

TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH SYRIA IN THE CONTEXT OF
THE KURDISH ISSUE: 1980-2014

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ABSTRACT

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This study analyzes Turkey's relations with Syria in the context of the Kurdish issue concentrating on the period between 1980 and 2014. The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that one of the main determinant factors behind Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria was the Kurdish issue in the covered period. In this regard, the study will seek to answer the questions such as how the PKK had an impact on Turkey's relations with Syria in the 1980s and 1990s. Then, the thesis will also seek to show that Syria's tough stance against the PKK and Turkey's departure from the security-based foreign policy yielded on having good relations between the two countries in 2000s. At the end, the fourth chapter of this study discussed Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria in the aftermath of the uprisings which began in March 2011. Afterwards, firstly, the thesis will focus on Turkey's relations with the PYD and Syrian opposition movements before and after the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous administration in Rojava. Then, Turkey's Rojava policy is discussed in detail.

Keywords: Turkey, Syria, the Kurdish Issue, the PKK, the PYD

ÖZ

KÜRT MESELESİ EKSENİNDE TÜRKİYE'NİN SURİYE İLE İLİŞKİLERİ 1980-2014

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Bu çalışma, 1980 ve 2014 yılları arası, Türkiye'nin Suriye ile ilişkilerini Kürt meselesi ekseninde incelemiştir. Bu tezin temel amacı, Kürt meselesinin, Türkiye'nin Suriye ile ilişkilerini etkileyen en önemli faktörlerden biri olduğunu göstermektir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma PKK'nin Türkiye-Suriye ilişkilerine 1980'lerde ve 1990'larda ne ölçüde etki ettiğini sorgulayacaktır. Bu tez, ayrıca 2000'li yıllarda Suriye'nin PKK'ye karşı sert tavrının ve Türkiye'nin Suriye'ye karşı güvenlik-odaklı dış politika anlayışını revize etmesinin, iki ülke arasındaki yakın ilişkilere katkısını inceleyecektir. Akabinde, bu çalışmanın dördüncü bölümünde ilk olarak, 2011 yılının Mart ayından itibaren Suriye'de başlayan halk ayaklanmalarından sonra Türkiye'nin Suriye'ye yönelik izlediği dış politika tartışılacaktır. Daha sonra, Türkiye'nin Rojava'da özerk bir Kürt yönetimi kurulmadan önce ve sonra, PYD ve diğer Suriye muhalefet hareketleri ile olan ilişkileri irdelenecektir. Bu çerçevede, Türkiye'nin Rojava politikası etraflıca incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Suriye, Kürt Meselesi, PKK, PYD

To the people who fight against the ISIS gangs in Kobanê

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLAGIARISM	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
ÖZ.....	v
DEDICATION	vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH SYRIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE KURDISH ISSUE BETWEEN 1980 AND 1998	8
2.1. Introduction	8
2.2. A Short Historical Background	8
2.3. The Rise of the PKK: The Rise of Tension	11
2.4. Similar Issue, Different Outcomes: The Impact of the Kurdish Issue on Turkey's and Syria's Foreign Policies.....	13
2.5. The Kurdish Issue in the Early 1980s.....	14
2.6. The Kurdish Issue in the Late 1980s	16
2.6.1. Özal's Damascus Visit.....	17
2.7. The 1990s: A New Period	20
2.7.1. Security Protocol-1992	20
2.7.2. Frustrations and New Confrontations	23
2.7.3. New Chances for Peace	25
2.7.4. Hatay: More Tension	26
2.8. Deterioration of Relations: the Mid-1990s Period	27

2.9. Conclusion.....	31
3. TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH SYRIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE KURDISH ISSUE BETWEEN 1998 AND 2011	32
3.1. Introduction	32
3.2. The October 1998 Crisis.....	32
3.2.1. Towards the October 1998 Crisis	33
3.2.2. The Reasons for the October 1998 Crisis	35
3.2.3. The Outbreak of the October 1998 Crisis.....	37
3.2.4. Shuttle Diplomacy	40
3.2.5. The Outcomes of the October 1998 Crisis.....	42
3.3. 2000-2004: A New Period in Relations	44
3.3.1. Common Stance against the Establishment of a Kurdish State in Iraqi Kurdistan.....	49
3.4. 2005-2010: Relations without Kurdish Issue: Bright Period of Relations	51
3.4.1. Mediation Efforts between Syria and Israel	56
3.5. Conclusion: Deterioration of Relations Again?	57
4. TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH SYRIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE KURDISH ISSUE FROM 2011 TO THE PRESENT DAY	59
4.1. Introduction	59
4.2. Syrian Crisis	59
4.2.1. Turkish-Syrian Relations in a Turmoil	63
4.2.2. A Jactitation: Challenging Syria for its alleged PKK support.....	66
4.2.3. The Policy of Syria's Kurds towards the Crisis in Syria.....	70
4.3. De facto Kurdish Authority	75
4.3.1. Turkey's Reaction to the De facto Kurdish Authority	80
4.3.2. Kurdish National Council: A Containment Policy toward the PYD	86
4.4. Turkey's Relations with the Syrian Opposition Movements	89
4.4.1. Turkey's Policy towards the Syrian Opposition in order to Contain Syria's Kurds in the Military and Political Spheres.....	96
4.5. Buffer Zone	100
4.6. Kobanê: An Example of the Fall of Turkish Foreign Policy Toward Rojava.....	102
4.7. Conclusion.....	106

5. CONCLUSION	109
LIST OF REFERENCES	117
APPENDICES	
A. TURKISH SUMMARY	138
B. TEZ FOTOKOPİSİ İZİN FORMU	149

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Kurdish regions in Syria.....	71
Figure 2: The geography of Kobane in Rojava map.....	102

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Justice and Development Party

BDP – Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi – Peace and Democracy Party

ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party

KNC – Kurdish National Council

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PKK – Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers' Party

PYD – Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat – Democratic Union Party

SKC– Supreme Kurdish Committee

SNC– Syrian National Coalition

UN – United Nations

US – United States of America

YPG – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel – People's Protection Units

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The borders in the Middle East were redesigned following World War I. With respect to the Kurds, suddenly they were separated from each other,¹ as the Kurdish territories were dispersed among four countries – namely Turkey, Iran, and two new states: Syria and Iraq, which were respectively under the mandates of France and Britain. As a result, the Kurdish issue has been not only a domestic issue for these four countries which have a major Kurdish population. As Phillip Robins points out, the Kurds became a significant factor affecting the interstate relations of these countries.²

Regarding Turkey, the Kurdish issue has always been one of the top issues on Turkey's agenda. Notwithstanding the Turkish domestic policy, the Kurdish issue gave direction to many dimensions of the Turkish foreign policy, especially its relations with three neighboring countries: Syria, Iraq and Iran.³ This study will examine Turkey's relations with Syria, in the context of the Kurdish issue, primarily from Turkey's perspective.

There are limited studies concentrating on Turkish-Syrian relations in relevant literature, and the majority of these studies do not examine in detail the impact of the

¹ Kemal Kirişçi and Gareth M. Winrow. *The Kurdish Question and Turkey: An Example of a Trans-state Ethnic Conflicts*. London: Frank Cass, 1997, p. 85. In the same page, the author states that the separation of the Kurds was just a 'default' which was really a simple analysis. Contrary to Kirişçi, the phenomenon that it was a 'design' preventing the independence of the Kurdistan was discussed by McDowall. See David McDowall. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London and New York: I. B. TAURIS, 1997, pp. 115-150.

² Philip Robbins, "The overlord state: Turkish policy and the Kurdish issue." *International Affairs*, Vol. 69, No. 4, 1993, p. 670.

³ Ofra Bengio, "The 'Kurdish Spring' in Turkey and its Impact on Turkish Foreign Relations in the Middle East." *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, December 2012, p. 625.

Kurdish issue on the relations of both countries. The aim of this thesis is to evaluate the relations of both countries strictly in the context of the Kurdish issue.

It is important to point out that the Kurdish issue didn't create a problem between Turkey and Syria until the 1980s. The Kurdish issue as a problem emerged after the PKK members escaped to Syria following the 1980 coup d'état in Turkey and onwards. At this point, this study will examine the impact of the Kurdish issue on the relations of both countries, concentrating on the period after the 1980 coup d'état.

Following the introduction, the second chapter of this thesis will begin with a short history of relations between the two countries, and will then analyze how the internal Kurdish problem of Turkey became an external problem for Syria. After the military coup of 1980 in Turkey, the members of the newly organized PKK escaped to Syria. Syria allowed the PKK to open training camps in the Bekaa valley, as well as an office in the capital city, Damascus. Actually, Syria became a logistic base for the PKK. As the Kurds living in Syria weren't considered to pose a political threat, the Syrian regime didn't hesitate to support the PKK, and provided its territories for the PKK as a "breeding ground"⁴ throughout the 1980s and 1990s as a result. Tensions between Turkey and Syria increased parallel to the increase in attacks of the PKK against Turkey from the Syrian territories. These attacks forced Turkey to discourage Damascus in several ways. Firstly, the Turkish Grand National Assembly gave authority to the government for a cross-border operation in September 1986. Moreover, with the initiative of Turkey, a great number of protocols (1987, 1992, 1993) were signed between the two countries in order to prevent the PKK attacks. However, Damascus' continued support for the PKK didn't cease until October 1998.

In the existing literature, it is highlighted that the PKK has been a "trump card" in the hand of Syria. Of course, the PKK, which exists in the Middle East region, has been open to having relationships with various countries. However, this situation cannot be defined by analyzing one side only. Contrary to the one-sided beliefs of some authors, Mete Çubukçu argued that the PKK has its own dynamic relations with

⁴ Tejel, Jordi. *Syria's Kurds: History, politics and society* (Welle Emily and Welle Jane Trans.) London: Routledge, 2009, p. 77.

these states.⁵ Moreover, regarding the relations of the PKK and Syria, even Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, acknowledged that the Syrian regime had used them, and added that the PKK also used the Syrian regime to empower itself.⁶ Indeed this was best defined by Ismet Cheriff Vanly:

The link is of mutual interest to the parties concerned: the ERNK (a branch of the PKK) has a rear base in Syria for its military activities against the Turkish government; the presidency has in the Kurds of Syria a shield against its internal and external enemies.⁷

In the third part of this thesis, I will examine the history of relations between Syria and Turkey in the context of the Kurdish issue, from October 1998 to the beginning of the upheavals in Syria in 2011. October 1998 is a crucial date on which Syria and Turkey almost went to war⁸. The two countries were able to resolve the conflict, signing the Adana Agreement within the same year. At the beginning of this chapter, I will examine the period which ushered in the Adana Agreement, and discuss in detail the reasons for the outbreak of the October 1998 crisis. Next, I will touch upon how Turkey's strategy became successful in deterring Syria. Finally, I will explore whether relations have improved between the two countries following the Adana Agreement.

The Kurdish issue, which was always a source of conflict between Turkey and Syria, emerged as an opportunity to form an open alliance for both countries following the

⁵ Mete Çubukçu, "Turkiye-Iran-Suriye Ucgenindeki PKK, August 22, 2011 <http://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/mete-cubukcu/turkiye-iran-suriye-ucgenindeki-pkk,4065> (Accessed on November 25, 2012).

⁶ Hasan Cemal, "Öcalan'dan "Seni Kullanıyorlar" Sözüne Yanıt: "Ben de Onları Kullanıyorum!" *Milliyet*, January 15, 2013.

⁷ Ismet Chariff Vanly. "The Kurds in Syria and Lebanon" in Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefab Sperl, eds., *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p.169.

⁸ Historically, it was the second time that the two countries came to the brink of war. The first time that they faced the prospect of war took place in August 1957. It was really a proxy war as the two countries were allies of the two ideologically opposite states, the US and the Soviet Union. See Ayşegül Sever, "The Compliant Ally? Turkey and the Middle East 1954-58." *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 34, No.2 (April 1998), pp. 80-83.

invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003. The potential establishment of an independent Kurdish state in Iraqi Kurdistan alarmed both Turkey and Syria. Unlike in the past, the Kurds of Syria were also aspiring for an independent Kurdish administration along with the Kurds of Turkey. Turkey and Syria were both against the existence of a Kurdish state in Iraq, but they couldn't prevent the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish administration there.

This chapter will highlight the rapprochement of both countries until 2011. In this new period, Syria was at the center of Turkish foreign policy's new approach, a time which saw zero-problem foreign policy.⁹ Within that context, this chapter will concentrate on the good relations of both countries in cultural, economic and political spheres which were the result of their alliance on the Kurdish issue. This chapter will also underline Turkey's mediation attempts between Syria and Israel, and how that was linked to having good relations with Syria in this period.

In the fourth part of the thesis, I will study how Turkish foreign policy toward Syria took a U-turn after the uprisings began in that country. Beginning from December 2010 and onwards, the Arab countries witnessed a sudden spread of protests and political uprisings. The protests and demonstrations gained momentum respectively in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and Syria.¹⁰ Economic breakdown, political corruption, oppressive governments and massive human rights violations were the factors provoking the uprisings in the Arab world.¹¹ In fact, the most

⁹ Zero-problem with neighbors was a Turkish foreign policy motto attributed to the then Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. It was summarized as "to eliminate all the problems from her relations with neighbors or at least to minimize them as much as possible." See <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa> (Accessed on December 5, 2014).

¹⁰ Jacqueline S. Ismael and Shereen T. Ismael, "The Arab Spring and the Uncivil State." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2013, p. 229.

¹¹ Kemal Eldin Osman Salih, "The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2013, pp. 186-187.

determining factor was the unemployment rates for the youth below age 25, who represented roughly 65 percent of the population.¹²

The Arab uprisings¹³ began on 17 December, 2010, when a street vendor in Tunisia set himself on fire against the seizure of his produce card. This event triggered large-scale demonstrations which shook the authorities of the Arab autocrats. Respectively, Zin al-Abidin bin Ali of Tunisia was deported to Saudi Arabia in January 2011, Hosni Mubarek of Egypt fell from power in February 2011 and Muammer Gaddafi of Libya was overthrown and subsequently killed in October 2011.¹⁴ Following the uprisings, the free elections were organized in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt in which the Islamists gained the victory.¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that the military forces of Tunisia and Egypt made significant contributions to the regime changes in both countries when they supported the political demands of demonstrators.¹⁶ The Islamists dominated these elections thanks to the oppressions of the former despotic regimes against them and their organizational capabilities.¹⁷ In this context, Turkey was content with the success of the Islamist parties as they were contemplating to emulate Turkey as a model. For instance, Tunisian leader Gannuschi was directly making reference to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.¹⁸

¹² *Ibid.*, 187.

¹³ The uprisings in the Arab world was misnamed as the 'Arab Spring.' It seemed that the revolution in the Arab world was not completed and later, the developments showed that the 'Arab Spring' became Arab winter. Egypt was back under the military governance, Libya has been faced by the bloody rivalry among the native tribes and Syria was horribly damaged by the fight between opposition movements and the regime. So this study preferred to use the term Arab uprisings instead of the Arab Spring.

¹⁴ Ismael and Ismael, "The Arab Spring." p. 230.

¹⁵ Osman Salih, "The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings." p. 202.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

¹⁸ John R. Bradley. *After the Arab Spring: How Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 56.

According to Kemal Kirisci, Turkey pursued a benefit-oriented policy toward the uprisings in the Arab world as it hoped "to be one of the main beneficiaries in terms of trade." However, the violence in Syria has deeply disturbed these plans¹⁹ as the Syrian case presented a different situation that formed in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in the sense that the uprisings in Syria were not concluding as in the later countries.²⁰ After a brief assessment of the crisis in Syria, the chapter will focus on Turkey's reactions to the Syrian crisis. Actually, there are two basic arguments regarding Turkey's reaction to the Syrian regime, and these are articulated in the chapter. One argument points to the fact that Turkey was not willing to see the fall of the Assad regime. On the other hand, the other argument finds reason to suggest that Turkey had decided from the outset of the uprisings to provide support for the Syrian opposition movements. Notwithstanding the two arguments, zero-problem foreign policy with neighbours became history when Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said that "Assad will not be able to stay in power anymore."²¹

The chapter also deals with the alleged Syrian support to the PKK. As for the Turkish press, Turkish politicians and academics reiterated that it was Syria behind the increased attack of the PKK. By giving reliable information, this chapter criticizes these weak claims and states that Turkey distorted the reasons for the PKK attacks in order to increase intervention into the Syrian crisis. Actually, the PKK attacks were related to the events in Turkey, and sprang from internal reasons, not external ones.

Next, the chapter will elaborate further on how the evolution of the Kurds in Syria determined Turkish foreign policy toward that country. Turkey's containment policy towards the Democratic Union Party (PYD) via different projects and movements, namely the Syrian National Council (later replaced with Syrian National Coalition),

¹⁹ Kemal Kirisci, "Arab Uprisings and Completing Turkey's Regional Integration: Challenges and Opportunities for US-Turkish Relations." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2013, p. 194.

²⁰ Khair El-Din Haseeb, "The Arab Spring Revisited." *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 5, issue 2 (April 2012), p. 9.

²¹ M. Ali Birand, "Is there a military intervention in Syria?" *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 7, 2011.

Free Syrian Army, Kurdistan Regional Government, the Kurdish National Council, al-Nusra Front and ISIS, towards the Syria's Kurds are scrutinized by giving many examples.

Ankara views the PYD as a branch of the PKK in Syria, and what really disturbs Ankara is the alleged role of Damascus in the PYD's enhanced grip on power in northern Syria. However, the following chapter criticizes the Ankara's claims. To be brief, in this chapter I will write how Syria's Kurds challenged Turkey, how Turkey took a position to an autonomous Kurdish state in northern Syria (Rojava), and how this position deteriorated the relations between the two countries. The chapter will conclude by examining the fall of Turkish foreign policy in Syria in the context of the Kurdish issue by analyzing the last events in Kobanê.

The last chapter consists of the conclusion, which is composed of concluding remarks regarding the thesis.

The question of Cengiz Çandar, a highly respected Turkish columnist, summarizes the main factor behind Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria: "Would there be a prospect of a war between Turkey and Syria if any Kurds did not live in Syria?"²² From this perspective, this thesis espouses the argument that since the Kurdish issue has been a domestic problem for Turkey, its relations with Syria have been deeply affected by this issue. With this argument in mind, this thesis discussed how the Kurdish issue has affected Turkey's relations with Syria from the 1980s through to late 2014.

²² Cengiz Çandar, "Suriyeli Kürtler ve Türkiye' nin 'Suriye paradoksu'," *Radikal*, November 15, 2012.

CHAPTER 2

TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH SYRIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE KURDISH ISSUE BETWEEN 1980 AND 1998

2.1. Introduction

This chapter scrutinizes Turkish-Syrian relations in the context of the Kurdish issue concentrating on the period from 1980 to early 1998. After a brief historical background of Turkey's relations with Syria, it focuses completely on understanding the change in relations within the context of the Kurdish issue between the years mentioned above.

2.2. A Short Historical Background

Turkish-Syrian relations require a full-fledged study in order to integrate the historical legacy of the Ottoman era and understand its impact of historical relations on the relations of the contemporary era.¹ Syria remained under Ottoman sovereignty for almost four centuries, so Syrian political life, like everywhere else under Ottoman sovereignty, was affected by Ottoman culture and Ottoman administrative practices.²

The First World War caused a radical change throughout the entire Middle East. Like the other modern states of the Arab Middle East, Syria emerged from the collapse of

¹ Bülent Aras. *Turkey and the Greater Middle East*. İstanbul: Tasam Publications, 2004, p. 87.

² Roger Owen. *State, Power, and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 5.

the Ottoman Empire and the settlement of the post-World War I.³ The Ottoman heritage was perceived negatively by both Turkish and Syrian sides as a result of the ideological dimensions of nation-building processes that occurred during the period of the Ottoman Empire's demise.⁴ During this period, the common Ottoman Islamic identity was deconstructed by Turkish and Arab nationalists.⁵ On one hand, the abolition of Caliphate in 1924 symbolized the end of the link between the new Turkish Republic and the Middle East.⁶ On the other hand, separated under the Sikes-Picot agreement, Syria began to adopt a Pan-Arabist policy; thus, both countries began to follow separate paths.

The conflict between Turkey and Syria started with differing claims over the Sanjak of Alexandretta/Hatay and escalated following a dispute over water rights in the 1960s.⁷

In 1938, France relinquished the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey for the sake of Turks' friendship. The Sanjak was annexed by Ankara in 1939.⁸ The loss of Alexandretta to Turkey left a lasting impact on Hafiz Assad and his Ba'thist comrades⁹, as they had always considered Alexandretta to be an integral part of the

³ Eugene L. Rogan. "The Emergence of the Middle East into the Modern State System" in *International Relations of the Middle East*, by Louise Fawcett eds., New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 17.

⁴ Meliha Altunışık, "Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Dönemde Suriye'nin Dış Politikası: Değişime Uyum Çabası," in Mustafa Türkeş and İlhan Uzgel eds., *Türkiye'nin Komşuları*, (İmge Yayınevi, Şubat 2002), p. 277.

⁵ Raymond Hinnebusch and Samir al- Taqi, "As Seen From Damascus: the Transformation in Syrian-Turkish Relations" in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür eds., *Turkey- Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013, p.97.

⁶ William Hale, "Turkey, the Middle East and the Gulf crisis." *International Affairs*, 1992, p. 681.

⁷ Berna Süer, 2011. *Transformation of Syrian Conflicts with Turkey and Israel in the 1990s: A Comparative Perspective on Ripeness*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, METU, Ankara, p. 86.

⁸ Süha Bölükbaşı, "Ankara, Damascus, Baghdat and the Regionalization of Turkey's Kurdish Secessionism." *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.14, no. 4, 1991, p. 18.

⁹ Muhammad Muslih, "Syria and Turkey Uneasy Relations" in Henri J. Barkey eds., *Reluctant Neighbor: Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, Washington: Washington Institute of Peace Press, 1996, p. 113.

Syrian homeland. For many years, Syria raised the issue of Alexandretta in its negotiations with Turkey. However, Syria shelved this issue after the October war of 1973. Since then, Syria's attention has been focused on resolving the various aspects of its conflict with Israel.¹⁰

Turkey and Syria remained in opposing camps during the Cold War. The İnönü administration of 1939-1950 and then the Menderes administration of 1950-1960 both tried to realign Turkey towards the West. To this regard, Turkey became a NATO member in 1952 as a Western ally.¹¹ However, Syria was in the pro-Soviet camp of the Arab world. Additionally, Syria saw Turkey as a potential threat due to its membership in NATO as well as its primary goal of enlarging the membership of the Baghdad Pact in the region.¹² In short, the countries adopted different positions on opposing sides which caused them to view each other with suspicion and hostility.¹³

During the mid-1960s, use of the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers created friction between the two countries. Turkey's building of dams on the rivers for energy and irrigation purposes was perceived a threat by Syria, which in turn blamed Turkey for holding sovereignty claims over these rivers and using their waters for its interests regardless of Arab interests.¹⁴

This combination of heritage, differences, and conflicts accounted for the chilly beginning of Syria and Turkey relations.¹⁵ To directly quote from Muhammed

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹¹ Ayşegül Sever, "The Compliant Ally? Turkey and the Middle East 1954-58." p.74.

¹² Raymond Hinnebusch and Samir al- Taqi, "As Seen From Damascus..." p. 98.

¹³ David Kushner. "Turkish-Syrian Relations: An Update" in Joseph Ginat and Onn Winckler, Moshe Ma'oz eds., *Modern Syria, From Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in the Middle East*, Brighton and Portlans: Sussex Academic Press, 1999, pp. 228-229; see also Meliha Altunışık and Özlem Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations." *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2006, p. 220.

¹⁴ Altunışık and Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners?" p. 220.

¹⁵ Kushner, "Turkish-Syrian Relations: An Update." p. 228.

Muslih: "Syria's relations with Turkey have evolved in this context of a mutual decay of confidence on both sides."¹⁶

Meanwhile, other important "irritants" continued to cast a shadow over the bilateral relations. Among them was the problem of security along the border. Another major issue was the alleged support given by Syria to various organizations, which were viewed as responsible for the growing restlessness in Turkey. All diplomatic efforts toward resolution proved fruitless, and these issues concerning security served to deepen suspicions and animosities negatively impacting on their relations.¹⁷ In this way, it is asserted that "the Turkish-Syrian conflict emerged as one of the major long-term challenges to the modern Syrian state."¹⁸

2.3. The Rise of the PKK: The Rise of Tension

Tensions based on different points of views vis-à-vis Kurdish identity became the main determinant of bilateral relations after the 1980s. On one hand, Syria used the Kurdish PKK movement factor as a bargaining tool to solve other problems with Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey rejected negotiation with regard to other problems unless Syria broke relations with the PKK.¹⁹

Largely quoting Ismet G. Imset, Michael Gunter states that Öcalan fled to Syria in May of 1979 predicting the military coup that finally occurred in September 1980.²⁰ During 1981 and 1982, Syrian *mukhabarat* agents trained PKK members in guerilla

¹⁶ Muslih, "Syria and Turkey Uneasy Relations." pp. 113-114.

¹⁷ Kushner. "Turkish-Syrian Relations: An Update." p. 230.

¹⁸ Eyal Zisser, "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria." *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2, March 2006, p. 188, cited in Berna Süer, 2011. *Transformation of Syrian Conflicts with Turkey and Israel in the 1990s*.

¹⁹ Jülide Karakoç, 'The Impact of the Kurdish Identity on Turkey's Foreign Policy from the 1980s to 2008', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 6, 2010, p. 921.

²⁰ Michael M Gunter. *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992, p. 26.

warfare in various camps throughout the country. PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was assigned a villa and an armored red Mercedes and was protected by Syrian bodyguards.²¹ After September 1980, Syria's support to the PKK, in terms of logistics, military, and finance, provided the PKK with most of its organizational freedom by 1984.²²

It was nothing new for Damascus to look for proxies to use in its various regional conflicts. In fact, Syria had long relied on foreign militants to implement its political and military targets. In this way, Syria had a number of outstanding conflicts with Turkey making it willing to tolerate militant groups²³, and the PKK's request for sanctuary, as suggested by Süha Bölükbaşı, was a godsend for the Assad regime which had been looking for ways to weaken Turkey.²⁴ Aliza Marcus states that Damascus, which had numerous disputes with Ankara, operated on the principle that its enemy's enemy was its friend. In line with this principle, Damascus became a haven for both Turkish and Kurdish leftist organizations.²⁵

As mentioned above, there were a number of reasons for the PKK-Syrian connection. Hostilities concerning the annexation of the Hatay province in 1939 to the Turkish territory and problems concerning the waters of the Euphrates River had long kept Turkish-Syrian relations cool. Moreover, disagreements existed over Cyprus, Israel, and the PLO leadership.²⁶

Ismet Chariff Vanly, an outstanding Kurdish academic and activist, clarifies the role of Syria well writing that Assad's regime had given the PKK "what may justifiably

²¹ Briefing, Supplement, June 6, 1988, p. 18, cited in Süha Bölükbaşı, "The Regionalization of Turkey's Kurdish Secessionism." p. 22.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²³ Aliza Marcus. *Kan ve İnanç: PKK ve Kürt Hareketi*. İstanbul: İletişim Publications, 2012, p. 88.

²⁴ Süha Bölükbaşı, "The Regionalization of Turkey`s Kurdish Secessionism." p. 17.

²⁵ Marcus. *Kan ve İnanç: PKK ve Kürt Hareketi*. p. 79.

