foregrounds a certain ethnic identity, language, culture, or religion, national identity has always included an exclusionary dimension. This exclusionary nature naturally generates reactions from marginalized identities. Within this context, three primary forms of reaction to nationalism can be identified. The first reaction is counter-nationalist movements. This refers to efforts by identities marginalized or excluded by the nation-state to construct alternative identities. Although such alternative identity-building often begins with cultural elements, it may evolve into political and militaristic movements over time. The evolution of Kurdish cultural identity-building efforts in the late 20th century into political and militarized forms is a concrete example supporting this idea. The second reaction consists of multicultural political responses. This reaction represents a critical stance against the exclusion of ethnic, religious, or cultural identities by national identity. Unlike counter-nationalist reactions, multiculturalist responses do not evolve into militarized movements but instead demand respect for other identities through democratic and peaceful means (G. Yıldız, 2018).

The exclusion of Alevis in Türkiye despite Sunni Islam being the dominant and most supported belief structure—is a striking example of such a multicultural reaction. The expression of Alevi grievances particularly through left-wing political parties in Türkiye illustrates this dynamic (Yaman & Erdemir, 2006, p. 55). The third reaction is voluntary-identitarian responses. The most distinguishing feature of this reaction is that it is not directed against the existing national identity. On the contrary, identities expressing voluntary-identitarian criticism seek to reconstruct their own identity together with national identity. Although often confused with assimilation, this process is not based on coercion and therefore cannot be described as assimilation. Instead, these groups express a sense of

belonging and identification with the national identity. Thus, unlike counter-nationalist reactions, voluntary-identitarian responses do not resort to political or militaristic actions based on ethnic identity, nor do they demand equality claims as seen in multiculturalist reactions. Rather, original identity and culture are preserved while integration into national identity is also desired (G. Yıldız, 2018). Examples include Chechens, Georgians, and Roma communities living in Türkiye for decades, supported by the state despite not being native to Anatolia.

Today, the structure known as the modern state whether federal, constitutional monarchy, unitary, or republican—is also the national state. The perception of the modern world as a "world of nations" and the view that the nation represented by the state constitutes the primary source of legitimacy make the concept of the nation-state crucial (Smith, 2002, p. 171). Fundamentally, the nation-state is built on three social and political pillars: the state, the nation, and sovereignty. Regardless of its origins, the success of the nation-state is undeniable; the condition of "being a nation" has spread across the world and has become the universal form of sovereignty (Billig, 2002, pp. 32–33). The nation-state can thus be defined as an entity that possesses the monopoly of legitimate force within a clearly defined territory, unites society under common symbols and values, and consolidates its authority through national identity. The nation-state claims to exercise its power on behalf of the nation and legitimizes its authority even its coercive power—through this claim. Conceptually, then, the nation-state is a modern structure that unites people under its sovereignty through shared symbols, values, and myths reflecting a common culture (Delannoi, 1998). According to Guibernau, as cited by Gündüz, a nation can be defined without referencing ethnicity or language. Guibernau describes the nation as "a group of people who share a common culture, are attached to a defined territory, and possess a collective consciousness asserting the right to self-government" (Guibernau, as cited in Gündüz, 2008, p. 5).

However, this definition raises questions regarding whether nations would emerge in the absence of states, as it does not address political organization, economic unity, or rights and responsibilities within society. Based on this, we may conclude that a nation gains its true meaning only when associated with a modern, territorially defined nation-state. Centralization and national unity are results rather than objectives in this framework. Thus, understanding the formation of nations requires evaluating cultural and political elements

alongside economic and technological factors (Anderson, 1995, p. 58). The fusion of reason and science within governance further emphasizes that the nation-state is also a product of the Enlightenment tradition. This brings us to a fundamental question: Does nationalism produce modernity, or does modernity produce nationalism? It is here that the relationship between the nation-state and nationalism becomes apparent. Some scholars argue that the functional alignment between the modern nation-state and nationalism is insufficient to explain their mutual evolution (Brown, 1998, p. 3). Nevertheless, nationalism remains closely associated with the features of modernity. Through nationalism, the boundaries presumed to exist between the state and society are minimized, and the individual becomes part of the modern state as a political actor governed through national sovereignty (E. Yıldırım, 2006). Historical analysis shows that nation-states emerged in Europe as a result of social and economic developments, particularly the American and French Revolutions (Tilly, 2000). Yet the formation of nation-states was not without conflict. The rise of the bourgeoisie, the decline of the aristocracy, the proletarianization of peasants, and rising wages all contributed to intense social conflicts. Nationalism emerged precisely at this stage as a mechanism to alleviate tensions and consolidate the new form of statehood. Nationalism as first conceptualized in 1774 by Johann G. Herder became a crucial tool for motivating, uniting, and mobilizing nations especially following the Industrial Revolution (Uzun, 2003, pp. 143–144). The intertwined relationship among nationalism, industrialization, and warfare became especially visible in the 19th century, when intensified wars contributed to the development of national consciousness. The relationship between war and the nation-state, conceptualized by Charles Tilly, underscores how warfare played a central role in nation-building (Tilly, 2001). Over time, national identity was strengthened through the "us versus them" dichotomy, often symbolized in warfare, heroism, and ideals that sanctified sacrifice. The modern understanding of citizenship, combined with the willingness to subordinate personal interests to public benefit, further deepened the link between nationalism and the nation-state (Baumann, 2006, pp. 25–26). The nation-state ultimately acquired clear territorial boundaries, unified fiscal systems, national legal structures, and a standardized national language—all of which were consolidated through nationalism (Poggi, 2005, p. 114).

As seen above, the nation-state is the state model that gained legitimacy in the 19th and 20th centuries. The idea of nationalism, on the other hand, occupies the position of the ideology

of the nation-state. To summarize, in the process of constructing the nation, ethnic groups became politicized on the basis of the ideology of nationalism and subsequently transformed into states. Although the nation carries certain characteristics of pre-modern societies, nationalism began to appear on the stage not as a pre-modern phenomenon but, on the contrary, as a distinctly modern one from the mid-19th century onwards (Can, 2006). It became one of the instruments and vital processes of nation-building as an ideology and a mode of thought. This is also a necessity. For members of an ethnic group to feel a sense of loyalty to a political unity and to society, they require a defined "homeland" that occupies a place in collective memory. As Anderson also states, subjects moving within a state with clearly delineated territorial integrity identified themselves with those with whom they shared the same culture (Anderson, 1995). The shared experience this produced, combined with the homogenizing state language, enabled subjects to perceive themselves as a community distinct from others (Delannoi, 1998, p. 32). In this context, the idea/ideology of nationalism does not so much help nations become aware of their own consciousness as it encourages structures that previously existed as ethnic groups to begin imagining themselves as nations—and, where they do not exist, serves the function of creating them. Even if not considered an awakening, it is the lever of a new form of social organization in places where nations did not previously exist (Gellner, 1983, p. 48). In this sense, nationalism performs the function of creating a sense of unity and acts as a bridge between the state and society. At this point, Anthony Giddens defines the idea/ideology of nationalism as a form of spiritual loyalty held by individuals subject to a political order, based on the belief that they share a common past and a common culture (Giddens, 2008).

On the other hand, it can be stated that nationalism shares common features with the concepts used to define ethnic identities. This is because nationalism draws on shared structures such as language and religion, and by benefiting from the distinctive characteristics of ethnicity, it can generate a sense of difference at the level of individuals (Yıldırım, 2006, p. 185). The establishment of a sense of commonality or belonging to a specific community is particularly influential during the formation of the nation-state. This is because the construction process of the nation-state involves determining one ethnic group as the dominant element and establishing, in direct connection with this group, a sovereign culture that is imposed over other ethnic groups (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1994, p. 276). In this context, Smith (2002, pp. 270–271) emphasizes the following regarding nation-building: "Nations are long-

term historical processes that are continually reconstructed within certain boundaries. To sustain their existence, nations need an ethnic core; if they lack such a core, they must reconstruct it." Ethnic groups, similar to nations, may undergo transformations that enable them to maintain continuity. Through these characteristics of ethnic groups, national unity is consolidated, the legitimacy of the nation-state's sovereignty is repeatedly reaffirmed, and the reproduction of the nation is ensured (Can, 2006). As seen, the emphasis on national culture and identity—which draws from the dominant ethnic identity and aims to expand into all spheres of political, social, and cultural life—occupies a significant place within nationalist thought and discourse, thereby gaining meaning as a dominant paradigm permeating every layer of life. Nationalism, as a thought/ideology that derives its significance from the dominance of a particular ethnicity, plays an important role in shaping the political content of the nation-state through its discursive, practical, and cultural dimensions. In this way, identity acquires a national context through ethnicity and, together with cultural-political construction, becomes a fundamental element of both individual and societal life (Aydın, 2018).

Although the nation-state and the ideology of nationalism are in a close and intensive relationship, and although all forms of nationalism are based on the idea of a nation, this does not mean that this constitutes the sole criterion for understanding nationalism. In addition to this, nationalism is also a tool through which it constructs, legitimizes, and mobilizes itself around a set of higher ideals (Delannoi, 1998, p. 32). At the same time, it encompasses values and norms related to both individual and collective beliefs. From this perspective, the idea of nationalism has always been influenced by processes of change and transformation throughout history and has often been a significant driving force behind these changes. Indeed, political developments and shifting balances of power have brought the demands of nationalist movements for independence and autonomy to the forefront of the international community's agenda, offering an ideological framework that masses have rallied behind (Smith, 1986, p. 171).

The nationalist movement, which began to gain strength particularly from the second quarter of the 19th century onwards, continued with increasing momentum after the First World War. As empires collapsed one by one under the pressure of intense nationalist movements at the end of the war, nationalism became a central issue in the international arena. Although it lost its popularity during the Cold War, it re-emerged strongly in the globalisation

process—especially with the dissolution of the USSR—and became a core component of separatist movements' agendas. In this regard, due to its eclectic nature, nationalism has come to be viewed as an ideology capable of continuously reproducing itself in line with the cultural, political, and economic variables with which it interacts under prevailing conditions (Heywood, 2013, p. 156).

2.2.2. Separatist Nationalism and Its Changing Nature in the Relationship Between Nation and Ethnic Group

In the historical process, within political communities that share a territory, a country, a historical memory, a common economy, common laws, shared myths, and common duties and obligations, national identity is less a matter of race and more the result of the mobilization and integration of communities living within a specific geographical area around a national culture (Nişancı & Işık, 2018, p. 112). The construction of national identity is a phenomenon, and in this process the sub-identities of individuals and communities that constitute the nation are also in motion. Within this mechanism, the formation of nation-states is achieved by foregrounding a superordinate identity while simultaneously eliminating or relegating other sub-ethnic identities to the background (Yanık, 2013, p. 3). From a broader perspective, when one looks at the global political scene, it becomes evident that an overarching national identity has not been able to ensure unity in every country, and the ethnic identities excluded by the national identity have emerged more forcefully particularly in the postmodern period. In various regions, the role played by ethnic groups as unifying actors in times of chaos and war has led to the further crystallization of ethnic identity. In this context, it can be said that while ethnic identity may play a positive role as a unifying force, excessive emphasis on it may also generate an "other" or an "enemy," thereby assuming a negative function.

The fundamental component of ethnic identity—ethnicity—is defined by Göka as "a social organization that individuals accept with a sense of belonging, which ensures continuity between generations through genetic lines, and which revolves around rituals that sustain shared elements such as a common language and traditions, and that are essential to community formation" (Göka, 2006, p. 233). The concept of ethnicity refers to individuals who associate themselves with a community that expresses itself through a shared ancestral

heritage and who believe they originate from that community. In this sense, ethnicity does not primarily serve as a biological reference; rather, it explains a cultural unity associated with shared roots and kinship in sociological terms (Smith, 1986, p. 21). The common element in definitions of ethnicity can briefly be expressed as a sense of commonality and belonging to a particular group. What must be emphasized here is that ethnicities are not unchanging, monolithic, or homogeneous. Like identities, ethnicities change over time; sometimes they gain importance, and sometimes they lose significance and disappear (Somersan, 2004, p. 38).

In general usage, the concept of minority is understood to rest on ethnic groups. Yet the concept of the ethnic group does not carry the same ambiguity as the concepts of race and minority. In an ethnic group composed of people who share cultural homogeneity and strong mutual ties, complete homogeneity is of course not possible (Berry & Tischler, 1978, p. 41). However, in ethnic groups, there is a high degree of similarity and attachment in basic institutions such as family relations, religion, and language. Moreover, the common religion, language, region, or leadership that symbolizes the cohesion of the group is expressed both within and outside the group. In this regard, as Özerk notes, members of an ethnic group perceive themselves as culturally distinct from other groups in the society in which they live (Özerk, 2006, p. 54). Ethnic groups also differ from race-based groups. Although it is possible for an ethnic group to rest on a racial basis, this is not a necessity. As Berry and Tischler point out, ethnic groups tend to define themselves as races and believe that they share a common bloodline and common ancestors (Berry & Tischler, 1978, p. 44). Even though such claims are often supported by myths, most of them rely on assumptions (Özerk, 2006, p. 55).

Smith, together with Wallerstein and Balibar, foregrounds historical and symbolic-cultural elements in defining ethnic groups, emphasizing the role of myths of origin and ancestry as well as historical memories (Smith, 1994, p. 41; Wallerstein & Balibar, 1995, p. 283). According to Smith, ethnic groups must possess a shared culture that distinguishes them from others, a common myth of origin, shared historical memories, and a sense of solidarity (Smith, 1986). In this respect, an ethnic group can be defined as a community that produces specific values, myths, beliefs, and practices, encodes these through particular symbols, shares similar perceptions and emotions, and identifies itself with a clearly bounded territory. An ethnic group may therefore be explained through two types of definitions: first, the

definitions made by its members as subjects about the group in which they exist; and second, the definitions made by other groups outside of and in relation to this group. This process can be understood as one of "definition and recognition" (Barth, 2001).

On the other hand, Gellner argues that ethnic groups give rise to nationalist thought once they begin to draw political boundaries for themselves, and he expresses this as follows: "Under the conditions of industrial production, standardized activities generate political and cultural units that are internally homogeneous yet differentiated from the outside. The political unit, as the state, acts as the guardian of culture, while culture provides the legitimacy and symbols of the state" (Gellner, 1998, p. 251). As can be seen, Gellner's approach suggests that nationalism creates nations. In this sense, with the politicization of an ethnic group and the emergence of the capitalist mode of production, the need for a sovereign state within defined borders also came into being. For, during the institutionalization of nation-states, they construct their own cultural norms—often to the detriment of other ethnic groups—by embedding them within ideological and political myths, thereby producing a nationalist discourse.

In fact, this situation stems from the differing natures of nation and ethnicity. Although ethnic groups may overlap with nations in certain cases, they lack many of the elements that nations possess. In addition, unlike nations, ethnic groups do not necessarily have a clear division of labor, a shared public culture, an integrated economy, or legal codes applicable to the entire group (Smith, 1994, p. 71). From this perspective, a nation is a political community that shares a common origin and is bound together through shared historical and cultural relations. In other words, it is a social and political category encoded in relation to the territorial boundaries of a state. The ethnic group, by contrast, is a distinct category that is not necessarily tied to state borders and that is transmitted from generation to generation (Wallerstein & Balibar, 1995, p. 92). While possessing certain ascriptive characteristics may be sufficient for membership in an ethnic group, no such precondition can be posited for nations. On this basis, it can be argued that ethnic groups are exclusive, whereas nations are inclusive. Nonetheless, even though ethnic solidarity alone is insufficient to form a nation, ethnic groups harbor within themselves the potential nucleus for nationhood, insofar as they may transform into nations under certain conditions. When ethnic groups become politicized, they often adopt nationalist thinking and may undertake nation-building in the course of this process (Calhoun, 1997, pp. 49–50). From this perspective, a nation can also

be defined as an ethnic group that is politically organized—either having established its own state or possessing the right to self-determination. The ethnonational model highlights precisely this linkage between nation and ethnicity. Smith even pushes this argument further by asserting that all nations are actually formed on the basis of "ethnic cores" (Smith, 1994). The asymmetrical relationship between nations and ethnicities encourages ethnic groups to nationalize themselves in order to benefit from the rights and privileges granted to nations. Even ethnic groups that do not initially seek to establish a state may attempt to undertake nation-building in order to gain recognition.

At the same time, the desire of elites within an ethnicity to control resources opens another door. This desire compels members of an ethnic community to view themselves not merely as repositories of collective memory or cultural symbols, but as part of a unit tied to specific economic problems and a particular territory (Smith, 2002, p. 203). In this context, the quest for self-sufficiency also creates the necessity of controlling economic resources. As a result, even in communities that did not initially aim at nationhood, the politicization of ethnicity makes nationalization virtually inevitable (Coulombe, 1999, p. 283). Thus, when an ethnic group attempts to draw political boundaries for itself, it begins to politicize, and nationalism follows in its wake. Members of such an ethnic group foreground their own ethnicity at the expense of others at the national level. In this process, they merge their cultural norms with ideological and political motifs and myths, constructing nationalist thinking and a discourse that otherizes other nation-states.

The main idea underlying the politicization of an ethnic group and the construction of its nationalism is the desire to create a legitimate political space in which its distinct cultural identity may be asserted. This entails the ethnic group's politicization through the creation of shared ancestors, collective memory, traditions, customs, religious symbols, myths, and national heroes, and by distinguishing itself from other ethnic groups. The dominant ethnic group, in constructing the national identity, instrumentalizes nationalist thinking in order to put this into practice; thereby, nation-states are built and the nation is continually reproduced. Nationalism, in this sense, transforms not only the nature and relations of states but also the aims and characteristics of many ethnicities. In the world of nations, nationalism encourages those who do not imagine themselves as part of a particular nation to transform their ethnicity into a nation. As Smith notes, the sense of compulsion felt by ethnicities to transform their relationships in line with a common legal citizenship and to strive for nation-

building is characteristic of the modern age and of nationalist thinking. This reinforces the idea that every nation should have its own state (Smith, 2002). In line with this, many ethnic groups seek to establish a form of connection with the territory on which they live.

In the global age, whose effects are felt in all ideological, cultural, and social spheres, elements such as religion, language, ethnicity, nation, and social structure have also been profoundly affected by this process (Ritzer, 2011, p. 64). In this era, although the nation-state remains the primary unit and actor of world politics, states seek to exercise their sovereignty within their borders without interference from any other power or authority. However, sub-identities with separatist aspirations living within the territories of states may refuse to submit to this sovereignty (Tekeli & İlkin, 2000, p. 115). In this context, ethnic groups as minorities express their demands through nationalist movements, in a wide spectrum ranging from social and political rights to violence. Nationalist/separatist movements that struggle to avoid assimilation within national unity resort to armed actions in pursuit of identity-based struggles. As a result, separatist nationalist thought and ideology come to pose a threat to the very existence of nation-states. In response, nation-states continue to regard ethnic groups as parts of a homogeneous whole under a single overarching identity, and they resist recognizing ethnic identity as an independent category (Wallerstein, 2015, p. 169). The fact that sub-identities as minorities act as autonomous units—if not fully independent—in global politics, and that they are protected or patronized by state and non-state actors, constitutes a serious threat to sovereign nation-states. Ethnic conflicts are among the phenomena that make this threat perception particularly significant.

From this perspective, it can be said that many contemporary conflicts that threaten both national and international security are closely linked to ethnic problems. Ethnic problems are socio-political divisions between communities that define “themselves” and “others” through ethnic attributes such as language, religion, race, origin, and cultural elements (Stavenhagen, 1996, p. 284). In other words, ethnic problems are disputes arising from ethnic differences (Kurubaş, 2009, p. 16). These disputes may occur between different ethnic groups within a country or between an ethnic group and the state itself.

Although there are disagreements among scholars regarding the causes of ethnic problems, there is also consensus on certain factors. In this regard, Posen (1993) attempts to explain ethnic disputes and conflicts through the security dilemma, which he defines in socio-psychological terms. For Posen, the primary cause of ethnic disputes is the attempt by

different groups within a country to protect themselves under conditions in which the effectiveness of the central authority has weakened or disappeared and where groups act out of security concerns against potential threats from one another. This situation gives rise to a security dilemma, increasing the risk of conflict between groups (Posen, 1993). Beyond the psychological conditions noted by Posen, another cause is that ethnic groups may adopt nationalist approaches when the state fails to provide security or economic welfare. The strengthening of nationalism among ethnic groups can in turn lead to the emergence of ethnic conflicts (Brown, 1993). Another perspective on the causes of ethnic conflicts is put forward by Walker Connor, who argues that ethnic problems stem from issues related to modernization and development (Connor, 1994). With modernization, ethnic groups may come to believe that their expectations are not being met, leading to ethnonationalism. While underdevelopment is often considered a cause of ethnic problems, the opposite may also be true: in some cases, an ethnic group's markedly more advanced position relative to the rest of the country can produce ethnonationalist movements. Northern Italian and Catalan ethnonationalisms are examples of this dynamic. To analyze these ethnic conflicts more systematically, it is essential to examine ethnic problems specific to the age of nationalism and their dependence on the nation-state within the framework of relations between the state and ethnic groups.

From this perspective, the nation-state aspires to a single cultural identity and political unity within its borders (Smith, 2002, p. 172). In order to achieve this, states build nations by promoting national integration and a sense of national identity while attempting to dissolve ethnocultural and political differences through assimilationist tools. Nation-states thus seek to absorb local elements into the national level through national anthems and flags, national epics, the adoption of a single official language, and instruments such as education and military service that strengthen national consciousness. Whether these efforts are successful depends, as Benedict Anderson states, on whether people in the nation-state believe in—or imagine—themselves as part of a single whole (Anderson, 2004). Despite all these efforts by the nation-state, ethnic groups are not always willing to participate in this process. For this reason, Connor argues that assimilation efforts generate a two-way process. According to Connor, such initiatives by the nation-state are perceived as a threat by ethnic groups and further strengthen their sense of identity. This, in turn, creates a security dilemma (Connor, 1994, p. 51).

Ethnic groups that fear losing their core identity, once alarmed by such fears, begin to politicize and set in motion a process that leads to demands for the recognition of their ethnic identity. In other words, while states seek to secure territorial integrity, independence, and security through instruments of "territorial nationalism," ethnic groups seek to secure their "ethnic identity" through self-determination (Stavenhagen, 1996). In this context, as Coakley notes, ethnic groups' political demands for recognition may range from symbolic authority to confederation, while separatist demands may range from establishing an independent state to joining a neighboring state (Coakley, 1993, p. 7). However, an important distinction must be made here. The actions of ethnic groups that fear losing their identity and that emphasize their culture and identity should not automatically be interpreted as ethnonationalism based on self-determination, autonomous authority, or territorial sovereignty. As Rodolfo Stavenhagen points out, not every form of ethnonationalism inherently contains separatist aims (Stavenhagen, 1996, p. 289). What is meant here is that fear, when transformed into an ethnic movement, may lead to ethnonationalist mobilization and thereby produce the potential for conflict between the state and ethnic groups.

Many of the conflicts and crises that today constitute threats to national and international security are closely related to ethnic issues. Since these problems are shaped around self-determination, nationalism, and national identity, they may be said to have an existential relationship with the internal structure of the nation-state. Although concepts such as underdevelopment, democratic deficit, and the failure to achieve national homogeneity and integration are causally linked to these problems, they are not sufficient on their own to explain and resolve ethnic issues. The problematic aspect of this situation is that full human personhood and citizenship are made contingent upon attachment to a nation, thereby prioritizing national identity over simple humanity (Balibar, 2016, p. 131; Cadava, Connor & Nancy, 1991).

In light of the conceptual discussion above, it can be said that with the emergence of every separatist movement, the idealization of the nation-state is reproduced. Nationalist movements that seek to build their own nation-state elevate the nation-state form to a fetish, as if it were the only imaginable form of state. Even as particular nation-states are damaged or fragmented by separatist movements, the idea of the nation-state and its understanding of sovereignty are reproduced and reinforced. In this thesis, it is argued that the ethnicities within nation-states became more visible in the late 20th century and gained further strength

in the 21st century. When and to what extent they will lose importance is something only the future will reveal.

2.2.3. The International System Dimension of the Ethnic Separatism Problem and Related Approaches

From the second half of the 20th century onward, a number of events and phenomena in the geopolitical and geostrategic centers of gravity of the international environment have altered existing balances. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the bipolar Cold War era came to an end. In the new unipolar order that emerged, certain state actors and international organizations began to make intensive efforts to exploit the opportunities that the issue of ethnic separatism could create. Within this framework, they launched a competition—at a level not witnessed before—to defend the fundamental rights and freedoms of minorities (Malek, 1989). In this period, crises that flared at regional and international levels provided an appropriate environment for some state actors and international organizations to support and organize separatist movements and to use them to their own advantage (Heraclides, 1992). Likewise, some ethnic separatist groups began to view the uncertainties of the international system as an opportunity for achieving social mobilization and, by securing international support, as a potential basis on which they could establish their own state (Gürses, 2020). Ethnic separatist groups, particularly those that regarded the phases of political uncertainty unfolding in their regions as openings, took action to garner international support.

This trend led to the transfer of many ethnic separatist movements onto international platforms, as in the case of the Gulf War (Freedman, 1991). Recent developments in the Middle East—specifically in Iraq—offer a striking example illuminating this perspective. The “safe zone” established in 1991 for the distribution of humanitarian assistance to the Kurdish minority in Iraq gradually turned into a “liberated zone,” and the political structure that emerged there came to shape the future of Iraq. The environment that developed after the First Gulf War effectively gave the Kurds in northern Iraq the opportunity for self-governance, irreversibly altering regional balances (Erkmen, 2003, p. 11). The Kurdish refugee flow that emerged immediately after the First Gulf War pushed the United Nations

(UN) to take measures related to minorities, thereby making a major contribution to the internationalization of the Kurdish separatist issue (Freedman, 1991, pp. 201–202).

Following the First Gulf War, UN Security Council Resolution 688, adopted on 5 April 1991 under the pretext of contributing to international peace and security, paved the way for intervention in the internal affairs of authoritarian regimes accused of engaging in human rights violations (Moynihan, 1993). Similarly, a resolution adopted in December 1992 by the UN General Assembly on the rights of individuals belonging to ethnic, linguistic, and religious minority groups further eased the path for intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Article 1 of that resolution stated that states concerned were obliged to protect the existence of minorities' ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural identities within their territories (Newland, 1993). In addition, Radio Free Asia—an extension of Radio Free Europe (RFE), originally established as a propaganda tool against the USSR—as well as London-based Amnesty International (AI) and the U.S.-based human rights organization Human Rights Watch contributed to such patronage by supporting separatists in the dissemination of information (Debata, 2010; Millward, 2004).

Ethnic separatist movement leaders, who viewed the developments and legal regulations of this period as significant gains, began to raise demands for autonomy, federal arrangements, and self-determination, starting from the premise of protecting their linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identities. From this stage onward, separatist Kurds not only in Iraq but also in neighboring regions began increasingly to voice demands for the protection of their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic rights, and in some instances, for self-determination and the right to secession. At the same time, this situation opened the door for separatist groups—those inclined to select violence as the primary means of achieving their objectives under given geographical conditions—to fall into the "violence trap" (Trevino, 1987).

In the first quarter of the 21st century, new developments arising from shifting balances further intensified geopolitical competition in territories falling within the spheres of interest and influence of state and non-state actors. Powers participating in the contest to control these regions and the associated geostrategic zones embarked upon a search for the methods to be used and the order of their priority. In this period, the repressive attitudes and disproportionate use of force by the governments of target states against violent actions by separatist movements in their territories facilitated the efforts of external actors. Frequent human rights violations were put forward as grounds—directly or indirectly—for

interventions by international state and non-state actors (Gürses, 2020, pp. 59–60). In fact, in this new order, it is generally observed that international powers do not intervene in internal struggles and conflicts stemming from ethnic separatism. The perception of such disputes as internal matters of the state concerned, the fact that they do not directly affect the vital interests of international powers, the desire to avoid the cost and potential losses of intervention, and the preference not to alter a status quo from which they benefit have all formed the basic components of this approach (Ataman & Öztürk, 2016, p. 112).

As a matter of principle, foreign state and non-state actors are inclined—especially on the basis of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, the prohibition of the use of force, and the principle of state sovereignty—to oppose the demands of separatist groups and communities and not to accept secession (Ganguly & Taras, 1998; Smith, 1981, pp. 198–199). Separatist movements stand in contradiction to the principle of "territorial integrity of states," which is enshrined in international law, and thus the international community generally sides with central nation-states against separatist movements. One of the main reasons for this stance is the assumption that accepting one case of secession may trigger subsequent secessions, and that such a process could continue; another is the entrenched fear of the international instability that partition could create (Şahin, 2010, p. 182). In addition, internal, economic, and international political constraints also discourage state and non-state actors from supporting separatist movements (Buchheit, 1978, pp. 19–20).

Due to the restrictions described above, it appears difficult in the international environment to support separatist movements. Nevertheless, despite these constraints, some state and non-state international actors do, in practice, become involved in separatist issues in other countries by supporting certain secessionist groups or by remaining silent and passive in the face of their secessionist aspirations. In practice, state actors and the international organizations they control sometimes support ethnic movements openly or covertly, and in some cases, they participate in disputes arising from ethnic issues by assuming the role of mediator. Especially because of the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and various domestic and international constraints, states and non-state actors that refrain from openly supporting separatist ethnic movements generally provide such support through covert means.

Despite international constraints and principles of international law, states' support for separatist ethnic movements rests on four main reasons (Ganguly & Taras, 1998). First is the aim—consistent with foreign policy strategies in the international system—of weakening or balancing rival or enemy states by supporting separatist elements within the target country. Second is the motivation to protect or assert claims over a kindred ethnic group residing in another country. Third is the belief that an ethnic problem in a neighboring country will affect kin ethnic groups living in one's own state, thus justifying intervention. Finally, there are humanitarian, religious, ideological, or expansionist reasons of a more general nature for supporting separatist ethnic movements. In addition to these four, Saideman notes that state support for ethnic groups varies depending on the balance of power between the supporter and the host country, the degree of potential harm that may be suffered from the ethnic movement, and the strength of ethnic ties (Saideman, 2002, p. 30). The presence of an ethnic group under threat, the spread of the same ethnic group across the borders of two or more countries, and kinship between the ethnic group inside the country and a neighboring state are among the primary reasons for interventions that may escalate into war between states that support and oppose the ethnic group (Gökçek, 2011).

In general terms, it can be said that problems arising from ethnic separatist movements become issues of foreign policy for regional and global actors and influence their external behavior (Ganguly & Taras, 1998; Saideman, 2002, p. 37). In this context, the foreign policies that state actors and the international organizations within their spheres of influence develop with respect to ethnic separatist groups tend to be either protective (patronizing) or expansionist. The former consists of defense-oriented policies applied in the face of threats directed at the sovereign state and includes elements such as preserving and securing spheres of influence, safeguarding national interests, and maintaining prestige. Through such foreign policies, the aim is to protect kin ethnic communities. The latter, by contrast, is aggressive and manifests itself in efforts to establish dominance, expand spheres of influence, and widen security perimeters (Şahin, 2010, p. 187).

Heraclides notes that central actors in the international system exhibit three distinct reactions to internal conflicts and disputes—including those involving separatist movements (Heraclides, 1992). The first and most common reaction is diffusion and encouragement. In this case, the support and encouragement that state actors and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) provide to weaker minority ethnic groups contribute to the expansion

and intensification of conflict and its internationalization. The second reaction is reconciliation, which entails attempts to create conditions conducive to peaceful solutions. The third reaction is isolation and suppression, where external actors either remain neutral and refrain from involvement or side with the central state to suppress the conflict (Heraclides, 1992, p. 345).

As stated earlier in other words, in international politics, state and non-state actors are generally inclined—under the principles of "respect for the territorial integrity of independent states" and "non-interference in internal affairs"—not to involve themselves in ethnic problems of other countries. The international system, in which central states largely maintain their hegemony, tends to favor the preservation of national borders in order to prevent potential disorder within the existing order. According to Touval, external powers do not take steps to resolve many ethnic disputes because doing so would not align with conditions that serve their interests (Touval, 1992, p. 272). However, even though central state and non-state actors do not approve of border changes, they may tolerate ethnic separatist movements that do not directly threaten the international system (Gürses, 2020, p. 53). Interestingly, in such cases, central powers often compete with one another in peripheral states where separatist movements occur in order to keep political and economic developments under their control. In an unstable environment shaped by separatist movements and ethnic disputes, the claim that the strategic interests of central states are threatened at national and international levels provides suitable conditions for external intervention (Daalder, 1996; Touval, 1992, p. 272). Under these conditions, when an ethnic separatist movement emerges in a developing sovereign state, some actor countries prefer to act as mediators or to impose their own solutions. In this context, power asymmetry facilitates the imposition of outcomes favorable to these actor states. This process is shaped by competition and/or cooperation among local, regional, and international powers, driven by economic and strategic calculations (Entessar, 1984; Nagel, 1993).

Viewed from a broad perspective, in an international environment where rules are generally framed so as not to contradict the interests of actor states, organizations such as Amnesty International (AI), which are under the control or influence of these powers, exert pressure particularly on underdeveloped and developing non-Western countries in the field of human rights (Gürses, 2020, p. 62). Amnesty International, which works closely with the UK Home Office (Christiansen & Dowding, 1994, p. 15), and similar organizations generate public

opinion against the governments of such countries and pressure them to "respect human rights," warning that otherwise they may face sanctions (Premdas, 1991, pp. 19–20). For this reason, some states refuse to become parties to the rules of international organizations, deeming them inconsistent with their own definitions and interests (Rady, 1993). Ethnic separatist movements, in turn, seek to use these organizations to support their own activities and prioritize building ties with them in opposition to the central governments of the countries in which they are located (Gürses, 2020, p. 62).

Thus, although ethnic separatism might initially be perceived as an internal problem of states, the fact that politicized ethnic groups conduct activities at the international level and generate phenomena such as migration and terrorism that transcend national boundaries brings the issue within the spheres of interest and influence of international state and non-state actors (Ganguly & Taras, 1998). In this situation, ethnic separatism, which appears to be a domestic political problem, acquires an international character and begins to affect the foreign policies of the states concerned. States that fail to resolve ethnic separatism at the national level attempt to prevent external intervention, but as external actors become involved, they encounter far greater difficulty in reaching a solution. Consequently, governments whose capabilities and room for maneuver in foreign policy are restricted are often compelled to make concessions in the face of external pressures. In this regard, as Stephan Saideman also notes, it is exceedingly difficult for states with serious ethnic problems to pursue ambitious and effective foreign policies (Saideman, 2002). As one of the elements of a strong foreign policy, states require at least a minimum level of internal cohesion; however, when ethnic groups within their territories engage in separatist movements with external support, they narrow the maneuvering space of the governments to which they belong.

It appears, then, that a state struggling against a separatist movement frequently faces circumstances that adversely affect its political decision-making mechanisms: the transformation and internationalization of economic and political relations into forms of mutual interdependence, the necessity of participating in international organizations and acceding to treaties, and the resulting narrowing of sovereign states' room for maneuver. These factors make it more difficult for governments to change economic, social, and political structures and to employ coercive methods. Under such conditions, separatist movements bide their time, waiting for carefully calculated external interventions—based

on economic, political, and strategic considerations—by regional and global state and non-state actors against target countries. With the development of communication technologies, such movements increasingly seek to attract the attention of potential supporters at the state and non-state level (Premdas, 1991, p. 13). Indeed, many ethnic separatist movements have succeeded in generating international public opinion on the grounds that human rights are being violated against their own ethnic group. Acting on the claim that they possess distinct identities and are therefore subjected to discriminatory and unjust policies by central governments, such movements have even managed to secure the imposition of sanctions on the governments of the countries in which they operate. At various times, countries such as Türkiye, the Russian Federation, China, and Iran have been subjected to such pressures (Gürses, 2020, pp. 61–62).

At the point reached today, the political mobilization of ethnic separatist groups threatens, above all, the functioning of the international system, international borders, and the nation-state structures of sovereign countries. Ethnic groups that seek secession on the basis of a claim to nationhood pose a level of threat capable of affecting the territorial integrity and unity of the states in which they reside, as well as altering international borders. For this reason, the international community pays close attention to such movements. At the same time, the concern that many states experiencing ethnic separatism may face the risk of partition and that the secessionist demands and efforts of ethnic groups may spread to other countries has led states to act collectively in the face of such movements (Şahin, 2010, p. 177). It is clear that failure to act collectively against separatist violence that threatens international peace and security, and the inability to ensure a fair and unified restructuring of the international system in economic, social, and political terms, will produce negative consequences. In this case, as the scope of problems generated by ethnic disputes and conflicts expands, it is highly likely that existing social, economic, and political inequalities in different parts of the world will continue to threaten local, regional, and international stability (Gürses, 2020, p. 62).

2.3. The Right to Self-Determination and the Demand for Secession

The right to self-determination emerged as an important principle in international law and political thought, particularly in the post-colonial period. This principle provides a legitimate

basis for the demands of peoples to determine their own political future and status freely, and to pursue their economic and social development without obstruction. However, there are serious debates concerning the scope, applicability, and limits of this right. Self-determination is often associated with a people's demand for autonomy or independence; yet, because such demands challenge the principle of sovereignty within the international system, they frequently lead to legal and political disputes. In particular, the efforts of ethnically based separatist movements to seek legitimacy by invoking this principle heighten security concerns within nation-state structures and create a basis for developments that threaten state integrity. In this context, both the theoretical foundations and contemporary applications of the right to self-determination must be examined with great care. In the following section, the historical development, conceptual framework, and various manifestations of this right in different contexts will be analyzed in a comprehensive manner.

2.3.1. The Demand for Self-Determination

The right to self-determination, which constitutes one of the most important foundations of separatist movements, lies at the center of related debates. In this respect, when the claims of separatist movements are examined, it becomes necessary to clarify the meaning and limits of the concepts of "self-determination" and "the demand for the right to secession." Accordingly, the following section primarily addresses the historical background, political and legal dimensions of self-determination and the demand for secession. It also highlights the differences between these concepts and separatist movements, and seeks to explain whether such demands are inherently separatist in nature. Thus, it is necessary to underline the key parameters and shed light on the historical background of the concept.

Although it is possible to trace this right back historically as far as the Congress of Vienna in 1815, it would not be wrong to state that it was transformed into a political principle during the First World War by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson, believing that the United States had a moral duty to liberate oppressed peoples from repressive and dictatorial regimes, played a pioneering role in elevating this notion to the level of a principle (Lynch, 2002). From this perspective, the principle of self-determination was conceived by Wilson as a way of reconstructing peace in the post-war period, by enabling the peoples of defeated empires to possess independent and sovereign states of their own (Çakmak & Çolak, 2011,

p. 14). The process through which the principle of self-determination emerged, composed of various parameters, can be considered in three waves (Kovacs, 2003, p. 444). These waves are: the incorporation of Wilson's principles into the agenda of the League of Nations after the First World War; the independence of colonial states after the Second World War; and finally, the processes triggered by the dissolution of the USSR. In this context, it is first necessary to address the right of self-determination as it appeared during the period of the First World War.

Within the framework of Wilson's principles, the right to self-determination was put forward and used as a principle legitimizing the establishment of states by the nations within the disintegrating Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and German Empires after the First World War. For this reason, the right to self-determination functioned as a kind of punitive mechanism applied to the collapsing empires at the end of the war. In this context, the right to self-determination was granted only to the peoples of the defeated empires, while the peoples of victorious empires such as the United Kingdom were excluded from the scope of this principle. The League of Nations (LN), established after the war, was an international organization composed of heterogeneous nation-states, and by granting extensive rights to minorities, it sought to prevent national minorities from seceding from their existing homelands. The core policy in this context was to prevent secession by granting rights to minorities (Kovacs, 2003, p. 444). Under these conditions, however, no general rules were formulated regarding the circumstances, in which states, and at what times the principle of self-determination would be applicable.

The second wave began with anti-colonial movements in the post–Second World War period. In this phase, the right to self-determination was granted to peoples who were being colonized by a distant foreign power. According to UN General Assembly Resolution 59/134, there was no alternative to the principle of self-determination in the process of decolonization. With this resolution, the right of self-determination was unconditionally supported by the international community for all peoples subjected to any form of colonialism, thus enabling them to establish their own states. The process through which the peoples of Africa and Asia dismantled colonial powers and established their own independent states is evaluated within the framework of this second wave. However, it is important to underline the following point with respect to the second wave: the right to self-determination was granted only to colonial peoples exploited by European states (Moore,

1998, pp. 2–3). The prevailing consensus on the principle was that it should be applied to colonial peoples. By the 1960s, it can be observed that the principle of self-determination had acquired a meaning mainly centered on its application to colonial populations (Şahin, 2010, p. 147). Outside this framework, the demands for self-determination by peoples living in other parts of the world were largely ignored. At the same time, in response to debates at the UN from the 1960s onward regarding the independence of colonial peoples and territories, the General Assembly adopted a landmark resolution intended to end these discussions. UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) on the "Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples" explicitly provided that the right of self-determination—including the right to establish an independent state—was recognized only for "colonial peoples." With this resolution, peoples living under colonial rule were granted the right to establish independent states or to unite and associate with other independent states. In doing so, the scope of Articles 1(2) and 55 of the UN Charter was expanded (Şahin, 2010, p. 137).

The third wave began with the end of the Cold War, which triggered a process marked by a substantial increase in demands for independence. In the post–Cold War period, ethnic tensions and conflicts became highly visible in failed or collapsed states that had been unable to achieve national unity and were experiencing identity crises. Unlike the previous two waves, during this phase the scope of rights associated with self-determination for ethnic groups and communities residing within the territories of independent states was significantly broadened to include elements such as language, religion, tradition, culture, and ethnicity (Vyver, 2000, p. 17). In this period, numerous nation-states emerged as fully independent entities out of the disintegrating USSR. Similarly, following the death of Marshal Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia broke apart into several different nation-states.

In this turbulent phase of recent political history, as stated in Article 1 of Additional Protocol I of 1977 to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, ethnic groups enjoying the right of self-determination in the face of colonial, occupation, and racist regimes began, especially in the globalizing climate of the 1990s, to make their voices more widely heard. Members of groups and communities who gained the opportunity to articulate their demands were able to construct and disseminate their narratives more easily with the facilitation of communication. Concurrently, as ethnic communities found it easier to express themselves and become visible in the international media due to the spread of information and communication technologies, central governments were increasingly compelled to include

such groups and communities in their decision-making processes (Keyman, 2006, p. 231). In addition, the growing number of demands for the right to self-determination over time led some unitary states to transform into federal structures. In this context, unitary states containing numerous ethnic groups granted certain rights to some of these groups, thereby turning them into autonomous entities within the country (Kalaycı, 2010, p. 50). Spain's autonomous Basque region and Catalonia stand out as striking examples.

In fact, although the third wave significantly expanded the boundaries of the right to self-determination, the states established in this period were, in many cases, previously existing regions or communities that had enjoyed a form of quasi self-government as "nationalities" (Moore, 1997, p. 903). Under this approach, the UN recognized the self-determination rights of peoples belonging to certain "nationalities" rather than all national groups after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. In this context, while the right to self-determination was granted to Slovenia and Croatia, which seceded from Yugoslavia, it was not initially granted to Montenegro, despite the fact that it met the criteria for statehood. Similarly, the Chechens' struggle for independence did not receive support from any international organization or state. As can be seen, it is not possible to speak of universally accepted and standard rules for the right to self-determination. Friedlander even argues that the right to self-determination is used more as an ideological weapon than as a universal principle (Friedlander, 1980). On the other hand, as Şahin notes, the common Article 1 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states:

"All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. All peoples may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources without prejudice to any obligations arising out of international economic cooperation based upon the principle of mutual benefit, and international law. In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence. The States Parties to the present Covenant, including those having responsibility for the administration of Non-Self-Governing and Trust Territories, shall promote the realization of the right of self-determination, and shall respect that right, in conformity with the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations." (Şahin, 2010, p. 142).

Through this formulation, self-determination is emphasized not merely as a principle, but as a “right.” However, although the principle is included in the text, the scope of this right—what exactly it entails and to which communities it may be applied—is not clearly specified. Since legitimacy is a fundamental condition of sovereignty, groups or communities that wish to secede and become sovereign must justify their claim to secession and place it on a legitimate footing in their own eyes and in those of the international community.

In this case, if we proceed from the broadest meaning of the concept, the right to self-determination refers to the right of a community to determine its own future freely, without any external interference, and outside the domination of a sovereign state. In other words, the concept of self-determination can be defined as the capacity of each nation to decide how it will be governed. However, many scholars, rejecting a single, uniform definition of the concept, have interpreted self-determination differently in different periods. The existence of multiple interpretations has rendered self-determination highly controversial at the conceptual level. Within this framework, a debate has emerged between those who argue that every ethnic group should be granted a right to secession and those who uphold the inviolability of existing state borders and territorial integrity.

Although self-determination is often perceived, in many areas, almost exclusively as the establishment of a fully independent state, two interrelated meanings—internal and external—have gained prominence in the debates surrounding the concept. Scholars working on this issue, while attempting to explain self-determination in terms of separatism, have also made it a convention to distinguish between its internal and external dimensions. Some thinkers analyze the element of secession separately alongside this internal/external distinction, while others consider self-determination in the sense of secession as a subtype of external self-determination (Arsava, 1993). As Oran also notes, the internal meaning of self-determination essentially refers to a particular interpretation of democracy (Oran, 2001). In this context, the internal dimension of self-determination refers to a community’s ability to determine its economic, social, and political order while constructing its own system of governance. Put differently, in the internal sense, the right to self-determination signifies the acquisition of rights by minorities sufficient to influence the decisions of the broader community in which they live, and thus to live in a pluralistic society. From this perspective, it can be argued that internal self-determination denotes a form of political autonomy

established on a democratic basis (Arsava, 1981, p. 57; Oran, 2001, p. 108; Pomerance, 1982).

The external meaning of self-determination, by contrast, refers to the organization of a community as a separate state, independent of any foreign authority. This external dimension goes beyond the political autonomy implied by the internal dimension and points to independence in the sense of establishing one's own state (Sönmezoğlu, 2000, p. 530). Put somewhat differently, in its external sense, self-determination implies that a minority can make its own political, cultural, and economic decisions without any foreign rule. For this reason, external self-determination expresses the establishment of a new state or the acquisition of autonomy within an existing state. Accordingly, while external self-determination is a right that can be exercised once, internal self-determination implies continuity (Buchheit, 1978, pp. 14–15; Cassese, 1995, p. 101). However, it remains open to debate which communities may benefit from external self-determination. When one considers the historical application of the concept, external self-determination does not necessarily mean secession from an existing state, but rather refers primarily to the independence of peoples under colonial rule (Şahin, 2010, p. 135).

Simon Caney distinguishes internal and external self-determination in terms of two opposing qualifiers: strong and weak (Caney, 1997). According to Caney, where there is strong self-determination, the community in question will seek to achieve national independence and to exist as a separate state. Weak self-determination, by contrast, can be realized through the acquisition of limited subnational privileges, such as a local government or regional parliament (Caney, 1997, pp. 352–353). Today, in multinational states, central governments attempt to prevent secession by granting significant autonomy to national groups within their borders, thereby providing them with a kind of internal self-determination and trying to forestall demands for external self-determination. Since such arrangements signify that the groups and communities concerned are treated well and respected by the broader society, they also undermine the legitimacy of these groups' claims to a right of secession (Baubock, 2004, p. 33).

The existence of different types of self-determination shows us the following: although every people nominally possesses a right to self-determination under international law, the indeterminacy of this right has led to different outcomes at different times in different countries. However, self-determination is not always a right that results in an independent

state; secession from a state of which one is already a part is only one dimension of the right to self-determination (Kalaycı, 2010, p. 39). The main reason behind the demand for political autonomy by nationalist national minorities seeking to preserve their own language and culture is the desire to protect their culture, language, and religion; yet the ultimate aim is often to seize political power. If the ultimate aim is not political power, then cultural, religious, and community-specific political structures can be preserved through autonomy granted by the central government. However, the fundamental reason why many groups are not content with such arrangements is, as Bauböck states, the desire to possess power (Bauböck, 2004). For this reason, contemporary nationalist minority groups seek to legitimize their separatist claims by alleging that they are exploited by central governments. As noted above, it is primarily the experience of exploitation and serious injustice that leads to international support for the establishment of a separate, independent state. Aware of this, nationalist minority groups and communities attempt to gain approval and support from the international community for their struggles by claiming that they have long suffered injustice and exploitation (Wellman, 1995, p. 147). However, the distinction between colonized peoples and ethnic minorities is comparatively easy to draw. Minority rights in international law emphasize respect by the state in which they live for their culture and identity, while underscoring the territorial integrity of that state; the discourse in the colonial context, by contrast, encompasses rights in the cultural, economic, and political spheres. While the protection of minorities' cultural and identity-related rights is held to be the responsibility of nation-states, the political integrity of those states is not to be compromised.

A second important factor is that international legal regulations concerning self-determination do not easily provide every community with the opportunity to gain independence. While nations do have the right to determine their own future, this right is not absolute and its exercise depends on the fulfillment of certain conditions. The most important of these is that the exercise of self-determination must not infringe upon the "sovereignty" of an independent state. This means that a nation's declaration of independence on the basis of the principle of self-determination is possible only with the consent of the central state. In the case of Iraq, for example, it becomes evident that the establishment of an independent Kurdistan by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) would only be possible if an agreement enabling independence were concluded with the central government of Iraq (Çakmak & Çolak, 2011, pp. 11–12).

This situation, in turn, raises the question of whether international law prioritizes the right to self-determination or the territorial integrity of states. Although international law recognizes the right to self-determination as one of the fundamental human rights, it places greater emphasis on the territorial integrity of sovereign states. Especially due to concerns about international security, greater—albeit implicit—emphasis is placed in international law on the territorial integrity of states (Bartkus, 1999, p. 68). In this context, given that the vast majority of states that constitute the current international system are not homogeneous, it is not wrong to suggest that there is a tacit and normative consensus among these states not to support the establishment of new nation-states, since the support of separatist movements among minorities would endanger their own existence. Taking into account that the final decision regarding the recognition of a state lies with the UN, and that this organization is composed of existing states in the international system, it becomes easier to understand why the UN generally refrains from supporting separatist movements (Kalaycı, 2010, p. 61). For this reason, it would not be incorrect to state that a view is dominant according to which ethnic groups and communities do not have a right to secede from nation-states. In this context, efforts by ethnic communities to move beyond a subordinate group status and to become nations in their own right have increased in recent years. At the international level, we see a prevailing picture in which states and peoples are identified with each other and the nation-state model is built upon the principles of popular and national sovereignty. Faced with the dominant notion that nations possess the right to establish their own states, ethnic groups and communities seek to legitimize their separatist movements by presenting themselves as national minorities.

Leaving aside all these debates, Van Der Vyver offers the following general definition of self-determination: “The right of self-determination is the issue of national independence when there is foreign occupation or a colonial regime; the issue of participation in the political process of the sovereign state when a nation is subjected to discrimination; and the issue of sovereignty when nations form units of belonging within the political order.” (Vyver, 2000, p. 24).

As can be seen, the ambiguity of universal definitions of self-determination has given rise to numerous debates and disagreements. In line with this definition, the international community avoids defining peoples and nations within nation-states as separate peoples and nations, and does not treat the right to self-determination as primarily a matter of

independence. However, the UN has been unsuccessful in preventing an increasing number of ethnic groups from defining themselves as nations and demanding self-determination on this basis. Under these ongoing debates, the UN does not follow a clear and consistent line regarding self-determination. While it emphasizes this right, it treats it more as a principle and does not adopt peoples as a standard category. Nevertheless, the UN generally remains unsympathetic toward separatist tendencies and their demands for self-determination. The primary reason for this is the concern that potential separatist movements inherent within ethnic groups and communities residing in the territories of nation-states may harm the international system (Johnson & Singh, 1980, p. 350). From the UN's perspective, for a demand for self-determination to be acceptable, there must be clear and serious discrimination and exploitation, and the community in question must no longer be able to live in peace and security in its current environment (Crawford, 1979). On the other hand, the right to self-determination also has limits, which, while not definite, vary according to international and domestic conditions. The main contours of these limits are that minorities are subjected to serious discrimination and, at the same time, do not engage in militaristic actions of any kind (Cobban, 1969, p. 309). Therefore, the success of an ethnic group or community depends on the dynamism of its civil society organizations, the efforts of its political parties to mobilize the people, its close relations with international actors, and the strength of the support it receives from them (Mayall, 1991, p. 421). As Kalaycı also notes, assuming that such demands will continue to rise in the future, the international community must introduce a new international mechanism to prevent these demands—based on the premise that each state contains multiple peoples, some of whom will demand self-determination—from evolving into conflicts that could escalate into civil war (Kalaycı, 2010, p. 65). Before concluding debates on the right to self-determination, it is necessary to examine, in a separate section, the difference between self-determination and the right to secession, which is often confused with it.

2.3.2. Secessionist Self-Determination and the Demand for the Right to Secede

Secession, in its broadest sense, is the attempt of an ethnic/national community to separate from the state of which it is a part in order to establish its own independent state. For secessionists, self-determination is viewed as a natural right and is therefore understood to inherently include the notion of secession. In terms of its content, the concept refers to the

separation of an ethnic minority or a minority nation living within a sovereign state in order to establish its own sovereign state. Thus, in its external sense, secessionist self-determination refers to the fragmentation of a sovereign state. However, in an international environment where only decolonization-type secessions are recognized or, in one way or another, legitimized by international law, the right to self-determination does not grant an ethnic group or a nation an automatic right to secede. In this respect, the secessionist interpretation of self-determination is constrained by the principle of preserving the territorial integrity of independent states (Şahin, 2010, p. 153).

On the other hand, while international law recognizes a right of secession in the context of decolonization, it does not impose an absolute prohibition on secession more generally. Specialists in the field have proposed theories containing certain necessary preconditions in order to determine under which circumstances an ethnic group or community's right to secede could be considered legitimate. Buchanan, who distinguishes between normative theories of secession, identifies two main types: Primary Right Theories and Remedial Right Only Theories (Buchanan, 1997; Patten, 2002). In Buchanan's typology, Primary Right Theories refer to secession in situations where a group or community has not necessarily been subjected to any particular injustice. According to this view, a group has a right to secede even if it has not suffered discrimination or injustice and is part of a highly democratic state. This right should be exercisable, if desired, without any prior justification. By contrast, Buchanan's Remedial Right Only Theory (also referred to as the just cause theory) links the condition for secession to respect for individual rights. Under this approach, the right to secede is triggered when a group subjected to serious and continuous violations of human rights has no other option left. In this view, the subjects of injustice and exploitation are not nations but individuals. When individuals who suffer systematic and severe human rights violations come to constitute a nation, a right to secede emerges. In other words, if a group facing individual-level human rights violations, and even the threat of genocide, has no option other than secession in order to survive, then secession becomes a legitimate right (Buchanan, 1997, p. 40). Put differently, under Buchanan's proposed Remedial Right Only Theory, if a group or community is subjected to any form of discrimination or experiences human rights violations at the hands of the state of which it is a part, it acquires a right to secede. Buchanan argues that a group or community facing oppression may legitimately seek international recognition of its right to self-government as a means of protection from such

oppression. In this framework, Buchanan suggests that secession may be justified if two preconditions are met: first, that fundamental human rights are being systematically violated or that the group's survival is under threat within the sovereign state of which it is a part; and second, that territory previously belonging to that group has been unjustly occupied by another state (Buchanan, 1997).

Another key perspective in this debate, the choice theory, maintains that secession tied to territory can only be realized under certain defined conditions (Costa, 2003, p. 64). Among those who argue that secession can be accepted only under specific conditions, Birch identifies four preconditions under which unilateral secession may be considered acceptable and legitimate. According to Birch, secession may occur if: the region inhabited by an ethnic group or nation has been seized by force by a sovereign state and the local population has not consented to this union; if the central government fails to protect the security, fundamental rights, and freedoms of the people living in that region; or if the political system of the sovereign state fails to adequately respond to the political, economic, and social demands of the region (Birch, 1989). Beran, who adopts a more flexible stance toward the right of groups and communities to determine their own destiny, emphasizes that, in order to constitute a nation, such groups must form a majority in a given region and possess the capacity to survive independently (Beran, 1993, p. 483). Likewise, Heraclides argues that oppressed non-national communities or disadvantaged nations may possess a right to secede (Heraclides, 1992, p. 409). Similarly, Buchheit, who also makes the legitimacy of secession conditional, points to systematic exploitation and discrimination as preconditions for the right to secede. In this context, Buchheit maintains that a group or community may legitimately possess a right to secede in order to prevent the erosion or destruction of its linguistic, religious, and cultural values (Buchheit, 1978, p. 213).

Beyond the aforementioned views regarding the legitimate foundations of secession, there are also exceptional circumstances under which secession may be deemed legitimate. One such circumstance involves secession from unstable states with a temporary status. As Şahin notes, the roots of this interpretation lie in a report prepared in 1920 by the Commission of Jurists of the League of Nations concerning the Åland Islands. In that report, a distinction was drawn between stable states whose sovereignty was recognized by the international community and unstable states with a temporary status. The report particularly emphasized the legitimacy of secession from unstable states with temporary status. Although, in the UN

era, such a justification is not considered a definitive ground for secession, it can be said that this justification may facilitate secession (Arsava, 1993; cited in Şahin, 2010, p. 157). Another exceptional ground for secession concerns peoples under foreign occupation for whom secession would encounter no resistance and would be granted legitimacy. In this context, the secession claims of peoples who, after the Second World War, were involuntarily subjected to the yoke of an occupying state, as well as the claims of constituent units of federal states, have been evaluated as legitimate demands for secession (Çavuşoğlu, 2001; Karaosmanoğlu, 2003, p. 157).

As Kurubaş notes, another important condition for secession lies in the definition of colonies under UN General Assembly Resolution 1541 of 15 December 1960, which underpins the so-called "salt water colonialism" theory that allows for secession (Kurubaş, 2004a). According to this interpretation, a territory must be geographically separated from the colonial power and ethnically and culturally distinct from it in order to be considered a colony. In practical terms, this resolution stipulates that, in order to qualify as a colony entitled to independence, geographical separation must be accompanied by ethnic and cultural difference. Thus, the secession of geographically discontinuous communities that are also ethnically and culturally distinct is regarded as legitimate (Kurubaş, 2004a). In addition to these debates, Kreptul argues that if a sovereign state persistently violates the autonomy rights of a group or community that officially enjoys autonomous status within that state, then that group or community acquires a unilateral right to secede. If a group or community that has been granted autonomy within certain limits experiences clear and ongoing injustice and exploitation, it possesses the right to secede and establish a new state (Kreptul, 2003, p. 47).

In conclusion, any attempted or actual secession in any part of the world is likely to bring with it a range of problems. From the perspective of international norms, the greatest threat posed by secessionist ethnic groups and communities to sovereign states is their tendency to seek revision of existing borders. When ethnic groups and communities seeking secession also demand the redrawing of borders in line with their own preferences, regional and international balances may be severely disrupted. Any secession will, by definition, entail redrawing borders, and it is uncertain how neighboring states will react in such a situation. Moreover, it is unclear how a potential state formed by a seceding ethnic group or community would maintain economic viability and protect its borders. This uncertainty

constitutes a significant risk and threat at both regional and global levels (Şahin, 2010, p. 180). In this context, secessionist movements that arise for domestic political reasons at the national level may become insoluble through internal dynamics alone and invite external interventions. Thus, although disputes between the state and an ethnic group are fundamentally internal problems, they may evolve into issues with an international dimension.

At the point reached in the 21st century—often referred to as the age of globalization—self-determination, as outlined above, is primarily implemented in states marked by colonial relationships and serious human rights violations. The increasing number of new nation-states emerging as a result of ethnically based secessions continues to occupy the international agenda. The steadily growing number of ethnic communities—currently numbering in the thousands—that seek to establish nation-states of their own raises the likelihood of serious instability and chaos in the future. As Balı notes, as of 1993, 223 national groups and ethnic minorities were actively taking political positions (Balı, 2001, p. 196). Considering that the vast majority of countries today are organized as unitary states, it would not be wrong to argue that a generally negative attitude toward ethnic separatist movements has become entrenched in the international arena (Çakmak & Çolak, 2011).

2.4. The Phenomenon of Separatist Terrorism in the Nation-State and Ethnic Identity/Group Equation

The roots of the phenomenon of ethnic separatist terrorism can be traced back to the emergence of nation-states. In various parts of the world, the traces of this phenomenon can be observed in the tensions between dominant nations that control the system and those belonging to different races who are bound to the same state by ties of citizenship. Within these tensions, minority groups with their own distinct languages and historical backgrounds, under the influence of major powers and international actors over time, have advanced claims such as that the territories they inhabit have belonged to them for centuries and have turned to systematic and organized violence, thereby giving rise to ethnic terrorism (İşeri, 2008, p. 23). Through this dynamic, ethnic separatist terrorist formations have constructed the ethnic identity they ground themselves in around a common pain or a chosen historical trauma, shaping it according to their own narrative. In doing so, they have managed

to sustain social anger and emotional disconnection fed by this trauma over the long term. As long as they have been able to recruit militants, and secure financial and logistical support from the ethnic group base among which they spread this artificially produced social psychology, they have been able to maintain their existence (Vamık, 2001).

The key common feature of ethnic separatist terrorist organizations is that they see themselves as the indispensable defenders of a particular ethnic identity. This makes it essential to examine the historical development of such movements, which is another crucial point for understanding separatist terrorism. Efforts to understand how certain groups come to see themselves as protectors of ethnic identities reveal that the answer reaches back to the development of ethnic nationalism and the processes of nation-state building (Akbaş, 2011, p. 32). Therefore, when analyzing ethnic terrorism, it is necessary to briefly address the ways in which states emerged, since the mode of state formation is a major factor in the emergence of ethnic-based problems. Clarifying how states came into being in their historical contexts significantly contributes to the analysis of today's ethnic terrorism.

The strong relationship between the ways many new states emerged and the ethnic-based problems currently experienced in the international arena inevitably takes us back to the deeper layers of political history. As is well known, there are roughly two hundred states that are members of the UN today. However, if we look back just a century, we see that the number of states in the world was far lower than it is today and that most of the political entities known as states now actually emerged in the last fifty years (Baharçiçek, 2000). Examining ethnic nationalist movements around the world, Özdağ identifies four main historical waves within this relationship (Özdağ, 2010):

The first wave at the end of the 19th century, described as the period of "classic ethnic self-determination," which developed primarily in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East against the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire;

The second wave, covering the period before and after the Second World War, which emerged in the Asian and African colonies of imperialist Western European powers and resulted in the collapse of colonial empires and the establishment of nation-states;

The third wave, beginning in the 1960s, which appeared in Europe in the form of Walloon and Flemish movements in Belgium, Basque and Catalan movements in Spain; Breton, Scottish and Welsh movements in Britain; and Québécois, Hispanic and Black nationalisms

in North America, a wave that spread rapidly and then lost momentum toward the end of the 1970s;

The fourth wave, which emerged after the Cold War along with globalization, affecting the area of the former USSR and its broader periphery along a Eurasian axis—from the former Yugoslavia, including Czechoslovakia, all the way to Kazakhstan (Özdağ, 2010).

In addition, the 1980s and 1990s were also periods when ethnic separatist mobilizations were extremely influential in the international system. The collapse of the USSR and the growing salience of various nations' demands for self-determination fueled these mobilizations and created numerous security problems in the international system. During this period, ethnic conflicts stemming from ethnic mobilizations spread from the Caucasus to the Balkans, and from South Asia to Central Africa—practically all over the world (Wilkonson, 2002, p. 53). These major waves of ethnic nationalism are, by their nature, accompanied by ethnic conflicts. Paul Wilkinson classifies the common features of such ethnic conflicts under three headings: (1) the spread of intense violence, affecting all layers of society and including mass killings verging on genocide against civilians; (2) the use of mass killings and forced displacement of civilians as weapons; and (3) the disregard for international law and public opinion (Wilkonson, 2002, p. 47).

Baharçiçek, who also emphasizes the important link between the ways many new states emerged and the ethnic-based problems experienced today, identifies two main parameters: the process of imperial disintegration and its aftermath, and the wave of independence in numerous colonial regions during the 20th century (Baharçiçek, 2000, p. 15). A common feature emphasized by both Özdağ and Baharçiçek is that in each of these waves and processes, ethnic mobilizations in one context have also influenced ethnic groups in other countries. As a result of such influences, groups that felt excluded in certain areas began attempting to gain what they believed they "ought to have." To understand this mindset of "regaining what was lost," the process of nation-state building occupies a central place (Akbaş, 2011, p. 33).

Özdağ and Baharçiçek are not the only ones to examine how nation-states entered the international system. Some researchers argue that nation-states have generally formed in two ways. According to Gottlieb, the first is that many of these states arose from the fragmentation of empires. As certain empires collapsed, global and regional powers

supported the creation of small, weak states built on ethnic foundations because these units would be easier to control and would better serve their interests. Through such efforts and support, new mini-states emerged from the ruins of the fallen empires, under the control of these powers (Gottlieb, 1994, p. 100).

Second, in the 20th century, many colonial regions attached to colonial empires gained independence and became new states. However, colonial powers had not drawn the boundaries of their colonies based on natural borders, but rather according to power balances and their own interests. As a result, ethnic groups and nations compressed into arbitrarily defined territories were forced to wage their struggles for independence within the borders drawn by colonial powers. Even when successful, these groups found themselves with a state but without a social structure capable of ensuring political stability. In many of these new states, there was no strong political tradition or solid national foundation. One of the most complex problems arising from this predicament has been ethnic conflict, which, in turn, has produced a distinct type of terrorism known as ethnic terrorism (Baharçiçek, 2000). From the second half of the 20th century onwards, terrorist organizations claiming to represent ethnic groups that could be described as ethnic minorities and defending those groups' independence have emerged in many parts of the world. Tamils in Sri Lanka, Irgun in Palestine, the PKK and the Armenian terrorist organization ASALA in Türkiye, the IRA in Northern Ireland, and ETA in Spain may be cited as examples (Cohen, 1994). These examples show that ethnic separatist terrorism is neither a new phenomenon nor confined to specific regions of the world.

When we examine the underlying motives of attempts to divide a society along lines of race, religion, or sect—a society that is essentially a single whole—we see that the core driver is often discomfort with the idea of "integration into a common national culture" that underpins nation-state building. Kymlicka explains this as follows: some groups oppose integrating into the common national culture of the state in which they live. The same can be said of certain indigenous peoples who reject integration into the majority, seeking instead to preserve themselves as separate nations (Kymlicka, 2006, pp. 457–458). In Kymlicka's account, the nation-building process inevitably privileges members of the majority culture, thus forcing members of minority cultures to choose among four options (Akbaş, 2011, p. 34; Kymlicka, 2006, p. 483):

- Mass migration to a nearby, prosperous, friendly state that is ready to accept them;
- Integration into the majority culture in exchange for better and fairer conditions, on the condition that such terms are accepted and implemented;
- Demanding from the government the exercise of self-government rights and powers necessary to preserve their own societal culture, including the establishment of their own political and educational institutions;
- Choosing permanent marginalization and requesting to be left alone on the fringes of society.

Kymlicka notes that in the option of "establishing self-government institutions," domestic minorities or indigenous peoples will demand "a form of autonomy" to achieve this aim, and that such autonomy may include claims that extend all the way to full secession (Akbaş, 2011, p. 3; Kymlicka, 2006, p. 487). Once the idea of secession surfaces in this way, the next step is to put it into practice—this is where separatist terrorist organizations enter the scene. Ethnic separatist terrorist organizations embark on terrorist activities within a specific strategy to glorify the cause of the subgroup(s) they represent within the broader society (Akbaş, 2011, p. 34). At the same time, it is evident that separatist terrorist organizations take care to accomplish certain things before openly putting forward the "fully secessionist" demands that Kymlicka mentions. Among these, the primary and most important argument is the construction of "difference and oppression based on that difference." As Byman notes, ethnic separatist terrorist groups begin their struggle by strengthening their ethnic identity. The first task is to politically separate the ethnicity they claim to represent from the majority ethnic group. In this way, not only is difference emphasized, but competing ethnic identities are rejected outright (Byman, 1998, p. 154). This rejection is crucial for constructing the image of an enemy "against whom people must unite." The observation by Arline and McCord that "for a separatist movement to emerge, members of an ethnic group must first become conscious that they share a common cause against a common enemy" is particularly significant in this context (Byman, 1998, p. 154; McCord & McCord, 1979).

Although separatist terrorist organizations are generally assumed to be fighting for a specific ethnic identity, the exact meaning of that ethnic identity is often unclear and is imbued with varying interpretations (Kınalı, 2015, p. 41). Ethnic separatist terrorism sometimes reduces ethnic identity to a region, tribe, sect, or clan, while at other times it elevates it into a claim to statehood or nationhood (Byman, 1998, p. 155). For a separatist movement to arise, an

ethnic group must first develop a sense of identity in which individuals recognize that certain shared values distinguish them from others. Ethnic identity consciousness is therefore of critical importance for ethnic terrorist groups. Even if ethnic separatist terrorist groups fail to achieve their goals, the result is often a sharpened distinction between "us" and "them"—precisely the outcome such groups seek, as it consolidates the sense of belonging among members of the ethnic group (McCord & McCord, 1979, p. 427).

Posen (1993) highlights what he terms the "security dilemma" in ethnic conflicts. According to this view, when any ethnic group believes that its identity, culture, or existence is threatened and takes security measures in response, other ethnic groups may interpret these measures as a threat and respond in kind. This security dilemma makes societies more vulnerable to provocations and incitement and heightens the likelihood of conflict between ethnic groups (Posen, 1993). Thus, given that an ethnic minority is defined as a group that clearly differs from the dominant society in terms of language, religion, race, culture, and nationality, it is clear that ethnic terrorism, the concept of ethnic minority, and ethnic conflict are closely interlinked (Simon, 1991, p. 83). In this sense, the separatist ideas that underpin ethnic terrorism are often constructed on differences of religion, language, race, or sect and typically manifest through violent action. By contrast, it is generally presumed that individuals living within the borders of a nation-state share a common language, culture, ethnicity, and even faith, and that the state is built upon this national foundation (İçduygu, 1995, p. 118).

For a person to resort to violence against the state authority in the country where they live, they must possess strong motivations. Feelings of loneliness and social exclusion, personal dissatisfaction and frustration, the desire to belong to a group and gain status through that group, and unemployment are among the common components of such motivation. In ethnic separatist terrorist organizations, the base is ready-made: individuals living among the particularly poor and marginalized segments of the ethnic population that the organization purports to represent constitute a potential recruitment pool. For the organization, the key step is simply to encourage these individuals and push them into action (Akalın, 2009, p. 54). An individual who feels discriminated against solely because of their ethnic identity and believes that those who are "fighting back" are also struggling for them and their loved ones may experience guilt for not joining the organization. To quell this guilt, they may at least be inclined to help the organization when possible. This psychological state is a valuable

resource for ethnic separatist terrorist organizations. For this reason, militants of such organizations can easily blend into the crowd during mass protests and use the public as a shield. The main objective is to provoke civilian casualties, create social hysteria, and escalate tension between the state and society. In this situation, the state must convince its citizens that its policy does not discriminate on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or nationality and that it is concerned only with distinguishing between the guilty and the innocent. If, for various reasons, the state departs from these principles, social divisions will accelerate and terrorist organizations will find fertile ground for mass support and recruitment (Akalın, 2009). Once again, ethnic separatist terrorism is closely linked to the concept of ethnic minority, which involves individuals who see themselves as separate from the dominant nation and central government.

The organizational development processes of terrorist groups in the trajectory of ethnic separatism also reflect their goals and methods. Economic and political crises at the national and international levels lay fertile ground for ethnic separatist terrorist formations. In periods when central authority is weakened and social unrest is high, individuals with strong feelings of belonging to an ethnic subgroup may come to believe that they can resolve their group's economic, social, and political problems through violence. Gürses explains this as follows: "…Ethnic movements often originate when a group of generally educated individuals step forward during times of growing political, economic, and social crisis, claiming they can solve the problems of the ethnic subgroup to which they belong, and decide to organize around a specific political program." (Gürses, 2007, p. 17). In this framework, the development of ethnic separatist terrorist organizations is often described in three stages:

First stage – Political organization: In this initial stage, intensive organizational work is carried out among members of the ethnic subgroup who feel excluded from society or dissatisfied with the functioning of the existing system. Accordingly, ethnic separatist terrorist organizations focus heavily on building organizational structures. Individuals belonging to the ethnic group who feel marginalized or discontented begin engaging in illegal political organizing without the knowledge of the central government. Since early exposure would allow the central government to easily suppress the movement, organizers hold secret meetings to establish the core structures of the organization (Gürses, 2007, p. 18). Once organizational structures are in place, short-, medium- and long-term strategies are determined. The organization then continues its efforts in areas populated by co-ethnics

that are relatively distant from central authority or in a neighboring country where it can receive logistical support (Kınalı, 2015, pp. 42–43).

Second stage – Action phase: In this stage, armed units composed of individuals who have been excluded from the broader society for various reasons attack strategic targets in order to undermine the authority of the central government and draw national and international attention to their demands (Gürses, 2007, pp. 18–19). Unable to secure their demands through legitimate means, separatist terrorist groups use violence both to corner the central government and to present themselves as acting in "legitimate self-defense" in the eyes of the international community. In this phase, armed units composed mainly of marginalized youth carry out attacks on public targets initially in regions where the organization feels strong. Over time, these attacks are extended to other regions of the country. Thus, operational units use violent actions as propaganda tools. Through such propaganda, they strive to establish political influence over the ethnic community they claim to represent and secure political and logistical support. At this stage, they also resort to extortion under the guise of "taxation" to raise illicit funds and obtain logistical resources, placing coercive pressure on their own ethnic community (Kınalı, 2015, p. 43).

In this way, separatist terrorist organizations that claim to represent an ethnic community living in one or more regions of the state attempt to mobilize their power against the existing authority and system, aiming to paralyze state institutions and security forces. Through large-scale destructive attacks, they seek to drive society into despair and hopelessness, eroding citizens' trust in and support for the state. Ultimately, they try to convince the population that accepting the organization's demands is the only way out. In this manufactured environment, they strive to project an image of the organization as extremely powerful and invincible (Kışlalı, 1998, p. 37). At the same time, they attempt to provoke state forces into using excessive violence, turning any civilian casualties into material for counter-propaganda. Through this, they aim to attract national and international attention. To achieve these goals, they resort to tactics such as forcing governments into negotiations, publicizing their aims, and provoking the state into committing what can be framed as "state terror" (Özdağ & Öztürk, 2000, pp. 19–20).

Third stage – Controlling territory and intensifying pressure: In the final stage, efforts focus on seizing control in regions densely populated by members of the represented ethnic group, and severing those regions' ties with the central government. At the same time, terrorist

attacks are extended to city centers and metropolitan areas in order to extract economic and political concessions from the central government (Gürses, 2007, pp. 18–19). Afterward, the organization seeks to establish "liberated zones" under its control and to spark broader uprisings among the ethnic community. Operations are increasingly shifted to high-profile areas, thereby intensifying pressure on the central government. Under this pressure, the organization then seeks to open channels of communication with the government and negotiate incremental concessions that will pave the way toward its ultimate objectives (Byman, 1998, p. 162). Throughout these stages, organizations adapt their strategies and tactics according to changing circumstances. For instance, in the PKK's case, attacks were shifted from rural areas to major cities; in the ETA case, the group later decided to pursue its goals through democratic means rather than violence (İşeri, 2008, p. 24).

Thus, the system that ethnic separatist terrorism seeks to undermine by resorting to violence and instilling fear and anxiety is the established democratic order of the sovereign state. By attacking the democratic order that contains the rules necessary for different ethnic groups to live together, such organizations attempt to paralyze democratic institutions. Their violence is designed to create the image that the central government is unable to protect the rights of minorities against the majority (Byman, 1998, p. 162). Ethnic separatist terrorist organizations claim that the lands belonging to the ethnic group or community whose rights they allegedly defend are "under occupation," and thereby drive a wedge between state institutions representing authority and the local population, easily turning the other side into "the other." At this point, even the smallest misstep by state officials or security forces is exaggerated and turned into propaganda. In this way, social mobilization is kept constantly alive (Akalın, 2009, p. 53).

As we have seen, ethnic separatist groups aim to separate themselves from the existing nation, government, and even the territory of the sovereign state in which they live, in order to obtain political independence. They either dream of independence in a state of their own making or of joining another state to which they feel closer. Their ultimate goal is to "liberate" the group they represent from what they define as "foreign rule" (Özerk, 2006). Bowen, however, disagrees. According to him, the real reason behind ethnic separatist terrorism and the closely related phenomenon of ethnic conflict is primarily the pursuit of political power (Bowen, 1997, p. 16). Byman diverges slightly from Bowen's view. He argues that ethnic separatist groups and organizations know that establishing a new state

through terrorism is extremely difficult. Therefore, acquiring political power is usually a secondary objective for them (Byman, 1998). Moreover, international law does not grant ethnic groups or nations a unilateral right to secede. Nor can self-determination be realized solely on the basis of the unilateral desire of a group or nation to separate; it only acquires meaning and can be implemented if accepted by the sovereign state (Hannum, 1998, p. 18). Under these settled rules, ethnic separatist groups and organizations use terrorism primarily as a tool to gain political leverage rather than as a means to establish a new state (Kınalı, 2015). Through the political concessions they may eventually obtain, they seek to become more influential actors within the system.

At the current juncture, it is clear that, with a few exceptions, violent actions against the sovereignty of nation-states often place the terrorist organizations at the center of chaos in a difficult position. Regional and global state and non-state actors, through their reactions, have increasingly encouraged target governments in their struggle against these organizations. This presents ethnic separatist terrorist organizations with a major dilemma that is increasingly difficult to overcome (Akalın, 2009, p. 56). Indeed, research indicates that there are currently nearly seventy separatist movements in the world, twelve of which are active and seven of which use violence (Akbaş, 2011, p. 30). Many of these organizations—like the PKK—have increasingly become marginal formations that exist solely through violence and, over time, have no mission other than producing violence (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998). A general look at these organizations shows that, although militants and even some leaders still cling to the ideal and hope of founding an independent state, they in fact no longer have any genuine mission beyond ensuring the survival of the organization itself (Post, 1998, p. 38).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on approaches that do not confine the concept of security solely to military threats, but instead address it through its social and discursive dimensions. Contemporary security theories, which go beyond classical security paradigms, have gained prominence particularly in the post–Cold War period as they seek to explain the increasing role of non-state actors and human-centered threats. In this context, theoretical approaches that emphasize the relationship between security and the process of social construction constitute a key point of reference for analyzing threat perception and foreign policy–making processes, which form the core of this study. Within this framework, the Copenhagen School—which argues that security is produced through discourse—and its securitization theory, positioned at the center of this perspective, will be examined in detail. In addition, the learning model, which suggests that states may make future policy choices based on past experiences, is also incorporated into the analytical process. Through this model, the study will explore how Türkiye has drawn conclusions from previous crisis experiences and how these have been reflected in its security policies regarding the PYD/YPG.

3.1. The Copenhagen School and Securitization Theory

The concept of security has undergone significant transformations within the discipline of international relations and has been interpreted differently by various theoretical approaches. While security during the Cold War period was predominantly associated with military threats and state-centered strategies, the post–Cold War era introduced debates on the economic, environmental, and societal dimensions of security. Within this context, the Copenhagen School generated a major paradigmatic shift in security studies, arguing that security should not be confined to its military dimension but instead be examined through a much broader perspective (Bakan & Şahin, 2018, p. 146). Realist and neo-realist theories that dominated the Cold War era conceptualized security in a state-centric manner rooted in military threats. However, with the end of the Cold War, several new types of threats emerged within international relations and security policies, prompting a reevaluation of traditional understandings of security. Phenomena such as globalization, technological

advancements, terrorism, irregular migration, environmental challenges, cyber security threats, and economic crises reshaped states' security policies.

In this regard, the Copenhagen School is considered one of the theoretical approaches that has made significant contributions to security studies within international relations. Developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, this school expands the security concept beyond its traditional state-centric and military-focused framework, offering a multidimensional analytical perspective (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 22). Accordingly, the Copenhagen School—one of the two prominent schools in contemporary security studies—aims to build a bridge between traditional and critical security approaches, whereas the Aberystwyth School provides a continuous and radical critique of traditional security studies (Ünver, 2024, p. 125). Both schools are considered part of the post-positivist movement that gained momentum in the discipline of international relations after the Cold War.

While the Copenhagen School contributes to diversifying critical security studies by examining security within a broad conceptual framework, the radical critique of the Aberystwyth School tends to question the fundamental assumptions of security studies. Together, these two approaches enhance theoretical diversity in the field and deepen academic debates. One of the most significant contributions of the Copenhagen School to international security studies is the development of Securitization Theory. Introduced for the first time by Ole Wæver in his 1989 work "Security: The Speech Act — Analyzing the Politics of a Word", the concept was subsequently expanded in "Securitization and Desecuritization" and later elaborated in the more comprehensive "Security: A New Framework for Analysis" (Akgül-Açıkmeşe, 2011, p. 57). As Williams notes, this theory generated a new intellectual debate within modern security studies and offered an innovative analytical lens. Securitization Theory stands as one of the core components of the Copenhagen School.

Securitization Theory posits that issues addressed within security studies can be evaluated at different levels. In this context, issues may fall into three categories: "non-politicized," "politicized," and "securitized." A non-politicized issue refers to a matter that is not a primary concern for political actors and does not require open public debate. Politicized issues, on the other hand, attract the attention of political actors and the public and become part of political decision-making processes. Securitized issues are framed as existential threats and thereby legitimized as matters requiring urgent and extraordinary measures

outside the bounds of normal political procedures (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 23). The securitization process involves presenting an issue as a security threat and ensuring societal acceptance of the extraordinary measures taken in response.

Securitization Theory argues that the perception of an issue as a security threat is not based on objective reality but is instead constructed through the discourse of political actors. According to this theory, security threats are not absolute or fixed; rather, they are framed within a specific discourse by specific actors in order to gain societal recognition (Baysal & Lüleci, 2015, p. 63). Security is therefore not merely a given condition but a concept shaped through social and political interactions. For an event or situation to be perceived as a threat, it must be defined in a particular way by relevant social, economic, and political actors. Through the discourse of these actors, security issues enter the agenda of both the public and decision-makers, making the securitization of an issue possible. The securitization process entails not only the identification of threats but also the shaping of policies, social attitudes, and state behavior in response to those threats. Consequently, security emerges as a phenomenon that is continuously debated, constructed, and reconstructed within societies. This process is a discursive practice that defines social structures, power relations, and the role of the state. Securitization involves transforming a particular issue from the realm of ordinary politics into one that demands urgent and exceptional measures (Miş, 2014, p. 355). In this process, the issue presented as a security threat is moved beyond the scope of routine political debate, and crisis-oriented discourse legitimizes extraordinary actions (Khanayev, 2024, p. 18). In light of these explanations, as illustrated in Figure 1, the securitization process consists of three stages: identifying a non-politicized issue, politicizing that issue, and ultimately elevating the politicized issue to the level of securitization.



Figure 1. Securitization process

Source: Wæver, O. (1995)

The Copenhagen School examines the securitization process across five distinct sectors: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental (Karaman & Yiğittepe, 2022, p.

31). These sectors are used to analyze different dimensions of security threats and contribute to the broadened understanding of security by demonstrating that security is not limited to military matters. The sectoral distinction introduced by the Copenhagen School highlights that security threats may emerge in various domains and that each sector possesses unique dynamics. Understanding the sector in which securitization occurs is therefore crucial for analyzing how states and other actors shape their security policies.

The military security sector examines direct physical threats faced by states and societies. These threats include war, armed conflicts, terrorist attacks, and military interventions (Durak, 2024, p. 344). States strengthen their armies, form defense alliances, or develop deterrent military strategies to protect national security. While this sector aligns closely with realist perspectives and focuses on the traditional state-centric dimension of security, contemporary military security also encompasses hybrid warfare, asymmetric threats, and cyber security (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 50).

The political security sector concerns a state's political stability and sovereignty. Internal and external threats faced by governments—such as coup attempts, separatist movements, foreign interventions, or activities aimed at weakening political authority—fall under this category (Aydindag, 2021, p. 6). According to the Copenhagen School, political security may be shaped not only by physical threats but also by ideological and discursive challenges (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 141). For instance, external actors questioning a state's governance system or international position may be perceived as threats to political security. In this context, authoritarian regimes may tend to securitize opposition movements, while democratic states may evaluate political security through the lens of rule of law and the protection of democratic values.

The economic security sector encompasses a state's or society's economic welfare, sustainability, and resilience against crises. Economic crises, global financial fluctuations, energy dependency, unemployment, inflation, and resource scarcity are among the threats addressed within this sector. With globalization increasing economic interdependence among states, economic security has become even more significant (Buzan et al., 1998). A country's dependency on external actors for critical sectors may weaken its economic security and become a strategic threat. Economic sanctions, trade wars, and energy security today represent major examples of how economic issues are securitized. At this point, energy security comes to the fore. Today, the most important factor in ensuring energy security is

moving away from fossil fuels and transitioning to green energy (Balcı & Khanayev, 2025, p. 104; Khanayev & Al, 2025, p. 801). Furthermore, with rapid digitalization and technological advancements, cyber threats have emerged as new components of economic security (Olteanu, 2024, p. 48).

The societal security sector focuses on identity, culture, demographic structure, and societal cohesion. Threats to societal security may stem from the suppression of a group's ethnic or cultural identity, social polarization, migration, or challenges in integration (Theiler, 2003, p. 251). In multi-ethnic and multicultural states, societal security often becomes a sensitive matter. States may frame minority groups as threats to national unity or adopt harsh policies to preserve national identity. For instance, in some European countries, migrants are framed as threats to national identity and cultural cohesion, illustrating how societal securitization emerges. Societal security is also linked to areas such as language, religion, and education, and the framing of these issues directly influences a state's security policies (Buzan et al., 1998).

The environmental security sector addresses threats directed at ecosystems, natural resources, and human health. Climate change, natural disasters, water scarcity, deforestation, and biodiversity loss are among these threats (Trombetta, 2008, pp. 586–587). According to the Copenhagen School, securitizing environmental threats leads states and international organizations to treat global problems such as climate change as priority security issues. Recent framing of environmental migration and climate-related crises as security concerns illustrates how environmental security has transformed. For instance, migration triggered by drought or water shortages is increasingly framed as a societal or political threat in some countries, demonstrating how environmental security policies intersect with securitization processes (Buzan et al., 1998).

The Copenhagen School's five-sector security approach demonstrates that security is a multidimensional concept and that each sector is confronted with its own distinct threats. This approach goes beyond the traditional understanding of security and offers a more comprehensive and flexible analytical framework for international relations and security studies. For instance, while military and political security generally deal with state-centric threats, societal and environmental security focus on broader, society-oriented threats. These sectors also have intersecting dimensions; for example, economic crises may lead to political instability, or environmental disasters may threaten societal security. Therefore, it can be

stated that securitization processes operate through different dynamics in each sector, and that security policies are shaped in a multidimensional manner.

For the securitization process to be successful, three fundamental components must come together: the securitizing actor, the referent object, and the audience. The interaction of these three elements enables a particular issue to be perceived as a security threat and legitimizes the adoption of extraordinary measures against it (Çona, 2023, p. 129). The securitizing actor is the individual or institution that defines the security threat and demands that measures be taken against it. These actors are generally individuals and institutions that hold social and political authority, such as state officials, political leaders, military authorities, or media organizations. Securitizing actors employ various strategies to persuade the public of the existence of a particular threat. They use dramatic language in their discourse to emphasize the magnitude of the threat, refer to historical examples to remind audiences of the harm caused by similar threats in the past, or attempt to substantiate the extent of the danger through statistical data. At the same time, these discourses spread to wider audiences through the media, further reinforcing the perception of threat (Sula, 2021, p. 95).

The referent object is the value, asset, or concept that is claimed to be under threat and in need of protection. This object generally includes elements such as the state, national security, territorial integrity, sovereignty, national identity, societal stability, economic security, or cultural values. In the securitization process, the referent object is deliberately presented as being under threat, ensuring that society takes this threat seriously (Baysal & Lüleci, 2015, pp. 77–78). For example, when a state asserts that it is combating a terrorist organization threatening national security, the referent object directly becomes the security of the country and the right to life of its citizens. In economic crises, the referent object is typically identified as financial stability or the national economy, and policies are developed accordingly. In cases where environmental threats are securitized, the referent object becomes ecosystems, natural resources, or public health. Once it is determined which referent object is under threat, security policies are formulated within that framework.

The audience, on the other hand, refers to the societal segment that listens to, evaluates, and accepts the securitization discourse. For the securitization process to be successful, the audience must accept the security threat narrative and act accordingly (Balcı & Kardaş, 2012, pp. 104–105). The audience is not necessarily limited to the general public; bureaucratic elites, civil society organizations, media outlets, international actors, or decision-making

groups that shape state security policies can also be considered part of this process. If the audience accepts the statements of the securitizing actor, the issue in question is framed as a security threat, and extraordinary measures are legitimized (Kurt, 2020, p. 8). For example, if a country plans to implement strict security measures against terrorist organizations, the audience must adopt this threat perception and support the policies proposed by the state. The audience's acceptance of the securitization discourse is a factor that strengthens political actors' positions and plays a critical role in mobilizing societal support, particularly during times of crisis.

The effectiveness of discourse is of paramount importance in the securitization process. For a discourse to succeed, a strong framework must be established that captures public attention and persuades broad audiences. Within this framework, the threat element must be presented not only as an existing danger but also as an existential threat. Securitizing actors often employ dramatic language when describing the security threat, creating a sense of crisis and emphasizing that extraordinary measures are required. In this context, three key elements are highlighted for the success of the discourse: the creation of a crisis atmosphere, the emphasis on urgency, and the reinforcement of the threat perception (Akgül-Açıkmeşe, 2011, p. 61). The crisis atmosphere is nurtured through statements that generate fear, anxiety, and uncertainty within society. In particular, state officials or security bureaucracies attempt to mobilize the public by making declarations about the existence of a specific threat. One of the most concrete examples of this is the continuous emphasis on the threat by governments following terrorist attacks to justify strict security policies and the development of discourse aimed at increasing societal sensitivity to the threat.

The emphasis on urgency is a strategy used to reinforce the idea that a threat will cause significant harm if immediate action is not taken. Securitizing actors argue that the threat is an unpostponable and non-deferrable problem, highlighting the need for rapid and comprehensive measures. This is particularly evident in the statements of political leaders. For instance, a leader who asserts that uncontrolled migration into the country poses a significant risk to national security may advocate for extraordinary measures to prevent this situation. When combined with the crisis discourse, the emphasis on urgency can also generate a sense of panic and alarm within society. This strategy is frequently employed in situations such as economic crises, epidemics, or wars, aiming to ensure that the public adapts more quickly to the security policies proposed by the state (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 24).

The process of reinforcing the perception of threat is achieved by keeping a particular issue constantly on the public agenda and making it a subject of debate. At this point, the media becomes one of the most important tools in the securitization process. The media can help frame a specific issue as a security threat, increase the perception of danger, or contribute to the criminalization of certain groups in the eyes of the public (Miş, 2014, p. 354). In particular, the consistent presentation of an issue as a "threat" in news broadcasts, newspaper headlines, and digital media platforms can accelerate the adoption of this perception by society. How the media presents events—the visuals used, headlines, and expert opinions—directly affects the public's sense of security. For example, the extensive and detailed coverage of terrorist incidents by the media increases the perception of threat and leads the public to support stricter security measures. Similarly, when immigrants or specific ethnic/religious groups are portrayed as security threats and this portrayal is reinforced through media channels, it is more readily accepted by society. News suggesting that immigrants threaten national security or cause economic crises can prompt the public to adopt harsher stances toward migration policies. In this process, the media functions as a tool that strengthens the discourse of securitizing actors and plays a key role in shaping societal perceptions.

It should not be forgotten that the securitization process is not carried out solely by states and political actors; it can also be shaped by various actors such as the bureaucracy, government institutions, lobbying organizations, the media, academia, pressure groups, and non-governmental organizations (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 40–41). In addition to the media, academic studies can also play a significant role in the securitization process. Research conducted on securitized issues can create the perception that a particular threat has been scientifically validated, thereby legitimizing the discourse. Similarly, non-governmental organizations and international bodies can contribute to the securitization process. It is common for certain human rights organizations or think tanks to strengthen securitization discourses by publishing reports emphasizing that a particular issue constitutes a security threat.

The applications of Securitization Theory can be observed in various cases worldwide. A significant example of the securitization process is the definition of terrorism as a global threat in the United States following the September 11, 2001 attacks, and the subsequent implementation of extraordinary security measures. The U.S. government identified Al-

Qaeda and global terrorism as existential threats, leading to extraordinary policies such as the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and the enactment of laws like the Patriot Act, which curtailed individual rights (Emir, 2021). Similarly, in Europe, irregular migration has at times been securitized, with refugees presented as threats to national security by certain political actors (Emir, 2024, p. 101). In this process, migration is framed not as an economic or humanitarian issue, but as a phenomenon threatening social order and national identity. Media and political discourse have contributed significantly to the effective functioning of this securitization process.

The securitization process can lead to the suspension of normal political procedures even in democratic societies. When an issue is securitized, it becomes possible to legitimize special and extraordinary measures outside ordinary political processes. This may weaken democratic oversight mechanisms and provide states with opportunities to justify repressive policies (Miş, 2014, p. 350). In particular, in authoritarian regimes, defining specific groups as terrorists or enemies facilitates the implementation of oppressive policies. However, securitization is not solely a state-centered mechanism. Non-governmental organizations, international institutions, and even individual actors can frame certain issues as security threats. For example, presenting environmental threats as global security concerns and developing international policies in this area demonstrates that securitization is not exclusively state-focused.

There are also critiques of Securitization Theory. Matt McDonald is among the foremost critics, arguing that the theory's excessive emphasis on the production of security discourse results in insufficient analysis of the social, political, and historical contexts in which securitization emerges. This limitation confines the theory to abstract discourse and neglects the diverse social dynamics involved in constructing security threats. Authors of the Copenhagen School, in their aim to create a universal theory of security threat construction, failed to account for the different responses and perceptions of specific communities and actors. In this regard, McDonald emphasizes the importance of factors such as identity, culture, and history in threat construction, noting that their neglect leaves the theory incomplete (McDonald, 2008, p. 571). Similarly, Balzacq critiques the Copenhagen School's approach as insufficient because it addresses the securitization process solely at the discursive level. According to him, securitizing actors must shape their discourse in relation to the perceptions of the audience and external realities. Additionally, focusing exclusively

on the discursive dimension of security risks neglecting material threats, which are real and tangible, such as terrorist attacks (Balzacq, 2005, p. 182). Furthermore, this theoretical framework may allow authoritarian regimes to manipulate securitization for their own purposes, potentially leading to dangerous consequences for democratic values. These shortcomings indicate that Securitization Theory remains an evolving framework that requires further refinement. Nonetheless, it provides a detailed perspective for analyzing Türkiye's security policies regarding separatist terrorist organizations such as the PKK-PYD/YPG.

The Copenhagen School's securitization theory can be applied to analyze the impact of PKK-PYD/YPG organizations on Türkiye's security. In this context, Türkiye identifies these organizations as existential threats and has implemented extraordinary measures to eliminate them. The PKK-PYD/YPG are perceived as threats to both Türkiye's military and societal security (Hamurcu & Özden, 2019, p. 457). These groups threaten Türkiye's territorial integrity and disrupt internal stability, as well as its ethnic and cultural identity. Türkiye's securitization discourse regarding the PKK-PYD/YPG is largely built upon the concepts of crisis and urgency. Turkish state officials argue that these organizations threaten the existence of the country and that the threat must be eliminated immediately. This discourse has been widely accepted by Turkish society, making the PKK-PYD/YPG a priority issue on Türkiye's security agenda.

The Copenhagen School's securitization theory provides an important framework for understanding Türkiye's policies toward the PKK-PYD/YPG. The theory explains how Türkiye defines these groups as existential threats and the extraordinary measures it takes to neutralize them. It also analyzes how Türkiye's securitization discourse has been accepted by society and how it shapes the country's security policies.

In conclusion, the Copenhagen School's Securitization Theory has brought a significant transformation to security studies, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding how security policies are constructed, legitimized, and justified for extraordinary measures. The theory serves as a critical tool for understanding perceptions of security in international relations, state policies, and societal dynamics. In the modern world, securitization processes are becoming increasingly widespread, exerting profound effects on global security policies.

3.2. Lesson-Drawing Model

The Lesson-Drawing Model, introduced by Richard Rose in his work Lesson-Drawing in Public Policy: A Guide to Learning Across Time and Space (1993), provides a systematic framework that helps policymakers develop context-appropriate solutions by examining policies implemented in other countries or regions (Rose, 1993). As a particularly significant model in the field of comparative public policy, the Lesson-Drawing Model analyzes how knowledge, ideas, and practices can be transferred across different political, economic, and cultural contexts and how this process can be used to improve policy outcomes (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 5). Rose's framework underlines the critical role of context and feasibility in the policy transfer process and offers a systematic method for assessing to what extent and in what form a policy that has been successful in one country can be implemented in another. At the core of this model lies the idea that policymakers can draw lessons by analyzing policies implemented elsewhere and then adapt these policies to address existing problems in their own countries. Rose argues that this process is not a simple act of imitation or copying; rather, it requires understanding under which conditions a particular policy has succeeded or failed and subsequently adjusting that policy to fit a new context (Rose, 1991, p. 4). This approach is consistent with the broader policy transfer literature, which emphasizes that cross-border learning is a dynamic and iterative process.

The first stage of the lesson-drawing process is to identify policies and programs implemented in other countries or regions that face similar problems. This requires a comprehensive investigation of relevant cases and a comparative analysis of policy outcomes in different contexts (Rose, 1991, p. 5). For example, a country seeking to reform its healthcare system may examine the experiences of countries with similar demographic or economic structures. Rose identifies several criteria for assessing whether a policy is transferable (Rose, 1993):

Similarity: Are the problems and contexts in the source and target countries sufficiently similar?

Effectiveness: Did the policy achieve the anticipated outcomes in the original context?

Feasibility: Is the policy implementable in the new context, given political, economic, and administrative constraints?

These criteria are crucial for ensuring that lessons drawn from other countries are both relevant and applicable. Dolowitz and Marsh note that the success of policy transfer largely depends on the degree of compatibility between the institutional structures of the source and target countries (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 13).

Once a potentially transferable policy has been identified, the next step is to adapt it to the local context. Rose identifies several approaches to adaptation (Rose, 1993, p. 30):

- Copying: The policy is adopted almost entirely without any changes.
- Adaptation: The policy is adopted after being adjusted to fit local conditions.
- Hybridization: Elements from multiple policies are combined.
- Synthesis: A new policy is developed, inspired by different sources.
- Inspiration): The policy is considered as a general idea rather than being applied directly.

This adaptive approach rests on the assumption that policies are not universal solutions and must be tailored to each context's specific needs and constraints (Evans, 2009, p. 245).

Despite the potential benefits of the Lesson-Drawing Model, the policy transfer process involves various challenges. Differences in political systems, cultural norms, and institutional capacities may hinder the successful implementation of a policy in a new context. Policymakers may also encounter resistance from interest groups that are skeptical of foreign models or prefer to maintain existing policies (Rose, 1993, p. 40). Although the model offers a valuable framework for policy analysis, it has also been subject to criticism. Some scholars argue that it conceptualizes the policy-making process in an overly rational manner and does not always reflect political realities (Evans, 2009, p. 250). Dolowitz and Marsh approach policy transfer from a different angle by treating the rationality of actors not as complete but as bounded rationality. According to them, fully rational behavior is extremely rare, as limited information inevitably leads to bounded rationality (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 14). Kerber and Eckardt emphasize that the extent to which lessons can be drawn from the experiences of other countries—particularly regarding how the positive or negative aspects of "superior policies" can be learned—remains a contentious issue. Although they do not claim that this process is entirely impossible, they argue that policy transfer is inherently complex and multidimensional (Kerber & Eckardt, 2007, p. 234). They maintain that a policy that has been successful in one country cannot be transplanted directly

to another because the success of any given policy depends on contextual factors, institutional differences, and societal dynamics.

For a policy developed in one country to be successful in another, it must first undergo an appropriate evaluation process. In the lesson-drawing process, if a policy has produced positive outcomes, it may be imported with proper adjustments and contextual adaptations. However, if the policies observed have failed, policymakers may avoid repeating similar mistakes by learning from other countries' experiences. In this sense, policy transfer does not have to be limited to successful examples; unsuccessful policies also provide valuable lessons by showing which practices should be avoided. For example, a delegation of public officials from a country working on education policy may visit various European countries to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their education systems and develop reform proposals suitable for their own country. Likewise, observation missions can be conducted in different countries outside Europe to examine education policies. This process is important not only for achieving positive outcomes but also for preventing the repetition of mistakes and understanding the reasons behind policy failures. The lesson-drawing process is not limited to the analysis of past experiences; it also involves anticipating the future consequences of a particular policy. Thus, policymakers not only assess a policy's past performance but also consider what kind of impact it might have in the future. According to Rose, the success of a policy depends not only on its general features but also on the specific conditions of the context in which it is implemented (Rose, 1991, p. 4). Therefore, a policy should neither be adopted wholesale nor rejected outright; instead, it should be subjected to a detailed analysis to determine under which conditions and in what form it might be adapted. Rather than blindly importing or rejecting policies, each country must adapt them in light of its own unique conditions.

To determine whether a policy has been successful and to properly evaluate the reasons behind its success or failure, assumptions must be rigorously tested (Sanderson, 2002, p. 19). Such tests help identify the conditions under which a given policy is effective. Success in one context does not guarantee equivalent outcomes in different geographical or administrative settings. Consequently, any policy transfer process must take into account the economic, social, cultural, and administrative characteristics of the implementation environment. In this regard, assessing the degree of feasibility and making necessary

adjustments before transferring a policy to another context emerges as a fundamental factor increasing the likelihood of success.

The question of how well policies work and under which conditions they are applicable is one of the central issues policymakers face. A policy that has proven successful in one place may not yield the same results elsewhere. Therefore, in any policy transfer process, the policy should be evaluated not only in terms of its success but also with regard to its feasibility and required adaptations. In areas such as social welfare systems, education reforms, or healthcare policies, countries can learn from one another's experiences and develop models tailored to their own contexts. However, since each country's political and social structure differs, it is necessary to prioritize adaptation and modification processes rather than directly adopting a successful policy. In this sense, policymakers can make more informed and effective decisions by examining not only what works but also which policy components fail under particular circumstances. At the same time, the model's emphasis on context-specific adaptation raises questions about the generalizability of lessons drawn from other countries. In the context of Türkiye's security concerns regarding the PKK–PYD/YPG, the Lesson-Drawing Model provides an analytical lens through which other states' counterterrorism policies can be examined, adapted, and integrated into Türkiye's own strategy. The Turkish state has long been confronted with the asymmetric threat posed by the PKK and related groups, which necessitates a dynamic and multi-layered counterterrorism approach. Turkish policymakers may study counterinsurgency and counterterrorism policies implemented by other states facing separatist uprisings and use these experiences to develop security strategies that are both effective and compatible with international best practices.

A suitable case study for Türkiye is Spain's counterterrorism approach toward the Basque separatist organization ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), which waged a violent insurgency for decades. Spain effectively neutralized the ETA threat through a combination of law enforcement operations, political engagement, and socio-economic policies aimed at addressing the root causes of separatist violence (Katılmış et al., 2022, pp. 878–879). Coordinated intelligence work by Spanish authorities, transnational cooperation with France, and legal measures targeting terrorist financing and support networks played a crucial role in dismantling ETA's operational structure. Moreover, Spain's ability to engage in political dialogue with moderate Basque nationalist parties helped isolate extremists and

delegitimize their cause. Türkiye can draw lessons from Spain's experience, particularly regarding the integration of intelligence-driven counterterrorism operations with broader political and socio-economic strategies.

Another instructive example is the United Kingdom's response to the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The British government adopted a dual-track strategy that combined military counterinsurgency measures with political negotiations, culminating in the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (Özer, 2022, pp. 96–97). Although Türkiye's case differs significantly in terms of geopolitical and ethnic dynamics, some components of the UK's anti-IRA policies—such as intelligence-led operations, engagement with local communities, and rehabilitation programs for former militants—may offer useful insights. However, Türkiye must carefully assess the limits and unintended consequences of such policies, ensuring that they do not inadvertently intensify radicalization or exacerbate grievances among local populations.

The Lesson-Learning Model demonstrates that policy transfer is not always straightforward, as contextual differences can directly hinder implementation. Factors such as Türkiye's geopolitical position, regional conflicts, ethnic and sectarian dynamics, and international diplomatic pressures must be considered before adopting counterterrorism models from other states. For instance, the United States' counterinsurgency strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan, which combine comprehensive military operations with nation-building efforts, have been criticized due to their high economic costs, long-term instability, and mixed effectiveness in preventing insurgent resurgence. Türkiye must critically assess whether elements of these strategies—such as psychological operations, local security partnerships, and counter-radicalization programs—can be adapted to its domestic counterterrorism policies without encountering similar pitfalls. Another important dimension of the Lesson-Learning Model is the role of institutional capacity and public legitimacy in shaping policy outcomes. Even if a counterterrorism model has proven effective in another country, its success in Türkiye depends on factors such as the strength of the legal framework, the professionalism of security forces, public trust in state institutions, and respect for human rights. Empirical studies indicate that counterterrorism policies that rely excessively on militarized solutions without addressing socio-political grievances have limited long-term success. Therefore, a holistic approach that integrates military, political, economic, and diplomatic efforts is more likely to yield sustainable results

in combating the PKK-PYD/YPG threat. Moreover, international law and geopolitical dynamics must be incorporated into any lesson-learning process. Türkiye's counterterrorism efforts occur within a broader context that includes NATO obligations, EU accession discussions, and regional power struggles encompassing Syria and Iraq. Lessons drawn from other states' counterterrorism experiences must therefore be reconciled with Türkiye's international commitments and diplomatic considerations. For example, Israel's counterterrorism policies are often regarded as highly effective due to intelligence dominance, preemptive strikes, and border security measures. However, implementing similar tactics in Türkiye's counterterrorism strategy could provoke international criticism and diplomatic tensions, particularly in light of human rights concerns and regional stability issues.

In conclusion, the Lesson-Learning Model provides a robust theoretical framework for analyzing and adapting counterterrorism strategies in Türkiye's fight against the PKK-PYD/YPG. By systematically evaluating the successful policies of countries facing separatist threats—such as Spain's strategy against ETA, the United Kingdom's approach to the IRA, or Israel's counterinsurgency operations—Turkish policymakers can gain valuable insights when adapting these lessons to Türkiye's unique security environment. However, lesson-learning is not a simple process of policy copying; it requires a critical assessment of contextual differences, institutional capacities, and geopolitical constraints to ensure that adopted strategies are both effective and sustainable. The ultimate goal should be to develop a comprehensive, adaptable, and legally sound counterterrorism framework that strengthens Türkiye's national security while preserving regional and international stability.

4. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SYRIA AND THE KURDS

The Middle East has long been a region where numerous ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups coexist, making it an area frequently marked by political and sociocultural tensions. As one of the key components of this multilayered structure, the Kurds have historically been dispersed across the four main states of the region, maintaining their presence within a demographic landscape largely unrepresented by political borders. This situation has rendered Kurdish aspirations for national identity and demands for political representation a matter directly affecting both nation-state structures and regional power balances. Particularly since the early twentieth century, the accelerating processes of nation-state formation have led to the Kurdish issue being approached predominantly through security-centered perspectives. The historical roots of Kurdish identity, the boundaries of ethnic affiliation, and the geographical distribution of Kurdish populations constitute fundamental elements for understanding these demands. Accordingly, examining the Kurds' historical background and their positioning within the region is crucial for contextualizing both the rise of PYD/YPG during the Syrian crisis and Türkiye's policies in response to these developments. The following section provides an analysis of the evolution of this ethnic group by focusing on the origins of the Kurds and their historical spread throughout the Middle East.

4.1. Origins and Expansion of the Kurds in the Middle East

To understand the Kurds—who have long lived predominantly within the borders of four neighboring states, namely Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria (Bruinessen, 2006, p. 31)—it is essential to examine, within the context of time and geography, the historical conditions that shaped the emergence of this ethnic group. From a historical perspective, references to communities resembling the Kurds can be traced back to the 6th century BCE. The term Kardaka, associated with the Kurds, appears not only in early accounts of several major tribes in Iran and Eastern Anatolia but also on two Sumerian threshold stones dated to around 2000 BCE. According to the Assyriologist Thureau-Dangin, inscriptions on two Sumerian tablets point to a region south of Lake Van known as Kar-daka. The scholar Driver has also addressed this subject. Additionally, Mehmet Şerif Fırat, in his work Doğu İlleri ve Varto

Tarihi, suggests that inscriptions belonging to Anno-Banini, a king of the Lullu people, found near Zehav close to the Iraqi city of Sulaymaniyah, indicate the presence of Guti Kurds in the region between 1900 and 1800 BCE (Fırat, 1961, p. 53).

In Islamic historiography, the 10th-century geographer al-Mas'udi refers to the Kurds as "nomadic communities." The term Kurdistan first appears in works written during the reign of the Great Seljuk Sultan Sanjar, where it was used to describe the region at the foothills of the Zagros Mountains south of Hakkari. Arab geographers also used this term to refer to the same mountainous region. According to Töreli, the concept grouped under the term Kurd has often been linked to ancient peoples that have since disappeared from history. Examples include the Kardak–Kardo and Med–Scythian theories, as well as the myth of Kawa included in the Shahnameh, written by the Persian poet Firdausi in the 11th century (Töreli, 2002, pp. 3–4). Ottoman archival documents also use the term Kurd, but primarily to denote nomadic and semi-nomadic groups. Numerous records show that among Turkmen groups, the label Kurd referred to those living in mountainous areas. In these records, the terms Etrak and Ekrad do not mean "Turk" or "Kurd" in the ethnic sense but rather "sedentary" and "nomadic" (Yılmazçelik, 1988, p. 128).

Given the varying interpretations in historical sources, it is useful to consider different scholarly views regarding Kurdish origins. According to Töreli, one group of authors argues that the Kurds are of "Aryan" origin and migrated approximately 3000 years ago from Northern Europe, through northern regions of the Black Sea and west of the Caspian Sea, eventually descending into Mesopotamia—a journey believed to have taken about 1000 years. These scholars, aiming to situate the Kurds within a clear historical and ethnic framework, claim that after settling in Mesopotamia around 1000 BCE, the Kurds overthrew the Assyrian state around 600 BCE and established the Median Empire, which later collapsed following Persian expansion. Other scholars reject this thesis, arguing that no such migration from Europe through the Caucasus into Mesopotamia around 3000 BCE is historically documented. They maintain that the Kurds were not a fully developed society but rather semi-nomadic groups that migrated from Central Asia and settled in the mountainous regions of Anatolia suitable for pastoralism. While the movements of Kurdish nomads date back to about 1000 BCE, the foundations of Mesopotamian civilizations can be traced as far back as 5000 BCE (Töreli, 2002, p. 1). A further set of scholars claims that the Kurds descended either from the Turanian Medes—considered a branch of the Iram

peoples—or from the Indo-Persian Parthians. Supporters of this view argue that the Kurds' habitation of remote mountainous areas prevented extensive mixing with other populations (as cited in Heper, 2008, p. 67). In addition, a widely accepted view holds that the Kurds are not descended from a single ethnic lineage; instead, the peoples who historically inhabited the relevant regions collectively contributed to the formation of modern Kurdish identity (Tan, 2009, p. 27). Authors who defend the thesis that the Kurds are of Turanian origin often rely on the works of historians such as Eberhard, Rasonyi, and Nemeth (Kafesoğlu, 1987, p. 19).

Despite differing opinions, the broader historical narrative suggests that the Kurds likely originated from Central Asia. Their customs and traditions also show notable similarities with those of the Turks. Western Asia—encompassing Anatolia, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Mesopotamia, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Levant—has historically served as a crossroads and battlefield for various peoples. Although the Kurds survived numerous invasions and preserved their social structure, they also absorbed elements of other ethnic groups as a result of these interactions. This cultural and ethnic mixing is also reflected in the Kurdish language. Kurdish, a member of the Indo-European language family, includes three main dialects—Kurmanji, Kurdi, and Zaza—each with distinct vocabulary and grammatical features (Heper, 2008, p. 67). Linguistic influences also emerged due to contact between Kurdish-speaking nomadic groups and neighboring populations, resulting in Kurdish varieties influenced by Turkish, Persian, and Arabic (Bitlisi, 1971, p. 27). In addition to Kurds in Iran and Türkiye, Arab historians refer to a larger collection of Middle Eastern tribes as Akrad (Kurds) (Eröz, 1984, pp. 256–257). Some researchers classify these communities into four groups: Kurmanj, Guran, Lur, and Kalhur (Töreli, 2002, p. 5). Therefore, it is plausible to argue that the Kurds, following Turkish migrations, constituted a borderland society influenced by Turkish, Arab, and Persian cultures. Today, these groups are dispersed across Türkiye, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (Kuran, 1992, p. 157). Their ancient origins, the presence of numerous surrounding ethnic groups such as Assyrians, Oghuz Turks, Kipchaks, Arabs, Circassians, Georgians, and Armenians, their internal sociological divisions into clans and tribes, and the coexistence of both nomadic and sedentary groups have collectively prevented the formation of a homogeneous Kurdish identity in the Middle East. Even within their primary geographic concentration—northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and southeastern Türkiye—these internal divisions

hindered the establishment of a unified political authority. Although the Kurds share certain similarities with neighboring peoples—speaking an Indo-Iranian language and adhering largely to Zoroastrianism historically and Sunni Islam today—they often remained outside the dominant belief systems of the ruling powers in their regions. The combination of these cultural, religious, and geographical factors prevented the emergence of a political entity named "Kurdistan" at any point in history (O. Bingöl, 2016). Despite these divisions, linguistic, cultural, and ethnic evidence clearly demonstrates that Kurds have lived for an extended period within the regions they inhabit today.

There are also notable observations regarding the migration movements that led the Kurds to their present-day settlements. Most likely, Kurds, unable to survive under the harsh climatic conditions of Central Asia and seeking protection from the incursions of other peoples, began migrating by following mountain chains and eventually selected the countries discussed in the following lines as their settlement areas (Sekban, 1979). After the Scythians-Sakas spread to West Asia in the 7th century BCE, Kurds began to appear in Anatolia, Iraq, and Iran. Both the Kurds mentioned in the Elgish inscription and those observed in West Asia were initially brought to the Zagros region by the Scythians-Sakas or other influences, where they remained for more than three centuries (Meydan Larousse, 1972, p. 736). In the work entitled Brief History of the Kurds and Kurdistan, a map illustrating Kurdish migration routes shows that the Kurds dispersed from Central Asia near the Karakoram plains in two directions. According to these sources, one group moved southward, crossing Afghanistan, leaving a small community near Herat, and continued into Balochistan, where they settled most densely around Kelat. Later, this branch moved westward along the coast of the Gulf of Oman and temporarily settled in Bandar Abbas. A small group that subsequently departed from here settled near Kerman. Meanwhile, the branch moving westward from the migration points surrounded the northern part of present-day Iran, particularly around Mashhad, with small Kurdish tribal communities. They traversed from Tehran to the Caspian Sea, through the mountains surrounding it, reaching the southwestern border of the Caucasus. From there, as a single community, they preferred numerous mountain ranges in western Iran as their settlements and eventually reached Bandar Bushehr on the Persian Gulf (Yüksel & Çimen, 2005, p. 4). Some Kurds settled in what is now the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions, while others permanently settled in the mountainous areas of Adana and around Ankara. It is also known that some Kurds who were living in the mountainous areas on the

left bank of the Tigris River around 2000 BCE later moved to lower plains. However, the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions experienced invasions by Assyrians, Iranians, and finally the Romans, from before the 6th century BCE up to AD 89. Some Turkish tribes living alongside the Kurds in these regions migrated in various groups to Central Anatolia after severe struggles, while other Turkish clans who remained displayed a collective presence under Roman administration (Fırat, 1961, p. 53). Meanwhile, some Kurds who continued to exist in Central Asia later migrated westward along with the Huns, similar to their settlement in Anatolia. This migration route also began, like the others, from the south and north of the Caspian Sea. The presence of Kurds in Hungary is evidence of this. In addition, some Kurdish tribes were identified in the territories of Czechoslovakia and Slovenia (Rasonyi, 1971). Those passing through the south of the Caspian Sea probably settled in Iran and Anatolia together with the Oghuz Turks, as noted above (Altınay, 1930; Sümer, 1967).

Today, the population identified as Kurdish is distributed as follows: approximately 34% in Türkiye, 26% in Iran, 24% in Iraq, and 11% in Syria, with smaller groups living in Armenia and Russia. Furthermore, communities known as Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Türkiye have shared over a millennium of common history and culture since the arrival of the Turks in Anatolia.

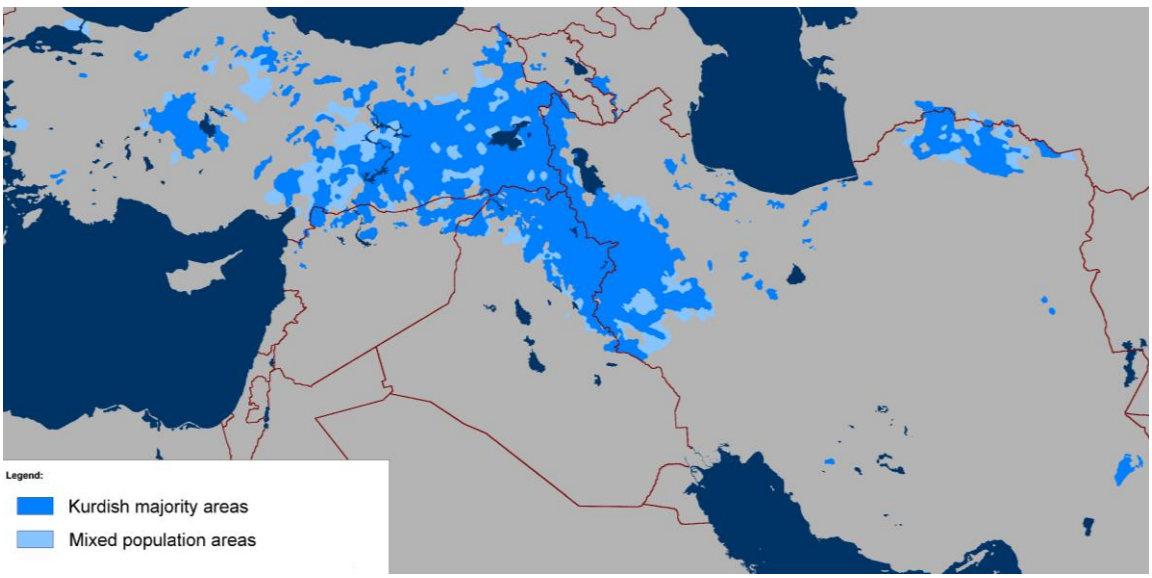

Figure 2. The Geographical Distribution of the Kurdish Population in the Middle East

Source: M. Izady 2022

The migration movements that we have tried to explain in detail above, together with the elements of language, culture, and identity, have led the Kurds to share the destinies of the Arabs and Persians, particularly the Turks. Indeed, according to some researchers, the Kurds, who began to appear in the political environment of the Middle East through intermittent conflicts with the Arabs from the year 637 onward, also came onto the stage during the campaigns carried out by the Islamic armies under Caliph Umar between the years 639–643. Likewise, in the Arab invasions of Iran and Turkestan in 646, the Kurds again come into view. During the time of Caliph Ali, between the years 656–661, the Iranians and the Kurds stood against the Arabs. During the Umayyad Dynasty between the years 661–750, the Kurds took the side of the Iranians in many events and uprisings against the Umayyad caliphs. Against the Kharijites who rebelled against Umayyad Caliph Marwan II (744–770), the Kurds this time supported the Caliph. The Kurdish rebels who rose up under the leadership of Faharcis in the Mosul region in 839 were suppressed by the Turkish commander Aytan, and the Kurds who rebelled in the Isfahan and Fars regions in 845 were likewise suppressed by the Turkish commander Vasif. Interestingly, the Kurds, who sided with the Kharijites who captured Mosul in 866, soon changed their position and assisted the Arab Hamdan ibn Hamdun, who besieged Mosul in 894 (Yüksel & Çimen, 2005, p. 11).

Despite all this, it is seen that no region was mentioned under the name Kurdistan until the Seljuk period. However, during the Hamdani state, which ruled between 924–1003, a dense Kurdish population lived in the region. Likewise, Arab writers list the Kurds among the minorities in regions such as Azerbaijan, Ahlat, Armenia, and Fars until the year 940 (Sevgen, 1968). Additionally, the existence of the Kurdish Mervani dynasty, which dominated a wide area in Diyarbekir between 990–1096, is recorded. The Kurdish presence in the Middle East also manifested itself in the military sphere. Indeed, in 1035, it is significant that the governor of Harran from the Numayr tribe, Vatahoğlu, captured the Roman-held Sibabaraka with an army composed of Kurdish nomads. Furthermore, in 1043, the conquest of the Tigris banks inhabited by Kurds, in addition to regions such as Arran, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan by Tuğrul Shah, indicates the Kurdish presence in the Middle East (Altınay, 1930, p. 270). In 1073, the defeat of the rebellious Kavurd Kurds at the hands of the Great Seljuk ruler Sultan Malik-Shah, whose army also included Kurds, is a significant piece of evidence. Likewise, it is a historical document that the Great Seljuk

emir Atsız included Kurds in his army during his 1073 Egypt campaign, and that the Kurds were present alongside the Arabs in the army of the Emir of Mosul who moved against the Seljuk emir Tutush in 1083. It is seen that the small Kurdish dynasties disappeared during the Seljuk period (Yüksel & Çimen, 2005, p. 12). Records also indicate that the Artuqids, who ruled (1108–1408) regions such as Mardin, Harput, Hasankeyf, and Diyarbekir, clashed with the Kurds many times. It is claimed that during the reign of Sultan Sanjar (1117–1157), there was a Kurdistan province centered in the city of Bahar in the western part of Cibal, Hamadan, and Isfahan. It is also mentioned that Imad al-Din Zengi (1127–1146) expanded his territories by conquering many Kurdish-inhabited regions. It is a well-known fact that the Abbasid caliphs maintained good relations with the Kurds, mostly in order to use them against the Turks. Although the Kurds did not have major movements during the Ilkhanid period (1256–1344), they were encountered during Timur's two campaigns in 1393 and 1400. Moreover, the Turkmen Kara Koyunlu and Ak Koyunlu states established in the 14th century in Kurdish-inhabited regions maintained close contact with the Kurds (Sevgen, 1968).

The geographies inhabited by the Kurds first came under Ottoman sovereignty during the reign of Sultan Selim I. After the victory of the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, Idris-i Bitlisi, who was sent to the region by the order of Sultan Selim I, ensured through his efforts that the Kurdish tribes in the east broke away from the Safavids and pledged allegiance to the Ottoman Empire. Thus, as a result of the Chaldiran War (1514) against the Iranians, almost the entire geography inhabited by the Kurds today was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, and in 1516 the region referred to as Kurdistan came completely under Ottoman rule (Sevgen, 1968). However, in the following period, due to geographical and social structure as well as administrative deficiencies, full domination in the eastern regions could not be achieved.

The long-standing vacuum of central authority resulted in the emergence of a unique socio-economic and cultural structure in this region. This social condition among the Kurds formed the tribal system, consisting of semi-independent communities displaying a feudal structure within themselves. Likewise, within this system emerged the agha institutions, based on wealth and land ownership, and the sheikhdoms, which held spiritual authority by dominating religious sentiments around various sects and orders (Töreli, 2002, p. 10). Thus, the region inhabited by the Kurds remained subject to an indirect administration strategy

until the 19th century. This administrative strategy manifested in three different statuses: “direct administration,” “administration with partial autonomy,” and “administration with full autonomy” (Heper, 2008, p. 69). The direct administration strategy was based on the traditional Ottoman sanjak system. In this form of administration, adopted in regions where tribal structure was weak and in major cities, the Ottoman Empire appointed the Sanjak Bey directly, as in other provinces. The partially autonomous form of administration consisted of nine Kurdish principalities that preserved their autonomy while declaring allegiance to the Ottoman Empire. In these structures, referred to as “Kurdish (Ekrad) Sanjaks,” administration was traditionally entrusted to the local Kurdish families dominant in the region. These Sanjak Beys, who had responsibilities toward the central government, were appointed by the Ottoman Empire on the condition that they came from the same family line (Demir, 2010, p. 260). In the administration with full autonomy, referred to as the “Kurdish Government Sanjaks,” full autonomy was granted to 14 Kurdish tribes settled in the Taurus and Zagros Mountains. The Ottoman Empire did not interfere with these tribal leaders other than sending an official document confirming their appointment, and they were not obliged to pay taxes or perform military service for the central government. The only expectation of the central authority from these tribes was loyalty to the Sultan and refraining from rebellion (Bruinessen, 2006, p. 239).

Like the position of Iranian Kurds during the Safavid period, the Kurds living in Ottoman territories preserved their existence until the late 19th century by combining their relative autonomy with the emphasis on Ottomanism shaped by the multiethnic and multicultural social structure with the concept of the ummah (Doğan, 2012). The fact that the Ottoman Empire’s bond with its subjects was based on religion and that an autonomy-centered administration was adopted in the regions inhabited by the Kurds prevented the Kurds from emphasizing an “ethnic us” consciousness until the 19th century (Bruinessen, 2006). However, in the mid-19th century, due to the capitalist development of the West, the emergence of nationalist movements, modernization efforts, and various internal reasons, the Ottoman administrative system began to deteriorate. At the same time, the relationship between the central administration and the regions where the Kurds lived semi-autonomously through emirates or tribes was also affected by this deterioration. When different ethnic and religious elements turned into problematic components within the existing administrative structure, the Ottoman administration sought to reinforce the central

authority and eliminate the decentralized system. The problematization of the center–periphery relationship and the policies pursued to strengthen central authority led to issues that would persist with variations until today. This period also corresponds to the time when the Ottoman Empire accelerated its modernization efforts and implemented centralization policies (Tekin, 2022). During this period, in the 19th century, when the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire was underway, the social uprisings that arose with the influence of nationalist movements—especially as a result of Sultan Mahmud II's centralizing reforms—led to the awakening of Kurdish identity consciousness (Kurubaş, 2009, p. 49). In other words, the strengthening of centralization, particularly in the post-Tanzimat period of the Ottoman Empire, triggered Kurdish nationalism (Doğan, 2012).

In this period, the expansion attempts of the central authority toward the periphery and the policies pursued in this regard were an important factor causing various religious and ethnic groups to experience tense relations with the Ottoman state and even to break away. At the same time, the centralization initiatives and factors such as the emergence of administrative vacuums formed the justification for many of the uprisings initiated by Kurdish tribes. As can be seen, although nationalist movements were beginning to emerge among minorities or non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, this groundwork had not yet developed among the Kurds, and the uprisings that emerged were feudal in character and based more on the problematization of the center–periphery relationship (Tekin, 2022). In other words, although the uprisings generally "led by Beys in the first half of the 1800s, and by Sheikhs between 1870–1937" (McDowall, 1996) and bearing a certain ethno-political content were influential in the construction of Kurdish identity, they were not nationalist in nature as a political movement demanding sovereignty on an ethnic basis with a strong social base that transcended tribal loyalties (Bruinessen, 1998, p. 39). However, this situation would begin to change in subsequent years under the influence of internal and external dynamics.

Meanwhile, after the great "World War" that would lead to a paradigm shift in world political history, empires dissolved, and a new world order based on the nation-state system was established upon their territories. The multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious Western-origin "nation-state" model in this new world order, instead of integrating the Kurds into the system, labeled them either as an element to be "assimilated" or as a minority that could be easily resolved in the future. Thus, the Kurds, who were divided into four parts across the territories of Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, were considered minorities in the

countries where they lived, except for Türkiye. Furthermore, the division of the geography inhabited by the Kurds into four parts caused each part to fall within the administrative borders of a different state. The tense geographies inhabited by Kurdish peoples were drawn almost with a ruler for purposes such as making them governable, ensuring spheres of influence, and facilitating covert settlements of political interests; tribal bonds and historical–cultural connections were ignored. In this situation, in the four neighboring countries of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, where the Kurds reside, political and social structures based on Kurdish nationalism and adopting a cautious approach toward authority emerged. These structures developed in different forms as Kurdish nationalist movements in each country (Tejel, 2015, p. 180). The separatist Kurdish nationalist activities organized in the new Middle East order created unique opportunities for the colonial activities of hegemonic states in the region. While this situation prevented Kurdish nationalist activities from being controlled by a single center, it provided a significant advantage for global powers seeking to establish systems of exploitation and interstate power balances in the region (Çalışkan, 2020, p. 66). In this context, while the states of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria had to struggle for years against separatist Kurdish nationalist organizations operating within their own political borders, these organizations were supported by different administrations and used as a threat element against the aforementioned states. In other words, an organization formed in one state—except for Türkiye—was seen by other administrations harboring Kurdish populations as an opportunity to weaken that particular state, and the organizations receiving such support eventually acquired the ability to organize as umbrella structures spanning the four states.

4.2. The Kurdish Presence in the Geography of Syria in the Historical Process

It is accepted that the homeland of the Kurds, who today maintain their dense presence in the east and southeast of Türkiye, in the south and west of Iran, in the north of Iraq, and in the north of Syria, is the Upper Mesopotamia and the surroundings of the Zagros Mountains in Iran. The question of when and how the Kurds went to the geography of Syria is a controversial issue. For all of the current information and assumptions regarding the Kurds of Syria consist of political polemics and claims. In the debates they have with the Damascus administration, the PYD leaders, who declare that they are the representatives of the Kurds of Syria, claim that “you did not exist when we were here” and, in this context, that the Kurds

are an older people in Syria than the Arabs, which is baseless. Likewise, the theses of some so-called Kurdish researchers that Northern Syria is the homeland of the Kurds are far from historical reality. However, in any pre-Islamic source concerning Syria, there is no mention of a Kurdish presence in Syria. This leads us to the fact that the Kurds did not reside in Syria before Islam and that the north of Syria is not the homeland of the Kurds. Indeed, when the historical sources of the Islamic period are examined, the name of the Kurds in no way appears in Syria before the 10th century. Afterwards, a Kurdish village as a settlement unit and a Kurdish quarter around Damascus are mentioned sparsely (Biçer, 2020, p. 1). It can therefore well be asserted that the Kurds came to the geography of Syria as of the 10th century. For there are authors who strengthen this thesis.

Although the early Islamic author Ibn Khordadbeh mentioned the Kurds living in the Khorasan region in his work Kitabü'l-Mesalik ve'l-Memalik, written in the years 885–886, he did not mention the Kurds or Kurdish settlements in the geography of Syria. Likewise, the 9th-century Islamic author Ya'qubi did not transmit any information about a Kurdish presence in Syria, although he mentioned the presence of Kurds in Saymara and Isfahan in his work Kitabü'l-Büldan. Similarly, in the work Hudûdü'l-Âlem, written in the years 982–983 by an unknown author, the Kurds in Iraq are mentioned, but the Kurds in Syria are not referred to. In addition to these, Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadani, one of the early Islamic authors who lived between the years 845–930, in his work Kitabü'l-Büldan, although he gives detailed information about the regions of Harran, Amid, Mardin, Nusaybin, Sinjar, Raqqa, Tur Abdin, Arzan, Dara and Mayyafariqin, he does not provide any information about a Kurdish presence there. Besides these, in the works of authors such as Ibn Khaldun, Ibn al-Qalanisi, Ibn al-Athir, Ibn Kathir, Usama b. Munqidh and Maqrizi, from the 10th century onwards, emirs, judges and warriors bearing the nisbas of Shahrizori or Hakkari, who are mostly referred to as Kurds, are mentioned in Syria (Biçer, 2020, p. 1). In contrast to these, it was during the period of the Hamdanid Principality, an Arab dynasty that ruled around Mosul and Aleppo between the years 905–1004, that the Kurdish presence in Syria was first mentioned to a limited extent (Karaarslan, 1997, pp. 446–447). According to the transmission of the author Kadri Yıldırım, based on the source Cebelü'l-Kürd "Efrin", "Under the rule of Sayf al-Dawla, the Hamdanid Principality, which had achieved significant victories against Byzantium from 953 onwards, made an agreement with the Kurds and made considerable use of their strength" (Yıldırım, 2015, p. 37). As can be seen, these pieces of

information alone are sufficient to demonstrate that the history of the Kurdish presence in Syria does not go back before the 10th century. Mas'udi, too, in his work Mürûcü'z-zeheb, while describing the Kurdish tribes and the places where they lived, "mentioned the existence of a Kurdish tribe called Debabil in the region of Damascus" (Mes'udi, 2004, p. 193).

Although not much information has been transmitted regarding the Kurds in Syria in the early period, there is nevertheless information that can shed light on the Kurdish presence in Syria. Perhaps the most striking of this information is related to a fortress known as "Hısnu'l-Ekrad" (Castle of the Kurds), located between Ba'labakk and Homs during the Mirdasid period. According to what Yaqut al-Hamawi transmits in his work Mu'cemu'l-Büldan; during the Mirdasid period, this fortress, located between Ba'labakk and Homs, was known as "Hısnu Safeh (Safeh Castle)", and its strategic importance emerged during the Crusades. The ruler of Aleppo, Shibl al-Dawla al-Mirdasi, in line with an agreement he made, settled a large group of Kurds from whom he had received support against the Crusader forces in Hısnu Safeh (Safeh Castle) in 1032. According to Kadri Yıldırım, quoting from Ahmed Vasfi Zekeriya, "This 'Kurdish group' settled in Hısnu Safeh belonged to the Berazi tribe, whose presence in Aleppo and Homs dates back to before the Ayyubid period" (Yıldırım, 2015, p. 39). According to the agreement, the Kurds would fortify and defend the insufficiently strong castle. Indeed, the Kurds resisted the Crusader attacks and prevented them in particular from seizing the Homs–Hama–Tripoli road. In return, the ruler of Aleppo, Shibl al-Dawla, allocated the lands and forests around the fortress to them and granted them salaries. Thus, this castle, which had previously been known as "Hısnu Safeh" (Safeh Castle), began to be known as "Hısnu'l-Ekrad" (Castle of the Kurds) after the Kurds were settled there (al-Hamawi, 2014, p. 264).

On the other hand, Yaqut al-Hamawi, in his work Mu'cemu'l-Büldan, mentions the Kurds living in Damascus and Hısnu Safeh. According to him, these Kurds were those who were settled in Hısnu Safeh, a strong fortress built on a large mountain opposite Homs and connected to Mount Lebanon, which was inaccessible, in order to form a barrier between the emirs of Damascus and the Franks. The emirs of Damascus administered this fortress, located between Ba'labakk and Homs, together with the Kurds. Yaqut, in his section on Mayyafariqin, uses the phrase: "The ruler of this province has married the daughter of the ruler of al-Jabal, where the Kurds of Damascus currently reside." Undoubtedly, this

statement by Yaqut al-Hamawi points to the close relationship between the Kurds of Damascus and the Kurds of Mayyafariqin and al-Jabal. According to these explanations, after selling Hısnu'l-Ekrad to the Crusaders, the Kurds of Damascus came to Mayyafariqin and settled there (al-Hamawi, 2014, pp. 199–200).

By the Fatimid period, there are records in some sources regarding the Kurdish presence in the geography of Syria. It is reported that in the Fatimid period (969–1171), some Kurdish figures served in various institutions of the Fatimid State, especially in Aleppo and Damascus, that they held positions such as judgeships and governorships, and that houses and lands were allocated to them (Maqrizi, n.d., p. 130; Yıldırım, 2015, p. 41).

Among the authors who shed light on the Kurdish presence in the geography of Syria in the Middle Ages, Kerim Yıldız, in his work The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People, argues that the history of the Kurds in Syria goes back approximately 1000 years to the Crusades in the 11th century. According to Yıldız, the Kurds, who had established principalities in the region that did not form a unified whole, mostly maintained their existence under the authority of the dominant powers, namely the Abbasid, Seljuk and Ayyubid rulers. In this period, a significant Kurdish presence, the majority of whom were Sunni and a smaller number were Shiite, and who spoke the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, is encountered in Damascus (Yıldız, 2005, p. 25).

The author Ali Sevim, who examines this period, states that in the Seljuk period, in 1065, under the command of Hanoğlu Harun al-Turkumani, the Turks came to the Aleppo region with approximately one thousand Turkmen horsemen and obtained as iqta the region called Ma'arrat al-Nu'man after struggles with the Mirdasids, who dominated the region, and with powerful Arab tribes. Furthermore, Harun al-Turkumani formed a military force of one thousand men composed of Turkmen, Dailamites and Kurds. Although Ali Sevim stated that there were Kurds in Harun's army, he did not give any information about the number of Kurds. According to this information, an important point that draws attention here is that there were, albeit in small numbers, Kurds in the region when the Turks came to Syria (Sevim, 2000, p. 41).

Shortly afterwards, when the Great Seljuk Sultan Malik-Shah granted Syria and the nearby regions as iqta to his brother Tutush in 1078, Tutush besieged Aleppo in the same year. At this time, a Fatimid army also besieged Damascus. Aleppo, which changed hands between

the Mirdasids and the Fatimids until 1079, later came under the control of the Seljuks and became one of their important centers. However, later in 1082, the Fatimid army under the command of Muslim b. Quraysh, with the help of tribes composed of Arabs and Kurds, recaptured Aleppo and some of its fortresses from the Seljuks (Ibn al-'Adim, 1976, p. 395). On the other hand, after Suleiman Shah conquered Antioch and its surroundings, he tried to dominate Northern Syria and began to struggle against the Uqaylid Emir Sharaf al-Dawla Muslim, who was influential in the region. In this process of struggle, in 1085, the Seljuk army under the command of Suleiman Shah encountered the army of six thousand men of Muslim in Kurzahil, located in the Amuq Plain on the Afrin River in Northern Syria, and the battle ended in a Seljuk victory. According to Kadri Yıldırım, the Kurzahil battle on 21 June 1085 between the Seljuks and the Fatimids is an important proof for the Kurdish presence in Syria. Yıldırım summarizes this battle as follows:

"During the Seljuk period, when Muslim b. Quraysh, who had revolted against the administration with the aim of liberating Aleppo and establishing a principality, saw that the forces he had formed from Arabs and Turkmen were insufficient, he sought support from some Kurdish tribes in the region, and these tribes gave him the support he wanted. In the fierce battle that took place on 21 June 1085 in Kurzele between Muslim's forces of six thousand men and the Seljuk forces, the Arabs and Turkmen abandoned Muslim, leaving only about 600 Kurdish warriors at his side. In this battle, which ended with Muslim's defeat, 400 people lost their lives and Muslim was also killed" (Sevim, 2000, pp. 118–119; Yıldırım, 2015, p. 39). As stated in the lines above; in the Great Seljuk period, the Turks, who began to come to Syria, under the leadership of Hanoğlu Harun al-Turkumani, formed an army in which Kurds were also present. Subsequently, the Seljuk State of Syria, established as a vassal of the Great Seljuk State, did not encounter a significant Kurdish presence in the region.

On the other hand, among the sources that claim that some Muslim Kurdish tribes living in the Syrian region during the Crusades fought against the Crusaders together with the Seljuks and the Ayyubids, Kerimüddin Mahmud Aksarayi, in his work Müsameretü'l-Ahbar, states that in this important historical process, the Kurds also set out from the Syrian region and went to help against the Crusaders. According to the author's account; when the Crusades began, Ahmadil Ibn Wahsudan, the ruler of Maragha from the Kurdish Revadi tribe, joined in 1111 the second campaign in the Urfa region and the siege of Tell Bashir of the Emir of

Mosul, Mawdud, who had been tasked with the jihad against the Crusaders by Sultan Muhammad Tapar (Aksarayi, 2000, p. 21). According to Biçer's transmission, in Kemalüddin Ibn al-'Adim's work Buğyetü't-Taleb fi (Tarihi Halep) there is also a record that the Mervani emirate responded to this call: "In October 1097, when the Crusader forces came before the walls of Antioch and began preparations to besiege the city, Emir Yaghi-Siyan, when he requested help from all the Muslim rulers and emirs, especially from Qurbugha, the Seljuk governor of Mosul, the Mervani emir Abu Nasr Ahmad heeded this call and reached Antioch via Aleppo with his forces" (cited in Biçer, 2020, p. 192; Ibn al-'Adim, 1976, p. 97).

With the disintegration of the Great Seljuk Empire and its disappearance from the stage of political history, its successors, the atabegates and principalities, continued the existence and political understanding of the Seljuks. The Zengids, Sökmenids and Artuqids re-established their political dominance in the regions where Kurds also lived. Among these principalities, the Zengids were undoubtedly those who were the most intertwined with the Kurds and who were very influential on Kurdish history. The Zengid atabegate, following the path of the Seljuks, used the Kurds, who recognized their rule and submitted to them, particularly in military service. The Zengids did not differentiate between the Turks, Arabs and Kurds in their entourage and treated them according to their loyalty to the state and to Islam. For this reason, the Kurds voluntarily joined the army of Imad al-Din Zengi as soldiers and took part in the Muslim armies in the struggles against the Crusaders (Aksarayi, 2000, p. 21; Biçer, 2020, p. 194). According to the transmission of Ahmed Muhammed Abdulkarim Barzenci, the Kurdish tribes, who were more at the level of family and tribe and were subject to the Zengids, fought under the banner of Imad al-Din Zengi in the liberation of Urfa from the Crusaders in 1144. They were particularly present in the regular army of Zayn al-Din Ali al-Saghir on the southern front of Urfa and played an important role in the siege of the city (Barzenci, 2001, p. 51).

As can be seen, in the Zengid period, due to the fact that the geographies where the Kurds maintained their presence were largely attached to this dynasty under the rule of Imad al-Din and Nur al-Din Mahmud Zengi, significant increases in the number of Kurds fighting against the Crusader forces were recorded in this period. In fact, the increase in the Kurdish population and influence in Syria occurred mostly in the period of Saladin Ayyubi. In this period, there are records that there were five large Kurdish tribes in the region. While prior

to the time of Saladin Ayyubi there were few Muslim Kurds in the Syrian region, the number of Kurdish warriors increased with the Kurds who came to fight the Crusaders. It is known that important Kurdish commanders and judges such as Isa al-Hakkari and Ali al-Meshtub came to Syria together with Saladin Ayyubi. It is claimed that in the Ayyubid period, Kurdish emirs and tribes, particularly from the Hakkari region, came to Syria to fight against the Crusaders, and that around thirty Kurdish emirs under the rule of Saladin Ayyubi have been identified by name. The Kurds, who took on important roles in the administration of Damascus and Aleppo in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, were also part of the political life of the region during the approximately 400 years when the Ottoman Empire dominated the geography of the Middle East (Tejel, 2009, p. 8).

Although there is not much information about the Kurdish presence in Syria during the Ayyubid period, it is claimed that in the Ayyubid period, as the continuation of the Zengids, the Kurds chose as their dwelling places, to a limited extent, the surroundings of Damascus and Aleppo, and that they maintained their presence especially in the northern regions of Syria. Boris James mentions, in the Ayyubid period in Aleppo, four adjacent mosques bearing the names of Kurdish tribes—Zerzari, al-Beshnevi and Harat al-Ekrad—as well as a few mosques built by the Kurds in Damascus and a Kurdish cemetery (James, 2015, pp. 50–51). It is also asserted by some authors that certain Kurdish tribes from the Hakkari region, who came to Syria, gave great political and military support to the Ayyubids and played an active role in the struggle against the Crusader attacks (Biçer, 2020, p. 199). Kadri Yıldırım, quoting from al-'Umari, provides the following information: "Most of the soldiers within the army, who settled in various parts of Damascus and belonged to the Kurds, were members of the Boti, Dasni, Zerzari and Mihrani tribes, who came here from various Kurdish regions" (al-'Umari, n.d., p. 126).

According to Kadir Yıldırım's (2015, p. 39) transmission, the name of the Kurds appears in some sources during the Mongol invasions. Al-'Umari, in his work Mesaüku'l-Ebsar, states that after the great massacres in Shahrizor, which was occupied by the Mongols in 1245, the Kurds left this city in masses and migrated to the lands of Damascus and Egypt. Likewise, he states that when the Kurds of Shahrizor, understanding that their turn would come after the Mongols occupied Baghdad in 1258, migrated in tribes to Damascus. In this process, he transmits that around 3,000 Kurds, under the administration of Emir Baha al-Din Ya'qub al-Shahrizori, known as "Emiru'l-Ekrad" (Emir of the Kurds), came to Damascus with their

horses, women and as much of their belongings as they could carry, and joined the Ayyubid rule (al-'Umari, n.d., p. 126; Yıldırım, 2015, p. 39). El-Ayni, whom Bekir Biçer quotes in his work Orta Çağda Suriye'de Kürt Varlığı, states in his work Ikdu'l-Cüman that as a result of the Mongol attacks, the Kurds of Shahrizor, who were forced to migrate to the lands of Damascus and Egypt, clustered in both regions under the name "Ekrad-u Şehrezur" (Kurds of Shahrizor) and that many scholars emerged among them bearing the nisba "Shahrizori" (Biçer, 2020, p. 200; al-Ayni, n.d., p. 181). Hamdullah Mustawfi, in his work Tarikh-i Guzide, while conveying information about those living in the Lorestan region of Iran, states that around one hundred Kurdish households in Mount Simak (Cebelü Simak) of Damascus, due to the conflicts and disputes among the tribes in the region, left the places where they lived and came to Lorestan in 1106 (Biçer, 2020, p. 201; Mustawfi, 2018, p. 432). Gregory Abu'l-Farac records the following in his work Abu'l-Farac Tarihi:

"Turkmen and Kurds generally formed alliances against the Mongols and the Crusaders. Even the Yazidi Kurds acted together with the Muslims against the Mongol invasion. The adherents of the Yazidi sect, which developed in the Artuk region and al-Jazira, gradually became stronger and began to play a role in political events. Abu'l-Farac transmits that in 1278, a large group composed of Turkmen, desert dwellers and Kurds living in Syria gathered in Damascus, invaded Cilicia and advanced as far as Hamdun, made great destructions there and, after taking booty, returned" (Abu'l-Farac, 1999).

In a later period, when we come to the period in which the Ottoman Empire largely dominated the geography of the Middle East, as a result of the massacres to which the Alevi Turkmen in the region were subjected before and after the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 and of the migration of some of the population to Iran, demographic changes took place in favor of the Kurds and Arabs in the geography where today's Syria is located, as in the rest of the region. In this period, it is also known that some Kurdish migrations took place from Diyarbakır, Mosul and Kirkuk. It is likewise reported in some sources that Kurds took place alongside the Turkish tribes settled in the section of the Pilgrimage Route crossing Syria, with the aim of ensuring security. In the later periods of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdish settlement became dense in the north of Aleppo and Raqqa and in the provinces of Hasakah (especially in Jazira and Qamishli) (Tejel, 2009, p. 8). By the 19th century, the population of the Kurds in the region increased further with the Kurdish tribes settled there by the

Ottoman administration from Anatolia and Iraq, and thus the Kurds became the largest ethnic minority in Syria (Kaçar, 2013).

On the other hand, in the 19th century, heavy defeats suffered in wars and the perception of threats to the territorial integrity of the country, especially from England, France and Russia, made it necessary to introduce fundamental reforms into the internal structure of the Ottoman Empire. On the brink of disintegration, the Ottoman Empire saw its salvation in centralization and Westernization. In particular, the proclamation of the Tanzimat Edict (1839) was the greatest step taken in this direction (Demir, 2010, p. 261). The Tanzimat Edict, in addition to guaranteeing the rights of non-Muslim subjects, introduced some administrative measures such as the collection of taxes by financial officers and the redrawing of provincial and district boundaries. These measures, which contained provisions for centralization, naturally began to terminate the semi-sovereign positions of local leaders (Tan, 2009, p. 87). At the same time, as a reflection of the principle of "equality before the law" introduced by the Tanzimat Edict, the Provincial Law of 1870 abolished the privileges and rights of the local Kurdish beys (Heper, 2008, p. 75). The developments brought about by these regulations were perceived as a threat to their existence by the Kurdish tribes, which until then had enjoyed partial or full autonomy. Indeed, from the time of Sultan Selim I onwards, it is observed that some Kurdish groups living in the mountains in isolation from the rest of society in certain regions occasionally revolted against state authority with varying intensity (Heper, 2008). The first of these revolts, which took place in line with the Kurdish nationalist movement that began in order to secure Kurdish independence, was initiated in 1806 under the leadership of Babanzade Abdurrahman Pasha from the Kurds of Sulaymaniyah, and a total of nine uprisings of different magnitudes occurred (Rışvanoğlu, 1978, p. 15).

These challenges by the Kurds, who demonstrated their discontent through local uprisings, were not supported by foreign states; on the contrary, they sometimes assisted the Ottoman administration in suppressing them. The state tried to overcome this problem, especially in the regions along the Iranian border, by means of resettlement measures. Kurubaş evaluates the uprisings of this period as revolts of feudal principalities due to the social and economic practices carried out by the Ottoman State within its reform efforts (Kurubaş, 2004b, pp. 10–11). According to Tan, these uprisings were feudal reflexes rather than the awakening of an ethnic consciousness based on Kurdish identity (Tan, 2009, p. 97). On the other hand,

according to Tan's assessment, the 33-year reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II from 1876 to 1909 has particular importance for the Kurds. Sultan Abdulhamid, who tried to keep the empire standing, embraced religious values and became the executor of an "Islamist" policy. Referred to as the "Father of the Kurds (Bave Kurdan)", the Sultan did not want the Kurds to join the other rebellious communities and, in order to prevent this, established military units called the "Hamidiye Regiments", composed of Kurds, in the region and opened "Tribal Schools" (Tan, 2009). According to Arfa's assessment, Sultan Abdulhamid established the "Hamidiye Regiments" in 1891 in order to keep the harsh and restless Kurdish tribes under a kind of control, to curb their aggressive tendencies, and to create a special bond between himself and the Kurds. Indeed, he achieved to some extent successful results from his attempt to organize the irregular Kurdish cavalry units in the region. After the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Era, the name Hamidiye was abolished and the term "Tribal Regiments" began to be used (Arfa, 1998, pp. 74–75). By the eve of the First World War, the majority of the Kurdish nation was living within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, while the rest were living within the borders of Iran, and some of them had separatist tendencies. These separatist tendencies, which had begun particularly in the last century of the Ottoman Empire, evolved into a destructive Kurdish nationalist movement and took on a different dimension with the outbreak of the First World War. However, in the new climate of the nation-states that arose on the lands of the empires destroyed by the First World War, due to the emergence of the concept of the nation-state and the fact that the national ideology increasingly proposed a narrowing identity model, some social groups with different ethnic identities, especially the Kurds, would not be able to find a place for themselves in this new discourse. Likewise, the Kurds, who could not take part in the building of a new nation and who felt that they were excluded in this respect, lost one of the most important symbols of their unity with the central administration in the new Republic of Türkiye when the caliphate was abolished on 3 March 1924 (Süleymanoğlu, 2015, p. 149). The fact that the Republic of Türkiye, founded on the basis of the nation-state system after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, which had been defeated in the First World War, envisaged a centralist political structure based on Turkish national identity and language, increased the discontent of the Kurds and this discontent gave rise to new revolts and conflicts. Parallel to Türkiye, the Kurds' discontent would also be experienced in Iran, which sought to construct a state/society understanding based on Persian identity and

language, and in Iraq and Syria, which based themselves on Arab identity and language (Tüysüzoğlu, 2013, p. 426).

Meanwhile, the war ended with the defeat of the Central Powers, in which the Ottoman Empire also took part, and its consequences were particularly severe for the Ottoman Empire. Perhaps the most important of these severe consequences were the destructive treaties that included arrangements against the defeated. Undoubtedly, the most striking of these was the secret Sykes–Picot Agreement, which envisaged the partition of the Ottoman Empire's territories in the Middle East. The agreement, which was secretly signed between the victors of the war, Britain and France, on 16 May 1916, was also a turning point for the Kurds of Syria. According to the agreement, the entire coastal region of Syria, from Acre northwards including Beirut, as well as Adana and Mersin, would belong to France. In the remaining territories, an Arab state or a confederation of Arab states was to be established. The area in which this state would be established was divided into zones of influence, with the part south of the Acre–Kirkuk line designated as the British sphere of influence and the part north of this line as the French sphere of influence. It was also decided that Palestine would become an international zone and that Iskenderun would be a free port (Bozkurt, 2013). Ultimately, with this agreement, concluded between Britain and France, the two global powers of the time that had imperialist ambitions over the Middle East, for the partition of the region, the territories of present-day Syria were placed under French protection. A short time after the end of the First World War, in 1920, French forces entered Syria, occupied this region, which had once been under the domination of the Ottoman Empire, and, after the withdrawal of the Turkish army from the Middle East in order to defend Anatolia, French control over Syria began as of 1920. On the other hand, during the National Struggle period, with the National Pact declaration, which was adopted and approved by both the last Ottoman Chamber of Deputies on 28 January 1920 and the Grand National Assembly on 18 July 1920, it was pledged that the Kurds and Turks would continue their existence as one and whole within the imperial territories, including the territories of Iraq and Syria, where the Kurds lived (Kaçar, 2013). In spite of this, in the Treaty of Sèvres of 10 August 1920, in the region, a Kurdistan with unclear borders and status was mentioned (Kurubaş, 1998, p. 207).

Likewise, with the San Remo Conference of 1920, it was planned that Syria would be left under the French mandate, and within the framework of the policy of "divide, partition,

rule", it was divided into five parts: Damascus, Aleppo, the Alawites, the Maronites and the Druze (Meray & Olcay, 1977, p. 67). With the Ankara Agreement signed between Türkiye and France on 20 October 1921, the Turkish–Syrian borders were drawn, and the Kurdish regions remaining within today's Syrian borders were officially ceded to France (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1973). In 1922, with the approval of the League of Nations, Syria officially became a French mandate. With the Treaty of Lausanne, signed on 24 July 1923, it was definitively established that Syria, together with the regions inhabited by the Kurds, would remain under the French mandate (Shambrook, 1998, p. 2). With the incorporation of Hatay into Türkiye in 1939, the present Turkish–Syrian border was drawn.

Having fully penetrated this region, which they occupied after the withdrawal of the Ottomans, the French began to pursue an imperialist policy in the military, political, economic and cultural senses. The French, whose interest in the geography of Syria dates back to the Crusades, placed all kinds of religious and ethnic discrimination at the center of their Syrian policy (Umar, 2002, p. 297). However, the greatest threat to the French, whose aim was full domination in the region, was undoubtedly Arab nationalism. Since one of the main goals of the French mandate administration was to prevent Arab nationalism, measures were taken to strengthen other ethnic minorities in Syria. For this, it was necessary to support other ethnic group(s) and put them up against Arab nationalism, and the most suitable minority for this was the Kurds. In this context, efforts were first initiated to ensure the participation of the Kurds in two important strategic institutions, the security forces and the armed forces (Bozkurt, 2012, p. 316). At that time, there were around 2,000 Kurdish separatists in Syrian territory (İyiat, 2018, p. 5). Moreover, they were not part of a very large movement and did not engage in any significant organized actions other than occasionally clashing with Turkish and French units on the Turkish border (Lazarev, 1989, p. 230). While the French mandate administration granted the Kurds rights far beyond their share in the population in order to ensure their place in the army and the police, it rejected their demands, which evoked autonomy, such as establishing schools, recognizing Kurdish as an official language and appointing Kurdish administrators to the regions where they formed the majority, and adopted a rigid stance in this regard (Erkmen, 2012, p. 15). The mandate administration, which took a positive approach to the demands of religious minorities in this direction, most probably took a cold attitude toward the Kurds' demands in order not to provoke the reactions of Türkiye and Iraq (Hassanpour, 2005; Rondot, 1939, p. 238).

On the other hand, between the years 1919–1937, uprisings of various scales took place in Turkish territory. As a result of the suppression of the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925, a large number of Kurds, around 22,000, crossed from Turkish territory to the Syrian side (Kurubaş, 2004b, p. 164). The Hoybun Society, founded in Beirut in 1927, brought together the groups settled in the Jazira region with nationalist circles in centers such as Damascus and Aleppo. In this environment, the French, who, like the British, used the "Kurdish card" against Türkiye, supported the initial organization of the Hoybun (Independence) movement in 1927, which would prepare the Ağrı Rebellion that was to take place between 1928–1930 (Fuccaro, 2013; Galip, 2015, p. 49). It is useful to briefly explain this formation, which is important in shedding light on a period of the ethnic separatist Kurdish movement.

The Hoybun Society, which aimed to establish an independent Kurdish state in the east and southeast of Türkiye, occupies a very important place within the separatist Kurdish movement. After the suppression of the Sheikh Said Rebellion, some of those who had taken part in the rebellion fled to Iran and Iraq as well as Syria in order to continue their anti-Turkish activities (Toplu, 1996, p. 370). This flight of the rebels and their activities against Türkiye were supported by France, which was the mandatory power in the region, and especially by Britain, because they served their national interests (Sarınay, 1998, p. 213). For the war had not yet ended for these two colonial countries. And there was still much to be done in the region. Their intention and plan was to bring together the separatist Kurds in order to support Armenian aspirations (Cöhce, 2000, p. 523), or at least to occupy Türkiye with a Kurdish problem and thus to realize their ambitions over Türkiye and the Middle East through separatism (İldeniz, 1995, p. 645). Indeed, the British intelligence service in Iraq began to operate in line with these objectives and, through the Kaymakam of Revanduz, Seyyid Taha, established contact with leading separatist Kurds. Thus, with the contributions of British intelligence, the first meeting on the founding of the Hoybun Society was held in February 1927 in Seyyid Taha's house in Revanduz (Doğanay, 2002, p. 260; Selim, 2005). According to the decisions taken at the meeting, the British would provide the Kurds with money and weapons and also support the Nestorians. If Hoybun's offensive against Türkiye, which was to begin from the Şemdinan region, resulted in the occupation of Van, the British would step in and provide support (Çay, 1996, p. 332; Kalafat, 1992, p. 134). The members of this formation, which is recorded as the first Kurdish political movement, aimed at creating an independent Kurdistan and adopted a broad strategy that included armed

struggle. At the same time, at the founding stage, Hoybun and the Armenian Dashnak organization agreed on cooperation for the establishment of independent Armenian and Kurdish states in Turkish territory (Tejel, 2009, p. 18). The Hoybun movement, which was established on 5 October 1927 in Lebanon by the Kurdish Nation Party and the Kurdistan Teali Society in particular, along with separatist Kurdish nationalist organizations, Kurdish leaders who had fled to Iraq, Iran and Syria, and also Armenians of Dashnak origin, did not include Alevi Kurds. Unlike the earlier separatist Kurdish societies that had been formed before it, Hoybun received great support from Britain and France, which were the mandatory powers in Syria and Lebanon, for its cooperation with the Armenians. France, in particular, as the mandatory power in Syria and Lebanon, allowed the Hoybun Society, to whose establishment it had greatly contributed, to organize and continue its activities. France may have wanted to resolve the Hatay issue, which it had with Türkiye, in its favor through the support it gave to Hoybun. The Armenians also made a great contribution to the organization of Hoybun in these countries. Considering that Armenian committee members took part in the armed gang formations established by Hoybun from separatist Kurdish elements, it can be said that the Armenians provided significant support to Hoybun not only in the field of organization but also in the military field. This shows that the separatist Kurds and the Armenians entered into a very close cooperation in this period. This cooperation conducted against Türkiye under the umbrella of the Hoybun Society would continue in later years under the roof of different societies and organizations (Çakmak, 2008, pp. 47–48).

Therefore, it can easily be argued that the Armenians intended to use the separatist Kurds gathered under the roof of this society, which they supported, within the framework of the "Greater Armenia" they sought to establish.

This organization, which was formed by the separatist Kurds who had migrated from Türkiye, coming together with the groups settled in the Jazira region of Syria and the nationalist circles in Damascus and Aleppo, tried both to establish a Kurdish–Armenian alliance in Syria and, with the support of the Soviets, to establish an independent and united "Kurdistan" within the framework of a "Kurdism" movement in Syria (Dağ & Uçan, 2014). In line with this objective, Hoybun's general program was as follows: first, to adopt a friendly attitude towards the Arab rulers and peoples of Iran, Iraq and Syria and also towards Britain and France, which protect them, thereby guaranteeing the peace and prosperity of the Kurds in these geographies; then, to establish friendship with the Armenian nation, which

shares the same fate, and to cooperate against Türkiye; and, in this context, to adopt as a principle the recognition of the independence and territorial integrity of Armenia and Kurdistan (Selim, 2005). However, the weakest point of the organization was that, contrary to its great claim, it did not have a structure and organization capable of representing all Kurds. For it was not possible for a small separatist ethnic community in exile, which had established centers not only in Syria but also in Cairo, Paris, Detroit and Philadelphia and which carried out particularly active activities in Paris, to represent all Kurds. Moreover, the organization had not been embraced by the Kurdish people; that is, it had not managed to root itself among the Kurdish people. The Kurdish people knew almost nothing about the organization. Therefore, the Hoybun Society was established without local support from the people living in the region. Yet the society tried to attract the people by creating Turkish–Kurdish hostility in the region and, for this purpose, launched intense written and oral propaganda against the Republic of Türkiye. Indeed, some of the separatist Kurds living in the region, who did not join the Hoybun Society because of its cooperation with the Armenians, chose to continue their activities against Türkiye in another framework by establishing another society called the "Kurdish–Turkish Caliphate Society" (Çakmak, 2008, pp. 47–48).

After the phases of establishment, organization and structuring, the organization, which began its destructive activities, launched the Ağrı Rebellions between 1927 and 1930 with the ideal of establishing a unified, independent Kurdish state by using as a pretext the Eastern Reform Plan put into effect by the newly established Republic of Türkiye on the remaining territories of the empire and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, which had been initiated after the abolition of the caliphate but had ended in failure (Kaçar, 2013). After the failure of the Ağrı Rebellion, like the Sheikh Said Rebellion, as the organization entered a process of disintegration, some of the ethnic separatist Kurds operating in the region turned to individual activities. The remaining part dissolved the Hoybun Society and joined the Mahabad Kurdish Republic, founded in 1946 (Kurubaş, 1997; cited in Töreli, 2002, pp. 2–3). The Yekbun-i Azadi (Kurdish League), which was established in 1945 as an ethnic separatist organization by the separatist Kurds who had fallen into silence after the unsuccessful attempt at independence in 1938, shortly before the official recognition of the Syrian state, did not become very influential in the political life of Syria either. The weak

activities of this organization continued until 1946, when Syria gained its independence (O. Bingöl, 2016).