²⁶ Gunter. *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey*. p. 93.

be called a strategic alliance."²⁷ In reality, Syria provided a haven for Öcalan before the Turkish coup of 1980. After the military took power, the Syrians permitted the rest of the PKK members to reconsolidate themselves on Syrian territory as well as in the parts of Lebanon they controlled. Syria's support for the PKK was in a such endless point that the PKK organized its first five congresses there and was permitted to maintain the Mahsun Korkmaz Military Academy as a training camp in the Bekaa Valley until April 1992. Until 1998, Öcalan lived in Damascus and the nucleus of the PKK forces remained in or near the Bekaa valley.²⁸

2.4. Similar Issue, Different Outcomes: The Impact of the Kurdish Issue on Turkey's and Syria's Foreign Policies

Security considerations regarding the Kurdish insurgency dictated the foreign policy of Turkey. In particular, Turkish foreign policy often appeared to be "indexed" by the issue of Kurdish ethno-nationalist radicalism, and especially in terms of the issue of the PKK. Kurdish identity had been affecting Turkey's foreign policy since the 1980s in the way that it led to the construction of a collective identity. This identity constituted the reason for cooperation or dispute between Turkey and other states.²⁹ As Philip Robins argues, what determined the foreign policy of Turkey is a simple equation: "If you abhor the PKK, you are our friend; if you (are perceived to) help or nurture the PKK you are our enemy."³⁰

Unlike Turkey, Syria did not have a Kurdish question. The Kurds of Syria were not seeking autonomy, and the Kurdish problem was not the principal issue for Syria in

²⁷ Ismet Chariff Vanly, "The Kurds in Syria and Lebanon" in Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefab Sperl eds., *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*,. London: Routledge, 1992, p.169, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁸ Gunter. *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey*. pp. 92-93.

²⁹ Jülide Karakoç, "The Impact of the Kurdish Identity on Turkey's Foreign Policy." p. 919.

³⁰ Robins, Philip. "The Foreign Policy of Turkey" in Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, p. 318.

its relations with Turkey. Thus, Syria could play the Kurdish card without inviting any serious threat to its territorial integrity.³¹

Syria preferred to utilize this aspect, which is the principal one for Turkey, in bilateral relations. Nevertheless, Kurdish identity in general had become a source of worry in the Middle East region for states having a Kurdish population. Syria has always fallen under this category. Additionally, Syria always chose to participate in meetings related to the Kurdish identity with Turkey and Iran although Syria supported the PKK.³²

2.5. The Kurdish Issue in the Early 1980s

The first meeting that gathered Turkish and Syrian officials regarding the PKK issue was in June 1981. Syrian and Turkish Justice Ministers signed an agreement in Ankara providing for the extradition of criminals. Contrary to the demand of Ankara, the agreement was not comprehensive as political refugees were not included in it.³³ Relying on the agreement, Ankara demanded that Damascus extradite "terrorists." Damascus argued that there were no "terrorists," only political refugees in the country.³⁴ Notwithstanding the agreement, Syria did not prevent illegal travel across common border with Turkey; hence, Ankara constructed a security road parallel to the Syrian border and assigned patrol officers to monitor it.³⁵

³¹ Muslih, "Syria and Turkey Uneasy Relations." p. 122.

³² Karakoç, "The Impact of the Kurdish Identity on Turkey's Foreign Policy." p. 921.

³³ Melek Fırat ve Ömer Kürkçüoğlu, "Irak ve Suriye'yle Sorunlu İlişkiler", in Baskın Oran eds., *Türk Dış Politikası, Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, cilt II, 6. Baskı, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2012, p. 131.

³⁴ Milliyet, June 16, 17, 28, 1981, cited in Süha Bölükbaşı, "The Regionalization of Turkey's Kurdish Secessionism." p. 23.

³⁵ Fırat and Kürkçüoğlu, "Irak ve Suriye'yle Sorunlu İlişkiler," p.132.

This attitude of Syria had remarkable impacts on the PKK policy. Between the 15 and 26 of July 1981, the PKK held its first party conference at its training camp close to Lebanon-Syria border. The conference resolved to hasten training activities in Syrian-controlled regions and to establish ties with regional powers, particularly Iraqi Kurdish movements. In line with the conference decisions, the PKK established relations primarily with Damascus. Moreover, the PKK began direct contact with Hafiz Assad's brother, Rifad Assad, who was the head of Syrian *mukhabarat*.³⁶ The brother of the Syrian leader Hafez Assad, Jamil Assad, was already responsible for his country's relations with the Kurdish world, and he had established contact with Öcalan. However, entering into picture, well-placed Rifad Assad had great significance. Cemil Bayik, one of the prominent commanders of the PKK, stated that "Rifat had great sympathy for the organization from the very beginning... He placed great value on us."³⁷ As a result, the PKK expanded its influence over the Syria's Kurds in addition to creating new recruitment offices, safe-houses, and several training camps within the country.³⁸

The second PKK party conference was held in July 1982, again on Syrian territory, and determined its basic duties to be that a "War of Independence" in the area regarded as Kurdistan would be carried out in three stages: a) strategic defense, b) balance of forces, and c) strategic offense. Following the Second Congress, the time for the strategic defense period had come to implement. Thus, the early "pioneers" were selected to prepare hideouts, supply depots, and establish contacts with the locals in Turkey.³⁹

Meanwhile, the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in 1982 and the effects of this invasion on the PKK brought about important results regarding Turkey. Twelve PKK

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

³⁷ İsmet G. İmset. *the PKK: A Report On Seperatist Violence In Turkey (1973-1992)*. Ankara: Turkish Daily News Publications, 1992, cited in Gunter, *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey*, p. 27.

³⁸ İmset. *the PKK*. p. 27.

³⁹ Bölükbaşı, p. 23.

members were killed, and twelve were held captive during the attacks of Israel to the PLO camps in Lebanon. The PKK obtained the sympathy of Palestinian organizations and Damascus via its resistance against Israel. Thereafter, the PKK settled in the camps where the Palestinians were rooted out by Israel. Military training as well as ideological education was hastened in these camps. Furthermore, the PKK consolidated its ties with the Kurdish movements in Iraq and Europe. In short, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon created the means for the PPK to become a regional power, and this new regional power was then prepared to begin its operations in Turkish territory.⁴⁰

Indeed, the PKK had a major representative office in Damascus and, connected to this, also had offices in the cities of Qamishli, Serê Kaniyê, Tirbespiyê, Dêrik, Kobanê, Afrin, Zebedan, al-Hasakah, Latakia, and Tilbesti in Syria by the mid-1980s.⁴¹

2.6. The Kurdish Issue in the Late 1980s

Turkish-Syrian relations had some pivotal points and negotiations in the post-Cold War era. The first period was between 1987 and 1996. Relations fluctuated during this period in the sense that, despite several agreements offering incentives to improve relations, these efforts were rebuffed. Syria did not respond to Turkey's demands after the agreements were signed.⁴²

The turning points in relations during the first period that led to the deterioration of bilateral relations include: a) The July 1987 visit of Prime Minister Turgut Özal to Syria which remained inconclusive as Syria was angered when Turkey began constructing its dams, while Turkey argued that the PKK attacks from Syria

⁴⁰ Fırat and Kurçüoğlu, 2002, pp: 132-133.

⁴¹ Imset. *the PKK*.

⁴² Berna Süer, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, p. 93.

continued. b) PKK attacks continued, and Özal threatened in 1989 to breach the water accord; Hafiz Assad's brother Jamil Assad, the regime's liaison with the PKK in Bekaa, claimed that the Kurds should have a homeland including Turkish territory. c) Syrian support for the PKK continued in the Taurus Mountains and Hatay. d) In 1993, President Demirel visited Assad, whom he perceived as being dishonest with him over Öcalan's use of Syrian refuge. e) The president of the Turkish chambers of commerce led a 100-man trade delegation to Syria. However, the warming of relations was cut short by increased Syrian support for the PKK.⁴³

2.6.1. Özal's Damascus Visit

Turgut Özal was the first Turkish Prime Minister to visit Syria on July 15, 1987.⁴⁴ At the time of his visit, Syrian officials were not willing to utter the name of the PKK, did not accept that the PKK was based on their territory, and did not accept that Öcalan lived in Damascus. The truth was that the PKK leader had been told to go to nearby Bekaa Valley and stay there until this official visit ended.⁴⁵

According to Hiram Abbas, the deputy of the Military Intelligence Service, none of this had been discussed in the Security Committee conference, in which the most secret topics had been expected to be discussed. According to him, when Turkish officials articulated the name of Abdullah Öcalan, Syrian officials rejected to talk about the subject as it would be justification of Öcalan's presence under the protection of Damascus. In addition to this, Syrian officials had counterattacked,

⁴³ Raymond Hinnebusch, *'Approaches to the Study of Turkey-Syria Relations, Workshop on Syria Syria-Turkey Relations.'* Damascus, 2010, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Cengiz Çandar, *Mezopotamya Ekspresi: Bir Tarih Yolculuğu*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 2012, p. 79.

⁴⁵ Imset, *The PKK*, p. 174.

contending that Turkey was supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, an outlawed organization in Syria.⁴⁶

Prime Minister Turgut Özal, on the other hand, had decided to use Turkey's control of headwaters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers as a bargaining chip against Syria. In return for securing its share of regional waters, Damascus would be forced to stop backing the PKK.⁴⁷

Despite these intricacies, a security protocol was signed between Turkey and Syria in Damascus in July of 1987. According to this agreement, Syria would cease permitting the PKK to raid Turkey from across its borders and remove the PKK camps from its territory so long as Turkey agreed to supply no less than 500 cubic meters per second of water per month. However, it was soon understood that Syria simply moved the PKK camps out of its legal control, to Lebanese territory.⁴⁸

During his visit to Damascus in 1987, Özal also signed a protocol for economic cooperation that included trade, banking, transportation, telecommunication, the transfer of electrical power, and exploration for oil and natural gas. Additionally, several agreements were made to facilitate the border crossing of Turkish pilgrims heading toward the Holy Cities in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁹

The 1987 protocol led, for a while, to a more determined action on the part of the Syrians; because it closed bases on Syrian territory, it was viewed as a positive development by many Turkish officials, as the PKK activities in Syria appeared to decline. However, bases in Lebanon which were claimed not to be under Syrian full control remained active, and they became the subject of Turkish complaints and

⁴⁶ Cengiz Çandar, *Mezopotamya Ekspresi*, p. 85.

⁴⁷ Damla Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill." *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 19, Issue 2, Spring 2012, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Gunter. *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey*, p. 93.

⁴⁹ Ayşegül Kibaroglu, "Prospects for Cooperation in the Euphrates Tigris River Basin." *Turkish Review of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 8 (1994-95), p. 149, cited in Kushner, *Turkish-Syrian Relations*, p. 232.

warnings. Contradictory to Syrian claims, Turkey argued that the bases in Lebanon were fully under Syrian control and that Syria was not doing all it could to prevent the PKK activities and their infiltration from Syrian territory into Turkey.⁵⁰

High-level contacts in 1987 did not demonstrate a warming up of relations. On 1 November 1989, Özal criticized Syria with a harsh discourse, blaming it as having antagonistic attitudes towards Turkey. He continued that if Syria did not comply with the protocol of 1987 and permitted the PKK to raid Turkey from across its borders, Turkey could relinquish water the protocol that agreed to supplying no less than 500 cubic meters per second of water per month. In the weeks that followed, there were several cases of shooting across the border; and, on 21 November 1989, a Turkish civilian aircraft was shot down by a Syrian fighter over Hatay.⁵¹

Indeed, in 1990, it became evident that PKK-Damascus relations had not been interrupted for two years despite the agreement reached between the two countries. In that year, the testimony of a provincial leader of the PKK confirmed that Damascus was still in support of the PKK and that Damascus had not only enabled the PKK to train on its territories but also to conduct cross-border attacks into Turkey.⁵²

In April 1990, another PKK member`s confession at a Diyarbakir military court showed Syrian support to the PKK existed even after the 1987 security protocol. PKK member Ramazan Cülüm was among 60 guerillas who infiltrated Turkey in early 1989. He claimed that the infiltration was made with the assistance of the Syrian government, adding that government officials gave them a Syrian guide and Syrian trucks which, at the river Tigris, were suspended on plastic boats in order to cross into Turkey.⁵³

⁵⁰ Kushner, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 236.

⁵¹ Fırat and Kürçüoğlu, "Irak ve Suriye'yle Sorunlu İlişkiler." p. 132.

⁵² Imset, *The PKK*, p. 174.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

2.7. The 1990s: A New Period

After decades of discreet disengagement from its Middle Eastern environment, Turkey became a more active player in the international politics of the region and began to redefine its relationship with the Middle East region in the 1990s.⁵⁴ This is reflected in Ankara's pursuit of a more proactive policy vis-à-vis Damascus aimed at undermining Syrian support of the separatist Kurdish guerilla organization, the PKK.⁵⁵

2.7.1. Security Protocol-1992

In March of 1992, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel targeted Syria openly for the first time, expressing an end to Turkish quiet diplomacy saying, "Syria's permission for PKK terrorists to have bases in Bekaa is not acceptable." ⁵⁶

Turkey had refrained from accusing Syria by name for its support of the PKK for many years, since 1980. All attempts at forcing Damascus to abandon its support to the PKK had always met with a denial from Damascus that there was any cooperation or even such a Kurdish organization existing in the region.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, namely the Gulf Crisis, had caused Turkey and Syria to share a common interest regarding the events.⁵⁸ Hinnebusch said that the second Gulf War created an opportunity for Syria to trade membership in the coalition in return for the US acknowledgment of Syrian interests.

⁵⁴ Meliha Altunışık, "Turkey's Middle East Challenges: Towards a New Beginning?" *Turkish Foreign Policy in Post Cold War Era*, 2004, p. 363.

⁵⁵ Sabri Sayarı, "Turkey and the Middle East in the 1990s." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol.26, No. 3, Spring 1997, p. 44.

⁵⁶ Imset, p. 176.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Kushner, p. 231.

Further, he added that Assad's plan was that, after the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait was resolved, the United States would resolve the Israeli occupation of Arab land in a comparable way.⁵⁹ Indeed, according to Philip Robins, the 1990 Gulf Crisis presented a significant change for Turkey in that it marked the end of "conventional wisdom" in which Turkey didn't require being an actor in the Middle East region and in which it emphasize the geostrategic importance of Turkey, in particular for the US.⁶⁰ In short, both Turkey and Syria found themselves on the same side of fence, allying with the United States and the West in an anti-Iraqi coalition.

More importantly, the establishment of a Kurdish autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan scared Damascus and Ankara in the sense that it was perceived as a common threat. Within this context, Turkey and Syria signed a significant protocol.⁶¹ In April 1992, Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin, Interior Minister İsmet Sezgin, and Gendermarie Commander Eşref Bitlis met with Syrian top officials in Damascus. Days before the visit, Ankara intended to force Syrian authorities to cease their known support of the PKK.⁶²

Turkish Interior Minister İsmet Sezgin met Hafez Assad in Damascus and presented him with evidence that: 1) Under the guard of Syrian Intelligence Services, or the *Mukhabarat*, Öcalan was still living in Damascus; 2) the PKK had been provided money, materials, and false identifications by the *Mukhabarat*; 3) the PKK meetings, congresses, and conferences were held within Syrian territory without any obstacle; 4) the PKK had been allowed to establish training centers and camps in the Bekaa valley. Also, Syria provided SAM-7 missiles to protect them; 5) Syria had provided arms to the PKK from its arsenals established near its border with Turkey; 6) and that

⁵⁹ Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Foreign Policy of Syria" in Hinnebusch Raymond and Ehteshami Anoushiravan eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, p. 158.

⁶⁰ Philip Robins, "The Foreign Policy of Turkey." p. 326.

⁶¹ Scheller, p. 115.

⁶² Imset, p. 176.

Syria had allowed the PKK to make radio transmissions to a distance of 72 kilometers from Damascus.⁶³

Two separate protocols were signed between Turkey and Syria after two rounds of lengthy discussions. According to the security protocol: 1) Both countries would cooperate against terrorism, "including its international form," and prevent terrorists from crossing from one country to the other; 2) Neither country would give permission to any organization outlawed by the other in order to organize, train, or make propaganda, and any captured member of an outlawed organization would be returned to both countries; 3) Both would exchange information regarding outlawed organizations; 4) Both would undertake measures to prevent infiltration and smuggling; 5) Both would take measures to prevent "unnecessary" armed incidents on their borders; 6) In order to ensure this cooperation, security officials would meet every three months; 7) The Syrians declared the PKK to be an outlawed organization in Syria, and that many members of the PKK would be apprehended and delivered to their respective judicial [Syrian] authorities.⁶⁴

İsmet İnönü expressed that, aside from Syria's reference to the PKK being outlawed, the document was hardly anything but a revival of the 1987 security protocol signed by Turgut Özal.⁶⁵ Indeed, although Sezgin declared, "I do not believe Syria will be behind PKK terrorism after this" and described his agreement with Assad as "the best protocol ever obtained" within months, the agreement became void as a new PKK camp was established some 20 kilometers west of the Bekaa Valley.⁶⁶

As on many occasions previously, the agreement brought some temporary relief, and the PKK members were removed from the Bekaa Valley. Although the Syrians

⁶³ FBIS-WEU, April 13; 1992, p.58, cited in Gunter, *Turkish-Syrian Relations*, pp: 93-94, taken from "Sezgin to Give Syria Evidence of PKK support" Ankara Anatolia in English, 1515 GMT, April 11, 1992.

⁶⁴ Berna Süer, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, p. 120; İnönü, pp. 177-178.

⁶⁵ İnönü, p. 177.

⁶⁶ Gunter, 1997:94, cited in "Syria not to be Asked to Extradite PKK Members", Turkish D News, April 23, 1992, pp. 1, 12; as cited in FBIS-WEU, May 4, 1992, p. 52.

appeared to be more willing to cooperate against the PKK, it was known that the organization was still active in various areas in the Kurdish-populated border regions to the north and still had its offices in Lebanese territory.⁶⁷ In essence, matters reverted back to where they had been before.

2.7.2. Frustrations and New Confrontations

For Turkey, relations with Syria became unsustainable in the 1990s. Turkey had become unhappy with the status quo of its relations with Syria, as conditions of a stalemate due to desperation and frustration had emerged.⁶⁸

Although, initially, the 1992 agreement bore fruit and the Helwe camp was closed, in the long term, no change in Syrian policy took place.⁶⁹ All diplomatic efforts toward resolutions proved fruitless, and the issues vital to the security and welfare of both countries only served to deepen suspicions and hostilities.⁷⁰

Turkish officials had generally been mute in their criticism of Syrian's policies; whereas they had suspected Syrian involvement in their country's domestic political problems since the mid-1970s. However, the escalation of PKK activities during the 1990s exacted a heavy toll on Syrian-Turkish relations, since Turkish politicians and the media began openly denouncing Syria and urging the government to take more forceful measures to stop Syria's support to the PKK.⁷¹

⁶⁷ İmset, p. 179.

⁶⁸ Berna Süer, unpublished doctoral dissertation, p. 145.

⁶⁹ Damla Aras, "Similar Strategies, Dissimilar Outcomes: An Appraisal of the Efficiency of Turkey's Coercive Diplomacy with Syria and in Northern Iraq." *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2011, p. 595; interview with former Interior Minister İsmet Sezgin, 20 Feb. 2006.

⁷⁰ Kushner, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 232.

⁷¹ Sabri Sayarı, "Turkey and the Middle East in the 1990s." p. 47.

During the 1990s, many Turkish officials also began to articulate the link between Syrian support for the PKK and the water issue. Former Foreign Minister Deniz Baykal reflected the prevailing Turkish opinion when he said: "Some circles may claim that they need additional water to wash the blood of terrorism from their hands."⁷² Actually, Syria's support for Kurdish groups, most notably the PKK, was directly related to the water dispute.⁷³ For instance, Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad attended the ceremony of the PKK in Bekaa Valley and sent a threatening message rebutting Turkey's decision to cut the flow of water for one month during the holding of the Ataturk Dam.⁷⁴

Confronting challenges of the PKK necessitated conflict with neighboring states, particularly Syria which had given the group refuge and support. In other words, "peace in the world" increasingly became difficult to sustain.⁷⁵ Turkey's conflict with Syria was largely a result of this phenomenon during the 1990s. Hafiz Assad saw the PKK as a lever that could be used against Turkey which became a player at the turn of the decade.⁷⁶

Syria faced an enhanced threat on its northern border with Turkey.⁷⁷ Confronted with growing Turkish capabilities and engagement, Syria began to formulate counterstrategies. To raise support for the PKK was a prominent element of this strategy.⁷⁸

⁷² Sayarı, "Turkey and the Middle East in the 1990s," p. 48, cited in Suer, unpublished thesis, p. 121.

⁷³ Muslih, "Syria and Turkey: Uneasy Relations." p. 121.

⁷⁴ Neşet Akmandor, Hüseyin Pazarcı and Hasan Köni. *Ortadoğu Ülkelerinde Su Sorunu*. Ankara: Tesav Yayınları, 1994, pp.62-63 cited in Özden Zeynep Oktav, "Water Dispute and Kurdish Separatism in Turkish-Syrian Relations," *The Turkish Yearbook*, Vol. 39, 2003, p. 102.

⁷⁵ "Peace at home, peace in the world" is a Turkish security strategy motto commonly attributed to Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic.

⁷⁶ Malik Mufti, "Turkish-Syrian Rapprochement: Causes and Consequences." *PolicyWatch Report 630*, June 21, 2002.

⁷⁷ Hinnebusch, "The Foreign Policy of Syria." p. 160.

⁷⁸ Mufti, "Turkish-Syrian Rapprochement."

2.7.3. New Chances for Peace

On 19-20 November 1993, just after a security protocol signed between Turkey and Syria, the Syrian Interior Ministry Chief of Security stated in an interview that Syria would not be a thoroughfare for "those who are against Turkey's interests."⁷⁹ A few days later, the Syrian State Minister for Security, in a television interview, stated that Syria had "begun to ban the PKK upon President Hafiz al-Assad's orders." He added that "Turkey's stability and integrity is important for Syria and the region. Therefore, there is no room for any groups perpetrating terrorism and causing trouble for Turkey."⁸⁰ This was the first time that a high-ranking Syrian official characterized the PKK as being a terrorist organization. Of course, the Turkish officials were delighted to see significant departure in the foreign policy of Syria, which had supported the PKK since 1984.⁸¹

On 23 August 1994, Syria participated at the Foreign Minister level in a summit conference held in Damascus with Iran and Turkey in which the Kurdish question figured prominently. At this summit, Faruk al-Shar'a of Syria did not specifically denounce the PKK as terrorist organization as Turkey demanded. However, he said that Syria was opposed to the fragmentation of the Middle East countries, referring to the Kurdish nationalist challenge to Turkey as well as to Iran.⁸²

In late 1994 and early 1995, relations between Turkey and Syria saw a brief positive development. On 5 December, Yalın Erez, president of Turkey's chamber of commerce and stock market, led a 100-person delegation to Damascus to engage in

⁷⁹ Newspot, no. 93/24, 2 Dec.1993, 4; cited in Olson, Robert, "The Kurdish Question and Turkey's Foreign Policy Toward Syria, Iran, Russia and Iraq since the Gulf War" in Robert Olson, eds. *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact on Turkey and Middle East*, 84-113. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996, p. 86.

⁸⁰ Newspot, no.93/25, 21 Dec.1993, 4; cited in *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

trade discussions. Syrian officials expressed their willingness to improve trade relations with Turkey.⁸³

The years 1994-1995 witnessed a positive development in trade negotiations. However, as will be seen below, Syria's alleged support for the PKK raid in Hatay mid-summer of 1995 prevented further improvement in relations.⁸⁴

By February 1995, the amount of water released by Turkey from its upriver dams on the Euphrates remained a bitter issue between two countries. In early February 1995, Prime Minister Tansu Çiller declared that if Damascus would abandon its "protection of PKK terrorists," Turkey would be ready to sign a water protocol with Syria guaranteeing a flow of at least 500 million cubic meters per second. However, no agreement over the flow of water was reached.⁸⁵

2.7.4. Hatay: More Tension

By mid-summer of 1995, the PKK attempt to establish an organizational structure in Hatay soured what seemed to be improving relations. In July, the commander of the military wing of the PKK announced that PKK guerillas were engaging in operations in the Taurus Mountains and in Hatay. In his announcement, he reported that, during the first six months of 1995, the People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan (ARGK), the military wing of the PKK, had killed twenty-five Turkish soldiers, village guards, and fascists.⁸⁶

The choice of Hatay was as significant as it was sensitive. The province was part of Syria until 1939, and its sovereignty was still a contentious issue between Turkey

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp: 87-88.

⁸⁴ Süer, unpublished thesis, p. 93.

⁸⁵ *Hürriyet*, February 11, 1995, cited in Robert Olson. *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s*. p. 88.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

and Syria; it remained as one of the sore spots in their relationship. The attempt to enlist the minority Alawite – especially the Alawite Arab – population against the dominant Sunni and Turkish populations was bound to create more friction among different sects of people in Hatay. Thus, reports during the summer of 1995 of the PKK's attempts to move into Hatay further cooled relations between the two countries.⁸⁷

At the end of 1995, the Syrian sanctuary of Öcalan, its support for the PKK, and its particular support for the PKK's move into Hatay, remained the principle reasons for the source of conflict-ridden relations between the two countries.⁸⁸

2.8. Deterioration of Relations: the Mid-1990s Period

In the mid-1990s, there was a noticeable deterioration in the state of Turkish-Syrian relations. The close cooperation of the two countries lasted until 1995, when the two main Kurdish actors, the Talabani and Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan, entered a bloody rivalry which reduced the fears of Turkey and Syria regarding a Kurdish autonomous administration in Iraq.⁸⁹ Within this context, Turkey was alarmed when it was reported that Öcalan had entered Syria in March 1995. Despite official denial by Damascus regarding Öcalan's presence, Turkey sought US assistance against Syria at that time.⁹⁰

In addition, the cases of infiltration from Syria into Turkey increased, and there was a particular rise of activity along the borders of the Hatay province. During the first months of 1996, Turkey reacted harshly to the fact that Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz had warned Syria by saying, "This neighbor will have to either give up taking hostile actions against us or, sooner or later, end up paying the price for its enmity toward

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp: 91-92.

⁸⁹ Scheller, p. 115.

⁹⁰ Kirişçi and Winrow. *The Kurdish Question and Turkey*. p. 168.

us." He reminded the Syrians that Turkey had no territory to give away, meaning Hatay. Afterwards, Turkish officials directly referred to Syria's support of the PKK. The Turkish Interior Minister reminded his listeners that it was nothing new for Syria "to use the terrorist organizations in the region as a means of threatening the internal security of various countries."⁹¹

Turkish grievances concerning the PKK incidents based in Syria continued. In the spring of 1996, Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz put forth that "the Syrian Government had embarked on a dangerous path... by using PKK terrorism as a trump card against the water issue."⁹² In the following months, in the summer of 1996, President Süleyman Demirel affirmed that "Syria's support for the PKK was clearly evident."⁹³

Turkey did not eschew utilizing the threat to use force in its relations with Syria. Relations between Turkey and Syria escalated in January 1996. In 1996, Turkey had implemented a coercive diplomacy effort to end Syrian support of the PKK. The Turkish Foreign Ministry sent a memorandum to Damascus asking Syria to cease its support to the PKK. If Syria ignored doing so, it would be seen as declaring Turkey's "right to respond with any measure it deemed appropriate at any appropriate time." Syria did not respond, and Turkey froze all relations between the two countries. Also during that year, limited border skirmishes took place between the two countries.⁹⁴

The escalation of tension reached a climax between May and June of 1996, as the number of troops concentrated on both sides of the border increased proportionally to

⁹¹ TRT TV, January 24, 1996; quoted by BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts: Central Europe and Balkans, April 22, 1996, cited in Kushner, "Turkish- Syrian Relations," p. 238.

⁹² "Turkey: Yılmaz Announced Reform Program," Ankara TRT Television Network, 0800 GMT, May 6, 1996; as cited in FBIS-WEU, May 8, 1996, p. 38, cited in Gunter, 1997, p. 94.

⁹³ "Demirel on Terrorism, Ties with Syria," Al-Musawwar (Cairo), July 26, 1996, pp. 18-21, 82-83; as cited in FBIS-WEU, Aug.5, 1996, p. 20, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁹⁴ Meliha Altunışık, "Turkey's Middle East Challenges." p. 366; Altunışık&Tür, 2006, p. 224; cited in Meliha Altunışık, 'Redefinition of Turkish Security Policies in the Middle East After the Cold War,' in Ali Karaosmanoglu & Seyfi Tashan, eds, *The Europeanisation of Turkey's Security Policy: Prospects and Pitfalls*. Ankara: Foreign Policy Institute, 2004, p. 222 and p. 225.

the growing animosity between the two sides. At the same time, there were a number of bombings in Syrian cities, most notably in Damascus. Turkish agents were apparently behind these bombings, which were designed to signal to Syria that its continued support to the PKK would cost greatly.⁹⁵

In 1996, Turkey suspended all official contact with Syria as Syria did not expel the PKK leader Öcalan, despite Ankara's official request.⁹⁶ In fact, there was no official contact between Turkey and Syria during 1995-1997.⁹⁷

The continued Syrian support for the PKK led Turkey to sign an agreement with Israel, including the military issues⁹⁸, in order to send a threat message to Syria in February 1996.⁹⁹ The close cooperation between Turkey and Israel was not withdrawn, even under the coalition government of Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan. He ratified the February 1996 military agreement and complied with F-4 modernization program.¹⁰⁰

Between July 1996 and 1998, two successive governments made efforts to solve the issue diplomatically. The Welfare (Refah) Party, the senior coalition partner of the government from July 1996 to June 1997, sought good relations with Syria.¹⁰¹ The consecutive government under Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz made a similar effort to

⁹⁵ Eyal Zisser. *Asad's Legacy. Syria in Transition*, foreword by I. Rabinovich, New York: New York University Press, 2001, p. 93, cited in Tejel, Jordi. *Syria's Kurds*. p. 77.

⁹⁶ Robert W. Olson, "Turkish and Syrian Relations since the Gulf War: The Kurdish Question and the Water Problem" in F. Ibrahim and G. Gürbey eds., *The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: Obstacles and Chances for Peace and Democracy*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), cited in Berna Süer, unpublished thesis, p. 93.

⁹⁷ Interview with Uğur Ziyal, who was the ambassador of Turkey between 1995 and 1997 in Damascus, May 28, 2011, Ankara; cited in *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁹⁸ Karakoç, "The Impact of Kurdish Identity." p. 923.

⁹⁹ Sayarı, "Turkey and the Middle East in the 1990s." p. 49.

¹⁰⁰ Süha Bölükbaşı, "Behind the Turkish-Israeli Alliance: A Turkish View," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 19, No.1 (Autumn 1999), p. 33.

¹⁰¹ *Hürriyet*, July 1, 1996, cited in Altunışık, "Turkey's Middle East Challenges" p. 366.

solve bilateral relations with Syria diplomatically. However, those last-ditch efforts failed.¹⁰²

In July 1996, a new government came to power in Turkey, the government headed for the first time by an Islamist party, the Welfare Party. The new government showed special regard to Syria, greatly welcomed by Syria as a deliberate attempt to set Turkish-Syrian relations during a new friendly period. The new Prime Minister's premise was that Islamic bonds could serve as a useful instrument for bringing about cooperation between Muslim countries. It is within this context that Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan sought the cooperation of Syria towards settling the Kurdish problem. In this way, the Syrian ambassador was received by the new Prime Minister. However, no progress was made toward solving any outstanding problems between the two countries. In the words of David Kushner, "If there was any lesson to be learned from the experience of Erbakan's government, it is that not even an Islamist prime minister with an Islamist orientation was able to bring about a meaningful change in the nature of Turkish-Syrian relations."¹⁰³

In late July of 1997, after two months reassuming as Prime Minister, Mesut Yılmaz went to the Hatay province in order to celebrate the 58th anniversary of its annexation. Yılmaz denounced Syria for its support of the PKK. He charged Damascus, saying that, because of its inability to confront Ankara, it had stooped to subcontracting its "dirty work" to the PKK.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp: 366-367.

¹⁰³ Kushner, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." pp: 239-240.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Olson. *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia, 1991-2000, The Kurdish and Islamist Questions*, California: Mazda Publishers, 2001, p. 98.

2.9. Conclusion

It was asserted that Turkey generally perceived Syria as the toughest of all Turkey's threatening neighbors.¹⁰⁵ The 1980s and 1990s witnessed strained relations between Turkey and Syria as a result of the Kurdish issue, namely the PKK issue. Turkey's periodical grievances over the PKK presence in Syria became fruitless as Syria repeatedly denied it. Various agreements were signed between the two countries; however, they were not completely implemented. Michael Gunter compares the relations between Turkey and Syria in this context, as "a dialogue of the deaf."¹⁰⁶

Syria appeared to suggest support to the PKK in order to seize concessions from Turkey on the other issues, the water dispute being the most predominant one.¹⁰⁷ However, for Turkey, years of trying to deal with Syria diplomatically came to an end in 1998. This will be examined in the following chapter.

¹⁰⁵ Philip Robins. *Turkey and the Middle East*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991, pp. 49-50.

¹⁰⁶ Gunter. *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey*. p. 93.

¹⁰⁷ Kirişçi and Winrow. *The Kurdish Question and Turkey*. p. 24.

CHAPTER 3

TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH SYRIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE KURDISH ISSUE BETWEEN 1998 AND 2011

3.1. Introduction

1998 and 2011 were two significant years for relations between Turkey and Syria. 1998 was a year of rising tensions between the two countries when they came to the brink of war, and 2011 was the year during the wake of the uprising in Syria. This chapter examines Turkish-Syrian relations in the context of Kurdish issue concentrating on the period from October 1998 to early 2011. After analyzing the crisis in October 1998 in a broader context, the impact of the Kurdish issue on Turkish foreign policy towards Syria will be investigated up until the Syrian uprising in March 2011.

3.2. The October 1998 Crisis

Although Turkey had already signed three security protocols with Damascus (in 1987, 1992, and 1993) and maintained a tough stance towards Syria in 1996, it was unable to persuade the Assad government to accept its demands by means of either protocols or military threats.¹ During the term office of Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz, bilateral relations reached a new stage. Motivated by internal political considerations, the Turkish government decided to force Syria to refrain from

¹ Yüksel Sezgin, "The October 1998 Crisis in Turkish-Syrian Relations: A Prospect Theory Approach." *Turkish Studies* Vol. 3, No. 2, 2002, p. 47.

supporting the PKK by bringing matters to the brink of war. Accompanied by the movements of troops along the border, the Turkish government engaged in military activities and used a harsh and threatening language.²

3.2.1. Towards the October 1998 Crisis

In mid-September in 1997, the Turkish media reported that Şemdin Sakık, number two commander of the PKK, had moved into Hatay from Syria with 40 PKK guerrillas. The Turkish army immediately started its operations through the Amanus Mountains covering Samandağ, Hassa, İskenderun, Dörtyol, and Erzin. As the press reported, the governor of Hatay asserted that the PKK wanted to extend operations in Hatay and outside the Southeast region.³

Once again, during the spring of 1998, the Turkish media tended to pay more attention to developments in Hatay. According to media reports, Şemdin Sakık⁴ was captured by Turkish commandos with the assistance of the KDP *peshmergas* on 13 April 1998. Contrary to Turkish authorities' information, both Robert Olson and Melek Firat assert that Sakik had been in Hatay without the orders of Öcalan. He had already decided to abandon the PKK and sought asylum with the KDP on 16 March

² David Kushner. "Turkish-Syrian Relations: An Update." in Moshe Maoz, Joseph Ginat and Onn Winckler eds., *Modern Syria, From Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in the Middle East*, Brighton and Portlans: Sussex Academic Press, 1999, p. 240.

³ Robert Olson. *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia, 1991-2000, The Kurdish and Islamist Questions*. California: Mazda Publishers, 2001, p. 109.

⁴ Unfortunately, in two important articles (see Sezgin, "The October 1998 Crisis" p. 62 and Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October 1998," p. 179,) the name of Sirri Sakik is articulated instead of Şemdin Sakik's name. The correct name is Şemdin Sakik, and he is called Parmaksız Zeki in the PKK organization. Sırrı Sakık is his younger brother, who was a member of Turkish parliament and now mayor of the province of Ağrı.

of that year. Moreover, the KDP turned in Sakik to Turkey in order to achieve its objectives.⁵

Turkey's accusations against Syria increased after the highly publicized confessions of Şemdin Sakık at his trial in Diyarbakir, during which he revealed the connection between the PKK and Syria. On the same day, Sakık made his statement, Deputy Prime Minister and head of the Democratic Socialist Party, Bülent Ecevit, accused Syria and Iran for its support of the PKK.⁶

On July 2, 1998, Turkey shared a document with Damascus that was known as the Forum of Good Neighborliness. This document explained Turkey's demands for the development of good relations. Turkey pointed out that its relations with Syria would improve if the principles indicated in the Forum were respected: Non-violation of frontiers, cooperation against terrorism, respect for human rights, nonintervention in domestic spheres, not resorting to force, undertaking to resolve conflicts through peaceful means, not permitting terrorist organizations to operate against the other side, respect for independence and territorial integrity, and not engaging in harmful activities to the other party in order to prevent misunderstandings.⁷

The principles of the Forum of Good Neighborliness were given to Syrian Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Adnan Omran during his visit to Ankara on June 1st, 1998. However, Syria's complete disregard of these principles was the 'last straw' and led to Turkey's consideration of the use of force.⁸

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109; Melek Fırat ve Ömer Kürkçüoğlu, "Kürt ve Su Sorunları Çerçevesinde Türkiye-Suriye-Irak İlişkileri(1990-95)" in Baskın Oran eds., *Türk Dış Politikası, Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, cilt II, 6. Baskı, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2012, p. 565.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷ Fırat and Kürkçüoğlu, "Kürt ve Su Sorunları Çerçevesinde Türkiye-Suriye-Irak İlişkileri(1990-95)." p. 565.

⁸ Damla Aras, "Similar Strategies, Dissimilar Outcomes: An Appraisal of the Efficacy of Turkey's Coercive Diplomacy with Syria and in Northern Iraq." *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2011, p. 597.

3.2.2. The Reasons for the October 1998 Crisis

There are many reasons for Turkey's aggressive and risk-seeking policy towards Syria in October of 1998, ranging from domestic aspects to international dimensions. The important ones are mentioned as follows:

Turkey was increasingly concerned about the growing political strength of the Kurdistan parliament-in-exile (KPE), in which the Kurds from Turkey were strongly represented. Respectively, Italy hosted the Kurdistan parliament-in-exile meeting in September 1998 and on October 11-12, 1998. The Fourth Kurdistan National Conference was held in London.⁹ Turkey was also concerned about European organizations, in particular the European Parliament's increasing pressure on Turkey regarding violation of Kurds' human and political rights.¹⁰ In addition, the European Union openly rejected Turkey's application for full membership due to Ankara's methods of dealing with its Kurdish problem.¹¹

Another factor contributing to Turkey's October crisis with Syria was the Washington Protocol of September 1998. Turkey was unhappy with the agreement the US mediated between Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani in September of 1998. According to the agreement, both Kurdish leaders accepted the status of a Kurdish entity within an Iraqi federation. According to Turkey, this position paved the way for the statehood of Kurds. Moreover, the possibility of a Kurdish state in Iraqi Kurdistan could encourage the Kurds of Turkey towards political autonomy.¹² Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit said that "the Turks feared that the agreement represented the first step toward the establishment of an independent Kurdish state

⁹ Sezgin, "The October 1998 Crisis." p. 62.

¹⁰ Robert Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel, and Russia...*, p. 115.

¹¹ Damla Aras, "Similar Strategies, Dissimilar Outcomes." p. 596.

¹² Robert Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia...*, p. 119.

and would provide the PKK with the opportunity to become more active in Iraqi Kurdistan, with more opportunities to penetrate into Turkey."¹³

Domestically, the Turkish government was suffering from serious political turmoil, as it was obliged to allocate ever-increasing military and economic resources to the struggle against the PKK. The turmoil at home had an impact on Turkey's external relations.¹⁴ From September to the end of 1998, there were innumerable allegations that one of the most notorious of Turkish criminals, Alaattin Çakici, was in cahoots with many high-level officials. Çakici had been involved in various criminal activities ranging from the assassination of Kurdish nationalists and journalists to drug trafficking and money laundering. Tapes revealed the relationships between government officials and the mafia members in Turkey. The threat against Syria was a needed by Mesut Yilmaz's government in order to distract the public from the on-going revelations of corruption.¹⁵

Another reason was the greediness of the Turkish army in its enthusiasm for a show of force before the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Turkish Republic to be held on October 29, 1998. It would be to the advantage of the Turkish army to intimidate Syria and force it to get rid of Öcalan.¹⁶

Moreover, Turkey saw the conjuncture as an opportunity for an intense diplomatic and military offensive, because Syria was facing challenges both in its domestic and foreign politics. In domestic politics, Hafiz Assad valued the continuation of his family's rule after his death. Thus, he concentrated on creating social and economic stability at home and a zero-problem foreign policy.¹⁷ Additionally, Syria had disputes with its neighbors. Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq had closed their borders, which

¹³ Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October 1998: A Turkish View." *Middle East Policy*, Vol. VI, No. 4, June 1999, p. 180.

¹⁴ Damla Aras, "Similar Strategies, Dissimilar Outcomes." p. 595.

¹⁵ Robert Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia...*, p. 116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁷ Damla Aras, "Similar Strategies, Dissimilar Outcomes." pp. 596-597.

upset its economy and pushed Syria into isolation by Arab states because of "contrasting ideologies, religious disparities, conflicting foreign policies, and rivalry for the leadership in the region." Moreover, Syria no longer had Soviet Union backing as a result of the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁸ In brief, as Sezgin clearly states: "Turkey needed a crisis that Syria needed to avoid."¹⁹

The existing literature has mostly explained the 1998 crisis by focusing on the balance of power between the two countries. The most widely-held common view was that the increasing economic and military power of Turkey changed the balance of power in favor of Turkey. It can be asked, despite the changing balance of power, why had Turkey not taken a tougher stance against Syria to obtain an effective result prior to its attempts in 1992 and 1996.²⁰

The answers to this question can be found in the article of Özlem Tür and Meliha Altunışık. According to them, there were two main reasons. First, the Turkish military, contrary to popular belief, did not have the modernized equipment needed to pursue an all-out war strategy against Syria. Second, even if the military felt stronger, constantly changing coalition governments were deprived of a political will to engage in a war with Syria.²¹

3.2.3. The Outbreak of the October 1998 Crisis

Ankara couldn't gain diplomatic support from the Arab League, NATO, the European Union, the United Nations, and the Organization of Islamic Countries for

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 597.

¹⁹ Sezgin, "The October 1998 Crisis." p. 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²¹ Meliha Altunışık and Özlem Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations." *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2006, p. 224.

its stance against Syria. The support that Ankara expected from the international community came from Washington. The US had already classified the PKK as a terrorist organization, and also asked Syria to put an end to functioning as a sanctuary for the PKK members.²²

In fact, the US, as a hegemonic force in the Middle East, had demonstrated its intention to defeat Saddam Hussein's regime and construct a Kurdish state in Iraq in the late 1990s. The US began to assist Turkey against the PKK, as it wanted to obtain Turkey's support in this matter. Turkey agreed to this support by accepting the US policy, even though it continued to meet with Syria and Iran in support of "Iraq's territorial integrity." Jülide Karakoç said that the assistance of the US to Turkey determined the latter's attitude to force these states, namely Iran and Syria, by means of speech acts, to cease supporting the PKK.²³

Domestically, there was a large measure of public support and a unity between all the political parties in the Turkish parliament. Moreover, all political parties in the parliament reached an agreement with regard to a declaration calling on Syria to cease its support for the PKK or "bear consequences" for failing to do so.²⁴

From the summer of 1998 onwards, Turkish high-level officials openly began to accuse Syria of having caused Turkey's war against the PKK.²⁵ In September 1998, the Chief of the Land Forces Command of Turkey, Atilla Ateş, expressed the country's serious concern about Syria by laying out Turkey's ground rules concerning Turkey-Syria relations. He stated that Turkey would not tolerate Syria's attitude towards the PKK. Then, as the Chief of the General Staff Hüseyin Kivrikoğlu said, there was an undeclared war between Syria and Turkey.²⁶

²² Damla Aras, "Similar Strategies, Dissimilar Outcomes." p. 599.

²³ Jülide Karakoç, "The Impact of the Kurdish Identity on Turkey's Foreign Policy from the 1980s to 2008." *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 6, 2010, pp. 924-925.

²⁴ Damla Aras, "Similar Strategies, Dissimilar Outcomes." p. 599.

²⁵ Altunışık and Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners?" p. 224.

²⁶ Karakoç, "The Impact of the Kurdish Identity on Turkey's Foreign Policy." p. 925.

Turkish leaders clarified that they would use force against Damascus in the event of its continuation of support to the PKK. During the inauguration of the National Assembly, President Süleyman Demirel emphasized Ankara's right of retaliation against Syria, due to its support for PKK activities.²⁷ Then, Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz stated that "the military was waiting for the order."²⁸

On 8 October 1998, Turkey declared the details of its complaints against Syria: 1) Syria's harboring of Öcalan and top level PKK leaders dated back to 7 July 1979; 2) The early two congresses of the PKK were held in Syria. Syrian military personnel trained PKK guerillas; 3) In January 1990, the PKK agreed to joint operations with leftist organizations. In 1995, it was Syria that ordered the PKK to begin operations in Hatay; in August of that year, the PKK attacked the Gazelsagu village and killed eight villagers; 4) the PKK cooperated with the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), the Turkish Peoples' Liberation Army and Front (THKO), Turkey's Communist Workers' Party (TKEP), the Turkish Peoples' Liberation Party and Front (DKKP-C), Turkey's Communist Party Marxist and Leninist (TKP-ML), and Dev-Sol.²⁹

Damascus did not respond to these claims. As a result, Ankara openly threatened with military action and reportedly sent 10,000 reinforcements to its Syrian border. Damascus retaliated by positioning 36 of 120 North Korean-made Scud-C missiles to the border the day after.³⁰ Also, Syria apparently denied Turkish accusations that Öcalan was in Syria and that PKK guerillas were being trained in Lebanon. Concerning a potential incursion, Syria asked the Lebanese government to have

²⁷ Hulusi Turgut. *130 Günlük Kovalamaca: Abdullah Öcalan'ı yakalamak için üç kıtada sürdürülen büyük takibin belgeseli*. İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2009, p. 243.

²⁸ The New York Times, Oct. 4, 1998; Hürriyet, October 3, 1998 cited in Damla Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill." *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 19, Issue 2, Spring 2012, p. 42.

²⁹ Hürriyet, October 8, 1998, cited in Robert Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia...*,pp. 112-113.

³⁰ Sezgin, "The October 1998 Crisis." p. 49-50.

foreign journalists visit the alleged PKK camps in order to prove that the camps were empty.³¹

On the other hand, Ankara initiated a diplomatic offensive and military campaign that would back up its threats and make them more credible by inviting television crews to the Syrian border to film the mobilization of Turkish armed forces for war. Moreover, it was declared that Ankara was going to hold military maneuvers near the Syrian border on November 7-9 in order to overawe Damascus.³²

3.2.4. Shuttle Diplomacy

In the midst of crisis, Egypt and Iran got involved in an intimate mission between Turkey and Syria. The reason behind the mediation attempts of Egypt and Iran can be understood by Aras and Köni's analysis that:

Turkish-Syrian relations have serious impacts on the geopolitical balances of the eastern Mediterranean and Turkey's relations with Iran and the Arab Countries, in particular with Iraq and Egypt. The absence of regular diplomatic channels prompts third countries to utilize their relations with Turkey and Syria for their own causes and to create difficulties for their regional rivals.³³

In this sense, Egypt's primary motivation was that it felt Israel would be the only victor in a war between Turkey and Syria.³⁴

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarek and Iranian Foreign Minister Kemal Kharazzi sought to mediate between the parties by means of shuttle diplomacy. Mubarak, who visited Damascus and Ankara to mediate, and hosted Assad in Cairo shortly

³¹ Robert Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia...*, p. 113.

³² Damla Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill." p. 42.

³³ Bülent Aras and Hasan Köni, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Revisited." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2002, p. 56.

³⁴ Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The Turkish-Syrian Crisis." p. 178.

thereafter, helped convince the Syrian president of the Turks' seriousness about taking military action.³⁵ Assad believed that Turkey would not take any military action before Mubarek's mediation attempt. He considered that these threats were not very different from those the Turkish government had made in 1992 and 1996. As before, President Assad supposed Turkey would cool its rhetoric and back down.³⁶ However, Mubarek apparently convinced President Assad that Turkey was not "bluffing" and that both Syria and the Arab world would be defeated in their struggle with Israel in case of a Turkish military intervention.³⁷ Afterwards, Assad began to take the Turkish threats more seriously and sent a message to the Turkish government stating that Syria would capitulate to Turkish demands, via Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi, on October 13.³⁸

Meanwhile, according to a report from the daily Turkish newspaper, Sezgin claimed that Syrian top military officials also warned President Assad that the PKK was losing its struggle against Turkey and would likely lose its efficacy as a trump card. Therefore, he was convinced not to insist upon harboring Öcalan and the PKK at the expense of a military defeat. In addition, Sezgin claimed that it was not fear of Turkey's military threats that led Assad to capitulation, but rather some vital domestic policy constraints in addition to his concern over his son Bashar's succession. These concerns reframed Assad's position following President Mubarek's manipulation.³⁹

³⁵ Sezgin, "The October 1998 Crisis in Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 56.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

³⁷ Aykan, "The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October 1998." p. 178, cited in Berna Suer, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, p. 93.

³⁸ Sezgin, "The October 1998 Crisis in Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 57. It was not the first time that Syrian authorities demanded Öcalan to close down the training camps in Syrian territory. In 1991, he reportedly was detained briefly after meetings he held with Iraqi Kurdish representatives; in 1992, Syria shuttered the PKK's military training facility in the Bekaa; and, in 1997, Öcalan apparently was told to close down the houses he used in Bekaa's Bar Elias town for meetings. But, this was the first time that Turkey seriously pressured Syria. See Aliza Marcus. *Kan ve İnanç: PKK ve Kürt Hareketi*. İstanbul: İletişim Publications, 2012, p. 359.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Unlike previous efforts, Turkey's strategy succeeded this time, as a result of its diplomatic offensive. Ankara not only benefitted from Washington's strong backing, but also benefitted from the psychological impact on Damascus of close Turkish-Israel relations and the shuttle diplomacy of Iran and Egypt between Ankara and Damascus.⁴⁰

Consequently, Assad informed Ankara that Damascus had already started to arrest PKK members and would extradite them, along with expelling Öcalan. The crisis was brought to a conclusion when Turkish Prime Minister Yılmaz announced that Öcalan had already been expelled from Damascus, and the Adana Accord was signed on October 20, 1998.⁴¹

3.2.5. The Outcomes of the October 1998 Crisis

The tension calmed down only after Egypt and Iran's mediation attempts. The government officials of Turkey and Syria met in Adana and signed a security agreement between the two countries.⁴² As Makovsky points out, although it is generally referred to as an "agreement," the document actually is entitled as meeting "minutes," suggesting that it is something short of a full-fledged agreement.⁴³

By the terms of the agreement, for the first time, Syria recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization. Additionally, Syria agreed to do the following: a) PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was no longer in Syria and would not be allowed to enter Syria; b) Syria would arrest active PKK members and remove the PKK camps; c) Syria would

⁴⁰ Damla Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill." p. 42.

⁴¹ Sezgin, "The October 1998 Crisis in Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 50.

⁴² Kushner, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 240.

⁴³ Alan Makovsky, "Defusing the Turkish-Syrian Crisis: Whose Triumph?" *Middle East Insight*, January-February 1999.

cease providing weapons, financial support, and logistical material to the PKK; and, lastly, d) Syria would undertake full cooperation with Turkey against the PKK.⁴⁴

Although Turkish officials were disturbed by Syrian slow implementation of the provisions of the agreement, relations between the two countries took a new turn as soon as the Adana agreement was signed.⁴⁵ The head of the Turkish Parliament and then-acting President, Hikmet Çetin called it a "bright period starting between the two countries."⁴⁶

The most important outcome of the Adana accord was the normalization of Turkish-Syrian ties.⁴⁷ In the aftermath of the PKK crisis, both Turkey and Syria sought to deepen relations, so that there would be no deterioration over the contentious issue of terrorism. In this context, Turkish-Syrian relations were consolidated by a range of means including, notably, cross-border trade and high-level visits.⁴⁸

Consequently, Syria appeared to be willing to transform its commitments into action and to understand the importance of the security issue after the 1998 crisis.⁴⁹ With respect to this, it is possible to discuss a period of trust-building that lasted until 2000. Within this period, the Turkish side especially wanted to see how much it could trust Syria and to what extent the Syrian side would comply with the provisions of the Adana agreement.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October 1998: A Turkish View." *Middle East Policy*, Vol. VI, No. 4, June 1999, p. 174.

⁴⁵ Berna Süer, 2011. Transformation of Syrian Conflicts with Turkey and Israel in the 1990s: A Comparative Perspective on Ripeness. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, METU, Ankara, p. 96.

⁴⁶ Altunışık and Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners?" p. 226.

⁴⁷ Damla Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill." p. 42.

⁴⁸ Philip Robins. "The Foreign Policy of Turkey" in Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, p. 296.

⁴⁹ Kushner, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 240.

⁵⁰ Altunışık and Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners?" p. 226.

3.3. 2000-2004: A New Period in Relations

The first turning point for Turkish-Syrian relations was the Adana agreement, and the second one was the attendance of former Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer at the funeral of Hafez Assad in 2000. Sezer's gesture influenced Syrian public opinion so much that some argue his attendance there was the starting point for rapprochement.⁵¹ In November of that year, Syrian Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam visited Ankara with a letter pledging to "turn over a new leaf" in bilateral relations.⁵²

The death of Hafiz al-Assad on 10 June 2000 gave rise to the question of whether the revival of Turkish-Syrian relations could be maintained after his succession. The deceased president's succession by his son Bashar Assad instead of his brother Rifad Assad⁵³ resolved Turkey's doubts.⁵⁴

After the attacks against the US on September 11, 2001, Syria faced increasing criticism from Washington, owing to its support for Hizbollah and radical Palestinian groups. On the other hand, Damascus tried to mend fences with the EU in order to counterbalance US pressure.⁵⁵ Within this context, Syrian ruling elite initiated policies to improve relations with Turkey. Syria's eagerness was welcomed by Turkey, and many official visits and contacts were held in a very short period of time.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Tayyar Arı and Ferhat Pirinççi, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy Towards The Middle East And The Perceptions In Syria and Lebanon." *Akademik Bakış*, Vol. 4, No. 7, Winter 2010, p. 9.