Thus, in conclusion, the settlement and spread of the Kurds in Syria can be summarized as follows: As can be understood from the information gathered from Middle Eastern historical researchers and local historians, it is clear that the northern region of Syria is not the homeland of the Kurds. The Kurds are among the peoples who came to this region later. Throughout Islamic history, the Kurds came to Syria gradually and, over a long period of time, settled in the region. According to historical records, the first appearance of the Kurds in Syria coincides with the Hamdanid period. From this period onwards, the Kurds, who began to be active in the Mirdasid period, were settled in the Sefah Castle by the Mirdasid administration and the castle began to be called the Castle of the Kurds. In addition, an examination of the records reveals that the names of Kurdish judges, soldiers and a small number of governors who served in the Hamdanid, Mirdasid and Fatimid states were identified. The number of judges and soldiers serving in the Fatimid period clearly increased. In the studies conducted on the Kurdish presence in Syria, it is noteworthy that the Kurds mostly lived in Damascus and its surroundings. In the records, in the 10th century, the name of a quarter in Damascus where the Kurds lived, a fortress named Berziye in the northern part of the city, and a cemetery founded by a Kurd are given. Many Kurdish scholars and jurists belonging to the Shafi'i school served in Syria as judges and professors, and during this process an increase in the Kurdish population was observed in the regions of Damascus and Aleppo. Especially considering that they used the nisbas of Shahrizori, Hakkari and Sincari, the Muslim Kurdish judges came here from the cities mentioned.

The tribe-based migration of Kurds who opposed the administration in the Abbasid period or who belonged to different sects is another factor in the migration of the Kurds to Syria. Another factor that increased the Kurdish population in Syria was that the Kurdish population, which was set in motion as the Seljuks began to establish dominance in Iran, Northern Iraq and Anatolia, shifted northwards to the Caucasus and southwards to the Syrian region. Although the Kurdish population, especially in the north of Syria, continued to increase during the Ottoman period, the most important factor that increased the Kurdish population in Syria was the migration of around 100,000 Kurds from Türkiye to Syria in the republican period. There are many pieces of evidence that show that the north of Syria is not the homeland of the Kurds. Perhaps the most important and most concrete of these is that

the name of the Kurds does not appear in the histories of the cities where the Kurds live today. For the founders of these cities were not Kurds. Just as in other regions founded by other peoples, the Kurds later came and settled in Syria.

If the organizations established in the geography of Syria and their short histories are set aside and the Kurdish population of this new country is examined closely, it is possible to see that the phenomena in question take place particularly along the Türkiye/Syria/Iraq border line. As mentioned in the lines above, with the suppression of the Sheikh Said and Ağrı Rebellions launched between 1925–1930, some members of the tribes migrated to northern Iraq as well as to northern Syria, particularly to Qamishli. These Kurdish tribes, who fled the country, settled in Syria along the Turkish border, predominantly to the province of Hasakah, especially Qamishli, in the east, to the area between Jarablus and Ayn al-Arab/Kobani in the center, and to the Afrin region in the west (Göçer, 2004, p. 382; Yıldız, 2005). Meanwhile, together with the separatist tribes that took part in the uprisings, around 20–25 thousand Kurdish people from Türkiye, who were distressed by the policies implemented in the region, left Türkiye and settled in the Jazira region, located in the northeast of Syria under the French mandate. Similarly, as a result of the fluctuations in the Kurdish movement in Iraq between 1931–1945, migrations to Syria took place (Kaçar, 2012). Thus, the Jazira region became a region with a dense Kurdish population, and those who migrated to the region were granted citizenship by the French mandate administration (Klein, 2011, p. 45).

As can be seen, during the French mandate administration, which lasted in Syria from 1920 until independence was achieved in 1946, the Kurds concentrated in three isolated regions mentioned above. Thus, the highly fragmented structure among the Kurds became even more pronounced (Tejel, 2009, p. 9). In fact, throughout the first half of the 20th century, it appears that there was no common and distinctive characteristic of the Syrian Kurds. It can be said that among the Syrian Kurds, instead of language and a shared historical heritage, group identities such as tribe, clan and lineage, as well as identities based on geographical origin such as village and hamlet, were dominant. In addition to this, it is also possible to speak of another type of identity constructed on religion and sect. Among the Kurds in the region, most of whom belong to the Sunni sect, there are groups differentiated by the Alevi sect and by the non-Abrahamic Yazidi religion. With these characteristics, the definition of the Kurds as a minority during the mandate period was also problematic (Bozboğa, 2012; Bozbuğa,

2014). Indeed, the conflicts between the Kurds who migrated to Syria and the local populations in the region further complicated this problematic situation. For these new inhabitants of Syria, who came to the region through irregular migrations from various geographies at different times, initially took part alongside the Arabs in deadly attacks against the Armenians (Travis, 2010, pp. 293–294). Moreover, after these attacks, which were engraved in memory, the ancient communities, especially the Syriacs (Chatty, 2010), were exposed to systematic attacks by the Kurds that reached the level of genocide and to forced migrations (Tejel, 2009).

At the present stage, when Syria is viewed from a geographical perspective, there are some sparse Kurdish settlements together with Arabs and Turks in Damascus, Latakia, northern Lebanon, Hama and around the Kurd/Turkmen Mountain south of Afrin (Kreyenbroek & Sperl, 1992, p. 147). Within the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic structure of Syria, it is seen that, apart from the big cities and scattered places where they live in the mentioned geography, the Kurds are densely settled in three northern Syrian regions that are not territorially connected with each other: Afrin–Kurd/Turkmen Mountain, Ayn al-Arab–Kobani and Jazira–Hasakah (Bozboğa, 2012, p. 298). These regions, where the Kurds live densely, host approximately 40–45% of the Kurdish population in the country, while the remaining population resides in the big cities and other regions where the Kurds constitute less than 30% of the population. Unlike in the neighboring countries where Kurds live, the Syrian Kurds are more urban and their population growth is lower than that of the Arabs living in neighboring regions. In Syria's recent history, the fragmentation caused by tribal loyalties and struggles for influence, as well as the policies of the dominant authorities in Syria towards the Kurds and the political strategies that influenced the course of Kurdish dynamics in neighboring geographies, have determined the settlement patterns of the Kurds (Bingöl, 2016; Bozbuğa, 2014, pp. 17–18).

4.3. The Place of Kurds in Political Life from the Formation of Modern Syria to the 2011 Civil War

During its 26-year administration in Syria, France pursued different strategies and thus constructed its own system, having closely analyzed the diverse ethnic and religious structure particularly in the northern part of the country. Anticipating that the local

population would only obey a strong authority, the French mandatory administration regarded the Kurds as an instrument to be used in line with its own interests throughout its mandate over the country (Palmer, 1922). In this context, the French mandate, acting on the basis of a divide-and-rule policy aimed at preventing national integration by supporting local notables, promised the Kurds, as it did other minorities, a number of rights (Fuccaro, 2005, p. 233; Kurubaş, 2004b, p. 164). In addition to the privileged policy pursued towards the Kurds, the granting of significant rights to minority communities in Syria encouraged the Kurds—as an important minority group in the country—to demand autonomy. More specifically, the Kurds who had later settled in the country's northeastern region along the Iraq–Türkiye border, as well as those living in the Afrin area to the north of Aleppo and in Ayn al-Arab (Kobanî/Kobani in Kurdish), where the Euphrates enters Syrian territory, came before the French mandate with demands for autonomy. However, these demands were not accepted by the French. In other words, the application submitted by the Syrian Kurds to the mandate administration for autonomy—which included demands such as the official recognition of Kurdish identity, mother-tongue education, the appointment of Kurdish administrators to Kurdish regions, and the recognition of Kurdish as an official language in these areas—was rejected (Özkaya, 2007, p. 93). In the 1930s, the Kurds in the Jazira region made another autonomy attempt, this time jointly with Christians, but the French mandate administration rejected this demand as well, most likely in order not to provoke negative reactions from Türkiye and Iraq, which were particularly sensitive about the Kurdish issue (Hassanpour, 2005, p. 238; Weiner, 2008, p. 28). The French mandate declared that autonomy rights would be granted only to religious, not ethnic, minorities, and stated that the Kurds did not constitute a religious minority. As can be seen, despite using the Kurds within local defense forces to consolidate their rule in Syria, the French preferred to pursue a cautious policy toward them due to their proximity to the British, preventing Kurdish autonomy demands and efforts to gain power (Tejel, 2009). According to Fuccaro, the fact that the Kurds, unlike other minority communities, did not live in a contiguous area but were dispersed along Syria's northern borders and in major cities played a role in the rejection of an autonomous Kurdish region (Fuccaro, 2013b; Vali, 2005, p. 252). Kemal Kirişci and Winrow interpret the rejection of Kurdish autonomy demands as an indirect outcome of the Anglo-French rivalry in the Middle East (Kirişçi & Winrow, 2010). Özkaya, on the other hand, argues that the rivalries among Kurdish tribes prevented the submission of an effective autonomy application (Özkaya, 2007, p. 94). Undoubtedly, the Sadabad Pact—a regional

non-aggression treaty signed on 8 July 1937 following lessons drawn by Türkiye from the loss of Mosul, which it indirectly associated with the Sheikh Said rebellion—had a constraining effect on the Kurdish movement in Syria. Türkiye's capacity to mobilize regional dynamics through arrangements such as the Balkan Pact and the Sadabad Pact affected British and French approaches to the Kurdish dynamic in the region, particularly from 1937 onward, in the pre–Second World War period (Çelik, 2018).

The end of the French mandate in 1946 and Syria's attainment of independence opened a new chapter for the Kurds and effectively constituted a turning point. In the decade following independence, due to the new state's struggle with multidimensional instability arising from economic difficulties and political fragmentation, there was no specific, systematic state policy toward the Kurds (Hassanpour, 2005, p. 239). The absence of a fully developed official state ideology that would frame Kurdish identity as a threat and subject it to direct pressure, owing to political instability, provided the Kurds with a limited degree of cultural and political freedom. Despite various difficulties and occasional arbitrary restrictions, the relative freedom surrounding Kurdish-language publishing and media was maintained (Gökcan, 2018, p. 168). In the meantime, with the country gaining independence in 1946, families and tribes separated by the Ankara Agreement and the San Remo Conference—who had lost contact with each other—were once again able to reunite. This new opportunity also triggered unexpected migration movements. From the 1950s onward, Kurdish-populated regions began to receive immigration from outside the country. Particularly from the early 1950s, for reasons such as the reunification of divided tribes, the attractiveness of the fertile northern Jazira lands within the Hasakah governorate, and the suppression of the Kurdish uprising in Iraq, the region witnessed intense migration movements (Bozbuğa, 2014). In addition, Kurdish migration was directed toward cities that developed within the framework of national development programs, especially the Damascus governorate. Some of the Kurds who migrated to the cities and worked in various sectors became politically active within the Syrian Communist Party during this period (O. Bingöl, 2016). This environment of relative openness continued until the mid-1950s, but toward the late 1950s the state's attitude toward Kurdish cultural and political activities and Kurdish identity in general hardened considerably (Gökcan, 2018, p. 168). Within this new framework, in order to balance and control the Kurdish population that had grown in favor of the Kurds in certain areas, the Damascus government denied citizenship to approximately 200,000 Kurds who could not

prove that they had resided in these regions prior to 1954 (Kaçar, 2013). As is evident, the fact that the founding nation possessed a demographically heterogeneous structure in ethnic, religious, and social terms constituted the main challenge faced by the new Syrian regime. In particular, the Shiites and Druze were uneasy about the Sunni Muslims, who made up the majority of the country. Syrian society was divided between an affluent urban middle class on the one side and poor peasants and nomads on the other. In the immediate post-independence phase, the rise of the Sunnis to power intensified these concerns (Kuzu, 2019, p. 15). Because the founding philosophy of the state rejected the political empowerment of sub-identities, the Kurds were likewise unable to gain significant power after the establishment of the modern Syrian state. Although Kurds, who constituted approximately 10% of the national population, were represented in the parliament by independent candidates between 1946 and 1957, they did not have a party capable of defending their rights (Tejel, 2009, p. 46). However, during both the mandate period and post-independence, Kurds attained important positions within the armed forces. The fact that the leaders of the two coups carried out in 1949 in Syria were of Kurdish origin is significant in showing the influence of Kurds in Syrian politics (Montgomery, 2005, p. 50).

A closer look at Syria's domestic political life reveals that the period from 1946 to 1970—often described as that of "independence and Arab nationalism"—was marked in both domestic and foreign policy by factional struggles not based on sectarian divisions (Van Dam, 1996, p. 36). After liberating itself from French colonial rule, Syria adopted a secular democratic regime modeled on the American system in March 1949. However, with the withdrawal of the French, a period of internal turmoil and coups began. In this process, the United States launched a smear campaign against Shukri al-Quwatli, Syria's democratically elected president, due to his hesitation to approve the Trans-Arabian Pipeline, which would transport American-owned Saudi oil via Syrian territory to the ports of Lebanon. He was accused of being anti-Western and a communist. The United States then installed a dictator, Husni al-Za'im, in power through a military coup that overthrew al-Quwatli (Weiner, 2008, p. 28). Husni al-Za'im, who came to power in place of Shukri al-Quwatli, first approved the U.S. project and then dissolved the parliament four and a half months later. Following a series of subsequent coups, the Syrian people returned Shukri al-Quwatli and his National Party to power through elections in 1955 (Van Dam, 2000, p. 37). However, in subsequent years, pro-Soviet tendencies began to replace American influence in Syria.

By 1957, U.S. and British intelligence services had embarked on covert operations aimed at toppling the regime in Syria, which refused to cooperate, and facilitating its invasion by U.S.-aligned Iraq and Jordan. CIA and MI6 organized a series of successive assassinations, killing the head of Syrian intelligence, the chief of staff for military intelligence, and the head of the Communist Party. As in the present day, an opposition "Free Syria Committee" and affiliated armed resistance groups were created (Weiner, 2008, p. 76). Following this chain of assassinations, a coup attempt in July 1957 failed. In the meantime, Arab nationalism and the Ba'ath movement began to gain strength in Syrian domestic politics toward the end of the 1950s, and they played a significant role in the establishment of the United Arab Republic between Syria and Egypt in 1958 (Şöhret, 2016, p. 49). Although the Americans— viewed as responsible for the political turmoil and instability—were expelled from the country, intelligence operations targeting the popularly elected Ba'ath regime continued (Jones, 2004). Eventually, Syrian officers discontent with Egyptian dominance in the UAR staged a coup, seized power, and dissolved the union with Egypt and the Ba'ath regime in 1961 (Van Dam, 2000). Just two years later, another group of officers within the military, dissatisfied with the existing government, conducted a coup in 1963 that brought the Ba'ath Party—which combined Arab nationalism and socialism—back to power (Kaçar, 2013).

Syria thus entered a period of Ba'athist junta regimes initiated by the March 1963 coup. During this time, a struggle for power emerged between the Nasserist unionists and the separatists favoring Syrian independence, pushing the country into a phase of political instability. On 8 March 1963, the Ba'ath Party under Amin al-Hafiz seized power in Syria through a military coup. Under al-Hafiz's leadership, divisions and disagreements among the party leadership eventually escalated into open conflict. In this turbulent environment, in 1966 Amin al-Hafiz was ousted in a coup, followed by Salah Jadid in 1970, after which Hafez al-Assad seized power alone in November 1970 (Hopwood, 1988, p. 90). Although the dissolution of the UAR initially raised hope among the Syrian Kurds that discriminatory and exclusionary policies targeting them might be dismantled, the political climate that soon emerged took a trajectory in the opposite direction. The growing emphasis on Syrian identity as an Arab republic amid power struggles and political uncertainty led to the adoption of measures that further restricted Kurdish identity and political activities (Şen, 2004, p. 184). Two of these measures in particular had a profound impact on the trajectory of the Kurdish

issue in Syria and shaped the main contours of the state's Kurdish policy up to the present. The first of these measures was an extraordinary population census conducted in 1962 in the Hasakah governorate, where Kurds constituted a dense population. Central government officials suddenly implemented an exceptional census in the predominantly Kurdish Hasakah region—within a country of 23 million people, of whom 10–12% were Kurds—and revoked the identity cards of those who had arrived in the country recently (Vanly, 1992, p. 118). Around 150,000 Kurds were arbitrarily stripped of their citizenship and subjected to a stringent Arabization policy, with no rights whatsoever (Montgomery, 2005, p. 10). According to state officials, the majority of those whose identity documents were cancelled were people who had fled from uprisings in Türkiye and Iraq. The Damascus government justified the revocation of their citizenship by claiming that these Kurds had entered the country illegally from Iraq and Türkiye, were assisting American imperialism, and were attempting to destroy Arab culture in the region and to establish an independent Kurdish state (Tejel, 2015). Although they were allowed to remain in the country, they were deprived of the rights to own property, work in state institutions, or travel domestically and abroad (K. Yıldız, 2005). Meanwhile, a major criminal investigation launched in the capital Damascus shed further light on the policy that would be pursued toward the Kurds during this period. In an indictment prepared against 32 detained individuals accused of attempting to establish an independent Kurdistan government in Syrian territory, it was alleged that, after founding the "Kurdish Democratic Party"—the continuation of the Syrian KDP—the defendants had gathered all members and engaged in separatist Kurdish nationalist activities (Milliyet, 1960). During this same period, ethnic and religious minorities across Syria were placed under close surveillance, and the reading of Kurdish books and listening to Kurdish music were banned. As part of an Arabization policy, Arab teachers, particularly those from Egypt, were assigned to Kurdish-populated regions (Tejel, 2009, p. 48).

The second major policy that had a profound impact on the Kurdish question in Syria and helped shape the core of the traditional Kurdish policy pursued by the state up to the present was the settlement-based "Arab Belt" project implemented in the mid-1960s. The Arabization policies, which were the expression of Arab nationalism in economic, social, and political domains, aimed at Arabizing settlements where Kurds constituted the majority and constructing a homogeneous Arab identity in these areas, thereby assimilating the Kurds into an Arab identity. The primary objectives of this project—systematically

institutionalized as a state policy centered on the Jazira region—were to prevent the reunification of Kurdish tribes whose historical territories had been divided into two by the drawing of the Turkish–Syrian border; to forestall the spread to Syria of Kurdish political mobilization in Türkiye and Iraq; and to secure the oil-rich regions of the Jazira where Kurds formed a dense population (Özkaya, 2007, pp. 96–97). To this end, it was planned that Kurds would be displaced from northern Syria and that these regions would be Arabized. In this framework, a significant number of Syrian Kurds were deprived of their citizenship rights on the grounds that they had migrated from Türkiye or Iraq. At the same time, in 1963, the Syrian central government conducted joint operations with Iraqi forces against the rebellion led by Molla Mustafa Barzani, crossing the Iraqi border and advancing as far as Zakho in the context of these operations (Vanly, 1992). As can be seen, the implementation of such policies in Syria coincided with the discovery of oil reserves in Kurdish regions and the Kurdish uprising in Iraq under the leadership of Molla Mustafa Barzani. However, the initial attempt to implement this Arabization project was considered unsuccessful, as it was believed to have further strengthened Kurdish identity and contributed to the rise of Kurdish nationalism in Syria (Tüysüzoğlu, 2013, p. 422).

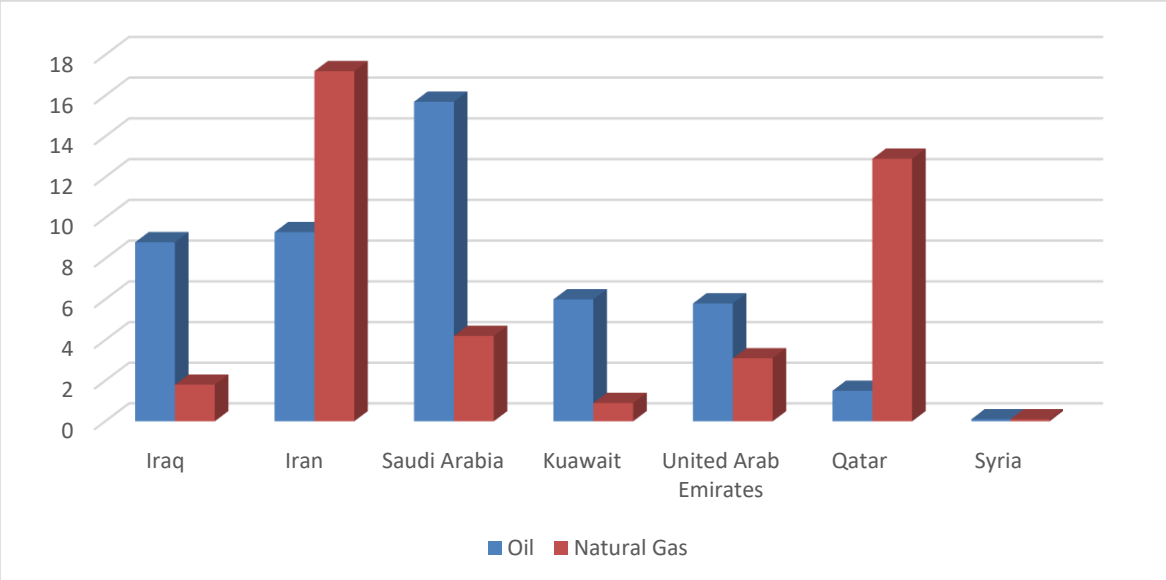

Figure 3. World Oil and Natural Gas Reserves by Middle East Countries (%)

Source: Bursa (2019), citing BP (2018)

In the midst of domestic unrest and coups, the Kurds, for their part, did not neglect drawing up their own political roadmaps. The process during which Arab nationalism rose and paved the way for Hafez al-Assad's rise to power was also the period in which Kurds began to organize politically. The Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party (SKDP), founded on 5 August 1957, was the first product of these organizational efforts. Recorded as the first qualified Kurdish organization in Syria, this structure also constituted the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), already active in Iraq (Gökcan, 2018, p. 169). According to the party's own declarations, people from all social strata—from notables to students, from workers to peasants—were interested in the party. In their view, the Syrian KDP was not a "class" party but a "nationalist" legal organization (Özkaya, 2007, p. 95). Evidently, this declaration was not taken seriously by regime forces; influenced by Iraqi Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, who had at one point taken refuge in Syria, the SKDP was not recognized as a legal party by the Syrian government, and some of its leaders were arrested and imprisoned in 1959–60 as part of investigations launched against it (Tejel, 2009, p. 49). The party's chairman, Nureddin Zaza, born in Maden (Elazığ), settled in Lausanne, Switzerland—where he had previously resided—after his release. The subsequent closure of the party by the regime and the arrest of some of its founders temporarily brought the separatist Kurdish political movement to a halt (Wikipedia, 2020).

After a period of relative silence, the Kurds once again became politically active, this time amid deep ideological divisions. In the ensuing period, the main issue of contention among Syrian Kurds was whether they constituted a "nation" or a "minority" in the country. The "left-wing" parties and groups argued that Syrian Kurds were a "nation," while the "right-wing" parties and groups defined them as a "minority." The left-wing camp demanded "autonomy" for the Kurds, whereas the right-wing camp based its program on the idea of "cultural autonomy" (Ballı, 1992, p. 553). Following this political divergence and fragmentation among Syrian Kurds, splits began within the Syrian KDP in 1965. As a result of these divisions, and mirroring the KDP–PUK pattern in northern Iraq, two main parties emerged in 1975: the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party and the Syrian KDP (Kaçar, 2013). Later, further splits occurred from within these two organizations, giving rise to numerous groups that constitute the basis of the Kurdish parties active today in Syria. All these structures trace their roots back to the Syrian KDP (Erkmen, 2012a).

As is well known, the position of Syrian Kurds in the country fluctuated considerably between independence, the Ba'ath regime, and the rise of Hafez al-Assad. Hafez al-Assad's assumption of power through a successful coup and his election as president in a 1971 plebiscite (Kuzu, 2019, p. 12) ushered in developments that would be critical for the Kurds as well (İyiat, 2018, p. 6). In the early period of Assad's rule, the pressure on Kurds was slightly eased, and limited permission was granted for their political activities and organizational efforts. At the same time, settlement projects were launched in the regions where Kurds were densely populated, and infrastructure investments were increased in these areas. The reason for this was not simply that Assad came from a minority background himself. There were other factors: Assad sought to use the Kurds, much like the French had used them against Arab nationalists, this time against the Muslim Brotherhood. Nor was the Muslim Brotherhood opposition the only element in Assad's Kurdish strategy. Similarly, in its disputes with Iraq and Türkiye, Damascus aimed to use Kurds in these countries to undermine the stability of Baghdad and Ankara; this was another component of Assad's Kurdish policy (Özkaya, 2007). At this point, from Türkiye's perspective, the most obvious lever was undoubtedly the PKK.

However, this atmosphere of relative optimism for the Kurds did not last long. Hafez al-Assad, whose political career would dominate the Ba'ath Party's trajectory, consolidated his power after seizing control in 1970 and being elected president in 1971 (Kuzu, 2019, p. 12). Following Assad's consolidation of power, an increasingly unstable environment emerged for the Syrian population and thus for the Kurds. In this period, when Arab nationalism reached its zenith, the Arab Belt project, which came onto the agenda, created major problems for Kurdish ethnic identity and demographics. In the face of different ethnic and sectarian groups that constituted the Syrian nation, Arab nationalism gained prominence, and exclusionary and discriminatory policies against minorities—particularly the Kurds—were implemented (Gökcan, 2018, pp. 173–174). Within this framework, the Arabization of regions inhabited by Kurds and other minorities was initiated. As part of the "Arab Belt" project implemented by the Syrian government from the mid-1970s, Kurds living along the northern and northeastern fringes of the Jazira region, along the Turkish and Iraqi borders, were relocated to Arab-majority regions and even abroad to Lebanon and its environs. Arabs were promptly settled in the areas evacuated by the Kurds. Within this scope, 7,000 Arab families were settled in forty "model villages" built along the Turkish border, and Kurdish

place and personal names in the region were Arabized. Reports indicate that what was implemented against Syrian Kurds during this period cannot be regarded as a simple settlement policy but rather as a direct assimilation policy (Landinfo, 2010, p. 7). Within this project, designed to reduce Kurdish concentration along Syria's northern border and replace them with Arabs (Kaçar, 2013), especially in the Hasakah governorate, Kurds had their land expropriated without compensation and were stripped of their identity documents and fundamental rights. As a result, Kurds living in these areas were turned into de facto refugees lacking citizenship rights (Hassanpour, 2005, p. 239).

As can be seen, through the "Arab Belt" project implemented in the second half of the 1970s, the Syrian government reorganized the demographic structure of the border regions in favor of the Arabs (Chailand, 1994, p. 86). This policy constituted the second attempt at implementing the Arab Belt project, aimed at severing Kurds in Syria from those in Türkiye and Iraq, following the initial attempt in the 1960s. In fact, this policy was not only intended to Arabize Kurdish regions but to Arabize the entirety of Syria. Within this framework, land reforms were used to break the influence of large landowners, and Arab Bedouins and Syriacs were settled in areas whose names had been changed to Arabic. Moreover, those who could not prove their presence in the region prior to 1945 were deprived of citizenship (Vanly, 1992). When the desired results were not achieved, the policy was abandoned from the mid-1970s onward. Up to 1976, when Hafez al-Assad abandoned this project, Kurdish nationalist activities in Syria had almost come to a standstill (Hassanpour, 2005, p. 242). During this period, Pan-Arabist ideological discourse and practices further accentuated the divide between Arabs and Kurds and deepened hostility toward Kurds in the country. As their situation deteriorated, Syrian Kurds were not only excluded from the system but also viewed as a potential threat. For this reason, unlike the governments of Iran and Iraq, the Syrian central government did not adopt a flexible stance regarding Kurdish organization. While Kurdish citizens were kept under pressure and deprived of basic rights as part of Ba'athist policy, the ethnic separatist Kurdish movement in Türkiye was simultaneously encouraged and the PKK was increasingly supported (Kaçar, 2013).

During this period, the Damascus regime supported the Kurdish movement in northern Iraq to undermine its regional rival, while gradually moderating the pressure on Kurds living in Syria. In this context, it introduced amnesties for Kurdish prisoners and provided infrastructure services to some Kurdish-populated areas. In return for this support, Hafez al-

Assad demanded that Kurdish movements refrain from raising the issues of Syrian Kurds and instead conduct their armed struggle on Iraqi and Turkish soil (Birand, 1993, p. 177). From 1975 onward, within the framework of his strategic calculations, Hafez al-Assad sought to use the Kurdish dynamic externally against his neighboring states Türkiye and Iraq, and internally against the Sunni-dominated Muslim Brotherhood movement (Hassanpour, 2005, p. 242). In this regard, the substantial contribution of later-arriving Kurds in Syria to the PKK's recruitment base is striking (Chailand, 1994, p. 86). Sources estimate that approximately 20% of the PKK militants active in this period were Syrian citizens.

Meanwhile, following the 12 September 1980 military coup in Türkiye, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and many organization members fled to Syria and Syrian-controlled Lebanese territories. After the Armenian terrorist organization ASALA was neutralized, the Syrian regime chose to collaborate with the PKK and provided military training to its militants in camps it established in the Beqaa Valley within Lebanese territory under its control. It allowed these armed elements to be based near the Turkish border and directed cross-border operations from these centers. During his stay in Syria, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan enjoyed the support of Hafez al-Assad and directed the organization freely from there.

In the 1980s, with the backing of the Kurdistan Patriotic Union (KPU) led by Jalal Talabani in Iraq's north and with the approval of the Syrian intelligence service al-Mukhabarat, the PKK intensified its activities in Syria and Lebanon (Özdağ, 1999, p. 34). In this context, the organization settled in the Helve Camp in the Beqaa Valley on the Syrian–Lebanese border in 1980 and used this camp—later renamed the Mahsum Korkmaz Academy—for training purposes for 12 years. From 1982 onward, the PKK systematically opened offices in Damascus, Qamishli, Ras al-Ayn, Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), al-Malikiyah (Derik), Afrin, Aleppo, Jarablus, and Hasakah (Öztürk, 2022, p. 4) and, from the mid-1980s, came to dominate other Kurdish parties in the country, becoming, with regime support, the principal actor shaping Kurdish nationalism. Under Syrian patronage, and with overt and covert backing from states such as Israel, Germany, France, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Greece, the organization acquired systematic military capabilities and gained significant political influence among the Kurdish population in Syria (Kaçar, 2012). Syrian Kurds, influenced by the PKK's propaganda and the fact that the organization was waging war

against a major country like Türkiye—an ally of the U.S. and NATO—developed sympathy for the PKK.

The fact that Syria, while forcing the Kurds and other minorities under its protection to live in a quasi-refugee status for years, simultaneously harbored the PKK and other terrorist organizations on its soil constitutes a striking example for understanding the sources of international terrorism. From this perspective, the PKK's presence in Syria became a central parameter in Syrian–Turkish relations during the Hafez al-Assad era (Arı, 2007, pp. 647–648). Türkiye repeatedly warned the Syrian government over its support for the PKK. Despite signing protocols with Türkiye in 1987 and 1992 committing not to allow PKK activities on its territory, the Damascus regime did not abide by these agreements and openly permitted the PKK to continue its activities in Syria (Dağ & Uçan, 2014). Due to Assad's repressive regime and its ability to channel Kurdish national motivation toward Türkiye and Iraq, there was no significant mobilization among Kurds within Syrian borders during this period, apart from the 1986 Newroz demonstrations. Western sources have advanced several claims regarding the PKK's failure to produce a political mobilization among Kurds in Syria. According to McDowall, Syrian Kurds initially provided strong support for the organization and the PKK easily recruited among them. This support stemmed from the PKK's advocacy of an independent Kurdistan, high levels of unemployment among Kurds in Syria, and the accelerating Kurdish nationalist movement in the region. However, due to the organization's coercive collection of money and provisions from Kurds and its resort to intimidation, the PKK lost Kurdish support in Syria in the 1990s. The fact that the organization's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in order not to fall out with Assad, claimed that all Kurds in Syria had in fact sought asylum from Türkiye and should return there, also contributed to the decline in Kurdish support for the organization (Bozkurt, 2013).

Nevertheless, the fact that in the 1990 Syrian elections Kurds became the ethnicity with the highest number of representatives in the Syrian National Assembly constituted an important turning point for the organization of separatist Kurds and the PKK in Syria. The approval and support of the Hafez al-Assad regime had a major impact on the ability of the Kurdish political movement in Syria and its close supporter, the PKK, to establish a sociological base in the country (O. Bingöl, 2016). On the other hand, the existence of an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Iraq from 1991 onward had a positive impact on Kurdish dynamics in the region (Özkaya, 2007, p. 98). At the same time, due to rapprochement with Saddam Hussein,

Hafez al-Assad withdrew his support from Iraqi Kurds (Gambill, 2004), which encouraged Syrian Kurds from the 1990s onward to act more boldly in demanding basic rights, freedoms, and cultural rights. During this period, Mesut Barzani and Jalal Talabani, who had previously kept their distance from Syrian Kurds in order to maintain Syrian regime support, began to improve their relations with Kurds in Syria and to support them in indirect and covert ways following Hafez al-Assad's change of policy.

The developments that occurred in the 1990s in Iraq—Syria's immediate neighbor—led the Hafez al-Assad regime to reassess its policy of using the Kurdish dynamic against neighboring states (Kaçar, 2013). The weakening of Saddam Hussein's regime as a result of the First Gulf War and the subsequent empowerment of the autonomous Kurdish administration in northern Iraq generated serious concern in Syria. The fact that in 1998 Türkiye and Syria came to the brink of war over the PKK was the final straw. Following this crisis, Abdullah Öcalan was expelled from Syria under the terms of the Adana Agreement, the PKK's camps in Syria and Lebanon were closed, and many militants were forced to leave the country. PKK camps in Syria and Lebanon were relocated primarily to the Qandil region in northern Iraq (O. Bingöl, 2016). As a result, the policy of using the Kurdish dynamic against neighboring countries, pursued since the late 1970s, came to an end with the Adana Protocol signed between Damascus and Ankara in 1999.

After Hafez al-Assad's death in June 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad, unlike his father, adopted a more liberal, reformist and open political line from the onset of his rule. This new era promised new opportunities for the Kurds, as indicated by two key steps taken by the Syrian leader. The first of these was Bashar al-Assad's decision in 2001 to appoint two high-ranking Ba'ath officials to hold talks with the Kurdish Democratic Alliance, formed by six Kurdish parties considered illegal, in order to gather information about Kurdish expectations from the regime (Gambill, 2004). Assad's second important move was a critical visit to Kurdish-populated regions. In 2002, during a visit to the Hasakah region—where Kurds form a dense population—he held a meeting with leading Kurdish figures (Gökcan, 2018a) and made commitments to rectify the negative situation caused by the 1962 census in Hasakah and to grant certain cultural and citizenship rights. This visit and the accompanying statements led Kurds to believe that a new period was about to begin in the country. Indeed, Syrian Kurds enjoyed a relatively more open environment during Bashar al-Assad's early years, and Kurdish parties operated without significant pressure. Kurdish-language

magazines and books, as well as music cassettes, were not subjected to censorship and were sold openly in public spaces. Likewise, Kurdish language courses were allowed to operate without interference. However, this springtime for Syrian Kurds was not to last very long. When the wave of Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia spread across the Middle East and reached Syria in 2011, the Kurds suddenly found themselves at the very center of a civil war. In the civil war that erupted in late 2011 and soon drew in regional and global powers, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah supported the Assad regime, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar backed the opposition and the Sunnis, with Türkiye, the United States, and the United Kingdom standing behind them (Khan & Khan, 2017, p. 591).

As for the Kurds, who generally inhabit the northern and northeastern regions of the country, they sought—particularly under U.S. patronage and protection—to consolidate and render permanent the de facto situation they created east of the Euphrates.

5. SEPARATIST KURDISH MOVEMENT AND SPHERES OF INFLUENCE IN THE 2011 SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The presence of PYD/YPG in Syria is not solely a product of the conditions created by the civil war; it is also the result of the long-standing strategic planning of the PKK/KCK structure. To understand the historical development of this organization in Syria, the country's political structure, ethnic policies, and historical attitude toward the Kurdish community must be taken into consideration. In this context, the PYD's ideological and organizational ties with the PKK reveal not only a tactical but also an institutional continuity. In the following section, the formation process of PYD/YPG will be elaborated in relation to the critical turning points in Syria's political history.

5.1. Emergence and Development of PYD/YPG, the Syrian Branch of the Regional Terror Network PKK/KCK

The political history of Syria possesses a complex background shaped by authoritarian structures, minority policies, and regional rivalries. Within this framework, beginning in the 1980s, the tensions experienced with Türkiye enabled the Damascus administration to provide direct or indirect support to the PKK, allowing the terrorist organization to take root in the region. Examining how the PYD emerged within this historical background and the socio-political conditions under which it gained legitimacy is crucial for understanding its current position.

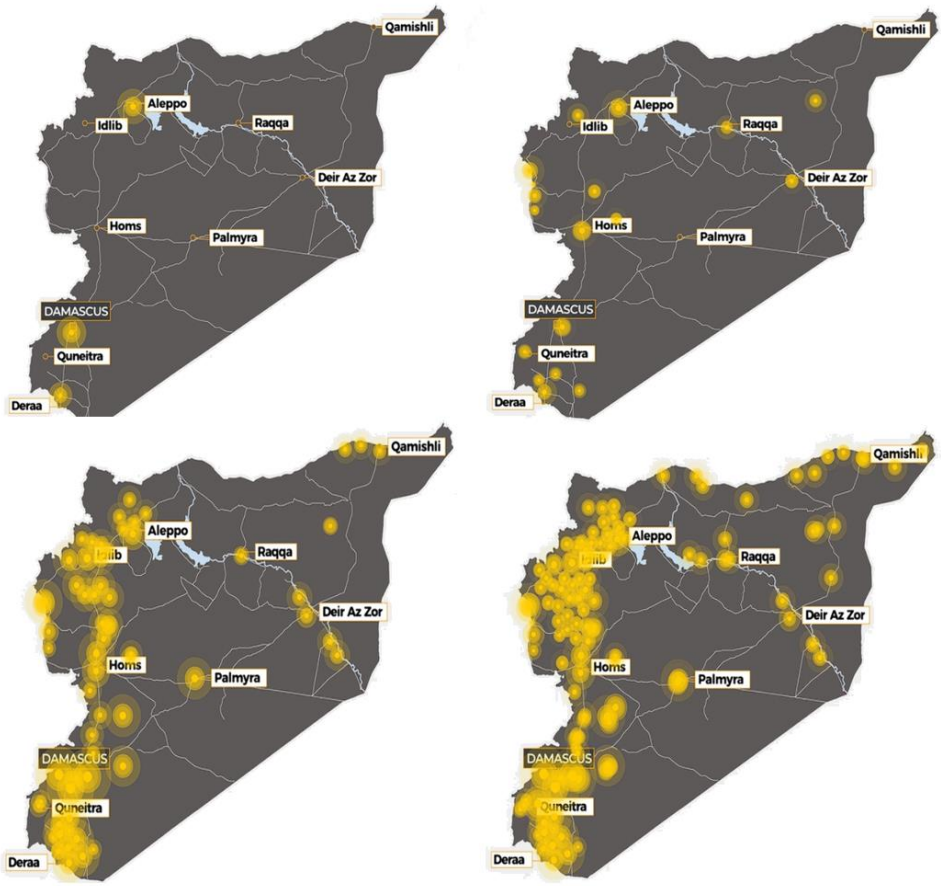

Figure 4. Spread of the Syrian Civil War Within the Country (March-May-December 2011-March 2012)

Source: Chughtai (2021)

5.1.1. The Formation Process of the Terrorist Organization PKK–PYD/YPG in the Political-Historical Background of Syria

The social base and organizational presence of the terrorist organization PKK in Syria dates back to the years when Abdullah Öcalan first began operating in the country. The Kurds, who predominantly live in the strategically important northern and northeastern regions of Syria where oil fields are located, constitute the largest ethnic minority in the country and, due to their demands for rights, have long been perceived as a threat by the Assad regime and placed under special surveillance (Williams, 2008, p. 10). This reality would bring the

terrorist organization PKK, which would find shelter on Syrian territory, and the Damascus regime together on the basis of a relationship of mutual interest. Indeed, after fleeing Türkiye in the aftermath of the 12 September 1980 military coup and deploying in Syria and Lebanon, the terrorist organization PKK began to operate in Syria under the support and protection of Hafez al-Assad's regime. While applying repressive and discriminatory policies against its own Kurds living in the north and northeast of the country, the Assad regime took Abdullah Öcalan, who had fled Türkiye after the 12 September military coup, under its protection and began to host him on its territory in order to use him as a leverage tool both against its neighbors and against the Kurds in Syria (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012a). In the same period, together with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) under the leadership of Jalal Talabani, it also facilitated the deployment and establishment of bases of the separatist terrorist organization PKK in northern Iraq (Özcan, 1999, p. 105). Moreover, with Syrian-nationality Kurds who joined the ranks of the PKK being exempted from military service by the Damascus administration, Syrian Kurds within PKK cadres became the largest group in the organization during the 1990s (N. A. Özcan, 2007). The organization, particularly by dominating other Kurdish parties in Syria and, with the support of the regime, became the primary actor shaping political Kurdish nationalism (Çalışkan, 2020, p. 71). With the influence provided by this position, between 1982 and 1987 it opened offices in Damascus, Qamishli, Ras al-Ayn, Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), Derik, Afrin, Aleppo, Jarabulus, and Hasakah (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, 2017). Likewise, in the 1990s it conducted intense propaganda among Syrian Kurds, especially in order to secure funding and militants, and formed part of its armed militant cadre from children and youth in the region (Sandıklı et al., 2015). Within this framework, a symbiotic relationship—a form of life—was established between the organization and the Damascus regime, in which Syrian Kurds would be neutralized as a threat for the regime in return for the protection and support given to the PKK, particularly against Türkiye (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 9). In this way, the Syrian regime sought to "export" its own Kurdish problem to Türkiye in order to create deterrence and to generate countermoves against Ankara's political and economic steps (Acun & Öner, 2014). In fact, from its foundation, the terrorist organization PKK had aimed to include northern Syria within the borders of the independent Kurdistan state it planned to establish in the Middle East. In this regard, the permission granted under Hafez al-Assad's protection for the organization to operate in the country constituted a unique opportunity for the terrorist organization.

In the period following the First Gulf War of 1991, the United States' strategy of using Iraqi Kurds against the Saddam Hussein regime created a new space for the Kurds in the region, while PKK elements also began to establish bases in this new space. From this period onward, the organization's center of gravity shifted to northern Iraq, and in addition to the United States and Western countries, regional actor Iran began to exert greater influence over the organization (Al Jazeera, 2013). In this context, although Lebanon—under Türkiye's diplomatic pressure—closed the PKK camps established in the Beqaa Valley within its borders, the organization's leader Abdullah Öcalan and its senior figures continued to reside in Syria under the protection and support of the Damascus regime. Throughout the 1990s, through deadly attacks carried out on Turkish territory and mass killings, the organization became Ankara's most significant security problem (Sarı, 2017, pp. 176–177) and transformed into a monster that needed to be absolutely eradicated. The terrorist attacks and incessant large-scale operations against civilians and soldiers conducted by the organization throughout the 1990s mobilized Türkiye's civilian and military authorities; by the end of that decade, the organization, which had suffered serious blows as a result of cross-border military operations, withdrew to areas controlled by the regimes that sheltered it (Montgomery, 2017, p. 187).

Within this framework, as a foreign policy choice of the Syrian state, the organization, which used Syria as a base under the protection and support of the Assad regime from 1979 to 1998, established a solid footing in northern Syria during this period. According to Tejel's striking analysis, with which we concur, the logic of the Syrian regime's support for the PKK should be sought in its assessment of the organization through the prism of the struggle against Türkiye and in the fact that the terrorist organization PKK, while waging its struggle against Türkiye, did not pose a problem within Syrian territory. While the Syrian regime protected and supported the terrorist organization PKK on the one hand, it did not grant the same room for maneuver to other parties in the country, many of which had been founded by individuals who had split from the Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party (Khalaf, 2016, p. 8; Tejel, 2009, p. 93). Scheller describes the place of Syrian Kurds within the PKK as follows:

"The Syrian regime not only turned a blind eye to the PKK's activities in the region, but also recruited members for the organization from among the Syrian Kurds. According to Ömer Şeyhmuz, a researcher who has observed Syria's Kurdish policy for many years: 'In Syria,

the PKK had highly persuasive operatives especially among students and women. They were very successful in recruiting young people into the organization; these recruits would first be sent to Lebanon and then to Türkiye. Syrian security forces had also infiltrated the Kurdish community in Syria… About 30–35% of the militants joining the organization from Syria were recruited through the Syrian state. In particular, the state security agency "amn ad-dawle" (state security unit) played an important role in initiating and organizing the network. They had contacts with Kurds in many places, especially Afrin, Damascus, Qamishli and Aleppo. They made a very clear agreement with those who were to join the organization: "We will send you to Türkiye to fight; in return, you will be exempted from military service, and you can return to your country in a few years." This system operated through well-respected figures within Kurdish society, such as doctors and other professionals. When recruits left Syria, security forces confiscated their identity cards. There were two main reasons for this: so that they could not return to the country without the permission of the security forces, and so that, if they were killed or captured in Türkiye, this would not have any repercussions for Syria.' This strategy was also useful for the Syrian regime, because in this way they both got rid of Kurdish activists in the country and waged war on Türkiye indirectly." (Çağaptay, 2012, p. 17; Scheller, 2013, pp. 100–101).

Especially in the period following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the most distinctive feature of Syrian foreign policy manifested itself as an effort to conceal the problems in the country's underdeveloped regions and the situation of its minorities, while at the same time preventing neighboring states from strengthening by supporting opposition movements and terrorist organizations within their borders (Somersan, 2004, p. 17). Within this policy framework, it can be said that the Assad regime viewed and protected the PKK as an instrument that could be used against its border neighbor Türkiye, whose empowerment it did not desire.

A new period would begin for the terrorist organization following the cessation of Syrian state support for the PKK and the expulsion of Abdullah Öcalan from Syria under the Adana Agreement signed between Türkiye and Syria on 22 October 1998 (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, 2017). In this context, the harsh statements made by the then Commander of the Turkish Land Forces, General Atilla Ateş, in Hatay in 1998 directly targeting Syria, and the speech delivered by then President Süleyman Demirel at the opening of the legislative year in the Turkish Grand National Assembly on 1 October 1998, in which

he stated: “In essence, Syria is pursuing an openly hostile policy against Türkiye and continues its active support to the PKK terrorist organization. Despite all our warnings and peaceful initiatives, Syria has not abandoned its hostile stance. I hereby declare once again to the world that we reserve our right to respond to Syria, and that our patience is about to run out,” created a turning point (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 10). Ultimately, with the involvement of then U.S. President Bill Clinton and under the mediation of Iran and Egypt, the “Adana Agreement” was signed between Türkiye and Syria on 20 October 1998; this agreement would later be renamed in 2010 as the “Agreement on Cooperation Against Terror and Terrorist Organizations Between the Government of the Republic of Türkiye and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic” and remain in force for three years. According to this agreement, both states would take measures against organizations that threatened them—primarily the PKK—and prevent all activities conducted by these organizations (Küçük, 2019). In the course of this tense process that culminated in a bilateral agreement between Türkiye and Syria, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was expelled from the country on 9 October 1998 and forced to leave Syria; in parallel with these developments, arrests and prosecutions were initiated against PKK members and its affiliates in Syria (Duran, 2012).

The capture and transfer to Türkiye in 1999 of Abdullah Öcalan, the founder and absolute leader of the ethnic separatist terrorist organization, after relentless and uninterrupted international pursuit, along with his trial and imprisonment, created deep trauma among PKK members and sympathizers both in Türkiye and abroad, as is the case with many terrorist organizations that lose their leader (Gökcan, 2018b, p. 195). Öcalan’s capture left the PKK’s top leadership and grassroots in a state of shock and confusion, and pushed the organization into a profound crisis not only structurally but also ideologically. The organization, which had already begun to disintegrate as a result of the military defeat it experienced in Türkiye during the same period, soon entered a process of fragmentation (Marcus, 2009, p. 381). In the following period, with its inclusion on the lists of international terrorist organizations by the United States and the European Union, the organization began to display signs of internal turmoil and schism, thereby facing one of the most serious crises in its history (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011, p. 154; Marcus, 2007). Subsequently, during the process of the invasion of Iraq—where Kurdish presence in the north emerged as a “local strategic ally” of the coalition forces—the PKK, which had obtained covert support from Western states and the United States, was sidelined and entered a troubled period. The

dizzying developments that unfolded within a short time and the changing international context also triggered a fundamental transformation within the terrorist organization PKK. This transformation would undoubtedly be reflected in the organizational structure of the PKK. The organization began to seek ways to present itself as a political movement rather than a heavily criticized armed ethnic-separatist terrorist organization shaped by its historical legacy. Instead of establishing an independent Kurdish state in Türkiye, it now aimed to develop a confederal struggle that transcended Türkiye's borders and encompassed all Kurds in the region, in a manner consistent with its new ideological position and political objectives. In this context, it changed its medium- and long-term strategy accordingly from the early 2000s (Soner et al., 2017, p. 12). This transformation also determined the organization's new ideological stance in line with its political goals. Within this framework, the VIIth Congress, which was formally scheduled to be held in 2002 but was brought forward due to Öcalan's capture, was convened on 2–23 January 2000 on Mount Qandil (Ergül, 2007, p. 167). At this extraordinary congress, so to speak, the organization's politicalization efforts came to the fore alongside the armed activities it had pursued since its foundation. This change can be clearly observed in the actions and discourse of the organization's leader, Abdullah Öcalan. After being captured at the end of an international manhunt that began with his departure from Syria, Abdullah Öcalan continued to give instructions concerning the organization's strategies from İmralı Prison through his lawyers and written defenses, and stated that the organization should also build structures in Syria. In this context, in his meeting notes dated 25 December 2001 Öcalan stated: "(…) I had made a proposal for four countries. In Iran it should be based on the notion of democratic Islam. The PKK should survive in Iraq; it may take the form of PKK of the South. In Syria, the Democratic Unity Party (…)" and in the notes dated 13 August 2003: "(…) In my defense I referred to the 'Democratic Party of Syrian Kurds'. I propose the Democratic Union Party also for the people of Syria (…)" (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, 2020, p. 10). Along with these statements, and the claims that Abdullah Öcalan, on 16 February 2002, via his lawyers, instructed the leadership to establish the KCK structure, can be regarded as the first seeds of what would be implemented as the Syrian branch of the PKK/KCK, namely the PYD. Ultimately, a decision emerged at the Congress to halt armed activities and to place emphasis on political work (Töreli, 2002, p. 151). Within this framework, the concepts of a "Democratic–Ecological Society" and, in parallel, "Democratic Confederalism" were introduced, and a confederal model of governance was imposed for the four countries in

which Kurds live—Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Eventually, a manifesto entitled "Democratic Transformation and Unity Manifesto" summarizing the new strategy of the organization was published (Ergül, 2007, p. 167). Thus, instead of establishing an independent Kurdish state in Türkiye, the organization adopted as its goal the development of a confederal struggle that transcended Türkiye's borders and encompassed all Kurds in the region, and from the early 2000s onward adjusted its strategy accordingly (Erdoğan, 2019, p. 35). In addition, in an effort to escape from its unfavorable situation, it tried to open an exit door by adopting the name KADEK in 2002 and KONGRA-GEL in 2003. Furthermore, under the umbrella organization KONGRA-GEL established in 2003, the idea emerged that separate organizational and party structures should be built in the four countries where Kurds live. Within this framework, it was decided to establish KADEK (Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress) in Türkiye, PJAK in Iran, PÇDK in Iraq, and PYD in Syria (Erdoğan, 2019, p. 45).

Leaving aside developments within the PKK, significant events concerning ethnic-separatist Kurds took place on the Syrian front in the same period. Following the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, the process of establishing the PKK/KCK structure present in northern Iraq in Syria as well began with the adoption of several important decisions. As a matter of fact, at the PKK's 8th Congress (1st Congress of the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress/KADEK), held between 20 and 24 April 2002, a decision was taken to build new structures in Türkiye as well as in Iraq, Iran and Syria (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, 2017, pp. 10–12). In other words, the decisions adopted at the PKK/KCK's 8th Congress prepared the ground for the establishment of the Syrian branch PYD of the regional terror network, which would constitute the basis of an independent/semi-independent structure to be built in northern Syria under the name "Democratic Middle East Federation" (Öztürk, 2022, p. 4). At the congress, the name of the Syrian branch was explicitly mentioned, and it was declared that "in Syria, the Democratic Unity Movement or the Democratic Union Party (PYD) should be established and this organization should be supported as part of the movement" (Soylu, 2016). Subsequently, with the introduction of the KCK Charter, so-called "part-structures" were envisaged, and the establishment of similar organizational models in Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria was set as a goal. The aim of the regional terror network system created by the PKK through the KCK Charter was expressed as the establishment of a "Democratic Confederal Kurdistan" in the four parts

consisting of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The Charter further envisaged organizing Kurds in the region under a single political, social, cultural, and legal framework in a "democratic autonomy" model that was non-hierarchical. It was hoped that this new model would function as a "pan-Kurdish" political model that ignored the physical borders created by the nation-states of the region that host Kurdish populations. The entire KCK system was subordinated to the will of its leader Abdullah Öcalan, referred to as the "Leadership", with KONGRA-GEL designated as the "legislative body" and the Executive Council as the "executive body". Within the framework of the KCK Charter, in line with Abdullah Öcalan's instructions and the organization's objectives, the Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party, PYD) was established on 17 October 2003 in order to sustain the organization's presence in Syria. The head of the PKK-controlled northern Syrian structure, as General Responsible for Syria, was appointed as Sofi Nurettin (K) Nureddin Halef al-Muhammed. Thereafter, the regional terror network PKK/KCK brought into being the KCK-Rojava structure as part of its efforts to establish autonomous structures in Syria in line with this system (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, 2017, p. 11).

Subsequently, the PKK's 9th Congress was held between 27 October and 6 November 2003 on Mount Qandil in northern Iraq. At this congress, the organization, which had most recently taken the name KADEK at the previous congress, was dissolved and replaced by KONGRA-GEL (Kurdistan People's Congress – Kongra Gelê Kurdistan) (Demirel, 2005, p. 424). At this congress, referred to as the "Congress of Democratic Foundation", emphasis was placed on organizational, political, and social openings (Yılmaz, 2007, p. 150), and it was stated that KONGRA-GEL would not have an armed structure, while its armed wing HPG—which carried out military actions—was emphasized to be a separate party and a separate formation. It is clear that by putting forward such discourse the organization sought to avoid responsibility for potential future violent acts carried out by its armed wing HPG, and to create an image of innocence in the eyes of national and international public opinion. It should also be underlined that with the establishment of KONGRA-GEL the organization moved into a new paradigm. With a decision that could be described as revolutionary, it moved away from the idea of establishing an independent and democratic Kurdistan state and declared that, regarding the resolution of the Kurdish issue, the new goal was no longer to establish a separate state, but rather to build a "Democratic Ecological Society" in which direct democracy would prevail in the four parts of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. In line

with this new strategy, Kurdistan was defined in the organization's statute and programs not as a geographical concept but as a philosophical space. Within this space, the ultimate objective was the establishment of four independent entities without geographical borders within the boundaries of four neighboring states (Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria) where Kurds are considered the main constituent element (Demirel, 2005, p. 262). Accordingly, in the four nation-states in which Kurds reside (Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria), each part would gain democratic autonomy, these nation-states would be transformed into democratic republics, and with the participation of each autonomous part, a Kurdish democratic confederal structure would be constituted. Democratic autonomy would function through clan–tribe and tribal structures in rural areas and through commune structures in urban areas; in this way the PKK would strengthen its sociological base (Öcalan, 1999b). Again, within the framework of this strategy, efforts would first be made to build a society in which Kurds are recognized as the main constituent element, backed by legal regulations, and then to bring these four parts together. To this end, alliances would be formed with other democratic organizations and political groups in order to secure the recognition of Kurdish identity (Erdoğan, 2019, p. 37).

Through this system created by the KCK Charter, the terrorist organization PKK aimed, while establishing the "Democratic Confederal Kurdistan" in the four parts consisting of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, to benefit from feudal structures that it could not fully win over in rural areas, and to exploit the resources of municipalities close to it in urban areas (Öcalan, 2005). This system, called the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), designed to encompass "Greater Kurdistan", was subordinated to the will of the organization's leader Abdullah Öcalan. The highest level of the hierarchy was defined as the "Leadership", the legislative organ as "Kongra-Gel", and the executive organ as the "Executive Council" (Hancılar, 2011, p. 38; Ünal, 2012, p. 8). On the other hand, the KCK Charter referred to part-structures, and within this framework the aim was to establish similar organizational models in Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. In order to implement the new strategy and the KCK structure, the organization's political and armed elements were restructured. Within this scope, "Self-Defense Forces" were established as local security units, and "special forces" with specialized operational capabilities directly subordinated to the PKK's armed wing HPG were formed. Courts were also set up, and preparations were made for engagements in both urban and rural areas. Meanwhile, given the existence of a strong

Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, priority was placed on building the parts in Syria and Iran without entering into conflict with this entity (Turner, 2012, p. 2012). Within this strategy, the PKK established the Syrian component of the structure planned in 2003, the PYD (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat – Democratic Union Party), and then, a year later in 2004, created PJAK (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê – Kurdistan Free Life Party) in Iran.

Meanwhile, at a time when the organization faced a risk of fragmentation due to internal splits, disagreements, disputes, and a pervasive loss of faith, Abdullah Öcalan in 2004 issued a call to form a "Preparatory Committee for Reconstruction" in order to recreate the organization as a much different party. According to Akkaya and Jongerden, this new PKK was no longer to be a "vanguard party" in the classic Leninist sense, but rather an ideological and philosophical power group that primarily valued membership. Political and military activities in each region of the so-called Kurdistan were placed under the control of the KKK/KCK, working in coordination with military and political organizations such as HPG and HRK, as well as with political parties (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011; Marcus, 2007, p. 150). In this way, "the KCK evolved into an institutionalized umbrella structure coordinating its own organizations: the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) in Türkiye, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran, and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK) in Iraq" (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011; Marcus, 2007, p. 147). Thus, from this period onward, the ethnic separatist terrorist organization PKK became not so much the name of a single party but rather of a "party complex", essentially functioning as the name of an umbrella organization (Soner et al., 2017, p. 13). In addition, through the new organizations planned to be established in Iran, Iraq, and Syria—neighboring states that host Kurdish populations—the aim was to reach broader segments.

On the other hand, when the broader picture of the Middle East is examined from a wide perspective, phenomena and events that would deeply influence all peoples in the region, the reigning regimes, and relations among states become visible. Among these, the decision of the global power United States to turn its attention to the region is particularly important. Following the declaration by the Washington administration, after the 11 September attacks, that it would wage war on authoritarian regimes, the invasions of Afghanistan and then Iraq radically changed the existing balances in the region. With the invasion, Iraqi Kurds suddenly became a strategic partner of the United States and acquired unexpected historical

advantages and gains. During the process of restructuring Iraq after the invasion, significant achievements such as the formal establishment of the Kurdish Regional Government, substantial Kurdish representation in the Iraqi parliament, the inclusion in the new Iraqi constitution of many provisions guaranteeing the fundamental rights and freedoms of Kurds, and, furthermore, the election of Jalal Talabani, of Kurdish origin, as the new President of Iraq, became a turning point for Kurds in the region. In this context, the historical advantages and significant gains provided to Iraqi Kurds as the United States' strategic partners in the Second Gulf War of 2003, and the subsequent consolidation of the Kurdistan Regional Government as a relative power in the region, encouraged Syrian Kurds and pushed them into a search for status. As illustrated by the Iraqi example, the "Kurdish space"—which transcends the borders of Türkiye as well as Iraq, Iran, and Syria and has its own characteristics (Soner et al., 2017, p. 13)—offered the terrorist organization PKK new opportunities after almost every development and event. Perhaps the most important of these opportunities was the motivation and the opportunity to establish a regional terror network structure. Viewing and exploiting developments in Syria, following those in Iraq, as a new window of opportunity, the PKK would seek to use the emerging power vacuum in this country in line with its own goals. In this context, the organization's efforts to build a regional terror network in Syria, which predate the uprising in that country, gained significant momentum after the outbreak of the uprising.

Indeed, the PKK, which had been present in Syria as the sole organization shaping Kurdish nationalism under the support and protection of the regime, positioned itself as the dominant Kurdish political party in the region during its time there and wove the web of relations that would form the basis for the establishment of the PYD in 2003 (Çalışkan, 2020a, p. 71). The "Democratic Union Party (PYD)", established as an extension of the regional terror network KCK in Syria, emerged as a new movement in the Kurdish region, composed of individuals linked to the PKK who had problems with the Assad regime (Federici, 2015, p. 83; Sheikhmous, n.d., p. 9). Within this framework, in line with its aim to build an autonomous structure in Syria, the PKK/KCK also brought into being the KCK-Rojava organization, which would operate under this system. At the head of this structure, which would operate under PKK/KCK control, Sofi Nurettin (K) Nureddin Halef al-Muhammed was appointed as General Responsible for Syria (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, 2017, pp. 6–7). The KCK Executive Council, chaired by Cemil Bayık and Bese Hozat, senior figures in the

PKK leadership, published a statement in 2006 declaring that PYD had been established in northern Syria, referred to as Western Kurdistan (Rojava), as a branch of the KCK (Soylu, 2016). An examination of the PYD Party Statute shows that the terrorist organization PKK designed its Syrian part-structure under the name KCK-Rojava. The same statute states that the PYD recognizes Abdullah Öcalan as its leader, that its purpose is to implement in Syria the "Democratic Confederalism" model, that it is a part of the KCK in Syria under the name Rojava, that the release of Abdullah Öcalan is among the party's objectives, and that PYD members must abide by the condition of "believing in Leader Apo". Within this framework, it can be observed that the PYD, just like the other extensions of the regional terror network PKK/KCK in Türkiye, Iran, and Iraq, aims to secure autonomy in the first stage in northern Syria by adopting the paradigm imposed under the name "Democratic Confederalism" (Sandıklı et al., 2015, p. 26). All these details demonstrate beyond any doubt that there is an organic link between the PYD and the PKK/KCK structure, and that the PYD constitutes the Syrian branch of the regional terror network. In addition, the intensive propaganda conducted by pro-PKK print and visual media, as well as the organization's extensions in Türkiye and Europe, regarding the establishment of the PYD immediately after its proclamation, also illuminates the existence of this organic link (Sandıklı et al., 2015, p. 25). Furthermore, the personnel changes in the upper ranks of the PKK, which resumed its actions in Türkiye, in parallel with developments in Syria—such as the transfer of the leadership of the organization's armed wing, the People's Defense Forces (HPG), from Murat Karayılan to the Syrian Feyman Hüseyin, who later handed it over in 2009 to another Syrian, Sofu Nurettin—should also be evaluated within this framework (Bingöl, 2016, p. 7). Additionally, the organization began to take steps to strengthen its structure in Syria; in this context, it opened political offices in Damascus, Qamishli, Derik, Ras al-Ayn, Afrin, Aleppo, Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), and Hasakah, and focused on building civil society organizations by establishing numerous foundations and associations. These elements constitute the fundamental components that reveal this web of relations. In this way, through the network of relations described above, the two organizations succeeded in filling the significant vacuum created in Afrin, Ayn al-Arab, and Jarabulus by traditional Syrian Kurdish political parties that had historically operated in the Cezire and Hasakah regions, thereby achieving lasting historical gains (Self & Ferris, 2016, p. 17). Meanwhile, Bashar al-Assad, who was in power, abruptly ended the relatively liberal environment that had just emerged, under the influence of the bureaucratic and political elite inherited from his father Hafez al-Assad and

out of concern that the changes in areas under the influence and control of external actors could destabilize his country, and reverted to the previous restrictions and pressures on fundamental rights and freedoms. As a result, a rupture and deep division emerged between Kurds and Arabs in Syria.

The year 2003 marked the beginning of a period in which the Kurdish issue came to the fore for Türkiye as well as for Iraq and Syria. In March 2003, during the Second Gulf War launched by the U.S.-led coalition forces against Iraq, separatist Kurdish groups living in the north of the country achieved historical advantages and significant gains, opening a new period. In this new phase, during the postwar occupation process, Kurds who filled the power vacuum in northern Iraq together with the Shiite majority carried out attacks—under the support and protection of their strategic partner, the United States—against the strategically important Turkmen city of Tal Afar in order to consolidate their gains and expand their sphere of influence (Özdağ, 2008, p. 83). These attacks constituted the first stages of the Iraq-centered chaos that would affect the entire region and continue for many years. As the chaos widened, movements began also in Syrian Kurdish regions adjacent to Tal Afar. Under these circumstances, the impact and consequences of the U.S. and Peshmerga operations against Tal Afar—located in a Turkmen governorate that had functioned as a buffer zone between Kurds in Iraq and Syria during the occupation—can be regarded as an early phase in the formation of the Syrian branch PYD–YPG of the PKK/KCK's regional terror network.

Leaving aside what happened in Tal Afar, on 12 March 2004, this time on the other side of the Iraqi border, in Syria's northeastern region adjacent to the Turkish border, an unusual mobilization began. The incident that took place in the border governorate of Qamishli and soon spiraled out of control would be the first impact and reflection of the U.S. invasion of Iraq on Syria, and would vindicate those who feared that the dramatic changes occurring in the region would destabilize the broader area. The insistence of the Bashar al-Assad administration on maintaining pressure-based policies against minorities, and particularly against Kurds, triggered one of the largest-scale protests in modern Syrian history, considered a turning point regarding the Kurdish question (Brandon, 2007, p. 21). On 12 March 2004, during a football match between the teams al-Jihad and al-Futuwah, Kurdish fans reacted to the Arabs' display of posters of Saddam Hussein, an act that would be tested by the terrorist organization PYD, which would later appear at another football match. In the same month, during a football match between the teams Deir ez-Zor (Arab) and Qamishli

(Kurdish), tensions began with Arabs chanting slogans in favor of Saddam Hussein and Kurds chanting in favor of George Bush and Ariel Sharon, sparking the protest wave that would soon erupt (Moubayed, 2005, p. 3).

During the match, the chants turned into opposing political slogans, and the events that began in the stands quickly escalated, bringing Arabs and Kurds into confrontation. Furthermore, the tension that broke out in the stadium, in which the PYD played a background role, soon spilled out into the streets and turned into violent clashes (Hürriyet, 2004). During the events, Kurds clashed not only with Arabs but also with security forces, shouting separatist slogans that had not previously been heard in Syria, such as "Free Kurdistan" and "Uprising until the occupation ends" (Hamidi, 2005).

In the chaos, Syrian flags were burned, many homes and businesses, as well as public buildings and institutions, were set on fire and damaged, and even statues of Hafez al-Assad were toppled. The events that began in Qamishli soon spread to the districts of Amuda, Ras al-Ayn, and Deir ez-Zor, where Kurds formed the majority; later they reached the cities of Ras al-Ayn, Hasakah, Afrin, and Aleppo, where Kurds also live in significant numbers, and turned into a widespread uprising (Tejel, 2015, p. 240). As the uprising grew, the Syrian government was forced to dispatch additional security forces to these regions and used harsh measures against the Kurds during the clashes. At the funerals of those killed, coffins were wrapped in the so-called Kurdish flag, and slogans in favor of Barzani were shouted. At the large funeral ceremony attended by approximately 10,000 Kurds, demonstrators attacked soldiers, police, and government buildings (Moubayed, 2005). During these attacks, Syrian flags were burned, many homes and businesses, and especially police stations, municipal buildings, and customs buildings, were set on fire and destroyed, and portraits of Hafez al-Assad were burned and his statues were toppled (Peyamner, n.d.). In Afrin, where the events spread, seven people were killed when security forces intervened in a demonstration organized by Kurds, and in Hasakah Arabs looted Kurdish shops and businesses, while Kurds attacked vehicles and businesses belonging to Arabs (Bozkurt, 2013). Moreover, in the city of Amuda, Kurds who rose up attacked a police station belonging to the security forces. In the other cities where unrest broke out, Kurds similarly attacked government buildings and private property, setting some vehicles and buildings on fire (M. Yıldız, 2020, p. 6). As can be seen, in the events in which 52 people, including police officers, lost their

lives and more than 100 were injured, Syrian Kurds carried out the largest and most resonant actions against the regime they had ever undertaken in the country.

On the other hand, while the families of those killed during the events claimed that the massacre was carried out by PYD militants for provocation, these claims were ignored, and in fact the events increased the PYD's influence over the population (Hürriyet, 2004). In other words, the PYD, which played an active role in the uprisings, strengthened its position within the Syrian Kurdish movement. As can be seen, Syrian Kurds carried out the largest and most impactful protests of their presence in the country through these events. In the framework of this Qamishli-centered uprising, closely watched with concern in Türkiye, Iran, and Iraq as well, the Syrian government blamed the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq for the events (Hossino & Tanır, 2012; Tejel, 2015, pp. 227–228). Although the Qamishli protests were suppressed by the harsh intervention of the Damascus regime, they generated significant developments for the political organization and struggle of Syrian Kurds. During the protests, opposition Kurdish political parties did not allow initiatives that would obscure the Kurdish-identity-based nature of the movement, and for the first time in a long period they exhibited a will to act and organize together. At the same time, this movement pushed other opposition groups against the Baath regime to seek alliances with the Kurds and encouraged them to take steps toward a democratic solution of the Kurdish issue. Given that Kurds in Syria, Türkiye, Iran and Iraq all expressed solidarity by issuing public statements and organizing demonstrations, thereby exhibiting a common national consciousness, these Qamishli-based protests—spreading to almost all cities inhabited by Kurds and brutally suppressed—constituted an important turning point for the regional Kurdish movement (Tejel, 2015, pp. 227–228). Following these protests, which began in Qamishli and spread to other centers, the regime's pressure on the political, social, and cultural activities of Kurds increased even further. Baath regime officials claimed that the events did not represent a legitimate struggle over the Kurdish issue, argued that there was no Kurdish problem in the country, and asserted that the disturbances were caused by individuals who had been stripped of their citizenship because they were not of Syrian origin, and who were incited by foreign states (Özkaya, 2007, p. 106).

In addition to the Qamishli events, another incident that intensified the anger of opposition Kurds toward the Assad regime was the assassination of Sheikh Muhammad Maşuk al-Haznevi, the leader of the Haznevi Sufi order. Maşuk al-Haznevi, who had considerable

influence over Kurds in Türkiye and Syria, had stated during the Qamishli events that the political and cultural rights of Kurds should be recognized. Moreover, in an interview given on 4 May 2005 to the Canadian newspaper The Globe and Mail, Haznevi emphasized the need for the U.S. to overthrow dictators in the region and argued that the Baath regime in Syria should be removed from power, thereby drawing the ire of the regime (Koring, 2005). Shortly after these statements, Haznevi was abducted by unknown assailants while leaving his office in Damascus, and his body was found weeks later in Deir ez-Zor. Although his relatives, opposition Kurdish parties, and Western actors blamed regime forces for the murder, the Damascus administration denied these allegations and claimed that the assassination had been carried out by two suspects from Deir ez-Zor who had no connection with the regime (Tejel, 2015, p. 208). Even though it has never been conclusively clarified who killed Haznevi and for what purpose, the killing of such an influential opinion leader within the Kurdish community shortly after the Qamishli events further increased anger and resentment toward the regime. Following Haznevi's disappearance in May 2005 and the discovery of his body in Deir ez-Zor, about 270 km south of Qamishli, demonstrations attended by approximately one million people were held in Qamishli, Amuda, and Derbisiye, where the incident was portrayed as an execution carried out by the regime (Taştekin, 2016, pp. 88–89). In the clashes that erupted when police and Arab tribes intervened in the demonstrations and protests attended by thousands of Kurds in Qamishli after Haznevi's death, six people, including one police officer, were killed and dozens were injured (Kaçar, 2013). The Syrian government held the Barzani and Talabani administrations in northern Iraq responsible for the events. In the areas where the incidents occurred, Deputy Governor of Hasakah Khalid Hodr stated that a group of protesters had opened fire in the city, but that security forces had dispersed them, and, partially blaming certain Kurdish politicians for the unrest linked to developments in Iraq, declared that "they are trying to provoke people by exploiting some poor Kurds" (Radikal, 2004). This Qamishli-centered uprising constituted an important turning point in the trajectory of the Kurdish political movement in Syria (Hossino & Tanır, 2012), and the PYD, which played an active role in the uprising, strengthened its position within the Syrian Kurdish movement. As can be seen, the historical advantages and gains obtained by Iraqi Kurds as the United States' strategic partners in the Second Gulf War of 2003, and the subsequent consolidation of the Kurdistan Regional Government as a relative power in the region, encouraged Kurds in Syria and led them to seek a political status (Hossino & Tanır, 2012).

While these mass events were ongoing in Syria, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, Masoud Barzani—targeted by the Damascus administration—accused Syria of using force and applying pressure against Kurds and suggested that the problem be resolved through dialogue. Barzani also declared that Kurds in Syria could be accepted as refugees in northern Iraq (TUİÇ, 2011). After the protests subsided, the Damascus administration took very harsh measures; within this framework, around 2,000 people—most of them Kurds—were arrested, and the activities of all Kurdish parties in the country, both legal and illegal, were banned on the grounds that they did not have licenses (N. Bingöl, 2013, p. 14). Meanwhile, while the events were still fresh, senior officials of the Assad regime, for the first time, officially engaged all illegal Kurdish parties in the country and held a secret meeting with their leaders in Damascus (Bozkurt, 2013). According to media reports and open sources from that period, state officials negotiated with Kurdish parties to stop the events. The leaders of the Kurdish parties demanded the withdrawal of soldiers from the region, the release of all detainees, and the recognition of Kurdish identity. In return, state officials agreed to all demands except the last one, in exchange for limiting tensions (Gökcan, 2018b, p. 182). Realizing the organized stance and protest capacity displayed by Kurds during the Qamishli events, the Assad regime, concerned that a repetition of these events might create grounds for foreign intervention, adopted—despite the existing mutual distrust—a stance in favor of establishing dialogue with Kurds, at least for a time. The most concrete step taken by Bashar al-Assad within this framework was the dispatch in 2005 of his brother Maher al-Assad and Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass to Kurdish regions to meet opposition Kurdish politicians and listen to their demands. In these talks, issues such as granting citizenship rights to Kurds with “ajanib” and “maktumin” status and the economic and social development of Kurdish regions were discussed, and agreement was reached. However, this agreement was never implemented, and the serious problems faced by stateless Kurds in social life continued (Gökcan, 2018b, p. 182).

Meanwhile, in the period between 2003 and 2006, debates emerged within the PKK/KCK’s leadership over the alleged ineffectiveness of its Syrian branch PYD against other Kurdish political parties in the country and the failure to establish the KONGRA-GEL system in this region, and decisions were taken to focus more heavily on restructuring (Sandıklı et al., 2015, p. 26). In fact, it can be said that the PYD systematically targeted and suppressed other Kurdish groups in the country, seeking to grow and rise at their expense, and that in this

regard these criticisms were misplaced. At a time when the activity level of PYD in Syria was being questioned within the PKK/KCK's upper leadership, developments occurred that partially justified the critics. In 2004, as a result of ongoing disagreements and factionalism within the PKK since its foundation, the PYD split into two, and the dissident group formed a new party called "Rekeftin" (Syrian Kurdish Coordination Party – in Kurdish: Rekeftina Demokrat a Kurd ya Suri). However, Kemal Şahin, founder of Rekeftin and a former PYD member himself, was killed on 17 February 2005 in northern Iraq, its senior leader Kamuran Muhammed was murdered in August 2005, and another Rekeftin member, Nedim Yusuf, narrowly survived an assassination attempt in September 2005 (Tejel, 2009, p. 156). Subsequently, the Rekeftin Movement, which would later support the Damascus Declaration against the Assad regime, continued its existence under the leadership of Fevzi Şingar and Nezhet Muhammet under intense pressure from the PKK (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 11). The PKK's stance toward Kurdish opposition in Syria, as elsewhere, continued unabated. In fact, in 2011, during the popular uprising in Syria, the Kurdish Future Movement, one of the Kurdish opposition parties and part of the opposition front, also became a target of PKK/KCK–PYD. Its leader Mishaal Temo was killed in his home by masked assailants. While members of the movement held the Assad regime responsible for the assassination (BBC, 2011), some sources claimed that the PYD was involved in the killing. Some researchers have suggested that Mishaal Temo, founder of the Syrian Kurdish Future Movement and one of the pro-revolution Kurdish Front leaders in Syria, was assassinated in 2011 by YPG militants, the armed wing of the PYD, because he was seen as a threat by both the regime and the PYD (Shadid, 2011). The attacks on opposition movements were not limited to this. Following the Temo assassination, the Kurdish Future Movement was prevented from joining the Kurdish National Council, and later PKK blocked the provision of financial and political support to the National Council (Soner et al., 2017).

Returning to the domestic Syrian political scene, in 2005 separatist Kurdish parties led by the PYD and other opposition actors reached a consensus among themselves and signed the Damascus Declaration, which set out their demands for fundamental rights and freedoms and democratization. This declaration, intended to bring together the fragmented Syrian opposition, was signed by different opposition groups, including Kurds, liberals, Arab tribes, and civil society organizations. Following the publication of the declaration, the Assad regime initiated investigations, arrested many individuals, and eventually forced the

signatories to operate outside Syria (ORSAM, 2011). Immediately afterward, in 2006–2007, two conferences held in the U.S. Senate and the European Parliament led to the establishment of the Syrian Kurdish National Assembly, which aimed to transform Syria into a federal state and secure the fundamental rights and freedoms of Kurds. Although these steps provided significant support for the Syrian Kurdish movement in gaining international backing, the Damascus Declaration was not sufficient to keep Kurds on the same side as other Arab opposition groups and minorities in their approach to the Assad regime. This was because, unlike other minorities, Kurds—who assessed the Assad regime more along ethnic lines than sectarian ones and focused their threat perception not on Sunnism but on Arabism, Salafism, and Wahhabism—remained distant from the Assad regime, which emphasized Arab nationalism. Conversely, other minorities, especially Christians and Druze, viewed the Assad regime as a secular structure that protected them from the Sunni majority (Hossino & Tanır, 2012). As a result, by 2009 most Kurdish parties withdrew from the increasingly dysfunctional Damascus Declaration and sought to carry the process of the Kurdish National Assembly, initiated in 2006, to a more advanced stage by forming a Kurdish National Congress (O. Bingöl, 2016, p. 8). During this period, the PYD, which had followed an uneven trajectory in Syrian domestic politics and failed to achieve internal stability, came under criticism. Subsequently, in order to overcome the internal turmoil within the organization, efforts were launched from 2007 onward to restructure the KCK project in Syria as a part-organization. However, despite having been built on the legacy of the PKK's operational space in Syria, the PYD had no significant influence on the Kurdish political arena in the country until 2009. The strengthening of the organization in Syria and its later ability to establish an armed force would only become possible by exploiting the power vacuum that emerged in Syria, relying on the support provided by the PKK, and, above all, benefiting from the support and protection of the West, particularly the United States, and suppressing its rivals (Soner et al., 2017, p. 18).

5.1.2. The Emergence of the Terrorist Organization PKK–PYD/YPG as a Local Actor in the Syrian Crisis

The main critical turning point in the process that enabled PYD/YPG, the Syrian extension of the regional terrorist network structure PKK/KCK, to achieve lasting historical gains was the Syrian civil war. Looking back, after a relatively calm period of several years, the Arab

peoples living in the Levant region, particularly on the Arabian Peninsula, witnessed a process in which the successive uprisings that began in the late 2010s and the subsequent popular revolutions transformed the structural characteristics of the entire region. It had long been argued that the ground for this process, which culminated in revolutions and came to be defined as the "Arab Spring", already existed; however, at a time when answers were still being sought to the questions of where and how it would first begin, the spark of revolt was ignited by Tarek el-Tayyib Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor living in Tunisia. After Bouazizi set himself on fire due to a dispute with municipal officers, his mother's laments spread across a wide area via protests organized by his relatives on social media, and these were followed by mass street demonstrations held by Tunisians who shared similar socio-economic concerns. Under the impact of these movements, which could not be brought under control throughout the country, the Tunisian government was overthrown, and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled the country for many years, was forced to flee (Koraltan, 2016, p. 33). Regardless of the label attached to these movements—referred to as the "Arab Spring", "Arab Awakenings", "Arab Protests", "Arab Popular Movements", "Arab Uprisings", "Arab Revolutions" or "Arab Rebellions"—this chain of events, driven by underlying social, economic and political causes, rapidly spread across the entire region through a domino effect (İyiat, 2018, p. 8). In fact, having observed how the regimes in the region and their leaders were affected by the Arab popular movements and foreseeing that the next stop of the rapidly spreading wave of revolutions and uprisings would be Syria, Bashar al-Assad had already signalled, particularly during the period of improved relations with Türkiye, that he would abandon the traditional policy pursued toward the Kurds of his own country. While the repercussions of the events of 2004 and their aftermath were still fresh, and on the eve of the spillover of the Arab popular movements in the Middle East to Syria, Bashar al-Assad, who had become aware of the looming danger, introduced a series of urgent measures and new openings towards minorities (CNN, 2011). Indeed, on the eve of the spillover of the Arab popular movements in the Middle East to Syria, Bashar al-Assad, having realized the imminent threat, took a series of urgent decisions introducing new openings particularly towards the Kurds and other minorities. At the initial stage of the Syrian civil war, he announced that 220,000 Kurds registered as foreigners (ajanib) in the al-Hasakah governorate would be granted citizenship, whereas around 80,000 Kurds with the status of kaçak (maktumin) would be excluded from this measure (CNN, 2011). In addition, through a law enacted by the Damascus administration on 7 April 2011,

approximately 60,000 Kurds obtained identity documents. Moreover, in order to prevent the sparks of the fire that had started in the Middle East from spreading to its own territory, the Syrian regime took a series of successive measures of general concern to the population, such as drastically increasing fuel subsidies and introducing certain improvements in the employment conditions and benefits of public servants.

Meanwhile, in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, Bashar al-Assad commented on the uprisings that had begun in Tunisia and spread to Egypt, stating that "if you did not see the need for reform before what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, then it is too late to undertake reforms", thereby indicating that they had decided on reforms following the uprising in Egypt. The continuation of Assad's remarks in the interview is also noteworthy: "Such events will not occur in Syria because we have very close ties with our people's beliefs. We are carrying out a reform process that is slow but determined" (Wall Street Journal, 2011). Until the uprisings in Damascus were triggered, Bashar al-Assad, who belongs to the Alawite (Nusayri) sect, a branch of Shiism, was portrayed, including by then U.S. Ambassador Robert S. Ford, as an enlightened and democratic leader (Kaçar, 2013) who sought to develop his country, whose population was 80 percent Sunni, in line with liberal values (Kaçar, 2013). However, his efforts to prevent the Arab popular movements, which had reached Syria's doorstep, from crossing the borders into the country would prove insufficient. In other words, his modern identity and closeness to Western values, the regime's openings towards minorities, particularly the Kurds, and his attempts to turn former enemies into new friends would not suffice to neutralize the deadly threat looming at the border.

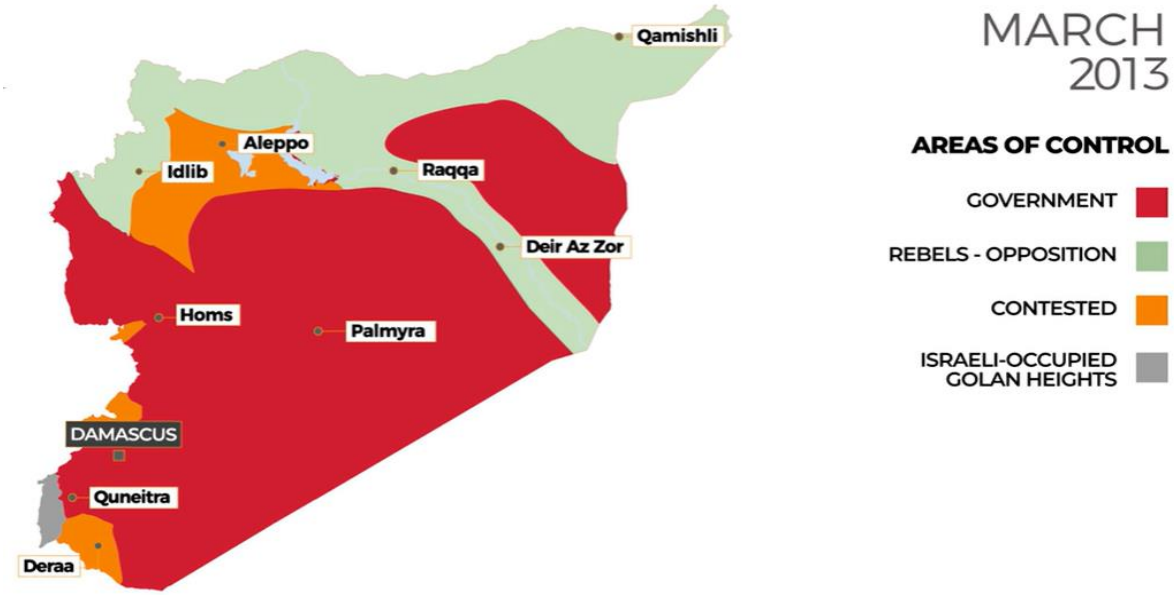

Figure 5. Active Forces in Syria (2013)

Source: Chughtai (2021)

Prior to the civil war, the popular uprising in Syria began in the southern city of Daraa on 15 March 2011, when a group of students wrote the slogan “It’s your turn, doctor” on a school wall, referring to the regime’s leader Bashar al-Assad (Sorenson, 2014, p. 119). The number of thousands of people who took to the streets to demand reforms to guarantee fundamental rights and freedoms against the repression and corruption of the Assad family and its inner circle rapidly multiplied, and the demonstrations quickly spread to other provinces of the country. The Assad regime, which labelled as “terrorists” the civilians who wanted a change of power through peaceful demonstrations, mobilized the army and security forces to suppress the protests, but this choice served only to rapidly escalate events. Following this move by the regime against peaceful public protests, the clashes that broke out between government forces and regular/irregular armed opposition groups gathered under the name of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) soon turned into a civil war that dragged the entire country into chaos (Özcan, 2020). During this process, in order to preserve its territorial integrity, the Syrian regime, which adopted harsh measures against the opposition, first implemented a strategy of using PYD, the Syrian branch of PKK/KCK whose leadership cadre it kept imprisoned, as a buffer against Türkiye, which was supporting the opposition. Within the framework of this strategy, it decided to discontinue the pressure exerted on PYD, which

stood in the ranks of the opposition, and took steps that would enable PYD to establish dominance and a quasi-autonomous structure in the northern regions of the country densely populated by Kurds (Ertuğrul, 2014, p. 77). As the situation spiralled out of control, the Damascus administration initially invited back to Syria Salih Muslim, the PYD leader whom it had previously detained and released and then banned from entering the country, and began releasing PYD members from prisons. It was even reported in the written and visual media that, following meetings held with PKK/KCK leaders Mustafa Karasu and Fehman Hüseyin, the Assad regime pledged financial and logistical support to the organization and allowed it to open camps in Kobane, Idlib and Qamishli and permitted the transfer of militants from Iraq to Syria (Akın, 2012). Following the talks held with PKK/KCK leaders, particularly Salih Muslim, the organization's presence in Syria was bolstered and the political and armed activities of the PYD/YPG structure in the country were effectively legalized. On the other hand, PKK/KCK decided to implement a strategy of maintaining the ceasefire atmosphere created by the "solution process" in Türkiye and focusing on activities in Syria, thereby prioritising its objective of achieving autonomy in this country. In this context, in order to increase the number of armed militants in northern Syria, the organization initially deployed part of its existing mountain cadre to the region and later transferred children and young people whom it had taken to the mountains from Türkiye during the solution process to the Qandil region for short-term training before dispatching them to Syria (Daily Sabah, 2015). Thus, in the chaos created by the popular movements that began in 2011, the complex survival strategy of the Assad regime paved the way for PKK/KCK to rapidly organize under the name PYD in the north and northeast of the country and to increase the number of its armed militants.

With the intensification of the civil war in 2012, the Assad regime withdrew from the north and northeast of the country and implemented a strategy aimed at preventing Syrian Kurds from joining the ranks of the opposition and limiting the effectiveness of the opposition (Acun & Keskin, 2017, pp. 11–12). When regime forces withdrew from areas heavily populated by Kurds and left them to PYD and its armed structure YPG, control of Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) and other regions effectively passed into YPG's hands on 19 July 2012 (Acun & Keskin, 2017, pp. 11–12). In more concise terms, the Damascus administration effectively handed over the region to the terrorist organization PYD. During this period, unlike other Kurdish political formations in the north of the country that sided with the opposition, PYD

adopted a stance in favour of the Assad regime and began to act in concert with the Mukhabarat and Shabiha forces (KurdPress, 2013). According to the second indictment prepared within the scope of the KCK investigation conducted by the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office and submitted to the 16th High Criminal Court of Istanbul, the organization's leader Abdullah Öcalan sent a letter of cooperation to Bashar al-Assad through his lawyers in April 2011, in which it was revealed that he promised that the organization would support the regime in return for administrative powers to be granted to PYD in the north of the country (HaberTürk, 2012b). In the later stages of the civil war, from 2013 onward, with Russia and Iran joining the field on the side of the Assad regime, Kurdish opponents of the regime within the opposition front lost ground, whereas PYD, which was effectively organizing in Afrin, Ayn al-Arab and al-Hasakah, began to come to the fore by maintaining good relations with the Assad regime and creating the impression that there was a de facto agreement between them (Bruneau, 2011). As can be seen, PYD, the Syrian extension of the regional terrorist network structure PKK/KCK, took advantage of the chaos engendered by the civil war and, with the support of the Assad regime, seized the opportunity to establish an administrative structure in northern Syria with the capacity to act autonomously. Through its military engagement with the Damascus administration and its military and logistical capabilities, it brought under its domination Kurds who had previously been aligned with the opposition and proclaimed canton administrations, thereby becoming an "armed non-state actor" with a sphere of influence in northern Syria (Durukan, 2019). In the so-called cantons it established, it began to impose the self-rule model that PKK/KCK essentially sought to implement in Türkiye, and under the absolute authority it established, pursued a policy that left no room for any actor other than itself, particularly opposition Kurds. Within a short period, the organization expanded its influence and became one of the most advantaged actors in the Syrian civil war in both global and regional terms (Ertuğrul, 2014, p. 81). Seeking to realise its ultimate objectives, PYD, which defined itself as a political party, soon announced that it had established its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), composed of experienced militants brought from the Qandil region (Erkmen, 2012b, p. 24). Meanwhile, the organization continued its activities and structuring in an atmosphere that was highly favourable for Kurds due to the civil war. In the chaotic environment in which the crisis and the civil war in Syria rapidly persisted, the organization, which opposed the arming of the opposition and foreign military intervention and adopted a stance in favour of dialogue with the Assad regime, began to voice more loudly its demands

for recognition of the Kurds' status, fundamental rights and freedoms, and for democratic autonomy for the Kurdish people in a pluralistic democratic Syria (Turner, 2012). In this context, it introduced a co-chairmanship system in order to create the impression in Europe that it was a modern leftist party. Indeed, at the 5th Extraordinary Congress held on 16 June 2012, the party's central committee was expanded, the co-chairmanship system was established, and Salih Muslim and Asiyah Abdullah were elected as co-chairs (Töre, 2014).

In implementing its strategy in Syria from the onset of the crisis, the organization simultaneously sought to place its presence in the territories under its control on a legitimate footing by putting forward a claim to a historical geography. In this context, in order to conceptualise "Western Kurdistan" (Batı Kürdistan), the name it gave to the lands it occupied, it began to use the Kurdish word "Rojava", meaning "west". Taking into account the density of the Kurdish population, this geography, which consists of three regions—Afrin, Jazira and Kobane—starts just north of the Turkish border, extends for approximately 700 km and reaches a depth of up to 150 km in some parts. It has subsequently been referred to by separatist Kurds and their supporters as Western Kurdistan. The effort to create a myth in the process by which the Arab town of Ayn al-Arab was transformed into "Kobane" constituted another component of PYD's strategy of conceptualising "Western Kurdistan". The clashes that took place during the recapture of this Arab town from DAESH with the air support of the international coalition were presented in the world media as the exercise of the right to self-defence by secular and democratic forces. The participation in these clashes of PKK militants and sympathisers from Türkiye, peshmerga from northern Iraq and Western foreign fighters would later be understood to have significantly reinforced this perception (O. Bingöl, 2016, p. 10). PKK/KCK and its political extensions have been particularly careful to use the term "Rojava" (west) when referring to northern Syria, and the organization's media outlets have sought to popularise this term, which bears no relation to the existing place names in northern Syria. In other words, by promoting the use of the term "Rojava", the organization has tried to create the perception that this region is not a part of Syria, but rather the western region of a unified/independent Kurdish state envisaged within the framework of the KCK structure (Sandıklı et al., 2015, p. 27). In this framework, the organization has conducted propaganda in Türkiye and in international public opinion for the establishment of an autonomous structure in northern Syria under the slogan "Rojava

Revolution", seeking to present its structuring in the region, where it settled under the protection and auspices of the regime, as a popular revolution (Acun & Keskin, 2017).

When the anatomy of PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network structure PKK/KCK, is examined, it is seen that the organization consists of five main organs: the Congress, the Conference, the Party Presidency, the Party Assembly and the Executive Committee. The Congress, the highest decision-making body of the organization, convenes every three years with the participation of a majority of the delegates, and decisions are taken by majority vote. Delegates elected from all organs of the organization may attend the Congress. The participation rate of regional administrations is determined according to their number of members as well as their level of success and performance. The party president and members of the assembly may attend the Congress as ordinary members. The Congress is vested with authority over the adoption and amendment of the party programme and statute, changes in strategy, and the determination of interim policies. Ordinary congresses may, where necessary, be postponed once for a maximum of one year by a decision of the party president or by a two-thirds majority of the members of the assembly. Extraordinary congresses are convened either at the request of two-thirds of the members of the Party Assembly with the approval of the presidency or at the request of two-thirds of the party membership. In the section of the statute which sets out the conditions required for PYD membership, loyalty to Abdullah Öcalan is stipulated as the basis. Under this heading, "adopting Leader Öcalan's method of democratic civilisation" is presented as a condition of party membership, while "to be proud of Leader Abdullah Öcalan and the values of the Kurdish people, to be loyal to them, and to struggle to free the leader from captivity" is described as the duty of every party member. The statute also contains provisions concerning the establishment and preservation of the democratic confederal system (PYD Rojava, 2010). In the text, the organizational leadership, which refers to an "ethical society and democratic politics paradigm", also touches upon issues such as gender equality and freedom of belief. Currently, the PKK's northern Syrian structure PYD/YPG, whose co-chairmanship is held by the terrorists Salih Muslim and Asiyah Abdullah, is effectively organized in Afrin, Ayn al-Arab and al-Hasakah, with its headquarters in Qamishli. Adopting the "Apoculuk" ideology in what it calls Rojava, the northern region of Syria, PYD defines KONGRA-GEL in its statute as the "supreme legislative body for the people of Kurdistan". The inclusion of these expressions in the statute, together with the declaration in the party statute that

Abdullah Öcalan is the leader of all Kurdish peoples, as well as of KCK and KONGRA-GEL, and that this is also accepted by PYD itself, demonstrates that PKK and PYD are not merely similar but are in fact components of the regional terrorist network structure KCK. Likewise, the organization's governance structure, symbols and rhetoric substantiate the organic link and unity between these two organizations. In addition, it is known that the congresses at which the basic principles forming PYD's structure are determined, all activities are regulated and major decisions are taken, were held between 2003 and 2015 in camps affiliated with PKK/KCK and were entirely administered by the organization (Acun & Keskin, 2017, pp. 33–34).

Although today Salih Muslim is regarded as one of the two co-chairs of PYD, some researchers argue that the organization is in fact run by Cemil Bayık, one of the most senior figures in PKK (Leezenberg, 2016, p. 682). Given that PKK has for many years recruited a significant portion of its militants in Syria under the support and protection of the Assad regime, this organic relationship should not be surprising (Hürriyet, 1998). As Can Acun and Bünyamin Keskin state in their work entitled "PKK's Northern Syria Structure", in many analyses, reports and comments published in the West in recent years concerning PYD, the Syrian extension of the regional terrorist network structure PKK/KCK, and its armed element YPG, it has been emphasised that the two organizations are closely linked and that there is even an organic relationship between them (Acun & Keskin, 2017). In these reports and analyses, YPG has been variously described as being under PKK's guidance, as a "subsidiary structure" fully controlled by PKK operating over a wide area in the region (Guehenno, 2016), as PKK's "Syrian extension", "sister party" (Pope, 2014) or "Syrian branch" (KurdWatch, n.d.). Virtually no document or scholarly work stresses that PYD is an independent political organization that represents the Kurds in Syria and defends their rights and demands. Emerging as a result of the organizational restructuring of PKK, which seeks to reach the Kurdish-populated regions in the territories of four neighbouring countries—Türkiye, Iran, Iraq and Syria—through a terrorist network system, PYD has been consistently defined as "PKK's Syrian branch" (KurdWatch, 2013) (Soner et al., 2017, pp. 15–16). According to research, an estimated 7,000–10,000 Syrian terrorists have joined PKK since its foundation, representing approximately 20 percent of the total number of militants (Barfi, 2016, p. 7). According to Akkaya and Jongerden, Syrians constituted 17 percent of PKK militants up to 2004, and between 2004 and 2008 the proportion of Syrians among

killed PKK militants ranged between 10 and 20 percent (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011, pp. 157–158). Kani Xulam, director of the Washington-based American Kurdish Information Network, shed light on an important statistical fact by stating that Syrian Kurds had held significant positions in PKK's cadres for about 20 years and that 5,000 Syrians who had fought in PKK ranks over the previous 30 years had been killed in clashes (Majalla, 2012). According to Jordi Tejel, who contends that northern Syria has become a breeding ground for PKK militants thanks to the cooperation of the Assad regime, the number of Syrian PKK militants killed or disappeared while in PKK ranks ranges between 7,000 and 10,000 (Tejel, 2009, p. 76).

From the foregoing, it is understood that the essential preconditions for the emergence of PKK offshoots in Syria already existed in Syria itself. When the terrorist organization PYD was established in Syria in 2003, it operated on a political, social and demographic base that had been prepared by PKK. In other words, PYD did not replace PKK in the region as a separate party or political organization; rather, without using PKK's name, it embraced the ideology and objectives of PKK by employing its cadres and militants (Soner et al., 2017). Within this regional terrorist network structure, at the centre of which stands PKK, there is interoperability and permeability between its various branches. The permeability and ability to act jointly between PKK, YPG, PJAK, TAK and the terrorist organizations of the radical Turkish left, such as RPLP/F and MLKP, demonstrate that these organizations are gathered under a single umbrella. Considering that PYD/YPG in Syria was established in 2003 by PKK's leadership and that it has since operated in line with PKK's instructions, it becomes clear that the existence of PYD is a product of the regional terrorist network structure PKK/KCK (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 3). Looking at the profiles of the founding cadre and the current leadership within PYD, one can easily speak of an ongoing organic link between PKK and PYD. PKK members sent from Qandil to Syria also hold the authority to make political and military decisions within YPG, PYD's armed wing. The case of Salih Muslim is a striking example in this regard. Having taken refuge in Qandil and operated for years in PKK ranks, PYD co-chair Salih Muslim has been known as a PKK member ever since PKK began directing its terrorist activities from Syrian territory (Soner et al., 2017, p. 20). There is also permeability at lower levels and among ordinary militants. Under an agreement reached in 2011 between Iran, the Syrian regime and PKK, PJAK, the Iranian branch of PKK/KCK, ended its activities in Iran and redirected its forces to Syria. Within

this framework, it is reported that more than 200 PJAK militants were transferred to Syria to fight in YPG ranks (KurdWatch, 2013). This permeability and transfer between PKK/KCK's branches according to strategic and operational priorities is ensured not by the free will of the militants but by decisions taken centrally at the organization's headquarters in the Qandil Mountains as part of a new armed struggle strategy, and implemented at the discretion of the leadership cadre (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 3).

The assessments and analyses of Andrew Self and Jared Ferris concerning the regional terrorist network structure PKK/KCK are also quite striking. According to them, PKK's relationship with its affiliated organizations should be evaluated not in terms of having supported their emergence in the countries of the region where Kurds live, but rather in terms of being an indivisible strategic leadership body that directly manages and controls these organizations, which are hardly distinguishable from one another. The conflicts in Syria and Iran are not of a different nature from those in Türkiye and Iraq; rather, they represent different military fronts within a common regional campaign for Kurdish autonomy, in which PKK openly participates with its cadres. Like a deceptive three-shell game, PKK's leadership in Qandil shifts the positions of its members between its affiliated organizations and fronts in order to conceal the true nature of the organization and avoid being labelled a terrorist organization in the international arena. In this context, PKK does not truly have offshoots; rather, there are four fronts, to which four different names have been given, all comprising the same individuals, the same leadership, the same ideology and the same terrorist past (Self & Ferris, 2016, p. 26). Considering that political, strategic and operational decisions are taken by the leadership cadre in Qandil or by the "eternal leader" on İmralı Island and implemented by PKK's field cadres in Syria or other fronts, it is possible to describe the regional terrorist network structure, the ramified system that holds the branches together and regulates the movement of militants between fronts on behalf of PKK/KCK, as a clandestine organizational and operational unity represented by PKK's leadership in Qandil (Barfi, 2016, p. 8). Thus, PKK has created an intertwined, complex terrorist network structure in the countries of Türkiye, Iraq, Iran and Syria, where Kurdish populations live, in order to maintain tutelage over this ethnic group. This model is a strategy that PKK adopted after the capture of its "eternal leader" Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and skilfully implemented with external support. It is clear that, in line with the ideological ideas and policy objectives it determined during a transitional period of restructuring and renewal,

PKK has been striving to transcend Türkiye's borders and forge a unified/confederal struggle encompassing all Kurdish peoples in the region. As a result of new circumstances brought about by events and phenomena in the region, PYD emerged as PKK's Syrian branch, designed on the basis of overlapping organic, strategic and operational ties with the terrorist organization PKK. On the other hand, Bayram Ali Soner, Ömer Aslan and Hakan Kıyıcı argue in their report "PKK's Regional Terror Network Structure" that PKK and the radical Turkish left have been engaging in increasing cooperation and unity in armed struggle in the region, and that this cooperation constitutes another facet of PKK's new terrorist structuring strategy (Soner et al., 2017, p. 25). In agreeing with this striking thesis, it should be added that since its establishment in 1978 by a handful of ethnically separatist Kurdish nationalists in southeastern Türkiye, PKK has undergone major transformations, evolving into a more complex, more organized and more international structure. The factors that have enabled the terrorist network structure PKK/KCK has established in the region to become so effective are, undoubtedly, the political vacuum that emerged/was created with the revolutionary movements in Syria and the rise of the radical Islamist terrorist organization DAESH as a major problem in the region (Al Jazeera, 2014a). It is clear that the regional countries hosting Kurdish populations, particularly Syria, have paved the way for the establishment of this system by actively supporting the terrorist organization PKK in the past.

Türkiye's so-called Western allies, by contrast, are supporting PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the terrorist organization PKK/KCK, in the fight against DAESH, another terrorist organization that has become a major problem in the region, on the grounds that it is "secular". While Western capitals provide PYD with political, diplomatic, military, economic and humanitarian capital under the banners of "democratic autonomy" and the "Rojava revolution", they turn a blind eye to the organization's application of its well-known repressive and authoritarian methods to the Kurds in Syria and to its perpetration of human rights violations and various war crimes in the process. Yet, as Bayram Ali Soner, Ömer Aslan and Hakan Kıyıcı point out, many observers note that the Rojava experience in practice amounts to nothing more than the establishment of a "Soviet-style one-party mini-state". The U.S. and Western support for PKK/KCK's regional terrorist network strategy and the participation of Western communist, Marxist, anarchist and anarcho-socialist foreign fighters in YPG, PYD's armed wing, have led to the formation of new, complex transnational crime and terror linkages. This implies, in particular, that the peace and security of Europe—

currently living in relative peace—will be jeopardised in the medium and long term. The connections to be forged when Western anarchists and Marxists who fought in PYD ranks in Syria return to Europe will further expand PKK's already existing criminal network on the continent. It must not be forgotten that PKK is a criminal and terrorist network involved in crimes such as extortion, kidnapping and drug trafficking. Given its current involvement in various crimes and its illegal revenues, PKK and its regional terrorist network structure, which already qualify as an international organized crime and terrorist organization, will not bring stability to Europe; on the contrary, they are increasingly holding Western countries' policies on Türkiye and the Middle East hostage, and the power the organization has gained within Europe is particularly open to exploitation at a time when Russia is becoming stronger and far-right and far-left movements are gaining significant ground in Europe. In this dark era, where the existing international order has been shaken, peace and security in the international environment have been severely undermined, populism is on an unstoppable rise and the "middle ground" is steadily eroding, it will be understood through bitter experience that supporting a totalitarian organization with a vision of a stateless society on a global scale is not the right choice (Soner et al., 2017, pp. 45–46). In sum, the KCK Syrian structure, based on an organizational principle comprising PYD on the political wing, YPG/YPJ on the armed wing and TEV-DEM in the social sphere, continues its activities predominantly under the unlimited support and protection of the United States and under the tacit acquiescence of the Damascus regime and its allies. According to observers' reports and researchers' analyses, PYD, in order to achieve its goals in the region, is entering into tactical relationships especially with the Assad regime, the U.S. and Russia, and is trying to bring under its control the regions in northern Syria inhabited by Arabs and Turkmen. It is even pursuing a strategy aimed at creating a corridor that could extend to the Mediterranean. It is known that the designation KCK-Rojava has ceased to be used in later periods in order to conceal the link with the PKK/KCK terrorist organization (Tüysüzoğlu, 2013). Under the current circumstances, the fact that KDP leader Masoud Barzani and the terrorist organization PKK, which compete for leadership of Kurdish nationalism, both seek to exert influence over the Kurds in Syria deepens the Syrian crisis and renders the boundaries of the regional ethnically separatist Kurdish issue even more complex.

5.2. The Historical Gains and Rise of Kurdish Separatism in the PKK–PYD Axis

As expressed in different wording in the previous section, following the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, demands emerged for the establishment of informal political forums enabling open discussion of political and social issues, as well as for the implementation of various reforms. With the intense activism of Syrian intellectuals, a period of political liberalization began. Although the demands of this period, known as the "Damascus Spring," were not formally accepted by the regime, a series of reforms was soon announced (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012b). However, these relatively small-scale reforms were quickly withdrawn, and the opposition movement was violently suppressed in the name of ensuring national unity and stability. Low levels of political participation, concerns regarding public security, and the various policy measures adopted in the field of governance led to the regime's increasing authoritarianism. During this period, in which the state of emergency remained effectively in force, security organs applied systematic pressure particularly on Islamist and Kurdish opposition groups. Harsh attitudes of the security forces toward people demanding their fundamental rights and freedoms triggered a wave of demonstrations across the country (Özdemir, 2016, p. 90). In response to this situation, Bashar al-Assad, who believed that the public had been deprived of new opportunities (BBC, 2015), first implemented several reforms related to economic liberalization. He then released political prisoners, dissolved the government, and ended the 48-year-long state of emergency (BBC, 2016). Yet not long after these openings, reform steps, and optimistic statements toward democratization and freedom, unrest erupted in Syria following Tunisia and Egypt. The self-immolation of Syrian Hasan Ali Akleh on 28 January 2011 — an individual act reminiscent of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia — became a signal flare for what was to unfold in Syria (Akşam, 2012). The events sparked by Akleh's dramatic action, even before tensions subsided, revealed the futility of the Damascus administration's willingness to take steps toward reforms that would meet the expectations of the public and especially minorities.

Indeed, the events began on 6 March 2011 in the city of Daraa, when allegations spread that a group of students had been tortured while in detention for writing slogans expressing their desire for freedom on school walls, inspired by the protests in Tunisia and Egypt (Taştekin, 2015, pp. 21–22). The harsh intervention of security forces against protesters angered by this incident, which had sensitized society, caused the demonstrations to escalate and spread

(Bursa, 2019, p. 103). Struggling to regain control, the Assad administration adopted several temporary measures aimed at reducing rising tensions, such as punishing those responsible for killing protesters and releasing those detained during the demonstrations. Additionally, it attempted to contain the unrest spreading across the country with promises largely overlapping with those of the 2005 Damascus Declaration. In this context, Presidential Spokesperson Buthaina Shaaban announced that legitimate demands would be taken into account, that parties other than the Baath Party would be allowed to participate in elections, that broad press freedoms would be granted, that corruption would be combated, that significant reforms would be made in the health sector, and that workers' wages would be increased (Miş, 2012, pp. 264–265). However, opposition groups, believing that these promises were neither new nor sincere and merely intended to placate the public, did not step back from the protests. The killing and mutilation of 123 security personnel by opposition groups in Jisr al-Shughur in Idlib escalated the violence, and the intervention of global and regional actors with interests in the area further complicated the situation (Bursa, 2019, p. 104). Meanwhile, the perception that the Turkish government had taken sides in the conflict and supported armed groups, as portrayed in Western public opinion, placed the Damascus administration in an even more difficult position. Armed opposition groups moving from the north toward central regions of the country posed significant challenges to the Syrian government. Although officials persistently claimed that the events stemmed from "clashes between the state and terrorist groups," Western governments as well as those of Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar emphasized that what was unfolding in Syria was a civil war (Bozkurt, 2013). Statements from the United Nations and the Arab League regarding the events, as well as remarks by Kofi Annan — former UN Secretary-General and Special Envoy to Syria — concerning his six-point "Peace Plan," particularly his warning that "...*if the peace plan is not implemented fully, I have quite frightening and profound concerns that Syria may be heading toward civil war*" (HaberTürk, 2012a), reinforced the prevailing perception that a civil war was indeed underway.

With the rapid transformation of initially peaceful protests into a bloody civil war, the regional terrorist network structure PKK/KCK also sought to determine its position in Syria, alongside the opposition groups. Throughout the process, the organization did not cooperate with opponents seeking to overthrow the regime; on the contrary, it became an important actor in suppressing Syrian Kurds who openly opposed Assad. In return, all activities of the

regional terrorist network's Syrian branch PYD, which avoided damaging its relations with the Assad administration, would be supported (Bozkurt, 2013) and facilitated under the protection of influential global and regional actors in the area. Indeed, shortly after the outbreak of the 2011 uprising, Salih Muslim, leader of PYD — previously designated an illegal organization — returned to Syria upon Assad's invitation and announced, together with roughly a thousand PKK militants accompanying him, the establishment of PYD's armed wing, the YPG. In this respect, the Arab popular uprisings created a major opportunity for YPG, which had begun organizing in 2004 in response to Baath regime operations, to officially declare its establishment in 2011 (Çalışkan, 2020a, p. 72). When the Syrian civil war began, PYD/YPG was a Kurdish political movement with limited military capacity. However, from the summer of 2012 onward, with the approval of the Assad regime, it gained the opportunity to rapidly increase its limited armed strength (O. Bingöl, 2016). Establishing PYD/YPG through its Syrian members and receiving substantial backing from its chief sponsor Iran, alongside the embattled Assad regime, the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK quickly consolidated control over the areas handed to it by the regime during the initial chaotic stages of the civil war (Uygur, 2019).

In 2012, when regime forces assessed that PYD could be a relatively cooperative actor in a period when the state was rapidly losing control, they effectively withdrew from large areas in the north and handed them over to the organization. PYD then began applying repressive policies on groups it deemed hostile. Meanwhile, U.S. support for the organization within the framework of the anti-DAESH campaign gradually enabled PYD/YPG — and TEV-DEM, the structure founded in 2007 under the name KCK-Rojava and renamed in 2011 — to dominate the opposition's political landscape in the region. More concisely, when regime forces withdrew from several parts of northern Syria in July 2012, the resulting vacuum was filled by PYD/YPG, and in November 2013, the establishment of "Rojava" — an administrative self-governing entity composed of Afrin, Ayn al-Arab, and Jazira — was declared. The Syrian regime, for its part, did not react to PYD's consecutive steps: its return in 2011, its seizure of areas vacated by the regime in 2012, and the declaration of the so-called Rojava in 2013. From the perspective of the emerging situation, during the period before Iran and Russia intervened on the ground, the Syrian regime avoided expending its rapidly diminishing resources to defend these areas, while the terrorist organization PYD capitalized on the opportunity to expand its sphere of control (Sönmez, 2021, p. 69). Viewed

in this light, it is apparent that PYD's territorial gains in the early stages of the civil war — a period in which the regime was rapidly losing control — were contingent upon implicit promises that its opposition to the regime would remain limited.

Following the killing of four senior officials in the 18 July 2012 Damascus bombing and the subsequent capture of the Manbij and Jarablus regions by opposition forces, regime units withdrew from northern districts populated by Kurds and pulled back into internal regions. With this move, Assad preferred that the Kurds — with whom he believed reconciliation would later be possible — establish control rather than other externally supported opposition groups. In doing so, he also aimed to create a security threat against Türkiye, thereby increasing pressure on Ankara (Taştekin, 2016). Assad's strategy unlocked the door for separatist Syrian Kurds to achieve significant historical gains, and PYD's cantonization process began immediately after the Damascus attack (Demir, 2015). In July 2012, PYD militants encountered no resistance as they seized Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) on 19 July, Afrin on 20 July, and al-Malikiyah (Derik) on 21 July. In these localities, PYD members held demonstrations with PKK/PYD flags and Abdullah Öcalan posters, while YPG, organized as "People's Protection Committees," took over security and policing functions under the name "People's Protection Units" (Fırat News Agency, 2012). Thus, from the onset of the unrest, the organization gained the opportunity to put into practice its previously articulated project of "democratic autonomy" both rhetorically and operationally in the areas it seized. During the initial stages of the crisis, Assad's relatively positive attitude toward Kurds within his strategy of combating opposition forces facilitated PYD's political activities and provided substantial advantages that could translate into lasting gains. At the beginning of the protests, Assad, who wished to avoid Kurdish involvement in the clashes, approved a law restoring citizenship to Kurds registered as "Ajanib". He even attempted to approach Kurds moderately by making requests for negotiations (Sol, 2011). The fact that PYD encountered no confrontation with regime forces apart from minor skirmishes as it expanded its areas of control, and that it took a position opposite the opposition, resulted in a deep rift within the anti-Assad camp (Bursa, 2019, p. 110). As seen, while Assad concentrated his forces westward in Damascus–Hama–Homs, northeastern Syria was effectively left or entrusted to separatist Kurds under PYD. Although tensions arose between the Syrian National Council/FSA and PYD/YPG within the opposition, the latter managed to turn this crisis to its advantage (Bozkurt, 2013).

Meanwhile, during the summer of 2012, as the regime forces weakened significantly, the Kurds—who would soon emerge as key actors in the Syrian civil war—became divided into several groups, thereby presenting a fragmented outlook. These groups included the Barzani-backed Syrian Kurdish National Council (Kurdish: Encûmena Niştimani ya Kurdi li Sûriyê – ENKS), the Kurdish National Unity, and the Democratic Society Movement (Kurdish: Tevgerên Civaka Demokratik – TEV-DEM), the latter serving as an umbrella organization established for the activities of the PKK in Syria and including the PYD among its components. Within this fragmented structure, the PYD emerged as the dominant group due to its armed elements and high level of organizational capacity (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 163). As seen during this period, while rival Kurdish organizations within the opposition camp competed with one another for leadership and became entangled in disputes over which Syrian opposition group(s) to align with, the PYD opted to remain distant from this turmoil. In contrast to the rhetorical ambiguity of the other parties, the PYD's consistency positioned it as a center of resolution even for some Kurds who had not previously supported it. Ultimately, the organization strengthened its grassroots presence by exploiting the weaknesses of the parties competing within the KUK, and rapidly expanded its organizational structure. Benefiting from external support, it gradually began to establish full control over the areas it occupied. To achieve this, the PYD deployed its affiliated groups—operating under the name "People's Protection Committees"—to replace regime-appointed officials withdrawn from Kurdish settlements, while simultaneously protecting its territorial gains through the brigade-level armed forces it had established (Bozkurt, 2013).

In November 2012, the FSA and the PYD/YPG confronted one another and clashed in Ras al-Ayn (Serê Kaniyê). This confrontation constituted a critical turning point for the PYD, strengthening its confidence both politically and militarily, and reinforcing its strategy of keeping the war away from Kurdish regions while expanding its sphere of influence (İşyar, 2017, p. 43). Subsequently, this strategic location—where Arab fighters had been receiving logistical support through Türkiye via the Ceylanpınar border gate—came under PYD control in July 2013 following ongoing clashes (Taştekin, 2016, p. 171). From this perspective, the encounter between the PYD and the FSA in Ras al-Ayn is highly significant, as it marked the PYD's integration into the broader conflict between the opposition and the regime, thereby altering the trajectory of the civil war (Ocak, 2012). After Ras al-Ayn, the PYD's expansion continued, and with U.S. support, the organization seized the oil-rich

Rimelan region from al-Nusra (Kasapoğlu, 2013). The organization subsequently captured the Til Koçer border crossing—an important point facilitating passage between Iraq and Syria, previously held by al-Nusra—in October 2013 (Milliyet, 2013a). As explained above, with regime forces withdrawing from the area to concentrate on fighting other groups more effectively, the PYD took control of Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria and, until the ISIS siege of Kobani in September 2014, rapidly transformed into the sole dominant power in the region, becoming the most influential Kurdish actor in the country. Meanwhile, with the intensification of ISIS attacks—which had entered the region in 2013—the PKK came to the aid of PYD/YPG fighters by providing logistical and militant support. Due to the "solution process" initiated in Ankara, the PKK had temporarily suspended its actions in Türkiye and began sending its militants to Syria. As part of this shift, Syrian PKK members serving in senior positions within the PKK/HPG were replaced with more experienced PKK operatives. In this context, Murat Karayılan—one of the key figures of the PKK leadership—was appointed as the head of the HPG (Milliyet, 2013b). Thus, the YPG— which until 2012 had functioned primarily as a policing force in Kurdish regions—significantly strengthened its capabilities and gained institutional depth with the influx of PKK militants from Syria and Türkiye. Amid these developments, an "International Coalition" was established under U.S. leadership by a United Nations decision to combat ISIS, which had become embedded in the region. The PYD's clashes during this period with Salafi-jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda contributed to the construction of a new image for the organization. In particular, the massacre of 450 civilians—mostly women and children—by al-Nusra militants in the town of Tel Abyad in July 2013 positioned the Kurds as victims in the eyes of the international community (İşyar, 2017, p. 44). Moreover, the PYD's fight against radical Islamist terrorist groups and the participation of women in this struggle helped to shift international perceptions of the PYD in a more positive direction (Bursa, 2019, p. 122).

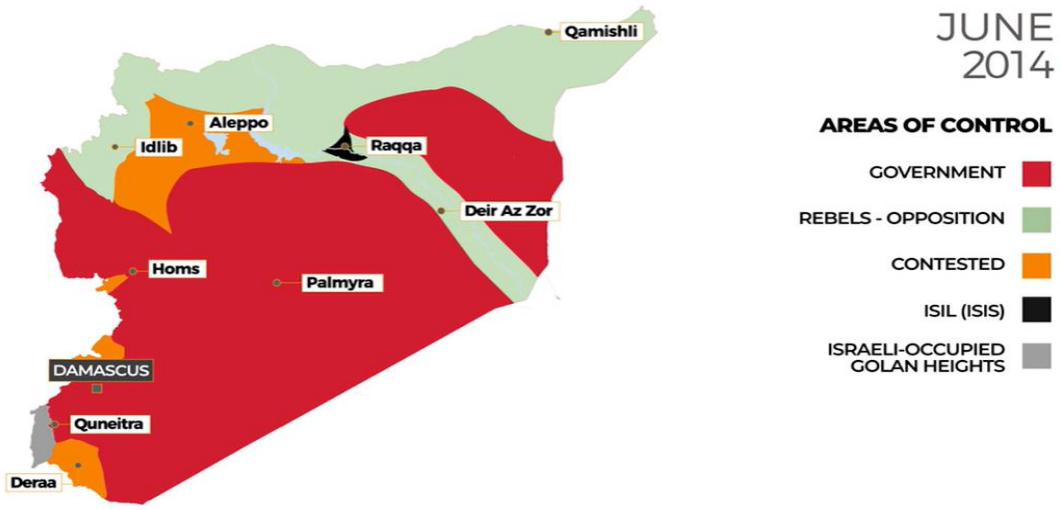

Figure 6. Active Forces in Syria (2014)

Source: Chughtai (2021)

The declaration of an "Islamic State Caliphate" by DAESH in 2014, its expansion into regions densely populated by Kurds in Syria after seizing Mosul, and subsequent attacks escalated clashes between DAESH and PYD/YPG (Kerman & Efegil, 2017). After capturing Kurdish-majority areas in 2014, DAESH leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the creation of a so-called "Kurdistan Province" composed of areas such as Jalula, Daquq, Hawija, Rashad, Mullah Abdullah, Abbasiyeh, and Yenice, claiming he would appoint Kurdish emirs, judges, and governors there. Thus, an autonomous Kurdish structure governing parts of northern Iraq and northern Syria emerged as a topic of discussion (İnternethaber, 2014). Given the attempt to draw Kurds into the opposition to further weaken the Assad regime by allowing such a structure, PYD declared that it did not seek to come under DAESH rule and joined the "Anti-DAESH Coalition" of the United States and Russia, who had agreed to fight DAESH (Sökmen, 2016). PYD mobilized YPG to defend Syrian Kurds, thereby gaining sympathy from rival Kurdish groups as well as support from Christian Arabs, Syriacs, and Druze, who were concerned about the presence and activities of radical Islamist groups in the region (Çitlioğlu, 2024, p. 124). Supported by all segments due to its resistance against DAESH, whose attacks intensified from late 2013, PYD/YPG reached the peak of its power under these conditions. As clashes intensified between DAESH and PYD/YPG, new recruits joined not only from among PKK militants but also from separatist Kurds living in Türkiye and Europe. Approximately 8,000–8,500 individuals

joined YPG from Türkiye (World Bulletin, 2015), accounting for nearly 40 percent of YPG's total force and playing a critical role in reinforcement (Jenkins, 2016). Claims also suggest that PKK's Iranian offshoot PJAK, after ending its operations in Iran, sent many of its militants to join YPG in Syria, likely with the facilitation of the Iranian government (O. Bingöl, 2016). As seen, PYD/YPG crossed an important threshold in achieving its present power due to misguided political strategies pursued under Türkiye's "solution process." PKK, while stalling the Turkish government during the process, conserved its forces and transferred a significant portion of its militants to Syria, thereby strengthening PYD/YPG's presence in the region.

A significant turning point in the Syrian civil war came in the second half of 2014 when DAESH and al-Nusra, two salafi-jihadist radical groups involved in the Iraq and Syria crises, split after a power struggle. This unexpected development created an important opportunity for PYD to consolidate its gains. Pursuing its goal of establishing an Islamic state governed by sharia, DAESH began expanding the territories it captured in Iraq and Syria. After seizing Mosul in June 2014, it focused on regions heavily populated by Kurds in Syria (Taştekin, 2015, p. 259). In October 2014, DAESH attacked and seized parts of Kobane — the first Syrian governorate PYD captured, symbolically significant for Kurds (T24, 2014a). Having secured U.S. protection under the guise of fighting DAESH, PYD set its sights on Tel Abyad, controlled by DAESH since June 2014. Tel Abyad's strategic importance — lying between the so-called Jazira and Kobane cantons, hosting the Akçakale border gate, and lying along the key M4 Syria-Iraq logistics route — made it an attractive objective (Acun, 2015, p. 5). When DAESH quickly retreated from Tel Abyad, PYD seized control of the area. Thus, with U.S. support, PYD connected the Kobane and Jazira cantons, forming an uninterrupted Kurdish corridor stretching from Iraq to Kobane along Türkiye's border. Having succeeded in linking the two so-called cantons, PYD then set its next target as the Azaz–Jarablus line to achieve continuity with the Afrin canton (Acun, 2015, pp. 5–7). The PYD–U.S. relationship, formally initiated during the Kobane operation, advanced significantly with the capture of Tel Abyad (Bursa, 2019, p. 116). Meanwhile, the U.S. brought together PYD's armed wings YPG and YPJ with groups such as the Syriac Military Council, Burkan al-Fırat, Suwar al-Raqqa, Shams al-Shamal, Liwa al-Selçuki, the Jazira Brigades, and Sanadid Forces, forming a new opposition coalition — the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) — on 13 October 2015. This broader, more complex structure, with PYD/YPG at its centre,

became the actor the U.S. wished to utilize on the battlefield. For PYD/YPG, this was also a significant opportunity to legalize its presence under a new name in the eyes of regional and global actors. Subsequently, SDF launched a major operation on 23 December 2015 to seize the Tishrin Dam — a strategic connection point between Raqqa and eastern Aleppo and a key energy source for DAESH. Supported by the U.S.-led coalition's airpower, SDF captured the dam in a short time, crossed west of the Euphrates, and moved toward the Azaz–Jarablus line (Suriye Gündemi, 2015). However, they could not proceed directly to Jarablus due to Türkiye's intervention. By capturing the Tishrin Dam — located at a critical point southeast of Manbij — PYD/YPG gained both control over water resources and geopolitical leverage toward joining the Afrin and Kobane cantons.

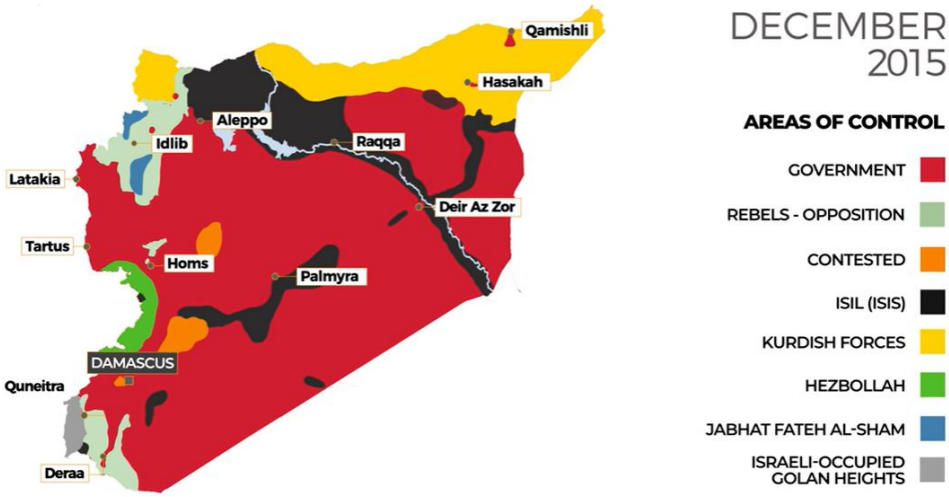

Figure 7. Active Forces in Syria (2015)

Source: Chughtai (2021)

As explained above, while the organization consolidated and expanded its control through military operations justified under the claim of "fighting DAESH," it simultaneously declared that it had transitioned to a federal model under the name "Rojava–Northern Syria Democratic Federation" to make its gains permanent (Taştekin, 2016). By July of the same year, PYD achieved yet another critical gain. With the support of coalition airpower, U.S. intelligence, logistics, and ammunition, and the direct involvement of U.S. special forces, PYD seized Manbij from DAESH (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 30). After Manbij, it targeted al-Bab — strategically located to link the Afrin and Kobane cantons and to connect the Kurdish belt in the north to the Mediterranean (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 179). These fast-

paced developments show that PYD aimed to advance west of the Euphrates through territory controlled by YPG, fill the corridor up to Afrin, seize the al-Hasakah governorate, then reach Raqqa and later take control of Deir ez-Zor. Although YPG forces had sufficient strength to move west of the Euphrates, they halted their advance toward al-Bab due to Türkiye's reaction and the possibility of military intervention, focusing instead on Raqqa. Indeed, shortly afterward, while coalition forces led by the U.S. launched an operation on Mosul on 17 October 2016, SDF, in which PYD constituted the main ground force, began its offensive on Raqqa — the capital of DAESH — on 6 November 2016 (DW, 2016). After prolonged clashes, SDF, with PYD/YPG on the ground, captured Raqqa following DAESH's withdrawal (O. Bingöl, 2016; Misto & Tok, 2017, p. 11). PYD then moved southward, exploiting the threat posed by DAESH, and took full control of key energy assets in the Deir ez-Zor region, including the Konoko gas plant (İnternethaber, 2017), the al-Omar oil field, and the al-Tanak field (Anadolu Agency, 2017). Thus, PYD gained control over a vast area east of the Euphrates and secured Syria's most important energy resources, aligning with U.S. energy strategies in the Middle East (Bursa, 2019, p. 118). Consequently, after gaining international legitimacy through its fight against DAESH, PYD secured substantial economic, political, and military assistance from the U.S., Russia, the EU, and Iran (İnat, 2015), adding new permanent gains to the ones obtained since the beginning of the civil war under U.S. protection.

As seen, the sudden emergence of the salafi extremist terrorist group DAESH as a high-risk threat in the region was an extraordinary stroke of luck for PYD. DAESH's military strategy was fundamentally based on controlling water resources. Concentrated in the Euphrates and al-Khabur regions — areas heavily populated by Kurds — the presence of DAESH was arguably a coincidence that proved advantageous for PYD. In this context, the sudden rise of DAESH and similar extremist structures as influential actors in Iraq and Syria produced unexpected outcomes/problems, such as the legitimization of PYD by influential actors in the region and its recognition as a strategic partner (İyiat, 2018). The organization's privileged status under the banner of "fighting DAESH," closely associated with its identity, granted it broad freedom of action and open-ended opportunities. The dominant narrative in global discourse that PYD was fighting alongside the Coalition against a common enemy strengthened perceptions of PYD as a political actor (Çalışkan, 2020b, p. 74). With the growing visibility of DAESH in the civil war, especially in the eyes of Western states led by

the U.S., attitudes toward PYD shifted positively. PYD was portrayed in Western media as a secular, cooperative, and legitimate organization fighting the radical extremist DAESH. Following DAESH's attack on Kobane, Western media published overwhelmingly positive content on PYD/YPG. Coalition airstrikes that had enabled success in Kobane were framed as PYD's achievements, deliberately downplaying the contributions of the FSA and the Peshmerga. Photos of PYD's female militants were widely circulated in Western media, promoting an image of a "gender-equal PYD," and emphasizing its fight against DAESH as justification for international support. Some Western experts even argued that the U.S. and Europe should remove PKK from their terrorist lists due to its role in the solution process in Türkiye and PYD's fight against DAESH (Hürriyet, 2014; Phillips, 2013). Washington went further, publicly asserting that PKK and PYD were separate groups and even requested that Türkiye open a support corridor to PYD during the Kobane clashes (Sandıklı et al., 2015).

While PYD expanded its de facto control under the guise of fighting DAESH, it simultaneously increased its foreign contacts and sought international support. PYD leader Salih Muslim's visits to Sweden (April 2013), Iran (August 2013), Russia and China (December 2013) marked the beginning of intensified diplomatic efforts. PYD officials later participated as a party in a meeting held in Moscow in January 2015 between representatives of the Assad regime and the opposition (Başer, 2015). During this period, PYD achieved limited but noticeable results in efforts to gain recognition as a legitimate actor. Western countries recognizing PKK as a terrorist organization nonetheless adopted a noticeably different attitude toward PYD, echoing Washington's insistence that PKK and PYD were separate entities. In February 2015, two female PYD representatives were hosted by French President Hollande at the Élysée Palace, where they requested greater military and logistical assistance from Paris (Sandıklı et al., 2015, p. 29). In November 2015, PYD obtained consultative membership in the Socialist International, and from May 2016 onward, it received permission to open representative offices in Moscow, Berlin, Prague, and Stockholm (Sabah, 2016). During the same period, the U.S. argued that PYD should be included in the Geneva talks, from which it had previously been excluded, seeking to integrate the organization into the political solution process for Syria.

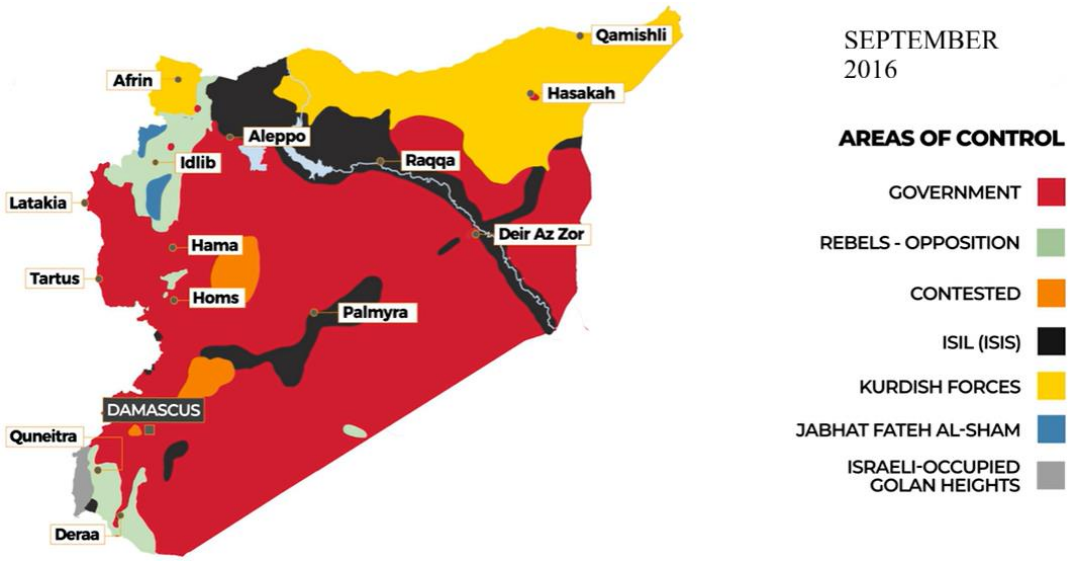

Figure 8. Active Forces in Syria (2016)

Source: Chughtai (2021)

Although some studies claim that PYD, elevated by Western states under the guise of fighting DAESH, became the backbone of the struggle against Sunni resistance forces in Syria (Holland-McCowan, 2018) and a dominant political actor that emerged during the civil war (Tejel, 2015), institutions such as the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) at King's College London have described PYD as a proxy deployed on the ground by Washington against a DAESH it was unwilling to defeat itself (Sökmen, 2016). Despite documented human rights violations in reports concerning PYD's actions while establishing territorial dominance amid Syria's power vacuum, no sanctions were imposed on the organization; instead, encouraging steps were taken (Amnesty International, 2015; Taylor, 2015). As a reward for its fight against DAESH, PYD began receiving substantial economic, political, and military aid from the U.S., Russia, the EU, and Iran (Socialist International, n.d.). With its gains and opportunities during the crisis, the organization transformed into a quasi-state structure and gained the ability to engage in simultaneous negotiations with regional and global actors. For example, while benefiting from U.S. military, logistical, and strategic propaganda support, it continued its negotiations with the Syrian regime without severing ties and gained the ability to use these actors against one another when needed. These realities indicate how Western public opinion viewed the

anti-regime fronts in the Syrian civil war — particularly SDF, of which PYD/YPG was a central component — mainly through the lens of the struggle against DAESH.

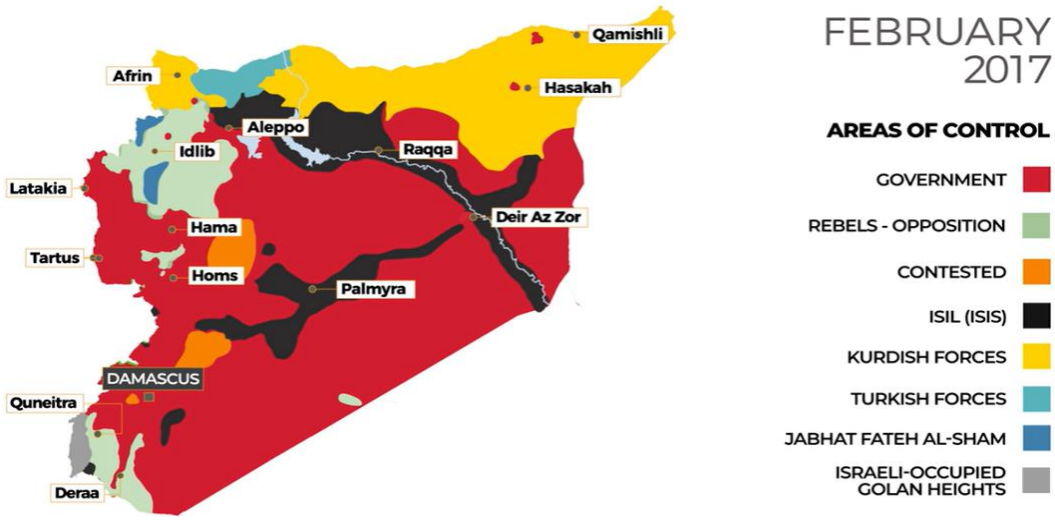

Figure 9. Active Forces in Syria (2017)

Source: Chughtai (2021)

Overall, PYD's organization within the base of PKK — which had been expelled from Syria after the Adana Agreement — significantly contributed to its increasing influence and prominence in Syria. Additionally, the Assad regime's survival in the early stages of the crisis, supported by Iran and Russia, the successive domestic developments in the country, and especially the shifting international context, provided PYD with broad freedom of action and opportunities to pursue its political agenda. Apart from these historical advantages, PYD's decision not to fully align with either the Assad regime or the opposition from the onset of the crisis — choosing instead a "third path" — prevented its categorization as a terrorist organization by the West and even garnered support (Erkmen, 2012b, pp. 26–27). Compared to other Kurdish parties in Syria, PYD's financial strength, its capability for independent action, its ability to mobilize masses following its significant role in the 2004 Qamishli events, and most importantly, the support and protection of the United States contributed to its emergence as a key actor during the civil war. In the later stages of the civil war, PYD's military branch "People's Protection Units (YPG)" became increasingly visible and came to describe itself as the official army of the "Northern Syria Federation" (Kulaksızoğlu, 2018). This framing — shaped around fighting a common enemy under the

guise of supporting the Syrian government against DAESH — boosted the international recognition of PYD/YPG (Kurt, 2014). Following the clashes in Kobane, Western media — ignoring the decisive role of coalition airstrikes, the FSA, and the Peshmerga — artificially emphasised PYD's contribution. The portrayal of PYD's fight against DAESH became a key argument in favour of Western support. Images of female militants in Western media further strengthened the narrative of a "gender-equal PYD" (Sandıklı et al., 2015). Thus, the organization came to be presented in Western public opinion as a secular, cooperative actor fighting DAESH. The overwhelmingly favourable coverage of PYD/YPG by Western media after DAESH's attack on Kobane significantly contributed to this perception. The dominant narrative that coalition forces fought alongside PYD against the common threat of DAESH greatly influenced the perception of PYD as a political entity. Additionally, arguments by some Western experts and analysts that, given the "solution process" in Türkiye and PYD's struggle against DAESH, the U.S. and European states should remove PKK from terrorist lists must also be understood in this context.

Drawing on information from Buğra Sarı's work The Syrian Branch of the Separatist Terrorist Organization PKK: PYD/YPG, we may add the following: PYD/YPG, through its pragmatic relationship with the regime during the civil war, achieved significant gains, extending over vast areas in northern Syria and resulting by 2019 in the emergence of three so-called cantons — Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira — collectively covering one-third of Syria's administrative territory. Under the guise of combating DAESH — a radical extremist organization that had merged into the regional crisis — and supported by the United States, PYD established its own canton structure. In these territories, it forcibly collected taxes, conscripted fighters, irregularly paid public employees, and exercised numerous state-like powers. Transforming its relationship with the regime from proxy status to occasional conflict and eventually partnership, the organization ceased to be merely a minority surviving under regime pressure. Instead, it became an actor with de facto autonomous authority, capable of negotiating and making agreements with the central government. By 2015, the organization began shifting away from its partnership with the Syrian regime and moved toward functioning as the U.S.'s proxy actor in the Syrian civil war (Sarı, 2022, p. 98).

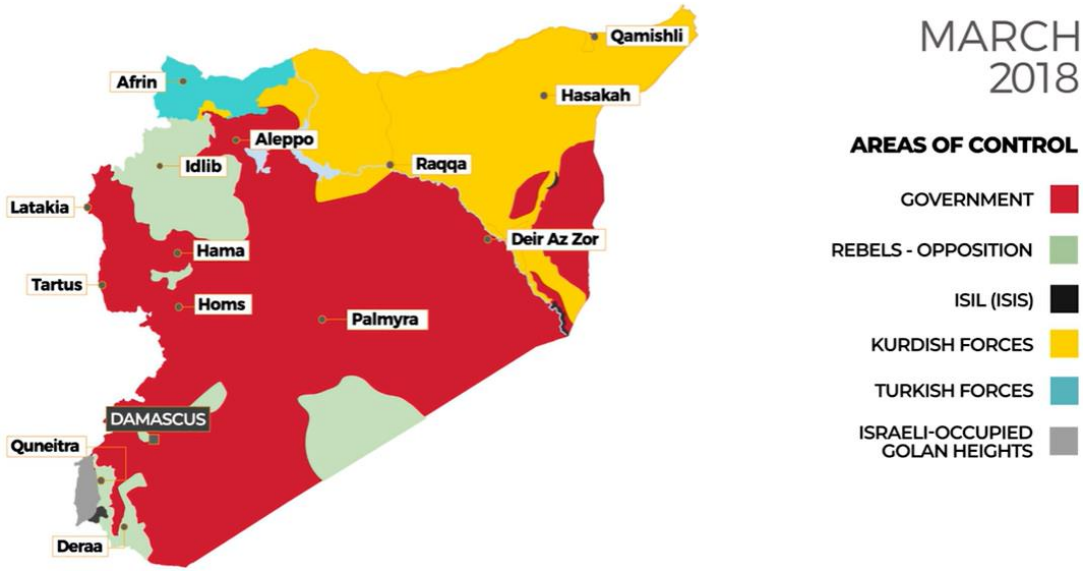

Figure 10. Active Forces in Syria (2018)

Source: Chughtai (2021)

At this point, PYD — the U.S.'s local ally — controls the Tishrin and Tabqa dams, the country's crucial water and energy reservoirs, highly productive agricultural lands vital for Syria's economic security and survival, and rich oil fields. Given the backing of the United States, it is clear that PYD will not easily relinquish these assets. PYD's degree of flexibility or intransigence depends directly on the reliability of U.S. guarantees. Thus, as long as U.S. presence continues in Syria, the evolution of PYD/YPG's relationship with the regime from pragmatic partnership to confrontation appears highly likely. One early indication was the Syrian regime's attempted military intervention against PYD/YPG forces east of the Euphrates in February 2018, which failed due to U.S. airpower (B. Sarı, 2022, p. 98). As Bozkurt also notes, the rise of PYD — now appearing as the group that has benefited most among Syrian Kurds and becoming a significant actor — is not the product of short-term developments generated solely by its relations with the Assad regime. Instead, long-standing dynamics between PKK and the Syrian regime, the deterioration of Türkiye–Syria relations (Bozkurt, 2013), and the broader preference of regional and global powers to implement their policies through local strategic proxies have facilitated PYD's influence over Syrian Kurds. However, it may equally be argued that the current relationship between Assad and PYD is neither fully severed nor a strategic alliance. From the perspective of Damascus, PYD today serves — at least for now — as a tool to prevent fragmented opposition forces

from establishing new strongholds, which arguably represents the most accurate characterization. Furthermore, the fluctuating historical relations between the Syrian regime and PKK may form the basis of today's de facto situation. Yet, in our view, Assad's primary reason for engaging PYD as an interlocutor lies in the organization's own weaknesses and limitations. PYD's ideology and practices — centred on demands for democratic autonomy and political rights for Kurds — have drawn significant opposition from Arab factions and created difficulties in its relations with Türkiye, which designates it as a terrorist organization. Nevertheless, the absence of hostile operations from the regime or Barzani-controlled regions — which could pose greater risks to Damascus — and the lack of new offensives against PYD-held areas have mitigated these vulnerabilities to an extent. Thus, for the Assad administration, as long as PYD does not serve the opposition, the existence of Kurdish-controlled territories outside central government authority does not currently pose a major problem. In our view, this regime perspective constitutes perhaps the most significant gain for Kurdish separatism represented by PYD/YPG in the political and proto-statebuilding trajectory within the 2011 Syrian civil war.

5.3. Politicization and Independence Efforts of the Kurds in Post-2011 Syria

Looking at the historical background, following the Adana Agreement of 1998, the PKK, which lost the open support of the Syrian regime and, at roughly the same time, felt the need to change its ideology due to its military defeat in Türkiye, underwent a profound transformation in both its ideology and strategy. In this context, Abdullah Öcalan, the leader and theoretician of the organization, inspired by the ideas of the American libertarian/communist Murray Bookchin, developed three interrelated concepts. Accordingly, within the four nation-states containing Kurdish populations (Türkiye, Iraq, Iran and Syria), each "part" would achieve democratic autonomy, these nation-states would be transformed into democratic republics, and a Kurdish democratic confederal structure would be established through the participation of each autonomous part (Öcalan, 1999a, 2011). Democratic autonomy would function on a clan–tribe basis in rural areas and through communes in urban areas; in this way, the PKK would strengthen its sociological base. This effort essentially aimed to draw on feudal structures in rural regions that the PKK had been unable to bring to its side, while maximally exploiting the resources of municipalities close to the organization in urban areas. This structure, designed to encompass the so-called

"Greater Kurdistan", was named the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), with Abdullah Öcalan assigned as its ideological guide at the head of the structure (Akyol, 2015). The KCK Charter, drafted over the following years, was finally adopted at the congress convened in 2007. In line with the implementation of the new strategy and the KCK structure, the organization's political and armed components were restructured. Within this framework, local security units under the name of "Self-Defence Forces" and a "special forces" unit with specialized operational capabilities directly subordinated to HPG, the PKK's armed wing, were established. Courts were also set up, and preparations were made for engagements in both urban and rural areas. Meanwhile, since there was already a strong Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, priority was given to building the "parts" in Syria and Iran without entering into conflict with it. Within this strategy, the PKK established the Syrian component of the planned structure, PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat – Democratic Union Party), in 2003, and one year later, in 2004, brought into being PJAK (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê – Kurdistan Free Life Party) in Iran (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012a). In the same year, when PKK resumed its attacks in Türkiye, several changes occurred in the organization's top leadership. The Syrian Feyman Hüseyin took over from Murat Karayılan as the head of the People's Defence Forces (HPG), the PKK's armed wing, and held this position until 2009, when he handed it over to another Syrian, Sofu Nurettin (O. Bingöl, 2016, p. 9). On the other hand, following the death of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in 2000 and the accession to power of Bashar al-Assad, who projected a comparatively weaker profile, the PKK sought to replicate in northern Syria the structure it had established in northern Iraq (Çalışkan, 2020a, p. 71). This step was shaped in the direction of state-building through the creation of a new organizational formation whose name would not be directly associated worldwide with terrorist activities (Köylü, 2018). Indeed, this political move manifested itself in 2003 as the establishment, in northern Syria, of a party under the name "Democratic Middle East Federation" aimed at founding a unified and independent Kurdish state across the territories of the four neighbouring countries (Şevkat, 2002).

5.3.1. Interaction of Separatist Kurdish Groups within the Ranks of the Opposition during the Syrian Civil War

Following the step taken by separatist Kurds in 2003 to form a party in northern Syria under the name "Democratic Middle East Federation", by 2005, when Syria had begun to simmer

from within, Kurdish parties led by the PYD and other opposition actors united against the regime, reaching a consensus among themselves and, within this framework, signing the Damascus Declaration, which set out their demands concerning fundamental rights and freedoms and democratization. During this process, the Kurdish movement in Syria began to receive international support. After two conferences held in 2006–2007 in the US Senate and the European Parliament, the Syrian Kurdish National Assembly was established with the aim of transforming Syria into a federal structure and guaranteeing the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Kurds. However, the Damascus Declaration did not suffice to keep the Kurds on the same front as the Arab opposition and other minorities in terms of their perception of the Assad regime. While the Kurds, unlike other minorities, evaluated the Assad regime more on an ethnic basis than a sectarian one and concentrated their threat perception not on Sunnism but rather on Arabism, Salafism and Wahhabism, thereby remaining distant from the Assad regime which foregrounded Arab nationalism; other minorities, especially Christians and Druze, perceived the Assad regime as a secular structure that protected them from the Sunni majority (Hossino & Tanır, 2012). Consequently, in 2009, most Kurdish parties withdrew from the Damascus Declaration, which had largely lost its function, and pushed the process initiated in 2006 with the Kurdish National Assembly further by attempting to form a Kurdish National Congress (O. Bingöl, 2016, p. 10). From that point onwards, activities of separatist Kurds in Syria remained relatively limited; nevertheless, the effects of the Arab popular movements that spread widely across the Middle East undoubtedly also encompassed the Kurds.

Indeed, when the Arab popular uprisings, which began in Tunisia and spread almost throughout the entire region, reached Syria in 2011, an observable mobilization also emerged among the Kurds. When events broke out in Syria, Kurdish groups did not fully join the demonstrations, but frequently convened and held consultations among themselves. In this process, in order to gain leverage in talks with other opposition organizations and to create a national agenda, an umbrella organization called the Kurdish National Council (KUK) was established following a meeting held in Qamishli on 26–27 October 2011, which was then followed by a meeting in Erbil. Of the parties belonging to the Kurdish Patriotic Movement established in May 2011, all except the PYD, the Future Movement, the Kurdish Democratic Party led by Abdurrahman Aluji, and the Syrian Kurdish Reconciliation Party (Rekeftin), formed by dissidents from the PYD, showed interest in this meeting. A total of 257 people

participated, 100 of whom were members of the parties and the rest representatives of various groups. At this conference, a 45-member Executive Committee was elected. Although some groups voiced advanced demands such as independence and autonomy, the following points of consensus were articulated (Bozkurt, 2013, pp. 108–109):

- The crisis in Syria can only be resolved by changing the authoritarian and totalitarian system.
- The "Security State", in which security forces and the army are present in the cities, must be dismantled and replaced by a democratic, pluralistic, parliamentary and decentralized structure.
- The Kurdish people living on their historical lands are an important component of Syria's social, national and historical fabric. This requires that the Kurdish people be recognized as an important part of the Syrian nation and that their problems be resolved democratically by recognizing the Kurds' right to self-determination within a "united Syrian state".
- Freedom of religion and minority rights must be guaranteed by the constitution.
- As a component of the Syrian opposition, the Conference rejects individual dialogue with the regime. All previously established Kurdish coalitions represented in the KVK (Political Council, Kurdish Democratic Coalition, Coordination Committee) must be dissolved.

Meanwhile, as noted in other sections, with the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, the PYD established dominance in the northern region from which the Syrian regime had withdrawn, eliminated other political structures and seized control through the armed forces it had created (M. Yıldız, 2020, p. 1). Thereafter, with the support provided by the Assad regime, it initiated efforts to establish an administrative structure in northern Syria in which it would act as the sole authority. Initially, from 2011 onwards, the PYD adopted a cautious stance towards the Syrian National Council (SNC), arguing that this movement had come under the control of Türkiye and Qatar and thus protesting the formation (Orhan, 2011, pp. 47–48). Within the opposition ranks in Syria, the PYD, which from the perspective of the Kurds—following the PKK's approach—at least advocated autonomy and "Democratic Confederalism" together with other Kurdish "parts", joined the "National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change", founded in 2011 in Damascus under the leadership of

Hasan Abdul Azim by 13 political parties and independent figures, and described as a more moderate and more secular opposition (Sputnik, 2016). In reality, however, it kept its relations with opposition fronts that believed in Syria's territorial integrity and were essentially national in character at a limited and insincere level. Due to the small size of the Kurdish population and the geographical discontinuity between the regions where they were densely settled—Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), Afrin and Jazira—other Kurdish parties in the opposition refrained from adopting an independence struggle and instead demanded the recognition of Kurdish constitutional rights within the framework of Syria's territorial integrity (Taştekin, 2016, p. 98). In contrast, the PYD, the Syrian extension of PKK/KCK, continued to act independently under the motto of "democratic autonomy" (Erkmen, 2012b, p. 24). Subsequently, in order to sideline other Kurdish political formations with which it maintained limited cooperation in the region, the PYD established an umbrella structure initially called the "National Council", later renamed the "People's Council of Western Kurdistan" (Sandıklı et al., 2015). However, because the majority of other Syrian Kurdish groups preferred to join the Kurdish National Council established under the leadership of Barzani, the PYD failed to achieve the desired outcome from this initiative.

In the ensuing period, under the influence of developments in the region, the PYD, having gained superiority over other Kurdish elements in the opposition camp, took steps to expand its sphere of influence with the aim of building the Syrian pillar of the "Democratic Confederalism" project, which had been instituted through the KCK charter and encompassed Türkiye, Iraq, Iran and Syria. In this context, the PYD interpreted the conflict environment in Syria as a religious–sectarian struggle among Arabs, foresaw the deepening of the civil war and the emergence of a power vacuum, and began establishing administrative, social, economic, political and security systems in regions with dense Kurdish populations (Bursa, 2019, p. 109; Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 169). Additionally, the organization introduced a co-chairmanship system in order to project the image of a contemporary leftist party in Europe. Indeed, at its 5th Extraordinary Congress held on 16 June 2012, the party's central committee was expanded, and the co-chairmanship system was instituted, with Salih Muslim and Asiyah Abdullah being elected as co-chairs (Kriter, 2016). In this configuration, the SNC and FSA, as components of the organized opposition front, opposed the autonomy of the Kurds and their "Democratic Confederalism" demands alongside other Kurdish "parts", as imposed by PKK/KCK–PYD. Even the election in early

2012 of Abdulbasset Sieda—a Kurdish politician who kept his distance from Kurdish parties and had been living in exile for 18 years—as head of the SNC failed to alter the moderate opposition's stance (Al Jazeera, 2012).

Efforts to construct a compromise between the ENKS, under Barzani's influence and regarded as the organized opposition structure vis-à-vis the regime, and the PYD/YPG terrorist formation commenced in the early stages of the Syrian civil war (Sönmez, 2021, p. 69). Seeking to balance the strengthening PYD in Syria, KDP President Masoud Barzani took an important step toward gathering the Kurds in Syria under a single umbrella under his own influence by supporting other Kurdish parties close to him. The meeting of the KUK, planned to be held on 17–18 December 2011 in Erbil, Iraq, but postponed for various reasons, was finally convened on 28–29 January 2012 in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government. The declared objectives of this meeting were as follows (Bozkurt, 2013):

- Bringing together Kurdish intellectuals and civil society figures to discuss the problems of Syrian Kurds
- Developing a common approach regarding the demands of Syrian Kurds
- Identifying possible scenarios following the fall of the Assad regime and seeking ways to protect the Kurds by closing potential security gaps
- Uniting Syrian Kurdish parties under a single umbrella (Erkmen, 2012a, p. 28).

The dynamics of conflictual relations between the two actors in the Syrian Kurdish opposition continued at full speed in the following year as well. In this period, while the KUK sought to broaden its grassroots by taking part in the anti-regime opposition, the PYD, exploiting its pragmatic relationship with the Assad regime, aimed to dominate Syrian Kurds. Beyond the deadlocks in their relations, the attempt by the PYD/YPG to fill the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of an increasingly weakened Assad regime from northern Syria in the summer of 2012 (Tosun, 2019, p. 106) further intensified the rivalry with the SNC/FSA (Erkmen, 2013, p. 8).

According to Çitlioğlu, when the disagreements and clashes between PYD/FSA and KUK in 2012 are examined chronologically, the first chain of events manifested itself when some of the leaders and senior cadres of ENKS member parties, who had joined the Kurdish High

Council formed in Erbil through the initiative of the KRG, were detained by PYD/YPG upon their return to Syria, followed by the arrest by PYD/YPG on 18 May 2012 of 24 members of the Syrian KDP as they passed from Iraq into Syria. Due to escalating tensions, the KRG closed the Semalka border gate between Iraq and Syria. In the days that followed, PYD/YPG initiated mass arrests in the town of Amuda, where ENKS members were concentrated, and tensions escalated further when interventions by YPG forces during protests held in June in reaction to these arrests resulted in the deaths of seven people and injuries to dozens (Çitlioğlu, 2024, p. 123). In fact, the developments in Amuda in June illustrate the level reached in the political struggle among Syrian Kurds. Following these events, which were strongly condemned by Syrian Kurdish parties, tension rose further, and raids by YPG forces on the offices of other Kurdish parties intensified the conflict. In the subsequent period, the PYD, through political maneuvers and by exploiting disagreements among parties affiliated with the KUK, became the only significant physical formation among Syrian Kurds, consolidating its political power. In parallel, it embarked on an intense power struggle with the KDP and parties close to it (Erkmen, 2013, p. 11). In the ensuing period, by exploiting divisions and rivalries among other Kurdish parties, the PYD emerged as the winner of this tension and, in addition to its intense efforts, quickly became the umbrella political organization of Syrian Kurds under external support and patronage.

Although the PYD dominated Syrian Kurds under external support and patronage, Kurdish actors on opposing sides would decide to act jointly within the framework of the reasons and dynamics set out below. The most significant of these reasons was arguably the growing possibility that the Assad regime might fall. Indeed, in June 2012, KRG President Masoud Barzani took another step to end ongoing disputes and clashes among Kurds and to establish coordination in the struggle to secure Kurds' political and cultural demands (Erkmen, 2012a). Under Barzani's initiative, the ENKS, representing 12 Kurdish parties, and the PYD, came together in June 2012 to resolve their disagreements. Within these talks, the PYD made the exclusion of the Syrian Kurdish Reconciliation Party (Rekeftin), formed by its former members, a condition for joining the KUK (Bozkurt, 2013). Within this framework, on 11 June 2012, the People's Council of Western Kurdistan, controlled by the PYD, signed a cooperation agreement with the KUK under the control of Masoud Barzani (Çandar, 2012, p. 620). In addition to the cooperation agreement signed in Erbil with the participation of the regional people's council affiliated with the PYD, a protocol was prepared to establish

security committees and to create people's defence units to protect Kurdish regions (M. Yıldız, 2020, p. 2). On 9–12 July 2012, the parties reconvened and agreed under the Erbil Agreement on coordination, deciding to establish the Kurdish Supreme Council (KYK) composed of five members each from the ENKS and the MGRK (Taştekin, 2016, p. 147). In line with this decision, the joint Kurdish Supreme Council was established with the participation of the aforementioned parties.

However, despite agreeing to act jointly on behalf of Syrian Kurds under the Erbil and Dohuk agreements, the PYD, which had joined the Kurdish National Council through the Erbil Agreement signed in July 2012, failed to comply with these agreements. Owing to disagreements over the establishment of a joint administration between the PYD and other parties in Kurdish-majority regions and the unification of armed forces, the Erbil Agreement could not be implemented (Sönmez, 2021, p. 70). Additionally, no practical political solution could be achieved because the PYD, in violation of the agreements, continued to act unilaterally in the region on the basis of its pragmatic relationship with the Baath regime, and did not abandon its ultimate goal of independence within the framework of the KCK project.

One of the main reasons that drove the PYD away from the opposition was that Kurdish groups within the opposition did not demand that autonomy be granted to Kurds in the post-Assad reconstruction process (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 170). Furthermore, the PYD adopted a distant stance towards the opposition because the Syrian National Council (SNC) was convened in Istanbul under the name of the Syrian National Council (SNC) as a structure influenced by Türkiye, which had not yet resolved its own Kurdish issue (Bursa, 2019, p. 110). In light of these developments, the PYD's establishment of dominance in regions from which regime forces had withdrawn became a major factor in heightening tensions and bringing it into confrontation with the FSA. As is known, in the early phase of the civil war, the Assad regime withdrew its forces from the northeast of the country while concentrating them in Damascus–Hama–Homs and westwards, effectively leaving this area to the PYD (Erkmen, 2013, p. 8). Yet, from the very onset of the Syrian civil war, despite verbally opposing the authoritarian nature and practices of the Assad regime and maintaining limited cooperation with other Kurdish political formations, it is an obvious fact that the PYD cooperated with the regime. Abdulbasset Sieda, head of the SNC, and Riad al-Shaqfa, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, openly accused the PYD of acting pragmatically in line with its

own goals and weakening the opposition (Abdulmajid, 2012; Pollock, 2012, p. 31). This situation led actors with interests and influence in the region, especially the United States, to seek to bring the PYD—emerging as a significant power in the Syrian civil war—together with the opposition. Indeed, the US, as a global actor, began to experience problems with the Istanbul-based SNC, which did not reconcile with the PYD under its protection and did not distance itself from radical Islamist groups (Taştekin, 2015, p. 217).

In the midst of these intertwined and complex problems, the events that would take place in October 2012 marked a significant paradigm shift for the historical gains of the PYD/YPG. On 25 October 2012, in the Ashrafiya and Sheikh Maqsoud districts of Aleppo, where Kurds formed a dense population, Free Syrian Army groups forced Kurds to flee, while government forces carried out airstrikes on Ashrafiya, causing serious casualties among the Kurds. Blaming the FSA for these casualties and demanding that the opposition withdraw from Ashrafiya, clashes broke out between Kurdish groups and the FSA, leaving 10 people dead and 20 wounded. Subsequently, clashes erupted on 27 October when PYD/YPG forces attacked FSA elements, resulting in the deaths of 22 people and injuries to more than 100 on both sides (Çitlioğlu, 2024, p. 121). Although PYD/YPG suffered losses in clashes in Kurdish-populated neighbourhoods such as Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiya in Aleppo, where they fought against both FSA forces and the Syrian army, they gained self-confidence and experience demonstrating that they could effectively confront regular military forces. The FSA's failure against regime forces in Aleppo further nourished the group's fighting spirit. Moreover, the resistance shown by PYD/YPG against the FSA and its determination to wage armed struggle in defence of the Kurdish population caused other Kurdish parties affiliated with the KUK (Kurdish National Council) to lose influence and grassroots support (Lister, 2015, p. 95). The fact that some Kurdish parties under the KUK maintained close contacts with the SNC (Syrian National Council) also elevated the PYD to the position of the true representative of Syrian Kurds and brought it closer to its goal of establishing so-called autonomous cantons. As a result of these problems, the US took the initiative to establish the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SMDGUK) in November 2012 in Doha, Qatar, as an alternative to the SNC. The Kurds adopted a positive attitude towards the SMDGUK in the hope that it would better address their demands and expectations regarding the resolution of their problems. This development was sufficient to demonstrate the difficulty of reconciling the SMDGUK, which embraced

principles such as upholding Syria's territorial integrity and the national unity of the Syrian people (Etilaf, n.d.), with the PYD, a separatist terrorist organization (Taştekin, 2016, p. 159) and to demonstrate the challenge of finding a common ground between the two (Bursa, 2019, pp. 110–111).

With the FSA fighting not only regime forces but also radical Islamist groups such as ISIS and al-Nusra, an environment of chaos emerged, and under these conditions, discussions were held between the Kurdish National Council (ENKS), the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the PYD regarding alternative plans for the "overthrow of the Assad regime" and the establishment of "a federal state structure" in Syria's future. Within this framework, a de facto ceasefire period commenced in January 2013 between the parties; however, this period ended following the PYD's unilateral declaration of so-called canton administrations in three regions in January 2014 and its refusal to allow other parties and groups to operate in these areas. Leaders of parties and groups outside the PYD described the canton declaration as a unilateral imposition, and some of their members had to move to the Kurdish region of northern Iraq due to pressure, abductions and unsolved murders targeting themselves and their political organizations (Sönmez, 2021, pp. 69–70). With the intensification of small-scale clashes between FSA elements and YPG forces in Afrin, Ras al-Ayn, Dirbesiye and Tirbesipi in May 2014, the relatively calm atmosphere within the opposition front gave way to renewed tensions. Immediately after the PYD/YPG announced in June 2014 that it had brought the Hasakah–Dirbesiye road under its control, fierce clashes broke out on 16 July, resulting in the full fall of Ras al-Ayn under PYD/YPG control (İşyar, 2017). As the PYD expanded its territorial control and ENKS-affiliated parties began to lose strength and grassroots support, some parties under this umbrella changed sides and joined the PYD, further strengthening the latter's political authority following its consolidation in Ashrafiya (Çitlioğlu, 2024, pp. 122–123). Moreover, after the clashes in Amuda, parties such as the Syrian KDP and the Freedom Party, as well as other Kurdish parties, were forced to abandon their anti-PYD rhetoric and to accept the PYD's political leadership of Syrian Kurds. In this context, the conflicts and disputes between the PYD and FSA and groups under the KUK, which extended into developments up to the present day, formed the milestones of the organization's gradual ascent to becoming the sole representative of Syrian Kurds.