⁵² Malik Mufti, "Turkish-Syrian Rapprochement: Causes and Consequences", *PolicyWatch Report* 630, June 21, 2002.

⁵³ Turkey's objection for Rifad Assad was based on his personal relations with the PKK. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he had great sympathy for the PKK organization.

⁵⁴ Fırat and Kürkçüoğlu, "Kürt ve Su Sorunları Çerçevesinde Türkiye-Suriye-Irak İlişkileri," p. 567.

⁵⁵ Altunışık and Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners?" pp. 227-228.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

Meanwhile, there were mainly two reasons behind the motivation of Turkey to improve its relations with Syria. First, the security cooperation implemented at the time satisfied the civil and military elites. Secondly, better relations with Syria were in line with the Ecevit government's "regionally based foreign policy," which aimed to pursue a broader foreign policy interest in all regions.⁵⁷

As a result of such mutual goodwill actions, Ankara set up close links with Damascus. In the military sphere, a commander of gendarmerie was appointed in September to coordinate communication and consultation between Syria and Turkey. Moreover, the two countries signed a security protocol in September 2001, and a training and cooperation framework agreement in June 2002.⁵⁸

However, in January 2002, Turkish security officials reported that Syria had provided shelter for the PKK; this report caused tension between the two countries, but Syria's continued cooperation with Turkey settled the matter.⁵⁹ Turkish-Syrian relations improved over the following months. Border restrictions were eased in February 2002, and bilateral trade increased significantly.⁶⁰

Turkey's ties with Syria were consolidated after the AKP came to power in November of 2002.⁶¹ It is asserted that, when the AKP came to power in 2002, the ground was already laid for the improvement of Turkey's relations with its neighbors.⁶² Under AKP rule, Turkey's relations with Syria flourished to a level of cooperation and closeness unprecedented in the history of relations between Turkey

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Damla Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill." p. 42.

⁵⁹ Jülide Karakoç, 2009. *Türkiye'nin Dış Politikasında Kürt Sorununun Etkisi: 1980'lerden Bugüne*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ankara University, Ankara, p. 59.

⁶⁰ Mufti, "Turkish-Syrian Rapprochement."

⁶¹ Michael B. Bushki, "Turkish-Syrian Relations: A Checkered History," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIX, No. 3, Fall 2002, p. 46.

⁶² Birgül Demirtaş, "Turkish-Syrian Relations: From Friend "Esad" to Enemy "Esed"." *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XX, No. 1, Spring 2013, p. 112.

and Syria.⁶³ Ankara began a deepening rapprochement policy with Syria, not only in the areas of politics and security, but also with regard to economics and culture.⁶⁴

Within this context, the Syrian government went a step further, by adopting tough measures and by oppressing the PKK. Damascus shut down the PKK camps within Syrian territory, closed the organization's radio transmission lines, prohibited its demonstrations, forbade PKK sympathizers from running in local and national elections, and outlawed distribution of PKK publications. Moreover, anti-Turkey news was terminated in the state media; border infiltrations were prevented, and the PKK members with Turkish citizenship were turned over to Ankara. Additionally, Damascus held several extensive military operations against the PKK in cooperation with Turkey.⁶⁵

Indeed, the Syrian government maintained its effective cooperation with Turkey against the PKK in 2003. Hence, in March 2003, Syria captured two leading figures of the PKK and handed them over to Turkey.⁶⁶ In addition, it was reported that five more distinguished PKK members were extradited to Turkey.⁶⁷

In January 2004, President Bashar al-Assad made an official visit to Turkey. This visit was a watershed for the bilateral relations as Bashar al- Assad was the first Syrian president to visit Turkey since the creation of Syria.⁶⁸ Before he began his visit, Assad pointed out that Turkey and Syria had experienced serious problems in the past due to Syria's ties with the PKK; however, he added that, now, there were no

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁶⁵ *Milliyet* (İstanbul), July 4, 2003 cited in Damla Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill", p. 43.

⁶⁶ "Turkish Press Scanner," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 19, 2003 cited in Muhammed Asil, *The Impact of the Kurdish Question on Turkey's Relations with its Middle Eastern Neighbors and the European Union Between 2002-2012*, unpublished master dissertation, İstanbul Şehir University, İstanbul, p. 51.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁸ Tayyar Arı and Ferhat Pirinççi, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy." p. 9.

PKK activities or presence of any sort in Syrian territory.⁶⁹ This visit marked a new era of relations as the two countries agreed to cooperate on a number of issues, including crime and terrorism. In December of 2004, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made an official visit to Syria, during which a free-trade agreement was signed.⁷⁰

Bashar al-Assad's first visit to Turkey was realized just a month after the US congress passed the Syria Accountability Act to punish Syria for its objection to the Iraq War. As a result, Syria became the target of US reaction, accused of promoting terrorism and standing against democratic change in Middle East. In February of 2005, France joined the US against the Damascus regime, following the assassination of respected Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. A UN Security Council resolution placed Syria in absolute isolation. In addition, most Western oil companies were forced not to invest in Syria. It is against this backdrop that Syria signed a free-trade agreement with Turkey. Syria's leaning towards Turkey can be understood within this context.⁷¹

The Kurdish issue was on the agenda during the reciprocal visits of both Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Assad in 2004. They formed a common understanding towards the issue in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁷² Following Assad's visit to Turkey, cooperation at different levels was deepened; and, in terms of security issues, a high-level cooperation was achieved. In this regard, a series of trials and imprisonments began in Syria. In December of 2004, a Syrian court condemned a Kurdish citizen affiliated with the PKK on the ground of attempting to break

⁶⁹ "New Perspectives in Ties," *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 5, 2004 cited in M. Ali Asil, "The Impact of Kurdish Question," p. 52.

⁷⁰ Michael B. Bishku, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 47.

⁷¹ Marwan Kabalan, "Syria-Turkish Relations: Geopolitical Explanations for the Move from Conflict to Co-operation" in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür eds., *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, England: Ashgate, p. 35.

⁷² Shmuel Bar, "Bashar's Syria: The Regime and Its Strategic Worldview." *Comparative Strategy*, 25, 2006, p. 417 cited in Jülide Karakoç, *Türkiye'nin Dış Politikasında Kürt Sorununun Etkisi*, p. 60.

relations with a friendly country.⁷³ In addition, Syria began to publicly affiliate PKK activities with terrorism; for instance, Damascus reported the PKK attack on a train in June 2005 as a terrorist activity.⁷⁴

Turkish decision makers tried to improve relations with all regional countries. However, Syria was at the center of AKP policy. Birgül Demirtaş explained this reason briefly in her article:

Following the U.S. occupation, Iraq had become destabilized and had to deal with terrorist attacks almost every day; Turkey's potential for deepening cooperation with Baghdad was limited as a result. Iran was also one of the countries with which Turkey started to desecuritize its relationship; however, despite the changing discourse and the increase in economic relations, Turkey and Iran remained regional powers and competitors. This left Syria as the country with which Turkey could increase its ties, with the aim of establishing an economic union.⁷⁵

More importantly, as F. Stephen Larrabee points out, Turkish-Syrian relations have largely been driven by Syria's rising concern over the threat of a spill-over effect of Kurdish nationalism. The emergence of a Kurdish government in Iraqi Kurdistan could trigger pressures for economic and political improvements among Syria's own Kurdish population similar to those in Turkey and Iran.⁷⁶

⁷³ "Shorts Diplomacy II," *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 28, 2004, cited in M. Ali Asil, *The Impact of the Kurdish Question*, p. 53.

⁷⁴ MENA, 2 July 2005; retrieved by World News Connection accessed on 21 July 2005, cited in Altunışık and Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners?" p. 229.

⁷⁵ Birgül Demirtaş, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 115.

⁷⁶ F. Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East." *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007.

3.3.1. Common Stance against the Establishment of a Kurdish State in Iraqi Kurdistan

After the November elections in 2002, Turkish Prime Minister Abdullah Gül plunged into a hectic diplomatic effort in order to prevent the invasion of Iraq. Starting from Damascus, Gül's regional journey⁷⁷ was welcomed by Syria.⁷⁸ It was obvious that Turkish support for Syria was not only for Syrian interests. Turkish-American relations had become tense due to the American support to Iraqi Kurds. Americans were reluctant to give support to Turkey in order for it to fight against the PKK. That's why Turkey showed solidarity with Syria, in order to stabilize the situation and send the US a message.⁷⁹

The invasion of Iraq and Turkey's March 2003 veto fostered the rapprochement between the two countries.⁸⁰ Both countries' concern over the fragmentation of Iraq led to the creation of a "common plan" for Iraq's territorial integrity,⁸¹ as Iraqi Kurds had taken the opportunity to rule themselves.⁸²

The US occupation of Iraq in 2003 affected both Turkey's and Syria's security interests. There seemed to have been two main concerns for Syria regarding Iraq. First, becoming its new neighbor, the ongoing harsh discourse of the US towards Syria grew more hostile, which in turn made Syria worried that it could be the next

⁷⁷ Abdullah Gül remarked about his hectic diplomacy in these words: "Both Iran and Syria share the same feelings with Turkey against the establishment of a Kurdish state. I visited Iran and Syria at different times instead of organizing a trilateral meeting, in order not to create different perceptions." *Ayn Tarihi*, May 2, 2013, cited in Nuri Yeşilyurt, "Ortadoğu'yla İlişkiler," in Baskın Oran eds., *Türk Dış Politikası, Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, cilt III, 1. Baskı, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2013, p. 414.

⁷⁸ Marwan Kabalan, "Syria-Turkish Relations." p. 30.

⁷⁹ Tayyar Arı and Ferhat Pirinççi, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy." p. 9.

⁸⁰ Nathalie Tocci and Joshua W. Walker, "From Confrontation to Engagement: Turkey and the Middle East" in Ronald H. Linden eds. *Turkey and Its Neighbors: Foreign Relation in Transition*, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012) p. 40.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸² Aliza Marcus, "Turkey's PKK: Rise, Fall, Rise Again?" *World Policy Journal*, Spring 2007, p. 75.

target with respect to the US administration's talk of transforming the Middle East through regime change.⁸³ Secondly, Damascus' earning a profit of around \$1 billion via Iraqi crude oil flow outside the UN oil-for-food regime through Syria would be reduced by the American occupation of Iraq. Hence, forming a coalition with Turkey was very important for Syria.⁸⁴

Another major concern for both Turkey and Syria was the political future of the Iraqi Kurds. The possible establishment of a Kurdish state in Iraqi Kurdistan would attract both Turkey's and Syria's Kurds to have separatist ambitions. Upheavals in March of 2004 in the Kurdish-populated regions of Syria led further to such concerns.⁸⁵ On March 12, 2004, Kurds took to the streets after the deaths of three Kurds in the Qamishli football stadium in Syria. Protests spread to the al-Hasaka province, Kobanê, a Kurdish quarter of Damascus, and the University of Damascus.⁸⁶ Although the demonstrations erupted against the forty years of oppression by the Ba'th party in Syria⁸⁷, US backing for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq had increased political confidence among the Kurds in Syria.⁸⁸ Conversely, the sensitivity of Turkey over this issue increased after the ending of the PKK ceasefire in 2004 and the subsequent rise of violence.⁸⁹

On regional issues, Syria stood closer to Turkey than to any other regional power. Neither the Syrians nor the Turks would support annexing Kirkuk to Kurdistan. Like

⁸³ Altunışık and Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners?" pp. 228-229.

⁸⁴ R. Hinnebusch and N. Qillam., "Contrary Siblings: Syria, Jordan and the Iraq War." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 3, September, cited in Özden Zeynep Oktav, "Regionalism or Shift of Axis? Turkish-Syrian-Iranian Relations" in Ozden Zeynep Oktav eds., *Turkey in the 21st Century: Quest for a New Foreign Policy*, England: Ashgate, 2011, p. 77.

⁸⁵ Altunışık and Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners?" p. 229.

⁸⁶ Eyal Zisser. *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Assad and the First Years in Power*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007, pp. 96-97.

⁸⁷ Harriett Montgomery. *The Kurds of Syria: An existence denied, executive summary*. Berlin: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2005, p. 19.

⁸⁸ Eyal Zisser. *Commanding Syria*, p. 97.

⁸⁹ Altunışık and Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners?" p. 229.

Syria, Erdoğan opposed the Iranian agenda for Iraq, and Kurdish ambitions in Kirkuk.⁹⁰ He also saw an immediate ally in Assad in terms of the war against the PKK.⁹¹ Both countries had a strong mutual interest in preventing the annexation of Kirkuk to Iraqi Kurdistan, because this would provoke the ambitions of Kurds in both Syria and Turkey.⁹²

3.4. 2005-2010: Relations without Kurdish Issue: Bright Period of Relations

The period between 2005 and 2010 illustrates Turkey's departure from security-based foreign policy and the breakthrough of good neighborhood relations.⁹³ The Turkish-Syrian relations which had been on the verge of a war in 1998 were now transformed into a strategic cooperation in ten years.⁹⁴

Syria continued to display a tough stance against the PKK members on its territory and restricted their activities. In July of 2005, the Interior Minister of Syria, Ghazi Khanaan expressed that Syria was working together with Turkey on the PKK issue.⁹⁵ After Khanaan's statement, the Syrian Supreme State Security Court sentenced four Kurds for their relationship with the PKK to thirty months imprisonment.⁹⁶ Within a

⁹⁰ Sami Moubayed, "Turkish-Syrian Relations: The Erdogan Legacy." *SETA Policy Brief*, October 2008, No. 25, p. 4.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹³ Özden Zeynep Oktav, "Regionalism or Shift of Axis?" p. 75.

⁹⁴ Tayyar Arı and Ferhat Pirinççi, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy." p. 11.

⁹⁵ "Şam: PKK'ya Karşı işbirliği _çindeyiz", <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/333777>, 21 June 2005, cited in Jülide Karakoç. *Türkiye'nin Dış Politikasında Kürt Sorununun Etkisi*, p. 60.

⁹⁶ "Diplomacy Newslines," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 26, 2005, cited in M. Ali Asil, *The Impact of Kurdish Question On Turkey's Foreign Policy*, p. 54. In the following month, the same court sentenced another three Kurds, namely Mustapha Khalil, Abdul-Karim Allo, and Mohammad Nouman to 30 months in jail: "Syria Jails Three Members of Kurdish Party," *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 29, 2005. In February 2006, an additional three Kurds faced imprisonment for the same conviction: "Syrian Court Jails Three Kurds for Belonging to PKK," *Hürriyet Daily News*, February 14, 2006.

short period of time, other imprisonments followed. In May of 2005, Syria's Supreme State Security Court sentenced three more Kurds to thirty months of imprisonment for their secessionist activities.⁹⁷

In October 2006, President Assad declared that Turco-Syrian relations were on a perfect level, and that the countries were against the PKK activities in the region.⁹⁸ Moreover, Turkey and Syria continued to cooperate against the establishment of a Kurdish state in the so-called Northern Iraq in "Iraqi Neighbors' Meetings."⁹⁹ In April of 2007, Syria and Turkey arranged for a joint operation against the PKK in Syrian territory. As a result, seven PKK members were arrested, including the organization's Syrian commander Sadik Aslan.¹⁰⁰

In mid-October 2007, when Bashar al-Assad came to Turkey, it was declared that Turkey and Syria had a common goal of ensuring stability in the region. At the time of visit, on 17 October, the Turkish Parliament authorized troops to cross the mountainous border into Iraqi Kurdistan in order to track down the rebels. President Assad backed Turkey's tough stance with regard to the Kurdish rebels operating out of Iraqi Kurdistan. Assad expressed support for Turkey's legitimate right to act in self-defense. Assad later fine-tuned his position, calling on Ankara to give Baghdad a chance to tackle the rebels. He said that "the problem cannot be resolved by being considered only as a military and security problem. Results cannot be obtained without the backing of political efforts."¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ "Syrian Court Jails Three Kurds for Separatism," *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 23, 2005, cited in M. Ali Asil. *The Impact of Kurdish Question On Turkey's Foreign Policy*, p. 53.

⁹⁸ "Esad: PKK Faaliyetlerine Karsıym", <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/389373>, October 31, 2006, cited in Jülide Karakoç. *Türkiye'nin Dış Politikasında Kürt Sorununun Etkisi*, p. 60.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁰⁰ Nuri Yeşilyurt, "Ortadoğu'yla İlişkiler." p. 414.

¹⁰¹ "Esad: Maliki'ye Bir Sans Verilmeli," available at: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=236152&tarih=19/10/2007>, cited in Berna Suer, "Syria" in Mustafa Kibaroglu eds., *Turkey's Neighborhood*, Ankara: Foreign Policy Institute, 2008, p. 217.

Bilateral relations rose to a new level, which was best described by Samir al Taki, a Syrian political analyst and head of the Orient Center for International Studies: "When the Syrians think of threats, they look at Iran. When they think of opportunities, they look towards Turkey." Furthermore, Sami Moubayed said that these opportunities were very real. For example, the Turkish government offered Syria \$6.3 billion USD to support 42 projects being carried out as part of the regional cooperation program between Turkey and Syria. In addition, the volume of trade between the two countries was expected to reach \$2.5 billion by the end of 2008.¹⁰²

Ankara also ignored the regional and international isolation of Syria, which came into being after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2005, by increasing economic, cultural, and diplomatic relations with Damascus.¹⁰³ Turkish-Syrian trade volume increased as a result of the improvement in political relations. The Turkish Undersecretary of Foreign Trade reveals that the official trade between the two countries was \$ 0.75 billion in 2004, and it exceeded \$1.750 billion in 2008.¹⁰⁴ Although the Syrian-Israeli peace process and Turkey's role in it were left in uncertainty, other facets of Syrian-Turkish relations flourished. These included an impressive increase in bilateral trade, encouraged by the signature of a free-trade agreement in 2007. As a result, the trade volume between the two countries increased from \$729 million to \$2,754 billion in 2008.¹⁰⁵

The two leaders signed a formal agreement in May 2008, settling the issue of compensation for the agricultural land and properties of nationals from Syria and Turkey in each other's country that had been confiscated during the 1950s and 1960s. The monetary value of the Turkish property in Syria was estimated at approximately

¹⁰² Sami Moubayed, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 5.

¹⁰³ Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria." *The Washington Quarterly*, 35:3, July 2012, p. 137.

¹⁰⁴ Tayyar Arı and Ferhat Pirinççi, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy." p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ William Hale, "Turkey and the Middle East in the 'New Era.' " *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2009, p. 152.

\$40 billion; while the estimated value of Syrian property in Turkey was about \$10 million.¹⁰⁶

There were some concrete achievements displaying AKP government's special emphasis on relations with the Damascus regime. The lifting of the visa requirements within the framework of high-level strategic cooperation and organizing joint cabinet meetings were two of these.¹⁰⁷ Another event was the joint military cooperation staged on April 27, 2009. Although the scope was limited, it was significant in that it was the first military engagement of both sides. Moreover, Turkey and Syria signed a technical military cooperation agreement in order to deepen collaboration between the national defense industries.¹⁰⁸ Another important development took place on September 16, 2009: during the Syrian delegations' visit headed by Assad, an agreement for establishing the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was signed.¹⁰⁹

October 13, 2009 was another significant date in the history Turkish-Syrian relations. Foreign ministers of both countries came together to sign an agreement for lifting visa restrictions. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that both countries were celebrating a third *bayram*, which was the removal of visa procedures, between Ramadan and the Sacrifice celebrations.¹¹⁰

Ankara viewed economic integration with Damascus as a crucial policy that could create interdependence between two states. According to a high-ranking Turkish Foreign Ministry official, Ankara considered Syria to be Turkey's hinterland, and felt that its economy could become a natural part of the Turkish economy. Hence, both countries could take advantage of each other's markets. In this context, Turkey would

¹⁰⁶ Michael B. Bishku, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 47.

¹⁰⁷ Birgül Demirtaş, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 116.

¹⁰⁸ Tayyar Arı and Ferhat Pirinççi, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy." p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ Birgül Demirtaş, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 111.

act as a bridge for Syria, in order to integrate its economy into the broader global economy; and, likewise, Ankara would benefit from Damascus' close ties with other Arab countries.¹¹¹

Furthermore, the second High Level Strategic Cooperation meeting was held on October 2-3, 2010 in Latakia with the attendance of Syrian and Turkish cabinet members, including ministers of energy, foreign trade, environment, agriculture, transportation, health, and housing. According to Damla Aras, this integration would pave way Damascus to support a politic and economic stable Turkey and trigger Ankara to benefit from the lucrative Syrian and Middle Eastern markets.¹¹²

Turkish business associations also took advantage of the AKP's vision of shaping Turkish foreign policy towards Syria through economic interdependence. The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey, the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association, others such as the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association, the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists, the Turkish Exporters Assembly, the Foreign Economic Relations Board, the International Transporters Association, and the Turkish Contractors Association, as along with other local business associations, such as the Diyarbakir Chamber of Commerce, the Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, and the İstanbul Chamber of Commerce, became more active in enlarging their businesses in Syria.¹¹³

In October 2009 and in December 2010, Turkish-Syrian High Level Strategic Cooperation Council meetings resulted in the signing of many bilateral agreements regarding environmental protection, social services, and energy, among other things. Trade volume between the two countries reached \$2.5 billion.¹¹⁴ The new period of

¹¹¹ Damla Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill." p. 44.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹¹³ Kirişçi and Kaptanoğlu, "The Politics of Trade and Turkish Foreign Policy." cited in *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹¹⁴ Michael B. Bishku, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 48.

reciprocal relations was summarized in the words of Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu: "Common fate, common history, common future."¹¹⁵

3.4.1. Mediation Efforts between Syria and Israel

Some events showed the level of cooperation between Turkey and Syria clearly. Turkey's mediation effort in Syrian-Israeli indirect peace talks was one of them.¹¹⁶ Bashar al-Assad had asked Turkey to play a role in the Middle East peace process during his first visit to Ankara in January of 2004. During a visit to Ankara in February 2007, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert expressed interest in Turkish mediation. Having secured the agreement of both Syria and Israel, a discreet Turkish shuttle diplomacy started between the two sides. It culminated in the announcement of indirect talks on May 21, 2008. In the Spring of 2008, Turkey held the first round of indirect talks between Syria and Israel.¹¹⁷ Despite major progress, five rounds of Turkish-sponsored peace talks ended in no agreement. The process was disrupted by the war in Gaza and the election of a far right government in Israel.¹¹⁸

Some claim that promoting peace among all parties was one of the pillars of Turkey's foreign policy at the time. In this regard, a principle feature of Turkish foreign policy had been to offer mediation in the conflict-ridden Middle East. It was against this backdrop that Turkey's mediation initiative began between Israel and Syria. The first mediation attempt dates back to January 2004, during Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Turkey. However, Israel rejected being a part of those negotiations. The 2006 Lebanese War triggered Israel's call for Turkey's mediation in September

¹¹⁵ "Turkey, Syria Sign Strategic Deal, Lift Visa Requirements," *Turkish Press Review (ARCHIVE)*, <http://www.byegm.gov.tr/yayinicerikarsiv.aspx?Id=6&Tarih=20091014&Haftalik=0#1>, October 14, 2009, cited in Veysel Ayhan, "A New Period in Turkey-Syria Relations: High Level Strategic Cooperation Council," *Ortadoğu Analiz*, November 2009, Vol. 1, No. 11, p. 32.

¹¹⁶ Tayyar Arı and Ferhat Pirinççi, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy." p. 10.

¹¹⁷ Marwan Kabalan, "Syria-Turkish Relations." p. 30.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

of 2006. Although official preparations had started, the process was postponed because of Israel's bombing of Syria's military installation near Dayr al-Zur in September of 2007. Turkey's shuttle diplomacy resulted in four rounds of official indirect talks between May 2008 and December 2008. On December 23, 2008, it appeared that direct talks would be launched in the short term. However, five days later Israel began the Gaza operation, which broke down the process.¹¹⁹

3.5. Conclusion: Deterioration of Relations Again?

The period between the years of 1998 and 2011 witnessed various significant developments between Turkey and Syria in the context of the Kurdish issue. In October of 1998, Turkey and Syria came to the brink of war, and subsequently compromised as a result of Syria's concessions. The relations of the the two countries took a spectacular turnaround following the agreement signed after the October 1998 crisis. Syria implemented all its requirements regarding the PKK issue. Moreover, after the AKP government came to power in Turkey, the two countries experienced a peaceful period of relations. Syria and Turkey formed an alliance against the formation of an independent Kurdish state in Iraqi Kurdistan after 2003. The political developments between Turkey and Syria influenced the economic relations of the two countries in 2000s; and, as a result, both experienced a significant improvement in economical relations within ten years.¹²⁰

Furthermore, as a result of mutual visits and the improvement of political, economic, and cultural relations, by the end of first decade of 2000s, there seemed to be no problematic issue between the two countries.¹²¹ In an interview for the *Wall Street*

¹¹⁹ Nathalie Tocci and Joshua W. Walker, "From Confrontation to Engagement: Turkey and the Middle East" in Ronald H. Linden eds., *Turkey and Its Neighbors: Foreign Relation in Transition*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012, pp. 51-52.

¹²⁰ Özlem Tür, "The Political Economy of the Turkish-Syrian Relations in 2000's," *Ortadoğu Analiz*, June-August 2011, Vol. 3, No. 31-32, p. 39.

¹²¹ Tayyar Arı and Ferhat Pirinççi, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy." p. 10.

Journal in January 2011, President Assad stated that Turkey was "a model, because we have the same society and similar traditions."¹²² However, the spectacular relations between Turkey and Syria came to an end after the emergence of the uprisings against the Syrian regime in March 2011, which will be explored extensively in the following chapter.

¹²² Michael B. Bishku, "Turkish-Syrian Relations." p. 48.

CHAPTER 4

TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH SYRIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE KURDISH ISSUE FROM 2011 TO THE PRESENT DAY

4.1. Introduction

Turkish-Syrian relations improved following the October 1998 crisis as the Kurdish issue, which was the main problem between the two countries, was solved with the Adana agreement. The good relations between Turkey and Syria continued until early 2011. However, the relations between the two countries deteriorated after the public uprisings began in Syria in March 2011. More importantly, the potential establishment of a de facto Kurdish administration in northern Syria alarmed Turkey. This chapter analyzes Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria in the context of the Kurdish issue from March 2011 to the present day. After introducing the crisis in Syria and its first reflections on the relations with Turkey, the chapter will focus on Turkey's foreign policy towards new actors (PYD, KNC, KRG, SNC, FSA, al-Nusra Front and ISIS) in the context of the Kurdish issue within changing dynamics.

4.2. Syrian Crisis

On December 17, 2010, the self-immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia sparked the flame of a series of demonstrations in the Arab world.¹ In a short time these large-

¹ Filipe R. Campante and Davin Chor, "Why was the Arab World Poised for Revolution? Schooling, Economic Opportunities, and the Arab Spring." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Spring 2012, p. 167.

scale demonstrations overthrew the authoritarian regimes respectively in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.²

With regard to Syria, in February 2011 President Assad expressed that there would be no upheaval in Syria, claiming that Syria was not like Egypt and Tunisia on the grounds that Syrian government had allegedly been sensitive to the public's demands.³

In reality however, things were not as Assad suggested. The Syrian regime had not satisfied the imagination of young people for decades.⁴ In addition, socioeconomic and political conditions in Syria, like the other Arab countries which were experiencing uprisings, had created dissatisfactions, along with high inflation, unemployment, political corruption, lack of freedoms and oppressive security forces.⁵ More importantly, the memories of Syrians were heavily influenced by the Syrian regime's military operation against the Muslim Brotherhood members in 1982 in Hama, in which estimates claimed that 20,000 people were killed. Within this backdrop, many Syrians were considering to take an active opposition against the regime.⁶

Less than a month after Assad's optimistic statement, the uprisings began in Syria in March 2011 when people took the streets in Dara'a, a southwestern city of Syria, in

² Patricia Smith, "Crisis in Syria." April 2, 2012, p. 14, available at www.upfrontmagazine.com.