Meanwhile, PYD co-chair Salih Muslim visited Tehran on 19 August 2013 upon an invitation from Iran. During this visit, the Iranian government took an important step by

beginning to view the previously opposed idea of "establishing a Kurdish unity in Syria" as a possible way out against the growing al-Qaeda threat and started to support it. Iran brought together PYD co-chair Salih Muslim and El Parti leader and SKYUK chairman Abdulhakim Bashar during this visit (İşyar, 2017, p. 55). Following this initiative by Iran, the Iraqi KDP adopted a supportive stance towards this unity (Barznjy, 2013). Later, to promote Kurdish unity and partnership in the region, a meeting was held in Duhok in northern Iraq on 22 October 2014 upon the invitation of KDP President Masoud Barzani. The meeting was attended by then-PYD co-chair Salih Muslim and alliance partners of the Democratic Society Movement (TEV–DEM/Tevgera Civaka Demokratik), consisting of three parties, as well as ENKS representatives close to the KDP. During the nine-day negotiations, issues of governance, defence, security and partnership concerning Syrian Kurds were discussed, and it was decided to establish a "Joint Political Council" comprising the parties as a first phase. According to the agreement reached at the end of these negotiations, the YPG, referred to as the "People's Defence Forces", was recognized as the sole military formation in Rojava (Sönmez, 2021, p. 71).

In the context of the struggle against ISIS, which had become embedded in the region's crises, Syrian, Iranian and Iraqi Kurds also formed an alliance against this common enemy, deciding to cooperate militarily with PKK, YPG and Iranian Kurdish armed forces to regain areas lost around Mosul, Kirkuk, Diyala and Erbil in Iraq. In this framework, in Sinjar, which provides a geographical connection between regions inhabited by Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, KDP Peshmerga and YPG forces from Syria, and in the environs of Kirkuk, Erbil and Diyala, PUK Peshmerga and PKK fought together against ISIS. Initially, the PYD opposed the prolonged presence of KDP Peshmerga in Syrian Kurdish regions; however, when Kobani was besieged by ISIS, it allowed a limited number of KDP Peshmerga to cross through Türkiye into Kobani (Köylü, 2017, p. 91). Following the siege of Kobani by ISIS and heavy losses suffered by YPG forces, KDP forces entered Türkiye through the Habur border gate in November 2014 with Ankara's permission and went to Kobani to assist, upon the order of Barzani, who sought to increase his influence over Syrian Kurds (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 28). As a result, tensions between the PYD and the KDP eased to some extent. Alongside the fact that the KRG forces fought alongside YPG against ISIS in Kobani, implementation of the Dohuk Agreement, which recognized YPG as the sole armed formation, yielded highly significant results. In consequence, the PYD, in addition to gaining political

representation of Syrian Kurds, was also able to mitigate tensions with the KRG, particularly with the KDP. Meanwhile, ENKS, which had retreated to northern Iraq and continued its activities from there, returned to northern Syria within the framework of improved relations following Barzani's support to the PYD during the clashes with ISIS in Kobani (M. Yıldız, 2020, p. 2). Nevertheless, despite efforts in this period and in the following years to achieve unity among Kurds in the opposition camp, success was not attained.

In addition to all these developments, new efforts were launched—under US planning and financed by Gulf countries—to bring together Syrian Kurds and opposition Arabs on the basis of shared interests, with a particular focus on the PYD/YPG. Within this framework, at the request of the US, Saudi Arabia sent technical teams to Deir ez-Zor and Rumeilan in April and May 2017 to modernize the oil wells under YPG control and increase production. Moreover, the UAE dispatched technical aid teams to Kobani, and Saudi Arabia did the same to Manbij and Raqqa; however, these initiatives yielded no tangible results as local opposition Arabs rejected the assistance. Through US initiatives, Saudi Arabia pledged to provide PYD/YPG with 520 million dollars over three years to support efforts to legitimize the organization, particularly in strengthening oil infrastructure, and made an initial payment of 200 million dollars. Additionally, under US policy to increase Saudi influence in Syria in the post-war period as a means of balancing Iran, work began in Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor to form a 10,000-strong "oil security force" composed of Arab tribes affiliated with the SDF/PYD (Çitlioğlu, 2024, pp. 40–41).

According to Çitlioğlu, the majority of Syria's oil wells are located in the Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor regions, under the control of the SDF, in which PYD/YPG is the dominant force, and under US protection within the framework of a "local partnership". A portion of the crude oil extracted in areas under US–PYD/YPG control is transported to the west of the Euphrates, where the Syrian National Army (formerly FSA) is present, refined in primitive refineries, and sold as gasoline and diesel. This system, under which rival groups such as PYD–SMO, SMO–HTS temporarily put aside their disagreements and engage in trade cooperation, also operates in the south between the Syrian regime and PYD/YPG. Although the US occasionally disrupts this traffic as part of its sanctions policy on Syria (CAESAR), it also refrains from completely cutting off PYD/YPG's revenue sources. Statements by then-Pentagon spokesperson Jonathan Hoffman that "the revenue from the oil fields in Syria protected by US forces will be given to the SDF" and then-US Secretary of State Pompeo's

remark that “US troops will remain in Syria to protect oil fields from ISIS” further clarify the overall picture (Çitlioğlu, 2024). In light of these findings and with additional observations, the deployment of experts from Saudi Arabia to Rumeilan at the request of the US to increase oil production and the implementation of an agreement, supported and approved by the US administration, between the US-based oil company Delta Crescent Energy LLC and the PYD—including the construction of two mobile refineries in the region—explain the US presence in Syria. Likewise, recent movements within the US–PYD–Gulf axis can be interpreted as preliminary steps toward establishing an autonomous Kurdish state as a local non-state ally that will support and consolidate US presence in Syria. It can thus be argued that Saudi Arabia, which has pursued an aggressive foreign policy since 2015, has sought to bolster the Riyadh–Washington line by modifying its Syria strategy following the election of Donald Trump as US president and has supported the PYD–SDF, the Syrian extension of PKK/KCK’s regional terrorist network, financially and particularly through efforts to strengthen the oil infrastructure, even at the cost of confronting Türkiye, an important regional actor.

When US plans for withdrawal from Syria emerged in 2019, new activity was observed in this period around Kurdish actors in the opposition camp, driven by both the US, which sought to leave a proxy behind before withdrawing, and Russia and France, which sought to gain dominance as the US exited. Within the framework of efforts to establish an autonomous structure in northern Syria, talks between ENKS and TEV–DEM—the umbrella structure in which YPG, the PYD’s armed wing, is the main component—began in 2018 and intensified in early 2019 (Sönmez, 2021, p. 68). On 10 November 2019, a meeting took place in northern Syria between Ferhat Abdi Şahin, codenamed “Mazlum Kobani”, a leader of PKK/YPG/SDG, and the Syrian Kurdish National Council (ENKS), composed of Syrian Kurdish groups close to Masoud Barzani’s Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and TEV–DEM, the umbrella organization of the PYD/YPG. Within this framework, ENKS also stepped up its efforts after 2019, holding talks with officials from many European countries and the US to unify Kurdish movements in northern Syria (Güngör, 2021). In November 2019, it was announced that an agreement had been reached among Syrian Kurds and that great efforts would be made to preserve this unity, which was supported by the US and European countries (Aydoğan, 2019). In particular, the increase in US logistical support to the PYD/YPG, which it perceived as a strategic local ally after 2019, and the role of the PYD

as an actor in the process of weakening ISIS, facilitated the organization's stronger voice on the international stage and the re-establishment of a dialogue environment among Kurdish groups.

These efforts to unite and integrate have also been recorded through concrete developments. According to information compiled from Ercan Çitlioğlu's work Suriye Dosyası, "within the framework of efforts led by the US and France to bring together the PYD and pro-Barzani Kurdish groups and to establish a structure in northeastern Syria similar to the KRG, direct talks between the Kurdish National Unity Parties (PYNK)—comprising 25 groups under PYD control—and the Syrian Kurdish National Council (KUK/ENKS), supported by Masoud Barzani, began in April 2020 at a US base outside Hasakah. The meeting was also attended by William Roebuck, the US Special Adviser to the International Coalition in Syria, and Mazlum Abdi, a senior PYD official who identifies himself as the General Commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)" (Çitlioğlu, 2024, pp. 116–117; Güngör, 2021). Based on these findings and according to Mustafa Yıldız, the first meeting chaired by William Roebuck, Adviser to the US Special Representative for Syria, was held with the PYD and the Kurdish Democratic Movement; the second meeting took place with ENKS leadership and Mazlum Abdi on behalf of the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces). Following the meetings, statements declared that "an agreement had been reached to establish a joint command for the armed forces, including the Syrian Democratic Forces backed by the US-led international coalition and the Rojava Peshmerga forces under the protection of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG), with an allocation of areas of deployment for fighters from both sides" (M. Yıldız, 2020, p. 3). An analysis of the timing, dynamics and possible outcomes of these talks allows the following conclusion: it is clearly evident that efforts are underway to construct in northern Syria a structure under different names and forms but essentially under the leadership of PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK/KCK regional terrorist network, designed to conceal this reality.

Furthermore, according to Yıldız, as of May 2020, the US intensified its meetings with Kurdish political groups in Syria to establish a joint administration and a unified Kurdish delegation in northern Syria. In a statement following a meeting with the PYD on 1 May, Mazlum Abdi, the so-called Commander-in-Chief of the SDF, signalled that an opening with Kurdish political movements might soon be possible. An article published in Al-Monitor on 1 May 2020, following the first meeting at which the parties came together under US

coordination, stated: “The Democratic Union Party (PYD), in the PKK orbit, and the Erbil-based Kurdish National Council (KUK/ENKS), aligned with Barzani, have begun direct talks. The aim of this initiative is to incorporate all Kurdish groups in northeastern Syria into the PYD-controlled self-administration and thereby pave the way for the participation of the self-administration in UN-sponsored Geneva talks on ending the Syrian war” (M. Yıldız, 2020, p. 3). Subsequently, another meeting was held in Qamishli on 4 May. In the discussions between Mazlum Abdi and Russian officials, issues related to improving dialogue between northern opposition Kurdish groups and the Damascus government and cooperation in the security domain were addressed. Similarly, at around the same time, the French established contacts with opposition Kurdish groups in Rojava and held talks with them. In addition, under the initiatives of the US and France, unity talks were held between the Syrian Kurdish National Council (ENKS), known for its close ties to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). During these talks, it was reported that ENKS had withdrawn from the Turkish-backed Syrian National Coalition (SNRC) and had closed its office in Türkiye. Regarding the talks, Kurdish Unity Coordinator Abdulkerim Sıko did not reveal details about the series of meetings but stated that the US, France and Russia supported Kurdish unity. On 7 May, PYD Executive Committee Member Abdulkerim Saruhan told Rudaw that the PYD and ENKS had reached an agreement, that a 100-year project had been prepared for the region and that Kurds needed to be part of this project. Rudaw, the broadcasting outlet of the KRG, reported on 10 May that William Roebuck, former US Adviser to the International Coalition, explicitly stated that ENKS needed to withdraw from the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition (SNRC). US Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey also remarked in an interview with Asharq al-Awsat that all foreign forces, including Türkiye, should leave Syria (Çitlioğlu, 2024, pp. 116–117). In light of the successive statements accompanying these developments, it becomes evident that the US and Western actors, with interests and influence in the region, support the politicization of the nascent structure in a fragmenting Syria through PYD/YPG, which they patronize.

Shortly after these talks and public statements, on 18 May 2020, a meeting was held in Qamishli aimed at achieving national unity among Kurds, resulting in the announcement of the establishment of a new structure called the “Kurdish National Unity Parties” to support and monitor national unity efforts in the region. In the statement following the meeting, the

following points were highlighted: “Given the current situation in Syria and the region, and the importance of talks between Kurdish forces and political parties, and in support of the initiative launched by the General Command of the Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD) to bring together Kurdish parties under and outside the framework of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Rojava Kurdistan around a common stance and position, a meeting was held by us on 18 May 2020 in Qamishli, and the following decisions were adopted:

- The developments emerging in the name of Kurdish unity will be monitored through joint work conducted under the name ‘Kurdish National Unity Parties’, represented by a committee.
- Our slogan and logo have been designated as ‘Kurdish National Unity Parties’.
- Representatives of these parties will hold regular meetings to conduct joint discussions on developments and events on the ground” (ArtıGerçek, 2020). Thus, with the involvement of the US, Russia and France in efforts to bring together and unite opposition Kurds in Syria, the process accelerated, and an agreement was announced on 18 May. It was then reported that talks between Kurdish political groups in Rojava, under US mediation, concluded with an agreement on 16 June 2020, which was formalized with signatures. These developments were also addressed at the trilateral summit held on 1 July 2020 via videoconference with the participation of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. At this summit, the common statement expressed opposition to these moves. Nevertheless, despite the determination reflected in the joint statements that included the common views of the US, Türkiye, Russia and Iran, the US ensured that the oil company Delta Crescent Energy LLC entered into an agreement with the PYD in disregard of international law (Dündar, 2020). In spite of all reactions, these steps can be interpreted as part of US efforts within the framework of its Syria policy to separate the PKK from its Syrian branch, the PYD, and to legalize and ultimately state-build the PYD.

While the reverberations of the agreement continued, on 23 April 2021 US Special Adviser William Roebuck held a press conference, thanking Masoud Barzani for his unifying role and expressing hope that the political agreement would serve as a strong basis for Syrian Kurds. He stated: “*On behalf of the US government, I would like to express our satisfaction*

with the efforts of both sides (PYNK–ENKS) regarding the progress achieved in these talks. The parties have reached a preliminary agreement. The 2014 Duhok Agreement formed the basis of the talks. I would like to thank General Mazlum (PYD), Mr. Masoud Barzani and Mr. Nechirvan Barzani for their efforts towards Kurdish unity." Recalling that the Duhok Agreement, referenced by Roebuck, was concluded on 22 October 2014 in Duhok in northern Iraq upon the invitation of Masoud Barzani to achieve Kurdish Unity and Partnership, Çitlioğlu argues that Roebuck's reference to this agreement in the context of the agreement between PYNK and ENKS should be read as a result of US efforts to legitimize its cooperation and collaboration with PYD/YPG in Syria (Çitlioğlu, 2024, pp. 116–117).

Meanwhile, while Türkiye continues its conventional military operations and targeted actions against the PKK terrorist organization, tensions that have long simmered between KRG Peshmerga forces and the PKK have spilled over into regions under YPG/SDG occupation in Syria (Acun, 2021). As a result, talks aimed at achieving reconciliation between ENKS, the umbrella structure of Syrian Kurdish elements close to the KDP, and the PYD/YPG terrorist organization have temporarily failed. Accordingly, it has also become evident that US efforts to separate PYD/YPG from the PKK/KCK regional terrorist network and to test a new PKK model under Mazlum Abdi's leadership have stalled. It is observed that Mazlum Abdi and the PYD/YPG leadership cadre, who had long tried to maintain a relatively neutral stance in Peshmerga–PKK tensions and to establish good relations with KDP leadership as an independent actor, have recently been compelled to harshly criticize the KDP in a series of statements (Acun & Görücü, 2021, p. 15). Mazlum Abdi's strengthened leadership role in US-mediated talks between ENKS and PYD has greatly disturbed the PKK/KCK leadership, which has responded by asserting its authority on the Syrian front. In this context, under the direct coordination of cadres such as Bahoz Erdal and Sofi Nurettin, terrorist elements linked to Qandil, including the Revolutionary Youth Movement (Ciwanên Şoreşger), carried out armed attacks and torched ENKS offices (Rudaw, 2018). These developments strained reconciliation talks, and one of the most important issues in the negotiations—the status of the Roj Peshmerga—remained unresolved. The Roj Peshmerga, composed of Kurds displaced from Syria and aligning with ENKS, were planned as ENKS's official military wing and were designed by the KRG to be deployed against the PKK and its affiliates in Sinjar and Syria (Suriye Gündemi, 2020). Ultimately, the escalating conflict and power struggle between Peshmerga and PKK in Iraq

inevitably drew Syria into its orbit, undermining—albeit temporarily—US efforts to build unity among Kurds in the opposition camp by bringing PYD/YPG and ENKS together (Acun, 2021).

Despite some negative developments in the recent period, further important steps have been taken in 2021 and beyond in the trajectory of interaction, politicization and independence efforts of Kurds within the Syrian opposition. One such step emerged in talks between the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In these talks between the two umbrella organizations, consensus was reached on an eleven-point set of principles, and an executive body was established to implement them. An agreement was reached that SDF forces would join the army and then the security forces not as a single military bloc, but through a professional integration with the Syrian army. However, for various reasons, this agreement was not implemented (ORSAM, 2021). Shortly thereafter, efforts were renewed to overcome this negative outcome. A joint front was re-established under the leadership of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change and the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). According to information compiled from Asharq al-Awsat, on 24 June 2023, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change and the Syrian Democratic Council in the city of Qamishli in northeastern Syria, with the participation of SDC Co-Chair Emine Ömer, Co-Chair Riyad Darar and Canda Muhammad; as well as the National Coordination Committee's General Coordinator, Syrian opposition figure Hasan Abdulazim, and executive members Abdulkahhar Suud Abu Murhef, Izzat Muhaysin and Nur al-Waki. Both parties announced that "a broad National Democratic Front encompassing Syrian revolutionary and opposition forces" had been established. The memorandum of understanding contained five main principles agreed upon by the parties in order to reach a final and consensus-based formula for the front's work. The explanatory section of the agreement stated that establishing a "National Democratic Front" composed of revolutionary and opposition forces had become an urgent necessity to save Syria from the catastrophe it faced. The Front declared that it supported a project of democratic change and transition from an authoritarian regime to a pluralistic democratic system and the establishment of a state based on a "decentralized system" to be agreed upon by Syrians in a future constitution covering all Syrian territory (Avsat, 2023).

In an interview with Asharq al-Awsat, Kurdish leader and SDC Co-Chair Emine Ömer stated that they had agreed on five key principles that complemented discussions held two years earlier with the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change. Ömer noted: "*Both parties emphasized that the only way out of this war, to save the country from the dangers it faces and to meet the expectations of our people, is a political solution, and that this is a safe path to preserve Syria's unity and sovereignty." She added: "Above all, we aim to halt the military attacks carried out by the regime against the Syrian people, and to work to remove all non-Syrian armed groups, militias and foreign forces from the country.*" Commenting on the newly signed memorandum of understanding with the Coordination Committee, Ömer said: "*Whenever we reach any understanding or agreement with any political party, we work with all our strength to implement it and remain committed to it. For this, both sides must implement its provisions in the field and coordinate joint action.*" She also noted that discussions with the Coordination Committee leadership had been completed to reach a common understanding on the fate of the Autonomous Administration in Syria's future, as well as on its military and security forces and the distribution of national revenue in areas controlled by its administration and military forces. Ömer stated: "*We will work to further develop this document. We are determined to implement its provisions to the letter. In the next stage, we will establish joint committees to set up executive mechanisms to activate this front and put the provisions of the document into practice*." Responding to a question by Asharq al-Awsat on how Kurdish rights and issues would be resolved under the agreements between the parties, Hasan Abdulazim, General Coordinator of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, said: *"In the founding document of the Committee, which was established years ago with the participation of Kurdish parties and figures, Kurdish rights were recognized. We stated that Syrian Kurds are a deep-rooted and historic part of Syria's national fabric and that the solution to the problem lies in ensuring the unity of the country's land and people.*"

According to Abdulazim, the Committee and the SDC signed the memorandum of understanding based on a "democratic national project that guarantees the preservation of Syria's geographic and political integrity and the rejection of any divisive and separatist projects or initiatives that threaten the unity of the country, its territory and its population" (Avsat, 2023). As outlined above, these unification initiatives constitute an important step that will strengthen the position of Kurdish groups in the Geneva peace talks.

The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), known as the political umbrella of the Arab–Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and encompassing political parties affiliated with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, primarily the Democratic Union Party, is known to control, through its military forces, seven cities and towns, including Manbij to the west of the Euphrates and al-Tabqa to the south of the river, and mostly regions to the east of the Euphrates. Considering that the core of these military forces—the second largest military presence controlling territory after central government forces and pro-Assad elements—is composed of YPG elements, the armed wing of the PYD, it is an undeniable fact that significant strides have been made towards state-building. In light of considerable material evidence that the US has supported and protected the PYD/YPG terrorist organization in Syria since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, as it previously did with Iraqi Kurds during the engineered Iraq crisis, it is highly probable that this assessment will remain valid in Syria's future as well. In these circumstances, it can be comfortably argued that Russia continues to pursue its traditional policy of accessing warm waters by maintaining its role as an influential actor in the Syrian crisis; that France, having lost its dominance in the Mediterranean, has begun to strengthen its position via northern Syria; and that the US, within the framework of its strategy of seizing and controlling energy resources in Syria, has taken one step closer to building a local, non-state allied structure in the region.

5.3.2. The Politicization and Independence Efforts of PYD/YPG as a Local Actor

When the recent historical background is considered, the Kurdish groups in Iraq—who successfully transformed the historical advantages they gained during the 2003 invasion of Iraq into lasting gains under the explicit political and military support of the United States—inspired PYD/YPG, which emerged as an actor in the Syrian civil war. Exploiting the chaos and internal disorder in the country, the organization seized parts of the territory in northern Syria (T.C. Ministry of Interior, 2017) and, under U.S. support and protection, embarked on initiatives to establish an autonomous structure similar to that in Iraq in the areas it controlled. As Iraqi Kurds had done, PYD/YPG primarily moved toward ethnic cleansing in regions where Arabs constituted the majority and where the local population spoke Arabic, particularly in Raqqa (Çalışkan, 2020a, p. 73). Within this framework, and similar to what occurred in Iraq, the organization sought to change the demographic order in its favor by killing civilians, destroying population and land registry documents, and exploiting the

prevailing chaos and instability to advance its goal of establishing an autonomous structure (B. Sarı & Tınas, 2018, p. 15). The organization targeted and neutralized, through armed elements, Kurdish politicians, tribal leaders, and activists whom it viewed as rivals in the region, and suppressed other Syrian Kurdish groups that organized protests against the regime through the use of violence (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Moreover, believing it had reached a sufficiently strong position, it ignored Arab, Turkmen, and other local communities who did not accept its authority, forced them to migrate, and seized their properties. It also burned down buildings that housed land registry and population records, destroyed existing documents, and, through coercive measures under the label of compulsory conscription, armed children (İyiat, 2018). Accordingly, together with its armed wing YPG, the organization began, from 2013 onward, to transform its structuring in northern Syria into autonomous administrations in Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira, thereby moving toward institutionalizing its political and military presence in the region (Sandıklı et al., 2015, p. 27). Despite agreements and reconciliation efforts, PYD increased its unilateral actions and pressure on other Kurdish groups as it strengthened militarily by reinforcing its forces with PKK militants from Türkiye (Cebe, 2016). Over time, PYD and YPG established armed checkpoints across northern Syria and even seized control of half of the border gates along the Türkiye–Syria frontier (T24, 2014b). PYD's human rights violations and attempts to establish an authoritarian administration—particularly against Kurdish opposition groups—generated discomfort not only in Syria but also among Kurds in the broader region (Sandıklı et al., 2015). Consequently, a group of Kurdish intellectuals from Europe, Iraq and Türkiye published a declaration against PYD in May 2015. In this declaration, the intellectuals stated that PYD had established an authoritarian structure through violence in northern Syria, was suppressing other parties within the Kurdish National Council, and was attempting to neutralize Kurdish journalists and writers it considered opponents (Al Jazeera, 2014b).

In addition, from the outset of the civil war, the organization pursued a policy of Kurdification by changing the names of villages, towns and districts—especially in areas predominantly inhabited by Arabs—into Kurdish names, thereby erasing the historical and cultural presence of Arabic in the region. Beyond name changes, and despite Arabic being the official language of the Syrian Arab Republic, the organization switched the language of instruction to Kurdish in the areas it controlled, particularly in al-Hasakah, depriving school-

age children of the opportunity to receive education in their mother tongue. Ayn al-Arab (Arap Pınarı), a predominantly Arab town, was seized by PYD/YPG in 2012 after regime forces withdrew and was renamed Kobane (Kobani). Other examples of the organization's renaming practices include the transformation of the district of Tel Abyad (Beyaztepe) into "Gire Spi", and the renaming of the multi-ethnic district of Ra's al-Ayn as "Sere Kaniye" (Çitlioğlu, 2024). PYD's Kurdification policies were not limited to changing place names. The organization replaced the Arabic-language curriculum implemented by the Syrian Ministry of Education with a new curriculum prepared in Kurdish and introduced schoolbooks reflecting PYD/YPG's ideological propaganda. This deprived Arab and other minority children living in these areas of the opportunity to learn their own languages and cultures (Kajio, 2016). According to researchers, PYD/YPG replaced the Arabic curriculum in approximately 75 percent of schools in al-Hasakah with the so-called Kurdish curriculum, incorporating "Kurdish history", "Zoroastrianism" and similar courses, along with content promoting PYD/YPG ideology (Abet, 2017). In subsequent periods, PYD expanded its practices aimed at removing Arabic from daily life in the territories under its control as part of its systematic Kurdification policy under direct U.S. support and protection. All these steps, carried out through deliberate programs and planning, revealed PYD/YPG's long-term plan to establish an autonomous administration governing a large portion of northern Syria.

With the intensification and deepening of the Syrian crisis and civil war, PYD capitalized on opportunities from 2013 onward and moved to institutionalize its political presence in northern Syria by transforming Afrin, Kobani and Jazira into autonomous administrations. On 7 January 2013, the organization declared a temporary Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria. A constitutional document including the electoral law was announced, and under this new administrative model, the region was divided into three cantons: Afrin, Jazira and Kobani. The model envisaged that, under a future democratic system, the region would remain part of Syria (Durukan, 2019). Within its state-building strategy, the organization advanced a claim to a historical geography. Accordingly, from the onset of the Syrian crisis, the Kurdish word "Rojava", meaning "west", was adopted to conceptualize "Western Kurdistan". Taking into account the density of the Kurdish population, this geography—consisting of Afrin, Jazira and Kobani—extends approximately 700 km along the Turkish border and reaches 150 km deep in some areas. The effort to create a myth during the transformation of Ayn al-Arab, an Arab town, into "Kobane" became

another pillar of PYD's "Western Kurdistan" conceptualization strategy. The battles to recapture this town from ISIS with international coalition air support were presented in global media as the exercise of the right to self-defense by secular and democratic forces. The participation of PKK militants and sympathizers from Türkiye, peshmerga from northern Iraq and Western foreign fighters reinforced this perception (Bingöl, 2016). Thereafter, the organization began advocating for recognition of Kurdish status, fundamental rights and freedoms, and for the granting of democratic autonomy to the Kurdish people within a pluralistic democracy in Syria (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012a).

During this period, PYD—an extension of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK—expanded its sphere of control in Syria and, having secured a favorable international perception, made a new move by announcing on 12 November 2013 the formation of an 82-member Constituent Assembly to establish an interim administration in Rojava (Cumhuriyet, 2013). Shortly afterward, on 7 January 2014, PYD declared a "Social Contract" in Amuda, following which it proclaimed three autonomous cantons: Jazira (21 January), Kobani (27 January), and Afrin (29 January) (Taştekin, 2016, p. 187). To project an image of inclusiveness and gain Western sympathy, the organization incorporated Christian Arab, Assyrian and Druze representatives into the councils of these autonomous cantons (Çitlioğlu, 2024, p. 123). During his visit to France on 2 December 2013, PYD co-chair Saleh Muslim's statement to Agence France-Presse was striking: *"There are three types of Arabs living among us: those with whom we have long lived together and fought alongside; those who fled from other parts of Syria due to the actions of jihadists and were embraced by the Kurds; and those forcibly resettled in our region under Hafez al-Assad's Arabization policy. They are victims, and we advocate peaceful solutions for these communities. If they wish, they may return to their homelands, and others may live in peace with the Kurds*." Following Salih Muslim's statement—which aimed to unite Kurds with Arabs and other minorities around a shared sense of victimhood and to emphasize the PYD's secular character—the organization declared "Democratic Autonomy" in Cizire on 21 January 2014 and established an interim government. By appointing Ekrem Hasso, an ethnic Kurd, as the head of the so-called autonomous administration, and Syriac Elizabeth Gewriye and Arab Husen Elzem as his deputies, the PYD sought to convey a peaceful message to the international community through Cizire, asserting that it did not exclude communities of different ethnic, religious, or sectarian backgrounds (Çitlioğlu, 2024, pp. 123–124).

The “Social Contract” highlighted principles such as democracy, freedom, secularism, human rights, private property rights, gender equality, and the rejection of discrimination, as well as decentralization and respect for the territorial integrity of the nation-state (Taştekin, 2016, pp. 187–188). These principles—particularly valued by Western states—bolstered Western sympathy for PYD, especially in contrast to the rhetoric and aggressiveness of radical Islamist groups in Syria. The emphasis on Syria’s territorial integrity was also crucial in preventing confrontation with the Assad regime and its Russian backer. Aware that recognition from Western states—particularly the U.S.—was necessary to legitimize its moves toward cantonization, establishing assemblies and drafting a constitution, PYD sought external support. Within this framework, PYD attempted to participate in the Geneva II Conference held between 22 January and 16 February 2014 but was unable to secure a seat (Bursa, 2019, p. 112).

By January 2014, the three autonomous cantons decided to unite under a federal system. The Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), which functions as an umbrella organization uniting Kurdish structures in northern Syria, declared itself responsible for governing these cantons (Özçelik, 2019). PYD’s unilateral declaration of federation was a major step toward state-building. In April 2014, PYD announced a political parties law intended to create a legal basis for suppressing Kurdish political parties within the autonomous region (Al Jazeera, 2014; Sandıklı et al., 2015). Opposition Kurdish parties reacted strongly to PYD’s autonomy declaration in Jazira, leading ENKS to participate in a meeting of the Syrian National Council in Istanbul. During the meeting, a PYD-opposed Kurdish representative was appointed as Minister of Economy and Natural Resources in the “Syrian Government-in-Exile” (Çitlioğlu, 2024, p. 124). Meanwhile, influential Kurdish political figures such as Salah Badr al-Din and KDP-S member Muhammad Ismail published strong criticisms of PYD. Badr al-Din argued that other Kurdish parties opposed the autonomous administration, that moderate Kurds, Arabs and Christians formed the demographic majority, and that PYD imposed its decisions through force, comparing it to ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Ismail emphasized their continued recognition of Barzani and the KDP as the political leadership of the Kurdish people and condemned PYD’s repressive practices (Çitlioğlu, 2024, p. 124).

In addition to all these developments, the organization sought to gain recognition as a legitimate interlocutor by intensifying its foreign contacts from 2013 onward and entered a period of vigorous pursuit of international support. In this context, the organization’s leader,

Salih Muslim, paid official visits to Sweden in April 2013, Iran in August of the same year, and the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China in December, requesting support for the PYD's activities in Syria during these meetings. Moreover, PYD officials succeeded in participating as a party in the talks held in Moscow in January 2015 between representatives of the Assad regime and the opposition (Başer, 2015). During this period, it was observed that the organization began to obtain, albeit to a limited extent, favorable outcomes from its attempts to be recognized as a legitimate counterpart. Indeed, Western states that designate the PKK as a terrorist organization also adopted a noticeably different stance toward the PYD. The U.S. administration, declaring that the PKK and the PYD were separate groups, requested that Türkiye open a support corridor for the PYD during the clashes in Kobani. In February 2015, two female PYD representatives were received by French President Hollande at the Élysée Palace, where, during a meeting organized and financed by the French government, the PYD delegation requested increased military and logistical assistance from France (Sandıklı et al., 2015).

The establishment of a joint operational force on 10 October 2015 to expel ISIS from Raqqa and its surrounding areas constituted a significant opportunity for the PYD to distance itself from its image as a terrorist organization (Sökmen, 2016). Under the name of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the armed structure of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, this joint force consisted of Arab, Turkmen, Armenian, and Syriac fighters. At its center stood the YPG, the armed wing of the PYD, and Mazlum Abdi, a senior PYD/YPG figure, was appointed as its commander. During this period of politicization and efforts to gain legitimacy, the PYD, under U.S. guidance, changed its name to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in order to counter claims that it was merely a branch of the PKK/KCK, thereby entering a new phase in its political identity transformation (Sivrikaya, 2019, p. 334). Thus, in response to allegations that it was part of the PKK/KCK's regional terrorist network, the organization—on the advice and recommendation of the United States—rebranded itself as the SDF, shedding its identity as the armed component of TEV-DEM and advancing to a new stage in political identity formation during the civil war. The fact that this transformation occurred under U.S. direction was explicitly confirmed by U.S. Special Operations Commander Raymond Thomas (Çalışkan, 2020, p. 73).Through this newly acquired identity, resources, and capacity, the organization supported the Damascus government against opposition groups, thereby downplaying its ties with the regime at the

domestic level while maintaining its relations with Russia and positioning itself externally in a dependent relationship with the United States (Çalışkan, 2020, p. 72). Under these conditions—marked by the absence of a central government capable of establishing sovereignty across Syria—the creation of the SDF in place of the PYD by the United States can be interpreted as an attempt to remove, or at least mitigate, the accusations of terrorism through an image-management strategy.

By 17 March 2016, it was announced that the "Federal Rojava Region" had been adopted following a meeting held under PYD leadership in the Rumeylan area of al-Hasakah in northeastern Syria. The so-called "Rojava Federal Region," composed of the three PYD-controlled cantons of Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira, was planned under Kurdish leadership and designed to include Arabs and Assyrians as well. However, in an environment in which all opposition elements had been suppressed or displaced, elections were held in the so-called cantons in 2017. In these elections, the "Democratic Nation List" led by the PYD achieved a clear numerical advantage over the ENKS "National List." The instrumentalization of such elections in this context was highly significant, as it served both to lend legitimacy to the organizational structure and to signal to international actors in the region that political representation rested with the PYD (Sönmez, 2021, pp. 69–70). On the other hand, the unilateral declaration of a federation aimed at establishing an autonomous region—and the steps leading up to it—was not accepted by either the Assad regime or the opposition. In a statement issued by the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the regime expressed its reaction by noting: "Establishing a federal system is contrary to the Syrian Constitution, all national frameworks, and international agreements." Similarly, the Syrian National Coalition, which represents the opposition on international platforms, declared that such unilateral announcements were unacceptable and argued that this move would "place the will of the Syrian people under guardianship." The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs also stated that Syria's territorial integrity must be preserved and that a unilateral declaration of federation would not be recognized (Suriye Gündemi, 2016). These reactions are based on understandable grounds. A transition from a unitary state to a federal system could pave the way not only for Kurdish autonomy but also for Sunni armed groups controlling large swaths of the country, as well as for Hezbollah's increased political influence in Syria, following its political consolidation in Lebanon. Moreover, a federal structure—by distancing the Ba'ath Party from its ideal of an Arab nation-state and enabling the emergence of ethnic and

religious autonomous regions—was perceived as a factor that could accelerate Syria's fragmentation. According to Assad, Arab populations constitute the majority in areas inhabited by Kurds in Syria, while Kurds account for only around 30 percent. Under such demographic conditions, Kurds would remain a minority in the very areas in which they declared autonomy (Dünya Bülteni, 2016). For the time being, the United States has not supported the establishment of a Northern Syria Federation, in which Kurds would hold authority over economic, security, and defense affairs under the name of democratic self-administration (Cumhuriyet, 2016). Likewise, although Russia has put forward the view that federalism could serve as a new administrative model for Syria, it has not offered explicit support.

Following PYD's federation declaration, significant shifts occurred in Syria. The cooperation between the Assad regime and PYD—jointly administering oil revenues in Rumeilan and governing Qamishli and al-Hasakah—collapsed. The Syrian army's clashes with YPG forces in Qamishli further escalated tensions. Arab tribes, who constituted the demographic majority in the region, announced the formation of an Arab military force named Jaysh Asha'ir al-Sharqiya (Eastern Tribes Army) against PKK/PYD. In a meeting attended by the Chief of Staff of the Free Syrian Army, 45 Arab tribal leaders declared their intention to fight the organization until it was completely eliminated (Mehmetçik TV, 2016). Thus, the organization's unilateral federation declaration triggered new conflict between Kurds and Arabs in the Syrian civil war, effectively eliminating the possibility of future coexistence. PYD, which had already forced Arab and Turkmen communities into displacement through oppression and violence, also applied the same methods against dissident Kurds. From this point onward, anti-PYD Kurdish groups began organizing political and military resistance under the Syrian Kurdish National Council (ENKS), headquartered in Erbil, northern Iraq. Similar to the intra-Kurdish conflicts in northern Iraq between KDP and PUK in 1994–1998, the possibility of confrontation also emerged between PYD and ENKS. Moreover, in April 2016, the final communiqué of the 13th Islamic Cooperation Organization meeting in Istanbul declared PYD a terrorist organization (Sökmen, 2016). In the same period, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter openly acknowledged the PKK–PYD/YPG connection during a Senate hearing in April 2016, stating that PYD/YPG was also a terrorist organization for the United States (Milliyet, 2016).

When the unilateral declaration of federation is examined in detail, it becomes clear that the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria—planned with the PYD at its center—is based on the principle of democratic autonomy. According to its architects, this so-called political system, which claims to rest on United Nations human rights norms and democratic social structures and to prioritize fraternity and peace among peoples, allows all communal groups to develop any form of political, economic, social, and cultural democratic alliances and relations at the regional and international levels. However, although the proposed federal system ostensibly emphasizes the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity and unity, it is inevitable that ethnic groups could pursue irredentist policies and move toward unification with the same ethnic communities in neighboring states (Evrensel, 2016). In reality, it is evident that the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria—with the PYD at its core—rests on the PKK/KCK's regional terrorist network structure. The system outlined mirrors precisely the order envisaged in the PKK/KCK's "social contract," in which the sovereign powers of the state are transferred to autonomous local administrations (Sökmen, 2012). Likewise, the decision-making bodies and provincial/regional assemblies envisioned in the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria are also specified in the KCK charter. Moreover, the local councils and government, constitutional status, local and autonomous economy, self-security—meaning that security would be ensured through Kurdish armed structures—and diplomacy, all proposed within the federal model, correspond to the elements articulated in PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's "Democratic Autonomy" project (Yeğen, 1999). Within this system, which would transform the new Syria from a unitary state into a federal one, it is evident that the proposed autonomous administration would enable the Kurds to construct a political order allowing them to govern themselves. It is also clear that the autonomous arrangement envisaged within Syrian territory is designed to gain formal political status from the central Syrian government. However, under the conditions of civil war, such a unilateral declaration of autonomy, without obtaining constitutional or political recognition from the central government, lacks a foundation in international law (Sökmen, 2016).

The PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK/KCK regional terrorist network that maintains control over a wide area in northeastern Syria under U.S. support and protection, has taken yet another bold step in its state-building efforts following "cantonalization," the "Autonomous Region Administration," and the unilateral "federation declaration." In the

spring of 2024, the organization announced the establishment of a so-called political system in the region, marking a new challenge. According to the structure declared, the territory under occupation was divided into 6 so-called metropolitan districts, 40 so-called cities, and 105 so-called towns, with Qamishli, Hasakah, Raqqa, Kobani, Manbij, and Afrin designated as so-called metropolitan centers. Additionally, seven so-called cantons were established in the occupied zone under the names Jazira, Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Tabqa, Euphrates, Manbij, and Afrin-Shahba (Sözcü, 2024). While the repercussions of this move continued, it became evident that the PYD had taken an additional step toward its objective of statehood. Researchers in the region claimed that the organization would hold a so-called "local election" on 11 June 2024. According to reporting by Rudaw, broadcasting from northern Iraq, this so-called election was not regarded as legitimate even by some Kurdish groups in the area and was met with criticism. The Syrian Kurdish National Council (ENKS), known for its close ties to the Erbil administration, announced that it would boycott the vote, stating: "*They are organizing an election solely through armed force. This is not legitimate and harms our people*" (Sözcü, 2024).

At this point, the following assessment can be made regarding the interaction, politicization and independence efforts of separatist Kurds in the Syrian civil war: The activities carried out by Syrian Kurdish parties and groups that participated in the anti-Assad protests—which quickly escalated into a civil war—did not initially attract attention, as they did not frequently turn into violent incidents. Nevertheless, Kurds became part of the opposition through alliances among themselves and by joining various opposition movements and coalitions. Two principal actors emerged from this process: PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK/KCK regional terrorist network, and the Kurdish National Council (ENKS), comprising Kurdish groups united under the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). These two actors took important steps toward forming an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. This indicated that the long-standing rivalry between Türkiye-based and Iraq-based separatist Kurdish movements could shift toward cooperation. However, despite external support enabling some degree of cooperation, several factors hindered long-term collaboration. One of these factors concerns the position of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) within Iraq, and another relates to the regional alliances of both actors. Although KDP claims to represent not only Iraqi Kurds but all Kurds, recent developments in Iraq and Syria have revealed that KDP's influence over Kurds in the region is limited. While the KDP

employs the discourse of a “common Kurdish cause” in the Syrian crisis, Kurdish parties in Iraq do not act in full alignment with the KRG’s policy toward Syrian Kurds.

Setting aside the historical rivalry among Kurdish movements—which possess ideological, cultural, political, and international dimensions—it is plausible that, at the current stage, the PYD would face significant limitations and challenges in establishing its desired structure in Syria without logistical and financial support from the KDP. Conversely, a major handicap for the KDP is the fact that the political parties and groups aligned with it hold very limited power and influence within Syria, particularly becoming markedly weaker in Kurdish-populated areas the further west one moves. At present, the KDP maintains influence in only a small number of localities. For this reason, should the KDP enter into an open power struggle with the PYD over influence among Syrian Kurds, it appears unlikely under current conditions that it could empower its affiliated groups effectively. From this perspective, even if the KDP were to secure international support in its efforts to gain influence over Syrian Kurds, the absence of a unified policy among Kurdish parties within the KRI regarding developments related to Kurdish parties in Syria constitutes a major obstacle preventing Kurdish groups from forming cohesive political linkages.

According to Bozkurt’s findings—which we share—the deeper continuation of KDP–PYD cooperation is also hindered by the external alliances of both actors. KDP’s relationship with Türkiye, and Türkiye’s sensitivity regarding PYD as the Syrian extension of the PKK/KCK network, severely limits cooperation between the two Kurdish actors. The close economic, social and political ties between Iraqi Kurds and Türkiye over the past several years have become too significant for either side to disregard. KDP’s disputed oil agreements with Baghdad and its political tensions with the central government created areas where it needed Turkish support and where cooperation could yield lasting gains (Bozkurt, 2013). Furthermore, according to the same author, Kurdish factions—openly supported by the U.S. and the West—calculate that Syria may be heading toward an ethnic and/or sectarian conflict. If such a scenario materializes, as in Iraq, Kurds could become key allies or balancing actors for both the regime and emerging political entities (Bozkurt, 2013). In this environment, where cooperation and rivalry coexist, PYD’s strategic alliance with the U.S.—which seeks control over the region’s energy resources—creates an additional point of tension. These multilayered and historically rooted problems impede the capacity of Kurdish actors in the Syrian civil war to form a unified political structure.

Despite seizing control over large areas in northern Syria after the onset of the conflict—particularly after regime forces withdrew—PYD faces significant challenges concerning its long-term future. PYD experiences serious governance issues in regions under its control, especially east of the Euphrates. As the organization expands southward under the pretext of fighting ISIS, it encounters increasing discontent among Arab populations under its rule. In fact, Arab tribes reacted strongly to the SDF's roadblocks, house searches and detentions conducted under the guise of counterterrorism. These tensions sometimes escalated into armed clashes between Arab militias and YPG forces, with frequent accusations that PYD sought to alter the demographic structure of the region (Öğür & Baykal, 2018, p. 61). Additionally, during Türkiye's Operation Peace Spring in October 2019, Arab fighters within the SDF refused to fight alongside PYD/YPG against Turkish forces (Balanche, 2020). PYD's inability to meet the population's basic needs in its areas of control represents another major obstacle to its state-building ambitions. The organization lacks the technical capacity and infrastructure required to support farmers and livestock producers in producing fertilizer and feed, and it has been unable to reverse the continual decline in agricultural productivity since 2011. Moreover, due to insufficient technical expertise and financial resources, PYD has been unable to repair water, electricity and telecommunications infrastructure damaged by the war, worsening living conditions for the local population (Balanche, 2020). In summary, although PYD—under U.S. support and protection—has seized a large area east of the Euphrates, it remains incapable of effectively governing these territories. This inability to administer the areas under its control constitutes one of the greatest obstacles to its ambition to establish a state-like structure (Sarı, 2022, p. 101). Above all, neither the opposition nor the regime accepts the existence of an autonomous or independent Kurdish region in Syria. Even if such a situation were hypothetically accepted, the structure, borders, population composition and governance of a so-called "Western Kurdistan" or "Syrian Kurdistan" would remain highly uncertain. Thus, for the Kurds, the primary issue lies not in how the difficulties or uncertainties of establishing a region will be resolved, but in determining their priorities.

6. PROBLEM AREAS ORIGINATING FROM PYD/YPG IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS: TÜRKİYE'S THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND POLICIES

The Syrian civil war has evolved not only into a source of regional instability but also into a multidimensional security crisis shaped by conflicting interests among various actors. Throughout this process, the direct or indirect support provided to PYD/YPG by international actors has been perceived by Türkiye not merely as a border security issue, but as a national security threat with the potential to undermine state integrity. The engagement of certain Western powers—particularly the United States—with PYD/YPG has prompted Türkiye to question the foundations of its alliance relationships. This situation has triggered securitization processes within Türkiye's Syria policy at both the discursive and practical levels, profoundly transforming its threat perceptions. Türkiye's policy responses to these developments have ranged widely—from cross-border military operations to diplomatic initiatives and strategic narratives aimed at shaping domestic public opinion. The following section will examine in a multidimensional manner how the international sponsorship and protection of PYD/YPG has influenced Türkiye's security perceptions.

6.1. The Patronage of the PYD/YPG as a Source of Tension During the Civil War

The patronage of the PYD/YPG—the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK—by actors holding influence and leverage in the region is not a newly emerged phenomenon, nor is it a coincidental development. Rather, it constitutes a long-standing structural issue that has historically hindered efforts to establish regional peace and stability. Indeed, the protection of ethnically separatist Kurdish groups against central governments within their respective geographies possesses a deep historical background and dimension. This phenomenon is directly linked to the policies and strategic designs of global and regional powers, each of which approaches the region with distinct political codes and interests. From this broader perspective, the Middle East—one of the primary arenas of geopolitical competition—has been significantly shaped by the aspirations of major actors. The United States, seeking to maintain its global supremacy, has historically aimed to control the region's vast energy resources and transit routes. Meanwhile, Russia, another

global power whose federal budget relies heavily on energy revenues, continues its traditional policy of seeking access to warm waters and strives to maintain a presence and influence along the strategic corridors of the Middle East's energy resources. Against this backdrop, the fact that Kurdish groups living adjacent to these highly coveted energy routes remain in close contact with expansionist Russia on one hand, and emerge as local strategic partners serving American geopolitical interests on the other, is far from coincidental.

6.1.1. The United States' Support and Patronage of the PYD/YPG During the Syrian Civil War

Due to its energy resources as well as its geopolitical and geostrategic position, Syria lies at the crossroads of the zones of contention among powers with interests and spheres of influence in the region, above all the United States. Syria constitutes one of the key links in the Kurdish Corridor project, which was designed to ensure the secure transport of a portion of the Middle East's oil and natural gas reserves to the Mediterranean (Akyener, 2016). In this context, the United States' desire to establish a Kurdish structure in Syria to secure this energy corridor can be interpreted through the lens of the natural gas pipeline routes that are cited among the reasons for the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011. From this standpoint, when we look at the region shortly before the outbreak of the crisis, Qatar—one of the US's allies in the Middle East—proposed in 2009 the Qatar–Türkiye Pipeline project to transport its own natural gas to Europe via Saudi Arabia–Jordan–Syria and Türkiye (Kennedy, 2016). This move prompted a reaction from the Assad regime and its backer, Moscow. Russia and Syria, whose interests in the global energy market would be harmed were this US-backed project to be realized, rejected participation and instead proposed the Islamic Pipeline project, which would transport Iranian gas through Iraq and deliver it to the Mediterranean via Syria's Tartus Port (Gençlik Araştırmaları Derneği, 2017). If implemented, this project would have given Russia—already maintaining a military base in Tartus—leverage over energy flows in the region. Under US influence, the proposal by Moscow and Damascus was rejected. In the same period, the Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia in 2010 and quickly spread across the region reached Syrian territory one year later, reactivating fault lines in this contested arena and triggering the Syrian crisis, which would later evolve into a civil war. As the countries supporting the Qatar–Türkiye pipeline project, together with the United States, threw their weight behind the opposition against Bashar al-Assad, the clashes

in Syria soon turned into a bloody civil war. In this process, the US administration, aiming to block the Islamic Pipeline and bring under its control the pipeline planned to run through Iran–Iraq–Syria, turned toward its local strategic partner, the Kurds (Perdisa, 2017). By supporting the Kurds in Syria after Iraq, the US sought both to prevent the implementation of the pipeline proposed by Moscow and Damascus, and, at a later stage, to control any energy pipeline it imposed through the Kurds under its patronage (Bursa, 2019, p. 100). From this perspective, it is possible to interpret the US's role in triggering the Syrian crisis and its subsequent support and patronage of Kurds in Syria, as it had done in Iraq, through the prism of the Kurdish Corridor project.

With these developments, the rapid expansion of large-scale protests and clashes—sparked by the failure to ensure basic rights and freedoms—across the country also mobilized the previously relatively stable Syrian separatist Kurds. During the phase in which social unrest was evolving into civil war, the Assad regime, which was implementing harsh measures against the opposition to preserve territorial integrity, considered using the PYD—the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK—as a buffer against Türkiye, which was supporting the opposition. In particular, during the period of good relations with Türkiye, the regime decided to cease its pressure on the PYD. At this point, it strategically allowed the PYD's organizational activities and autonomy efforts in the northern regions of the country where Kurds are densely populated (İyiat, 2018, p. 8). This development suddenly turned the organization into a significant local actor in the eyes of the Damascus regime and of the regional and global powers that wield influence in the region (Ertuğrul, 2014, p. 77). In response, the organization, which defines itself as a political party, rapidly increased its influence in the areas where it operated and took steps towards achieving its ultimate objectives, including the establishment of its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG) (Erkmen, 2012, p. 24). In the early phase of the civil war, in early 2012, Syrian regime forces, in a coordinated manner, withdrew from Cizire, Ayn al-Arab (Kurdish: Kobani) and Afrin in the country's north, after which the PYD/YPG established dominance in these areas and consolidated its military presence. In July 2012 it seized Ayn al-Arab, and on 20 July it captured Amuda and Afrin with almost no serious clashes (Dağ, 2015, p. 12). Having unexpectedly found such advantages before it, the organization, empowered by the control it gained, began jointly administering, alongside regime units and Shabbiha militias, cities such as Qamishli and Hasakah, with Qamishli at the forefront (Özay, 2019, p. 200).

However, perhaps the PYD/YPG's greatest stroke of fortune was the sudden emergence in the region of the Salafi-jihadist terrorist organization ISIS as a high-risk threat. ISIS's military strategy was primarily based on taking control of water resources, with a focus on the Euphrates and Khabur basins—regions that overlapped with Kurdish-populated areas. As ISIS emerged as an almost game-setting actor in the civil war, and as the extremist formations it represented became a powerful force in Iraq and Syria, balances changed rapidly and significantly (İyiat, 2018, p. 9). The PYD/YPG's struggle against ISIS in northern Syria—especially in Ayn al-Arab (Kobani)—with external backing captured the attention of the West, which favored a secular Syria, while simultaneously strengthening the justification of the US, which sought to establish dominance in the region. The US perspective on Syria also sheds light on the fault lines in Ankara–Washington relations. From 2012 onwards, divergences emerged between Türkiye and the US over their approaches to the PYD/YPG, the fight against ISIS and the fate of Bashar al-Assad, leading to a parting of ways. The US's withdrawal of support from Assad and its use of this stance as leverage against Iran and Russia created an area of influence over Türkiye. Within this sphere of influence, the US preference for ethnically separatist Kurds as local partners in pursuit of a project to establish an energy corridor to the Eastern Mediterranean became clear. In line with its strategy of reshaping the Middle East, the US began to support the PYD/YPG more strongly instead of so-called "moderate Islamists," pushing the Kurds to the forefront (Köse, 2016, p. 184). During this period, PYD Co-Chair Asiya Abdullah openly stated that US air operations played a very large role in the "fall of Kobani" to ISIS being reversed, shedding further light on this relationship (BBC, 2014).

In subsequent stages of the Syrian civil war, the PYD/YPG, the Syrian arm of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK, pursued a distinctly pragmatic policy and developed good relations with the Damascus regime and its supporters Russia and Iran. By neutralizing the Kurdish groups supported by Barzani in Syria, it also positioned itself as the sole representative of the Kurds (Çotu, 2017, p. 299). As ISIS advanced in Syria and attacked areas densely populated by Kurds, the PYD/YPG emerged as the only organized force capable of stopping ISIS. In exactly this environment, the PYD/YPG presented the US with multi-functional opportunities and new instruments that could be used in the evolving Kurdish equation—both against Türkiye and Barzani, and against the cooperation among other regional actors (21. Yüzyıl Türkiye Enstitüsü, 2013). Under these circumstances, the

PYD/YPG, which had maintained its relationship with the Assad regime from the start of the crisis, entered into military engagement with the US and began receiving weapons, equipment and logistical support from Washington under the pretext of the fight against ISIS (Sarı, 2022, p. 99).

In the midst of the civil war, after a sensational assassination targeting high-level officials made Assad's fall seem imminent, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah came to his aid. From spring 2013 onwards, the regime began, while setting the Kurds aside, to offset the opposition (Canyurt, 2018, pp. 23–24). With Russia's intervention on the regime's side in September 2015, the trajectory of the civil war shifted in Assad's favor. Through intense attacks and sieges, the regime regained much of the territory it had rapidly lost at the outset of the war (Özcan, 2022). In fact, this situation not only weakened the rival opposition but also provided significant advantages to the PYD and opened up a wide field for the organization. Backed by the regime and external actors, the PYD/YPG expanded across a broad area, and after establishing control over these territories, it targeted the Syrian opposition, neutralizing other Kurdish opposition elements. After a series of clashes with the Syrian opposition, it expanded its area of control further, seizing the Yarubiyah town and border crossing near the Iraqi frontier. It then moved into ISIS-controlled areas, including the oil-rich region near Qamishli that encompasses places such as Yusufiye, Sefa and Girhok. In particular, by expelling segments of the Arab and Turkmen populations from the Tel Abyad region that it occupied, it created a corridor stretching from Cizire to Ayn al-Arab (Kobanî) (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 177). As the opposition withdrew from the region and ISIS was forced to retreat to Tel Hamis and Tel Barak (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 26), the organization leveraged its alliances with the US and the Assad regime to move to the next step in its strategy of unifying the cantons it had declared.

Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of ISIS—capturing towns with oil fields—and the intensification of its activities added another layer to the regional crisis. In January 2014, clashes broke out between the Syrian opposition and ISIS. Soon thereafter, ISIS seized Raqqa and then captured areas populated by Kurds, including Hasakah, eastern Aleppo and the northeastern belt extending toward the Turkish border. Clashes then began between ISIS and YPG. By September 2014, ISIS had taken control of almost all the villages and towns surrounding Ayn al-Arab (Acun & Öner, 2014, p. 3). Faced with Russia's overt military intervention on the regime's side in September 2015—which threatened US interests,

particularly regarding control of energy resources—the Washington administration adjusted its Syria policy. In this framework, it responded to the PYD/YPG's search for international support and calls for assistance amid mounting ISIS attacks (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 27). When ISIS, bolstered by heavy weapons captured in Iraq and Syria, advanced rapidly and approached full control of Ayn al-Arab, the Pentagon moved to intensify its military engagement and cooperation with the PYD/YPG, particularly to expel ISIS from the oil-producing areas it had captured (Darıcılı, 2019). In this sense, ISIS's siege of Ayn al-Arab (Arabic: Ayn al-Arab, Kurdish name: Kobanî) marked a key turning point in the PYD's military and political development. With the fall of Ayn al-Arab to ISIS, the United States activated UN mechanisms and, through the international coalition, began intensive airstrikes against both ISIS and Syrian opposition forces in Syria and Iraq (Acun, 2015, pp. 4–5; Ulutaş, 2015). In line with a strategy of encircling ISIS from the north via a corridor, the US conducted three-quarters of its air operations in Syria in support of the Kurds in Ayn al-Arab (Lund, 2015) and, in addition to airstrikes, provided arms by airdropping weapons to PYD/YPG forces fighting ISIS. The US's initial support via airdrops and, starting in September 2014, overland military assistance continued with hundreds of truckloads of military supplies sent across the Iraq–Syria border by late 2014 (Ukav, 2016), complemented by weapons air-dropped via US C-130 aircraft from October 2014 onwards (Zaman, 2015).

American support for the PYD did not stop there. Following the start of airstrikes against ISIS positions, at the instruction of then US President Barack Obama, US Special Operations Forces were deployed to the field to provide direct operational advice to the YPG-SDF. It was announced that these US Special Forces—numbering fewer than 50—would have the primary mission of training, supporting and advising SDF fighters. After US Special Forces took control of the Rmelan air base within PYD territory in northern Syria, they improved the airfield's infrastructure to facilitate the use of the base by advisors, special forces and other military units, as well as to enable the delivery of weapons and supplies to Kurdish forces (Majumbar, 2016). Once this infrastructure was strengthened, air combat control elements, rescue teams working with special forces and, in December 2015, additional special forces with tasks ranging from coordinating air operations on the ground to training and directing opposition groups, were deployed to the base. On 1 December 2015, the US Secretary of Defense declared that a special expeditionary force with authority to conduct unilateral operations in Syria—without consulting anyone—had been sent to the region to

gather intelligence, conduct raids, rescue hostages and capture ISIS leaders, in addition to supporting Kurdish forces (21. Yüzyıl Türkiye Enstitüsü, 2013). Around the same time, another US official, Brett McGurk, the US President's Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, traveled to Ayn al-Arab and held talks in the field with PYD/YPG leaders (Milliyet, 2016).

US–PYD/YPG contact was not limited to these steps. In the fight against ISIS, Türkiye and the US jointly trained Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga forces and sent them via Türkiye to fight in Ayn al-Arab (Martin, 2018, p. 549). In this way, US officials secured Türkiye's opening of a corridor for KRG peshmerga forces through Turkish territory to provide ground support to Ayn al-Arab (Milliyet, 2014). By January 2015, YPG forces had taken control of the Ayn al-Arab area and significantly widened the corridor along Türkiye's southern border (Byman, 2015). The Kobani experience demonstrated to the Pentagon that YPG forces could be turned into an effective ground force in the fight against ISIS, while, for the YPG, it underscored the importance of US air power (Erol & Çelik, 2018, p. 31). It is also worth noting that the failure to target areas where ISIS was engaged in clashes with the opposition and especially with YPG forces, and the lack of interference with ISIS's establishment of logistical routes to these fronts, gave the impression that ISIS was being directed primarily against the opposition and that US airstrikes were being conducted deliberately and selectively. It became increasingly apparent that the US was instrumentalizing its supposed fight against ISIS and conducting it largely through the YPG, the PYD's military wing, which it had turned into a ground force (Ünal, 2015). Within this context, in line with the military engagement initially established in Ayn al-Arab, it became clear that the aim was to bring the entire Hasekeh–Qamishli to Afrin belt along the Turkish border under PYD/YPG control. Indeed, with US logistical and intense air support, the capture of Tel Abyad by YPG forces enabled the unification of the Cizire and Kobani cantons and brought a 400-kilometer stretch of the border under PYD/YPG control (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 165). Following these gains, the 110-kilometer Jarablus–Azaz line between Afrin and Ayn al-Arab became the PYD/YPG's next priority. However, Ankara's declaration that it would not allow YPG forces to cross to the west bank of the Euphrates, and its subsequent military operations against YPG attempts in that direction, forced the Pentagon to step back and led to a mutual understanding that Türkiye would be engaged as a partner on this hot front (Acun, 2015, pp. 1–8). Nonetheless, the Pentagon appeared reluctant to provide sufficient

support in the region to opposition groups backed by Türkiye for the stated purpose of clearing ISIS from the area, and took steps that effectively slowed Ankara down.

Despite Türkiye's strong objections, the US continued and even increased its assistance after October 2015 (Aljazeera Türkiye, 2017). This aid included, primarily to PYD/YPG forces, Russian-made AK-47 (Kalashnikov) rifles, DShK heavy machine guns (Degtyaryov–Shpagin), PKS infantry machine guns (Pulemyot Kalashnikova Stankovıy), TOW anti-tank systems and ammunition, armored personnel carriers, night-vision systems, small unmanned aerial vehicles for military purposes, basic survival equipment for combat environments and various camouflage products (Efegil, 2016, pp. 55–56). In addition to the 24 tons of weapons and ammunition supplied for use in the fight against ISIS in Kobani (Letsch, 2014), international and local sources report that the US has provided the YPG with some 120 tons of military equipment to date (Military Times, 2015). These and later expanded military deliveries became the most critical component of the strategic alliance that emerged between the PYD and the US in the context of the fight against ISIS, which began with the Kobani battles (Duman, 2021). With weapons support and combat experience gained in the fight against ISIS, the PYD became an influential military force in the Syrian civil war (Darıcılı, 2019, p. 330).

Meanwhile, when it became clear that the SDF—whose core was formed by YPG units—could not break Türkiye's declared red line on the west bank of the Euphrates via Jarablus, it moved further south. In December 2015, it announced an operation to "liberate" the Tishrin Dam, located on the route connecting eastern Aleppo to Raqqa (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 29). With heavy US air support, YPG–SDF forces advanced in large convoys from Hasekeh in the east to Ayn al-Arab in the west, toward the Tishrin Dam. As ISIS forces in the area south of Sarrin withdrew without serious resistance, as in Tel Abyad, the region fell into YPG–SDF hands (Suriye Gündemi, 2015). The Tishrin Dam on the Euphrates in eastern Aleppo, besides being a key energy source for ISIS, also served as a corridor connecting its controlled areas in eastern Aleppo and Raqqa, giving it substantial geostrategic importance (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 178). The dam is also crucial for the YPG's strategy of crossing to the west bank of the Euphrates and ultimately unifying Afrin with other cantons. Thus, the fall of this strategic dam to YPG–SDF forces represented a highly critical development affecting the balance of power in northern Syria (Suriye Gündemi, 2015).

As can be seen, what began as logistical support quickly evolved into a structured negotiation process between PYD/YPG and US officials. The military cooperation that began during the siege of Afrin deepened and transformed into a strategic partnership on the ground (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 182). Protected by intense US air support during the siege and directly backed in hot combat by American Special Forces, the YPG consolidated its superiority on the ground through substantial weapons and equipment deliveries within this cooperation. After the capture of Afrin, the PYD/YPG and the US moved to the phase of unifying the so-called Cizire and Kobani cantons. With the seizure of Tel Abyad, a 400-kilometer stretch of the Türkiye–Syria border came under PYD/YPG control, and a large Kurdish geography emerged in northern Syria, stretching from the Iraqi border to Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) (Orhan, 2015). In this period, the US created the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) for the ostensible purpose of fighting ISIS, with the YPG at its core, and this umbrella organization became the primary coordinating structure working with US Special Forces in Kurdish regions. Some opposition Arab groups also joined SDF ranks to avoid relinquishing contested areas to Kurdish forces. While Pentagon-backed SDF units operated in northeastern Aleppo, CIA-backed groups remained active in the west (Duvan, 2024). In this complex equation, Russian attacks on the Islamist opposition groups supported by the CIA weakened them and opened space in the north for the Pentagon-backed Kurds. As a result of this military and political cooperation, in every area captured by the PYD/YPG, the US helped restore urban infrastructure, establish military bases and form local councils under PYD/YPG supervision (Mohammed et al., 2015). Consequently, the YPG's status as a local partner to the US was strengthened, and Washington increased its support. These developments transformed the PYD into a major political actor in northern Syria, backed by economic, social and military gains achieved under US support and patronage during the Syrian civil war. In this regard, these steps can be understood as manifestations of a significant shift in US Syria policy following Russia's active intervention in the conflict (Çitlioğlu, 2024).

During this period, Türkiye found itself opposed to both the US and Russia. On the one hand, it sought to prevent the Azez–Jarablus corridor from falling into PYD/YPG hands and forming a contiguous Kurdish cantonal belt along its border, and on the other, it attempted through the Euphrates Shield operation to block Kurdish advances in areas where ISIS was active. It is evident that both the US and Russia, albeit for different reasons and expectations, looked favorably upon granting autonomy to separatist Kurds in Syria. The US's intention

to use the loyal PYD/YPG as a multi-purpose instrument and to encircle Türkiye from the south is a well-known reality (21. Yüzyıl Türkiye Enstitüsü, 2013). Although the weapons and military equipment delivered to the PYD/YPG by the US and Russia were strongly criticized by Türkiye and Syrian opposition forces, the bigger picture shows that the organization, using its newfound capabilities, aligned with the Damascus regime against opposition groups domestically, while externally maintaining its ties with Russia and positioning itself in a dependent relationship with the US (Çalışkan, 2020, p. 72). Through this pragmatic cooperation, the PYD/YPG expanded its territorial control by launching attacks on ISIS-held areas under the guise of the fight against terror, while portraying itself as a democratic and secular party fighting terrorism, thereby seeking to legitimize its actions in Syria. Consequently, it began to be recognized as a non-state local actor in the international arena, especially in Western public opinion (Duman, 2021). For the US, a common enemy provided a legitimate and convincing rationale for implementing the Kurdish Corridor project to secure control over the Middle East's energy resources and routes. At the same time, the PYD/YPG allowed Washington to command a well-organized, armed and sufficiently numerous local ground force.

As detailed above, ISIS attacks opened the door for the PYD/YPG to secure the international support it sought and pushed the organization toward a strategic alliance with the US. The expansion of ISIS—a Salafi-jihadist terrorist organization—into important cities such as Mosul, Sinjar and Makhmour, thereby threatening Kurdish regions under US patronage and disrupting American oil company activities, was a major factor in the US decision to enter into a strategic partnership with the PYD (Yüksel, 2014). In this framework, ISIS's advance in Kobani, which made external support indispensable for the PYD/YPG and drove the organization to seek US aid, and Washington's search for a suitable local proxy to safeguard its interests converged precisely at the point of ISIS's attacks. In other words, the PYD/YPG's confrontation with ISIS provided the US with an exit from its deadlock in the Syrian civil war. The US found the "moderate opposition" it had long sought in Syria in the PYD/YPG forces fighting in Kobani (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 175). Thus, in October 2014, the meeting in Duhok between PYD Co-Chair Salih Muslim and US Deputy National Security Advisor Tony Blinken marked the first time the US openly recognized the PYD as a local strategic partner in the fight against ISIS (Oral, 2014). After various speculations circulated in public regarding US military support for certain armed opposition groups

during the civil war, Salih Muslim declared that these supplies were indeed being provided to the PYD, thereby clarifying the issue. Shortly thereafter, the statement by YPG spokesperson Redur Halil on 15 October 2015, in which he said that Muslim's words bound only the PYD and that he had no involvement in military matters, revealed the US's need to obscure the political and military nature of its support for the terrorist organization (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 30).

Once ISIS had been confined to a narrow territory through ground operations and airstrikes conducted by international coalition forces under US leadership (Duman, 2021), the PYD/YPG, having accumulated enormous advantages and gains, further consolidated its position. By leveraging the military superiority it had achieved through its engagements with the US and Russia and its arrangements with the Assad regime, it took further steps. The organization, with US leadership in particular, rebuilt the infrastructure in areas under its control and established military bases and local councils (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 183). In addition, in territories it captured—including Raqqa, Hasakah and Tel Abyad—it carried out actions that constituted war crimes, such as collective punishment, extrajudicial executions, village burnings, and seizure of goods and property (Sarı & Tınas, 2018, p. 15). By disregarding Arab, Turkmen and other local populations who did not accept its authority, forcing them to flee, confiscating their properties, and burning buildings containing land registry and population records, the organization wiped out documentary evidence. Furthermore, through coercion, it armed children under the guise of compulsory military service (T.C İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2017). In this way, it sought to make the region—whose demographic structure it had forcefully altered—governable on its own terms. Supported and protected without limit by the regime along with Russia and the US, the organization's human rights violations—especially against Kurdish opponents (Human Rights Watch, 2014)—and its attempts to impose an authoritarian administration created deep discontent among Kurds in Syria and the broader region. Despite Türkiye's and various opposition Kurdish intellectuals' concerns regarding the PYD/YPG, it cannot be said that the same degree of unease has been reflected in the West. Criticisms and warnings in this direction do not appear to have been taken seriously, as no sanctions have been imposed on the PYD/YPG; on the contrary, steps have been taken that could be construed as encouraging (Amnesty International, 2015). Nonetheless, organizations such as Amnesty International and the Syrian Network for Human Rights have documented these actions in reports—

drawing on satellite imagery—and have voiced serious criticism toward the attitude of ignoring the war crimes committed by the organization (Amnesty International, 2015).

These successful outcomes and historic gains—achieved under external support and patronage and providing the organization with a significant source of morale and motivation—undoubtedly have a historical background and dimension. To see this, one need not look too far back; it suffices to consider the US's murky, speculative activities in Syria. As will be recalled, in the later stages of the civil war, alongside efforts to unite Syrian Kurdish actors under one roof in opposition to the regime, proposals also emerged to train and equip certain so-called "moderate" opposition groups and provide them with logistical support, in order to reduce fragmentation and instill greater discipline within the opposition fighting on the ground. Within this context, as part of the fight against ISIS, the US, together with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and Türkiye, launched the train-and-equip program to enable local armed non-state opposition groups to fight jointly (Byman, 2015, p. 183). With Ankara's acceptance of an active role in this program, the "Train-and-Equip" project entered into force on 19 February 2015, when then US Ambassador to Ankara John Bass and then Turkish Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioğlu signed the relevant agreement. Sinirlioğlu, referring to the agreement as an important step in the strategic partnership between the two countries, noted that it was only the first step. Under the agreement, the US committed to sending more than 400 troops, including special operations units, to train Syrian opposition fighters outside Syria, while it was decided that 1,000–1,500 selected fighters would be trained annually in three-month cycles at a facility in Kırşehir, Türkiye by Turkish and American experts (BBC, 2015). Türkiye also later joined the US program to train Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga under the train-and-equip framework and to send them through Turkish territory to fight ISIS, thereby participating in the anti-ISIS coalition (Martin, 2018, p. 549). However, not only was the targeted number of fighters not trained, but the program also failed on the ground, and advanced weapons systems like TOW anti-tank missiles ended up in the hands of groups such as al-Nusra, causing dissatisfaction and deep disappointment in Washington (Miller & DeYoung, 2015). After the program failed to produce the desired results, US officials announced that support would shift from the groups trained under train-and-equip to armed groups actively fighting ISIS on the ground (Stewart & Holton, 2015). On 3 October 2015, in a press conference at the White House, President Barack Obama referred to the failure of the program, saying: "I'm the first to acknowledge

that this program hasn't worked the way it was supposed to," signaling that emphasis would shift toward cooperation with Kurdish forces in Syria. In the days following Obama's remarks, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter stated in a joint press conference with his British counterpart Michael Fallon that "Train-and-Equip will be modified to focus on working with capable Kurdish and other forces," implicitly pointing to the PYD/YPG without explicitly naming it (Sputnik Türkiye, 2021). According to a 9 October 2015 report in the New York Times, citing the failure of the train-and-equip program, the US decided to adopt the PYD/YPG as its local strategic partner and terminated the program in 2015 (Atlıoğlu, 2025, p. 105; Shear et al., 2015). Later, President Donald Trump stated in an official address that he had ordered the CIA to terminate its program of training and arming rebels, but that support for the SDF—and therefore for the PYD/YPG—would continue (Mazzetti et al., 2017). Citing the small number and poor performance of trained groups as reasons, the US withdrew from the train-and-equip project and left Türkiye isolated after opting to adopt the PYD as its local strategic ally (Çitlioğlu, 2024, p. 100). From that point onward, the US began directly supporting non-state armed actors that were actively fighting ISIS on the ground, with the SDF—centered on the YPG—emerging as the main armed non-state actor in this role (Gibbons-Neff, Ryan & DeYoung, 2017). The US's decision to use the YPG/SDF as a ground force in the so-called fight against ISIS and its expanded military and logistical support to the organization triggered tensions with Türkiye, which defines the PYD/YPG as a threat to its national security.

Due to criticism from international organizations and occasional expressions of concern in Western public opinion, the US has sometimes sought to cloak its tactical partnership with the PYD/YPG in different forms. Yet Washington further solidified its relationship with the organization by taking another step: on 11 October 2015, US officials helped establish the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF; Kurdish: Hezen Suriya Demokratik) as an alliance composed of armed formations dominated by the YPG. At roughly the same time, to strengthen the opposition front against regime forces and expel ISIS from Raqqa and its surroundings, a joint operations force was created. The SDF, whose establishment was announced following a meeting that lasted only two hours in Hasakah, brought together the YPG/YPJ, the Syriac Military Council, Liwa al-Tahrir, Liwa Suwar Raqqa, Jaysh al-Suwar and the Sanadid Forces (Timetürk, 2015). The SDF, the military force of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, is composed of Arabs, Syriacs, Armenians and

Turkmens under one joint operational command, with the PYD's armed wing, the YPG, at its core, and the organization's senior figure, Mazlum Abdi, as its de facto commander. By entrusting the SDF command to the YPG, the US signaled its intention to extend its cooperation with the PYD/YPG into the long term (Darıcılı, 2019, p. 329). In essence, the SDF represents the militarization of prior political structures and the formalization of their military activities. Within this formation, where the PYD/YPG sits at the center of armed power, it is evident that certain Turkmen groups such as Liwa Sultan Selim and Liwa al-Selajiq serve more as cosmetic elements (Acun & Keskin, 2017, pp. 29–30). It is clear that, throughout these efforts toward politicization and the attainment of legitimacy, the PYD sought, under US guidance, to mitigate accusations that it was the Syrian extension of the PKK by rebranding its military forces as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), thereby entering a new phase of political identity transformation in the civil war (Sivrikaya, 2019, p. 334). In this regard, the remarks of US Special Operations Commander General Raymond Thomas are particularly striking. In his speech at the Aspen Institute's Annual Security Forum in Colorado in October 2015, Thomas stated: *"They formally called themselves the YPG, which the Turks said was the same as the PKK and that you are dealing with a terrorist enemy of ours, how can you do that as an ally? So we told them they had to change their name. What else would you like to call yourselves other than YPG? … The next day they declared that their name was the Syrian Democratic Forces. I thought it was a smart move to put 'Democratic' in the middle of the name. It gave them some legitimacy. They wanted to be at the table in Geneva and Astana, where Syria's future was being discussed. They could never be at the table under the PKK name. So we militarized them*." (Çopur & Hernandez, 2017). In line with the US official's statement, Çitlioğlu argues in his work "Suriye Sorunu" that, regardless of whether the entity is named PYD, its armed wing YPG, SDF or the Kurdish Autonomous Administration, the US has sought to legalize its chosen partner in Syria by means of the agreement signed with Delta Crescent Energy LLC (Çitlioğlu, 2024, pp. 54–55). Following General Thomas's well-known admission from October 2015, the terminology used by then US Special Envoy for Syria James Jeffrey to refer to the PYD is also instructive in understanding how far the organization has progressed toward its goals of politicization and statehood. While designating the PKK as a terrorist organization, Jeffrey explicitly stated that the US did not regard the PYD as a terrorist entity and that Washington would continue to supply it with weapons in the fight against ISIS (Temizer, 2018). By avoiding direct reference to the PYD name and instead using the term

"Kurdish Autonomous Authority," Jeffrey revealed how the US administration conceptualized the organization (Çitlioğlu, 2024, pp. 54–55). According to Ali Burak Darıcılı, it can also be inferred that the US, by deliberately fostering conceptual confusion, seeks in the long term to deepen the distinction between PKK and PYD, to detach the PYD from the KCK/PKK and transform it into a proxy actor it can fully control, and to legitimize it in the international arena (Darıcılı, 2019, p. 335). In many respects, this US policy resembles its approach in the 1990s, when it handled the Kurdish issue in Iraq and Türkiye primarily through Iraqi Kurdish groups KDP and PUK rather than the PKK, playing a key role both in helping Türkiye capture Abdullah Öcalan and in the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Atay, 2018). It is therefore reasonable to argue that the US is attempting, just as it successfully secured Türkiye's acceptance of the KRG, to secure acceptance of an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Syria by supporting and patronizing the PYD/YPG—an organization it does not classify as terrorist.

Here, one must not overlook the key role of ISIS as a threat that the US can present both as a bargaining chip with Türkiye and as a constant justification for its foreign policy to its own domestic public. It is clear that decision-makers have sought to keep this perception of necessity alive in US public opinion (Özcan et al., 2020). Within this framework, the PYD/YPG could be presented to the international community and Türkiye as the "legitimate representative of the Syrian Kurds," thereby separating it from the terrorist label associated with the PKK and eventually positioning it as an actor at the Syrian political settlement table. It is conceivable that the US plan may be to seek Türkiye's acceptance of a Syrian Kurdish autonomous region analogous to the Kurdish region in Iraq, after first weakening and pressuring PKK leadership and then bringing Türkiye together with the SDF, in which the PYD/YPG is the dominant and founding element, on a common ground (Darıcılı, 2019, p. 335). The implementation of such a plan would undoubtedly take the PYD/YPG-centered tension in US–Türkiye relations under the conditions of the Syrian civil war to a new level.

On the other hand, while US support for the PYD, which is fundamentally rooted in Washington's strategic interests, appears to provide the organization with significant advantages, it is in fact the organization's greatest vulnerability. In his 2017 remarks, then US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken clearly stated that the US mission in Syria was the defeat of ISIS, and that the US's proxy relationship with the PYD was valid only within that context. It would not be wrong to add that US support for the PYD also aims to

constrain Iran's influence in Syria and the wider Middle East. However, it would be mistaken to interpret US support and patronage for the PYD as permanent. Indeed, the US's tacit acquiescence to military operations against the PYD/YPG when required by the geopolitical balance of power—for example, its silence and the withdrawal of its forces from the area during Türkiye's 2019 Operation Peace Spring (Çelikaslan, 2021, p. 379)—illustrates Washington's position. From this, it can be concluded that the PYD/YPG misreads its relationship with the Pentagon by ignoring the reality that US support is conditioned solely on its utility for American interests in Syria, and that it nurtures the illusion that the US will support its long-term goal of state-like structures. After Türkiye's Operation Peace Spring in 2019, the organization recognized this miscalculation. In an interview, SDF leader Ferhat Abdi Şahin (Mazlum Kobani) stated that, although their military ties with the US had developed, the political dimension of the relationship remained weak (Taştekin, 2019a), a phrase that sufficiently captures the organization's disappointment. Ultimately, although a pragmatic military relationship continues on the ground, the fact that US support for the terrorist organization will not last indefinitely has become a dynamic that currently pushes the PYD/YPG toward making concessions (Sarı, 2022, pp. 99–101). Under these conditions, it can reasonably be argued that the future of the PYD/YPG in Syria will be shaped by the extent of the concessions it is prepared to make.

6.1.2. PYD/YPG's Search for Cooperation with Russia in the Civil War

The fact that the Kurds, living right next to the rich energy resources of the Middle East, emerge in times of crisis as local strategic partners serving American despotism on the one hand, and remain in close contact with expansionist Russia on the other, is far from coincidental. The efforts to unite Syrian Kurdish actors under a single umbrella—thus bringing them together on a common ground with both Americans and Russians—alongside attempts to grant the PYD/YPG legitimacy as a local actor and to support and protect it, are insufficient on their own to explain Russia's presence in Syria. As a global power that obtains more than half of its budget revenues and two-thirds of its exports from energy resources (Özdemir, 2015), Russia is in constant motion in search of presence and influence along the routes of Middle Eastern energy resources within the framework of its traditional policy of gaining access to warm seas. From this point of view, and in line with the assessments of Kolobov and Kornilov—which we share—Russia, upon returning to the

region, did not simply continue classical Soviet diplomacy. Instead, it adopted a different regional policy that: makes use of international law; attaches importance to bilateral relations; can develop a flexible perspective by taking into account the viewpoints of multiple parties in conflict resolution; brings economic, military and technological assistance along with it; and, moreover, exports Russian "soft power" through education and culture (Kolobov & Kornilov, 2011, pp. 32–33; Stepanova, 2016, pp. 2–4, 7–10; Doster, 2012, pp. 48–53). On the basis of this assumption, it is certainly possible to argue that there is a relationship between Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war on the side of the regime and its patronage of the ethnically separatist terrorist organization PYD/YPG. Looking back, Russia, which seeks to maintain its influence in the Middle East, initially adopted a strategy of relative silence during the transformation of protests into civil war in Syria (Aydoğan, 2015, p. 2). Under this approach, in the early stages of the conflict, when Assad's forces withdrew from the country's northern regions and the PYD/YPG filled the resulting vacuum, Moscow preferred to observe the organization closely. As the balance of power shifted with the Syrian civil war and Russia sought to safeguard its regional interests, it came to see that its short- and medium-term projects regarding the region could be implemented through local Kurdish opposition forces that had no fundamental dispute with the Assad regime. Thus, Moscow engaged with the Syrian agenda via the regime and the PYD/YPG. In parallel fashion, while striving to ensure the continuity of the Assad regime on the ground, Russia also attempted to open a breach in the opposition front by supporting the PYD/YPG (Aliyev, 2019, p. 3). Under these conditions, the PYD/YPG, in addition to its good relations with the United States, established ties with another key regional actor, Russia.

The intensification of PYD/YPG contacts with Moscow following Russia's direct intervention in the Syrian civil war on 30 September 2015, and the organization's orientation toward acting jointly with Russia against both ISIS and the Syrian opposition (Acun & Keskin, 2017, pp. 12–13), appears as yet another parameter rooted in the historical background. In this period, the struggle against terrorism—especially against ISIS—emerged as a separate problematic within the Syrian crisis and was brought to the forefront by Russia as well. In September 2015, at a time when the Syrian government was in dire need of support, Russia intervened directly in Syria under the pretext of combatting ISIS. However, the intervention was not limited to ISIS; various rebel groups also became targets

of Russian airstrikes (Humud et al., 2017, p. 10). Accepting the PYD as an effective force fighting ISIS, the Russians sought, on the one hand, to continue protecting the Assad regime, and on the other, to find common ground with Western states through the PYD's presence. Russian President Vladimir Putin summarized this stance in a speech at the UN, stating: "In Syria, no one other than the Assad government and the Kurdish militias is truly fighting ISIS" (Aydoğan, 2015, p. 2). Beginning in 2015, Russia escalated its use of force in Syria under the rubric of "counter-terrorism" and, in October 2015, together with Syria, Iran and Iraq, established a joint intelligence center in Baghdad to coordinate activities against ISIS in Syria, thereby leading the formation of an international coalition distinct from the US-led one (Taşdemir, 2016, p. 162). However, debates over who would control the territories vacated by ISIS limited cooperation between the US and Russia and, in some cases, created new areas of tension between the two actors (Çağlar & Aksu, 2019, p. 533). Clearly, the clashes that began in Syria turned into an internationalized internal armed conflict with Russia's direct military intervention. While regime forces had suffered heavy losses up to that point, they began—backed by Russia, Hezbollah and Iran—to regain strength and recover much of the territory they had lost. Russia's direct involvement in the Syrian civil war and its subsequent airstrikes on various targets, much like those conducted by the US, also mobilized the PYD/YPG, which sought to turn this new situation to its advantage by taking certain political steps. Following the start of the airstrikes, already ongoing PYD–Moscow talks were accelerated by both sides (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 32). In this framework, in October 2015 Salih Muslim met Russian Deputy Foreign Minister for Middle Eastern Affairs Mikhail Bogdanov in Paris, and Asya Abdullah, together with so-called Kobani canton representatives, met Bogdanov again in Moscow. In these meetings, Salih Muslim stated that "Russia's security begins in the Middle East" and called for support "to ensure the national rights of the Kurds" (Aliyev, 2019, p. 5). During this period, the idea of the PYD opening a representative office in Moscow was also voiced more explicitly. Accordingly, in October 2015, talks began with PYD/YPG representatives seeking to open such an office (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 187).

An incident that took place in late 2015 became one of the turning points in relations along the Russia–Türkiye–PYD/YPG axis and further increased Russia's support to the terrorist organization. On 24 November 2015, following the downing by Türkiye of a Russian reconnaissance aircraft on the grounds that it had violated Turkish airspace, anti-Turkish

propaganda surged in the Russian media. One striking example of the strategy of supporting and protecting the ethnically separatist terrorist organization PKK and its affiliates, and using this issue against Türkiye at every opportunity, was the statement by Leonid Savin, editor-in-chief of the Russian journal Geopolitics, who argued that "the best response Russia can give Türkiye is to actively provide financial, diplomatic, political and military support to Kurdish militants (PKK and PYD)" (Aliyev, 2019, p. 5). As Abdul Samet Yavan also notes, Russia has in fact used the PYD/YPG card against Türkiye at every opportunity throughout the Syrian crisis and continues to do so. Naturally, the practical manifestation of such support and protection on the ground has been the financial, weapons and equipment aid delivered to the organization and its affiliates. Once US arms support came to the agenda and detailed information emerged regarding the weapons intensively used by the YPG in its terrorist activities, it became clear that Russia, like the US, had supplied the PKK and its affiliates with weapons and ammunition. Russian-manufactured weapons used by the PKK—such as the AK-47 (Kalashnikov) assault rifle, the DShK (Degtyaryova-Shpagina Krupnokaliberny) heavy machine gun, and the PKS (Pulemyot Kalashnikova Stankovıy), which normally serves as a light machine gun but can also be used as a heavy machine gun when mounted on a tripod—were also identified in YPG arsenals. In addition, it is known that the YPG possesses numerous improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and uses Russian-made RPG anti-tank/rocket launchers. Records also indicate that the YPG has, albeit in limited numbers, TOW (Tube-launched, Optically-tracked, Wire-guided) anti-tank missile systems (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 31). Thus, while Türkiye was engaged in a struggle against the PKK within its own borders, Russia, operating on the assumption that Türkiye would not exert sufficient pressure on the PYD/YPG in Syria (Erem, 2017), contributed to conditions under which the weapons and ammunition supplied to YPG units could also be used by the PKK in violent attacks inside Türkiye (Yavan, 2017). As a result, in this period of crisis and sharp tension, the Kremlin lowered its relations with Türkiye to the lowest level and moved closer to the PYD/YPG, increasing its support to the organization (Ulutaş, 2016). On the ground, this support manifested itself clearly: while Russia was conducting airstrikes against opposition forces at certain locations east of Afrin, PYD/YPG units advanced in four villages; furthermore, Russia delivered approximately five tons of weapons and ammunition to territories under PYD/YPG control—another indicator of the extent of its support (Anka Enstitüsü, 2015). In parallel to ongoing contacts between the parties, Russia allowed the PYD/YPG to open an office on Russian soil called the "Representation of Western

Kurdistan." At an event held in Moscow on 10 February 2016, a PYD/YPG representation was inaugurated, with a militant named Abdüsselam Ali appointed as its representative. It was stated that this center, known as the "Representation of Western Kurdistan," represented the areas referred to as the Cizire, Kobani and Afrin cantons under PYD/YPG control (Aljazeera, 2016). Through this step, the Kremlin elevated its patronage to a new level by providing diplomatic and financial support to PYD/YPG forces (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 187).

Naturally, relations between Russia and the terrorist organization did not proceed uninterrupted in a uniformly positive atmosphere. While debates over whether an "American-controlled Kurdish region" was emerging continued in the wake of the YPG's capture of Tel Abyad with US support, the PYD/YPG's efforts—again with US backing—to open a corridor in the region (Byman et al., 2012) produced a situation that ran counter to Russia's geopolitical interests and caused a relatively shallow rupture in relations (Tosun, 2019, pp. 182–184). This development, unsurprisingly, prompted Russia to reconsider its relationship with the PYD/YPG (for more on Russia's geopolitical interests and policy in the Syrian crisis, see Sakal & Tanrısever, 2022, pp. 300–306). In response, the Kremlin swiftly took concrete steps to repair relations with Türkiye and restore regional balance. Within this framework, it joined the dynamics on the ground by moving ahead of YPG forces in Jarablus, one of the active conflict zones (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 188). The main points of convergence between Türkiye and Russia regarding the Jarablus Operation were the need to preserve Syria's territorial integrity and to impose some limits on PYD/YPG's area of operations. Following the launch of the Jarablus Operation on 24 August, a statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry suggesting that Türkiye could also share information with the Assad regime was interpreted as a sign that Moscow was adjusting its PYD/YPG policy (Gafarlı, 2016).

In the fluid dynamics of the Syrian crisis—where balances constantly shift and developments succeed one another—Russia's stance toward the PYD/YPG has also been far from static. Strained relations soon settled back onto their previous footing, and Russian support to the PYD/YPG returned to earlier levels. The effort to ensure that the PYD/YPG was not labeled a terrorist organization remained a key item on the agendas of the two principal global actors, the US and Russia (Samoylov, 2017). A development on the ground that same year disappointed those who argued the contrary: Russia's support, alongside that of the US, for

the PYD/YPG was once again confirmed through a military operation. Shortly after the beginning of the Mosul Operation, on 6 November 2016 US officials announced that, together with YPG/SDF forces, they had launched an operation toward Raqqa under the name "Wrath of the Euphrates." It was claimed that ISIS was planning terrorist attacks in Western capitals, that this planning was being conducted in Raqqa, and that for this reason Raqqa had to be besieged at least in the short term (Deutsche Welle Türkçe, 2016; Suriye Gündemi, 2016). Having secured recognition as the most important local force in the fight against ISIS, YPG/SDF units similarly announced in November 2016 that they had launched the Raqqa Operation under the same name, "Wrath of the Euphrates" (Milliyet, 2016). With support from US and Russian forces, YPG/SDF units carried out attacks from the north toward Raqqa city center. As US and Coalition forces attacked Tabqa city center from the north, YPG/SDF seized both the Tabqa Dam and the nearby air base. In this operation, for the first time, the US-led anti-ISIS coalition provided close air support and air-assault capability via helicopters to the SDF, led by the PYD/YPG, in Syria. The Pentagon confirmed that the US had provided air-assault support to the SDF under PYD/YPG leadership to capture the Tabqa Dam and its surroundings on the Euphrates from ISIS (Anka Enstitüsü, 2017; İleri, 2017). While the Raqqa Operation continued under the pretext of the ISIS threat, YPG/SDF forces—backed by the US, Russia and Coalition powers—established military bases in the areas they captured, consolidating their military presence (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 166). After this operation, in December 2017, a press conference was held in Deir ez-Zor against the backdrop of Russian and PYD flags, following a meeting between the PYD and Russian officials. YPG spokesperson Nuri Mahmoud declared: "The eastern part of the city has been completely liberated from ISIS with the support of the international coalition and Russia. We thank the international coalition and Russian forces for their aerial and logistical support and for the coordination they have provided as advisors on the ground" (BBC, 2017). Beyond this joint appearance, Russia's recent release to the media of survey results regarding the level of popular acceptance of Bashar al-Assad also suggests that Moscow is seeking to construct a more flexible equation—one that will not threaten the Russian presence in the country through new tensions—built on a new configuration. Efforts to bring ENKS and TEV-DEM together, and to present this united structure as the primary counterpart to the regime, further reinforce this argument (Sönmez, 2021, p. 71). President Putin's statement at the UN that "no one other than the Assad regime and the Kurdish militias is truly fighting ISIS" encapsulates Moscow's perspective on the PYD/YPG, which it wishes

to see alongside the regime it shelters (Çotu, 2017, p. 300). More explicitly, it is quite possible to argue that Russia, in line with its longstanding policy of seeking access to warm seas, supports the PYD/YPG in parallel with the Syrian regime in order to maintain its influence in Syria and the surrounding region, safeguard its interests, and constrain the US while preserving the balance of power (Yüce, 2016, p. 275). The fact that Russian soldiers shielded YPG militants in such a way as to prevent the Turkish Armed Forces from entering Manbij after Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), and that Russia supported the YPG through intense airstrikes in the operation to seize the Tel Rifaat area from opposition forces (Acun, 2018, p. 315), provides strong grounds for the claim that Moscow evaluates the PYD/YPG and the Syrian regime on the same plane.

Further developments confirmed this trajectory. In August 2020, a group of SDF members under PYD/YPG leadership was invited to Russia, where they were received at a high level by official authorities and signed a cooperation memorandum with the "People's Front for Change and Liberation in Syria" (PFCL), which the Syrian opposition refers to as the "Moscow Group." This was an unmistakable indication that the Kremlin wished to assign the terrorist organization PYD a role in Syria's future and reconstruction. It can thus be said that the memorandum reached in Moscow between the SDF and the PFCL indirectly helped the PYD advance its goal of participating in the Geneva talks and securing a place as an actor in Syria's future (İnat, 2020). Taken as a whole, these developments suggest that the US and Russia—despite having different plans and ultimate objectives—share similar views on positioning the terrorist organization PYD/YPG as a legitimate actor in the Syrian crisis (Aydoğan, 2015, p. 59). In the broader picture, it can be said that the assessments of those authors who argue that Russia, through the cantons to be declared, intends to transport energy shipments to the Mediterranean, to create safe zones and build a regional order in cooperation with local collaborators that allow it to operate freely in the region, are quite accurate (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 188). In parallel with these views, it may also be stated that Russia, while striving to deepen relations with non-regime actors who might approve its Syrian project, does not want the PYD to strengthen its cooperation with the US and fall fully under American patronage.

6.1.3. Efforts to Unite Separatist Kurdish Actors Within the Syrian Opposition Under a Single Umbrella

The efforts and initiatives aimed at uniting Kurdish actors within the opposition under a single umbrella—an issue that brings the Americans and the Russians onto common ground in the Syrian crisis—constitute a significant dimension of the problem of supporting and patronizing the PYD/YPG terrorist organization. When the historical background of this patronage is examined as an empirical phenomenon, it becomes clear that, in the early stage of the civil war, powers with spheres of interest and influence in the region planned to consolidate the opposition front in order to topple the Assad regime. Within this framework, certain steps were taken to achieve consensus regarding the unification of Kurdish actors on the opposition side; however, no tangible progress was initially made. Kurdish parties and political formations within the Syrian opposition, which categorically rejected dialogue with the regime, later came together and, through the Erbil Agreement concluded in June 2011, decided to cooperate on the opposition front against the regime (Erkmen, 2012, p. 10). Yet, this decision to cooperate under the Erbil Agreement did not immediately produce results, and full implementation of the agreement was delayed until July. Indeed, following the final meeting held on 12 July 2011, the partnership formed by the PYD and the KNC (KUK) initiated the so-called “19 July process” (21st Century Türkiye Institute, 2013). As a result of the talks conducted by Kurdish parties and groups on the opposition side, the meeting initially planned for 26–27 October 2011 was eventually held on 28–29 January 2012 in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), under the auspices of KDP leader Masoud Barzani. At this meeting, the Syrian Kurdish National Council (KNC / KUK) was established. The participants also decided to continue the joint struggle against the regime (Erkmen, 2012, p. 14). Although an agreement was reached in Erbil in June 2012 between Barzani-aligned groups in Syria and the PYD regarding unification, this agreement did not yield concrete results; ultimately, a process of eliminating political formations and organizations close to the KDP was initiated by PYD elements (Suriye Gündemi, 2018a). During this process, the PYD/YPG, which had gradually become a significant actor through historical gains achieved in the Syrian civil war, used force against other Kurds on the opposition side. As a result, these parties and groups lost their influence, and many of their leaders and supporters were forced to flee either to northern Iraq under KRG control or to Türkiye (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 12). In this period, numerous human rights violations

were documented in detail on the KurdWatch website of the Berlin-based European Center for Kurdish Studies. These include, in particular, the killing of many civilians as a result of security forces opening fire on demonstrators composed of PYD-opponent Kurdish groups in Amuda in cooperation with regime militias and intelligence, the torture of detained activists, and systematic pressure on opposition groups. Against this backdrop, KDP leader Masoud Barzani further heightened tensions when, during his visit to Diyarbakır in 2013, he implicitly targeted the PYD by suggesting that the regime had deliberately handed over certain areas to the PYD (Hürriyet Daily News, 2013).

Meanwhile, in order to contain the ongoing tension among Kurdish actors, U.S. officials took a concrete step in May 2012 by establishing contact between the KNC leadership and other actors following a meeting with the KNC. Subsequently, the two successive Erbil Agreements in the same year, followed by the Duhok Agreement in 2014, played an important role in fostering a degree of rapprochement among Kurdish actors on the opposition side (Sönmez, 2021, p. 70). As can be seen, the foundations of the unification efforts currently on the agenda were laid at that time through intense efforts by the Pentagon. However, despite all these efforts, the desired level of progress toward unification between KDP-aligned Kurdish groups and PYD-led Kurdish groups could not be achieved. After several years marked by tension, the U.S. withdrawal plan from Syria in 2019 accelerated the PYD/YPG-based unification efforts of the United States—which wished to leave behind a local proxy in the region—and of Russia, which sought to take control on the ground after a possible U.S. withdrawal (Balcı & Kaya, 2019). As a result of parallel efforts driven by different motives in the background, a partial softening emerged between the KDP-affiliated umbrella organization ENKS and TEV-DEM, which is dominated by the PYD/YPG. In this process, ENKS's harsh anti-PKK/PYD line was somewhat tempered. In the first half of 2019, particularly through initiatives in February, March and May, the U.S. visibly intensified its efforts to "reorganize the Kurdish movement" within the somewhat fragmented structures under PKK/KCK control—namely the SDF and formations operating under a TEV-DEM façade (Levent, 2020). During this period, the PYD/YPG, unwilling to lose U.S. support, engaged in negotiations with ENKS, particularly from 2020 onward, with Washington's backing. On 17 June 2020, it was announced that a general agreement would be signed between ENKS and PYNK/YPG (Güngör, 2021). As Sönmez notes in his work titled "Talks Between ENKS and TEV-DEM in Northern Syria: The Role of the U.S. and

Russia and Projections for the Future", these efforts inherently contain a number of question marks due to existing disagreements between the U.S. and Russia—disagreements that may deepen further as the NATO approach becomes more entrenched (Sönmez, 2021, p. 72). In this regard, one of the most striking issues among these questions is the emphasis placed by the U.S.—acting together with France, which seeks to maintain influence in Syria and, indirectly, in Lebanon—on the construction of a "governance structure under UN supervision." Indeed, recent reports that the U.S. has been constructing new military bases for the PYD/YPG in the so-called Afrin canton near Tabqa–Raqqa are significant in that they point to preliminary steps toward such a "UN-supervised governance" (Erginer, 2019, pp. 61–62). Within the framework of these developments, former U.S. President Donald Trump's new strategy for Syria, framed around the concept of a "safe zone," sheds light not so much on achieving Kurdish unity as on the American plan to strengthen the PYD/TEV-DEM structure (Yavan, 2017). At precisely this point, the remarks of Serhat Erkmen during a discussion on U.S. Syria policy held on 16 June 2020 on the Global Panorama platform—alongside Mustafa Aydın, Nihat Ali Özcan and Kaan Kutlu Ataç—are particularly noteworthy. According to Erkmen, the Americans have begun to establish a different kind of permanent presence in the region. Although President Donald Trump repeatedly declared, "I am withdrawing the troops, we are leaving," recent developments have made it clear that this withdrawal would not be in the form of "packing up everything and going." It is apparent that Washington is trying to leave behind a lasting political legacy that it can steer and influence. However, once on the ground, the U.S. realized that it could not pursue this solely through the PYD and the Kurds, and that it would be illogical and unfeasible to do so. Therefore, it has sought to integrate Arab actors—particularly in the area east of the Euphrates, including parts of Deir ez-Zor—into the sphere of influence that it had expanded via the PYD, taking into account the demographic structure of Raqqa as well. Inspection reports monitoring these operations and published every three months have for some time underlined that the PYD has particularly excluded other Arabs in the region both militarily and politically, that these practices have opened the way for activities by the regime and Russia, and that pressure must therefore be applied on the PYD. When one looks at the area east of the Euphrates, it is clear that, although the majority of the population consists of Kurds, the regions of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor—where oil reserves are located—are home to numerous Sunni Arab tribes ready to cooperate with external actors that would provide them with greater opportunities and protect their interests. Thus, this area is in essence a Sunni

Arab region. It can therefore be argued that, insofar as the Americans cannot implement their so-called "safe zone" project solely on the basis of the PYD/YPG's presence, they are always in a position to turn to other actors. As a result, it is an undeniable reality that, in order to control this area, they are compelled to move toward a dual structure. For this reason, they are trying to build a bridge among Kurdish groups in Syria by bringing together, under a single roof, on the one hand a structure that has a real presence on the ground but is regarded—especially by Türkiye—as a terrorist organization (the umbrella structure TEV-DEM under PKK/KCK-PYD/YPG influence), and, on the other, a structure with weaker influence on the ground but greater international operational utility (ENKS under KDP influence). Within this framework—in which Russia and European actors also support unification efforts among Kurdish groups—the Americans will continue to back the Kurdish unification project, especially east of the Euphrates, in order to mitigate the risk that the Arabs under their control may, in the future, slip from their influence and distance themselves. Considering the efforts by Iraqi Kurdish groups KDP and PUK—which have been driven into economic crisis—to curb the growing power of PKK/KCK-PYD/YPG in the region, it is anticipated that, beyond Idlib and the economic crisis, one of the most prominent agenda items in Syria after 2020 will be these unification efforts (Özcan, Erkmen & Ataç, 2020).

At the current stage, the U.S.—which maintains a military presence in Derik, Ras al-Ayn, Shaddadi, Deir ez-Zor, Tanf and Ayn al-Arab, where oil reserves are located in areas under PKK/KCK-PYD/YPG control in northern Syria—appears to have shaped its Syria policy around three main pillars: sustaining economic and political pressure on the regime through control of oil-producing areas; connecting regions of Kurdish-majority population between Syria and Iraq; and preventing Iranian Shia militia movement while also ensuring Israel's security (Alagöz, 2023, pp. 6–8). It is clear that U.S. efforts and initiatives to make its presence permanent in Syria through the PYD, and to bring the Syrian Kurds under a single umbrella to develop an autonomous or semi-autonomous model akin to the KRG, have seriously disturbed not only Türkiye but also powerful regional actors such as Russia and Iran, albeit for different reasons (Baran, 2023, pp. 51–52). Against this backdrop, a second crisis point in Syria seems to have emerged in addition to Idlib, where marginal religious groups have been squeezed. Although Türkiye, Russia and Iran do not fully agree on Idlib, they are united in opposing the self-rule agreement negotiated under U.S. coordination

between the PYNK and ENKS (Çitlioğlu, 2024, p. 119). In response to these developments, Türkiye has sought to deepen its relations with Russia and China. Following the summit held on 1 July 2020, a joint statement was issued in which Russia clearly opposed transforming the understanding reached between the PYNK and ENKS into a self-rule arrangement. However, it must not be forgotten that Russia is itself directly involved in this problem area, given that the Kremlin does not designate the PKK or PYD as terrorist organizations and has permitted these groups to open representative offices in Russia (Yılmaz, 2016, p. 783). From this perspective, the fact that the architect of the agreement between the PYNK and ENKS is the U.S., that Washington stands to gain advantages not only in Syria but also in northern Iraq—via the KRG under its patronage—through this agreement, and that Russia, which opposes the arrangement, continues close contact with the PYD to prevent the emerging entity in northeastern Syria from falling entirely under U.S. control, are all issues that merit close attention (Topcu, 2023, pp. 102–103). The most striking example of this contact is the report published on 20 March 2017 by Rudaw, a media outlet affiliated with the KDP, under the headline "Sözcü" confirms: YPG is receiving training from Russians in Afrin." The report stated: "*Kurdish forces in Syria have announced that they are in direct contact with Russia and receive training from Russian forces. YPG spokesperson Redur Xelil officially declared that, under an agreement with Russian forces stationed in the westernmost Afrin canton, the Russian military is providing military training to the YPG. Xelil stated: 'The agreement is based on the framework of military training between our fighters and the Russian army within the scope of the fight against terrorism. We are in direct contact with the Russians*.' *He described the cooperation as a positive step in the fight against terrorism and noted that the YPG works with many groups*." (Çitlioğlu, 2024, p. 120). Indeed, when one looks at the situation on the ground, despite the clear wording of Article 6 of the Sochi memorandum signed between Türkiye and Russia on 22 October 2019 within the framework of Operation Peace Spring—which states that "all YPG elements will be removed from Manbij and Tel Rifaat along with their weapons"—PYD/YPG elements have nonetheless been allowed to remain deployed in these areas. During Türkiye's Afrin operation, Russian forces opened a safe corridor from Afrin city center to Tel Rifaat to evacuate PYD/YPG militants, thereby saving them from destruction and placing them under the protection of Russian military police in Tel Rifaat. Likewise, despite harassment fire and infiltration attempts against the Turkish Armed Forces by YPG elements in Manbij and Tel Rifaat—areas under Russian supervision and control—no intervention was made (Orhan, 2024).

As has been explained in detail above, while the names of actors such as the PKK/KCK and its Syrian branch PYD/YPG are gradually being obscured, organizational progress is being conducted under the umbrella of TEV-DEM, and the search for a unifying leadership is being channeled through Abdi Şahin (Mazlum Abdi), the so-called commander-in-chief of the SDF. Russia indicates the Damascus regime as the primary interlocutor for these actors in the event of a possible unification, while the U.S. points to Abdi Şahin, the SDF's so-called commander under PKK/KCK influence, as the primary counterpart. The intensive media coverage of contacts between both powers and Abdi Şahin demonstrates that the process is focused on assigning a unifying role to the PKK–YPG–SDF axis. In the long term, when the current positions of the two actors—who may converge in the medium and long run—are examined, it is assessed that ENKS, under KDP patronage, aims for an autonomy model similar to that of the KRG, whereas TEV-DEM—an umbrella formation whose center of gravity is the PKK/KCK's Syrian branch, the PYD/YPG—seeks to build its own autonomous administration in a way that may pave the way toward independence. Under present conditions, it is evident that both the U.S. and Russia are investing in the establishment of a political structure in northern Syria similar to the Kurdistan Regional Government (Sönmez, 2021, p. 72). Within this equation, the PYD/YPG, by virtue of the civil war strategy it has pursued, clearly appears to have taken shelter under Russia's protective umbrella in addition to that of the U.S., displaying a tendency to use global actors within a "win-win" framework (Orhan, 2015). While keeping its relations with the U.S. alive by remaining at the center of Washington's attention, the organization has also sought to obtain economic, political and military assistance from Russia. In this context, it can be argued that the PYD/YPG—recognizing that cooperation solely with the U.S. will not generate sufficient gains in the region—regards U.S.–Russia rivalry as an important asset and pursues a balance policy between the two powers (Karan, 2016). It can also be asserted that, while implementing this balance policy, the organization has taken steps to further develop its relations with the Russian leadership—without crossing either side's red lines—in order to compensate for its weaknesses (Kerman & Efegil, 2017, p. 188). Indeed, the organization calculates that, in the political settlement process, it is not the U.S. but rather Russia that will be able to persuade the Damascus regime to accept its "de facto autonomous" governance model and that it can use Russian pressure to transform the "de facto" autonomy in Rojava into a "de jure" legal status in the future (Taştekin, 2015). According to Kaan Kutlu Ataç's assessment in the same 16 June 2020 Global Panorama discussion on U.S.

Syria policy, the fact that Kurdish actors have significantly enhanced their capacity to pit great powers and regional actors against one another—and have gained substantial experience in demographic engineering—constitutes a serious problem from Türkiye's perspective. It can be argued that the PYD terrorist organization in northern Syria pursues a relatively adept diplomacy between Moscow and Washington, as well as with key capitals in continental Europe. In this context, the organization has become a significant regional actor through military training from both the Eastern bloc and NATO, the acquisition of combat capabilities from U.S. sources, and the use of advanced equipment and materiel on the ground. From a cultural perspective, the voluntary participation of academics from some of America's leading universities in training programs that enhance the intellectual capacity of PYD/YPG cadres has further strengthened the organization's visibility as a regional actor (Özcan, Erkmen & Ataç, 2020). Looking at the broader picture, it should not be surprising that the PYD/YPG terrorist organization—step by step pursuing its objectives—seeks to bring under its control regions in northern Syria inhabited by Arabs and Turkmens through tactical relations with the Assad regime, the U.S. and Russia, and, externally, with Europe (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 33). Nor should it surprise anyone that the organization, in line with the U.S. goal of establishing a corridor linking the so-called Kurdistan to the Mediterranean, seeks to carve out for itself—and for its overarching project of a so-called "Greater Kurdistan"—a significant operational sphere (İyiat, 2018, p. 10). Within this framework, it must be acknowledged that the PYD/YPG, having turned the Kurdish equation to its advantage, has emerged as a highly functional instrument against Türkiye, which has sought to break free of Western control. Indeed, the PYD/YPG, backed not only by the U.S. but also by Russia and the EU, is striving with all its might to build a "Northern Syria," and it is conceivable that the "democratic autonomous administrations" it has established in accordance with its own ideological model could later be tested by the PKK/KCK in Kurdish regions within Türkiye. In this regard, at a time when terrorism has flared up once more in the region, Türkiye's influence—pursuing an "autonomous foreign policy"—might be partially constrained through the PKK/KCK–PYD/YPG axis (21st Century Türkiye Institute, 2013). In this context, although each actor on the Kurdish side has different tactical and strategic objectives for the subsequent stages of the ongoing process, it is clear that, despite varying intensities of effort toward unification, they have collectively formed a certain degree of unified driving force. A closer look reveals that what is presented as inter-group reconciliation and unification is, in fact, a process in which TEV-DEM grants limited

concessions to ENKS in order to make its own leadership indisputable (Rûdaw, 2020). This situation, in turn, facilitates the emergence of a terrorist structure in which the SDF, with the PYD/YPG at its core, assumes the leadership and is able to absorb and suppress opposition formations on the ground more easily. From this perspective, the U.S. effort to separate and legalize the PYD/YPG from the PKK/KCK should be regarded as a preliminary step in a plan to turn the relationship between the two organizations into one of conflict over interests. Any such step would constitute, in effect, the beginning of a process that could ultimately lead to the disintegration of Syria's unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty (Gürbüz, 2021, p. 914). Indeed, open-source reports—thought to have been deliberately disseminated—regarding disputes between PKK/KCK leadership and PYD officials over the sharing of revenues generated from oil and gas production in the eastern and northeastern parts of the country may be interpreted as preliminary groundwork for such a strategy (Topcu, 2023, p. 101).

Under these conditions, the power dynamics embedded in the construct of the "Northern and Eastern Syria Democratic Autonomous Administration" constitute a significant source of tension in the Syrian crisis, which has been drawn into a spiral of deadlock. Considering that Sulaymaniyah and Halabja in northern Iraq seek their own autonomy within the KRG, it should not be overlooked that actors with histories laden with tensions—similar to intra-KRG groups—may, particularly under U.S. and Russian support and patronage, possess the capacity to build an even more fragmented structure in northern and northeastern Syria (Sönmez, 2021, p. 72). Furthermore, although unity talks continued under U.S. mediation among Syrian Kurds after 2020—focusing on security and administrative and political power-sharing in Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria—clashes between the Syrian Kurdish National Council (SKUK), supported by KDP leader Masoud Barzani, and the PYD, the PKK's political arm in Syria, negatively affected relations and led to an impasse in the negotiations. Indeed, during the ongoing talks, the statement by ENKS Executive Board Member Muhammad Ismail on 25 October 2020 that "the Roj Peshmerga will join the SDF" indicated that unity discussions were continuing and that this would be carried out through the U.S.-backed SDF. However, due to factors such as the imminent presidential elections in the U.S. and the PKK/YPG's refusal to allow the Roj Peshmerga to return to Syria, this plan did not materialize (Güngör, 2021). Yet, after certain issues—such as administrative power-sharing between SKUK and the PYD and the deployment of the Roj

Peshmerga, composed of Syrian Kurds, into Syria—were agreed upon in the unity talks, some parties within SKUK had begun opening offices in regions controlled by the PYD. Following clashes between the YPG and the Roj Peshmerga, however, these offices became targets of attack, and statements by YPG leader Mazlum Kobani supporting the PKK's stance against the KDP further deepened already existing problems between SKUK and the PYD (Yıldız, 2020, p. 3). Within this complex setting, the U.S. effort to detach the PYD/YPG from the PKK and construct a more localized Kurdish formation in Syria has revealed the difficulty of making the Kurds—who have been turned into local actors on the ground—an acceptable element in Syria's future political order (Duman, 2021). In fact, a U.S. delegation visited ENKS on 10 April 2021 and TEV-DEM—dominated by the PYD/YPG—on 15 April 2021. Despite these separate meetings, negotiations between ENKS and TEV-DEM did not resume, and political offices affiliated with ENKS continued to be targeted by YPG militants. While U.S. initiatives to restart the stalled talks continued, the visit of Syrian National Coalition (SNC) President Nasr Hariri to Erbil paved the way for ENKS to assume a more active role in areas controlled by the Syrian Interim Government. This development indicates that, following the failure of talks with TEV-DEM, ENKS has sought closer alignment with the Syrian opposition and Türkiye and has decided not to resume negotiations with the YPG (Güngör, 2021).

Apart from the tension among Kurdish actors reflected in clashes between the YPG and the Roj Peshmerga, an important obstacle to U.S. and Russian efforts to construct a broad-based structure that, under a unifying façade, encompasses many different elements while still handing real power over to KCK/PKK and PYD/YPG, is Türkiye's threat perception concerning the region. It is an undeniable reality that Türkiye's successive military operations in the region have created a physical environment that prevents the establishment of a terrorist state, while simultaneously producing a new situation in which names and actors change rapidly (Babahanoğlu & Örselli, 2022, pp. 171–175). Although it remains a separate subject of debate to what extent PYD/YPG elements have been removed from the region under the ceasefires declared following operations by the Turkish Armed Forces, and how far medium- and long-term operational objectives have been achieved, it must not be forgotten that Türkiye is a regional actor with the ability and capacity to disrupt the mechanisms being constructed in the region (Duvan, 2024, pp. 198–199). In this respect, it can easily be argued that setting policies for Syria that disregard the national interests and

security of Türkiye—as a regional actor—will open the door to new problems for both the U.S. and Russia. For Russia, the primary imperatives are to sustain the advantages provided by fractures within NATO and to preserve its relationship with Türkiye, with which it is compelled to coexist on the Syrian front, at least until the S-400 systems become fully operational. For the U.S., the priorities are to ensure the potential unification and durability of Kurdish actors, and to avoid a complete rupture with Türkiye—a NATO ally that could help sustain U.S. influence indirectly in the region after a possible withdrawal (Sönmez, 2021, p. 73).

These interlinked imperatives represent distinct areas of concern in the Türkiye–Russia–U.S. triangle of the Syrian crisis. In this situation, as Türkiye, directly or indirectly, engages with Russia in crises in Syria, Libya, Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh, its importance within NATO grows; at the same time, the United States—which has patronized a terrorist state structure centered on the PYD/YPG—is likely to become increasingly isolated internationally and may be compelled to reconsider its Syria policy (Sönmez, 2021, p. 118). As Çitlioğlu also emphasizes, contrary to Washington's claim that it is in Syria in the name of fighting terrorism, the U.S. is in fact present there to control energy resources and transit routes. By organizing an agreement with a terrorist organization, it has effectively placed itself in the position of a state contributing to the financing of terrorism, which will create a serious weakness in global efforts against international terrorism and provide a dangerous precedent for states seeking to use terrorist organizations as proxy forces. The absence of a strong reaction from the Western world to this initiative—which invites serious questioning of the sincerity of U.S. rhetoric on counterterrorism—must be regarded as a clear example of hypocrisy (Çitlioğlu, 2024, pp. 118–119). This situation shows that states targeted by terrorist organizations may, under certain interests and conditions, be left alone by the international community in their struggle against terrorism.

As we have tried to explain in detail in the foregoing paragraphs, in conclusion, the attempts to sever the PYD/YPG's organic ties with the PKK in connection with the fact that the organization is not designated as a terrorist entity by external actors—primarily the U.S. and Russia—; the sympathy it has gained in the eyes of Western countries due to its so-called struggle against ISIS, which has become embedded in the region; the significant role assigned to the PYD through its inclusion in the profits generated from Syria's energy resources; the increasing frequency of its contacts with the Syrian regime in recent periods;

and the efforts to bring together TEV-DEM, under PYD/YPG control, and ENKS must all be evaluated within the same framework. Within the context shaped by these dynamics, setting the Russians aside, we may say that the Americans now compel us to acknowledge that a new phase of transformation is approaching in the last century of the Middle East's history. It is evident that the role played in the region by the British a century ago is now being played by the Americans. However, the Middle East facing the United States today is far more complex and challenging than the one confronted by the British, and the Kurdish equation within this Middle East has far more unknowns. Moreover, there appears to be no sophisticated plan in U.S. hands for resolving this equation. At the present stage, leaving aside the Russians—whose attention has been diverted by the long-running conventional war with Western-backed Ukrainians—the picture that emerges for the Americans and the Kurds may be summarized as follows: Iraqi Kurds, who came very close to independence under U.S. support and patronage, now find themselves gripped by the fear that these aspirations may be dashed due to Washington's changing stance. Since such problems have always existed in the nature and history of their relations, they are currently in search of a new path, and drawing closer to Türkiye appears to be a good option for them. The U.S., for its part, regards the Syrian Kurds—and, more specifically, the PYD/YPG—as vital instruments for tolerating this handicap, preserving the "Kurdish card," and, more importantly, preventing the derailment of the Kurdish Corridor project. For this reason, it is extremely generous in providing them with all kinds of support. Within the rapidly shifting balance of power, the PYD/YPG—displaying a highly pragmatic organizational behavior—is clearly very pleased to see not only Russia but also the U.S. at its side during this period in which the ill-fated destiny of the Middle East is being rewritten, and to be taken seriously by both actors. Therefore, taking into account the gains achieved by Iraqi Kurds thanks to the Americans, it is obvious that the PYD/YPG entertains similar aspirations.

6.2. The Impact of the PKK–PYD/YPG Presence on Türkiye's Security and Foreign Policy

Since the recent past, Türkiye has faced serious contradictions and deadlocks in its foreign policy due to the security threats posed by separatist Kurdish nationalism, particularly embodied in the ethnic separatist terrorist organization PKK and its Syrian extension PYD/YPG (Barkey & Fuller, 1998). When analyzing, from a security perspective, the risks

and threats Türkiye encounters as a result of the pressures arising from this focal point, it becomes necessary to reconsider the dimension of theoretical approaches in international relations. What compels us to this necessity is the fact that the ethnic separatist Kurdish movement in Syria—entangled with the region's problems and deeply terrorized—embodies historical, sociological, theoretical and international dimensions within itself. Accordingly, as a first step, it is essential to evaluate the effects of the ethnic separatist Kurdish movement in Syria within the framework of the concept of security, along a spectrum that extends from local/regional dynamics and the roles of global actors to the tensions among realist, liberal and constructivist approaches in Turkish foreign policy. In connection with this, the reflections of this problem and its consequences on Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy, as well as possible future scenarios, will be put forward.

6.2.1. The Emergence and Activities of PYD/YPG as a Source of Threat

In this section, before analyzing the effects of the presence and activities of PYD/YPG – the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK – on Türkiye's security, we consider it necessary to briefly revisit the emergence and development of this threat. As is well known, the Middle East, historically shaped by ethnic, sectarian and political conflicts, has significantly influenced the security and foreign policy strategies of modern states. It is an undeniable reality that there exists a global hegemonic program over this geography, designed in the background by the British and, in the foreground, by the Americans and Israelis, with Western Europe acting as a supporting pillar. The project of fragmenting the Middle East and redrawing its borders – constructed by the aforementioned global and regional actors and foregrounding tribal, clan, ethnic and sectarian elements – manifested itself with the American occupation of Afghanistan following the three simultaneous attacks carried out against the United States on its own soil about a quarter century ago. In this broader picture, the new American strategy took shape around the objective of eliminating state or non-state entities it considered a direct threat to its values, interests and global primacy. Following this ultimately unsuccessful occupation, the invasion of Iraq – located at the heart of the Middle East – and later the Arab uprisings starting in Tunisia and spreading across the region became key parameters of the destructive transformation on the continent. Within the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, and particularly in the context of the Arab uprisings, these developments deeply affected the security policies of all states in the

region, large and small, as well as those of regional and global actors. In this regard, with the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the power vacuum that emerged in the country paved the way for actors with interests and influence in the region to descend onto the battlefield. With the weakening of state authority during the Syrian crisis, organizations such as ISIS and PYD/YPG became indispensable actors of this new arena of contention. In this period, PYD/YPG – the Syrian component of the PKK, an ethnically separatist terrorist organization with strong ideological and structural ties to it – took advantage of the withdrawal of regime forces from Kurdish-populated areas during the early phase of the civil war and, as the Syrian extension of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK, managed with American support to gain control over areas such as Kobani, Jazira and Afrin. In subsequent stages, PYD/YPG's attempts to seize mixed-population areas such as Ras al-Ayn (Resulayn) fuelled ethnic conflict and led to the displacement of Kurdish populations (Allsopp & van Wilgenburg, 2019). During this period, PYD/YPG exploited the power vacuum and chaos to consolidate its territorial control in Kurdish-majority regions of northern Syria, succeeded in establishing de facto autonomous areas within the chaotic environment of the civil war, and thus emerged as a political and military power. As examined in detail in previous sections, at the outset of the Syrian civil war the organization adopted a stance opposed both to the Syrian government and to the opposition, including the Syrian National Council (SNC). It took a hostile position toward the SNC, the umbrella formation of other Kurdish groups within the opposition – which it accused of acting in line with Türkiye's interests – and, because this body was unwilling to support Kurdish autonomy, its actions led to the withdrawal of almost all Kurdish parties that had been under this umbrella until 2012. In this early phase of the civil war, PYD/YPG's core strategy was to defend Kurdish regions and remain as distant as possible from direct clashes. In this context, it initially avoided confrontation with the Assad regime; when regime forces withdrew from Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) and surrounding areas in July 2012, it quickly and with little resistance took control of this region. Thus PYD/YPG emerged as a de facto authority in Kurdish-inhabited areas of northeastern Syria.

In the early stages of the civil war, Türkiye, adopting a stance in favor of Syria's stability, entered into confrontation with the regime. In the first months of the Arab uprisings spilling into Syria, Ankara tried to persuade the Syrian regime to undertake reforms by using the "fraternity bond" built between the two countries and by leveraging bilateral economic and

political relations (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015, p. 200). When these efforts failed to yield results, Türkiye shifted to policies based on hard power and, together with its ally the United States, sought to bring about regime change. From this point on, when the United States began to use PYD/YPG as a proxy organization (Ekşi, 2018a, pp. 85–86), Türkiye found itself compelled to struggle not only against the Syrian regime, but also against the United States and its proxy actor PYD/YPG. The insistence of the United States on supporting PYD/YPG as its local strategic partner further eroded the already fragile relationship (Duvan, 2024, p. 189).

Meanwhile, in the crisis environment in Syria triggered by the Arab uprisings, the rise of a separatist Kurdish movement centered on PYD/YPG became even more intertwined with the United States during the international coalition's campaign against ISIS. In particular, PYD/YPG came to the fore in the U.S.-led coalition's operations against ISIS in 2014, and from that year onwards significantly expanded its territorial dominance thanks to the military, intelligence and logistical support it received from coalition forces. Consequently, with the expansion of ISIS in Syria and Iraq from 2014 onwards, PYD/YPG became a key ground force for the U.S.-led international coalition (Keskin & Acun, 2017). The organization played a critical role especially in retaking Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) and Raqqa from ISIS (UK Parliament Committees, n.d.), and soon afterwards established an administrative structure under the name of the so-called "democratic autonomous administration" across a vast area east of the Euphrates in northern and northeastern Syria that it had brought under its control. Ideologically, PYD/YPG advocates a governance system based on local autonomous administrations and communal structures, in opposition to the nation-state model, and embraces the concept of democratic confederalism. It attempted to implement this model in the region they refer to as "Rojava" in northern Syria, establishing autonomous administrative units there.

At this point, the United States, drawing on its experience in Iraq, began to conduct its Syria policy, as in Iraq, through the Kurds, who had created a broad zone of dominance in the north of the country, in order to prevent post-Assad authority from becoming Shia-dominated or falling into the hands of Salafi organizations (Bursa, 2019, p. 102). Although the United States initially shared a common understanding with Türkiye on the Syrian crisis, within the framework of its evolving policy on Syria's future it began to support PYD/YPG as a non-state armed paramilitary actor (Acun, 2028, pp. 313–314). Within this context, in

the emerging conflict and chaos environment the U.S. aimed, by using PYD/YPG as a proxy in Syria, to obtain international legitimacy, to reduce the amount of military equipment and personnel it needed to deploy in the region, and to secure certain military, linguistic and ethnic capabilities it did not possess as a foreign power (Sarı Ertem & Karadeniz, 2019, p. 21). In this way, with the emergence of a Kurdish structure stretching from Iraq to Syria, the U.S. obtained an opportunity to sever the link between Syria and Iran – which it describes as part of an "axis of evil" threatening its interests and the existence of its ally Israel by supporting organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas – (Taştekin, 2015, p. 57).

The developments in northern Syria during this period, following those in Iraq, pushed the country's nation-state structure not toward consolidation, but rather toward the disintegration of the state apparatus. Under these conditions, Kurdish efforts to establish autonomous and semi-independent structures became one of the fundamental sources of regional instability. The tolerance shown by the West towards the regionally manifested ethnically separatist Kurdish movement, under the discourse of human rights and freedoms, further sharpened Türkiye's reactions to Kurdish autonomy demands. In parallel with this, PYD/YPG's position and status as a non-state actor in the civil war environment transformed, for Türkiye, into a multi-dimensional threat containing numerous problematic aspects. Being presented as the most effective ground force in the fight against ISIS, the organization gained international legitimacy, which made the threat even more complex from Türkiye's perspective. Evaluating these developments as an attempt to "build a terror corridor in northern Syria", Türkiye began to experience deep fault lines in its relations with the West, especially the United States.

The possibility that the model of separatist Kurdish nationalism in Iraq – which is a product of this partition project – might be coupled with the ethnic Kurdish separatism taking shape around PYD/YPG in Syria also emerged as a complex security issue for the Turkish nation-state structure, which encompasses different ethnicities sharing the same ideal, culture and language. Alongside the pan-Kurdist movement centered in northern Iraq, moderate structures seeking to resolve Kurdish-related fundamental rights and freedoms issues through peaceful means, and the ethnonationalist Kurdish movement dominated by the terrorist organization PKK, all became core components of this complex security problem.

Confronting the most toxic of these components through a national security struggle, Türkiye has simultaneously adopted a position of defending the territorial integrity and

stability of Syria, following its earlier stance on Iraq, out of concern that developments there could mobilize its own Kurdish population. In this context, it has tried to prevent the spread of ethnic-sectarian conflicts in the region and has focused on resolving the regional Kurdish problem. Within this complex issue, the fact that the autonomous structure in northern Iraq has claimed the role of patron of all Kurds in the region and has stoked Kurdish nationalism through irredentist policies within the framework of pan-Kurdism; the support and protection given to the ethnic separatist terrorism of PYD/YPG rising on the Syrian front; and efforts to internationalize and legitimize Türkiye's own ethnic Kurdish issue via various platforms all serve to keep Ankara's motivation alive. In this respect, Turkish decision-makers, quite understandably, interpret the dizzying pace of developments in Syria following those in Iraq as parameters of attempts by Kurds to link up, politicize and move toward independence. They believe these developments will, in the medium and long term, transform into destructive threats to Türkiye's territorial integrity. Within this framework, Türkiye experiences concerns that autonomous, federal or potentially independent entities in northern Iraq and northern Syria may serve as an example for its own Kurdish population and strengthen separatist tendencies. Thus, the presence and activities of PYD/YPG in Syria must be evaluated, from Türkiye's perspective, as a geopolitical risk field in which the terrorist threat emerging just beyond its borders has acquired continuity.

As will be recalled, during the process in which clashes in the Syrian crisis spread across the country and evolved into full-scale civil war, the tactical withdrawal of Ba'ath regime forces from Kurdish regions stirred separatist Kurds in these areas into action. In parallel with these developments, PYD/YPG – the Syrian arm of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK – which adopted a neutral stance through covert cooperation with the Damascus regime, took control of these areas and ultimately established "liberated zones" under its own authority. Meanwhile, KDP leader Masoud Barzani stepped in and established close contact with Syrian Kurdish parties aligned with him within the opposition. Members of these Kurdish groups and parties received political and military training in the Iraqi Kurdish region in order to balance PYD/YPG, and then returned to the Syrian theater (Kurubaş, 2013, p. 19). In subsequent stages, disagreements and rivalries among the parties in the anti-regime opposition camp came to the fore. To resolve these disputes, an agreement was signed in Arbil in June 2012 between the Kurdish National Council (KNC) – formed by 12 Kurdish parties – and PYD under Barzani's mediation (Van Wilgenburg et al., 2012). Despite

renewed attempts at agreement in later stages due to the failure to establish a firm unity between the parties, no concrete results were achieved. It is beyond doubt that these efforts toward unification had a reinforcing effect on the linkage between Kurdish regions. In parallel with this, under Barzani's encouragement, support and protection, Syrian Kurds in the opposition and PYD, as the Syrian extension of the PKK/KCK regional terrorist network, achieved significant gains toward establishing a structure similar to that in post-Saddam Iraq (Kurubaş, 2013, pp. 20–21).

Looking at the current situation, research indicates that PYD/YPG officially demands recognition of Kurdish rights and democratic autonomy within a unified Syria. However, many sources suggest that the organization is in pursuit of broader autonomy or even ultimate independence. Indeed, despite its declared commitment to the ideology of democratic confederalism, the fact that it has established its own administration (AANES) and security forces (YPG/SDF) suggests that it has created a de facto autonomous entity. Furthermore, many sources highlight the highly visible operational and strategic links between PYD/YPG and PKK, describing PYD/YPG as the Syrian branch of PKK and emphasizing that they share the same ideology, leadership cadres, organizational structure, strategies and tactics. It is also known that other, more conservative and nationalist Kurdish groups within the Kurdish National Council (KNC) seek a federal system similar to that of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. These groups have criticized PYD/YPG for suppressing dissenting Kurdish voices and monopolizing power in areas under its control, which is why attempts at unification and power-sharing between PYD/YPG and the KNC have largely ended in failure.

As can be seen, with the intervention of KDP leader Masoud Barzani in the Syrian crisis, a situation of linkage between Kurdish regions emerged. The potential for Syrian Kurdish regions to become integrated with the KRG deepened Türkiye's fears of an "Independent Unified Kurdistan" (Gunter, 2023). The new mechanisms that have enabled direct interaction between Kurdish-majority areas in Türkiye and Syria and the KRG have created a new field of political and military struggle in the Middle East along the axis of Iraqi–Turkish–Syrian Kurds (Semin, 2011, pp. 194–195). From this perspective, it can be said that the main impact of the Syrian crisis on Türkiye is the situation that has arisen along the PKK–PYD–KRG axis, in parallel with developments along the Türkiye–Syria–Iraq line. According to Wilgenburg, Tanır and Hossino, this situation carries two meanings for the

Kurds: first, it has brought Kurdish movements in different geographies closer together, linking Kurdish regions and issues; second, it has strengthened the status, self-confidence and expectations of Kurds in each country (Van Wilgenburg et al., 2012).

At the current stage, it can be argued that the strengthening of the position of Kurds in Iraq and Syria and the interlinking of Kurdish regions has two important consequences for Türkiye's national security. First, this development has brought with it a series of deadlocks in Türkiye's foreign policy toward both Iraq and Syria. As will be recalled, during the Iraq crisis Türkiye sought to preserve Iraq's national and territorial integrity due to the possibility of an independent Kurdish state emerging, but at the same time – owing to strained relations with then Prime Minister Maliki, cooperation on PKK's disarmament and the desire to tap economic opportunities – supported the decentralized demands and practices of Iraqi Kurds and helped sustain the existence of the KRG. In doing so, by acting as a catalyst in the estrangement between Erbil and Baghdad, Türkiye, albeit indirectly, supported the conditions for the birth of the "Kurdish state" it had long regarded as a nightmare due to its own separatist Kurdish problem (Kurubaş, 2012). Similarly, during the Syrian crisis, Ankara repeated the same mistake by supporting the opposition against the regime: on the one hand, it played an active role in weakening the Ba'ath regime in Syria, while on the other, it indirectly paved the way for the emergence of a new autonomous Kurdish region and opened up new existential space for the ethnically separatist terrorist organization PKK (Semin, 2011, pp. 194–195). In short, at the current stage Türkiye's policies have, albeit indirectly, contributed to the strengthening of Kurdish regions outside its own borders. Thus, the interlinking of Kurdish regions, the potential establishment of a Kurdish state, and the possibility of an independent, unified Kurdistan (pan-Kurdism) have emerged as threats to Türkiye's national security. Indeed, the fundamental factor that gives rise to deep concern in Türkiye over developments in Kurdish regions is the possibility that such a Kurdish state may emerge and that, in this context, pan-Kurdism could become reality. This scenario is feared to strengthen Kurdish nationalism and increase instability – even foster disintegration – within Türkiye. A Kurdish state that could emerge in the region may serve as an example for separatist Kurds in Türkiye and motivate them toward secession. The fact that PKK spokesmen in the Qandil mountains view the regional political situation as an opportunity further legitimizes these concerns. In addition, a Kurdish state emerging in northern Iraq and northern Syria could pursue policies toward Kurds in Türkiye based on an expansionist–

patronizing approach and incite separatism. Therefore, in light of the picture outlined above, the primary reason for the strong reaction of Turkish officials to the emergence of a Kurdish region in Syria is precisely this concern (Sabah, 2012).

6.2.2. Regional Security Problems Originating from PYD/YPG and Their Impacts on Türkiye

Türkiye has, for decades, been compelled to contend with the problem of ethnically motivated separatist terrorism due to both its geopolitical location and its adverse relations with neighbouring countries. With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the terrorist organization PKK became involved in the conflict through its Syrian branch, the PYD/YPG, pursuing the objective of establishing a Kurdish state encompassing northern Syria and southeastern Türkiye. Although Türkiye sought to neutralize the effects stemming from the organization's presence and activities by conducting numerous cross-border operations in Syria to ensure border security, it was unable to prevent the organization from seizing control over large parts of its northern Syrian border due to the support provided to the PYD/YPG by the United States and the Western coalition (Kadıoğlu, 2020, pp. 2203–2205). On the other hand, with the increasing activities of another terrorist organization, ISIS, which became embedded in the region during the Syrian crisis and intensified its operations particularly in Iraq and Syria, Türkiye's threat perception ceased to be solely ethnically motivated and assumed a more complex and multi-dimensional character through the emergence of ISIS, which employs religion as an instrument. During the fight against ISIS, the PYD/YPG, acting as the local strategic partner of regional and global powers, captured the territories previously held by ISIS as a result of ground offensives conducted under intense air support and with substantial supplies of weapons, ammunition, and logistical assistance. Subsequently, the organization did not relinquish control of the territories it had seized and declared the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria.

6.2.2.1. Composite Threats Arising from the Spillover of Conflicts, Separatism, and Demographic Pressure

In the complex environment of the civil war, Türkiye played an active role in the fight against ISIS, which had embedded itself in the region, by jointly undertaking the training of Iraqi

peshmerga forces with the United States, allowing them to use its borders, and providing the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with weapons, ammunition, training, and logistical support. At the same time, however, Türkiye was exposed to the spillover effects of the war. Indeed, the successive terrorist attacks carried out in metropolitan cities such as Istanbul and Ankara clearly demonstrated that these acts were intended to generate fear within society, which is the primary objective of terrorism, and revealed that the spillover impact of Syria-based terrorism had expanded to encompass the entire country. Thus, it became evident that the spillover effects of PYD/YPG attacks were not geographically confined to areas close to Syria. In this regard, the spillover of the conflict can be considered one of the principal negative factors affecting Türkiye's security (Kadıoğlu, 2020, pp. 2203–2205). In other words, it may be argued that one of the key domains in which the PYD/YPG presence in the Syrian civil war has impacted Türkiye's security is the threat posed by the spread of the conflict across borders.

On the other hand, in the early phase of the crisis, the PYD/YPG shifted toward a broader administrative approach by changing the name of the region, which it initially referred to as "Rojava," to the "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria," thereby encompassing the non-Kurdish population as well (Aftandilian, 2023). The support and protection extended by various actors with interests and spheres of influence in the region to the ethnically separatist terrorism centered on PYD/YPG have further increased the motivation of these separatist movements. The local governance system constructed by PYD/YPG on the basis of the idea of "democratic confederalism," which it adopts ideologically under external patronage, has functioned as a center of attraction, deeply influencing separatist Kurds who maintain their presence in neighboring geographies. In such an environment, it is inevitable that ethnically separatist movements in Türkiye will take this structure emerging in Syria as a model, thereby generating long-term socio-political threats for Türkiye's internal stability.

Indeed, looking at the field, the presence of PYD/YPG – a component of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK – in Syria, the advantages it has gained during the civil war, and its historical achievements have had significant effects by encouraging and motivating the separatist Kurdish movement in Türkiye. Under these influences, Türkiye's separatist Kurdish issue has become more complex, and social polarization has deepened. A concrete example that can confirm and reinforce this assertion is the attempt by the ethnically

separatist terrorist organization PKK in 2015 to launch a front war inside Türkiye, on Turkish soil, as an overt act of defiance. Parallel to the developments in the Syrian crisis, the reconciliation process that had been initiated and maintained for a time came to an end with this insurrection in 2015, thereby obstructing Türkiye's efforts to resolve its separatist Kurdish question (Netjes & van Veen, 2021). The clashes fought in urban areas as street warfare between government forces and members of the organization negatively affected Türkiye's national security and domestic stability and created a deep crisis of trust (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). As can be seen, the establishment of an autonomous structure by PYD/YPG in Syria has the potential to revive similar demands in Türkiye. Ankara, which regards any attempt at regional secession that might threaten its unitary structure as a primary security threat, has perceived the support extended to this group as a threat to its national security and has responded with military operations to the formation of the so-called "Kurdish corridor", which includes the establishment of an autonomous structure in Syria. At the root of Türkiye's perception of PYD/YPG's presence and activities in Syria as a serious threat to its national security lies the ideological and operational connection between PYD/YPG and PKK. Türkiye considers the formation of a region immediately south of its borders controlled by a structure that has organic ties to PKK to be a risk to its territorial integrity and security. This situation is shaping Türkiye's policies toward Syria and its military interventions there. In essence, it is clear that the so-called "reconciliation process" – which must not be interpreted independently of developments in Syria – was used by the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK as a tactical tool. The "trench incidents" ("Hendek Olayları"), which formed an important parameter of the process and were linked to the "Kobani events", demonstrated that such developments could generate fragilities in Türkiye's demographic structure. After the end of the reconciliation process, clashes that took place in certain provinces and districts of Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia – clashes that quickly turned into urban combat and were intended by PKK to constitute an "urban insurrection based on rural support" (Bayır, 2021, p. 43) – revealed that this could be exploited as a weak point of Türkiye by rival actors.

As discussed above, during the Iraq crisis, the autonomous structure formed by Kurdish groups organized under the KDP and PUK in the north of the country adopted the role of patron of all Kurds in the region and, through irredentist policies oriented toward the ideal of Pan-Kurdism, incited Kurdish nationalism. Later, the experience of the so-called

autonomous administration established by the PYD/YPG terrorist organization on the Syrian front can be said to have inspired separatist movements in Türkiye.

On the other hand, during the civil war, large numbers of irregular and uncontrolled migrants flowed into Türkiye—and, via Türkiye, toward Europe—as a result of several interrelated dynamics: ground operations conducted by Iran and its proxy force Hezbollah under the air support of the Russian Air Force (Anadolu Ajansı, 2016); and Russian airstrikes that made no distinction between Salafi-jihadist groups and the moderate opposition, thereby pushing anti-regime Syrians toward the Turkish border (Acun & Salaymeh, 2018, p. 10; Musa & Karacaoğlu, 2019).

On the other hand, during the civil war, the ground operations carried out by Iran and its proxy Hezbollah under the support of Russian air forces (Anadolu Agency, 2016), as well as the airstrikes conducted by Russia without distinguishing between Salafi-jihadist groups and the moderate opposition, pushed large numbers of anti-regime Syrians toward the Turkish border (Acun & Salaymeh, 2018, p. 10; Musa & Karacaoğlu, 2019). These populations then flocked to Türkiye—and through Türkiye to Europe—in a highly irregular and uncontrolled manner. Instead of accepting refugees in a location outside the country of origin, Türkiye adopted an open-door policy within the framework of the protection concept in safe zones inside the country of origin and opened its borders (İçduygu & Demiryontar, 2022, p. 321). At this juncture, Türkiye not only sought to prevent the threats and dangers posed to its national security by PYD/YPG militants deployed in regions adjacent to its borders in northern Syria through the establishment of a safe corridor, but also approached the situation from a humanitarian perspective by accepting millions of refugees fleeing the conflict (Çitlioğlu, 2024, p. 27). In this period, the open-door policy that Türkiye implemented due to humanitarian imperatives (Karakaya, 2020, p. 96) resulted in millions of unregistered refugees entering through the borders, creating a significant security vulnerability. The massive influx of refugees into Türkiye due to the ongoing civil war in Syria (Stanicek, 2019) has produced extremely significant negative effects—albeit indirect—on Türkiye's demographic structure. The metropolitan areas of Türkiye, which applied the "Open-Door Policy" to thousands of civilians because of the civil war in Syria, became open targets for terrorist attacks due to the flexibility exhibited at the borders (Demir, 2018, pp. 2–3). Following the de-securitization of Syria-based migration, the number of Syrian refugees arriving in Türkiye far exceeded expectations, generating risks and

uncertainty for national security both because of their demographic impact and their potential to be exploited by terrorist organizations. Considering that foreign terrorist fighters returning to their home countries—and some disappearing within Türkiye—pose a major threat as dormant cells, the PYD/YPG and ISIS terrorist organizations active along the Türkiye–Syria border continue to constitute a significant threat and security risk for Türkiye (Korgun, 2021, pp. 77–78).

"In the meantime, the number of Syrian refugees exceeding the level that society could reasonably absorb heightened social sensitivities due to the resulting integration problems, thereby creating an environment open to disinformation and susceptible to manipulation (Duvan, 2024, p. 200).". It is also a matter of record that irregular, illegal migration is a facilitating instrument in the structuring and activities of terrorist organizations (Polat & Bincan, 2023, p. 293). In addition, the uncontrolled influx of refugees from Syria has led to economic and social tensions in Türkiye. The practices and systematic demographic policies pursued by PYD/YPG in the regions it occupies have increased the number of refugees and further inflamed these tensions. Although the government has attempted to encourage the return of refugees by creating safe zones, developments in areas under PYD/YPG control have made this process more difficult. At the same time, the fact that Syrians tend to work in relatively unskilled jobs has further deepened problems of unemployment and employment. Social and cultural clashes and societal polarization arising from uncontrolled refugee movements have increased Türkiye's fragility and disadvantages with respect to a possible slide into an ethnic conflict spiral (Duvan, 2024, p. 201).

As can be seen, the evolution of the Syrian civil war into a hybrid conflict has made it difficult to determine which actor is acting with whom, and has rendered the conflict environment ambiguous. Türkiye has faced a number of security problems due to this uncertainty. One of the most important issues affecting Türkiye within this environment of uncertainty has been the wave of migration from Syria. In this context, the irregular migration movement triggered by the presence and activities of PYD/YPG – which has established dominance in the country's north and northeast – has made Türkiye vulnerable to weaknesses in its border security (Duvan, 2024, p. 187). Türkiye's geopolitical position as both a target and transit country for refugee flows also reveals its vulnerability with regard to hybrid conflicts. The fact that the perpetrators of the terrorist attack carried out on İstiklal Avenue on 13 November 2022 also came from northern Syria confirms this (Aslan, 2022).

With these developments, the prolongation of the civil war in the Syrian crisis led to a weakening of the central authority and the emergence of non-state armed actors. Armed groups such as the PYD/YPG and ISIS, which exploited the resulting power vacuum, rapidly gained significant room for maneuver in the region. Moreover, the continuation of clashes between Assad forces and opposition groups up to the Turkish border has also brought border violations in its wake (Altundeğer & Yılmaz, 2016, p. 293). With the terrorist organization PYD/YPG seizing control in northern and northeastern Syria, various problems have emerged regarding Türkiye's border security. Clashes along the Syria–Türkiye border, attempts at terrorist infiltration and smuggling activities have undermined stability in the region. In addition, the situation of the Arab and Turkmen populations living in areas under PYD/YPG control has become a source of concern for Türkiye. As can be seen, Türkiye is among the countries that feel most acutely the conflict and violence in the region (Koşar, 2017, p. 119; Tosun, 2019, p. 150).

From the beginning of the civil war, PYD/YPG has rapidly occupied an area constituting approximately 20–30% of Syrian territory – including the Jazira, Euphrates, Raqqa, Tabqa and Deir ez-Zor regions, and cities such as Qamishli, Hasakah and Raqqa, where a large part of Syria's oil, gas and wheat production takes place – and continues to control this important area in northern and northeastern Syria through its military wing, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Under these circumstances, the PYD/YPG terrorist organization, which is active in northern Syria, constitutes a threat and security risk for Türkiye. The northeastern Syrian areas under PYD/YPG control, where Arab, Kurdish and Syriac populations are dense and smaller Turkmen, Armenian, Circassian and Yazidi communities also exist, were initially limited to Kurdish-majority regions but, as the group expanded its area of dominance, came to include regions with Arab majorities. On the ground, Arab perceptions of PYD/YPG in Syria are complex and vary by region. It is known that in some areas liberated from ISIS, PYD/YPG is seen as a protector and provider of basic services. However, there are also reactions due to allegations of discrimination, forced displacement of Arabs and Turkmens, and the imposition of Kurdish domination in regions historically populated by Arabs (Aftandilian, 2023). Some Arab tribes are even known to have revolted against the SDF, which is led by PYD/YPG. Naturally, the situation in this multi-ethnic region has led to tensions, as well as to accusations of forced displacement and demographic engineering. In other words, there are serious allegations that PYD/YPG is attempting to

change the demographic structure by forcibly displacing Arab and Turkmen populations in areas under its control. According to reports by experts based on local accounts, PYD/YPG has implemented demographic engineering practices in areas where it has established dominance. In this framework, it is claimed to exert pressure on Arab, Turkmen and opposition Kurdish populations in an effort to transform the ethnic composition of these regions in its favor. This has led to the emergence of a homogeneous, PYD-backed structure in areas adjacent to Türkiye's border, a structure which now directly threatens Türkiye's border security. Given that roughly 900 kilometers of the Türkiye–Syria border lies adjacent to areas where PYD/YPG is active, this situation increases risks such as cross-border infiltration, smuggling and arms transfers. The areas under PYD/YPG control function as a logistical base and safe passage zone for PKK.

In fact, these claims, which are based on concrete evidence, and the developments reflected on the ground have reinforced Türkiye's PYD/YPG-related perceptions rooted in mistrust. The conflicts PYD/YPG has had with non-Kurdish communities in areas it controls – while representing only a segment of the Kurdish population during the civil war – have heightened ethnic tensions and fuelled regional instability (Phillips, 2015). Furthermore, the fact that the growth rate of the Kurdish population in Syria is lower than that of the Arab population, leading in some regions to the shift of Kurds from majority to minority status (Bozbuğa, 2025); the absence of territorial contiguity between certain Kurdish-inhabited areas; and systemic human rights violations perpetrated by PYD/YPG in places such as Ras al-Ayn against Arab majorities and other opposition Kurdish elements, leading to the displacement of local populations, have produced a demographic chaos in the country. In connection with this, the attractiveness of northern Iraq – controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) – and Turkish territory for Kurds in Syria in certain regions, in terms of demographic dynamics, also creates medium- and long-term risks (Allsopp & van Wilgenburg, 2019).

Moreover, efforts by PYD/YPG to alter the demographic structure of areas under its control threaten Türkiye's historical ties with the Turkmen and Arab populations in Syria. The organization has been accused of implementing ethnic cleansing and forced displacement policies in regions such as Raqqa and Tel Abyad. These activities weaken Türkiye's socio-political influence in Syria and increase refugee flows. The actions of PYD/YPG further exacerbate the burden of Türkiye, which is already hosting millions of Syrian refugees. Forced migration, ethnic cleansing and demographic engineering practices directed

primarily at Arab and Turkmen elements from areas under PYD/YPG's regional control carry the risk of triggering new waves of migration toward Türkiye. From this perspective, the organization's effort to build a mono-ethnic administration in northern Syria contradicts Türkiye's emphasis on "Syria's territorial integrity" and deepens regional instability. This situation increases social and economic pressures in Türkiye's border provinces and generates anxiety regarding attempts to alter the demographic structure. Indeed, allegations that the PYD/YPG terrorist organization has subjected Arab and Turkmen groups, as well as Kurdish populations, to forced migration in areas under its control are described by Türkiye as "ethnic cleansing" (Dettmer, 2015). However, alongside all these threats, Türkiye's efforts to reinforce its borders and conduct cross-border operations, as well as its plans to settle refugees in northern and northeastern Syrian regions, have themselves provoked debate. Among these debates, some circles claim that Ankara harbors an underlying intent to effect demographic change. Thus, another major impact of the presence and activities of the PYD/YPG terrorist organization in the Syrian crisis on Türkiye has been the risks created for border security and the growing concerns about regional instability.

6.2.2.2. The Paradox of National Identity and Border Security as a Form of Socio-Political Instability

As has been clearly observed in the crises in Iraq and Syria, the fact that the PKK, an ethnic separatist terrorist organization, and its elements in other geographies have carried out actions that threaten the territorial integrity of the countries in which they reside, and have imposed demands aimed at satisfying their ethnically based claims under the support/protection of actors with spheres of interest and influence in the region, has led, particularly in the Turkish context, to Kurds as a whole being perceived as an internal and external national security threat. Through the separatist Kurdish issue, it has instilled the concern that all external threats are directed straight at territorial integrity, national unity, and cohesion. In this regard, the debates that began when politicized separatist Kurds positioned themselves outside the framework of national identity have come to dominate the terrain of domestic politics as a problem of belonging within the country. This situation has weakened the national unity and integration on which foreign policy rests, undermining morale and motivation. Containing these components within itself, the separatist Kurdish issue has, due to fears experienced regarding national unity and cohesion, led to an intertwining of internal and external security; in other words, negative external

developments have created a climate of insecurity at home. From this perspective, it is evident that the existence and activities of the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the regional PKK/KCK terrorist network, as an ethnic separatist movement also affect the internal dynamics of Türkiye's foreign policy. This impact is first manifested in national identity through the damage it causes. More specifically, the ethnic separatist Kurdish issue, particularly in the context of the PKK–PYD/YPG, has deeply affected Türkiye's national identity and its policies of social integration. The inability of Turkish national identity to be defined in a way that inclusively encompasses ethnic differences has strengthened the identity-based demands of separatist Kurdish movements. The lack of reforms concerning the socio-cultural rights of Kurdish citizens has led to social tensions in domestic politics as well as to international criticism in the field of foreign policy (Yeğen, 2022). While this situation has given rise to problems of belonging in domestic politics, it has also limited Türkiye's capacity to comply with international norms in foreign policy (Buzan & Hansen, 2024). A closer look reveals that the understanding of Turkish national identity as forming unity by incorporating ethnic differences has, due to the separatist Kurdish issue, evolved at the societal level into an understanding that seeks to achieve unity by excluding ethnic and sectarian differences. Another dilemma arising from this situation caused by the separatist Kurdish issue appears as a sphere of influence on Türkiye's security policies. Indeed, this situation has led Turkish decision-makers to evaluate every development occurring within the country through a security lens and to narrow the scope of foreign policy by merging internal threat perceptions with external threat perceptions. The fact that the separatist Kurdish issue embodies the dilemma created by two elements, security and identity, has brought along debates concerning the nation-state structure and national identity with respect to Türkiye. Viewing the separatist Kurdish issue from the perspective of democracy and human rights, the EU has begun to question and criticize Türkiye's philosophical foundations, such as its national identity, understanding of the nation-state, and unitary structure. Moreover, the EU's use of the separatist Kurdish issue as one of the instruments for measuring democratization and progress in human rights in Türkiye has led to the emergence, in the eyes of the Ankara administration, of a strong perception that the EU is, albeit indirectly, supporting the PKK terrorist organization under the guise of human rights and democracy.

The negative effects of the regional separatist Kurdish issue on national unity are not limited to the aspects outlined above. When another impact of the problem is examined more closely, it becomes evident that the regional separatist Kurdish issue renders the arguments concerning national interests, on which foreign policy actions rest, contentious in the eyes of external actors. For the identity crisis created by the separatist Kurdish issue adversely affects the process of determining national interests as rationally as possible and, at times, even obscures the very definition of the concept of national interest. In addition, Türkiye's perception of a pan-Kurdist threat leads to a reactionary pan-nationalist tendency or behavior in Turkish foreign policy. This can be observed in the reactions to the policies pursued by Türkiye in the Syrian theater. The Turkmen policy, which gives the impression of having been developed against Syrian Kurds in the aftermath of Iraq, leads to Türkiye being perceived externally as irredentist. Domestically, it strengthens claims that Turkish national identity is based on ethnicity, thereby weakening the loyalty and sense of belonging of citizens of Kurdish origin to the national identity. In conclusion, in the context of national identity and socio-political stability, the regional separatist Kurdish issue has laid the groundwork for a situation in which certain foreign policy actions adversely affect the domestic sphere, while developments in the domestic arena likewise negatively influence certain foreign policy preferences and behaviors.

In this case, it is possible to state more clearly and succinctly that, due to the ethnic separatist Kurdish issue and the existence of the PKK, Türkiye's Middle East policy has ceased to be multidimensional and has become largely confined to this problematic area. In this context, Türkiye has found itself caught in a dilemma between, on the one hand, not harming the Western quality of its national identity and, on the other, fulfilling its security needs without becoming trapped in the unstable structure of the Middle East, and this dilemma has confined it to the narrowness of security policies. Within this circle, a purely security-oriented perception has hindered—and continues to hinder—Ankara's medium- and long-term openings for permanent solutions. Under these conditions, it can be said that the threat perceptions generated by developments shaped around the rise of the PYD/YPG in the Syrian theater, which slipped into chaos after Iraq, have led to significant dilemmas in Ankara's domestic and foreign policies.

Another component of the dilemmas and contradictions created by the existence and activities of the PYD/YPG, the Syrian extension of the regional PKK/KCK terrorist network,

concerns Türkiye's principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and non-violation of their sovereignty. Looking back, while Türkiye initially adopted a solution-oriented, constructive attitude in the Syrian crisis, with the rise and empowerment of the PYD/YPG as an actor, it shifted its focus to preventing the activities of this organization and ensuring border security. In response to the threat perception created by the PYD/YPG, Türkiye subsequently carried out a series of successive military operations in areas controlled by the organization in the Syrian theater in order to establish a security corridor (Özerdem & Whiting, 2019). Thus, due to its security needs in the face of the risks and threats stemming from the ethnic separatist PKK terrorist organization, which gained momentum with developments in Iraq and Syria, Türkiye, by conducting cross-border operations into Syrian territory and developing proactive policies, has become a focal point of international debate. According to compiled information, the cross-border operations carried out within the scope of the fight against the PYD/YPG, the Syrian extension of the regional PKK/KCK terrorist network, have been perceived by the international community, particularly Western states, as if they were conducted against the Kurds. While Türkiye's cross-border operations in Syria have aimed to ensure security against the PKK/YPG, they have simultaneously been perceived as interference with the sovereign rights of Iraq and Syria and have negatively affected Türkiye's regional image. This situation has caused tensions in Türkiye's relations with the West and has increased mutual distrust with neighboring countries at the regional level. The steps taken in response to national security needs have been manipulated by spokespeople and supporters of the terrorist organization to create the impression that Ankara is seeking pretexts for its expansionist policies, and efforts have been made to instill in international public opinion the judgment that Türkiye is an expansionist state. In parallel with this, Türkiye's attempts, first in Iraq and then in the Syrian theater, to prevent the formation of a terrorist state and its implementation of proactive policies in this direction have led to its perception as an external source of threat in the eyes of regional countries. Ultimately, the ensuing polemical debates have led to a decrease in Türkiye's potential influence over the region.

In essence, Türkiye's declaration that it cannot accept the formation of ethnically based federations and autonomous structures in Iraq and Syria, and its taking of de facto steps in this direction, constitute, in the traditional sense, interference in internal affairs and a violation of sovereignty—a stance that Türkiye does not adopt in principle. Naturally,

despite Türkiye's principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, its conduct of cross-border operations in the Syrian theater after Iraq due to the threat posed by the PKK and its Syrian extension the PYD/YPG understandably creates the perception that this principle has been violated. Although these military operations are intended to provide security against terrorist organizations, they are evaluated as interventions in Syria's sovereignty. The perception of these operations as violations of Syria's sovereignty leads to debates within the international community and creates additional tensions in Türkiye's relations with neighboring states (Barkey & Fuller, 1998). Furthermore, this situation negatively affects Türkiye's image in the eyes of the international community and causes blockages in its regional relations (Ibrahim & Gürbey, 2000). Under these conditions, the PYD/YPG terrorist organization's portrayal of Turkish military operations as an "occupation" and its accusations of human rights violations directed at the international community undermine Türkiye's international image. In addition, this issue has led Turkish decision-makers to adopt reactive discourse and actions, thereby continuing to negatively affect Türkiye's image and rationality in foreign policy. Criticized by the international community for this stance—which undermines the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and non-violation of their sovereignty—Türkiye has not taken a step back despite the reactions and objections raised. This situation has also caused tensions in Türkiye's relations with other regional and international actors

6.2.2.3. Realpolitik Dilemmas in the Regional Security Architecture and the Risk of Diplomatic Isolation

Another clear effect of the regional problem of ethnic Kurdish separatism on Türkiye concerns its connections along the Eastern and Western axes in its bilateral relations. Undoubtedly, this sphere of influence manifests itself in Türkiye's relations both with Western countries and with its neighboring states in the Middle East. At the same time, this sphere of influence constitutes, particularly in terms of Türkiye's Western anchor and its relations with the West—primarily the United States—a factor of contention that, rather than producing an actual military confrontation, undermines alliance relations and leads to distorted economic, social, and political external relations. The outcome it produces is the weakening of Ankara's Western connection, the deterioration of relations associated with this, and exposure to intense external pressure. For Ankara's perception of Western orientation in the field of foreign policy as an existential necessity and a fundamental

principle turns the separatist Kurdish issue into a function of its relations with the West. This, in turn, necessitates the implementation of certain reforms for a lasting solution to this chronic problem. However, this necessity both narrows Türkiye's capabilities and room for maneuver in foreign policy and reinforces its perception of external threats.

From this perspective, when one looks at the field, the strategies implemented by the PYD/YPG in the context of civil war have been shaped by the interests of regional and global actors. The rise of the PYD/YPG in the Syrian theater has been nourished not only by local dynamics but also by the interventions of global actors. Actors such as the United States, Russia, Iran, Israel, and the United Kingdom have used the PYD/YPG terrorist organization in line with their own strategic interests, thereby rendering the regional balance of power even more complex. Within these intricate power balances, the support given to the PYD/YPG terrorist organization by the United States and Western countries constitutes a major area of contention in Türkiye's relations with its NATO allies. The fact that the United States, in violation of international rules and customs, has regarded the PYD/YPG terrorist organization as a local strategic partner in its so-called struggle against ISIS and, in this context, has provided the organization with weapons, training, and logistical support, fills out the substance of this problem area. Indeed, the support the United States has given the PYD/YPG terrorist organization within the framework of the fight against ISIS has increased this group's military capacity (Stein & Danforth, 2023). The PYD/YPG terrorist organization's gain in power in the region has led Türkiye to reshape both its regional alliances and its global positioning in foreign policy. The United States' military and logistical support to the PYD/YPG under the pretext of combating ISIS, together with its military bases in Syria and the weapons supplied to the PYD/YPG, has heightened Türkiye's border security concerns and strengthened Ankara's perception of threats to its national security (Phillips, 2015). Türkiye has interpreted the provision of weapons and training by the United States—a NATO ally—to a terrorist organization as a direct intervention in its sovereignty and national security, criticizing this support as a "double standard in the fight against terrorism." While Ankara defines this group as an extension of the PKK terrorist organization, the Washington administration evaluates the PYD/YPG as an effective local ally against ISIS (Stein & Danforth, 2023). The military and financial support provided by the United States to the PYD/YPG has led to serious ruptures on the Ankara–Washington line and has resulted in a historical crisis in Türkiye–U.S. relations. This situation triggered

the S-400 crisis, paved the way for CAATSA sanctions, and, after Türkiye faced measures such as its removal from the F-35 program, accelerated Ankara's orientation toward the Eurasian axis. These conflicting interests and policies have not only produced a severe crisis of confidence in U.S.–Türkiye relations but have also caused a deep rift within the NATO alliance and harmed Türkiye's relations with the West (Phillips, 2015).

As presented and explained in the foregoing paragraphs, the unlimited support the PYD/YPG receives from the United States creates tensions in Türkiye's relations with its NATO allies. Undoubtedly, this situation casts a shadow over alliance solidarity within international organizations such as the UN and NATO. For example, allegations that Finland and Sweden have supported the PYD/YPG have led Türkiye to oppose these countries' NATO membership. Furthermore, the fact that some European countries regard the PYD/YPG terrorist organization as the representative of the Kurdish peoples and approach this armed organization with sympathy constitutes another striking example of this problem area. Likewise, the objection of Western countries such as Germany and France to Türkiye's military operations in the Syrian theater—operations carried out primarily against the PYD/YPG and other terrorist organizations—and their imposition of sanctions and arms embargoes against Türkiye can also be cited as examples. As can be seen, this picture that has emerged on the international axis reflects the reality that Türkiye is facing a risk of diplomatic isolation on the international stage.