³ Bente Scheller. *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy Under the Assads*. London: Hurst and Company, 2013, p. 32.

⁴ John R. Bradley. *After the Arab Spring: How Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts*. The US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 145.

⁵ Jeremy M. Sharp, "Unrest in Syria and U.S. Sanctions Against the Asad Regime." *Congressional Research Service*, August 9, 2011, p. 1.

⁶ David W. Lesch. *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012, p. 51; as suggested, after the demonstrations took place in Dara'a, the Muslim Brotherhood declared an announcement inviting Syrian people to participate in the uprisings against the regime. See Veysel Ayhan, "Suriye'de Rejim Karşıtı Gösteriler: Bir Arap Halk Hareketinin Ontolojisi." *ORSAM Report*, March 24, 2011. <http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/yazigoster.aspx?ID=1643> (accessed on November 28, 2014).

order to protest against the government for the torture of the students. The security officials responded with force and demonstrations quickly spread across the country. From the beginning of the protests Assad sent tanks into cities and security forces opened fire on demonstrators.⁷

The incompetent management of the crisis made things worse for Syria on an international level.⁸ From the outset of the crisis onwards, the United Nations condemned pressure and violation of human rights by Syrian government. However, Assad did not care for the UN warnings regarding the deteriorating situation and Syrian regime continued to operate military engagement against the demonstrations,⁹ because the Syrian regime had advantages that were helping it to hang on. It was commanding the "overwhelming firepower, including tanks, heavy artillery, helicopter gunship, and war planes."¹⁰ Conversely, the opposition movement had only small arms and light weapons.¹¹ The regime continued to respond to the protests with "schizophrenic response." The Syrian regime was really bewildered on the grounds that the military forces were increasing their pressure in cities that were boiling with demonstrations, while the President was declaring reforms¹² which were never realized.

As a significant actor, the US initially pursued an ambiguous policy regarding the Syrian revolution. However after a while, the US could not continue its hesitant position with regard to what was taking place in Syria.¹³ First, the US implemented sanctions after the protests in Syria were suppressed by violent measures in March

⁷ Patricia Smith, "Crisis in Syria." p. 14.

⁸ Bente Scheller. *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game*. p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Smith, "Crisis in Syria." pp. 14-15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹² Lesch. *Syria*, p. 100.

¹³ Scheller. *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game*. p. 63.

2011 and the assets of the prominent leaders in Syria were frozen.¹⁴ Then, in August 2011, President Obama called for Assad to resign and said: "It is time to stop the killing of Syrian citizens by their own government."¹⁵ It should be highlighted that, although Obama's administration condemned "brutal suppression" of the demonstrations, the US refrained from bluntly criticizing the Assad regime.¹⁶

Later, the US ambassador to the UN Security Council introduced punitive precautions in August 2011, though Russia and China objected to these measures.¹⁷ Failing to convince the Security Council to pass a resolution that would adopt serious penalties on the Syrian government, the Obama administration ordered a US Navy aircraft carrier task force to take up position in the eastern Mediterranean in late November 2011. Moreover, in June 2012, it was stated that the Central Intelligence Agency had launched a direct connection with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the military unit of the SNC, and was working with the FSA commanders by sharing operational intelligence.¹⁸

On the other hand Russia played a completely different role than the US as it has been an important supporter of the Assad regime. China also accompanied Russia on this issue. Russian President Vladimir Putin has rejected any possible attempt to make the Syrian regime step down by means of force.¹⁹ Moreover, at the beginning of the uprisings in Syria Moscow advised opponents of the Assad regime to enter into dialogue with the Syrian government and avoid taking up arms,²⁰ and it displayed its continuing support to the Syrian regime when it vetoed a proposed

¹⁴ Fred H. Lawson. *Global Security Watch: Syria*. England: Praeger, 2013, p. 159.

¹⁵ Smith, "Crisis in Syria." p. 14.

¹⁶ Lesch. *Syria*. p. 151.

¹⁷ Lawson. *Syria*. pp. 159-160.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 160.

¹⁹ Fahrettin Sümer, "Turkey's Changing Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring." *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 18(1), 2013, article 8, p. 22.

²⁰ Lawson. *Syria*. 160.

resolution that would have implemented "targeted measures" on Syria in order to topple the Assad regime.²¹ Furthermore, it was reported that Russian intelligence agencies appeared to work with Syrian security forces in late 2011.²²

In addition to Russia, Iran has been one of the leading advocates of the Syrian regime against the public uprisings as it perceived the Syrian uprising as the "the ploy of the devil US." Within this framework, Tahran provided an unquestionable support and blamed the Syrian opposition movements for the bloody deaths. Moreover, the Iranian officials didn't avoid supporting the Syrian regime by means of speech acts.²³ On the other hand, the Arab League adopted a tough stance against the Syrian regime. In this regard, it made a historical decision by suspending the membership of Syria in a Foreign Ministers meeting on November 12, 2011 in Egypt.²⁴

4.2.1. Turkish-Syrian Relations in a Turmoil

Shortly after the Arab uprisings started, it was easy for Turkish authorities to react to events in Tunisia and Egypt. However, as the wave shook Libya, it became more complicated for Turkey to make a decision. The biggest challenge came when the uprisings in Syria began by March 2011.²⁵

There are two arguments regarding Turkey's reaction to Syria after the uprisings began in the latter. On the one hand it is pointed out that the AKP government was

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 167.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ Nebi Miş, "Allah, Suriye, Beşşar'dan "Allah, Suriye, Hürriyet'e: Suriye'nin Zorlu Arap Baharı" in Kemal İnat, Muhittin Ataman, Fuat Keyman and Bilal Yıldırım eds., *Ortaoğu Yıllığı 2011*, İstanbul: Açılım Kitap, No. 7, year. 7, 2011, p. 287.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 289.

²⁵ Ahmet K. Han, "Paradise Lost: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy and the Case of Turkish-Syrian Relations" in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür eds., *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, England: Ashgate, 2013, p. 67.

reluctant to see the collapse of the Syrian regime since Turkey's improved relations with Syria was at the focal point of its zero problem foreign policy doctrine.²⁶ On the other hand it is argued that Turkey didn't hesitate when the Assad regime collapsed. In this sense it is believed that Turkey burned the bridges with Syria very quickly as the Turkish government changed its position from encouraging Assad for making reforms to supporting the opposition movement within a month.²⁷ Moreover, Christopher Phillips argues that Turkey had indicated its tacit support for the fall of the Assad regime by permitting the first Syrian opposition meeting to be conveyed in early June 2011 in Antalya.²⁸

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called on Assad to listen to the demands of his people after the outbreak of the Syrian rebels in March 2011. In fact, Erdoğan had previously warned Assad during his visit of Aleppo on February 6, 2011.²⁹ Indeed, it was claimed that Turkey didn't welcome a promoting intervention.³⁰ In this sense, a Turkish top diplomat asserted that Prime Minister

²⁶ See Ahmet K. Han, "Paradise Lost: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy and the Case of Turkish-Syrian Relations" in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür eds., *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, England: Ashgate, 2013, p. 67; Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 14, 2011; Sami Moubayed, "Milking the Male Goat and Syrian-Turkish Relations" in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür eds., *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, England: Ashgate, 2013, p. 75 and Henry Barkey, "Turkey's Hard Stance on Syria Hides its Conflicted Loyalties," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 23, 2011.

²⁷ Christopher Phillips, "Into the Quagmire: Turkey's Frustrated Syria Policy," *Chatham House briefing paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme, December 2012, p. 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Ünal Ünsal, "Irak ve Suriye Politikası", Baskın Oran eds., *Türk Dış Politikası, Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, cilt III, 1. Baskı, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2013, p. 158; According to Philip Robins, Erdoğan reacted to the situation in Syria with 'typical self-confidence'. This was accelerated when he won the parliamentary elections in June 2011, verifying that domestic support was safe. Philip Robins, "Turkey's 'double gravity' predicament": the foreign policy of a newly activist power. *International Affairs* 89:2, 2013, p. 394.

³⁰ It should be noted that Turkey changed its position quickly on the ground that it initially implemented the EU sanctions on Syria. Moreover, Turkish government advocated the military intervention even by enforcing the US and encouraged the international community to impose sanctions and establish a buffer-zone. Turkey consolidated its position when Syrian forces shot down a Turkish air force in June 2012. Subsequently, Turkey immediately called a NATO meeting demanding consultations in the context of Article 4 on the grounds that Davutoğlu had declared that "any attack against Turkey's borders is an attack against NATO." See Ahmet K. Han, "Paradise Lost."

Erdoğan advised the US to give Assad more time to make reformations during his meeting with the US Ambassador to Turkey Francis Ricciardone.³¹

All diplomatic efforts to convince Assad proved fruitless by August 2011. On August 9, 2011, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu went to Damascus with an "ultimatum." When this attempt failed, Davutoğlu, Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Gül, one after the other, began to call for regime change in Syria.³²

In late September 2011, Erdoğan pointed out that he had cut all contact with the Syrian administration in New York.³³ Subsequently, by November 2011, Turkey became the leading advocate of regime change in Syria³⁴ at which point on November 22, 2011, Erdoğan reminded Assad of the end of Kaddafi, namely the death of the latter by lynching.³⁵

Syria, meanwhile, reacted more cautiously toward Turkey. For instance, in June 2011, the Syrian ambassador in Ankara stated that Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood was equivalent to Syrian support for the PKK³⁶ as Damascus had openly said that Turkey had been supporting the Muslim Brotherhood with

p. 67; the tension between two countries increased in October 2012 when they came close to a war. Turkey again called on NATO for help and as a result, the Dutch, Germans and Americans accepted to deploy several batteries of Patriot missiles on Turkish lands. See Philip Robins, "Turkey's 'double gravity'." p. 396.

³¹ "Turkey Advises US to Give Al-Assad More Time for Reforms," *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 17, 2011.

³² Ahmet K. Han, "Paradise Lost." p. 67; also it is understood that Davutoğlu's visit was a formality as put forth by Christopher Phillips. Phillips claimed that Turkey had already decided to cut its ties with Syria before this meeting. Christopher Phillips, "Into the Quagmire." p. 6.

³³ "Turkish PM Cuts All Ties with Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, September 21, 2011.

³⁴ Philip Robins, "Turkey's 'double gravity' predicament." p. 395.

³⁵ Ünal Ünsal, "Irak ve Suriye Politikası." p. 159; it was a dilemma for Erdogan to demonize Muammar Gaddafi as the former was awarded by the Libyan leader to receive the "Al-Gaddafi International Prize for Human Rights" in late November 2010, just several weeks before the beginning of the uprisings in the Arab world. "Erdogan receives Gaddafi Human Rights Award," *Today's Zaman*, December 01, 2010. This situation (the swift u-turn in Libya policy) proved that the Turkish foreign policy towards Libya was really pragmatic and conjunctural.

³⁶ Sami Moubayed, "Milking the Male Goat." p. 76.

weapons.³⁷ Another example was the burning of Turkish flags and Prime Minister Erdoğan's pictures in the pro-governmental demonstrations in Syria.³⁸

In brief, Turkey officially didn't cut its ties with Syria until late September 2011. However, it appeared that Turkey had made its decision regarding the fall of regime earlier. In this sense, it was asserted that on June 20, 2011, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan expressed his opinion to the US President Obama that the Assad regime would fall within four or six months.³⁹ The formation of the Free Syrian Army in the province of Hatay in late July 2011 and Turkey's backing the coordination of the Syrian political oppositions in August 2011 are other two pieces of evidence of the claim that Turkey had given its decision regarding the collapse of the Assad regime earlier.⁴⁰

4.2.2. A Jactitation: Challenging Syria for its alleged PKK support

It was asserted that Turkey's anti-Assad position triggered Syrian regime not to take any action against the PKK.⁴¹ Davutoğlu's last trip to Damascus in August 2011 was realized in this wake of Turkish media reports that Syria had renewed its support for the PKK, in reprisal of Turkey's criticism of Assad's crackdown.⁴²

³⁷ M. Ali Birand, "Turkey is Preparing for a Buffer Zone Inside Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 15, 2011.

³⁸ Fehim Taştekin "Suriye Rejimi İç ve Dış Düşman Arıyor," *Radikal*, June 26, 2011; The author also added that the burning of pictures and flags became a chance for the Syrian regime to characterize the enemy it has been searching for to suppress the peoples demands for freedom.

³⁹ Alptekin Dursunoğlu, "Türkiye'nin İdealist Dış Politikasının Suriye Sınavı," June 29, 2011, http://www.ydh.com.tr/YD314_turkiyenin-ideal-dis-politikasinin-suriye-sinavi.html (Accessed on December 1, 2014).

⁴⁰ Christopher Phillips, "Into the Quagmire.", p. 6.

⁴¹ Aylin Ünver Noi, "The Arab Spring, Its Effects on the Kurds, and the Approaches of Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq on the Kurdish Issue." *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 2, June 2012, p. 26.

⁴² Soner Çağaptay, "Turkish-Syrian Ties Worsen," *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 14, 2011.

In this regard, a Turkish academician interpreted the statement of President Assad that Damascus sent a subtle threat message in October 2011 when stating that "Turkey could fall into a state similar to ours", implying that it would not abstain from supporting the PKK if it perceived that Turkey was promoting the Syrian opposition.⁴³

On October 19, 2011, 24 Turkish soldiers were killed and 18 were injured in Hakkari, an eastern province of Turkey. Turkish officials were concerned that there was either a third party that wanted to create tension between Ankara and Damascus, or Syrian regime itself might have been behind the attack.⁴⁴ First, Prime Minister Erdoğan accused Syria and Iran of "supporting terror" without naming them, following the PKK's.⁴⁵ Then, the news appearing in the media on Syria's possible cooperation with the PKK caused Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu to warn Damascus. On October 27, 2011, during his official visit in Qatar, he said: "Recalling the past. [Syria] should not even think of playing the PKK card. Everybody will see where such an act would lead."⁴⁶

In fact, rather than the assistance of Syria, the rise of the PKK attacks was connected to the events in the Turkish domestic policy. In the June 2011 parliamentary elections the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) had won 36 seats. However, this success turned to a crisis when one of the prominent deputies of the BDP was deprived of his seat by the Supreme Election Board on the grounds that he was charged with a conviction on a "PKK terrorism charge." Moreover, five other BDP

⁴³ Özden Zeynep Oktav, "The Syrian Uprising and the Iran-Turkey-Syria Quasi Alliance: A View From Turkey" in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür eds., *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, England: Ashgate, 2013, p. 199.

⁴⁴ Serkan Demirtaş, "Sound of Silence Over Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 25, 2011.

⁴⁵ Kadri Gürsel, "Where Do Kurds Stand in the 'Arab Spring?' " *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 31, 2011.

⁴⁶ "PKK Card May Exacerbate Already Strained Ties between Syria and Turkey," *Today's Zaman*, October 30, 2011.

deputies couldn't take up their seats because of their imprisonment.⁴⁷ The rise of the attacks of the PKK was the result of the turmoil emerged within this climate.

Actually, even before the elections, there were signals of the use of force as the Turkish army had "ambushed" seven PKK fighters in Tunceli province. Later twelve PKK fighters were killed near Şırnak. These military operations were in fact even criticized by some top officials.⁴⁸

Once again, in the middle of November 2011, it was reported that the Syrian regime provided a training camp for the PKK, as retaliation to Turkey's criticism of Syria's crackdown on the protests. It was reported that the training camp was located in Serê Kaniyê region of northern Syria, bordering the Ceylanpınar district of Turkey's Şanlıurfa province. It was estimated that 150 PKK members were staying in this camp. After hearing of the alleged agreement between the PKK and Syria, Turkish Land Forces Commander General Hayri Kıvrıkoğlu immediately visited the border area and border gendarmerie were supplied with extra military equipment.⁴⁹

On behalf of Turkey, President Abdullah Gül reiterated his warnings toward Syria about PKK support: "I would strongly suggest and would expect that Damascus would not get involved in such a dangerous game. Even though I do not think they would do that, we are still closely following the matter."⁵⁰

On behalf of Syria, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem said that Syria remained loyal to all cooperation signed with Turkey against the PKK. Moreover, he said that although Turkey's stance against Syria had "hurt" Syria, Syria did not change its position concerning the PKK.⁵¹ Despite Syria's official explanations, the process of

⁴⁷ "Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency," *International Crisis Group Europe Report*, No. 213, September 20, 2011, p. 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ "Despite Turkey's Warnings, Syria Provides Camp for Terrorist PKK," *Today's Zaman*, November 24, 2011.

⁵⁰ "Gül to Syria: Do Not Use PKK against Us," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 8, 2011.

⁵¹ "Syria's Stance Against PKK Unchanged, Syrian FM Says," *Today's Zaman*, November 29, 2011.

the securitization between the two countries appeared to be launched again.⁵² The Syria-Turkey border, which had been demilitarized during the rapprochement period, was now securitized.⁵³

At the end of July 2012, Turkey deployed its military forces to the Syrian border and it was announced that Turkey would hold maneuvers along the Syrian border.⁵⁴ Some NATO member countries asked Turkey for information about the operations. Turkish officials informed them that the operations included three messages: 1) for the PKK and its Syrian branch PYD: not to form sub-structures for assaults against Turkey; 2) for Kurdistan Regional Government: not to encourage "terrorists"; 3) for the Syrian Kurdish National Council: not to support the PKK and the PYD.⁵⁵

In brief, clashes between the Turkish army and the PKK increased when the Syrian crisis first emerged. It was asserted that the PKK held its "fiercest battles" against the Turkish army in recent years.⁵⁶ However, there was no connection between these attacks and the alleged Syrian help for the PKK. In fact, it has been one of the general characteristics of the Turkish foreign policy to deny the presence of a Kurdish problem; the PKK was depicted as an "externally-supported organization."⁵⁷ Despite exceptions, the Syrian regime had been careful not to provoke Turkey by using the "PKK card." Erol Cebeci and Kadir Ustun argue that "As such, it would be extremely difficult and possibly counterproductive for Turkey to act unilaterally

⁵² Marwa Daody, "Back to Conflict? The Securitization of Water in Syrian-Turkish Relations" in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür eds., *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, England: Ashgate, 2013, p. 143.

⁵³ Moubayed, "Milking the Male Goat," p. 76.

⁵⁴ www.cnnturk.com, August 3, 2012 cited in Unal Unsal, "Irak ve Suriye Politikasi." p. 160.

⁵⁵ *Taraf*, August 8, 2012, cited in *Ibid*.

⁵⁶ Karen Kaya, "The Syrian Crisis from a Neighbor's Perspective: View from Turkey." *Military Review*, March-April 2014, p. 46.

⁵⁷ Kemal Kirişçi, "The Kurdish Question and Turkish Foreign Policy," in Lenore G. Martin and Dimitris Keridis eds., *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2004, p. 284.

without a direct security threat posed by Syria."⁵⁸ However, Turkey apparently continued to utter this claim in order to interfere with the Syrian regime.

4.2.3. The Policy of Syria's Kurds towards the Crisis in Syria

To begin with, approximately 10 or 12 percent of Syria's population of 23 million are Kurds⁵⁹ and largely quoting kurdwatch.org, the information about the cities in which Kurds live are as follows as seen shown on the figure 1, below:

- 1) Efrin is a big city where 470,000 people live. The majority of the residents are Kurds and one or two percent of the total population is Arab,
- 2) Amûdê has approximately 200,000 residents, including many Yazidi,
- 3) Kobanê has roughly 250,000 inhabitants. The majority of the inhabitants are Kurds and each Arab and Turkmen constitute 5 percent of the population,
- 4) Dirbêsi has 120,000 residents.
- 5) Al-Hasakah has approximately 180,000 inhabitants composed of Kurds, Arabs and Christians,
- 6) Al- Jawadiyah is a small city with 5,000 inhabitants composed of an equal population of Arabs and Kurds,
- 7) Dêrik has roughly 175,000 habitants,
- 8) Tirbespiyê has approximately 120,000 residents composed of Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, and Arabs,

⁵⁸ Erol Cebeci and Kadir Üstün, "The Syrian Quagmire: What's Holding Turkey Back?" *Insight Turkey*, vol. 4, No. 14, 2012, p. 18.

⁵⁹ "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle, *International Crisis Group Middle East Report*, No: 136, January 22, 2013, p. 6.

- 9) Qamişlo is the largest Kurdish city in Syria with 400,000 residents. 70 percent of the residents are Kurds, 20 percent are Arabs and 10 percent are Christians,
- 10) Serê Kaniyê has roughly 50,000 inhabitants, including many Yazidi.⁶⁰



Figure 1: Kurdish regions in Syria⁶¹

There are five main political trends among Syria's Kurds:

- 1) The parties and organizations which follow Abdullah Öcalan's ideology;

⁶⁰ <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?cid=183&z=en#cilaxa> (Accessed on November 29, 2011)

⁶¹ "Kurds in Syria," in "Canton Based Democratic Autonomy of Rojava," *Kurdistan National Congress Report*, May 2014, p. 3.

- 2) The parties and organizations which are branches of the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP);
- 3) The parties and organizations which follow Iraqi Kurdish ex-President Talabani's movement;
- 4) The Kurds who are committed to a religious order such as Xesnewi sect;
- 5) The Kurds who collaborate with Arabs against the Syrian regime.⁶²

It is crucial to touch upon the connection between the Kurds living in both Syria and Turkey. The border between Turkey and Syria separates the Kurdish territories. The border was formed at the end of the first World War following the Ottoman railway line and it is approximately 560 miles long, making it the longest border Turkey shares with a neighbor. Kurds living on each side of the border are connected to each other. For instance, they talk about their "respective regions" as Ser Xetê and Bin Xetê, terms which mean "above the line" and "below the line."⁶³ It can be said that the Turkey-Syria border is really a Kurdish-Kurdish border.

Syria's Kurds did not take any position at the beginning of the Syrian uprisings.⁶⁴ After the emergence of public uprisings, Kurdish demonstrators took the streets under the slogan of "freedom" in Amûdê, Dirbêsiyê, al-Haseka and Qamishli.

Jordi Tejel, an expert on Syria's Kurds, drew a picture that Kurds were in collaboration with the Syrian regime. He asserted that "some concessions, such as the regime's acceptance of 50,000 Kurds as citizens last April and agricultural support in

⁶² "Suriye Kürtlerinin Türkiye'deki Kürt Sorunu ve Çözümüne Yönelik Algısı: Suriye Kürtleri Saha Araştırması Raporu," *International Middle East Peace Research Center Report (IMPR)*, July 2014, p. 19.

⁶³ Karen Kaya, "The Syrian Crisis." p. 45.

⁶⁴ Mete Çubukçu, "Araplarla Kürtler Savaşırsa!" *Radikal*, November 4, 2012.

the border regions, have urged the Kurdish parties to “wait and see” how much more they can obtain from the regime.”⁶⁵

However, according to Turkish senior columnist Cengiz Çandar, Syria's Kurds pursued a dual strategy in an attempt to be ready for either the collapse of the regime or vice versa and Kurdish administration in Iraq played a significant role in this situation by offering the Kurdish parties, except for the PYD, to become distant and prudent to the events. In addition, he expressed that Syria's Kurds believed that in case of the onset of the uprisings in the Kurdish cities, Assad would suppress these uprisings with Arab backing by depicting the situation as an "Arab-Kurd" dilemma.⁶⁶

In April 2011, President Assad promised to abolish media restrictions, remove state security courts, adopt a general amnesty for political prisoners, and permit "approved" demonstrations. He also pledged to grant 300.000 Kurds citizenship, which was a long-standing Kurdish grievance.⁶⁷ Moreover, on June 7, 2011, Syrian President Assad invited representatives of Kurdish parties including the PYD to talk, in an attempt to obtain support from Syria's "restive" Kurds. According to the report the parties accepted Assad's invitation although it was unclear when the talks would take place.⁶⁸

However, contrary to the expectations, Kurdish parties decided not to meet with President Assad. According to the statement the parties issued on June 8, 2011, Kurdish parties agreed that the meeting would be meaningless under the then repressive political conditions.⁶⁹ In addition, the rumors that President Assad would solve the Kurdish issue "through constitutional recognition based on international

⁶⁵ Kadri Gürsel, "Where Do Kurds Stand in the 'Arab Spring?'" *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 31, 2011.

⁶⁶ Cengiz Çandar, "Suriye'deki Dalgalanma Sınırı Aşabilir," *Radikal*, May 10, 2011.

⁶⁷ Jeremy M. Sharp, "Unrest in Syria." p. 6.

⁶⁸ "Syria's Assad Invites Kurdish Parties for Talks, Report Says," *Today's Zaman*, June 7, 2011.

⁶⁹ "Al-Qamishli: Kurdish Parties Refuse Dialogue with Bashar al-Assad," June 11, 2011 <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1651> (Accessed on November 10, 2014).

conventions and agreements"⁷⁰ were never realized. On the contrary, the restrictions against Kurds increased. For instance, a new political party law, which wouldn't allow for the establishment of ethnic parties, was adopted and this law primarily targeted the Kurds.⁷¹

Historically, Syria's Kurds had been subjected to brutal suppression and "identity-based discrimination" by the Syrian regime. One of the imminent examples took place in March 2004.⁷² On March 12, 2004, during a football match which took place in the largest Kurdish city Qamishli, tensions rose between the fans of al-Jihad from Qamishli and al-Futuwah, the Arab team from Dayr az-Zawr.⁷³ The security forces opened fire and six people, all of whom Kurds, were killed.⁷⁴ Subsequently Kurds took the streets for demonstrations the following days. The Syrian regime responded harshly which resulted in numerous deaths, injuries and arrests.⁷⁵ The Syrian regime continued to suppress Kurds until the summer of 2005. Lots of political and religious Kurds were detained and killed. Of course the most remarkable was the abduction and subsequent killing of the Kurdish sheikh Xesnewî in May 2005.⁷⁶

Moreover, the past experiences of the Kurds of Iraq had an impact on the policy of Syria's Kurds. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Kurds of Iraq paid a "very high price" when they opposed President Saddam Hussein. At this point, the Syria's Kurds didn't

⁷⁰ İlhan Tanır, "Syrian Kurds Welcome Turkish Humanitarian Corridor to Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, February 27, 2012.

⁷¹ Fehim Taştekin, "Arap Baharı Yazı Görmese de Hala Kasıp Kavuruyor," *Radikal*, July 31, 2011.

⁷² "Syria Kurds in the Syrian Arab Republic one year after the March 2004 events," *Amnesty International Report*, March 2005, p. 1.

⁷³ "The Al-Qamishli Uprising: The beginning of a new era for Syria's Kurds?" *Kurdwatch Report 4*, Berlin, December 2009, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Jordi Tejel. *Syria's Kurds: History, politics and society*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 115.