Similarly, Russia and Iran—actors that possess interests and spheres of influence in the region—have also chosen to use the presence of the PYD/YPG terrorist organization in the Syrian crisis in line with their own interests. The fact that actors such as Russia and Iran have used the PYD/YPG terrorist organization in line with their own interests has further complicated the balance of power in Syria (Barkey & Fuller, 1998). While Russia has used the PYD/YPG as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the Assad regime, Iran has regarded Kurdish movements as a balancing element against its regional rivals (Barkey & Fuller, 1998). Moreover, they have exerted diplomatic pressure by characterizing Türkiye's operations against the PYD/YPG as "violations of Syria's sovereignty." In response, Türkiye has sought to undermine the PYD/YPG's political legitimacy by cooperating with Russia and Iran within the framework of the Astana Process. However, Russia's continued military presence in PYD/YPG-controlled areas, particularly in Qamishli and Hasakah, has restricted Türkiye's operational freedom of action. In addition, there are claims that actors such as the

United Kingdom and Israel have provided indirect support to Kurdish movements in line with their strategic interests in the Middle East. Speculations that they have fueled regional instability through long-term plans such as the "Kurdish corridor" project have reinforced a skeptical approach in Türkiye's foreign policy (Özerdem & Whiting, 2019). This situation has strengthened Türkiye's perception of regional threats and led it to adopt a more defensive posture in its foreign policy (Kirişçi & Winrow, 2024).

As is evident, the existence of the organization, backed by the covert support of Israel and certain Gulf states, also limits Türkiye's military and political influence in Syria. The organization's proximity to Israel's presence in the Golan Heights adds a new dimension to the Türkiye–Israel rivalry. The PYD/YPG's control over Syria's oil- and wheat-producing areas has also had negative repercussions for Türkiye's energy security and economic interests. Some of the energy agreements concluded by the organization with Russia and the Syrian regime—owing to the diversity of agricultural and energy resources in PYD/YPG-controlled areas—disrupt Türkiye's regional economic policies as it seeks to gain dominance in the Middle Eastern market and pursues energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, the revenues obtained by the organization from these areas not only grant it significant advantages but also contribute to strengthening the financing of the umbrella structure PKK/KCK. Indeed, Türkiye views this situation as the control of Syria's economic resources by a terrorist organization and advocates for the return of these resources to the Syrian people. The situation that has emerged has made the balance of power in Syria even more complex and has complicated Türkiye's regional policies. This axis that has taken shape has simultaneously created serious tensions between Türkiye and actors that possess interests and spheres of influence in the region.

As we have sought to explain in the foregoing paragraphs, the equation created by the resurgence of regional ethnic Kurdish separatism in the Syrian crisis following Iraq has led to a number of contradictions and dilemmas in Turkish foreign policy. As is known, Türkiye, which is situated precisely on the fault line between Western civilization—having developed post-modern structures and modes of relations in today's international conjuncture—and the Middle Eastern world, in which pre-modern structures and modes of relations are dominant, is compelled, due to the regional Kurdish separatist issue, to maintain strong relations and interaction with both spheres. For Türkiye, the West generates psychological, social, and political threats within its own strategic perspective, while the Middle East also radiates

military and political threats to its environment in accordance with its own strategic culture, which came to the surface especially in the Syrian crisis. Within this complex equation, the regional Kurdish separatist movement has carried the problem it has diffused into both of these spheres by organizing militarily in the Middle East and socially, politically, and culturally in the West. Since Türkiye has been unable to develop a foreign policy approach that can separate these two distinct spheres of organization from each other in a balanced way, it has naturally experienced a series of dilemmas, tensions, and contradictions both internally and in its relations.

The contradictions and dilemmas created in Türkiye's foreign policy by the rise of the PYD/YPG, the ethnic separatist terrorist organization, in the Syrian crisis stem from both domestic political dynamics and international relations. By increasing threats and risks in Türkiye's eastern regions, the regional separatist Kurdish issue has weakened Türkiye's eastern link and pulled it onto the slippery and insecure ground of a Middle East policy that has become a highly securitized foreign policy sphere. This situation has led Türkiye, in maintaining its presence in the region, to shape its security policies solely along the axes of military and border security, preventing it from sufficiently focusing on economic, social, legal, and cultural dimensions (Allsopp & van Wilgenburg, 2019). Consequently, the separatist Kurdish issue that it faces has blurred the traditional distinction between domestic and foreign policy by linking internal and external security. Furthermore, by forging a strong link between identity and security, it has consolidated Türkiye's perception of threats both at home and abroad. Having confined its security policies to a narrow military framework due to the ethnic separatist Kurdish issue, Türkiye has struggled to internalize this broadened security understanding. Looking specifically at the PKK terrorist organization, the PKK's presence in Syria and Iraq has led Türkiye to interpret its national security within a narrow framework. In particular, the perception that the PYD/YPG in Syria has organic ties with the PKK has induced Türkiye to adopt a hard-power-oriented approach in its foreign policy (Ibrahim & Gürbey, 2000). In other words, the separatist Kurdish issue has had negative effects on Turkish foreign policy by increasing the threats that Türkiye perceives to its national security in the Middle Eastern context. The phenomenon feeding these threats is the PKK's deployment in neighboring countries and the fact that these countries' governments use it as a bargaining tool. As can be seen, regional Kurdish separatism stands out as a major problem area in Türkiye's relations not only with its Western partners—given the damage it

has inflicted on Türkiye's Western connection—but also with its Middle Eastern neighbors. Owing to these components, the Syrian dimension of the ethnic separatist Kurdish issue forces Türkiye to become more deeply involved in Middle Eastern politics. In parallel with this, Türkiye's traditional policy of distancing itself from the Middle East is being derailed by the threats generated by this problem in an environment of regional instability.

As we have sought to explain, in the Syrian crisis, Türkiye is compelled to struggle against the problem of ethnic separatism in two distinct foreign policy lanes and between two different cultures and identities: on the one hand, facing military threats emanating from the Middle East in the form of the PKK/KCK–PYD/YPG, and on the other hand, confronting political demands from the West. The West's approach to the separatist Kurdish issue through a human-rights perspective, its indirect support for the PKK terrorist organization and its Syrian extension the PYD/YPG, and its crude, partisan criticism of Türkiye's approach—which regards the regional ethnic Kurdish separatist movement as a national security issue—have driven Türkiye away from its Westernization goal and toward seeking cooperation with alternative actors such as Russia and Iran (Yeğen, 2022). In this regard, Türkiye's relations with the West have been damaged due to the differing approaches to the separatist Kurdish issue. In addition, Türkiye's questioning of its position within NATO has increased the risk of a strategic rupture in its relations with the West (Barkey & Fuller, 1998). The fact that Türkiye has been subjected to CAATSA sanctions by the United States due to its purchase of S-400 missile defense systems from Russia, and the ensuing mutual crisis of confidence in Turkish–American relations, can be cited as a striking example of these dilemmas (Stein & Danforth, 2023). Moreover, the separatist Kurdish issue undermines Türkiye's understanding of preserving the link between its own security concerns and Western values, thereby damaging alliance relations and rendering these relations more conjunctural than structural. In this context, the direct and indirect support that Western countries give to the PKK terrorist organization and its Syrian extension the PYD/YPG, owing to their negative perceptions of Türkiye, has merged with Türkiye's historically rooted negative perception of the West. As a result of this situation, while the stance of Western countries has shaken Türkiye's trust in its allies, Türkiye's falling short of expectations in embracing Western values has also produced a deep crisis of confidence between the parties.

At the same time, the separatist Kurdish issue centering on the PKK terrorist organization has strengthened the connection between Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy. The lack of reforms addressing the rights of Kurdish citizens in domestic politics has led to international criticism in foreign policy and has strained Türkiye's relations with the EU (Kirişçi & Winrow, 2024). Simultaneously, security-oriented approaches in foreign policy have increased social polarization in domestic politics and made it more difficult to resolve the separatist Kurdish issue (Allsopp & van Wilgenburg, 2019). This cyclical relationship has created a structural dilemma in both Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy. In a broader perspective, the separatist Kurdish issue not only undermines Türkiye's alliance relations with the West but also leads to dysfunctional dialogues between the parties, particularly on fundamental issues such as sovereignty, the nation-state, and international values. Leaving aside the most recent period, within the framework of the strictly pro-Western foreign policy that Türkiye has pursued, the West has pressured Ankara to meet its demands concerning the separatist Kurdish issue. Conversely, Ankara's domestic policy, which has failed to produce a solution to the separatist Kurdish issue, has prevented the fulfillment of Western demands in this direction. Undoubtedly, the fundamental reason for the tension produced by this paradox lies in the differences between the internal and external policy paradigms of both sides. The tolerance of the activities of the PKK and its derivatives in EU countries for many years, combined with historically entrenched prejudices, has exacerbated this perception and belief system, deepening the crisis of confidence and the problem of credibility in relations. Put more clearly, while the EU regards Türkiye as unreliable due to its reluctance regarding the reforms it imposes and the problems in their implementation, Ankara believes that the EU, rather than seeking full membership for Türkiye, imposes difficult-to-fulfill reforms in order to destabilize it. In this way, the separatist Kurdish issue not only creates a crisis of confidence in bilateral relations but also constitutes a separate problem area insofar as it provides the EU with a tactical leverage. Unwilling either to admit Türkiye into the Union or to leave it outside, the EU sustains this policy through the criticisms and recommendations it makes on the basis of the separatist Kurdish issue. Türkiye's failure or inability to take steps that would deprive the EU of this leverage keeps this instrument continuously functional. As can be seen, the efforts of the United States and the EU—two pillars of Türkiye's Western connection—to use the PKK and the separatist Kurdish issue as tools in their policies of Westernizing Türkiye have not only inflicted considerable damage on bilateral relations but also contributed to Türkiye's gradual

transformation into a security state rather than a democratizing polity, occasionally pushing it toward searching for alternatives to the West.

As explained in detail above, the presence and activities of the PYD/YPG ethnic separatist terrorist organization in Syria constitute a multidimensional threat to Türkiye's national security and policies. While the organization's links with the PKK threaten border security and domestic stability, its demographic policies and human rights violations weaken Türkiye's socio-political influence in Syria. In this respect, the organization's geographical spread and demographic impact in Syria create direct and indirect threats to Türkiye's border security, internal stability, and demographic structure.

From Türkiye's perspective, the rise of the organization in the Syrian crisis is not merely a cross-border security issue; it is also positioned as a question of survival (beka), identity, sovereignty, and geopolitical stability. In this sense, the presence of the PYD/YPG in Syria should not be considered solely a military threat for Türkiye but rather as a multi-layered national security problem. Furthermore, each gain achieved in Syria by this structure, which is directly linked to the PKK terrorist organization, nourishes separatist activities within Türkiye. In response to these threats, Türkiye has adopted a proactive strategy, seeking to limit the PYD/YPG's influence through military operations and diplomatic initiatives. However, this process has led to social tensions in domestic politics and complex alliance dynamics in foreign policy. The policies Türkiye has developed and the military operations it has conducted in response to these threats have deeply affected its regional alliances and international relations.

Although Türkiye's military, diplomatic, and intelligence policies toward this threat form part of a long-term cross-border defense strategy, the de facto legitimacy extended to the PYD/YPG terrorist organization in the international system complicates Türkiye's security concerns. Therefore, the main challenge before Ankara is to maintain military deterrence on the ground while simultaneously persuading international actors of this threat in the diplomatic arena. Türkiye's policies toward this structure are of vital importance not only in terms of counterterrorism but also with respect to regional balance, international relations, and internal political cohesion. The presence of the PYD/YPG in Syria constitutes not only a security issue but also a geopolitical arena that tests Türkiye's claim to regional leadership. The support of international actors for the PYD/YPG terrorist organization strains Türkiye's relations with its NATO allies and increases the risk of diplomatic isolation.

The future of the separatist Kurdish movement in Syria, which directly affects Türkiye's national security, international relations, and domestic and foreign policies, depends both on the strategies of the PYD/YPG and on the general political situation in Syria. Should the Syrian crisis continue under the current balance of power, it can be argued that the PYD/YPG's efforts to preserve its autonomous regions could fuel ethnic conflicts and increase regional instability. In this scenario, Türkiye will continue its security-oriented policies, but this approach will not produce a long-term solution (Phillips, 2015). From this perspective, a major question mark concerns the course Türkiye will follow in its future Syria policy and the stance it will adopt toward the presence and activities of the PYD/YPG terrorist organization in the Syrian theater. Different scenarios are conceivable, such as Türkiye continuing its military operations in line with shifting balances, seeking solutions through diplomatic channels, or cooperating with other actors in the region. The outcomes and effects of these policies will be decisive both for Türkiye's national security and regional role and for Syria's future. For this reason, the potential repercussions of the steps Türkiye will take need to be closely monitored. In this respect, Türkiye's future success in countering the PYD/YPG threat will depend on its capacity to conduct effective diplomacy with international actors and to assume an active role in the Syrian political settlement process. The course Türkiye follows in addressing this threat will largely hinge on the delicate balance of its relations with the United States, Russia, the Syrian regime, and, to a more limited extent, Israel. In this context, the PYD/YPG terrorist organization will continue to occupy a central place in Türkiye's multilayered security architecture and foreign policy vision. Accordingly, Türkiye's national security policies will continue to be shaped with the dual aim of ensuring regional stability and protecting its own borders. It is clear that Türkiye's future policies toward the PYD/YPG and the potential implications of these policies for regional security and stability will be of critical importance for the future of the Middle East. Among the steps to be taken are the pursuit of diplomatic avenues, the maintenance of military deterrence, and the development of cooperation with local actors in Syria (Portzer, 2020). The steps Türkiye takes will deeply affect not only its own national security but also the security and stability of the entire region. Considering different scenarios, the evolution of the PYD/YPG's status in Syria and the future of its relations with Türkiye remain uncertain. For this reason, Türkiye must develop a multidimensional strategy encompassing diplomatic, military, and local partnerships in order to deal with this complex problem. On the other hand, if a comprehensive political solution is achieved in Syria, it is

likely that the autonomy demands of the Kurdish movement will be addressed within a more peaceful framework. This could reduce Türkiye's border security concerns and increase opportunities for regional cooperation (Barkey & Fuller, 1998). Türkiye's proactive role in this process could both strengthen social cohesion in domestic politics and enhance its regional influence in foreign policy. However, in order to achieve these objectives, Türkiye must adopt a vision based not only on security-oriented approaches but also on democracy, human rights, and regional cooperation (Özerdem & Whiting, 2019). Moreover, Türkiye's capacity to resolve the separatist Kurdish issue will determine both social peace in domestic politics and regional stability in foreign policy. The worst-case scenario would be the establishment of an autonomous structure in Syria after Iraq, and the subsequent integration of Kurdish regions in both countries into an independent Kurdish state. This would strengthen the fear of an "Independent United Kurdistan" in Türkiye and increase regional instability. However, due to conflicting interests among regional and global actors, the realization of this scenario currently appears to be a low probability (Gunter, 2023).

In this case, we can say that the U.S. interventions in Iraq—which can be evaluated primarily in structural terms—and the de facto emergence of a Kurdish administration in northern Iraq in the climate of chaos and power vacuum caused by these interventions, along with the rise of the PKK–PYD/YPG in the Syrian crisis to the brink of autonomy, are important phenomena in determining the regional balance of power. In the face of these phenomena, which Türkiye has no power to change or influence, it has become imperative for Ankara to reassess its domestic and foreign policies. Undoubtedly, the developments that underpin these phenomena and the new situations that have emerged are extremely important in that they show how relations between Türkiye and the United States have been shaped more by conjunctural realpolitik considerations than by the principles required by an alliance. Furthermore, in parallel with this, they are extremely significant in terms of demonstrating how the stance adopted by the United States in the face of Türkiye's greatest existential threat has shifted relations between the two allies onto a highly fragile footing. Likewise, the fact that U.S. policies toward the region in this process—fundamentally shaped around the separatist Kurdish issue—have merged with Türkiye's fear of disintegration renders the developments undergirding these phenomena even more important.

Furthermore, following the Kurds of Northern Iraq—who are the vanguard of the regional Kurdish movement—the PYD/YPG in the Syrian theater continues its political, military,

economic, and societal activities under the support of powers that possess interests and spheres of influence in the region, until it attains its ultimate objectives. In this context, the Kurds in both countries, who, albeit controversially, control abundant oil resources, act with the awareness that the key to their independence lies in the hands of regional and global actors. This situation has made it possible for Türkiye to revise its historically security-oriented perspective toward regional Kurdish separatism. Indeed, Ankara has chosen to pursue cooperation with Erbil in seeking to resolve the PKK and ethnic Kurdish separatism problem. This approach has naturally brought a more flexible Kurdish policy for Türkiye. In this new relationship concept based on such an approach, energy has emerged as the most important dynamic. This dynamic not only allows Erbil to increase its autonomous power in Iraq through Türkiye but also elevates Türkiye to the status of a significant energy actor in the region. Dynamics such as the PKK problem, the rise of the PYD/YPG in the Syrian theater, and Türkiye's energy needs have opened the door to a completely new type of relationship between Türkiye and the Kurdish groups of Northern Iraq. Over time, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has become a neighbor with which Ankara enjoys good relations, and Erbil has attained a central position for Türkiye, which is advancing on the path to becoming a regional power (Kurubaş, 2013, p. 24).

Under today's conditions, even though the developments in the Syrian theater following Iraq undoubtedly constitute a security risk, according to Kurubaş—whose views we share—the realization of pan-Kurdism in the foreseeable future does not appear possible due to the sociological conditions of Kurdish society and the nature of international politics. Indeed, to date, there has been no form of pan-nationalism, including those with deep ideological foundations, that has managed to succeed politically in even the most developed societies (Kurubaş, 2007, pp. 69–72). Furthermore, it is unrealistic to expect the KRG and the PYD/YPG's Syrian branch of the PKK, both of which struggle with issues of existence or capacity, to pursue irredentist policies and realize pan-Kurdism. Put differently, while the KRG's weak sovereignty relies even now on external support and, in particular, on good relations with Türkiye, it does not appear likely that independent Kurdish states established in Iraq and Syria could sustain their existence (Semin, 2011, pp. 194–195). In a broader perspective, the fact that, sociologically, the Kurdish peoples have lived for centuries in mutually disconnected communities and, for approximately a century, under the sovereignty of different political cultures and political authorities—thus possessing widely divergent

motivations and expectations—prevents pan-Kurdist discourses from becoming a realistic ideal (Kurubaş, 2007). In conclusion, as Kurubaş, whose views we share, also points out, even if the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in any of the countries that host Kurds in their territories is considered a long-term possibility, the notion that this would inevitably lead to the partition of Türkiye is contingent upon certain conditions whose realization is highly unlikely. The implementation of pan-Kurdism in the region and, in this context, the emergence of an "independent, united Kurdistan" is an ideal whose realization is not possible unless there are very profound changes in the prevailing conditions (Kurubaş, 2013, p. 22).

In conclusion, the existence, activities, and rise of the PYD/YPG in Syria have posed threats to Türkiye's border security and heightened concerns about national unity through the risks and uncertainties they have generated. The problem has become a major area of contention in Türkiye's relations with the West due to the serious contradictions and dilemmas it has created in Türkiye's foreign policy at both regional and international levels. Türkiye's policies toward this issue must strike a balance between realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches and move from security-centered strategies toward multidimensional and constructive policies. In our view, steps to be taken in this direction will both enhance Türkiye's regional influence and strengthen its image in the eyes of the international community. In the long term, Türkiye's capacity to resolve the separatist Kurdish issue will make a significant contribution to social peace in domestic politics and regional stability in foreign policy. A proactive, inclusive, and visionary approach that Türkiye adopts in this process will enable it both to protect its national interests and to reinforce its regional leadership.

6.3. Türkiye's Threat Perceptions and Reactions Originating from the PYD/YPG in the Syrian Crisis

In view of the subject of our study, it is necessary to examine Türkiye–Syria relations and, within the framework of these relations, Türkiye's policy shaped through the issue of terrorism in the face of the threats directed at Türkiye that have emerged in the uncertainty created by the Syrian crisis—a context that harbors numerous intertwined risks. From this point of departure, within the framework of the problems created by the PKK, an ethnic separatist terrorist organization, the historical background of Türkiye's policies and threat

perceptions that have emerged on the axis of Türkiye–Syria relations is taken under scrutiny as a cross-sectional analysis. From the proclamation of the Republic onward, Türkiye's general foreign policy—guided by a principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its neighbors and proceeding along a line that is as much security-oriented as it is peace-focused—has been continually preoccupied with risks and threats emanating from the Syrian geography, which was once Ottoman territory. When we open the door to this period, we encounter the Greater Syria Project, which can be traced back from the present day to the 1940s and which aimed to unite, under a single state structure, not only Syria's neighbors Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, but also some of Türkiye's southeastern provinces. Within the context of this project, it is observed that, particularly from the 1970s onward, the Syrian regime chose to employ terrorism as a tool in its foreign policy (Yavuz, 2005, pp. 360–362). During this period, in response to the strategy of Hafez al-Assad's Syria, which, holding Ankara responsible for its water problems, sought to place Türkiye in a difficult position in the international arena by inciting regional countries against it together with Soviet Russia and by supporting the PKK terrorist organization, Türkiye pursued a security-based and hard-power-oriented foreign policy, combining coercive diplomacy with the possible use of military force (K. Dora, 2022, p. 158).

The fact that Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK ethnic separatist terrorist organization that emerged in Türkiye, moved to Syria in 1979, and that the founding cadre followed him to Syria immediately after the military coup of 12 September 1980, constituted an important turning point within the axis of Syria's policies toward Türkiye during the Hafez al-Assad period and Türkiye's reactions to these policies. From that date onward, the Syrian regime began to use the terrorism card against Türkiye with increasing intensity; in this context, Syria became a refuge and a support base not only for the PKK but also for other terrorist organizations such as ASALA and DEV-SOL (İldeş, 2022, p. 289). The continuation of these organizations' military and political training activities in camps located in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon under Syrian control, the decisions taken at the PKK's Second Congress held between 20–25 August 1982 to train organization members on Syrian soil close to the Turkish border and to open representative offices in Syrian cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Qamishli, and Afrin, and the regime's granting permission for all these activities point to the underlying codes of Syria's policy pursued against Türkiye (Yavuz, 2005, p. 380). As a result of the intensification of Ankara's reactions in early 1983 to these ongoing hostile

policies, not only members of the PKK terrorist organization but also ASALA militants were expelled beyond the border, and subsequently, following bilateral talks with the Hafez al-Assad government in December 1984, the Border Security Protocol between Türkiye and Syria was signed at the beginning of 1985 (Williams, 2001, pp. 28–30). However, in response to the discomfort generated by Türkiye's Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP), which envisaged the construction of a series of irrigation dams on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, the Syrian government continued its policy of using terrorism as a tool. During this period, as a result of talks conducted at the prime ministerial level between Syria and Türkiye, protocols were signed in which the parties agreed not to allow terrorist activities on their respective territories, to promote economic cooperation, and to release a flow of 500 cubic meters of water per second to Syria (Karabulut & Eryılmaz, 2016, pp. 27–28). Nevertheless, despite the agreements reached and protocols signed within the framework of ongoing diplomacy, the Assad regime did not desist from harboring the PKK terrorist organization against Türkiye. As a consequence of these anti-Turkish policies and the increased attacks carried out by the terrorist organization, the resulting and gradually chronic crisis dragged Türkiye–Syria relations into a deadlock. In 1996, the Ankara administration, by sending a memorandum to the Damascus government with reference to Article 51 of the UN Charter, signaled cross-border military operations, emphasizing that the necessary measures would be taken against terrorism. In this environment dominated by suspicions and prejudices, the memorandum card that was played would, two years later in 1998, become an important instrument of pressure on the Damascus government to cut off support for the PKK terrorist organization and expel its leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria (Erciyes, 2004, pp. 120–125). Indeed, following a series of harsh statements and warnings by Turkish officials, Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK terrorist organization, was expelled from Syria in October 1998. Subsequently, on 20 October 1998, the Adana Agreement was drafted between Syria and Türkiye. In this Agreement, it was explicitly stated that the terrorist leader Abdullah Öcalan and other members of terrorist organizations were not present in Syria and would not be allowed to re-enter, and that no permission would be granted for PKK terrorist camps or propaganda activities (Özarslan, 2020, pp. 359–361). Thanks to Türkiye's security-prioritized, resolute foreign policy approach and its coercive diplomatic initiatives, this agreement, which was signed as a result, normalized relations with Syria, a country which had long used the threat of the PKK ethnic separatist terrorist organization as a bargaining chip against Türkiye since the issue first began to preoccupy Ankara's agenda. In this

respect, the Adana Agreement is one of the turning points in that it ended the ongoing tense relationship between the two countries and initiated a period of normalization after a long phase of tension and mistrust (Ekşi, 2018a, p. 80). In the subsequent period, especially between 1998 and 2000, mutual talks continued regarding the implementation of the agreement, and following this significant blow dealt to PKK terrorism centered in Syria, Türkiye–Syria relations entered a phase of détente. After the death of Hafez al-Assad on 10 June 2000 and the succession of his son Bashar al-Assad, this period of détente in bilateral relations continued from where it had left off (İldeş, 2022, p. 289).

Table 1. The Effects and Consequences of the Kurdish Issue on Turkish Foreign Policy

The Areas It Affects	***The Effects***	***The Consequences***
The Vision of Turkish Foreign Policy	Realist foreign policy understanding to reproduce, To force a change in foreign policy understanding, Traditionalist-reformist separation in the decision-making mechanism.	Inability to produce a vision and inward-looking foreign policy (security dilemma), Inability to adapt to the new understanding of international relations and failure to perceive the outside (distancing from the West), The contradictory state of realpolitik and the emergence of new problems, Indecision and uncertainty in foreign policy orientations.
The Internal Dynamics Underpinning Turkish Foreign Policy	Weakening in national unity and national identity, Uncertainty in national interest, Problems in national security (increase in threat perceptions, linking of internal and external threats)	As a result of the domestic-foreign policy connection, foreign policy being conducted and implemented based on inward-looking and fear of division, The domestic sphere being negatively affected by foreign policy, and foreign policy being negatively affected by the domestic sphere.
Turkey's Eastern and Western Connections and Its Bilateral Relations	Problems in the "alliance relationship" due to threat perceptions arising from "conflicting interests" with the USA, Problems in the "accession relationship" due to threat perceptions arising from "mentality differences" with the EU, Problems in bilateral relations due to overt threats from Middle Eastern neighbors, The Northern Iraq issue and pan-Kurdist threat perception	Weakening of the Western connection and the decline of the European character of Turkish foreign policy (distancing from Westernism), The Eastern connection becoming more risky and the increase of the Middle Eastern character of Turkish foreign policy.
Contradictions and Dilemmas in Turkish Foreign Policy	Principled contradictions Realpolitik contradictions Normative contradictions	Loss of image, Failure to seize opportunities, Passivity, Incompatibility with the international arena

Source: Kurubaş (2009)

Under the influence of the optimistic climate generated by this new paradigm, by the early 2000s, as the Ankara administration completely abandoned hard-power policies and defined its foreign policy vision in terms of soft power (Taşpınar, 2012, p. 128), Türkiye–Syria relations evolved to a new level, and relations with the Damascus government began to be shaped within a framework in which security was removed from the agenda. Along with this normalization process in Syria policy, which had been conducted cautiously and rationally between 1998 and 2002, security-oriented policies were rapidly and gradually abandoned from 2002 onward, to be replaced by policies based purely on soft power (K. Dora, 2022, p. 178). Within this framework, a series of cooperation agreements in various fields were signed between the two countries from 2002 to 2010. After the Syrian government signaled that relations would continue in an atmosphere of trust by handing over PKK militants it had apprehended to Türkiye from 2003 onward, the two-day official visit of then Prime Minister of the Republic of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Damascus in December 2004, followed by the visit of then President Ahmet Necdet Sezer to Syria and, the very next year, the reciprocal visit of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Türkiye, assumed a key role in overcoming mutual prejudices, suspicions, and mistrust that had historically dated back to the period following the French occupation (Atlıoğlu, 2004; Bınarcı, 2004, pp. 292–293). The fact that these visits—which laid the groundwork for the development of relations between the two countries—raised mutual trust to an unprecedented level also created a solid basis for ending terrorism and preventing border smuggling. In 2008, Türkiye's mediation diplomacy between Syria and Israel opened doors to new hopes in Türkiye–Syria relations and led to the emergence of new areas of cooperation, including in the commercial and military spheres. In particular, the cooperation developed in the military field became one of the most concrete steps indicating that the two countries no longer perceived each other as security threats. Indeed, in June 2009, the Ankara administration initiated a radical change in its security policies by approving in the Turkish Grand National Assembly Law No. 5903 on the clearance of minefields along the Syrian border (TBMM, 2009). Subsequently, at the First Meeting of the Türkiye–Syria High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council held in Damascus in December 2009, various cooperation agreements were signed in numerous fields. Within this framework, the "Agreement on Joint Cooperation Against Terrorism and Terrorist Organizations" is of particular importance (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009). From this period onward, positive developments such as joint cabinet meetings and the introduction of visa-free travel between Türkiye and Syria, achieved within

the context of the relative cooperation established between the two countries, were part and parcel of an "optimistic foreign policy approach" that was detached from the realities of international balances. This approach persisted until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Given Türkiye's geopolitical position, where security threats are constantly present, the complete abandonment of security-oriented approaches entailed significant risks and constituted a handicap for the Ankara administration (K. Dora, 2022, p. 178). Indeed, with the outbreak of events in Syria in March 2011, the optimistic atmosphere in bilateral relations dissipated, giving way to a climate of tension, and the consequences of Türkiye's complete abandonment of security-oriented approaches became visible one by one. The Arab popular movements that began in Tunisia in 2010 and rapidly engulfed the entire region spread to Syria a year later, and the chaos and power vacuum that emerged in the country triggered a series of interrelated developments. In connection with this, separatist Kurds living in the north and northeast of Syria also took their place in the opposition ranks and became increasingly active. Thus, the U.S. invasion of Iraq within the context of its imperialism-based policy toward the Middle East, and the artificial structure that this invasion produced in northern Iraq, would acquire even greater significance in the Syrian crisis.

6.3.1. Türkiye's Threat Perceptions in the Syrian Crisis

The uprisings in Syria, where the Arab popular movements had spread and which began as anti-government protests in March 2011, were bloodily suppressed by the Assad regime through the use of disproportionate force; however, the demonstrations, which could not be brought under control, quickly spread across the country (Nabiyeva, 2016, p. 66). Within the framework of the pre-2011 "zero problems with neighbors policy", Türkiye, which had developed its relations with Syria through an optimistic foreign policy approach, did not remain indifferent to the onset of the crisis in Syria; on the contrary, it attempted to become involved in the situation. Initially, since the protests were based on the Syrian people's demands for democracy and freedom, Türkiye adopted a position in favor of mediating between the regime and the opposition with a view to implementing reforms that would meet the demands of the people. When the protests and demonstrations, which had begun in March as rights-based actions, turned into large-scale mass movements, the Ankara administration formulated a framework for the Syrian crisis and, within this scope, accused the Damascus regime of repressing the opposition and using force against its own people.

Along with these accusations, it called upon Bashar al-Assad to desist from using disproportionate force against his people and to undertake reforms that would meet popular expectations. The coercive diplomacy that continued until August 2011 did not yield results, revealing the fact that Bashar al-Assad tended, in times of crisis, to act together with his longstanding allies Russia and Iran (K. Dora, 2022, p. 162). Meanwhile, as the crisis, which continued throughout the country, very soon turned into a bloody civil war, Türkiye launched an "open-door policy" by unconditionally opening its border gates to the internally displaced Syrian local population (Nurdoğan & Öztürk, 2018, p. 1166). Owing to the "open-door policy" pursued particularly along the Syrian border, millions of Syrians, together with many members of terrorist organizations who mingled among them, crossed into Türkiye from the border within a few years without any obligation to present identity documents. During this period, despite the civil war continuing along its border, Türkiye displayed an attitude that did not prioritize security, but instead gave precedence to soft-power policies focused on humanitarian diplomacy (K. Dora, 2020, p. 505). The situation of the Syrians who fled their land and sought refuge in Türkiye as the events quickly evolved into clashes and subsequently into a civil war was used by the Turkish government as a justification for its accusatory rhetoric toward the Damascus regime. However, perhaps the most important reason for the Ankara government's anxious approach to the Syrian crisis was the existence of separatist Kurds in the north of that country. The activity of the PKK ethnic separatist terrorist organization and of the KDP leader Massoud Barzani in the region, the strong interpretations that Barzani was planning to seize control of Syria's northeastern region and thereby gain access to the Mediterranean, and the claim that, in line with a secret plan allegedly devised by Israel to partition Syria, a Kurdish state would be established by uniting the Kurds scattered in separate groups in the area stretching from Qamishli to the Mediterranean, and that this state would later be linked to northern Iraq and eventually unified, brought Türkiye's national security concerns stemming from the Kurds to the fore (K. Dora, 2022, p. 162).

When the peaceful demonstrations that had begun in certain regions of Syria spread rapidly across the country and turned into clashes as a result of the Assad regime's misguided strategy, the Ankara administration likewise changed its short- and medium-term strategy toward Syria. In this context, the Ankara administration, basing its plans on the assumption that Bashar al-Assad would be overthrown, began to seek ways to secure its national security

by preventing the separatist Kurds in the region from using the power vacuum that had emerged during the crisis to increase their strength. At the same time, acting with the ideal of neo-Ottomanism and the ambition of becoming a key hub in the transportation of certain energy resources in the Middle East to Europe, Türkiye sought to create its own sphere of influence (Yeşilyurt, 2013, p. 421). Undoubtedly, Türkiye's steps can largely be explained by its desire to become a power with influence in the region and by its wish not to be excluded, as it had been in Iraq, from the reconstruction process of Syria. Indeed, operating under the assumption that Bashar al-Assad would eventually be removed from power as a result of the economic and diplomatic pressures exerted by powers with interests and spheres of influence in the region, the Ankara administration adopted the ousting of Bashar al-Assad as its sole objective. With this in mind, it first closed its embassy in Damascus, suspended ongoing trade relations with Syria, severed ties with Syrian state banks, and also suspended the supply of military equipment to the Syrian army (Aljazeera Türk, 2014). Thus, the goodwill-based friendly relations that had been maintained with Syria until a very short time previously reverted to their former trajectory, in which hostility and mistrust once again prevailed.

As the number of parties to the clashes across the country increased and the events turned into a bloody civil war, and as threats directed at Türkiye from Syrian territory—its longest land border—continued to increase by the day, the Ankara administration called for the immediate overthrow of the Assad regime through an international operation and began to redeploy its military units to the Syrian border and conduct exercises (Bursa, 2019, pp. 134–136). Not content with this, it also began to support the Syrian opposition, particularly by backing and patronizing the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In addition, Türkiye assisted the organization of the Syrian National Council (SNC), allowed it to hold meetings on its soil, and facilitated border crossings (Pursane, 2014, pp. 124–125). Acting on the assumption that the problem would be resolved in a short time by the opposition groups once Bashar al-Assad was removed from power, Türkiye particularly insisted on preventing the separatist Kurdish issue from being brought to the fore (Erkmen, 2012, p. 28). However, the Ankara administration, which failed to read the regional dynamics accurately, created a fertile environment for the strengthening of the PYD, the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK, through its shallow policies that provided unconditional support to the regime opposition (Bursa, 2019, p. 135). Owing to factors such as the interventions of

regional and global actors, the participation of foreign terrorist organizations in the fighting, and the fragmented and complex structure of the opposition, the crisis, which quickly turned into a bloody civil war, generated a deep power vacuum from which the Kurds could benefit. Indeed, after the attack in Damascus on 18 July 2012, which resulted in the deaths of senior officials, Bashar al-Assad, thinking that he could reach a future accommodation with the Kurds and seeking to create a threat against Türkiye, withdrew his military forces from the northern and northeastern regions where Kurds were densely populated, thereby enabling the PYD/YPG terrorist organization to take control without any resistance in Afrin, Kobani, Derik, and Amuda, while in Hasakah and Qamishli it shared control with regime forces (Taştekin, 2016, p. 149). When the Syrian civil war began, the PYD/YPG, which was an illegal Kurdish political movement with limited military capacity, rapidly began to increase its limited military strength from the summer of 2012 onward under the eyes of the Assad regime (Bingöl, 2016, p. 12). In this tense environment, the downing of an unarmed Turkish military reconnaissance aircraft, which took off from the Erhaç base in Malatya in June 2012 and was shot down by Syrian air defense units without warning on the grounds that it had violated Syrian airspace, further escalated tensions between the Ankara and Damascus administrations (Ergan, 2012; Keskin, 2012, pp. 17–27). In response to this development, Türkiye changed its rules of engagement and decided that any attack coming from the direction of Syria would be responded to instantly (T24, 2015). In the same period, after five people lost their lives in the Akçakale district of Şanlıurfa as a result of fire opened from Syrian territory, a broad-mandate parliamentary motion was passed in October 2012 authorizing the deployment of Turkish troops to a foreign country, with the timing, scope, and limits to be determined by the government, within the framework of taking necessary measures against risks and threats that might emanate from Syria toward Türkiye (Bursa, 2019, p. 135). In an environment characterized by uncertainty, in which global and regional powers such as the United States, Russia, France, and Iran were involved, and in which terrorist organizations that had taken advantage of the political instability in Syria strove to carve out zones of influence, the Syria motion—renewed annually and, in 2013, combined with the Iraq motion—became an important element of the Syrian agenda, signaling that Türkiye could deploy military force to the field at any moment and that stringent security measures were always on the table (K. Dora, 2022, p. 164). Within the framework of all these developments, the first foundations were laid for possible cross-border military

operations on Syrian soil that might be carried out in accordance with the rules of international law.

Although the events that began in 2011 with local demonstrations in Syria initially emerged as an internal crisis, the inability to contain them within the country and their continual expansion over time led to a transformation. As the crisis escalated and spread over a wide area, the local crisis gave rise to interrelated national, regional, and international developments. The inability to resolve the Syrian crisis at the local, national, regional, and international levels was related to both the number of parties to the crisis and their goals and instruments. The tension that began locally between the Syrian regime and the opposition was militarized in a very short time, and for each party the primary objective became to defeat the other. While the actors were unwilling to move toward a political solution, over time PYD/YPG and ISIS became parties to the conflict in the Syrian theater with new demands. The fact that these actors, instead of seeking a solution to the crisis in Syria, pursued their own goals—such as state-building and/or independence—and activated military methods in order to achieve these goals prevented the local resolution of the Syrian crisis. As the chaos spread within the country and armed non-state actors gained increasing influence at the local level, the Syrian crisis began to affect neighboring states, and threats emanating from Syria came to the fore for those neighbors (Çağlar & Aksu, 2019, p. 534). Indeed, as regional and global actors with interests and spheres of influence in the region took positions, the crisis deepened, and with the involvement of the extensions of international terrorist organizations in the power vacuum that emerged alongside the domestic turmoil, the Syrian civil war took on new dimensions. When the situation in the camp of the separatist Kurds is examined within this complex environment on the Syrian stage, it is evident that the course of the ongoing civil war offered new opportunities to the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK. With the emergence in 2013 of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham), a religiously motivated terrorist organization, and its becoming influential in Syria after Iraq (Özarslan, 2020, p. 349), and with its rapid advance and attacks on Kurdish regions, the PYD/YPG was brought to the fore as the only force capable of stopping this organization, which had intensified its threats in the region. Facing the situation shaped by these developments, PYD/YPG pursued a highly pragmatic policy, cultivating good relations with the Damascus regime and its natural supporters Russia and Iran, and, in addition, neutralizing other opposition Kurdish

groups supported by Barzani in Syria, thereby becoming the sole representative of the Kurds there (İldeş, 2022, pp. 290–291). Under these conditions, the PYD, which made good use of the opportunities generated by the intensification of the civil war and the deepening of the political crisis in Syria, oriented itself from 2013 onward toward transforming its structures in northern Syria into an autonomous administration and institutionalizing its political and armed presence in the region. In this context, it wasted no time and, on 7 January 2013, declared a provisional Kurdish Autonomous Administration in the northeast of the country. Within this framework, a constitutional text that also included an electoral law was announced as part of the new governance model, and in the model that was prepared, the region was divided into three cantons: Afrin, Jazira, and Kobani. It was also envisaged that, upon the transition to a democratic system, the region would remain a part of Syria (Acun & Keskin, 2017). Furthermore, the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), which had been formed in January 2011 in northern Syria and claimed to constitute an umbrella organization uniting separately organized Kurdish groups, declared in 2014 that it was responsible for the administration of the so-called cantons (Özçelik, 2019, p. 1). Within this framework, it announced in April 2014 that it had enacted a "political parties law" and, with this so-called law, sought to establish the "legal" basis on which it could suppress other Kurdish political parties within the targeted autonomous region (Sandıklı et al., 2015). In fact, prior to the Syrian crisis, the PYD terrorist organization, the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK, had already created a de facto basis and referred to the north of the country as "South Kurdistan". Moreover, under its so-called provincial structure, it had not neglected to divide this geography into three regions: Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), Rojava (Jazira), and Afrin, which were the cantons included in this so-called formation. Seizing the opportunity presented by the prevailing situation, the organization even appointed so-called administrators to these areas by taking advantage of the power vacuum created by the civil war (İyiat, 2018, p. 9).

In connection with these developments, the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK also came to the aid of PYD/YPG by providing logistical and militant support. With changes made in the higher echelons, the duties of Syrian militants within the PKK/HPG ranks were terminated and replaced by experienced operatives, and the demobilized cadres from the HPG ranks were transferred to the YPG unit operating in Syria (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 13). Thus, the YPG, which until 2012 had only been able to perform policing functions in

the Kurdish regions, was strengthened and institutionalized through the participation of PKK militants of Syrian and Turkish origin (Şardan, 2016; Cebe, 2016). Meanwhile, with ISIS intensifying its attacks from late 2013 onward on regions where Kurds resided densely, a new front was opened that would trigger further developments in the civil war. Owing to the resistance and struggle it displayed in its fierce clashes with ISIS and the support it received from all sides as a result, the organization's power peaked particularly in 2014. As the intensity of clashes between ISIS and PYD/YPG increased, new recruits joined not only from among PKK militants but also from separatist Kurds living in Europe. It was reported that approximately 8,000–8,500 individuals from Türkiye had joined the YPG (World Bulletin, 2015), that those originating from Türkiye constituted about 40 percent of YPG's total strength, and that Türkiye played the most significant role in reinforcing the organization in this way (Jenkins, 2016). In addition, there are claims that PJAK, the Iranian branch of the PKK, after terminating its activities in Iran, sent a significant portion of its militants to the YPG ranks in Syria, and it is not difficult to surmise that the Iranian regime facilitated this process (Bingöl, 2016, p. 11).

On the other hand, after the PYD came to the fore as an actor in the Syrian civil war, attacks by Islamist opposition groups on areas under PYD control actually helped the organization's advance. In this process, the PYD, which seized Ras al-Ayn (Rasulayn), Rmeilan, and the Til Koçer border gate, began to gain prestige in the international arena, particularly in the eyes of the West, as a formation fighting jihadist organizations. The announcement by the organization of a Constituent Assembly in Rojava and of the Social Contract, which has the character of a constitution, as well as the declaration that autonomous administrations had been established in Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira, prompted Türkiye to seek to curb the PYD's growing influence and to gain the capacity to steer the organization by both engaging the PYD with the opposition and balancing it with other Kurdish groups. However, failing to bring the PYD into the opposition camp, Türkiye turned to cooperation with other opposition Kurdish groups in order to exploit the PYD's power struggle with the Kurdish National Council (ENKS), which was under Barzani's influence and which the PYD did not want to see emerge in Syria as a second Kurdish authority alongside the KDP and PUK in Iraq (Erkmen, 2012, p. 28). In this way, Türkiye sought to include ENKS in the Syrian National Coalition (SNRC) as the representative of the Kurds in the Syrian opposition and to block the terrorist organization PYD (Taştekin, 2015, p. 227). However, because the terrorist

organization exerted pressure on other opposition Kurdish parties in Syria in order to preserve its authority and increased its dominance by expanding the territory under its control, Türkiye's policy of breaking the PYD's monopoly in Syria through ENKS under Barzani's influence also failed (Bursa, 2019, p. 137). At the same time, the Ankara administration, in order to turn the existing situation in Syria to its advantage and harmonize its policies, hosted Salih Muslim, the co-chair of the PYD terrorist organization, in Türkiye from time to time and held talks with him. During this process, the PYD asked Türkiye to recognize the autonomous administrations it had declared in Syria, to cease its support for Islamist organizations, and to reopen the closed borders, while Türkiye demanded that the organization sever its cooperation with Bashar al-Assad, refrain from opposing a safe zone in the Syrian theater, and ensure that decisions regarding Syria's system of governance would in future be taken together with all Syrians (Hacaloğlu, 2013). The talks conducted within this framework reached an impasse, and the parties left the table without reaching agreement. In precisely this period, in 2014, after ISIS captured Mosul and in order to sever the link between the so-called Kurdish cantons and connect Jarabulus and Tel Abyad, it attacked Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), thereby reopening negotiations between the PYD and Türkiye. Because the only open route by which aid could reach this town, which was besieged within ISIS-controlled territory, was the Turkish border, the organization's request for support through Türkiye was rejected by the Ankara administration, which instead took the necessary security measures along the border and watched from a distance as the two organizations clashed (Deli, 2014).

The Turkish government's failure to make sufficient efforts to prevent militants who joined jihadist organizations—primarily ISIS—from entering Syria via Türkiye (Yalçınkaya, 2015, p. 6), and media reports that it supplied these organizations with weapons and ammunition through its intelligence service, created the perception that Türkiye was a country which, in order to contain the PYD, supported and cooperated with jihadist organizations fighting in the Syrian theater (Oktav, 2016, p. 47). In fact, it can quite plausibly be argued that, since the PYD was perceived as a greater threat to the country, and because ISIS sought to block the Kurdish corridor, Türkiye turned a blind eye to ISIS's attacks. The fact that Kurds living in Türkiye—responding to the call of Selahattin Demirtaş, then co-chair of the HDP—took to the streets to protest the Ankara administration's passive stance toward developments in Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), and that, during the actions they organized, demonstrators demanded

that Türkiye halt its support for ISIS and open a corridor for military aid from the KRG, strengthens this thesis (BBC News Türkçe, 2014). On the other hand, feeling the pressure of the international public opinion over accusations that it supported and harbored terrorist organizations, and in the face of the mobilization of the Kurds with whom it was conducting a negotiation process, the Turkish government changed its attitude and, following negotiations, allowed Iraqi peshmerga forces to pass through its territory and reach Ayn al-Arab (Yazıcı, 2018, pp. 69–71). Thus, with air support from the US-led international coalition against ISIS, and with KRG assistance as the ground force, ISIS was pushed out of Ayn al-Arab (Kobani). Meanwhile, due to the ISIS threat to the Tomb of Süleyman Shah, which, despite being located on Syrian soil, had been granted a special status as Turkish territory, the Shah Euphrates Operation was conducted, and the tomb was relocated to Eşme, which was under PYD control (Taştekin, 2015, p. 205).

However, the US–PYD partnership that emerged after the Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) experience produced consequences far more significant for Türkiye than the ISIS threat. Having found in the PYD/YPG a secular organization, rather than a jihadist one, with which to secure the ground force it sought in the Syrian crisis, the United States established a strategic partnership with the PYD ethnic separatist terrorist organization under the pretext of the struggle against ISIS and, by expanding the PYD's area of control to include territories occupied by ISIS, began to mature the Kurdish corridor project. From this stage onward, the priority of the Americans in Syria was to expand the area under the control of PYD/YPG, which they supported and protected, while the priority of the Turks was to contain the PYD/YPG terrorist organization and prevent the formation of the Kurdish corridor (Bursa, 2019, p. 139). In fact, from 2012 onward, the Ankara administration, having assessed the potential dangers, repeatedly voiced demands for a safe zone and a no-fly zone, arguing that such measures were necessary to prevent the implementation of the Kurdish corridor project, to protect and support the opposition against the Assad regime outside Turkish territory, to prevent PKK militants from infiltrating the country, and to stem the uncontrolled increase in the number of refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria (Tunç, 2014, pp. 15–16). Although the Turkish government held many meetings with the United States regarding the safe zone and no-fly zone, no concrete steps were taken due to differing approaches and expectations in Ankara's and Washington's policies on Syria. In light of the US stance, Türkiye turned toward Iran and Russia to conduct diplomacy with these two countries, despite differences

of opinion regarding the future of Bashar al-Assad (UK Parliament Committees, n.d.). Owing to the veto rights of Russia and China—supporters of the Assad regime—at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), no progress could be made in obtaining an international decision regarding the establishment of a safe zone, despite Türkiye's insistence on a safe zone with legitimacy sanctioned by NATO and the UN (Deniz, 2013, p. 326).

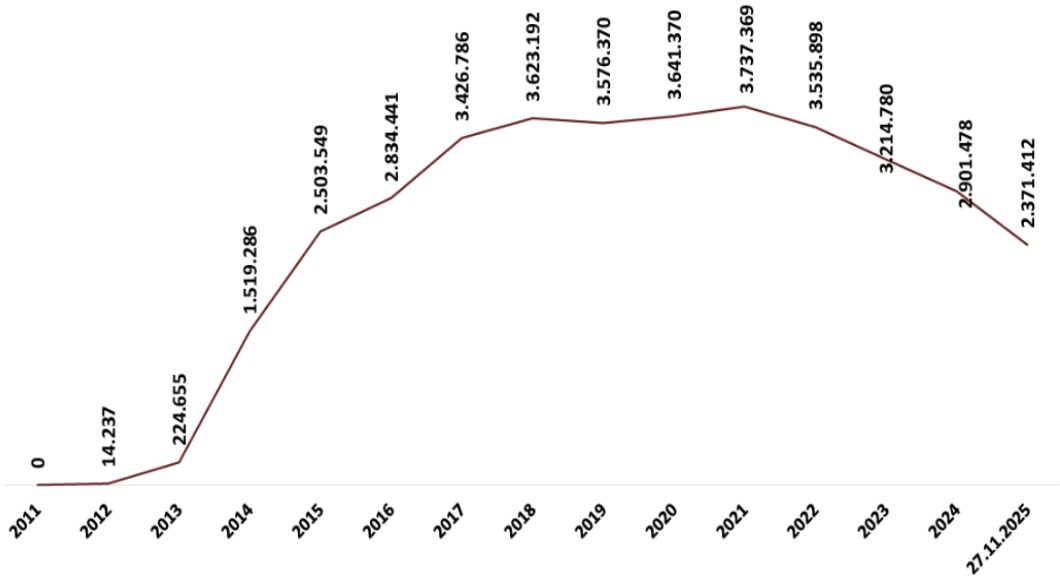

Figure 11. Syrians Under Temporary Protection by Year

Source: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Internal Affairs (2025)

Thus, the pragmatic military cooperation between the United States and PYD/YPG, which began at this stage and has continued to deepen to the present day, has become one of the most important areas of concern as a threat perception directed at Türkiye's national security in the Syrian crisis. Türkiye, a NATO ally of the United States within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, reacted strongly to this cooperation process. With statements that "under no circumstances will the creation of a terrorist belt along the country's Syrian border, and even the extension of this terrorist zone to the Mediterranean, be allowed", Türkiye lodged objections and kept this area of concern on the agenda. In response, the United States, claiming that the PKK and PYD/YPG were different formations, argued that it was assisting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which incorporated various ethnic groups, and that the SDF was its most important partner as the ground force of the coalition

in the fight against ISIS. At this point, the United States sought to shape international public perception of the declared cooperation processes with PYD/YPG through the image of "only the Kurds, with their secular women fighters, standing against the barbarians" (Darıcılı, 2019, p. 328). The attempt by the United States to obscure the PYD terrorist organization under the SDF umbrella and present it as a new opposition actor whose mission in Syria was to fight ISIS was an indication that the advance of the organization under US support and protection would not cease. Indeed, after the YPG–SDF captured the critically important Tishrin Dam in late 2015 and thereby achieved a significant gain in terms of crossing the Euphrates, it attracted attention by securing control in Manbij in August 2016, moving west of the Euphrates, and then advancing toward al-Bab in an effort to link Afrin to the Mediterranean (Hürriyet, 2016). In this way, the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK/KCK regional terrorist network, expanded its sphere of activity and influence in Syria under US support by highlighting its struggle against ISIS, another terrorist organization. Türkiye, which faced a major threat in the form of a Kurdish barrier along its southern flank that would sever its connection with the Middle East and exclude it from energy exports due to the opening of PYD/YPG to the Mediterranean, entered a critical phase (Tarakçı, 2018, pp. 1–2).

The policies pursued by PYD/YPG, a highly functional instrument deployed against Türkiye—which had turned the Kurdish equation to its advantage and was attempting to extricate itself from Western control—were particularly influential in the termination of the "solution process" in Türkiye and in the escalation of terrorism. Seeing this as a historic opportunity, the PKK, which had the support not only of the United States but also of Russia, sought to sabotage the "solution process" that Türkiye had initiated and to establish a "Northern Syria" and spread the "democratic autonomous administrations" it had created in accordance with its own ideology to Kurdish regions in Türkiye. Following the PKK's unilateral declaration of the end of the ceasefire period and the termination of the "solution process", the organization began to carry out large-scale terrorist attacks across the country (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2016). This caused Türkiye to direct its motivation and energy in the struggle against terrorism more toward the domestic arena. At the same time, while the PKK kept the government in Türkiye occupied during the "solution process", it conserved its forces until July 2015 and shifted a significant portion of its militants to Syria, thereby consolidating PYD/YPG's presence there. PYD/YPG, too, made a significant leap toward

its current strength due to the mistaken politics and strategy pursued under the name of a "solution process" in Türkiye (Global Security, n.d.). According to Karakoç Dora, whose analyses we endorse, the reason for overlooking the fact that a regional terrorist network was operating during the period when security-oriented policies toward Syria were completely removed from the agenda can be traced to the Oslo talks that began in 2009. The Oslo talks marked the beginning of a process that was formalized under the Law on the Termination of Terrorism and the Strengthening of Social Integration, which was promulgated in the Official Gazette on 15 July 2014 with the signature of then President Abdullah Gül, following the announcement by then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the launch of the "democratic opening process as the national unity and fraternity project" in 2009. This project, introduced under the name of the "solution process" and encompassing a ceasefire and the disarmament of the PKK terrorist organization, was aborted when the organization decided unilaterally to resume hostilities and subsequently launched a regional uprising. Yet, at a time when the long-standing struggle against the PKK had never seen Türkiye take a step back or make concessions, it created a significant security vulnerability for Türkiye to embark upon a solution process with the PKK while the civil war in Syria was ongoing and while PYD/YPG, the PKK's affiliate, was present on Syrian soil as a party to that civil war (K. Dora, 2022, pp. 165–166).

During the "solution process", the PKK relaxed within Turkish territory and, in the same period, focused on its structures in Syria and Iraq, thereby gaining the opportunity to enhance its military strength. Thus, the series of activities that began with the withdrawal of regime forces from the northern and northeastern regions of the country, continued with the expansion of the areas of control established by the PYD in these regions, and eventually reached a stage of institutionalization through the consolidation of its presence in these areas, created a very significant security gap for Türkiye within the Syrian crisis. Moreover, the crisis with Russia that arose after Türkiye shot down a Russian aircraft that violated Turkish airspace on 24 November 2015, despite the rules of engagement, further reduced Ankara's influence in Syria and led to the PYD/YPG spinning even further out of control. Given that Barzani, who had previously maintained good relations with Türkiye, had almost completely lost his influence in Syria and that his attempts to sell oil via Türkiye were largely blocked, it is clear that the sphere of influence of Türkiye, which in practice was trying to pursue an "autonomous foreign policy" outside US control, was restricted. At the same time, the

increase in the activities of PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK/KCK regional terrorist network, particularly in the north of the country under the pretext of the fight against ISIS, and the protection extended to this structure by the United States, clearly constituted a direct threat to Türkiye's existence, territorial integrity, and national security as a whole (İldeş, 2022, pp. 290–291). These components very clearly formed the ground for a possible separatist Kurdish structure in the region and created a problematic and unstable situation along Türkiye's southern borders, particularly in the Southeastern Anatolia region (Altundeğer & Yılmaz, 2016, p. 293).

In this chaos and turmoil, the irregular massing of millions of Syrians along Türkiye's border lines and Türkiye's consequent obligation to host these refugees; the radical Islamist terrorist organization ISIS, which seized areas along the Türkiye–Syria border from 2014 onward; the terrorist organizations PKK–PYD/YPG, which declared their own administrations; the attempts of these organizations to establish a terrorist corridor encircling Türkiye's southern borders; the implementation by external actors of the plan to establish a "Kurdish Corridor" from Iraq to the Mediterranean; the grave endangerment of border security due to attacks and actions directed at Türkiye by both the terrorist organizations in northern Syria and regime elements—all confronted the Ankara administration as serious problems that needed to be overcome. It is quite possible to state that the multidimensional risks, dangers, and uncertainties generated by these problems constitute complex, interwoven threats to Türkiye's national security. In the face of these multifaceted threats that emerged within the framework of developments, Türkiye, which for a long time sought solutions through diplomatic initiatives in the international arena, saw its proposals for the establishment of safe zones in Syria together with coalition forces fail to receive a response. The new foreign policy that Türkiye sought to design—disconnected from its historical security-based relations with Syria and shaped in the face of adverse developments—became unsustainable under the impact of terrorist attacks carried out by DAEŞ and PYD/YPG, as well as the bloody regional uprising of the PKK terrorist organization. The new foreign policy toward Syria, which the Ankara administration attempted to shape in recent years with an excessive optimism divorced from its historically security-based relations and characterized by soft-power elements, and the concessions granted to the PKK terrorist organization under the so-called "solution process" in line with this policy, produced developments and configurations that, as explained above, created threats to Türkiye's national security. In more concise

terms, it emerged that this configuration—stemming from the mistaken policies pursued by Ankara on the Türkiye–Syria axis—gave rise to a serious security threat for Türkiye. At this stage, Türkiye was confronted with the severe consequences of abandoning security-focused policies. The softening policies implemented by abruptly shelving hard-power elements within Türkiye's long-standing security-oriented policies toward Syria, together with the failure to adequately take into account Syria's relations with its traditional allies Russia and Iran, and the attempt to disengage from the historical context of Middle Eastern dynamics—which had turned into a field of conflict and mutual balancing among global powers after the end of Ottoman rule—were seen to have led to risks that would be impossible to remedy in the medium and long term (K. Dora, 2022, pp. 161, 166).

Ultimately, in order to ensure security along its borders and prevent terrorist organizations from taking steps that would threaten its national security, Türkiye moved to implement a smart-power strategy and, in this direction, began to employ hard-power elements de facto alongside soft-power instruments. On the ground, Türkiye, which was particularly deeply concerned about the advance of the PYD/YPG terrorist organization, foresaw the establishment of a planned terrorist belt on the Azaz–Jarabulus axis and sought to erect a barrier between the so-called Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira cantons (Taşçı, 2015). Upon the PYD terrorist organization's capture of Tel Abyad under the pretext of fighting ISIS and the linking of the Kobani and Jazira cantons, and its advance toward the Jarabulus–Azaz line, the Ankara administration sprang into action and, in order to prevent the implementation of the Kurdish corridor project, declared the west of the Euphrates a red line, aiming to block the transit of PYD/YPG militants (Milliyet, 2015). From 2016 onward, Türkiye, which began to employ hard-power elements de facto alongside soft-power instruments and thereby transitioned to a smart-power strategy, turned to the option of military operations in order to push the DAEŞ terrorist organization away from its border and prevent the PYD/YPG from establishing a terrorist corridor. In this context, it shifted its Syria policy from a focus on overthrowing the Assad regime to preventing the creation of a terror corridor, thereby abandoning its regime-change policy and moving to a counter-terrorism policy (Ekşi, 2018a, p. 88). Consequently, from this period onward, and up to the commencement of military operations against Syria in 2016, traditional security-oriented foreign policy toward Syria was set aside (Öncel & Akar, 2015, p. 79). In this way, Türkiye's perception of threats to its national security ignited the fuse of the military intervention in

the Syrian theater that had long been on its agenda. Indeed, the attempt by the PKK–PYD–YPG presence in Syria to establish a terror corridor extending to the Mediterranean was thwarted by the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring, and Spring Shield operations. These operations, undertaken primarily on the basis of the right of self-defense enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter, were also grounded in bilateral agreements signed between the two countries (İldeş, 2022, p. 291). In this context, faced with attempts to replicate in northern Syria the artificial formation that had been attempted in northern Iraq, Türkiye sought not only to neutralize threats to its own territorial integrity, but also to ensure the protection of Syria's territorial integrity, and it conducted the aforementioned operations on Syrian soil in accordance with international law and custom (Özarslan, 2020, p. 367). In this regard, the following can be stated: two developments stand out in the change in Türkiye's security-oriented perspective toward the regional Kurdish dynamic. The first is the possibility—largely structural in nature—of an independent Kurdish state emerging in Syria and Iraq as a consequence of interventions by actors with interests and spheres of influence in the region, interventions that continue to the present day. The second is the significant change in Türkiye's counter-terrorism method through its orientation toward terrorist centers beyond its borders. Under the impact of these two fundamental dynamics, Syria and Iraq have assumed a central position in Türkiye's goal of becoming a regional power (Dalar, 2015, p. 54). It is possible to speak of two basic parameters that support Türkiye's thesis, which perceives the separatist Kurdish movements arising from the power vacuum in Syrian and Iraqi territories just beyond its southern borders as a threat that might create a wave among its own Kurdish population. The first of these is that the emergence of an independent Kurdish state subsequent to the independence referendum in northern Iraq, and the appearance of the Türkiye–Iraq line as a border dividing Kurds in Türkiye and Kurds in Iraq, would have a character that undermines Türkiye's nation-state structure. The second is that the PKK's leadership cadre is sheltered in camps in northern Iraq and that the organization uses northern Iraq as a base area in the terrorist acts it carries out in Türkiye. Therefore, for a long period, Türkiye has read the Kurdish political movements in northern Iraq with a nervous and suspicious gaze within the framework of these two parameters (Oral, 2007, p. 77), and, drawing on the same reasons and accumulated experience, has conducted a series of military operations beyond its borders in the Syrian theater in order to preempt the threat posed by a possible PKK–PYD/YPG formation in the areas that would be vacated by ISIS in northern Syria (Biçer, 2018, p. 137).

In conclusion, in relation to the reactions it has displayed both on the ground and at the negotiating table, the following can be said about Türkiye's threat perceptions in the Syrian crisis: in a period woven with uncertainties in which efforts are being made to redraw the maps and establish a new order in the Middle East, Türkiye has faced serious threats due to the increasing influence and activity along its borders of terrorist organizations, paramilitary elements under the support and protection of regional/global powers, and armed non-state groups. The outbreak of the Syrian crisis before the Iraq problem had been resolved, and the fact that powers with interests and spheres of influence in the region took positions in line with their own aims and interests in the Syrian crisis after Iraq, rendered the emerging problems even more complex. Moreover, the activities of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK—which interacts with separatist currents in the four countries where Kurds reside—and of the radical Islamist terrorist organization DAEŞ, which attached itself to the region and constituted a separate area of concern, have posed a direct threat to the existence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Türkiye, compelling the Ankara government to pursue a proactive policy in the Syrian crisis. Indeed, Türkiye has carried out a series of military operations in succession to eliminate threats originating from the Syrian theater (Erkmen, 2020). With the new security concept it has established, Türkiye has, from August 2016 onward, begun to implement its strategy of neutralizing threats at their source and, after three military operations against the PYD/YPG and DAEŞ terrorist organizations, finally reduced threats along its southern borders to a minimum level through an operation conducted in March 2020 against regime elements. Türkiye, faced with attempts to replicate in northern Syria the artificial formation initiative in northern Iraq, has conducted the aforementioned military operations on Syrian soil in accordance with international law and custom, while seeking to neutralize threats to its own territorial integrity and, at the same time, to ensure the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity (Özarslan, 2020, p. 367). These military operations, carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army under its support, were conducted with respect for Syria's territorial integrity, with the utmost care for the lives and property of the civilian local population, targeting only terrorist elements, and successfully implemented without harm to the environment, religious, historical, and cultural structures, or infrastructure facilities. Through these operations, Türkiye has to a large extent ensured its border security, prevented the creation of the terrorist corridor that was intended to be established to its south, and thereby disrupted global and regional plans that would have posed threats to its national security. In light of these

developments, it should also be added that, given the divergences of opinion and the multi-actor network of interests, Türkiye must preserve its military gains in Syria—where diplomacy and conflict are intertwined within a competitive arena—by conducting cautious and multidimensional diplomacy.

6.3.2. Türkiye's Reactions to the Threats Emerging in the Syrian Crisis

Within the framework of its legitimate self-defense rights under international law and its struggle against terrorist organizations, the Ankara administration carried out four major military operations at intervals between 24 August 2016 and 5 March 2020, targeting northern Syria. In this context, with Operation Euphrates Shield launched by the Turkish Armed Forces on 24 August 2016, Jarabulus, al-Rai, Azaz, and al-Bab south of Kilis were cleared of terrorist organizations and brought under control. Through Olive Branch Operation launched on 20 January 2018, Afrin and its surroundings were secured, and with Operation Peace Spring launched on 9 October 2019, Tel Abyad, Ras al-Ayn, and nearby areas were cleared of terrorist entities. In addition, beginning in October 2017, within the framework of the Tripartite Guarantor Agreement signed with Russia and Iran, Türkiye established observation posts in Idlib and its surroundings; due to attacks by Syrian regime forces against the units stationed at these points, Türkiye launched Operation Spring Shield (OSS)on 27 February 2020 and achieved control on the ground (Demir, 2021, p. 571).

6.3.2.1. Operation Euphrates Shield

As previously explained, during the period when the Army of Conquest (Jaish al-Fatah) advanced toward Aleppo and achieved significant progress against the regime, clashes between the SDF forces—whose core cadre consisted of YPG militants—and the terrorist organization ISIS around eastern Aleppo brought greater challenges along Türkiye's border in northern Syria. On 6 August 2016, YPG–SDF forces, under US support and protection, crossed to the west bank of the Euphrates and captured Manbij, thereafter advancing further west and north. This development increased the likelihood that northern Syria would transform into an entity similar to the de facto structure established in northern Iraq, forming a terrorist corridor in the region. The presence of YPG–SDF in Afrin, combined with the possibility that the capture of al-Bab would expand this belt, created the potential for territorial continuity among the so-called cantons held by the organization in northern Syria.

As ISIS attacks intensified, removing this region from both ISIS and the PYD/YPG became vital within the framework of Türkiye's newly formulated Syria policy centered on national security (K. Dora, 2022, p. 167). Consequently, launching a cross-border military operation into the Syrian theater became inevitable. The fact that ISIS had become a national security threat to Türkiye—through its attacks launched from Syrian territory and its growing capacity—led Türkiye's political decision-making mechanisms to evaluate Operation Euphrates Shield as a necessity (Şenol, 2022, p. 142).

Türkiye launched Operation Euphrates Shield on 24 August 2016 with the aims of ensuring border security, supporting coalition forces in the fight against ISIS, preventing territories under ISIS control from being captured by another terrorist organization—the PKK/KCK-PYD/YPG—contributing to Syria's territorial integrity, and creating a safe zone for the local population forcibly displaced from the region. This decision was taken particularly in response to the intensification of ISIS attacks targeting Türkiye in early 2016 and the PKK/KCK-PYD/YPG's capture of Manbij in August 2016, which accelerated the process of establishing a terrorist corridor along the Turkish border (Şenol, 2022, p. 140). Through Operation Euphrates Shield, Türkiye sought to establish a safe zone in northern Syria to protect its borders against terrorist threats. To this end, an eight-article press statement was issued following the National Security Council (NSC) meeting, outlining the objectives of the operation. Türkiye officially described Operation Euphrates Shield as follows: "It is being conducted within the framework of Türkiye's rights under international law, the Right of Self-Defense enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter, and the UN's decisions regarding the fight against ISIS. Operation Euphrates Shield primarily aims to clear the region of terrorist organizations, strengthen border security, and at the same time prioritize and support Syria's territorial integrity." By emphasizing the increasing attacks against Türkiye carried out by ISIS and the PYD's deployment immediately across its border, Türkiye framed the operation within the legal basis of the right to self-defense, as stipulated in Article 51 of the UN Charter—which allows a member state to exercise individual or collective self-defense until the UN Security Council takes necessary measures (Yeşiltaş et al., 2017, p. 9). Moreover, despite Türkiye's persistent objections, the United States' use and protection of the PYD/YPG as a ground force played a decisive role in Türkiye's decision to carry out military interventions and to establish safe zones on its own initiative (Alptekin, 2019, p. 11).

The operation was designed as a military campaign under the command of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF), involving the TAF's land and air forces, Special Forces, the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), as well as Syrian opposition groups. For Operation Euphrates Shield, Türkiye mobilized opposition elements including Jaysh al-Nasr, Jaysh al-Tahrir, Faylaq al-Sham, the Hamza Division, the Nureddin Zengi Brigade, Liwa Suqur al-Jabal, Liwa al-Mutasim, the Sultan Murad Brigade, the Sham Front, and the 13th Division through an extensive train-and-equip program. The 13th Division, along with Jaysh al-Nasr, Faylaq al-Sham, and the Nureddin Zengi Brigade, which had not participated in the Havar-Kilis Operations Room previously established to clear al-Rai (Chobanbey) from ISIS, joined the Euphrates Shield operation, with additional groups participating during later phases (Suriye Gündemi, 2020). The first phase of the operation was conducted between Jarablus and the Sajur River from 24 to 28 August 2016. During this phase, the TAF and Free Syrian Army (FSA) units, along with affiliated groups, quickly secured control over Jarablus and advanced southward to prevent PYD/YPG–SDG forces from crossing the Sajur River north of Manbij. By leaving the PYD/YPG–SDG on the opposite side of the river, the Sajur was established as a natural boundary. The rural areas from Jarablus city center to the Sajur River were cleared of ISIS and PYD/YPG–SDG elements, allowing ISIS fighters to withdraw toward al-Bab. Subsequently, efforts focused on liberating the 90-kilometer border stretch between Azaz and Jarablus from ISIS, as well as freeing al-Bab and Manbij from SDG–YPG control (Acun & Görücü, 2021, p. 48). This 90-kilometer corridor between Azaz and Jarablus had long been under ISIS control and securing it was essential. Additionally, preventing the unification of the PYD/YPG–SDG cantons along the corridor, which included al-Bab and Manbij in northeastern Aleppo, was of critical importance. Within the operation, TAF and supporting FSA units, together with other armed opposition groups, combined forces across the Azaz-Mare-Chobanbey triangle to link the Jarablus–Chobanbey line, thereby removing ISIS from the Turkish border and ensuring border security. In a short period, the Turkish border was cleared of ISIS, establishing the Chobanbey–Jarablus connection, representing a significant milestone. Meanwhile, Türkiye-backed opposition groups liberated approximately 20 villages from PYD/YPG–SDG control south of Jarablus between 27 and 29 August 2016, bringing an area of roughly 400 km² between Jarablus and the northern Sajur River under their control. Throughout the operation, conducted under a joint operational concept, the TAF leveraged the initiative to maintain operational momentum and adapt through manipulation, achieving both physical and psychological

superiority over ISIS and PYD/YPG forces through simultaneous engagement, deep operations, and operational sustainability (Yeşiltaş et al., 2017, p. 19).

After this phase, the options before the TSK and Syrian opposition forces were the cities of al-Bab and Manbij. While preparations were underway to expand the operation toward Manbij, the presence of Russian-backed regime forces to the west of Manbij and US troops to its north temporarily halted the advance (Görücü, 2019). On 28 August 2016, the Pentagon assured Turkish officials that PYD/YPG–SDF elements would withdraw completely to the east of the Euphrates, convincing Türkiye—at least temporarily—to refrain from a direct operation toward Manbij. Consequently, the operation was halted 12 km from Manbij, and priority was shifted to al-Bab and its surroundings. The second phase of the operation—aimed at clearing the area between al-Rai and Dabik of ISIS elements—was conducted between 3 September and 16 October 2016. The Cerablus–al-Rai corridor was secured and the entire area between the three nodes (Azaz, al-Rai, Jarabulus) was cleared of ISIS. With the neutralization of ISIS elements along the Azaz–al-Rai and al-Rai–Jarabulus lines, border security was consolidated. With the capture of Jarabulus, Türkiye had fully secured its border line, cleared ISIS entirely from its frontier, and established the al-Rai–Jarabulus link.

The city of Jarablus, located west of the Euphrates River and hosting a border crossing with Türkiye, is of notable logistical importance as it facilitates the supply of support to opposition groups under Turkish protection, and holds significant value for all actors on the ground. Moreover, any potential military operation launched from the Jarablus line toward the southwest would be strategically significant, given that the Euphrates River would serve as a natural barrier on the western front and Türkiye would be positioned on the northern front. Additionally, controlling Jarablus is crucial for preventing the unification of PYD/YPG's so-called cantons and for minimizing threats along the Turkish border (Acun & Görücü, 2021, pp. 49–50). Looking back, Jarablus came under opposition control in July 2012 but was subsequently captured by ISIS toward the end of 2013. Following this, after losing control of Tel Abyad, ISIS retained Jarablus as its sole gateway to the outside. The PYD/YPG, aiming to bring the region under its control and to unite the self-declared cantons in northern Syria, launched an offensive toward Jarablus in mid-2015. Indeed, Operation Euphrates Shield thwarted the U.S. plan to transfer ISIS-controlled territories to the SDG/YPG and to facilitate the unification of the self-declared cantons.

Following the securing of the Gaziantep–Kilis border and the clearing of the Mare–Azaz–al-Rai line on 19 September 2016, the third phase commenced. This phase targeted the area between al-Bab and Dabik between 17 October and 20 December 2016, and the final phase targeted al-Bab—considered at the time one of ISIS's largest strongholds—between 21 December 2016 and 30 March 2017.

Subsequently, forces advanced southwards from the Turkish border, and at this stage the operation largely achieved its objectives with the recapture on 24 February 2017 of the strategic town of al-Bab, located 30 km from the border and one of Daesh's key base centres in Syria (Acun & Görücü, 2021, p. 30). Thus, in order to refute the justification of the PYD/YPG, which had been expanding by seizing territories under the control of this organisation under the discourse of fighting Daesh, Türkiye also conducted Operation Euphrates Shield in the Daesh-occupied areas situated between the so-called Kurdish cantons, basing its action on the fight against Daesh. With the successful completion of the operation in March 2017, Türkiye brought Azez, Jarablus, al-Rai, Çobanbey and al-Bab under control. Within the scope of Operation Euphrates Shield, which was successfully concluded on 31 March 2017, control was established over an area of 2,015 km² and 243 residential localities (T.C. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.; Şenol, 2022, p. 141). By deploying elements of the Free Syrian Army and the Turkish Armed Forces in the regions retaken from Daesh, a barrier was also erected against the PYD/YPG's advance to the west of the Euphrates River and against the realisation of the project to establish a Kurdish corridor..

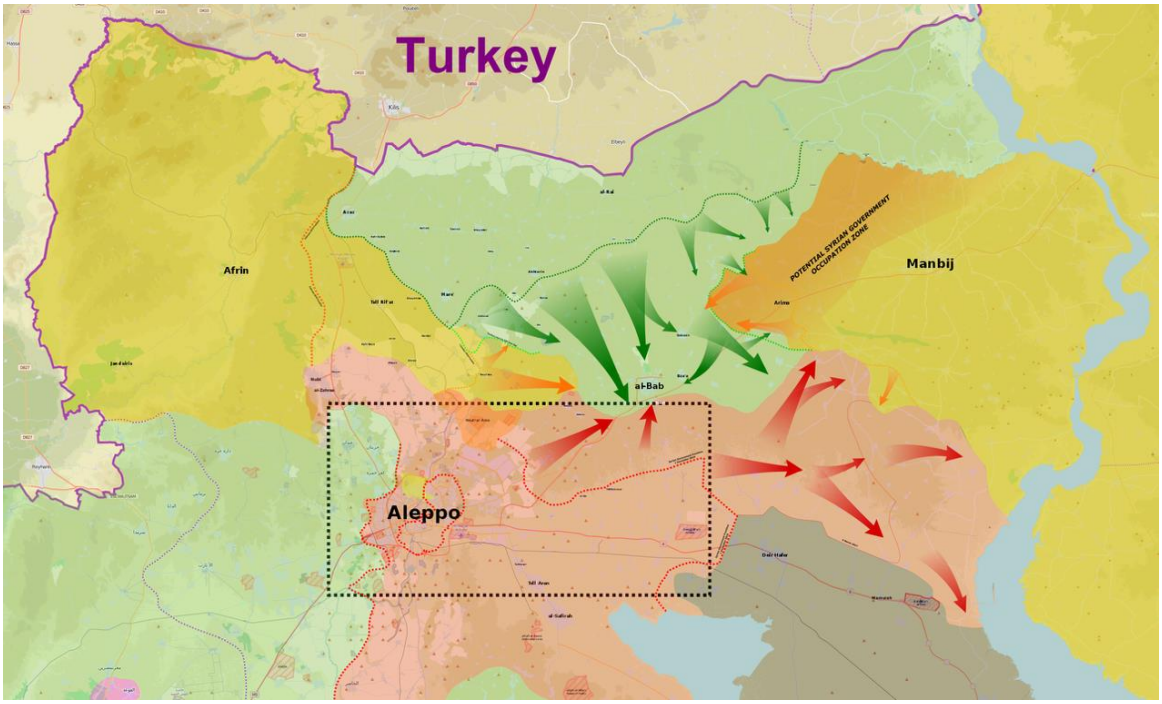

Figure 12. Fırat Kalkanı Harekatı haritası (31 Mart 2017)

Kaynak: OpenStreetMap

On the other hand, while Operation Euphrates Shield was ongoing, Syrian regime forces continued their offensives to capture Aleppo. In Aleppo, which was taken by regime forces in December, a ceasefire was declared through the intensive efforts of Russia and Türkiye, and the safe evacuation of 45,000 civilians was ensured. With the memorandum they signed as guarantor states on 30 December 2016, Türkiye and Russia ensured that the ceasefire in Aleppo was implemented throughout the country (T.C. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). These efforts demonstrated that Türkiye would not abandon humanitarian policies regarding the security of the Syrian people and that the aim of its military presence in Syria was not solely to ensure its own security. As a result of these developments, Russia and Iran, the main supporters of the regime, held a high-level meeting in January 2017 in Nur-Sultan, the capital of Kazakhstan (then called Astana), with the participation of Türkiye, a meeting that would subsequently continue at regular intervals (K. Dora, 2022, p. 168). Türkiye's success in the operation it conducted with determination paved the way for the Astana process, and with the launch of the Astana Process it became clear that no strategy could be pursued in Syria that ignored Türkiye. Through the Astana initiative, it also became apparent that

Türkiye could not shape its Syria policies independently of Russia and Iran, Syria's historical allies.

The developments experienced in this period show that Operation Euphrates Shield also had the function of bringing to the surface the complex alliance equation in Syria and of making more explicit the divergences and contradictions among the allied states. Indeed, statements made by official spokespeople have supported and reinforced this argument. White House Spokesman Josh Earnest, in a statement on the day the operation was launched, described Operation Euphrates Shield as "the latest example of the important contributions that Türkiye has made to the counter-Daesh efforts" (Çam, 2016). However, only a few days after this statement, when Turkish Air Force fighter jets struck PYD/YPG positions between Jarablus and Manbij and the FSA seized the villages of Jub al-Kusa and al-Amarna, which were under PYD/YPG control to the south of Jarablus, U.S. Department of Defense Spokesman Robert Cook declared that they were concerned about clashes in Syria east of Jarablus between the TAF and some opposition groups allied with it and units affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). While accepting Türkiye's exercise of its right of self-defence against Daesh, the United States did not accept this against the PYD/YPG, thereby bringing to light the tense process in the context of Syria between Türkiye and the United States (Terzioğlu, 2018, p. 614). In the end, the objective of establishing a secure zone 90 km in length and 40 km in depth in northern Syria was achieved; however, the goal of pushing the PYD/YPG entirely to the east of the Euphrates River could not be realised due to U.S. intervention and objections (Polat, 2020, p. 69). As can be seen, the failure of the Turks to advance in different directions in Syria, due to the U.S. military presence in the region and its protective stance towards the SDF, meant that the Turkish Armed Forces were unable to enter Manbij with this military operation (Yeşiltaş et al., 2017, p. 25). Although Türkiye was successful in the operation, it continued to emphasise that the security threat had not ended due to the presence of the PYD in Afrin, Manbij and east of the Euphrates River (Özalp, 2018, p. 182).

In conclusion, it may be stated that Operation Euphrates Shield was carried out against the goal of establishing a terrorist state whose threat level would run counter to Türkiye's national interests, including regions along Türkiye's Syrian border (Akça, 2018, p. 68). With this operation, Daesh elements of the terrorist organisation were pushed 40 km beyond the Turkish border. Türkiye-backed opposition forces gained self-confidence in the struggle

against Daesh and adopted the belief that Daesh could be defeated. In particular, the propaganda in the international public sphere that "only the PYD/YPG is fighting/can fight against Daesh" was rendered ineffective. The emergence of the possibility that the opposition could advance on Aleppo following the capture of al-Bab also exerted pressure on the Syrian regime. Furthermore, the clearing of the border strip between Azez and Jarablus of Daesh contributed significantly to efforts to prevent the crossing of foreign terrorist elements across the border. As a result of the operation, the corridor which the PKK/KCK-PYD/YPG sought to create along the Turkish border in order to reach the Mediterranean was blocked. However, the U.S. did not fulfil its promise that the PKK/KCK-PYD/YPG would withdraw to the east of the Euphrates. The terrorist organisation continued its activities in Tel Rifaat and Manbij. Perhaps this was the only objective that Türkiye failed to achieve with Operation Euphrates Shield (Şenol, 2022, p. 144).