⁷⁵ *Kurdwatch Report*, p. 21.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 16.

want history to repeat itself because the Syrian opposition movement was weak and there was a possibility of the Syrian regime to "wreak" revenge on the Kurds.⁷⁷

On the other hand, the PYD, leading power of the Kurds of Syria, lacked international legitimacy. In addition to Turkey, the US and most European countries affiliated the PYD with the PKK.⁷⁸

In brief, it would be extensively evaluated as follows: Syria's Kurds became distant from the Syrian regime and exhibited a different position taking into consideration their past experiences, Arabs' ignorance of Kurdish rights, and Turkey's anti-Kurdish policies in 2011.⁷⁹

4.3. De facto Kurdish Authority

Syria's Kurds finally emerged as part of the picture in both national and regional context in 2012.⁸⁰ The PYD, which Turkey absolutely didn't want to see in the Syria picture, became the main actor of Western Kurdistan (Rojava). Hence, Turkey chose to exclude the PYD by blaming it with phrases such as "the branch of the PKK, tool of the regime, no base."⁸¹

Before going into further details, it would be necessary to clarify how the PYD emerged as a powerful actor. Based on the explanations of Jordi Tejel, the former PKK fighters returning to Syria were sentenced ranging from 1 to 10 years following the October 1998 agreement between Turkey and Syria, so the PKK members in

⁷⁷ Lesch. *Syria*. p. 106.

⁷⁸ "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria," *International Crisis Group Middle East Report*, No. 151, May 8, 2014, p. 21.

⁷⁹ *IMPR Report*, p. 22.

⁸⁰ Soli Özel, "Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Kurdish Issue," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 26, 2012.

⁸¹ Fehim Taştekin, "Kürtler Zapatista Taktiği ile Yol Alıyor," *Radikal*, December 19, 2012.

Syria initiated to set up new parties and organizations with an aim both to escape from state repression and to maintain support from its members and sympathizers. Within these intentions, the PYD was founded in 2003.⁸²

Those who want to affiliate the PYD with terrorism claim that the PYD is a branch of the PKK and it is a member of Union of Kurdish Community (Koma Civaken Kurdistan, KCK) which is an umbrella organization that shares the same leadership and charter as the PKK.⁸³ However, the PYD rejected the allegations and the co-leader of the PYD, Salih Muslim reiterated that the PYD didn't have an organic link with the PKK. On the other hand, he added that they were inspired by Abdullah Öcalan and he described the PYD as the BDP of Syria.⁸⁴ The best description regarding the PKK-PYD proximity was made by Aliza Marcus, a journalist specialized on the Kurdish issue. According to her, the PYD is certainly connected to the PKK, though the former is a Rojava based organization and Syria's Kurds are in the center of the decision-making.⁸⁵

A report conducted by the IMPR showed that, even at the beginning of 2011, a significant part of Syria's Kurds believe that the PYD was not heavily influenced in Rojava. However, the PYD immediately took position after the emergence of a power gap, while other Kurdish groups could not take any position following the uprisings. In a short time, the PYD organized itself in military sphere. In addition, Syria's Kurds think that the PYD's policy kept away the Kurdish regions from the war and it was due to the PYD's success that Kurdish regions, except for Serê Kaniyê, were distanced from clashes from the early 2011 onwards.⁸⁶

⁸² Tejel. *Syria's Kurds*. p. 79.

⁸³ "Syria's Kurds." *ICG Report*, p. 10

⁸⁴ Cengiz Çandar, "Suriye BDP'si' ile.," *Radikal*, December 7, 2012,

⁸⁵ "PYD Kesinlikle PKK'yla Bağlantılı," *Milliyet*, October 27, 2014,

⁸⁶ *IMPR Report*, p. 11-12,

According to the same report, the reason of the high public support of the PYD could be found in their willingness to fight for the defense of Rojava and to keep the Kurds out of the violent war.⁸⁷ Moreover, the report clearly showed that the PYD has been the most powerful party both in political and militarily terms among Rojava people.⁸⁸

In mid-December 2011, the PYD established the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK). The newly established unit assigned new mayors and local leaders who would work instead of governmental officials. In addition, its activities concentrated on social services at which point it mobilized support for the PYD.⁸⁹ Also, as a part of this project, People's Tribunals and a police force, the Asaysh, were established to enforce law and order.⁹⁰

Meanwhile on July 18, 2012, a suicide bomber struck at a high-level security meeting, in which top Syrian officials including the interior minister, defense minister and vice chief of the general staff were killed.⁹¹ Following the bomb attack, turmoil occurred in the country. The PYD had already consolidated its power until July 2012,⁹² and this turmoil became a chance for the PYD to declare an autonomous authority by capturing the control of Kobanê, Afrin, Amude, Derbasiye, Serê Kaniyê and Dêrik in Rojava.⁹³

As mentioned above, there is a highly debated topic of whether there was a connection between the PYD and the Syrian regime. Jordi Tejel implied in his article that the PYD captured the power in Rojava by Syrian government's deliberately

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 12.

⁸⁹ "Syria's Kurds." *ICG Report*, p. 13.

⁹⁰ "Flight of Icarus?" *ICG Report*, p. 14.

⁹¹ "Bomb Rocks Syrian Leader al-Assad's Inner Circle," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 19, 2012.

⁹² "Syria's Kurds." *ICG Report*, p. 14.

⁹³ Fehim Taştekin, "İkinci Kürt Özerk Bölgesine Doğru," *Radikal*, July 23, 2012.

withdrawal from the Kurdish regions.⁹⁴ Another author openly stated that after the beginning of the uprisings, the Syrian government revived its relations with the PYD, permitting it to set up its power over Syria's north regions, simultaneously giving "less than a subtle threat" message to Ankara.⁹⁵

However, Fehim Taştekin, a highly respected Turkish columnist, thinks that the PYD didn't get help from regime. In his column, he wrote this in a broader perspective:

The Kurds were the only group pursuing a result-oriented strategy. The maneuvers of Kurdish parties amazed all who evaluated the region from outside. Kurdish parties managed to build a unity between them with the contribution of Kurdistan Regional Government President Masoud Barzani. Kurds created a region far away from the war by not colliding with regime powers and keeping away Free Syrian Army.⁹⁶

By April 2013, the PYD accelerated its steps towards the establishment of an autonomous administration. On March 31st, Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) members captured Aleppo's Sheikh Maqsoud area. Subsequently, the Syrian military bombarded the district from the air which was evidence that the Syrian regime regarded the Kurdish forces as a "hostile entity."⁹⁷ In May 2012, tensions between the PYD and regime became more apparent when the regime forces killed several more PYD members in Aleppo.⁹⁸

Moreover, Syrian regime forces targeted Qamishli city in northeastern Syria on the Turkey-Syria border with mortars and air bombardments.⁹⁹ The Turkish

⁹⁴ Jordi Tejel, "*Troubled Past, Uncertain Future*", October 16, 2012, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=49703> (Accessed on November 15, 2014).

⁹⁵ Scheller. *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game*. p. 11.

⁹⁶ Fehim Taştekin, "Kürt Çağrısı! Farz Edin ki PYD Suriye'nin BDP'si," *Radikal*, August 20, 2012.

⁹⁷ Daniel Nisman, "Have Syrian Kurds Had a Change of Heart?" *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 12, 2013.

⁹⁸ "Syria's Kurds." *ICG Report*, p. 15.

⁹⁹ "PYD Begins Fight Against al-Assad Regime Forces in Northern Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 8, 2013.

government's allegation that the PYD and Syrian forces had been in talks for Qamishli in northern Syria¹⁰⁰ actually became meaningless when Syrian army forces began targeting the city.

In July 2013, Saleh Muslim announced a plan to create an interim governing body to represent all of Rojava. The plan represented an important step toward Kurdish autonomy in Syria, something that Syria's Kurds aspired to.¹⁰¹

In late July 2013 during his visit to Turkey, Saleh Muslim didn't hesitate to explain that Kurds would establish an autonomous administration. Although there was no statement issued by the Turkish government, Muslim confirmed that he had held talks with Foreign Ministry officials including Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu on the developments in Rojava and he had stressed the provisional rule they were intending to establish was causing "misunderstandings" in Ankara.¹⁰²

In November 2013, the PYD announced the creation of a "joint-interim administration" containing regional and legislative assemblies and governments in three cantons: Efrin, Kobanê and Cêzîre. In addition there would be a general assembly including Kurds, Arabs, Syrians and Assyrians from these three cantons. Later, in early 2014, the PYD declared that it had formed the first legal governments in Kobane and Cêzîre in January, and in March 2014 it formed the "Social Contract of Rojava" which would work as a provisional constitutional charter for the region.¹⁰³

Although the PYD declared an autonomous region, it lacked international legitimacy. They decided to act with the KNC under the umbrella organization of the SKC and Turkey's peace talks with the PKK appeared to open a way towards legitimacy for a

¹⁰⁰ Serkan Demirtaş, "Ankara: Assad Leaves Turkish Borders to Kurds," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 25, 2012.

¹⁰¹ Karen Kaya, "The Syrian Crisis." p. 46.

¹⁰² "PYD Leader in Visit to Turkey Proposes Formation of Provisional Council until Political Solution," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 27, 2013.

¹⁰³ "Flight of Icarus?" *ICG Report*, p. 15.

while. However, the SKC lost its function and the PKK-Ankara peace talks had not developed; Turkey called the organization a terrorist one and the Western governments kept mum.¹⁰⁴ For instance, the PYD was forced to participate in the Geneva II conference under the auspices of the SNC, but the PYD rejected this offer giving reason that SNC had refused its declaration of autonomy and wanted to participate as an independent Kurdish delegation. In truth, Ankara was content with the PYD's non participation.¹⁰⁵

4.3.1. Turkey's Reaction to the De facto Kurdish Authority

Turkey has paid attention to the Syrian crisis as it posed three direct threats to its own security. First, there was a security problem regarding its border with Syria in particular, taking into consideration 600,000 refugees (now exceeding 1,500,000)¹⁰⁶ locating in the border region. Second, Turkey feared that northern Syria would be a safe haven for the PKK. And third, Turkey has been concerned about the prospect of Syria's Kurds gaining an autonomous administration in northern Syria.¹⁰⁷

The potential establishment of a Kurdish administration in Syria annoyed Turkey. What mainly annoyed Turkey was that it perceived an establishment of a Kurdish administration as a threat to its territorial integrity, because a majority of Kurdish population in the Middle East lives in Turkey on the ground that a Kurdish administration in Rojava could trigger the Kurds in Syria. Hence, the Turkish government pursued a policy toward Syria that "the regime should go, but Syrian unity should be preserved."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁵ Verda Özer, "The Kurds' Schizophrenic Week," *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 28, 2014.

¹⁰⁶ The author's note.

¹⁰⁷ Karen Kaya, "The Syrian Crisis." p. 43.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 44.

As mentioned above, what shaped Turkish foreign policy towards Syria was a possible Kurdish authority in Rojava. In this sense, Ünal Ünsal pointed out that Erdoğan directly implied the Kurdish issue when he reiterated that Syria was "an internal affair" for Turkey.¹⁰⁹

Turkish press alleged that Assad began to support the Kurds living in northern Syria in an initiative to threaten Turkey in its struggle against the PKK. It was claimed that Assad initiated to prepare the floor for the establishment of a Kurdish administration by encouraging Kurdish schools with the Kurdish language and by permitting the head of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), Muhammad Salih Muslim to return to Syria from exile in Iraq. This was said to be a message to Turkey: "Accepting the Kurdish politician into Syria must be seen as an action to punish Turkey for harshly objecting to Syria's crackdown on its dissidents."¹¹⁰

Contrary to allegations made by the Turkish press, a Berlin based anti-PYD website, Kurdwatch.org, apparently clarified that Assad had been distant from providing an autonomous administration to Kurds. In addition, it was reported that Assad's regime had suppressed the demonstrations in Rojava with harsh measures and subsequently numerous Kurds had been killed and injured.¹¹¹

Returning to Turkey's reaction to the Kurdish structuring in Syria, Turkey was alarmed after news broke out that the PYD seized control of lots of centers throughout Rojava along the Turkish border, including Kobane and Efrin in Aleppo and Amude in the city of al-Hasakah. State officials held an emergency meeting on July 25, 2012 in order to discuss developments both in Syria and particularly in Rojava. According to the short statement released after the meeting, it was the first time that the government officially paid attention to the presence of the PKK (the

¹⁰⁹ *Sabah*, August 7, 2011, cited in Ünal Ünsal, "Irak ve Suriye Politikası."

¹¹⁰ "Assad to Play Kurdish Card against Turkey, Report Says," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 9, 2011.

¹¹¹ www.Kurdwatch.org.

PYD was perceived as the PKK's Syrian branch) and was perceived in Syria by using the term “neighboring countries,” apparently referring to Syria.¹¹²

Once again, it was claimed that the Syrian regime deliberately left the administration of three districts in Rojava to the PYD. Ankara was concerned that this situation would sustain the possible establishment of another front for the PKK in its attacks against Turkey. A top state official told *Hürriyet Daily News* that “Damascus left the region to the PYD both to deploy its troops in the center of the country for its clashes with the Free Syrian Army and to intimidate Turkey.”¹¹³

As part of Turkish foreign policy's new measures, the Turkish army transferred new troops to the frontier of Nusaybin, a district of Şanlıurfa, in 200 civilian vehicles. Actually, the military had already set up some surface-to-air missiles on the Syrian border when Turkey changed its engagement rules after its jet was downed by Syria on June 22, 2012.¹¹⁴

Prime Minister Erdoğan said that Turkey would take all possible measures to prevent a formation of a "terrorist organization" in Rojava, obviously implying the PYD. He said that Turkey would not tolerate any solidarity between the PKK and the PYD. Further, he added that Turkey respected Syria's territorial integrity at which point Turkey didn't want the beginning of sectarian or ethnic clashes.¹¹⁵

The position of Turkish governments regarding the PYD and an autonomous Rojava administration was best described by chief advisor of Prime Minister:

... and finally to the Kurds. After months of a “wait and see” attitude, the majority of the Kurds of Syria have now turned against the Assad regime. The regime seeks to use the Democratic Union Party (PYD),

¹¹²“Turkey to Take Action Against PKK in Syria,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 26, 2012.

¹¹³ “Ankara: Assad Leaves Turkish Border to Kurds,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 25, 2012.

¹¹⁴ Serkan Demirtaş, “Ankara: Assad Leaves Turkish Borders to Kurds,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 25, 2012.

¹¹⁵ “Turkey Won't Permit PKK in Northern Syria: PM,” *Hürriyet News*, July 27, 2012.

the Kurdish party that claims to represent the Kurds in the north of the country. But the PYD's claims to social support and political representation is undermined by the fact that it is a sister organization of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been supported by the regime to secure the Kurdish areas. The recent reports that the PYD has taken control of all of the Kurdish areas in northern Syria are largely exaggerated. Instead, it has taken advantage of the security vacuum that has emerged with the diminishing control and authority of Damascus in the outlying areas of the country. The vast majority of Syria's Kurds are against the PYD and its open alliance with the Syrian regime.¹¹⁶

In this logical framework, following the PYD's capture control in Rojava, Turkish military exercised maneuvers on the Syrian border. In addition, Turkey sent armor and missile batteries to regions bordering Rojava.¹¹⁷ As a response to Turkey's tough stance, the PYD leader questioned whether Turkey had any right to interfere in Rojava. According to Saleh Muslim, "the protection of my people in my areas, in my town: that is my right, no-one can deny it, and that's what we did. So there is no need for Turkey to be worried and make threats."¹¹⁸

In April 2013, speaking at a conference in İstanbul, Syrian National Coalition leader Moaz al-Khatib said that he attempted the mediation of talks between Turkey and the PYD. He had contacted the co-leader of the PYD, Saleh Muslim, and he had received a positive response from the Kurdish leader. However, his initiative didn't yield as Turkey expected a serious will from the PYD against Syrian regime.¹¹⁹ For a long time, the PYD expected Turkey to begin direct negotiation talks. However, Turkey

¹¹⁶ İbrahim Kalın, "The Post-Assad Syria?" *Today's Zaman*, August 1, 2012.

¹¹⁷ "Turkey Continues Tank Drills on Syrian Border," *Today's Zaman*, August 2, 2012 .

¹¹⁸ "PYD Party Says Turkey Should Not Interfere in Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 7, 2012.

¹¹⁹ Sevil Erkuş, "Rebels 'Mediate' Talks between Turkey, PYD," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 22, 2013.

rejected any contact with the PYD "in fear of setting a precedent for recognition of an autonomous Kurdish entity in Syria."¹²⁰

Meanwhile, Turkey domestically initiated peace talks with the PKK in late 2012 and early 2013; however its policy toward the PYD continued to be ambivalent. Nevertheless when its containment policy towards the PYD via Barzani failed, it entered into a dialogue with the PYD although it continued to accept the KNC as the sole legitimate power of Syria's Kurds.¹²¹

The expected meeting was realized in mid-June 2013 when Turkish officials met with Salih Muslim in Cairo. It was claimed that the meeting was realized as a result of the PYD's repeated calls. Interestingly denying the past, a Turkish diplomat said that they had "never had an organic opposition to the PYD," expressing Ankara's three expectations from the party as follows: "taking a clear stance against the Syrian regime, against the PKK, and not already imposing conditions such as autonomous rule for the future of Syria at this stage." Turkish officials said that the dialogue with the PYD could continue if the party cleared its attitude in this framework of three expectations.¹²²

At the same time, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç stated that the Turkish government would not allow any "fait accompli" in Syria referring to a Kurdish de facto situation in northern Syria, while the Turkish army was engaging in military arrangements along the Syrian border. He added that they didn't consider any military intervention that would complicate the situation in Syria. Arınç's statement obviously clarified that Turkey was not planning to cross the border to intervene

¹²⁰ Daniel Nisman, "Have Syrian Kurds Had a Change of Heart?" *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 12, 2013.

¹²¹ "Flight of Icarus?" *ICG Report*, p. 18.

¹²² Sevil Erkuş, "PYD Leader Meets Turkish Officials," *Hürriyet Daily News*, June 3, 2013.

against the PYD as before Turkish government had explained it wouldn't tolerate a fait accompli in Syria by implying an intervention in Rojava.¹²³

Salih Muslim's visits to Turkey accelerated. After less than a month Salih Muslim returned to Turkey in August 2013 for official talks with Turkish diplomats. The YPG forces had gained control of the Syrian town of Serê Kaniyê after violent fight with the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front since mid-July 2013. Although the Turkish state officials admitted that the communication between Ankara and the PYD became quasi-hectic diplomatic, they claimed that they were not behaving towards the PYD as if it was the only Kurdish representative among Syria's Kurds that the Turkish government had been talking to. On the contrary, they claimed that Turkey was in contact with several Syrian Kurdish parties and groups at different levels.¹²⁴

Although the PYD forces started to clash with the pro-governmental Syrian forces from late 2012 onwards and the PYD declared the establishment of an autonomous region, Ankara maintained its suspicions about the alliance of the PYD and the Syrian regime.¹²⁵ Following the announcement of an autonomous administration in Rojava, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that Assad had handed over five provinces to the PYD.¹²⁶

To summarize, the withdrawal of Syrian military from mainly Kurdish cities along the border raised Turkey's fear regarding the PKK. On the other hand, the PYD was engaged in consolidating its power against a possible chaotic environment after Assad's fall. According to Prime Minister Erdoğan, the PYD was the PKK and its

¹²³ "Turkey is Not Mulling Military Intervention in Syria, Deputy PM Arınç Says," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 24, 2013.

¹²⁴ "Syrian Kurd Leader Back in Turkey," *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 14, 2013.

¹²⁵ Bill Park, "Turkey's Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas- Syria, Iraq and at Home; How They Are Related, and Where They Might Lead." *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 5, No. 1, July 2013, p. 44.

¹²⁶ "Syria's Kurds." *ICG Report*, p. 15.

main enemy was Turkey.¹²⁷ In this regard, Ankara demanded the fall of the PYD. However, the fall of the PYD would endanger the future of the uprisings as Veysel Ayhan pointed out that all ethnic groups, including Kurds, were armed. In case of pressure against the Kurds, both the PKK and Barzani would mobilize their military forces.¹²⁸

In fact, as Abbas Vali put forth, Turkish government could not adopt an "independent policy" towards Syria. The main determinant of Turkish foreign policy making towards Syrian crisis had been indexed to the Kurdish issue and in particular the PKK.¹²⁹ It appeared that Turkey repositioned itself as Kurdish autonomy in Rojava became unstoppable.¹³⁰ However it was too early to say that "Turkey's alleged proxy war against the PYD looks to be over", although Salih Muslim argued that the number of jihadists coming from Turkey decreased compared to the past and Turkey ceased to support these groups which had been combating against the PYD.¹³¹

4.3.2. Kurdish National Council: A Containment Policy toward the PYD

The PYD's revival from the spring of 2011 onwards triggered the other Kurdish parties in Rojava to form a strong entity. In October 2011 sixteen political factions established the Kurdish National Council (KNC) under the auspices of Kurdistan Regional government President Barzani. It should be remarked that most parties

¹²⁷ "Syria and The Kurds: South by South-east,": *The Economist*, Turkey, October 20th 2012 <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21564870-fiercely-anti-assad-stance-turkey-taking-syria-aggravating-long-running-troubles> (Accessed on April 21, 2013).

¹²⁸ Mete Çubukçu, "Araplarla Kürtler Savaşırsa!" *Radikal*, November 4, 2012.

¹²⁹ "Professor Vali: No State Will Tolerate Autonomous, Radical Left Kurdish Rule", *Today's Zaman*, September 2, 2012.

¹³⁰ "New Kurdish Equation, Turkey's New Game Plan," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 12, 2013.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

which joined the council were splits of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party (Partiya Kurdên Demokratên Sûrî), which was Syria's first Kurdish party founded in 1957.¹³²

Kurdish National Council arranged its first meeting in Arbil, the capital city of the KRG, in which they called for the establishment of a "Kurdish federal state" in Syria on January 28 and 29, 2012, by the attendance of Kurdistan Regional Government President Masoud Barzani.¹³³

In general, Kurdish National Council had four main demands for Syria's Kurds:

- 1) The constitutional recognition of Kurdish identity,
- 2) Consideration of the Kurdish issue as an integral part of Syrian domestic policy,
- 3) Removal of all racist policies and discriminatory laws implemented against Kurds,
- 4) Protection of the Kurdish national rights in line with the international conventions and agreements in a decentralized Syrian government.¹³⁴

As mentioned above, the distinctive priority in Turkish foreign policy with regard to Syria was to prevent an autonomous authority in Rojava. When Turkey realized that it could not prevent the emergence of a Kurdish administration, it triggered creation of a Kurdish council in which the PYD wouldn't be dominant.¹³⁵ Behind the establishment of the KNC, there was the discontent of Barzani and Ankara for the PKK and the PYD and their distaste for the PYD's sovereignty over the Rojava.¹³⁶

¹³² "Syria's Kurds." *ICG Report*, p. 3.

¹³³ İpek Yezdani, "Syrian Kurds Aim to Establish 'Federal State'," *Hürriyet Daily News*, February 7, 2012.

¹³⁴ İlhan Tanır, "Syrian Kurds Welcome Turkish Humanitarian Corridor to Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, February 27, 2012.

¹³⁵ "Professor Vali: No State Will Tolerate Autonomous, Radical Left Kurdish Rule," *Today's Zaman*, September 2, 2012.

¹³⁶ "Flight of Icarus." *ICG Report*, p. 2.

In July 2012 Barzani tried to decrease the influence of the PYD among Syria's Kurds by brokering a united front between the PYD and the KNC.¹³⁷ As a result of the attempts of Barzani, the KNC and the PYD agreed to establish the Supreme Kurdish Committee which would be a power-sharing mechanism between the KNC and the PYD. However, the agreement remained as a "dead letter," because the KNC failed to function effectively within this committee.¹³⁸ Also, two events caused the de facto abolishment of the SKC.¹³⁹ Respectively, the Kurdistan Regional Government closed its border with Rojava in May 2013¹⁴⁰ while the PYD was clashing with the al-Nusra Front, and the KRG did not allow Salih Muslim to fly to the US from Arbil in late October 2013.¹⁴¹

After the establishment of the SKC, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu visited Arbil on August 1, 2012 to discuss the developments in Rojava which had caused concerns in Ankara about the establishment of a de facto Kurdish administration in the region. The determining factor behind Davutoğlu's visit was to warn Barzani not to back the PYD's moves in Rojava after the capture of control in a number of towns along the Turkish border by the PYD. Davutoğlu had previously depicted the relations between the PKK and the PYD as "terrorist activity" and warned that Turkey would not allow "moves that could endanger Turkey's security."¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Bill Park, "Turkey's Kurdish Dilemma." p. 47-48,

¹³⁸ "Flight of Icarus." *ICG Report*, p. 2,

¹³⁹ According to the report of Democratic Progress Institute, the decisions of the Supreme Kurdish Council were implemented only in Qamishli, the largest Kurdish town of Qamishli. Cengiz Çandar, "Turkey's Dual Challenge: The Kurdish Question and Syria", *Democratic Progress Institute Report*, December 2012, p. 47.

¹⁴⁰ "Hewler Rojava'ya kapisini kapatti," *Özgür Gündem*, May 22, 2013, İlhami Buldan and Mehmet Nur Ekinci: http://www.ozgur-gundem.com/?haberID=73505&haberBaslik=Hewler%20Rojava%E2%80%99ya%20kap%C4%B1s%C4%B1n%C4%B1%20kapatt%C4%B1&action=haber_detay&module=nuce (Accessed on 28th November 2011),

¹⁴¹ Fehim Taştekin, "Kürt Kürt'ün Kurdu!" *Radikal*, October 31, 2013,

¹⁴² "FM Davutoglu Chides Iraqi Kurds Over Syria's Security," *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 2, 2012.

Taking into consideration the good relations of Turkey with the KRG, Cengiz Çandar asserted that Turkey did not object to autonomy in Rojava which would be under the hegemony of Barzani¹⁴³, although Erdoğan said that Turkey urged Barzani that the autonomous administration in northern Iraq would not be applied to Syria on October 31st.¹⁴⁴

All in all, the KNC had advantages and disadvantages together. The biggest advantage that the KNC enjoyed was the international legitimacy provided by the KRG.¹⁴⁵ However compared to the PYD, the KNC had a very weak presence in Syria's Kurdish populated regions. Although they stated that they were planning to open offices in most of the Kurdish populated areas, it remained only statements. Furthermore, it lacked a military wing of its own¹⁴⁶ and in addition, the KNC was deprived of a unifying vision and program and was disconnected from young activists.¹⁴⁷ More importantly, the personal contentions divided the organization on the grounds that Abdulhakim Darwish (close to Talabani) and Abdulhakim Bashar (close to Barzani) reflected their rivalries (PUK-KDP) over the Syria's Kurds.¹⁴⁸

4.4. Turkey's Relations with the Syrian Opposition Movements

As mentioned above, after the uprisings started in Syria, Turkish government was confronted with an impasse whether to push the Syrian regime to make reform by encouraging President Assad or to support the opposition movements which

¹⁴³ Cengiz Çandar, "Suriye'de 'Çıkılmaz Sokakta Yürüyüş'," *Radikal*, July 27, 2012,

¹⁴⁴ "Turkey warned Iraqi Kurds that autonomy would not be applied in Syria: PM," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 2, 2012.