At the same time, Operation Euphrates Shield thwarted the efforts of the ethnically separatist terrorist organisation PYD/YPG to link Ayn al-Arab with Afrin. The operation not only ensured the complete removal of Daesh from the Turkish border, but also led to the weakening of Daesh, which had become embedded in the region as a source of instability, and to the severing of its border connections. More importantly, it turned Türkiye into one of the actors in the Syrian theatre capable of taking the initiative with its land forces and exercising influence over areas of control. In all these respects, it is possible to regard Operation Euphrates Shield as one of the turning points of the Syrian war (Acun & Görücü, 2023, p. 31). On the other hand, the crushing of the terrorist organisation Daesh, which claimed to have established a so-called Islamic state within Syria, also revealed the importance Türkiye attaches to Syria's territorial integrity and to the security of the Syrian people in the areas formerly under Daesh control. This shows that, through Operation Euphrates Shield, Türkiye is present on Syrian territory not with the aim of occupation, but, alongside securing its national security, with the aim of ensuring the security of the Syrian people. When the operation is considered not only in terms of the military dimension but also in its entirety, including humanitarian aid delivered in the regions liberated from the organisation, the establishment of local councils, the provision of advisory services for the establishment of local police forces and judicial authorities, and similar activities, it can be argued that the operation made a significant contribution to stabilising the region. In this context, it may well be argued that the operation constituted a national step that, in addition

to its national and international military dimensions, also encompassed a humanitarian aid perspective and the coordination of international and local alliances (Yeşiltaş et al., 2017, p. 25). Indeed, in the statement issued following the meeting of the National Security Council (MGK) dated 29 March 2017 announcing the end of the operation, it was declared that the operation had been conducted "in order to ensure the security of our country's borders, to prevent the threats and attacks of the Daesh terrorist organisation against our country, to enable our displaced Syrian brothers and sisters to return to their country, and to ensure that they can continue their lives in peace and security in the Operation Euphrates Shield area", thus very clearly underlining both the aim and the outcome of the operation.

This military operation was a response given by Türkiye, in full conformity with international agreements, to protect its borders and to eliminate threats to its internal security. Through the operation, Türkiye adopted a more proactive stance in protecting its national security, while at the same time sending a clear message that it would remain committed to international obligations. The operation also enabled Türkiye to reaffirm to allied countries its reliability in combating Daesh and other terrorist groups in the region. During the operation, Turkish ground forces were supported by the air power of the U.S.-led coalition. The fact that Turkish soldiers were welcomed with joy by Syrians increased Türkiye's soft power in the region and raised the likelihood that the country would engage in further military operations in the future, particularly in Syria and Iraq (Usluer, 2016, pp. 38–29). The decision to launch Operation Euphrates Shield is also of critical importance in that it showed that the sensitivity within Türkiye's domestic public opinion regarding stopping the aggressive illegal activities of the Daesh terrorist organisation against Türkiye was not ignored. In addition, by demonstrating that Türkiye would not remain unresponsive to any terrorist organisation seeking to position itself along its borders, it revealed its deterrent hard power. Moreover, as a country within the anti-Daesh coalition that managed to suppress this extremely dangerous terrorist organisation in a short period of time, Türkiye gained prestige and increased its credibility in the eyes of the UN and NATO (Şenol, 2022, p. 142).

6.3.2.2. Olive Branch Operation

Looking back, Afrin, which is located in the Aleppo governorate in north-western Syria and consists of a total of six towns—Cindires, Racu, Sharran, Sheikh al-Hadid, Maabatli and

Bulbul—and which has geostrategic importance due to its location, changed hands dramatically in the early phase of the civil war. Taking advantage of the regime's desperation, its flawed strategy and the region's demographic structure following the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011, the terrorist organisation PYD/YPG took Afrin from regime control without encountering any resistance between May and August 2012 and deployed itself along the Turkish border. Rapidly spreading over a wide area of Afrin, the terrorist organisation turned the region into a training and sheltering centre and in 2014 declared it a so-called canton (Kara, 2019, p. 325). The fact that the United States continued to support and protect the terrorist organisation PYD/YPG, which rapidly expanded its sphere of control by capitalising on the chaos and weakening authority during the civil war, made this threat that had emerged along Türkiye's border even more dangerous. The ease with which terrorists crossed into Türkiye via the Amanos Mountains on the Hatay border, the harassing fire and attacks carried out indiscriminately by the PYD/YPG on settlements along the border, and the fact that all these phenomena and incidents posed a threat to Türkiye's national security rendered an operation against the PYD/YPG, which had entrenched itself in Afrin, a necessity (Şenol, 2022, p. 147). In response to the threats and attacks of PYD/YPG elements deployed in the Afrin region in north-western Syria, together with another terrorist organisation, Daesh, against both the local population and the lives and property of Turkish citizens living on the Turkish side of the border, the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army, which it supported, launched a military operation named Olive Branch Operation (Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı, ZDH) on 20 January 2018. In defining the aims and scope of the operation, Türkiye treated the terrorist organisations Daesh and PYD/YPG as equivalent and underlined that both organisations posed threats to Türkiye's national security and to the stability of the region.

From another perspective, following the official announcement by the authorities that Operation Euphrates Shield had ended on 30 March 2017, Türkiye now found itself at the very centre of the Syrian crisis, and the Turkish Armed Forces were de facto present on Syrian soil. In the same period, parallel to Operation Euphrates Shield, the construction of observation posts by the Turkish Armed Forces in Idlib and adjacent areas against possible threats from the PYD/YPG and Daesh terrorist organisations further positioned Türkiye at the heart of the Syrian crisis. When this situation is examined more closely, it can be argued that, through Operation Euphrates Shield, Türkiye, which cut the link between Manbij and

Afrin, also initiated talks with Russia and Iran in order to extend its reach as far as Idlib, which has strategic importance. At the root of these talks lay Türkiye's intention, in the face of the possibility that the groups clustered in Idlib would shift towards the areas under Operation Euphrates Shield control and pose a threat if Assad forces, having captured Aleppo, were to attack Idlib, where the opposition is concentrated, and in the face of the possibility that millions might seek refuge in Türkiye due to the ensuing clashes (Acun & Salaymeh, 2018, p. 9), not only to prevent the PYD/YPG and Daesh from establishing themselves in Idlib by exploiting chaos and instability, but also to increase its influence in Idlib, step up pressure on PYD-controlled Afrin, and pave the way for an operation to be conducted there. Türkiye's adoption of a ceasefire decision with Russia in December 2016, with a view to halting the conflict in Syria despite its disagreements with the United States, in a sense determined the course of the steps to be taken regarding Idlib. In this context, together with al-Nusra and Daesh, the PYD was excluded from the ceasefire at Türkiye's request. The agreement, which emphasised Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty, provided for negotiations to be held for a political solution (İsmayıl, 2017, pp. 3–4). Within this framework, a series of talks were held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, whose legitimacy was grounded in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and which replaced the Western-led Geneva process. As a result of the negotiations, Türkiye, Russia and Iran were recognised as guarantor states of the process, and agreement was reached on the establishment of de-escalation zones in Idlib. Subsequently, between October 2017 and May 2018, Türkiye established twelve separate observation posts in Idlib. Türkiye's success in persuading external actors to accept the establishment of observation posts in the Idlib de-escalation zone and its completion of the construction of these posts during the operation is extremely important in that it reveals a forward-looking approach to the region (Varlık, 2019). More plainly, the control points established in Idlib brought to mind a possible operation to be conducted against Afrin. In other words, the fact that Türkiye positioned some of its initial observation posts to the west of Aleppo, south of Afrin, strengthened scenarios concerning a possible operation against Afrin. Another factor that reinforced this scenario was the Americans' announcement that they would form a 30,000-strong Border Security Force with the YPG-SDF at its core.

Indeed, this development prompted Ankara to take action. In this context, upon Ankara's instructions, Turkish Armed Forces elements encircled Afrin by taking control of Salwa on

13 October 2017, Tal Fakih (Takve) on 23 October and Mount Aqil on 19 November, thereby eliminating elements that could pose an obstacle to the conduct of a military operation (Turkish General Staff, 2018). At this stage, in response to the threats and attacks of PYD/YPG elements deployed in the Afrin region in north-western Syria, together with another terrorist organisation, Daesh, against both the local population and the lives and property of Turkish citizens living on the Turkish side of the border, the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army, which it supported, launched a military operation named Olive Branch Operation (ZDH) on 20 January 2018 (K. Dora, 2022, p. 171). With the launch of the operation, the Ankara administration declared that through this military operation it aimed to prevent the emergence along its border of a possible terrorist corridor, to terminate the so-called canton/state structure, to ensure stability in Afrin and create a safe environment for the local population, and to liberate the Syrian people from the pressure of terrorist organisations. In defining the aims and scope of the operation, Türkiye treated the terrorist organisations Daesh and PYD/YPG as equivalent and stressed that both organisations posed threats to Türkiye's national security and to regional stability. As in Operation Euphrates Shield, it was stated that Olive Branch Operation would be conducted on the basis of Türkiye's rights under international law, UN Security Council Resolutions 1624, 2170 and 2178 concerning the fight against terrorism, Article 51 of the UN Charter, and respect for Syria's territorial integrity (Köylü, 2018, p. 80).

Indeed, with the participation on 20 January of 72 Turkish warplanes in air operations and the shelling by artillery units on the ground of PYD/YPG positions, the operation was effectively launched, and as in Operation Euphrates Shield, in this operation too land forces with manoeuvre capabilities supported by air power were actively employed (Özçelik & Acun, 2018, p. 48). On the first day of the operation, 20 January 2018, predetermined targets belonging to the terrorist organisation PYD/YPG—positions, tunnels, training camps and headquarters—were struck and destroyed by the Turkish Air Force. Subsequently, on 21 January 2018, ground forces affiliated with the TAF and the FSA launched an advance from the Türkiye–Syria border line towards Afrin (Şenol, 2022, p. 149). On 21 January, ground forces participating in the operation entered the region from six different points, and at a later stage the connection points were linked up (Suriye Gündemi, 2018b). By linking these points, the Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian National Army, which deepened their advance, created axes of advance towards Afrin city centre. The defensive lines established

by the terrorist organisation PYD/YPG in rural Afrin, such as tunnels, positions and trenches, were breached, and rural areas were brought under control in a controlled manner in preparation for the operation towards Afrin city centre. During this preparatory stage, PYD/YPG terrorist elements withdrew, abandoning the cell structures they had established in the city centre. It may be argued that the rapid breaking of the defensive lines of the PYD/YPG, the high number of casualties suffered by the terrorists, and their deterioration in morale and motivation to the point where they could no longer mount a defence against the TAF and the SNA were effective in this withdrawal. Under these conditions, in a period as short as almost two months, the Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian National Army entered Afrin city centre on 18 March 2018 and took control. Subsequently, they advanced in the south of the city and delineated the current borders, thereby successfully concluding Olive Branch Operation (Acun & Görücü, 2023, p. 32).

With this operation, on 18 March 2018 TAF units established control in Afrin city centre and compressed the PYD terrorist organisation into the Tel Rifaat region. Thus, through Operation Euphrates Shield, the Astana talks and Olive Branch Operation, Türkiye created a significant area of control in the Syrian theatre (Bursa, 2019, p. 144). Indeed, in press statements made by government officials, it was declared that the primary aims of the operation were to prevent the infiltration of the PKK terrorist organisation into the country, to completely break the attempted Kurdish corridor belt opening onto the Mediterranean, and to eliminate the possibility of severing Türkiye's connection with the Arab geography (İnternethaber, 2018). Within the scope of this operation, which lasted approximately two months and ended on 18 March 2018, a total area of 2,265 km² in the Afrin region was brought under control. On the eve of the operation, the FSA, which had been brought together under three corps, actively participated in Olive Branch Operation with approximately 12,000 fighters from 28 FSA groups and accompanied TAF units (Şenol, 2022, p. 149). Thus, the chain of military operations launched by Türkiye against Syria with Operation Euphrates Shield continued with Olive Branch Operation, and the attempts of the terrorist organisation PYD/YPG to infiltrate Türkiye via the Amanos Mountains were eliminated beyond the border.

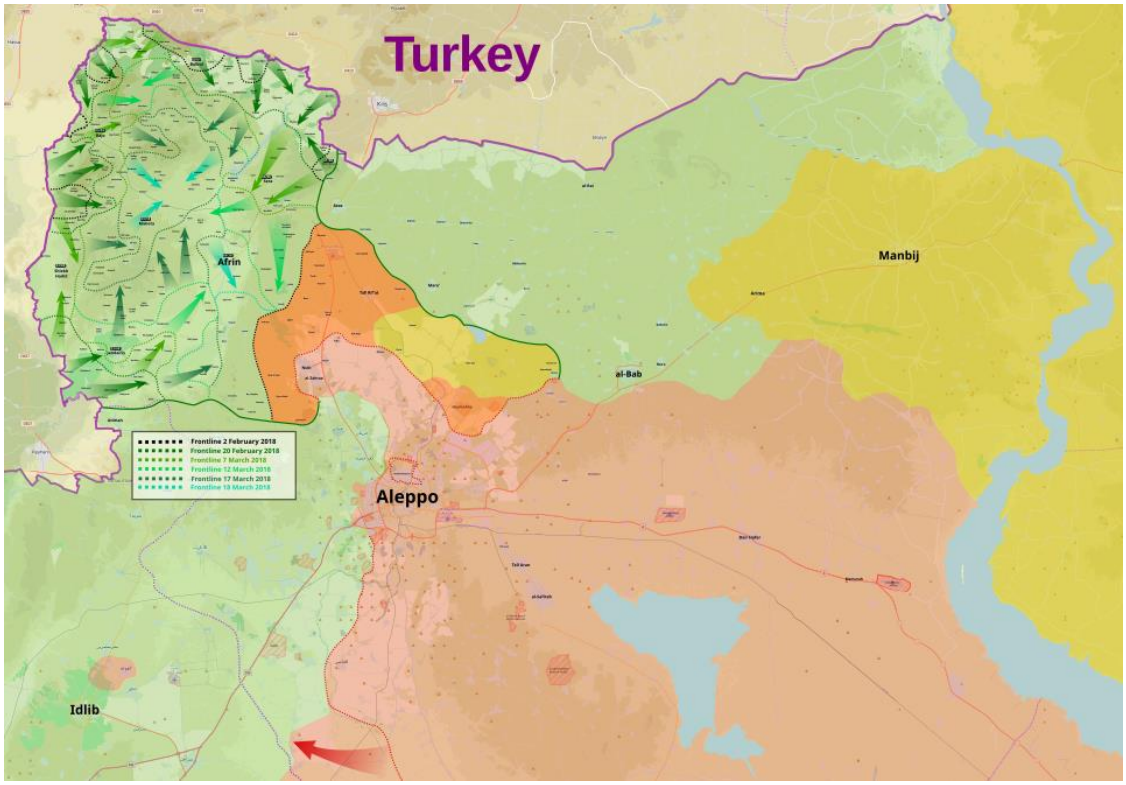

Figure 13. Map of Olive Branch Operation (18 March 2018)

Source: OpenStreetMap

In addition, the attempts by terrorist elements to link Afrin and Manbij, which had already been largely thwarted by Operation Euphrates Shield, were completely brought to an end. Through this operation, strategic gains were achieved consisting of components such as ensuring the security of Türkiye's borders, preventing the territorial control of the terrorist organisation in Syria, establishing a land connection for moderate opposition groups positioned in Idlib and northern Aleppo, and ending the presence of the PYD/YPG to the west of the Euphrates (Acun & Görücü, 2023, p. 32). Meanwhile, the heavy blows inflicted by Türkiye's successive military operations on terrorist organisations operating along its borders prompted regional and global actors that had been protecting these organisations, primarily the United States and Russia, to take action. With these movements, developments emerged in the region that overshadowed Türkiye's success on the ground (Özçelik & Acun, 2018, p. 12). Indeed, within the scope of Olive Branch Operation, it had been aimed to merge the areas brought under control through Operation Euphrates Shield, to establish a connection with Aleppo, and to halt and prevent the passage of PYD/YPG elements to Manbij (Taştekin, 2019b); however, this strategic objective could not be achieved due to the

United States' opposition to this advance. Furthermore, the failure of the Russia–Iran–Assad front, together with the Assad regime, to give the green light for Türkiye's use of the airspace in the region and Russia's oppositional stance and military presence prevented the Turkish Armed Forces from conducting a comprehensive operation in Tel Rifaat. In this period, Iran not only targeted Olive Branch Operation via all possible channels, but also provided military support to the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation against the Turkish Armed Forces and Free Syrian Army elements by channelling Shia militias from the Nubbul–Zahra area, where it held influence alongside the regime, into the region. At the same time, Iran assumed the role of mediator in the inconclusive talks between the Assad regime and the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation on the transfer of Afrin to the control of the Damascus administration (Şenol, 2022, p. 150). On the other hand, it may be argued that the Moscow administration, which does not even recognise the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organisation, displayed a partially reactive stance towards the ongoing military operations. From this perspective, the weakening of the PYD/YPG's presence in the region, which operates under American guidance, the demonstration of the Turks as a balancing actor in Syria, and the strengthening of the regime's presence in the region, particularly in the Tel Rifaat area, stand out as components that shaped Russia's interpretation of Olive Branch Operation. In this context, Olive Branch Operation was regarded by Russia as a new opportunity to escalate tension between Türkiye and the United States (Özçelik & Acun, 2018, p. 34). On the basis of this situation, it may be suggested that Russia, motivated by the aim of maintaining a close and sustainable relationship with Türkiye, which possesses NATO's second-largest army, and by the objective of weakening the power of the United States at the global level, attached strategic importance to its relations with Türkiye in the Syrian theatre, and therefore refrained from displaying a harsh reaction to Türkiye's military operations. In any case, as a result of these developments, an axis emerged, distinct from that of the United States, consisting of Türkiye, Russia and Iran, all of which advocate Syria's territorial integrity. Through its chain of military operations and the spheres of control it created, Türkiye increased its influence in Syria with a diplomatic initiative involving Russia, the Assad regime and Iran, thereby strengthening its hand against the U.S.–PYD/YPG partnership (Ekşi, 2018b). Under the influence of this axis, Türkiye did not allow the United States, Iran and the Assad regime to carry out activities aimed at slowing down and rendering inconclusive the operation. Thus, by conducting Olive Branch Operation following Operation Euphrates Shield, Türkiye once again demonstrated at the international level that

it would not permit the implementation of policies aimed against itself in the region. With this operation, Türkiye primarily thwarted the U.S. objective of establishing a terror corridor and proved that future-oriented projects planned in Syria could not be implemented without its involvement. Moreover, by deploying to the west of the Euphrates River and thereby blocking the PYD/YPG's access to the Mediterranean, Türkiye revealed itself as a rule-setting and rule-disrupting actor in the geopolitical struggle in Syria (Ekşi, 2018a, p. 91). The tactical political manoeuvres pursued in this military operation process—informing the international public and establishing contacts with actors that possess spheres of interest and influence in the region—served as a complement to the success achieved in the military domain. In addition to all this, it is quite possible to assert that, by conducting Olive Branch Operation, Türkiye cleared Afrin of terrorist elements and rendered this segment of the border secure. Moreover, the importance attached to the territorial integrity of Syria was once again demonstrated, and the message was conveyed that terrorist organisations would not be allowed to become influential actors in Syria.

Following these steps, the issue of the Turkish Armed Forces entering Manbij in order to completely clear the PYD/YPG from the west of the Euphrates River came onto the agenda. However, the presence of American soldiers in the region caused Türkiye to pause in its resolve to carry out a military intervention in Manbij. To overcome this significant obstacle, Türkiye met repeatedly with American officials in 2018 in an effort to find common ground on the Manbij issue (Bursa, 2019, p. 145). As a result of negotiations focusing on Türkiye's proposal that the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation be removed from Manbij and that security in the area be jointly ensured by Türkiye and the United States, the parties agreed in June 2018 on a roadmap for establishing security and stability in Manbij (Erboz, 2019). Within this scope, a three-stage process was planned, which included the preparation of an implementation plan, the establishment of stability and security through joint military supervision by Türkiye and the United States, and, in the meantime, the withdrawal of the PYD/YPG from the area (Gündoğan, 2018). Following these developments and the announcement by the PYD/YPG that it would also withdraw from Manbij (SDE, 2018), Turkish and American soldiers began to conduct joint patrols in Manbij (VOA Türkçe, 2018). Despite this ostensibly positive picture over the passage of time, the PYD/YPG elements did not withdraw from Manbij. It was thus demonstrated that the United States, which justified its presence in Syria by expressing its aims as the total defeat of Daesh, the

withdrawal of Iran-backed militias from Syria and the restoration of order in the country, continued to provide the necessary support to the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation, operating under the name of the SDF and dominated by YPG militants, even after Operation Euphrates Shield, under the pretext of combating Daesh (Polat, 2020, p. 80). In view of this situation, it has been observed that the Americans sought to establish a structure in northern Syria that would act in line with their own interests and that, as in Iraq, they pursued a policy aimed at creating a terror corridor in Syria (Güner, 2016, p. 273). Throughout the operation, the United States, via diplomatic channels, voiced its discontent and concern over the lack of a land connection between Afrin, which was under PYD/YPG control, and Hasakah and Manbij, and sought to undermine the operation on the ground by not preventing the transfer of militants and ammunition from the east of the Euphrates to the region by the organisation. Thus, it became evident that the United States, which stalled Türkiye through diplomacy regarding the future of Manbij, where it had military bases, was not inclined to abandon the PYD/YPG, which it utilised as its ground force in the Syrian theatre.

In the face of these developments, Türkiye, which did not adopt a conciliatory stance regarding the presence of the PYD/YPG, brought back onto the agenda the issue of conducting a comprehensive military operation to the east of the Euphrates and, at this point, reopened the debate on the establishment of a safe zone. The United States, on the other hand, treated the area east of the Euphrates as a geo-political and geo-strategic region, particularly in terms of controlling energy resources and curbing Iran’s influence in the region, and thus declared that it would not abandon the Kurds in this process and would not approve a unilateral intervention. During this period, while Türkiye increased its military build-up along the border as part of preparations for a military operation, the United States not only stepped up its arms supplies to the PYD/YPG, but also called on the United Kingdom, France and Germany to deploy troops to the east of the Euphrates in an effort to forestall a possible military intervention. Despite this tension, efforts to find common ground between Washington and Ankara regarding the fate of the area east of the Euphrates continued. Leaving these reconciliation talks aside, the United States did not abandon its effort to establish a safe zone in northern Syria without Türkiye and to position itself between the PYD/YPG and Türkiye in order to protect the organisation (Bursa, 2019, p. 147). The PYD/YPG side, for its part, which stressed that neutral actors should be present in the safe zone, declared that it could join these actors on the condition that Türkiye withdrew from

Afrin, thereby projecting an image parallel to that of the United States (Taştekin, 2019c). Thus, it became apparent that the negotiations conducted between Türkiye and the United States following Olive Branch Operation and aimed at removing the PKK/YPG terrorist organisation from Manbij did not yield any results and that neither side backed down from its demands and expectations (Görücü, 2019).

While this deadlock occupied the Turkish side, the United States announced that the safe zone to be established in Manbij would be supervised by the so-called anti-Daesh coalition countries and, in this context, that the United Kingdom, France and Denmark had begun military preparations (Timetürk, 2019). However, it is a fact that the safe zone measure outlined in this framework evoked memories of certain incidents in the recent past that had not yet faded from collective memory. More specifically, it clearly recalled Operation Provide Comfort, conducted via Türkiye after the First Gulf War with the aim of protecting the Kurds in northern Iraq from Saddam Hussein's attacks and involving other allied countries that had taken part in the war under U.S. leadership, as well as the air component that implemented this operation, "Poised Hammer" (incorrectly translated into Turkish as "Çekiç Güç"). The Turkish government was concerned by the reality that this scenario, as in the past, would provide a protective shield for the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation and undermine the military operations to be carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces (Arpacık, 2019). In response to these developments, Türkiye, which declared the PYD/YPG structure a red line, intensified and increased its military deployments to the Syrian border and the Operation Euphrates Shield area in order to protect its national interests and security. Türkiye's determination to launch a military operation to open a peace corridor in northern Syria attracted the attention of the Americans. Apparently regarding a TAF intervention as imminent and realistic, they decided to reopen and intensify negotiations with Turkish officials on the future of the area east of the Euphrates (DeYoung et al., 2019).

As a result of the diplomatic traffic conducted between Washington and Ankara on this issue, the Turkish Ministry of National Defence (MSB) announced in August 2019 that an agreement had been reached with the United States on the establishment of a joint operations centre in Türkiye for the creation of a safe zone aimed at addressing Türkiye's security concerns originating from Syria and on the settlement in this area—referred to as a peace corridor—of Syrian citizens returning to their country (MSB, 2019a). Although the agreement reached with the United States gave the impression that consensus had been

achieved regarding the east of the Euphrates, the Turkish side voiced certain legitimate criticisms regarding the details of the memorandum. These legitimate criticisms centred on the failure to present a transparent framework that would satisfy Türkiye with respect to depth and control in the area where security was to be established, where the PYD/YPG had not withdrawn; the condition that Turkish soldiers would not enter Kurdish settlements and city centres; and the continuation of U.S. military support to the PYD/YPG, which meant that Türkiye's security concerns were not allayed (Bursa, 2019, p. 149). Moreover, the statement by the Pentagon that the agreement addressed the concerns of the Turkish side and would ensure that the SDF, which had ceased to consider a TAF intervention and would now focus on combating Daesh and ensuring the security of the region, clearly demonstrated that the United States had not lifted its protective shield over the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation. Faced with this impasse, Turkish officials emphasised that they were sensitive to the need to prevent the safe corridor from turning into a delaying tactic as in the Manbij process and stated that, if necessary, Türkiye could, on its own initiative, clear the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation from the region and establish a safe zone (Özdemir, 2019). In this process, under the shadow of debates such as "Is a new Poised Hammer emerging?", the Turkish government evaluated the safe zone agreement reached between Türkiye and the United States as a temporary formula, managed to enter the east of the Euphrates and brought the region into a bargaining process (Aksan, 2019).

As explained above, Olive Branch Operation is extremely important in that it irreversibly and profoundly altered the balance of alliances in Syria. At the outset of the Syrian crisis, Türkiye fought together with the United States against the Assad regime; however, with this operation, it began to engage in direct confrontation with the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation, which was under U.S. support and protection (Ekşi, 2018, p. 91). In this respect, the operation created a paradigm shift in Turkish–American relations, which from that point onwards proceeded on the basis of mistrust. On the other hand, the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation, in which the United States had invested heavily, was weakened by the operation. Having drawn closer to the United States, it was punished by Russia through Türkiye and was compelled to seek assistance from the Syrian regime, whose territories it had occupied, against Türkiye (K. Dora, 2022, p. 171). In addition to all this, in the complex picture that emerged, it may be argued that Türkiye, thanks also to its military successes on the ground, created a safe zone along the Syrian border and in the Operation Euphrates

Shield area and relatively designed the western bank of the Euphrates together with Russia and its eastern bank together with the United States. In this way, it would not be overly optimistic to contend that Türkiye pursued a delicate balance policy aimed at protecting its national security and interests through partial diplomatic success.

6.3.2.3. Operation Peace Spring

Following Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, Türkiye focused on the PYD/YPG presence to the east of the Euphrates River and, within this framework, sought opportunities to establish a safe zone. After the creation of a relatively safe area on the western bank of the Euphrates, it began searching for ways to build a safe zone on the river's eastern bank as well and to prevent the efforts and initiatives of the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation to establish a so-called autonomous state. Towards the end of 2018, following a series of statements made by state officials, the possibility of a military operation towards the east of the Euphrates River began to be seriously discussed in the Turkish public sphere. In response to Türkiye's moves to increase its military measures and to carry out an operation in the region, the United States took steps in the form of preventive diplomacy, and in this context a series of meetings were held between Washington and Ankara on the removal of the terrorist organisation from the area east of the Euphrates and the establishment of a safe zone (Acun & Görücü, 2023, p. 33). Within this framework, the option of establishing a safe zone in northeastern Syria in response to the threat perception generated by the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation against Türkiye's national security was negotiated with the United States between February and September 2019. In the course of these negotiations, it was stated that Türkiye reserved its right to self-defence against the terrorist threat and that it was wrong and problematic to wage the struggle against Daesh in cooperation with another terrorist organisation. Nevertheless, the Washington administration avoided making any commitments concerning the establishment of a safe zone (K. Dora, 2022, p. 172). Leaving this expectation aside, the Washington administration not only failed to take effective steps to eliminate the ongoing threat posed by the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation to Türkiye's national security and to address Türkiye's legitimate security concerns in this context, but also continued to provide arms and military equipment to the SDF, dominated by YPG militants, via Iraq. For these reasons, no progress was made towards achieving an Ankara–Washington agreement on the withdrawal of terrorist elements from the aforementioned area as a result of the negotiations conducted. In the subsequent period, although frequent

meetings were held between the parties regarding the borders and scope of the safe zone planned to be established to the east of the Euphrates River, the withdrawal of the PYD/YPG from the area was not achieved, and it became apparent that Türkiye did not obtain the desired outcome through diplomatic means. Thus, the Turkish government came to accept that the safe zone issue was part of an American delaying tactic and adopted the idea of establishing a safe zone by conducting a military operation on its own initiative to the east of the Euphrates River (Bursa, 2019, p. 151). In this process, Türkiye's increased military activity along the Syrian border and its determination to conduct a military operation were reflected in a telephone conversation between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and U.S. President Donald Trump. In this conversation, it was declared that the two leaders had agreed that American soldiers would not take part in the clashes and would withdraw from the area during Türkiye's possible operation, and that the Turkish government would assume responsibility for the detained Daesh militants in the region. Although, according to statements by U.S. officials, it appeared that there was an agreement on the boundaries of the operation, contradictory statements from the American side caused confusion. U.S. officials announced that they rejected and did not approve the military operation to be conducted by Türkiye, and they also emphasised that the withdrawal of U.S. soldiers from the region and the lack of U.S. involvement did not mean that Trump had given the green light to the military operation. In parallel with this reaction, the Pentagon declared that the provision of aerial surveillance and reconnaissance information to Türkiye had been halted (T24, 2019). In this negative climate, on 8 October 2019 the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM) adopted a decision to extend for one more year the mandate authorising Turkish troops to conduct military operations beyond the border in Syrian and Iraqi territory (Eyvaz, 2019). On the following day, the Ministry of National Defence announced that on 9 October 2019 Operation Peace Spring had been launched to the east of the Euphrates "in order to ensure border security, to prevent the establishment of a terror corridor in northern Syria, to neutralise terrorist elements, primarily Daesh and the PYD/YPG, which pose a threat to our national security, to establish a safe zone and thereby ensure regional stability, and to enable Syrians in Türkiye to return to their homes in a safe, voluntary and dignified manner" (MSB, 2019b). President Erdoğan, in his statement on the issue, declared that the operation had been launched against the PYD/YPG and Daesh terrorist organisations and that its aim was to demolish the terror corridor and establish a peace corridor (T.C. İletişim Başkanlığı, 2019). Following the launch of the operation, Türkiye referred in its letter

informing the UN Security Council about the operation to the Adana Accord concluded between Syria and Türkiye in 1998. Türkiye recalled that, in this accord, Syria recognised the PKK as a terrorist organisation and undertook not to allow it to operate on Syrian territory under any circumstances, and that, in this context, Türkiye had been granted the right to conduct cross-border operations to a certain depth (Akgün, 2019).

On 9 October 2019, Operation Peace Spring was launched by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian National Army (SNA), which it supported, along a 480-kilometre stretch of the border to a depth of 32 km, with the aim of driving PYD/YPG elements in northern Syria that threatened Türkiye's national security away from the Turkish border, establishing a safe area along the border, and creating a living space for Syrian refugees wishing to return to their country (Anadolu Agency, 2019a; Şenol, 2022, p. 155). Ankara based the legal basis of the operation on Article 51 of the UN Charter and also referred to the rights arising from the Adana Accord (Yüzbaşıoğlu et al., 2019). Under these conditions, it became evident that Türkiye had begun to implement, on its own initiative, the safe zone agreed upon with the United States. However, once the operation had begun, many states, primarily EU and Arab countries, issued statements condemning Türkiye. The UN Security Council also convened to condemn Türkiye, but no consensus was reached due to the vetoes of the United States and Russia (Sputnik Türkiye, 2019). Although Russia occasionally appeared to be on Türkiye's side in this manner, it did not support Türkiye's establishment of a sphere of influence in Syria, as it viewed Türkiye's presence in Syria as contrary to its own strategic interests in the region. To counter this influence, Russia undertook mediation between the SDG, which is in a position of occupation in Syrian territory and cooperates with the United States, and the Damascus administration. In this equation, it sought to weaken Türkiye's operational capability by ensuring the deployment of regime forces in areas under SDG control (K. Dora, 2022, p. 173). In addition, following the launch of the operation, unfounded claims were made that the military operation would lead to a deep humanitarian crisis, weaken the fight against the Daesh terrorist organisation, disrupt the political process aimed at resolving the Syrian crisis, and alter the ancient demographic structure in the area east of the Euphrates River. In response to these claims, produced with the aim of discrediting Türkiye's counter-terrorism efforts, it was stated that the operation would pave the way for the return of local people displaced by PYD/YPG actions, that it would thwart the separatist agenda of the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation and contribute to the advancement of the

political process, and that countries which persisted in the error of fighting Daesh alongside the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation had no right to lecture Türkiye, the only country combating the Daesh terrorist organisation on the Syrian ground (K. Dora, 2022, p. 173). Therefore, in the face of various criticisms directed at the operation, the Ankara administration declared that its fundamental expectation from the international community was support for the struggle against terrorist organisations and stated that, as in the past, it would continue to fight resolutely against all terrorist organisations (Polat, 2020, p. 78). It was announced to the press that with Operation Peace Spring it was planned to establish a safe zone 30 km deep in the area concerned. The Ministry of National Defence, in its statement on the operation, declared that it aimed "to ensure the security of our borders, to prevent the establishment of a terror corridor to the south of our borders, to neutralise terrorist organisations and terrorists that threaten our national security, primarily the PYD/YPG and Daesh, and to create suitable conditions for the return of displaced Syrians to their homes and lands". In a related statement, then-Minister of National Defence Hulusi Akar declared that all necessary measures had been taken in the area of operations, that Türkiye's objective in the operation was to eliminate the presence of the PYD/YPG and Daesh to the east of the Euphrates and to establish a peace corridor, and to ensure the return of local people who had fled the war in Syria and taken refuge in Türkiye to their homes (MSB, 2019c).

In the initial phase of the operation, control was sought in the Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn regions, and Operation Peace Spring effectively began on the ground with the deployment of air forces followed by land forces and Free Syrian Army elements to the region. While Türkiye was conducting Operation Peace Spring against the PYD/YPG in northern Syria, it simultaneously targeted the PKK in northern Iraq with Operation Claw (Pençe Harekatı) (Bursa, 2019, p. 153). Within the framework of Operation Peace Spring, which began on 9 October 2019 in the Tel Abyad–Ras al-Ayn direction, almost all of the predetermined targets were destroyed through air strikes and artillery fire. On the first day of the operation, two axes of advance were established in the Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn regions, and subsequent advances were made to the east and west of these towns. On the third day of the operation, forces began to enter the city centre of Ras al-Ayn.

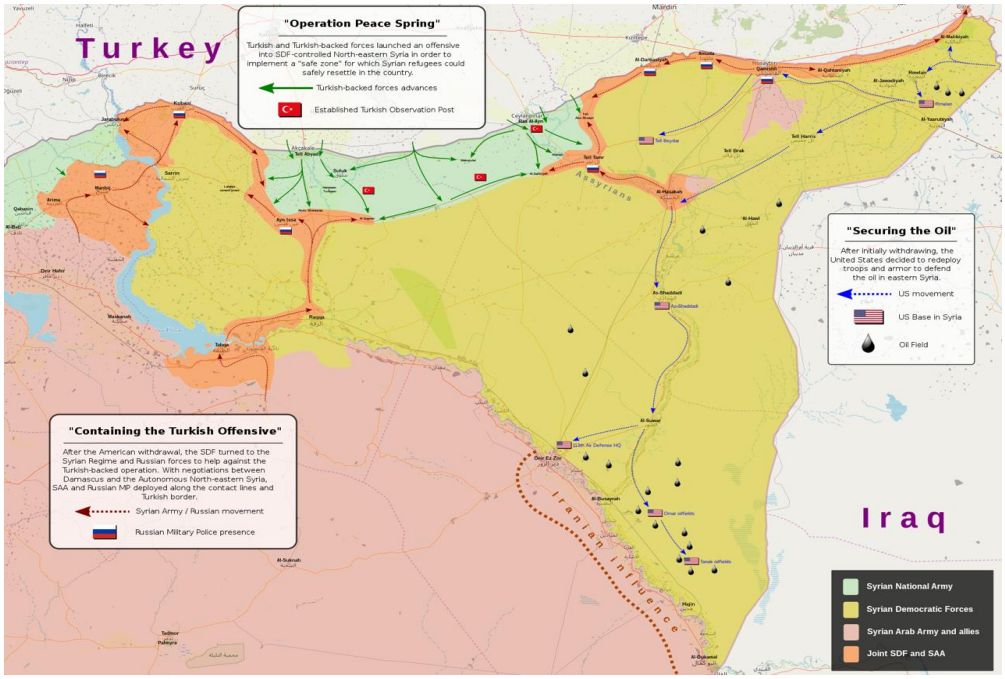

Figure 14. Map of Operation Peace Spring (23 October 2019)

Source: OpenStreetMap

On the fourth day of the operation, an advance was made almost directly from the centre of the rural area between the cities of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn towards the M4 highway. By the fifth day of the operation, an entry was made into the city of Tel Abyad, and substantial progress was achieved in a short time (Özer, 2020). The Turkish Armed Forces and Syrian National Army elements, which continued to advance rapidly, made further gains on the sixth day of the operation towards the west of Ras al-Ayn and the east and south of Tel Abyad. In this context, an element of 2,500 fighters from the Syrian National Army launched an advance on 14 October 2019 from the Kerpiçli area towards Manbij, where a second operation was planned, and captured the village of Yalişlı. The operation launched on 14 October 2019 by the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army towards Manbij, in addition to the Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad regions, was halted after securing control over the villages of Yalişlı and Dandaniye. Thus, within the scope of the operation, the city centre of Tel Abyad was fully captured as of 16 October 2019, and the city centre of Ras al-Ayn as of 23 October 2019. As a result of the operations carried out by the Syrian National Army, an area of 4,160 km² containing 605 settlements, including the centres of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, was cleared of terrorist organisations (Şenol, 2022, p. 140).

Owing in part to the rapid collapse of the PYD/YPG's resistance, the area between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn was completely cleared of the PKK/YPG terrorist organisation on the 21st day of Operation Peace Spring, following separate agreements reached with the United States and Russia. In the following days of the operation, the final advances along the Ayn Issa and Tal Tamr lines were completed, and the 4,219 km² area between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn was cleared of the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation (Acun & Görücü, 2023, p. 35). As a result of Operation Peace Spring, control was established over a border strip of approximately 145 kilometres in length and between 21 and 32 kilometres in depth along the Türkiye–Syria border, clearing this strip of terrorist elements (Suriye Gündemi, 2020). The fact that Türkiye's legitimate right to self-defence as an independent state has been recognised only following military successes manifested itself through the successful military operations conducted on Syrian territory. Having captured 605 settlements, including Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad, and established control over an area of 4,219 km² within the scope of Operation Peace Spring, Türkiye took significant steps towards normalising life in the region once the operation concluded. In Tel Abyad, located on the Turkish border and first seized by Daesh and later by the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation during the Syrian civil war, the majority of the population had been forced to seek refuge in Türkiye. These displaced persons, separated from their families, had the opportunity to return to their lands and reunite with their families through Operation Peace Spring. In Ras al-Ayn—home to a comparatively larger Kurdish population but with Arabs forming the majority—during the period in which the terrorist organisation controlled the region, the demographic structure was altered in favour of the Kurds, as the organisation forced Arab youths, especially in tribal villages, to join their ranks and subjected the population to persecution. Most Arab families had fled their homes, leaving behind only the elderly. After the operation, the possibility emerged that these adverse conditions would be remedied, and hope grew among families living in the settlements during the operation that their relatives could return.

Russia and the United States, which had displayed positions against Türkiye by attempting to manipulate international public opinion through the media and by employing various groups on the ground to ensure the failure of the Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian National Army, shifted their strategies upon observing Ankara's determination and its success on the ground. While the operation continued at full speed, an agreement on a "Safe

Zone" was reached on 17 October 2019 following the talks between the Turkish delegation and the U.S. delegation—composed of U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, and Special Envoy for Syria James Jeffrey—and Operation Peace Spring was paused for five days (Milliyet, 2019). According to the agreement reached between the two countries, it was decided that within 120 hours, terrorist elements would withdraw beyond the designated Safe Zone, which extended 32 km in depth; that heavy weapons held by the PYD/YPG would be collected; and that fortifications would be destroyed. Following the inter-delegation meetings held in Ankara under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, it was agreed on 17 October 2019 that the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation would evacuate the area between Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad within 120 hours (Durul et al., 2019). Indeed, within the framework of the agreement reached, PYD/YPG terrorists began to leave the safe zone in convoys, and at the end of the 120-hour period, the United States announced that the PYD/YPG had fully withdrawn from the region and that it would consent to intervention in case of any military activity (Yeni Asya, 2019). In the joint statement, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence also declared that he acknowledged the legitimacy of the operation and the new status quo on the ground. On the other side of the coin, however, as a result of U.S. diplomatic efforts, Operation Peace Spring ended before achieving its intended objectives. Even today, the reason for the halt of the operation remains a subject of debate. What should not be overlooked is that the United States withdrew from two military bases in the area—which later came under Russian control—despite having conducted thousands of airstrikes to liberate Manbij from Daesh. Thus, following Operation Peace Spring, the United States strangely abandoned Manbij, a city it had significantly contributed to retaking from Daesh (Hubbard et al., 2019). Ultimately, the Manbij equation concluded with the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Manbij after Operation Peace Spring in 2019.

Meanwhile, Russia, which took part in the Operation Peace Spring equation via Manbij and Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), became an influential actor to the east of the Euphrates without taking any military steps or encountering any difficulties, capitalising on the gradually diminishing U.S. influence (Acun & Görücü, 2023, p. 34). In the negotiations with Russia during the operation, the M4 highway became the southern boundary, and an area was designated for a demilitarised zone. Following the U.S. Safe Zone Agreement and thirteen days after the start of the operation, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Vladimir Putin met in Sochi

and reached a mutual understanding on clearing the Syrian territories located to the west and east of the Operation Peace Spring zone, as well as the Manbij and Tel Rifaat regions, of terrorist elements, thereby accepting the new status quo. They also agreed on the withdrawal of the PYD/YPG from the Türkiye–Syria border east of the Euphrates. On 22 October 2019, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin convened in Sochi concerning the Syrian crisis and announced to the public the memorandum outlining the points on which they had agreed. The memorandum stipulated that the status quo established by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian National Army within the Operation Peace Spring area would be preserved. According to the memorandum, PYD/YPG elements located outside the area between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn were to be removed 30 km south of the Türkiye–Syria border within 150 hours by Russian forces. To supervise this withdrawal, it was decided that, except for the city centre of Qamishli, joint Turkish–Russian patrols would be conducted up to 10 km deep along the Türkiye–Syria border (Şenol, 2023, p. 140). At this stage, with the signing of the memorandum, Russia also became a formal actor with authority in the region.

The articles of the memorandum are as follows:

1. Both sides reaffirm their commitment to the preservation of Syria's political unity and territorial integrity and the protection of Türkiye's national security.
2. They emphasise their determination to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and to thwart separatist agendas on Syrian territory.
3. In this framework, the existing status quo in the Operation Peace Spring area, extending 32 kilometres in depth and covering Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, shall be preserved.
4. Both parties reaffirm the importance of the Adana Agreement. The Russian Federation shall facilitate the implementation of the Adana Agreement under current conditions.
5. From 12:00 p.m. on 23 October 2019, Russian military police and Syrian border guards shall enter the Syrian side of the Türkiye–Syria border outside the Operation Peace Spring area to ensure the removal of YPG elements and their weapons to a depth of 30 kilometres from the Türkiye–Syria border. This process shall be completed within 150 hours. From the same time onwards, joint Turkish–

Russian patrols shall begin up to a depth of 10 kilometres to the west and east of the Operation Peace Spring area, except for the city of Qamishli.

6. All YPG elements and their weapons shall be removed from Manbij and Tel Rifaat.

7. Both sides shall take the necessary measures to prevent the infiltration of terrorist elements.

8. Joint efforts shall be made to facilitate the safe and voluntary return of refugees.

9. A joint monitoring and verification mechanism shall be established to oversee and coordinate the implementation of this memorandum.

10. The parties shall continue their efforts within the framework of the Astana Mechanism to achieve a lasting political solution to the Syrian conflict and shall support the activities of the Constitutional Committee (Anadolu Agency, 2019b).

The agreement reached was announced in a press release by the Ministry of National Defence on 29 October 2019. The press release stated the following:

1. The Turkish side showed the necessary sensitivity in implementing the provisions of the memorandum reached with the Russian Federation in Sochi on 22 October 2019 concerning the east of the Euphrates.

2. At the end of the 150-hour period, the Russian Federation reported that the YPG had withdrawn with its heavy weapons 30 kilometres from the Türkiye–Syria border, as well as from Manbij and Tel Rifaat.

3. Joint Turkish–Russian patrols would begin to the west and east of the Operation Peace Spring area up to a depth of 10 kilometres, except for the city of Qamishli. In this context, mine and IED clearance activities and reconnaissance flights had begun along the patrol routes.

4. Türkiye would never allow the formation of a terror corridor to the south of its borders, and its fight against terrorist organisations, primarily Daesh and the PKK/YPG, would continue resolutely.

5. Through the establishment of a peace corridor in the region, the voluntary and safe return of displaced Syrians to their homes and lands would be ensured (MSB, 2019d).

This agreement also meant that Russia had begun conducting field patrols in northeastern Syria, expanding its sphere of influence on Syrian territory and increasing the risks faced by the United States regarding its presence in Syria. This development, which rendered tangible the possibility that Türkiye, amid the Syrian crisis, could cooperate with Russia against the United States, further deepened the mutual mistrust between the United States and Türkiye while also strengthening Türkiye's hand in negotiations due to the lack of support from its ally, the United States (K. Dora, 2022, p. 174). Operation Peace Spring and the subsequent Memorandum of Understanding signed with Russia may be considered an intelligence, military and diplomatic success. From this perspective, one of the key aspects of the operation was Türkiye's demonstrated success both on the ground and in the diplomatic sphere. The fact that agreements were signed with both the United States and Russia within a week of the start of Operation Peace Spring serves as an indication of this success (Şenol, 2022, p. 161). Moreover, Türkiye's military intervention in Syria and its subsequent expansion towards the region west of the Euphrates River led to new disputes among the actors in the crisis. Operation Peace Spring reshaped the existing geopolitical and geostrategic balances in Syria—where regional and global powers engage in proxy conflicts via local terrorist groups—and strengthened Türkiye's position as a spoiler actor. Indeed, the crisis of trust that emerged within the pragmatic relationship between the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation and the Damascus regime, which had begun and continued with the onset of the Syrian crisis, supports this argument. Although the PYD/YPG had occupied the northern and northeastern parts of the country following the outbreak of the Syrian crisis and had sought the support of the Syrian regime against Türkiye during Olive Branch Operation—and had received the regime's support during the operation—this time the Damascus government accused the PYD/YPG of separatism and held it responsible for the outbreak of the operation due to its refusal to engage in dialogue with the Syrian government (Al Jazeera, 2019).

Thus, with Operation Peace Spring, Türkiye added a new chapter to its successful operations conducted within Syrian territory. Through this operation, the terrorist elements in the areas referred to as the eastern Euphrates were largely eliminated in a short period, and the project to establish a terrorist state collapsed. Following Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, Türkiye succeeded in dividing the PYD's so-called cantons through Operation Peace Spring. The successes achieved on the ground during Operation Peace Spring once

again demonstrated that it was impossible to formulate a policy for resolving the Syrian crisis without Türkiye and reinforced the fact that Türkiye would not alter its counter-terrorism stance, even at the cost of diverging from its allies. Moreover, Türkiye's rapid conclusion of agreements with both the United States and Russia highlighted that its diplomatic gains concerning Syria were founded upon its military successes. At this point, it appears that Türkiye and its allies on the ground have gained experience in hybrid warfare, which began with Operation Euphrates Shield, continued with Olive Branch Operation, and further evolved with Operation Peace Spring (Şenol, 2022, p. 161). Following Operation Euphrates Shield, Türkiye appears to be continuing its path in the Syrian theatre by increasing its gains and experience. On the other hand, from the outset of the Syrian civil war in 2012, opposition forces—whose training, organisation, equipment and financing were supported by Türkiye—attained the status of the Syrian National Army and contributed to the Turkish Armed Forces as a regular military structure (Göksede, 2019). Compared to Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, elements of the Syrian National Army, whose training and discipline levels had risen and whose coordination with the Turkish Armed Forces had improved, achieved their expected objectives with fewer losses and in a shorter period during Operation Peace Spring. Within the scope of Operation Peace Spring, control was achieved over the M4 highway, the city centres of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, and numerous settlements, including residential areas, hamlets and villages, which were cleared of terrorist elements (Şenol, 2022, p. 161).

6.3.2.4. Operation Spring Shield

Before analysing Operation Spring Shield, which was based on different reasons and characteristics than Türkiye's previous military operations—Operation Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch Operation and Operation Peace Spring—it is necessary to address the developments leading up to the operation in the Idlib region. Idlib, neighbouring Türkiye's Hatay province along the Syrian–Turkish border, has been one of the last remaining regions under the control of Syrian opposition forces fighting against the Syrian regime since late 2016. This situation turned Idlib into the region receiving the highest number of internally displaced persons due to the Syrian civil war. The presence of numerous opposition groups, some of which act independently and exhibit radical religious motives, made this region a primary target for the Assad regime and its supporters, Russia and Iran (Demir, 2021, p.

562). Indeed, under the influence of these developments, the Assad regime and its supporters began launching intense attacks on the region.

Due to the intense attacks launched by the regime and its supporters targeting Idlib, the likelihood of a new wave of mass migration increased significantly, prompting Türkiye to take action (Demir, 2019, pp. 41–42). Within this framework, as part of Türkiye's diplomatic initiatives, a general ceasefire covering four regions, including all of Idlib, the Hama countryside, eastern Quneitra and eastern Ghouta, was declared on 30 December 2016 as a result of the "Astana Talks" conducted with Russia and Iran. Shortly thereafter, at the beginning of 2017, Türkiye, Russia and Iran were recognised as guarantor states for monitoring the ceasefire in the Idlib region as part of the negotiations conducted between the actors. Subsequently, under the Astana Memorandum signed on 4 May 2017, "Idlib De-escalation Zones" (IDZs) were established, and further details concerning the boundaries of the IDZs, as well as the duties and responsibilities of the military elements of the guarantor countries, were clarified through the second Astana Memorandum signed on 15 September 2017. Following the reduction of tensions in Idlib and to prevent an influx of mass migration towards Türkiye, an Idlib operation, independent of large-scale military offensives, was conducted on 8 October 2017. Thereafter, Türkiye and Russia, with Iran's support as guarantor states, signed the Sochi Memorandum on 17 September 2018 (K. Dora, 2022, p. 175). As part of the Astana and Sochi Memoranda, Türkiye established 12 Observation Posts between October 2017 and May 2018 in regions under the control of Syrian opposition groups surrounding Idlib from the north, east and south. Opposite the Turkish observation posts, Russian and Iranian military elements established their own observation posts in areas controlled by the regime (Kapucu, 2020, p. 35). The duty of the Observation Posts, according to the plan, was to monitor the ceasefire between the regime and the opposition and to ensure that local civilians could maintain their normal lives.

While Türkiye fulfilled all its responsibilities in Idlib to ensure a lasting ceasefire and stability and prevent irregular mass migration, the Assad regime, from mid-2018 onwards, violated the ceasefire by launching attacks on the de-escalation zones, including Idlib, with air support from the Russian Air Force and ground support from Iran's paramilitary forces. During this process, the regime and its supporters seized the de-escalation zones in eastern Ghouta and the Hama countryside; opposition fighters, including radical groups, withdrew towards Idlib. A particularly noteworthy development was the stance of Moscow and

Tehran, who were guarantors of the regime under the Sochi Memorandum. Both sides supported the regime's capture of the "de-escalation zones" in Daraa, Homs, eastern Ghouta and surrounding areas, which had been designated in May 2017 in Sochi. With opposition forces fleeing these regions, Idlib—home to approximately 4 million civilians—became the next target of the regime and its supporters. During this process, Russia and Iran sought to exploit the fragilities and tensions in the region to expand their areas of influence in Idlib and to push civilians fleeing the conflict towards the Turkish border (Domazeti & Özcan, 2020, p. 1). Although new ceasefires for Idlib were announced in the Sochi Memorandums adopted in January and March 2019, the regime and its supporters used the presence of radical groups in Idlib as a pretext and launched comprehensive offensive operations. By mid-2019, regime forces supported by Iran and Russia seized control of some areas, including those near Turkish Observation Posts (Demir, 2021, p. 564). Thus, despite multiple agreements, the Syrian regime continued to carry out attacks on the region under the guise of fighting terrorism, seeking to trigger a new wave of mass migration towards Türkiye. Russia's lack of full coordination with Türkiye in reducing tensions, despite the memorandum, led Ankara to consider a new military operation (K. Dora, 2022, p. 175).

As Syria entered the tenth year of its civil war in early 2020, Western media widely argued that the Assad regime, with support from Iran and Russia, sought to end the war by making a final push to capture Idlib, where opposition forces had taken refuge. However, these assessments ignored the fact that one-third of Syria was under the control of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose core structure consists of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK's Syrian branch, the PYD/YPG. At the same time, within the Sochi and Astana processes in which Türkiye participated, Moscow and Tehran showed reluctance toward efforts to pursue a political solution involving Syrian opposition forces (Bayraktar, 2020). Against this backdrop of uncertainty, regime forces, with Russian air support, began launching heavy attacks around Turkish Observation Posts in Idlib's de-escalation zone from early 2020 onwards, while also targeting civilians to force them to flee. Supported by Iran-backed militias, the regime advanced behind the Turkish observation lines to seize the Aleppo–Damascus highway. During the attacks on Maarat al-Numan, Turkish military personnel stationed in the region were directly targeted. By 3 February 2020, the regime had carried out its most severe attack since Türkiye's deployment in the area in 2016, killing eight people—including five soldiers and three civilians. Although Türkiye intensified its

warnings for Russia to restrain the regime, Damascus increased its efforts to capture Saraqib—a strategic junction linking Idlib, Aleppo and Damascus—and to expel the Turkish Armed Forces entirely from Idlib, eliminate the opposition and push civilians out of the country (Bayraktar, 2020).

Despite a new ceasefire declared on 12 January 2020 between Türkiye and Russia, the Assad regime's attacks and its advance towards Idlib city centre continued. With the Assad regime, in its tenth year of the Syrian war, seeking to reassert control over the country, it continued its deadly attacks against civilians in Idlib in expectation of a rapid and easy victory and forced the local population to flee. Due to the regime's ceasefire violations and the unwillingness of Russia and Iran to stop these attacks, Türkiye faced increasing threats—including risks to its border security, the potential for a mass wave of irregular migration, and direct risks to Turkish military personnel stationed at the Observation Posts (Demir, 2021, p. 564). In this context, then–Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated in an interview with TRT Haber on 20 February 2020 that the Sochi and Astana processes had been severely damaged and that it would be difficult to return to the negotiating table without establishing calm on the ground. Concurrently, Türkiye began deploying reinforcement units to counter the regime's advance towards Idlib city centre. Despite having notified the Russian military authorities regarding all deployments, regime forces carried out major attacks on Turkish control points and reinforcement convoys between 3 and 27 February 2020, resulting in the martyrdom of 50 Turkish soldiers, the injury of 54 others, and the loss of two civilians. From early February onwards, it became evident that the regime and its supporters intensified their attacks on Idlib to limit Türkiye's manoeuvre space. The Assad regime's disregard for the Sochi Memorandum and its disproportionate use of force against civilians, along with the growing threats and the possibility of a new crisis of mass displacement, prompted Ankara to declare that it would not allow Idlib to fall. Throughout February, the Turkish Armed Forces rapidly deployed armoured vehicles and combat units to the region, changing the dynamics on the ground. The regime's direct targeting of Turkish soldiers in Balyun on 27 February 2020 marked a critical turning point. The regime and its supporters' escalation strategy in response to Türkiye's statements of a possible intervention—culminating in the attack that killed 34 Turkish soldiers on 27 February—made decisive Turkish action unavoidable (Domazeti & Özcan, 2020, p. 1). Despite the positions of Turkish military units tasked with monitoring the de-escalation zone in Idlib

being shared with Russia, these positions were targeted in airstrikes carried out by regime forces, an action that was interpreted as a Russian operation against Türkiye, supporting the Damascus administration. This approach, reflecting direct hostility by Russia in the context of Syria's constantly shifting alliances, highlighted the need to redesign on-the-ground partnerships and added a new dimension to the complex situation in Syria. When evaluated as a whole, the developments in Idlib and its surroundings between 2017 and 2020 reveal several critical dynamics: the repeated violations of ceasefires by the Assad regime, attacks and massacres against the local civilian population, the consequent displacement of civilians toward the Turkish border and the resulting humanitarian crisis, attempts to cut off supply routes to Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) units and Turkish observation posts in the Idlib region, attacks causing casualties among Turkish forces, and the increasing radicalization of extremist groups and other actors in response to regime aggression—all of which posed direct threats to Turkish forces and border security. In light of these circumstances, a military operation against the Assad regime on 27 February 2020 became unavoidable.

On 27 February 2020, following a new attack by Russia-backed regime forces that resulted in the martyrdom of 34 Turkish soldiers, Türkiye announced the launch of a new military operation targeting the Syrian regime, named Operation Spring Shield, as of 27 February 2020. The operation was carried out within the framework of United Nations resolutions and international law, with the objectives of safeguarding national security, securing the border, protecting civilians in Idlib, and preventing a new wave of refugee flows (Domazeti & Özcan, 2020). The operation was legally and legitimately grounded on several agreements and frameworks: the 1998 Adana Agreement concerning Türkiye-Syria border security, the 2017 Astana Agreement between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran, which defined jointly agreed borders, and Türkiye's status as a guarantor in Idlib under these agreements, as well as the First and Second Sochi Agreements between Türkiye and Russia in 2018, which authorized Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) to monitor the ceasefire on the ground. Accordingly, the operation was conducted under the right of self-defense outlined in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. With Operation Spring Shield, the Turkish Armed Forces aimed to ensure the security of Turkish units in the region, prevent irregular migration toward Türkiye's borders triggered by regime attacks, and enable the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of displaced local populations (MSB, 2020a). Building on the stabilization achieved by previous operations along Türkiye's southern border, Türkiye sought to establish security

and stability in Idlib, a region of strategic importance due to its proximity to Hatay province and the Mediterranean coast. The operation primarily aimed to eliminate threats to national security by creating a zone 30–40 kilometers deep along the border, reducing clashes, and mitigating chaos (Domazeti & Özcan, 2020, p. 4). In essence, as an extended continuation of prior operations in Idlib, the purpose of Operation Spring Shield was described as follows: "…to prevent the worsening of the humanitarian crisis, stop the bloodshed, and ensure the return of displaced local populations, in response to the regime's continued aggressive stance despite ceasefire agreements and accords signed by guarantor countries to maintain stability in the region" (TSK, 2020).

Between 27 February and 6 March 2020, during Operation Spring Shield, the Turkish Armed Forces conducted effective interventions both from the air and ground. The operation employed Armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (SİHAs) for aerial strikes and utilised multiple combat assets on the ground, including Fırtına howitzers, MLRS systems and Kaplan missiles (Yeltin, 2022). As Russia closed its airspace during the operation, using F-16 fighter jets became risky, prompting Türkiye to explore alternative methods. Turkish-made SİHAs—important elements of Türkiye's air power—played a decisive role in the course of the operation. Supported by domestically produced electronic warfare systems that blinded enemy radar, numerous UAVs and SİHAs were used in coordinated fashion, with artillery fire providing additional support (Batu, 2020, p. 86). These strikes inflicted significant human and material losses on regime units (MSB, 2020b). The operation also revealed the ineffectiveness of Russian air defence systems against Turkish SİHAs (Bayraktar, 2020). During the seven-day operation—which consisted of intense aerial strikes—an area of 3,394 km² and 370 settlements were brought under control; 3,398 armed regime elements were neutralised, and regime military vehicles, equipment and ammunition were destroyed (TSK, 2020). Through this operation, including the city centre of Idlib as well as Afrin, al-Bab, Azaz, Jarabulus, Tell Abyad, Ras al-Ayn, Harim, Ariha and Jisr al-Shughur, a total of nine district centres and 1,500 settlements were secured, forming a safe zone of 11,828 km² (Demir, 2021, p. 571).

With Operation Spring Shield, Türkiye declared for the first time that every regime element was a legitimate target in the comprehensive and direct war it launched against the regime. Ultimately, with the diplomatic initiatives of Russia, the main supporter of the Assad regime, Operation Spring Shield ended following the agreement reached between Türkiye and

Russia in Moscow and the signing of the "Additional Protocol to the Memorandum on Stabilizing the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Zone" on 5 March 2020 at the level of heads of state, and the signing of the "Implementation Principles Regarding the Operation of the Safe Corridor" on 13 March 2020 (K. Dora, 2022, p. 176). According to the Additional Protocol to the Memorandum on Stabilizing the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Zone signed between Türkiye and Russia:

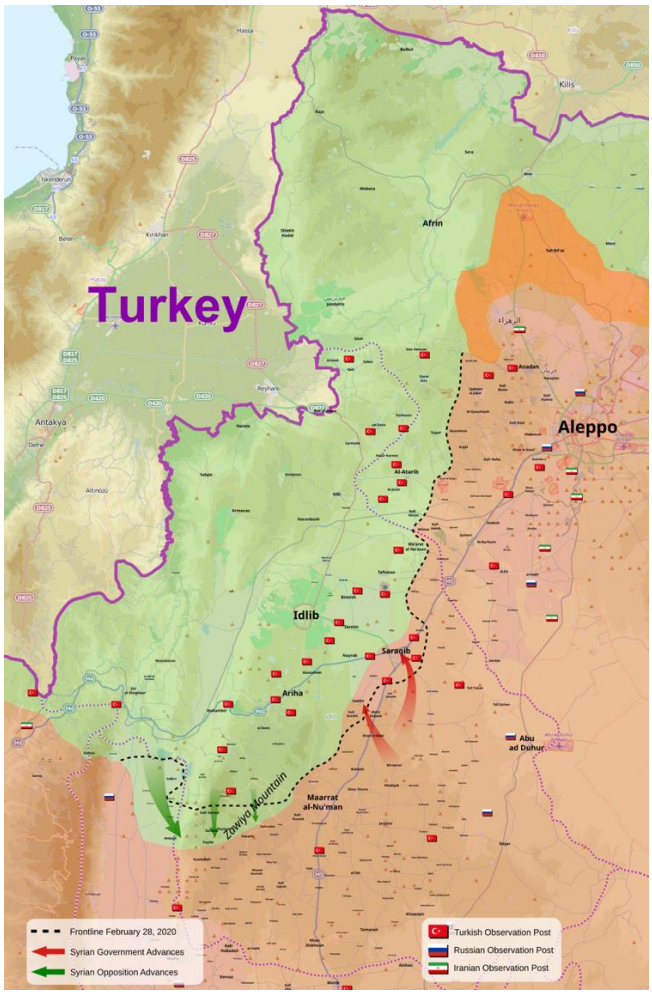

Figure 15. Map of Operation Spring Shield (6 March 2020)

Source: OpenStreetMap

"1. As of 00:00 on 6 March 2020, all military activities along the front line in the Idlib De-Escalation Zone shall be halted.

2. A 6-km-wide security corridor shall be established to the north and south of the M4 Highway, with the situation in the safe zone and the Idlib region to be determined within the defense ministries of the two countries.

3. Turkish-Russian joint patrols shall begin on 15 March 2020 along the section of the M4 Highway (2 km west of Saraqib) extending to Ain Al-Hawr."

As seen, through this agreement, Russia began joint patrols with Turkish Armed Forces elements along the M4 Highway, which remained within the areas under the control of the Turkish Armed Forces and the opposition, in order to monitor the ceasefire and the presence of radical groups in the region. However, the same agreement confirmed that the Assad regime would continue to maintain control over the areas it had seized in Idlib by violating ceasefires since 2018; thus, the strategically important M5 Highway came under the control of Russia and the regime (Demir, 2021, p. 568). Accordingly, 9 of the 12 Turkish Observation Posts in Idlib remained within areas controlled by the regime. Nevertheless, the city center of Idlib and the districts of Ariha, Jisr al-Shughur, and Harem continued to remain under the control of the opposition and Türkiye (Demir, 2021, p. 568). The Turkish Armed Forces continued to deploy reinforcements and equipment to the areas under their responsibility in order to strengthen their control in Idlib within the framework of the 5 March 2020 Moscow Agreement, and established bases, checkpoints, and positions in newly identified strategic areas. In addition, a significant number of Turkish Observation Posts besieged by the regime were gradually withdrawn months later toward the newly designated boundaries of the Idlib De-Escalation Area Plan (Göksedef, 2020).

Operation Spring Shield, whose primary objective was to stop the regime forces supported by Russia and the paramilitary groups supported by Iran that violated the Sochi Memorandum signed between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran on 17 September 2018 and attacked Idlib, to push the regime forces beyond the boundaries of the memorandum, and to support moderate opposition, appears to have influenced the dynamics of the Syrian civil war in many respects (Domazeti & Özcan, 2020, p. 1). This military operation was the first and greatest blow dealt to the Assad regime, which had embarked on 2020 with major objectives. With this operation, the military weakness of the Assad regime also became apparent; one of the most important opposition fronts was kept active, maintaining the need for a political solution that would include the opposition. In other words, while Türkiye's Operation Spring Shield protected civilians in Idlib in place and kept the opposition alive, the regime lost

confidence, began to be questioned by its supporters, and came under international pressure. Moreover, the military weaknesses of Russia and Iran, which supported the regime, were also revealed (Bayraktar, 2020).

Thus, the Assad regime, which, with the support of Iran and Russia, had been carrying out deadly attacks against civilians in the expectation of a rapid and easy victory around Idlib in its tenth year of civil war, was halted by Türkiye's intervention, and through this military operation, threats and possible attacks against a significant part of Türkiye's southern borders were eliminated. In this context, Türkiye, which conducted a conventional operation against the regime, also limited the regime's advance supported by Russia. Accordingly, the massive humanitarian migration wave that was about to begin from Idlib toward Türkiye's borders was prevented, and a new humanitarian tragedy was avoided. While it is possible to consider the operation conducted in Idlib as a humanitarian intervention, it is more accurate to regard it as a military operation containing various strategic objectives. The fact that the Syrian regime, supported and protected by Russia, had become active along the northern borders, and that thousands of regime-supporting organizations and groups, as well as paramilitary forces backed by Russia and Iran, continued to maintain their presence actively, constituted a serious threat for Türkiye. In particular, Russia's increasing military presence in the region along with the airbase it established in Hmeimim on the Mediterranean coast poses a significant medium- and long-term risk to Türkiye's interests in the Mediterranean (Domazeti & Özcan, 2020, p. 3). In this sense, it is possible to argue that with this operation, the Turkish government limited the national security risks posed by the regime, its paramilitary supporters, and Russia along the northern borders of Syria, while at the same time gaining resilience regarding the territorial integrity of Syria and the prevention of a possible migration risk. From this perspective, Türkiye's consolidation of its presence in Idlib, where it has been a guarantor country since 2017, is extremely important for establishing stability in the region, protecting Syria's territorial integrity, stopping the flow of refugees to Türkiye, and balancing threat perceptions emanating from Russia. Furthermore, the possibility that the Assad regime might, after seizing the region, transfer control to the PYD/YPG, which could then turn this border region into a new base and pose a threat to Türkiye, made it essential to prevent Idlib—highly significant in geo-strategic terms—from falling into hostile hands (Bayraktar, 2020). As explained above, Türkiye's gains through Operation Spring Shield were not limited to the military field; political gains

were also achieved within the Damascus–Tehran–Moscow axis. Likewise, a new balance was established between the paramilitary forces supported by Russia and Iran and the forces aligned with Türkiye (Yeltin, 2022).

In addition, Domazeti and Özcan's striking analyses regarding Operation Spring Shield are highly pertinent. According to the authors, this military operation conducted by Türkiye, besides aiming to stop a regime that massacres its own people, can also be considered an operation to exist and strengthen its position under changing regional conditions and a transforming international system. Conducted at a time when the United States was reducing its presence in Syria and European countries were losing influence in the region, this operation could make Türkiye a balancing and stabilizing actor in the Middle East against Russia's growing influence. Undoubtedly, this situation will also play a motivating role in strengthening the confidence of friendly countries that cooperate with Türkiye in the field of security. The decision to launch the operation despite possible risks and despite NATO and the United States offering only rhetorical support and Russia's negative stance is important for Türkiye's regional and international prestige and deterrence. The operation might also lead other actors to reconsider both their relations with Türkiye and their calculations regarding the Syrian crisis. Furthermore, the military success achieved by Türkiye in this operation in Idlib, given its scope and objectives, will not only affect the Syrian theater but also has the potential to produce significant outcomes in the Eastern Mediterranean energy geopolitics, the Libya crisis, and the Balkans. Another noteworthy point is that at a time when actors such as the United States, Russia, China, and France are restructuring their national security strategies around autonomous systems and information technologies, Türkiye demonstrated through its successful next-generation air operations that it possesses this capability. Türkiye's steady advancement and reflection of this capability on the field through its recent operations constitute an important indicator that Türkiye may become one of the leading actors globally in high-tech autonomous weapons and systems (Domazeti & Özcan, 2020, p. 3). Thus, it is possible to argue that these operations revealed the effectiveness and capability of the Turkish Armed Forces in conducting cross-border operations, and showcased the capacities of the domestic and national Turkish defense industry, which was used effectively in the operations.

As detailed above, the attempt to create a terror corridor extending from Iraq through Syria to the Mediterranean was also thwarted by the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring,

and Spring Shield operations. These military operations are based on the legitimate right of self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter and also on the bilateral agreements signed between Türkiye and Syria. Until state authority is re-established in Syria and threats to the territorial integrity of the Republic of Türkiye are eliminated, the military operations conducted or to be conducted will continue to be recognized as legitimate under international law (İldeş, 2022, p. 291). Within the scope of its Syria policy, Türkiye has gained various long-term achievements aimed at ensuring border security through its activities and initiatives both on the ground and at the negotiating table, strengthening its diplomatic and military influence, and becoming a more decisive actor in international relations by engaging in regional developments. The Turkish Armed Forces, which have carried out four major cross-border operations, have demonstrated their determination to protect Türkiye against all kinds of threats and dangers targeting its national security. Thanks to the achievements gained through military success, Türkiye has broken out of the narrow political space in which it was constrained due to the unpredictable consequences of the Arab Spring and the peace process, becoming once again an active player capable of reshaping international balances and assuming the role of a major spoiler disrupting existing plans. Moreover, the fact that Türkiye maintains contact with all actors involved in Syria and informs them of its operations is important for crisis management and for gaining international approval. According to Keskin, Türkiye did not seek to maintain the status quo in this process; instead, it implemented a strategy of testing available options within the framework of crisis management. Although Ankara conducted its operations by informing all parties present in Syria, it was uncertain for some actors how successfully Türkiye would execute these operations. In this regard, Türkiye's operational success was significant in conveying the message that the Turks could create challenges at unexpected times. Türkiye demonstrated that its stance was clear and that it was determined to implement policies consistent with this stance. Türkiye disrupted the Syria plans of the actors with influence in the region, namely the United States and Russia, and established the legitimacy of its operations through valid justification. Türkiye, which intervened in the Syrian crisis due to the terrorist threat and migration threat emanating from its southern border, is undoubtedly the only actor among those on the ground prioritizing regional peace and stability. As a result of Türkiye's operations, a partially safe zone was created in the northern part of Syria along the border, and a relatively favorable environment was ensured for humanitarian assistance. Given that the interventions were conducted in accordance with the UN's accepted criteria for self-

defense and humanitarian intervention, Türkiye is unlikely to face a legal problem under international law in the post-crisis period (Kesgin, 2022, p. 258). Although Türkiye was caught unprepared at the beginning of the Syrian crisis and faced certain dilemmas, once it began acting on its own initiative, it became the actor that managed the process most successfully in terms of crisis management. Additionally, Türkiye did not become part of the polarization that emerged in the crisis and pursued a multidimensional policy consistent with its interests, occasionally clashing with both the United States and Russia while sometimes cooperating with them.

In addition, the success achieved through these military operations is highly significant in demonstrating Türkiye's regional role and deterrence. Following previous military operations conducted against terrorist organizations in different fields, this most recent operation, which emerged as an important deterrent against the aggressiveness of the Assad regime and its supporters, represents an undeniable series of steps in preventing Türkiye's "complex security risks" on the ground. However, while Türkiye addresses potential risks and threat perceptions in the field, it is also important for it to pursue a rational and balanced policy by taking into account the attitudes of regional and global actors with whom it is in competition. The fact that external actors such as the United States and Russia are secondary parties to the conflict in the Syrian crisis—being indirectly involved rather than directly engaged—supports this argument. Therefore, Türkiye must plan and evaluate subsequent stages in parallel with the actions of the regional and global actors with whom it is in competition over the medium and long term. In this regard, Türkiye's ability to stand out within regional power dynamics in pursuit of medium- and long-term goals depends on adopting a rational strategy that takes into account the actions of major powers and the increasing hybrid conflicts in the region. Accordingly, while shaping its national security strategy, Türkiye must also consider the military and political plans of regional and global actors in order to further strengthen its current position (Domazeti & Özcan, 2020, p. 5). Through these operations, Türkiye has taken concrete steps toward its national security by reacting against both local proxy groups and terrorist organizations, as well as the powers supporting them; by initiating reconstruction processes in the territories under its control for Syrians, Türkiye has both prevented new waves of migration and begun to establish the basis for safe returns. This foreign policy approach, built on a "smart power strategy" that neither abandons soft power nor completely renounces hard power, has shown that Türkiye is an

important actor that cannot be excluded from the regional equation. The current Syrian strategy also involves the ability to work simultaneously with actors who have conflicting interests and different alliance relations. Considering that countries with different goals in Syria may cooperate with terrorist organizations that also have different goals on Syrian soil, it would not be inaccurate to view Türkiye's new Syria policy as a highly dynamic, multi-actor, and variable mechanism in the complex equation of the Syrian crisis (K. Dora, 2022, p. 179).

Ultimately, the developments and the current state of affairs indicate that Türkiye will continue its military interventions in the Syrian crisis until it achieves its objectives. However, given the divergences of interest and the multi-actor nature of the conflict, Syria is a competitive arena in which diplomacy and conflict are intertwined, and Türkiye must crown its military gains with successful diplomacy. In other words, for the ongoing Syrian crisis to be resolved in line with the expectations of Türkiye and the Syrian people, it is essential that the military successes achieved be transformed into political gains. In this context, Türkiye's military presence in Syria is highly important and must continue until the period of normalization.

7. CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

This study has comprehensively analyzed the power vacuum that emerged in Syria in 2011, which paved the way for the rise of PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the regional terrorist network PKK/KCK, the multidimensional effects of this situation on Türkiye's national security, and the proactive policies developed by Ankara in response to these threat perceptions. The theoretical framework forming the basis of this thesis was constructed, drawing on the dynamic nature of the concept of security, around the Securitization Theory of the Copenhagen School and the Lesson-Drawing Model, which focuses on the ability of policymakers to learn from past experiences. Through these analytical lenses, a holistic assessment has been presented of how Türkiye's security approach has been shaped in the context of the international political conjuncture and its own historical security experiences.

The main finding of the study is that the political, military, and socio-demographic gains achieved by PYD/YPG—which emerged as a local actor in the early stages of the Syrian crisis and was especially shielded by global actors such as the United States and Russia in the fight against ISIS—have been perceived as a vital and existential threat by the Republic of Türkiye. This threat perception has been fueled by the continuation of the organization's organic ties with the PKK and its efforts to establish a "terror corridor" extending to the Mediterranean. Ankara has securitized PYD/YPG's declaration of so-called cantons in northern Syria, its efforts to draft a constitution, and its demographic engineering activities not only as a risk to border security but also as a profound risk to national unity, social stability, and national identity.

From the perspective offered by Securitization Theory, the presence of PYD/YPG has been removed by the Turkish leadership from the realm of ordinary political issues and presented as a crisis (existential threat) requiring extraordinary measures. In this process, the referent object has been defined as the territorial integrity of the state and national identity, which has legitimized Ankara's resort to proactive cross-border military reactions despite diplomatic pressures. Türkiye's Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring, and Spring Shield operations against this threat constitute the concrete output of this securitization practice. These operations have been grounded in the legitimate right of self-defense arising from international law and the rights stemming from the Adana Agreement signed with Syria, thereby placed on a legal basis. Through these operations, Türkiye has achieved its

objective of preventing the formation of a terror corridor along its southern borders and has disrupted the global and regional plans of terrorist organizations targeting Türkiye. At the same time, the operations have contributed to Türkiye's long-term policy framework aimed at supporting regional stability.

The analysis based on the Lesson-Drawing Model, which reinforces the theoretical originality of the study, has played a key role in explaining the shift in Türkiye's security strategies. Learning from its experience with the Kurdish mobilization in Northern Iraq, Türkiye acted in a preventive and agile manner to prevent PYD/YPG from establishing a permanent autonomous structure in Syria. Similar to Rose's (1993) understanding of policy learning, Ankara examined global experiences in combating separatist terrorism (such as Spain's approach to ETA or the United Kingdom's approach to the IRA), but instead of directly copying these policies due to contextual differences, it adopted a hybrid strategy focused on military elimination, adapted to its own geopolitical conditions. This model has shown that Türkiye's military engagements have stemmed from rational calculation and a desire not to repeat past mistakes.

In the context of comparison with the literature, this study has examined in depth the theoretical conflicts created by the PYD/YPG threat in Turkish foreign policy. Türkiye's security policies have been influenced by three main approaches within the discipline of international relations:

1. Realism: Türkiye's military operations and its perception of border security as an absolute priority constitute a classic Realist reflex developed in response to the anarchic nature of the international system. Realist concerns have led to the necessity for Türkiye to create a balance of power against PYD/YPG, which threatens its national security, and to act in accordance with the principle of self-help.
2. Liberalism and Constructivism: The fact that Turkish foreign policy has acted with Realist concerns has created a deep contradiction with Liberal and Constructivist approaches, particularly in the eyes of Western allies (the United States, the EU). The EU's attempts to address the Kurdish issue within the framework of democracy and human rights have led to domestic political resistance in Türkiye and to a crisis of confidence in its relations with the West. The United States' protection of PYD/YPG while disregarding Türkiye's national security sensitivities has constrained Türkiye's capacity to comply with international norms and accelerated Ankara's drift toward the Eurasian axis. From a

constructivist perspective, this has led to the weakening of shared social identities and norms (such as the NATO alliance).

3. The Sovereignty Paradox: One of the study's original findings is Türkiye's confrontation with a "Sovereignty and Non-Intervention Principle/Border Security Paradox." While Türkiye has traditionally respected the sovereignty of neighboring states, it has been compelled to undertake military interventions that violate Syria's sovereignty due to the necessity of protecting its national security in the face of PYD/YPG's presence. This dilemma reflects Türkiye's prioritization of survival, despite attracting criticism in the international arena and incurring the risk of diplomatic isolation.

It has been observed that the main dynamic behind the rise of PYD/YPG has been the United States' acquisition of a purportedly legitimate pretext to implement its "Kurdish Corridor" project, designed in line with its goal of controlling energy resources and their transport routes. The United States' organization of agreements with PYD/YPG through a company called Delta Crescent ENERGY LLC, placing itself in a position of contributing to the financing of terrorism, and its efforts to refer to PYD as the "Kurdish Autonomous Administration" have been evaluated as a clear example of hypocrisy that calls into question the sincerity of U.S. theses and discourse on counterterrorism.

Another important contribution of the study is its focus on the potential of PYD/YPG's efforts to achieve autonomy in Syria to serve as a socio-political source of inspiration for separatist movements in Türkiye. This situation has been concretized through the "Trench Events" initiated by the organization in 2015 by derailing the resolution process and has seriously threatened Türkiye's internal stability. In addition, the pressure exerted by the irregular migration and refugee influx resulting from the Syrian civil war on Türkiye's demographic structure, as well as the long-term border security risks, have revealed the multidimensional impacts of hybrid conflict.

In conclusion, Türkiye's proactive military strategy in the face of the PKK/KCK–PYD/YPG threat has been evaluated as a military, intelligence, and diplomatic success. The operations conducted have increased Türkiye's regional deterrence and highlighted the capabilities of its domestic defense industry. In particular, the Sochi Memorandum signed with Russia following Operation Peace Spring has demonstrated that Türkiye has achieved diplomatic success both on the ground and at the negotiating table. Through this memorandum, Russia

has at least partially responded to Türkiye's national security concerns (removal of PYD from Manbij and Tel Rifaat).

From a future-oriented perspective, it is anticipated that Türkiye's struggle against the PYD/YPG threat will continue around the objective of preventing the establishment of a new "Independent United Kurdistan" in Syria. The likelihood of this worst-case scenario materializing is currently low, due to the competition among regional and global actors and the internal contradictions among Kurdish groups (such as tensions between the ENKS and TEV-DEM). In this complex geopolitical equation, Türkiye should maintain its smart power strategy and pursue a multidimensional and balancing diplomacy with Russia, the United States, and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) in order to transform its military gains into political gains. Otherwise, overreliance on military power and neglect of socio-political problems will not bring about a sustainable long-term solution and will push Türkiye toward the risk of becoming a security state. The steps Türkiye will take in this process will both consolidate its regional leadership and determine its capacity to manage tensions in its relations with the West.

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