¹⁴⁵ "Syria's Kurds." *ICG Report*, p. 18,

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

challenged the existing Assad administration.¹⁴⁹ On the one hand Turkey appeared to encourage Assad's regime to make reformations. On the other hand Turkey openly supported the opposition movement. More openly, Turkey was offering Assad to share power with the Muslim Brotherhood, whose leader had already moved to İstanbul,¹⁵⁰ while at the same time pushing for reformations.¹⁵¹

It is believed that the leader cadre of the AKP was influenced by the doctrines of Sayyid Qutb and Hasan al-Banna, who at the same time were the religious and political leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hence it was argued that the AKP government thought that more friendly governments would come to power in Arab countries under the Muslim Brotherhood leadership when the uprisings started in the Arab world.¹⁵² In this sense, Turkey thought that the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria would come to power if Assad stepped down.¹⁵³ Although Turkey supported the SNC, it mostly sponsored the Muslim Brotherhood¹⁵⁴ even though the Brotherhood had proportionally small social ground in Syria.¹⁵⁵ They had such good relations that the Muslim Brotherhood leadership even called on Turkey for the military intervention in Syria.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁹ Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Spring: Between Ethics and Self-Interest." *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2012, p. 46.

¹⁵⁰ Moubayed, "Milking the Male Goat.", p. 77.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 75.

¹⁵² Yasemin Akbaba and Özgür Özdamar, "Ethnicity, Religion and Foreign Policy: Turkish-Syrian Relation since the 1980s" in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür eds., *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, England: Ashgate, 2013, p. 130.

¹⁵³ Moubayed, "Milking the Male Goat.", p. 80.

¹⁵⁴ Christopher Phillips, "Into the Quagmire." p. 7.

¹⁵⁵ "Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey," *International Crisis Group Report*, April 30, 2013, Brussels, p. 28.

¹⁵⁶ <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48370> (Accessed on November 28th 2014).

Turkey allowed the Syrian Opposition to hold its first conference in the city of Antalya, from May 31 to June 3 in 2011.¹⁵⁷ This conference was a milestone for the Syrian opposition because a committee, in which various groups would be represented, was formed as follows: the Muslim Brotherhood:4, Kurds:4, Liberals:4, Arab tribes:4, Damascus Declaration Group:4, Youngs:4, Women:4 and Independents:4.¹⁵⁸

Then the Syrian opposition again held a meeting in İstanbul in August 2011 in order to form a national council to represent the revolution in Syria.¹⁵⁹ Two opposition movements were developed in this meeting. One was political and the other was armed resistance. Although they began separately, they functioned with similar purposes. The Syrian National Council became the center of political efforts while the Free Syrian Army acted within military terms to overthrow Assad. The decision to set up the SNC was first declared in İstanbul on August 23rd 2011. Then the SNC was unofficially established in Turkey on September 15th.¹⁶⁰

On September 30, 2011, Turkey declared that it would put leverage on Syria. Subsequently, the SNC opened an office in İstanbul and was officially established on October 2, 2011 at a conference which was conveyed in İstanbul.¹⁶¹

Turkey was really pursuing an incoherent foreign policy toward Syria. During his meeting with the head of the SNC, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu had urged the SNC to express their demands by peaceful ways on October 17, 2011.¹⁶² However less than

¹⁵⁷ Jeremy M. Sharp, "Unrest in Syria." p. 8.

¹⁵⁸ Veysel Ayhan and Oytun Orhan, "Suriye Muhalefeti'nin Antalya Toplantısı: Sonuçlar, Temel Sorunlara Bakış ve Türkiye'den Beklentiler," *Ortadoğu Analiz*, Temmuz-Ağustos 2011, Cilt:3, Sayı: 31-32, p. 12.

¹⁵⁹ İpek Yezdani, "Syrian Opposition: Assad's Promises Are 'Meaningless'," *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 22, 2011.

¹⁶⁰ David W. Lesch. *Syria*, p. 167.

¹⁶¹ Philip Robins, "Turkey's 'double gravity' predicament." p. 395.

¹⁶² Sevil Küçükkoşum, "Ankara Officially Meets Syrian National Council," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 18, 2011.

two months later, in early December 2011, this time Ankara itself announced that it would impose economic sanctions, measures that stood far away from peace and negotiation, on Syria.¹⁶³

Turkey not only backed the founding of the Syrian National Council¹⁶⁴ but also, as the head of the SNC Burhan Ghalion stated, "Turkey has become a partner for the SNC; we have the same outlook towards Syrian people."¹⁶⁵

Then Turkey took primary part in the foundation of the Free Syrian Army.¹⁶⁶ In an interview, Khaled Khoca, the representative of the SNC in Turkey, confirmed Turkey's logistic support to the FSA. He explained that:

...the coordination bureau cannot be opened anywhere else than Turkey because the people that will be assigned to the bureau have to work in coordination with the leaders of the Free Syrian Army, Riad al-Assad and General Mustafa al-Sheikh, the leader of the Higher Revolutionary Council. And they both live in Turkey.¹⁶⁷

In March 2012 Ankara and Qatar initiated a meeting in order to unite the Syrian opposition under the roof of Syrian National Council.¹⁶⁸ Foreign Minister Davutoğlu said that the Syrian opposition broadened the opposition's scope in Doha on November 11, 2012. He added that "all those who support the rightful struggle of the Syrian people should declare clear support for this agreement and be more active."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³ Robins, "Turkey's 'double gravity' predicament." p. 395.

¹⁶⁴ Ünal Ünsal, "Irak ve Suriye Politikası." p. 158.

¹⁶⁵ İpek Yezdani, "Turkey a Partner For SNC," *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 11, 2012.

¹⁶⁶ Ünal Ünsal, "Irak ve Suriye Politikası." p. 159.

¹⁶⁷ "SNC Seeks Arms Office in Turkey," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 2, 2012.

¹⁶⁸ İpek Yezdani, "Turkey and Qatar Invite Opposition to İstanbul," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 27, 2012.

¹⁶⁹ "New Syrian Opposition Pushes for Recognition," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 13, 2012.

Foreign Minister Davutoğlu announced that Turkey recognized the Syrian National Council as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.¹⁷⁰ Then in June 2013, among other countries which participated in the conference of Friends' of Syria Group, Turkey agreed to provide material support to opposition against the regime forces.¹⁷¹

Turkey was happy with the gains of the SNC and the FSA against Syrian regime. In this sense, Turkey's stance was best described by İbrahim Kalın, the chief adviser of Prime Minister Erdoğan:

The Assad regime's end seems more imminent now than it was several months ago. This is not only because Syrian opposition forces led by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other combat groups are making gains on the ground. It is also because the majority of the Syrian people, including the minority Alawites which have been the traditional base of the Assad-Baath regime for the last 40 years, and Syrian Christians are increasingly realizing that the old regime's days are numbered.¹⁷²

However, the efforts of Turkey to make Assad step down proved fruitless as the uprisings in Syria didn't create a regime change. Indeed, "a weak and disorganized opposition" reinforced the position of Assad's regime.¹⁷³ Turkish foreign policy became embedded in a dramatic situation as suggested by Professor İhsan Dağı:

In short, I do not see much leverage for Turkey to remove Assad and help establish a friendly government in Syria. Turkey will either increase its support for the Free Syrian Army, which will make Turkey a target for further terrorist activities originating from Syria, or start an operation against the regime in Damascus on its own that will get Turkey into a regional war.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ "Turkey Recognizes Syrian Coalition as Legitimate Representative of Syrian People," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 15, 2012.

¹⁷¹ "Friends of Syria Agree Military Aid to Rebels: Statement," *Hürriyet Daily News*, June 22, 2013.

¹⁷² İbrahim Kalın, "The Post-Assad Syria?" *Today's Zaman*, August 1, 2012.

¹⁷³ İhsan Dağı, "Who Will Topple Assad, and When?" *Today's Zaman*, February 17, 2013.

¹⁷⁴ İhsan Dağı, "What Can Turkey Do About Syria?" *Today's Zaman*, May 12, 2013.

Things occurred as İhsan Dağı expressed. The inability of the SNC to topple Assad pushed Turkey to increase its assistance for the armed opposition. Despite Turkey's denial, the border residents and western journalists asserted that Turkey was training and arming the insurgents.¹⁷⁵

In this regard, Turkey primarily supported the al-Nusra Front which declared its formation on January 23, 2012 and declared its allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri in April 2013.¹⁷⁶

The reports continuously claimed that Ankara allowed the insurgents to enter Syria by using its territory.¹⁷⁷ Turkey's support was not just limited to transportation activities. In December 2012 approximately 260 insurgent commanders met in Antalya in order to elect a Supreme Military Council and a "nominal" new head. Beyond these, the fighters of these opposition movements could be easily met in the border towns and villages.¹⁷⁸ The report of the ICG obviously revealed how these fighters became a daily part of Turkish life in Hatay province:

A visit to Hatay shows how prominent and desperate the armed Syrian opposition is. A special camp in Apaydın houses officers and their families who have fled the regime, fronting onto a public road and appearing to consist of nothing more than tight ranks of white tents like the other collective centers. One day in January 2013, the main streets of Yayladağ were full of unarmed Syrian insurgents shopping. Most said they were on monthly leave to see their families. Others were shopping for supplies including foodstuffs and clothing for their units. One of the hospitals for and run by Syrians in Reyhanlı treats

¹⁷⁵ Christopher Phillips, "Into the Quagmire." p. 7.

¹⁷⁶ "Al-Nusra Fears Hinder West Aid to Syria Rebels," *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 22, 2013.

¹⁷⁷ Sedat Ergin, "Warnings About Syria From the US to Ankara," *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 10, 2013.

¹⁷⁸ "Blurring the border." *ICG Report*, p. 36.

mainly convalescent fighters who rest in small wards or limp through a one-story collection of prefabricated units by the main road.¹⁷⁹

In fact, it was no secret among the top officials in Ankara that the al-Nusra Front was considered the most powerful force against the Syrian regime by the Turkish government.¹⁸⁰ In this respect, a senior Turkish security official confessed that Turkey was pursuing the principle of supporting the Syrian opposition with arms.¹⁸¹ In this sense, it was claimed that 160 cargo flights that carried arms had arrived to Esenboğa airport in Ankara with an aim to reach Syrian insurgents by late March 2013.¹⁸²

On June 3, 2014, Turkey put up the al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organization,¹⁸³ while the US had listed the same organization as terrorist in December 2012.¹⁸⁴ Turkey had criticized the decision of the US when it had designated the al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organization. Turkish Foreign Undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioğlu had said: "It was more important to focus on the "chaos" that Assad had created instead of groups such as al-Nusra."¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ "Why is Jabhat al-Nusra No Longer Useful to Turkey?" Semih İdiz, June 10, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2014/06/idiz-turkey-syria-opposition-nusra-terrorist-unsc-erdogan.html#ixzz3KZ5rTW9W> (Accessed on November 15, 2014).

¹⁸¹ Interview in Ankara, February 2013, cited in "Blurring the border." *ICG Report*, p. 37.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁸³ "Why is Jabhat al-Nusra No Longer Useful to Turkey?" Semih İdiz, June 10, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2014/06/idiz-turkey-syria-opposition-nusra-terrorist-unsc-erdogan.html#ixzz3KZ5rTW9W> (Accessed on November 27, 2014).

¹⁸⁴ "Turkey Lists al-Nusra Front as Terrorist Organization," *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 3, 2014.

¹⁸⁵ "Turkey Reconsiders Support for Jabhat al-Nusra," Semih İdiz, August 18, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2013/08/turkey-considers-support-for-al-nusra.html#ixzz3KZmkKApW> (Accessed on November 27, 2014).

Turkey's decision regarding the al-Nusra Front came out when it became apparent that Assad would remain in power for the "foreseeable future" and there wouldn't be a direct military intervention against the Assad regime, so Turkey had no choice.¹⁸⁶

4.4.1. Turkey's Policy towards the Syrian Opposition in order to Contain Syria's Kurds in the Military and Political Spheres

Turkey's, the SNC's and Syria's Kurds's first encounter was in mid-2011 during the Antalya meeting, which was backed by Turkey. A majority of the Kurdish parties did not attend the conference giving the reason that Turkey had continued its anti-Kurdish policies. In fact, the conference committee also announced that they had just called five Kurdish parties and some Kurdish oppositionist in exile.¹⁸⁷

Kurds didn't join the İstanbul Conference of the Syrian opposition that conveyed on July 16, 2011 under the conditions that the other Arab members maintained to insist on the name "Syrian Arab Republic." This name was not acceptable for the Kurdish Parties. In addition, they also criticized Turkey's position which was expressed in the report of the Democratic Process Institute:

The demands and the legitimate rights of the Kurds are still ignored and this clearly shows the Turkish influence and impact over the Syrian opposition... Turkey fears that the Kurds will be key players in the new Syria which is supposed to be a democratic state, and it's further concerned that the role played by Kurds in Syria would reflect on Turkey's Kurds, too. Therefore, the Syrian Kurds opposition views the growing role and influence of the Turkish government over the SNC with suspicion.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ "Why is Jabhat al-Nusra No Longer Useful to Turkey?" Semih İdiz, June 10, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2014/06/idiz-turkey-syria-opposition-nusra-terrorist-unsc-erdogan.html#ixzz3KZ5rTW9W> (Accessed on November 27, 2014).

¹⁸⁷ Veysel Ayhan and Oytun Orhan, "Suriye Muhalefeti'nin Antalya Toplantısı." p. 11.

¹⁸⁸ Çandar, "Turkey's Dual Challenge," p. 36.

On the other hand, the PYD took a tough stance against the Kurds joined to the SNC meeting by blaming them as "cahş;"¹⁸⁹ a word that is used for those Kurds who cooperated with the enemy fighting against the Kurds. The PYD also stated that the priority of the SNC has been to ensure Turkey with sufficient ground for military intervention to Syria to establish buffer zone in Rojava, in order to avoid a Kurdish administration.¹⁹⁰

Returning to Turkey's policy, initially Ankara desired the participation of the PYD in the SNC with an aim to discourage the Kurds from the formation of a separate administration.¹⁹¹ However, the PYD did not join the Syrian National Council since they were not accepted as a separate ethnic identity.¹⁹² Later, the PYD joined the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB) which rejected any form of intervention in Syria.¹⁹³

The other representative of Syria's Kurds, the KNC held an important meeting with the SNC taking place in Arbil in January 2012. The talks didn't yield when the SNC rejected to admit the written guarantees for the self-determination rights of Kurds "within Syria's territorial integrity." The leading heads of the SNC said that they would not accept federalism. Also, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the most powerful part of the SNC, declared through its representative that it rejected the option of federalism and opposed to change the name of the country to the "Syrian Republic" instead of the "Syrian Arab Republic."¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ A Kurdish word which means donkey's foal.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 43.

¹⁹¹ Kadri Gürsel, "Is Syria Becoming a 'Second Northern Iraq'?" *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 17, 2012,

¹⁹² Mete Çubukçu, "Araplarla Kürtler Savaşırsa!" *Radikal*, November 4, 2012,

¹⁹³ "Syria's Kurds." *ICG Report*, p. 37.

¹⁹⁴ Cengiz Çandar, "Turkey's Dual Challenge." p. 39.

Turkey also made an effort to unite the KNC and the SNC before the meetings of the "Friends' of Syria Group" in İstanbul which would be held on April 1st 2012. However, Turkey's efforts proved fruitless as the 'National Covenant' issued by the SNC clearly touched upon the Kurdish rights.¹⁹⁵ Then, the SNC, with Turkey's direct involvement, decided to annex "The National Covenant concerning the Kurdish Question in Syria" to its "National Covenant" in order to convince the Kurdish parties of their participation. However, new covenant again didn't mention any status, neither the autonomy nor the federal, so the adoption of the new covenant could not accomplish its aim.¹⁹⁶ It was argued that the non-integration of the Kurdish parties to the SNC, which was apparently under the influence of Turkey, became the biggest handicap of Turkey that it couldn't achieve to create a unifying Syrian opposition.¹⁹⁷

After the PYD gained influence in Rojava, Turkey supported the Syrian National Council to meet the PYD threat.¹⁹⁸ In fact Turkey was so concerned about Syria's Kurds growing more powerful, that it did not pay attention to any actor, including radical Islamists providing that they opposed to the Kurdish desires. After the beginning of the clashes between Kurdish and Islamist militias in Serê Kaniyê at the Turkish border in November 2012, it appeared that Ankara "prioritized supporting those groups pitted against Kurdish militias."¹⁹⁹ Above all, the PYD was not invited to talks in Doha in November 2012 in which the Syrian National Coalition was formed.²⁰⁰

Beginning in November 2012, Syrian opposition fighters and the YPG members had clashed until February 2013 in Serê Kaniyê. The PYD bluntly accused Turkey of

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 31.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p, 33.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁹⁸ Michael M. Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No.3, 2013, p. 447.

¹⁹⁹ Scheller. *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game*. p. 118.

²⁰⁰ "Defiant PYD Rejects New Syria Opposition," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 22, 2012.

providing ground for Syrian opposition fighters in Ceylanpinar which was "a jumping off point" for them. According to Salih Muslim, Serê Kaniyê was a strategic location on the Turkish border and its fall would enhance a "domino effect" on the fall of "Syrian Kurdistan."²⁰¹ Also, the International Crisis Group Report revealed that numerous Syrian opposition fighters crossed the Turkish-Syrian border at the district of Ceylanpinar in order to fight against the PYD in Serê Kaniyê and the Kobanê front in November 2012.²⁰²

In July 2013, following the Kurds' revolution in Rojava, it was now al-Nusra launching attacks on the region.²⁰³ The clash was so severe that in mid-August 2013, 20,000 civilian Kurds crossed the KRG border. Al-Nusra failed to contain the advancement of Kurds in northern Syria²⁰⁴ and they suffered heavy losses at the hands of the YPG forces.

In an interview with Turkish daily Taraf, Salih Muslim explained that Turkey was employing the radical-Islamic groups to fight against them on the ground that they had documented the affiliation of these groups with Turkey.²⁰⁵ Also, the IMPR report clarified that Syria's Kurds repeatedly criticized the perceived Turkey support to the radical Islamic groups against Kurds.²⁰⁶ For instance, the PYD leader said that

²⁰¹ "Syrian Kurdish Leader Says Turkey Seeks Buffer Zone in Syria" <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/02/syrian-kurds-accuse-turkey.html#ixzz3KBQDAPuO> (Accessed on November 26, 2013).

²⁰² "Blurring the border." *ICG Report*, p. 25.

²⁰³ <http://www.kurdishquestion.com/component/k2/al-nusra-deproscribed-by-turkey/124-al-nusra-deproscribed-by-turkey.html> (Accessed on November 30, 2014).

²⁰⁴ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2013/08/turkey-considers-support-for-al-nusra.html#ixzz3KZmkKApW> (Accessed on November 27, 2013).

²⁰⁵ "Ankara Denies Accusations of Providing Arms to Extremist Groups in Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, September 18, 2013.

²⁰⁶ *IMPR Report*, p. 10.

Turkey had turned a blind eye when 120 ISIS fighters crossed the border from Turkey in mid-October 2014.²⁰⁷

In brief, Turkey is perceived as the supporter of consolidating a Sunni-Arab regime in Syria in which there would not be any political, military and cultural rights for Kurds.²⁰⁸ Turkey respectively supported the all opposition movements, the SNC, the FSA, al-Nusra Front in order to contain expansion of Kurds of Syria as also confirmed by a pro-government academician:

Turkey openly used its geopolitical leverage to ask its allies to keep away from the PYD. It even tried to weaken the PKK influence on Syrian Kurds. It tried to strengthen Masoud Barzani, the president of northern Iraq, and supported certain Arab tribes and radical groups to put military and psychological pressure on the PYD. None of these attempts seem to have succeeded.²⁰⁹

4.5. Buffer Zone

As repeatedly mentioned above, the developments in Rojava caused a threat for Turkey. Apart from Turkey's direct involvement in this issue, it also struggled for an international reaction towards Kurdish formation in Syria.

Ankara adopted a tougher stance against Syria following the arrival of Syrian refugees which ceased the manageability of soft power between the two countries and began to consider a buffer zone along Syrian border.²¹⁰

Although it was not explicitly expressed, the scenario of a buffer zone has been related to "Kurdish dimension" of the developments in Syria. The buffer zone would

²⁰⁷ "Syrian Kurdish Leader Sees War of 'Attrition' in Kobane," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 24, 2014.

²⁰⁸ *IMPR Report*, p. 27.

²⁰⁹ Nihat Ali Özcan, "Erdoğan's Negotiations With the PKK and the Syrian Kurds," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 21, 2013.

²¹⁰ Ünal Ünsal, "Irak ve Suriye Politikası." p. 158.

be realized in the event of a flow of refugees from Kurdish cities Idlib, Amûdê, Dirbêsiyê, and al-Haseka.²¹¹

Also, Turkey feared that in case of an unrest spread to Aleppo, there could be a massive flow of refugees into Turkey. A wave of Syrian refugees into Turkey would allow the PKK to infiltrate from the border, which was something Ankara didn't wish. Hence, Ankara was willing to establish a buffer zone inside Syria, where Ankara would supply the Syrian citizen security and relief.²¹²

Kendal Efrini, a Syrian Kurdish opposition member and representative of the Alliance of Syrian Liberals, said that Kurds were very much against the regime. Further he claimed that the al-Assad regime considered launching an operation in the northern regions where Kurds live in order to protect his position. However, Syria was afraid of Turkey. Efrini said that Assad's regime feared that Kurdish immigrants would flow into Turkey in case of an attack. Then it would be a godsend for the Turkish army to interfere at the border and create a buffer zone.²¹³

From the beginning of the Syrian crisis onwards, Turkey repeatedly voiced the need to exert a buffer zone. Although officially the reason for establishing a buffer zone was explained as humanitarian assistance to Syrians,²¹⁴ it was obviously aimed to contain the Kurdish expansion in Syria.

Despite major efforts, Turkey couldn't become successful in drawing the attention of the international community to establish a buffer zone.

²¹¹ Cengiz Çandar, "Türkiye'nin Suriye belası," *Radikal*, June 16, 2011.

²¹² Soner Çağaptay, "A Turkish Buffer Zone Inside Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 3, 2011.

²¹³ İpek Yezdani, "[Assad might attack Syrian Kurds, Opposition Claims](#)," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 3, 2011.

²¹⁴ Serkan Demirtaş, "Ankara Wants to Hear US Scenario on Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, September 24, 2014.

4.6. Kobanê: An Example of the Fall of Turkish Foreign Policy Toward Rojava

After the canton of Kobanê was surrounded by the ISIS, Turkey became the only place where people could have their needs met. Kobanê is geographically separated from the other regions under the control of the PYD as seen on the map below.²¹⁵ However Turkey closed its border which was a message to Kurdish people to "go surrender to ISIS."²¹⁶



Figure 2: The geography of Kobanê (Ayn al-Arab) in Rojava map²¹⁷

The ISIS, Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, which was previously known as Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic State of Iraq, is a terrorist organization that wants to establish a "caliphate" based on Sunni sect of Islam.

There were strategic reasons for the ISIS to attack Kobanê as it was in the middle of Cerablus and Tel Abyad which were controlled by the ISIS. The ISIS wanted to

²¹⁵ Sevil Erkuş, "Ankara Urges PYD Leader to Join Ranks of Free Syrian Army Against al-Assad," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 5, 2014.

²¹⁶ Fehim Taştekin, "Syrian Kurdish Mother Killed at Turkish Border," May 21, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/syrian-kurdish-mother-killed-turkish-border.html#ixzz3JGKQt1NT> (Accessed on November 14, 2014).

²¹⁷ "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria," *International Crisis Group Middle East Report*, No. 151, May 8, 2014, p. 26.

connect these two cities by seizing Kobanê. Also, there was a gateway to Turkey in Kobanê that ISIS wanted. Moreover, ideologically Kobanê was the first city establishing its autonomy on July 19, 2012.²¹⁸

On behalf of Turkey, President Erdoğan reiterated that Turkey would not give military aid to the PYD and Kobanê, giving reason that it would mean to support a terrorist organization²¹⁹ believing that the PYD and the YPG are terrorist organizations which are extensions of the PKK.²²⁰

On the other hand, the siege of Kobanê by the ISIS became a chance for Turkey, at which point it declared that it would help Kobanê if Rojava Kurds abolished their autonomy administration and participated in the opposition movements against the Assad regime.²²¹

Meanwhile, it was tragic for Turkey that Prime Minister Davutoğlu explained that he was "in favor of heeding the Kurds who were demanding a corridor for military and humanitarian assistance," while President Erdoğan was continuing his allegations by denying to Davutoglu that both the PYD and YPG were terrorist organizations on the grounds that Turkey wouldn't assist them.²²²

²¹⁸ Fehim Taştekin, "Kobani is Becoming Turkey's War," October 8, 2014", <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-syria-kurds-isis-kobani-war.html#ixzz3JGKfEaxL>(Accessed on November 14, 2014).

²¹⁹ Murat Yetkin, "Trying to Understand What Turkey is Doing About Kurds," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 20, 2014.

²²⁰ Fehim Taştekin, "Erdogan Plays 'Arab Card' in Kobani," October 28, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-kobani-erdogan-deals-arab-card.html#ixzz3JGL8z78z> (Accessed on November 14, 2014).

²²¹ Fehim Taştekin, "Kobani is Becoming Turkey's War," October 8, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-syria-kurds-isis-kobani-war.html#ixzz3JGKfEaxL> (Accessed on November 14, 2014).

²²² Fehim Taştekin, "Ankara Struggles to Maintain Bearings in Kobani," October 21, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-united-states-kurds-obama-kobani.html#ixzz3JGLJS3Je> (Accessed on November 14, 2014).

On October 18, 2014, flying from Kabul to Turkey, Erdoğan explained that it would be wrong for the US to help the PYD with arms as follows his speech:

At the moment, the PYD is equal to the PKK for us. It is also a terrorist organization. It would be very wrong for America – with whom we are allies and who we are together with in NATO – to expect us to say ‘yes’ after openly announcing such support for a terrorist organization. It cannot expect such a thing from us and we cannot say ‘yes’ to such a thing either.²²³

Just 20 minutes after Erdoğan's plane landed in İstanbul, he learned that the US changed its policy as he talked to President Barack Obama via a phone call. Obama informed Erdoğan that the US would assist the PYD in Kobanê with weapons. After the phone call, Erdoğan's press advisor said that both Erdoğan and Obama agreed to keep their cooperation to strengthen their joint struggle against the ISIS.²²⁴

The decision of the US was not surprising as it considered the radical Islamic groups more dangerous, and therefore to have good relations with Kurdish actors.²²⁵

Immediately after the phone call, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that Turkey would allow the Kurdish Peshmergas to cross Kobanê by using the Turkish territory to support the PYD. It was surprising that Turkey was militarily helping the PYD forces resisting the ISIS. "This became evident following the phone call by Obama, despite Erdoğan's strong words about US-PYD contact and Turkey's condition of al-Assad condition for that."²²⁶

²²³ "President Erdoğan Says PYD ‘No Different Than PKK’ for Turkey," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 19, 2014.

²²⁴ Fehim Taştekin, "Ankara Struggles to Maintain Bearings in Kobani," October 21, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-united-states-kurds-obama-kobani.html#ixzz3JGLJS3Je> (Accessed on November 14, 2014).

²²⁵ Bente Scheller. *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game*. p. 118-119.

²²⁶ Murat Yetkin, "Trying to Understand What Turkey is Doing about Kurds," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 20, 2014.

The dramatic U-turn of the Turkish foreign policy is deemed in this explanation of Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu:

We have never wanted Kobanê to fall and never will. Turkey has made every effort to prevent that. Turkey sent humanitarian assistance and medical equipment. We have been in full cooperation with coalition forces for Kobanê. We want the region to be cleaned of all threats.²²⁷

Erdoğan then initially tried to play the "Kurds versus Kurds" card by calling the KRG to act in Rojava with an aim to create a conflict between Kurdish actors in the Iraqi and Rojava on the grounds that the Turkish government would allow the Kurdish Peshmergas to cross to Rojava via Turkey.²²⁸ The parliament of the KRG had already adopted a bill that was recognizing Rojava and providing all possible support to it on October 15, 2014,²²⁹ so it was not possible to use the Iraqi Kurds against the Syrian ones as a sticker.

Failing to achieve this policy, Erdoğan this time played the Arab card by claiming that the PYD had admitted the offer of the FSA that 1,300 FSA fighters would go to Kobanê to assist the PYD against the ISIS. However, this claim was verified neither by the PYD and the YPG nor by the FSA. Moreover, he continued manipulations by making allegations that Kobanê was an Arab settlement and confirming his claim by using the other name of Kobanê, Ayn al-Arab.²³⁰

Turkey's priorities for support for the Kurds in Kobanê were to force them to cut their alleged PKK links. Also, Turkish government demanded an international

²²⁷ "Turkey Lets Kurdish Fighters Cross into Kobane," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 20, 2014.

²²⁸ Fehim Taştekin, "Erdogan Plays 'Arab Card' in Kobani," October 28, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-kobani-erdogan-deals-arab-card.html#ixzz3JGL8z78z> (Accessed on November 14, 2014).

²²⁹ Fehim Taştekin, "Ankara Struggles to Maintain Bearings in Kobani," October 21, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-united-states-kurds-obama-kobani.html#ixzz3JGLJS3Je> (Accessed on November 14, 2014).

²³⁰ Fehim Taştekin, "Erdogan Plays 'Arab Card' in Kobani," October 28, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-kobani-erdogan-deals-arab-card.html#ixzz3JGL8z78z> (Accessed on November 14, 2014).

coalition to expand its anti-ISIS operations to the Syrian regime. However, the developments didn't allow Turkey to continue its preconditions.²³¹ Subsequently it became the least effective actor in Rojava.

4.7. Conclusion

After Assad's ignorance to the Turkish criticism regarding the Syrian regime's crackdown, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that Turkey wouldn't remain silent against human rights violations although, as Ünal Ünsal pointed out, there were same violations and dictatorship in Syria while the two countries had good relations for a long period.²³²

From March 2011 onwards, the policy of Turkey towards Syria can be explained in several stages:

Pushing for reformations; cutting diplomatic ties; supporting regional and international political solutions; and supporting and aiding Syria's political and armed position. While advocating a fifth stage- direct military intervention against the Assad regime, such as a no-fly zone or humanitarian corridor- Turkey is unwilling to act unilaterally.²³³

It seemed clear that, whether the Syrian regime falls or not, "Turkish-Syrian relations have already transformed once more."²³⁴ The impasse in Syria created significant problems for Turkey. Turkey adopted a position in which it wrestled to make the Assad regime step down and take a better place at the "Syrian table."²³⁵

²³¹ Fehim Taştekin, "Ankara Struggles to Maintain Bearings in Kobani," October 21, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-united-states-kurds-obama-kobani.html#ixzz3JGLJS3Je> (Accessed on November 14, 2014).

²³² Ünal Ünsal, "Irak ve Suriye Politikası." p. 158.

²³³ Christopher Phillips, "Into the Quagmire." p. 1.

²³⁴ Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 14, 2011,

²³⁵ Mete Çubukçu. *Yıkılsın Bu Düzen! FEL YASKUT ENNİZAM! Arap Ayaklanmaları ve Sonrası*. İstanbul: İletişim Publications, 2012, p. 201.

More importantly, significant security cooperation against the PKK came to an end. Also, the developments there had repercussions for Syria's Kurds that the Kurdish issue once again was regionalized.²³⁶ While Turkey was engaged in helping the SNC and the FSA, Syria's Kurds were dispersed in many parts. However, Turkey was alarmed by the strength of the PYD. Also, Barzani had reconciled Kurdish parties under an umbrella. On July 26, 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that Turkey was against a new Kurdish establishment in Rojava and he claimed that Turkey had the right of intervention.²³⁷

In order to contain the power of Syria's Kurds and topple the Assad regime, Ankara allowed the radical Islamist fighters to cross from Turkey into Syria.²³⁸

Turkey's strategy didn't work as the Turkish government considered Assad regime to fall soon and the opposition movement to capture the power and prevent the PYD's power. Conversely, Assad strengthened his position and the PYD declared an autonomous administration.

After the emergence of the ISIS, there were four main actors in Syria: Assad, the ISIS (acting together with al-Nusra), the PYD and the FSA. Turkey was against Assad, ISIS and the PYD, and was perhaps the only country holding such a position.²³⁹

²³⁶ Meliha Benli Altunışık, " Explaining the Transformation of Turkish-Syrian Relations: A Regionalist Approach " in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür eds., *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, England: Ashgate, 2013, p. 189.

²³⁷ Ünal Ünsal, "Irak ve Suriye Politikası." p. 160.

²³⁸ "Flight of Icarus?" *ICG Report*, p. 18.

²³⁹ Murat Yetkin, "Turkey, ISIL and the PKK: It's Complicated," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 7, 2014.

According to the Turkish government, the PYD was at least as bad as the ISIS.²⁴⁰ It apparently seems that within this framework, Turkey will never be successful in its Syria policy.

²⁴⁰ Murat Yetkin, "Trying to Understand What Turkey is Doing about Kurds," *Hürriyet News*, October 20, 2014.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The role of the Kurdish issue in determining the Turkish foreign policy has been unquestionable. In this context, it has become apparent that the relations between Turkey and Syria have been strained by the Kurdish issue during the period studied by this thesis, namely 1980-2014. During this period, the tensions between the two countries extended such a point that they even came to the brink of war in October 1998.

As already noted, the Kurdish issue became the main source of the tensions between Turkey and Syria between 1980 and 2014. This study sought to answer to what extent the Kurdish issue has affected the relations of two countries.

Syria used the opportunity of the turmoil in the Turkish domestic policy when it provided a haven for the PKK cadres in the early 1980s. Not suffering from the Kurdish issue, Syria adopted a pragmatic policy to enforce Turkey to solve the other bilateral conflicts (Hatay issue and the right of the use of the waters of Euphrates and Tigris) in favor of the former, on the grounds that they signed various security protocols during the 1980s and 1990s. In this regard, the first security protocol was signed in July 1987 during which Ankara accepted the demand of Damascus to supply no less than 500 cubic meters per second of water per month in return for the acceptance of Damascus to remove the PKK camps from its territory. However, Syria's noncompliance with the agreement caused the bilateral relations to revert. The same situation renewed itself until the October 1998 crisis; they were always signing agreements which were not being applied. The second chapter of this study

sought to examine these agreements and answer how these agreements evolved and subsequently lost their validities.

Taking into consideration the negative impact of the Kurdish issue on the relations of Turkey and Syria during this period, it can be observed that the only exception took place in the early 1990s when the prospect of an independent Kurdish state in Iraqi Kurdistan emerged. At this point, Turkey and Syria formed an alliance in 1992 which was also examined in the second chapter. Following the 1992 security protocol, Syria always participated in the regional meetings related to the Kurdish issue along with Iran and Turkey although it continued the PKK support. As a result of Syria's continuous PKK support, there was a noticeable deterioration in the relations of Turkey and Syria in the mid-1990s. In this sense, Turkey and Syria reciprocally didn't refrain from sending threat messages to each other. For instance, in 1994, in the aftermath of Turkey's decision to cut the flow of water for one month during the holding of the Ataturk Dam, Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad attended the ceremony of the PKK in Bekaa Valley. As a response to Syria's policy, in January 1996, Turkish Foreign Ministry sent a memorandum to Damascus. Moreover, Turkey signed a military agreement with Israel in February 1996. All in all, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the strained Turkish-Syrian relations as a result of the Kurdish issue.

Turkish-Syrian relations came to a new stage when Turkey became determined to force Syria to refrain from supporting the PKK to the extent of even by bringing matters to the brink of war. Actually, there were also other reasons which, out of Syria's PKK support, determined Turkey's tough policy. On the one hand there were domestic reasons triggering Turkey to adopt such a policy in the sense that it wanted to cover the turmoil at home. On the other hand, the US had attempted to reconcile two Kurdish leaders in Iraq, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, in September 1998 with an aim to provide the Kurds a statue within an Iraqi federation which alarmed Turkey that it would accordingly pave the way for the statehood of Kurds in Iraq. As a result, Turkey feared that an establishment of a Kurdish state would provide the PKK with a new safe haven to attack Turkey from and increase sentiments of the PKK even more for a Kurdish state in Turkish territory.

In this context, Turkey did its utmost best to deter Syria for its assistance of the PKK. In this sense, Turkey initiated a military campaign and diplomatic offensive that created friction between the two countries. In the aftermath of the crisis, Turkey and Syria signed an agreement in October 1998 thanks to the conjuncture of the Syrian domestic policy and Egypt's actively mediation attempts. Consequently, Syria appeared to implement the agreement's commitments and as a result Syria declared that it had expelled Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader, which Turkey greatly desired. In conclusion, this agreement paved the way for a new stage for the relations of two countries.

The turning point for Turkish-Syrian relations in the new stage was the attendance of the former Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer of the funeral of Hafez Assad in 2000. Subsequently, Syrian Vice president Abd al-Halim Khaddam came to Turkey with an intention to "turn over a new leaf" in bilateral relations. The relations gradually improved until the AKP government came to power in November 2002. The bilateral relations with Syria flourished under the AKP rule which also increasingly pushed the Syrian regime to combat against the PKK.

Meanwhile, the invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003 consolidated the two countries' relations as they formed an open alliance against the possible establishment of a Kurdish state in Iraqi Kurdistan which would cause both Turkey's and Syria's Kurds to have "separatist" ambitions. The formation of an alliance was accomplished as the Kurds of Syria also tended to be politically conscious in addition to the Kurds living in Turkey. So Turkey and Syria had same concerns to create an alliance. Although, at the end, Turkey and Syria couldn't become successful to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan, they deepened cooperation and increased their ties.

The period between 2005 and 2010 illustrated a bright period of the relations between Turkey and Syria. Syria's determined struggle against the PKK and Turkey's zero-problem foreign policy resulted in concrete achievement in the security, politic, economic and cultural spheres which were scrutinized in the third chapter of this study. In fact, Syria adopted a tough stance against the PKK and restricted its

activities in its territory. As a result, Turkey left its security-based foreign policy and espoused zero-problem foreign policy with its neighbour. It is important to note that Turkish-Syrian relations were transformed into a strategic cooperation in this period. The trade volume between the two countries boomed. Furthermore, the visa restrictions were lifted and joint cabinet meetings were organized. In this context, the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council meetings were held in October 2009 and in December 2010. As a result, various agreements were signed in the spheres of energy, trade, environment, agriculture, transportation, health and housing. There seemed to be no problematic issue between two countries in this period. In this framework, it is worth to mention that Turkey's relations with Syria reached such a high point that the former initiated a mediation effort in Syrian-Israeli indirect peace talks. In general, there seemed to be no problematic issue between Turkey and Syria by the end of 2010 as a result of the mutual visits and the improvement in the spheres of the politic, economic and culture.

However, once again Turkish-Syrian relations deteriorated after the large-scale public uprisings reached Syria in March 2011. The uprisings were part of the upheavals in other Arab countries and the reason of these uprisings in the Arab world were the people's discontent against oppressive and "uncivil" Arab states. By October 2011, three autocrats of state were overthrown in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Although various opposition movements gained momentum following the uprisings, the prevailing actors became the Islamist movements. In particular, the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the most powerful opposition group in the Middle East. Actually, Turkey became supporter of the new governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

The response of the Syrian regime to the demonstrations became very brutal at which point the mismanagement of the crisis made things worse for Syria on the international level. The UN, the Arab League and the USA adopted a tough stance against the Syrian regime, whereas Russia and China has been important supporter of it. On the other hand, Turkey took the same of attitude in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya as it collaborated with the Syrian opposition movements for the removal of Bashar

al-Assad. In this way, Turkey provided material assistance to these movements, which were not only limited to the political fractions, but also to the military movements. In the political sphere, Turkey's priority has been respectively to support the Syrian National Council (SNC), mostly the Muslim Brotherhood under this Council, and in the military sphere to assist the Free Syrian Army (FSA) against the Syrian regime and Syrian military forces. Turkey allowed the Syrian opposition to hold its first meeting in the city of Antalya in late May 2011. Then, the Syrian opposition again held a meeting in İstanbul in August 2011. In September 2011, in the aftermath of Turkey's declaration that it cut its ties with Syria, the SNC opened an office in İstanbul. Actually, Turkey became a collaborator with the SNC and the FSA in order to topple the Assad regime. Nevertheless, Turkey's efforts to topple Assad didn't succeed. Not accomplishing its aim, Turkey supported the radical Islamic groups such as al-Nusra Front to topple the Assad regime. Although Turkey officially denied its assistance for the radical armed oppositions, this study espoused the argument that Turkey supported these groups, proving by reliable sources in the fourth chapter.

Meanwhile, the Arab uprisings had a major impact on the Kurds. Kurds again became a significant subject of the Middle East region. Syria's Kurds took a different position at the beginning of the Syrian uprisings as they pursued a dual strategy in an attempt to be ready in the condition of either the collapse of the regime or vice versa. Consequently, they became distant from the Syrian regime and adopted the "wait and see" policy taking into consideration their past experiences, Arabs' ignorance of Kurdish rights and Turkey's anti-Kurdish policies.

The policy of Syria's Kurds became successful as they gradually took the control of Rojava and consolidated their power in this region. In fact, the real power of the Kurds of Syria was the PYD. In fact, the PYD was not heavily influenced in the region even at the beginning of the uprisings in Syria. However, in the aftermath of the uprisings, the PYD immediately took position and organized itself in the military sphere. As a result, Rojava region except Serê Kaniyê city became remote from the clashes and this situation increased the high public support of the PYD in the region.

The PYD established the People's Council of Western Kurdistan in mid-December 2011. Then, in July 2012, it declared the the autonomy of Rojava after capturing the control of Kobanê, Afrin, Amude, Derbasiye, Serê Kaniyê and Dêrik. In November 2013, a joint-interim administration was created and this administration was containing regional and legislative assemblies and governments in three cantons: Efrin, Kobanê and Cêzîre. Next, the Social Contract of Rojava was formed in March 2014.

The emergence of the Syria's Kurds as a power in Rojava scared Turkey very much. What really disturbed Turkey was the sovereignty of PYD over Rojava. In the aftermath of the PYD's taking power in Rojava, Turkey increased the security precautions in the border. In this framework, Turkish army sent armour and missile batteries to the regions bordering Rojava. Actually, Turkish foreign policy was shaped by the possible establishment of a Kurdish authority in Syria. In this context, the AKP government openly targeted Syria's Kurds, and in particular the PYD, leading power of the Syria's Kurds by terrorizing them equating with the PKK. From the beginning of the possibility of emergence of a Kurdish autonomous administration onwards, Turkey pursued a policy to contain such a structure. First, Turkey made an effort to integrate the PYD to the SNC with an aim to discourage the Kurds from formation of an autonomous administration. However, the PYD did not join the SNC since Kurds were not accepted as a separate ethnic identity by the SNC. Failing to integrate the PYD to the SNC, Turkey began to help the SNC and the FSA, while at the same time it triggered the other Kurdish parties in Syria via the KRG President Masoud Barzani to restructure their powers in order to counterweigh to the PYD. It was quite clear that Ankara didn't have sufficient knowledge regarding the Syria's Kurds. The majority of Syria's Kurds had a tendency towards the PYD and the PYD outweighed all Kurdish organizations among Syria's Kurds, so it was a vacuous attempt to contain the PYD via the other Kurdish parties as the fourth chapter of this study analyzed. Failing to achieve to contain the PYD, Turkey backed terrorist organizations such as al-Nusra Front to retain the PYD. The grievances of the Kurds of Syria didn't make sense regarding Turkey's support for the al-Nusra

Front. Despite Turkey's efforts however, it was obvious that Syria's Kurds defeated the al-Nusra militias and obtained a very important position in Rojava from July 2013 onwards. At the same time, Turkey has advocated a military intervention and establishing a buffer zone ploy in Syria by enforcing the US and the international community. In fact, the buffer zone scenario was related to the Kurdish dimension of the developments in Syria. In this way, Turkey hoped to intervene in Rojava much more easily and prevent the establishment of a Kurdish administration in this region. Nevertheless, Turkey couldn't take the assistance of the international community to establish a buffer zone. To summarize, none of Turkey's attempts to weaken the PYD via opposition movements and other projects succeeded.

One of the most debated issues put forth by the anti-Kurdish environments in Turkey, was that there was cooperation between the PYD and the Assad regime. This study thwarted these claims by analyzing the facts objectively. For instance, it was said that the Assad regime deliberately relinquished from Rojava in order to hand over the power to the PYD in July 2012. However, this study analyzed that there was a chaotic environment in Syria after the bomb attacks in which three high security officials were killed, and subsequently the PYD used this opportunity by capturing lots of Kurdish cities and towns with its consolidated power.

After July 2013, Turkey pursued a new policy regarding the PYD as the latter had declared autonomy in Rojava. On the one hand Turkey encouraged the PYD to abolish its autonomous administration and join the SNC to consolidate the power of the SNC via official talks with Salih Muslim, the co-head of the PYD. On the other hand, it continued to involve in tacit, even some open support to the radical terrorist organizations.

The October 2014 was a significant date on which the ISIS surrounded Kobanê, a Kurdish city and one of the three cantons of newly established Kurdish autonomous administration. Turkey's foreign policy concerning this event was highly interesting. In this respect, President Erdoğan declared his sincere feelings regarding the surrounding of Kobanê by stating that "Kobanê is about to fall" on October 7th 2014,

and further equating the ISIS with the PYD.²⁴¹ All in all, although Turkey was reluctant, it was forced by the US to open its doors to the refugees coming from Kobanê and allow the crossing of KRG Peshmergas to Kobanê as demanded by the US.

In conclusion, Turkish government couldn't pursue an independent policy towards the Syrian crisis and the Kurdish issue became the most important determinant of the Turkish foreign policy. This study analyzed the case of Kobanê which demonstrated that Turkey pursued an incorrect policy toward the developments taking place in the regional context. More openly, it represented the failure of Turkey's anti-Kurdish policies.²⁴² Consequently, Turkey's strategy didn't succeed in Syria and Rojava as the Turkish government thought that the Assad regime would fall soon and the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated opposition movement would take the power and prevent the PYD's power. Nevertheless, Assad strengthened his power, the opposition movements were divided into many parts and the PYD declared an autonomous administration in Rojava.

²⁴¹ "Turkish President Erdoğan Says Airstrikes Not Enough to Save Kobane," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 7, 2014; the articulation of the words of the President Erdoğan made sense much more in Turkish: "Kobani düştü, düşecek," which was a statement hoping the fall of the mentioned city.

²⁴² As noted already, Turkey had formed an alliance with Syria against the establishment of a Kurdish state in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, Turkey had not been successful in its policy like its current policy in Rojava.

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY

Ortadoğu'daki sınırlar Birinci Dünya Savaşı sonunda yeniden çizildi. Bu bağlamda, çizilen yeni yapay sınırlarla Kürtler birbirinden ayrıldı ve yaşadıkları topraklar dört ülke- yani Türkiye, İran ve sırasıyla Fransa ile İngiltere'nin himayesindeki yeni kurulan Suriye ve Irak devletleri arasında paylaştırıldı. Neticede, Kürt meselesi yoğun bir Kürt nüfusuna sahip bu dört ülkenin bir iç meselesi olarak kalmayıp, devletlerarası ilişkileri etkileyen önemli bir faktör haline geldi.

Türkiye bağlamında düşünüldüğünde, Kürt meselesi her zaman ülke gündeminin en üst sıralarında yer aldı. Mamafih, Kürt meselesi Türk dış politikasına, özellikle Suriye, Irak ve İran ile olan ilişkilerinde, yön veren en önemli faktörlerden biri oldu. Bu çalışma, Kürt meselesi ekseninde Türkiye'nin Suriye ile 1980 ve 2014 yılları arasındaki ikili ilişkilerini, Türkiye perspektifini esas alarak inceleyecektir.

Literatürde, Türkiye ve Suriye ilişkilerini inceleyen az sayıda çalışma bulunmaktadır. Fakat ne yazık ki bu çalışmaların da büyük çoğunluğu Kürt meselesinin iki ülke ilişkilerine etkisini açıklamaktan yoksundur. Bu noktada, bu çalışmanın amacı iki ülke ilişkilerini sadece Kürt meselesi ekseninde değerlendirmek olacaktır.

Kürt sorunu genel olarak 1980'lere kadar Türkiye ve Suriye ilişkilerinde bir sorun teşkil etmemiştir. Fakat Türkiye'deki 1980 darbesini müteakiben PKK üyelerinin Suriye'ye sığınmaya başlamasıyla birlikte, Kürt meselesi iki ülke ilişkilerini etkileyen bir sorun olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu noktada, bu çalışma Türkiye'nin Suriye ile ilişkilerini Kürt meselesi ekseninde 1980'den sonraki döneme odaklanarak anlatacaktır.

Tezin ikinci bölümünde, iki ülke arasındaki sorunlu ilişkilerin tarihi kısa bir şekilde anlatıldıktan sonra, Türkiye'nin dahili Kürt meselesinin Suriye ile ilişkilerde nasıl harici bir soruna dönüştüğü anlatılmıştır. Yukarıda da değinildiği gibi, Türkiye'deki meş'um 1980 askeri darbesinden sonra, daha yeni örgütlenmiş PKK üyeleri Suriye'ye iltica etmeye başladı. Suriye 1980'li yıllarda Türkiye'deki iç karışıklıklardan istifade ederek, PKK kadrolarına önemli bir sığınak olmuştur. Suriye PKK'ye Bekaa Vadisinde eğitim kampları ve başkent Şam'da bir irtibat bürosu açmaya izin verdi. Neticede, Suriye toprakları PKK için bir lojistik üs oldu. Türkiye ile Suriye arasındaki gerilim PKK'nin Türkiye'ye yönelik saldırılarının artmasına paralel olarak yükseldi. Artan PKK saldırıları, Türkiye'nin Suriye'yi bu tutumundan vazgeçirmesi için çeşitli yöntemlere başvurmasına yöneltti. İlk olarak, 1986 Eylül ayında olduğu gibi, Türkiye hükümetleri meclisten tezkereler çıkartmak suretiyle sınırötesi operasyonlarda bulunmak için yetki aldı.

Kendi sınırları içinde Kürt siyasal hareketlerinin zayıf olduğu Suriye, bunu fırsat bilerek Hatay sorunu ve su sorunu gibi ihtilafli konularda kendi lehinde çözüm bulmak için 1980'lerde ve 90'larda PKK'yi bir kalkan gibi kullanmak suretiyle Türkiye'yi zorlamıştır. Bu bağlamda, Suriye'nin ilk kazanımı, Temmuz 1987'de imzalanan bir anlaşma ile Ankara'nın Şam'ın PKK kamplarını lağvetmesi karşılığında saniyede 500 metreküp su vermeyi kabul etmesi olmuştur. Fakat Suriye'nin anlaşma maddelerine uymayıp PKK'ye yardımını sürdürmesi ikili ilişkileri geriletmiştir. Aynı durum, Ekim 1998 tarihine kadar devam etmiştir, yani taraflar 1987, 1992 ve 1993'te olduğu gibi hükümlerini uygulamayacakları anlaşmalar imzalamışlardır. Tezin ikinci bölümü, bu anlaşmaların yapılış sürecini ve daha sonra nasıl geçerliliklerini kaybettiklerini incelemiştir. Şunu da belirtmek gerekir ki, yapılış süreçleri farklılık arz etse de anlaşmaların içerikleri birbirine çok benzer olmuştur.

Kürt meselesinin Türkiye ve Suriye ilişkileri üzerine olumsuz etkisi göz önüne alındığında, tek istisna 1990'larda Irak Kürdistanı'nda bağımsız bir Kürt devleti ihtimali ortaya çıktığında vuku bulmuştur. Bu tarihte (1992), İki ülkeyi anlaşmaya sevkeden başka nedenler olsa da, Türkiye ve Suriye bu ortak tehdide karşı

müttefiklik anlaşması imzalamışlardır. 1992 yılında imzalanan güvenlik protokolünü takiben, Suriye Kürt meselesiyle ilgili Türkiye ve İran'ın öncülük ettiği bölgesel toplantılara sürekli katılım göstermişse de PKK desteğini sürdürmüştür. Suriye'nin PKK desteği, iki ülke ilişkilerinin 1990'lar ortasında gerilemesini körüklemiştir. Bu bağlamda, Türkiye ve Suriye karşılıklı olarak birbirlerini tehdit etmekten kaçınmamışlardır. Örneğin, Türkiye'nin 1994 yılında, Atatürk Barajı'nın su tutması nedeniyle bir aylık su kesintisine karşılık olarak Suriye Devlet Başkanı Hafız Esad, bizzat Bekaa vadisine gidip, PKK toplantısına katılarak tepkisini ortaya koymuştur. Öte yandan, Türkiye Ocak 1996'da Suriye'ye nota göndermiş ve akabinde Şubat 1996'da İsrail ile askeri bir anlaşma imzalayarak Suriye'ye gözdağı vermiştir.

Literatürde PKK'ye biçilen rol, Suriye'nin elinde bir koz olmanın ötesinde değildir. Şüphesiz, varlığını Ortadoğu gibi çatışmalı bir bölgede sürdüren PKK, çeşitli ülkelerle bağlantı içerisinde olmuştur. Fakat bu bağlantılar, PKK'nin bir maşa örgüt olduğu şeklindeki değerlendirmelere mahal verecek bir durum değildir. Kendi dinamiklerine sahip olan PKK örgütü, bu devletlerle konjonktürel ilişkiler içerisinde olagelmıştır. PKK-Suriye ilişkisi bağlamında, PKK'nin tutuklu lideri Abdullah Öcalan da kendilerinin Suriye tarafından kullanıldığını, fakat bu yolla PKK'yi Suriye'nin piyonu olamayacağı bir yere taşıdıklarını ifade etmiştir. Suriye'nin PKK liderini sınırdışı etmesi ve Suriye topraklarında PKK faaliyetlerini tamamen yasaklamasına rağmen, PKK'nin bölgesel bir güç olarak varlığını sürdürmesi bu iddianın en büyük kanıtı olmuştur.

Tezin üçüncü bölümü, Kürt meselesi ekseninde Türkiye'nin Suriye ile ilişkilerini Ekim 1998'den Mart 2011'e kadar olan dönemi esas alarak anlatmıştır. Ekim 1998, Türkiye'nin Suriye ile savaşın eşiğine geldiği önemli bir tarihtir. İki ülke 20 Ekim 1998'de imzaladıkları Adana Anlaşmasıyla bu krize son verdiler. Üçüncü bölümün başlangıcında, Adana Antlaşmasına giden süreç, yani Ekim 1998 krizinin neden ve sonuçları detaylı bir şekilde anlatılmıştır. Ayrıca, Türkiye'nin bu süreçte izlediği strateji, Suriye'deki iç gelişmeler de göz önünde bulundurularak değerlendirilmiştir. Akabinde, Adana Anlaşmasıyla düzelen ilişkilerin seyri etraflıca incelenmiştir.

Türkiye-Suriye ilişkileri 1998 güzünde Suriye'nin PKK'den desteğini çekmesi için Türkiye'nin durumu bir savaşın eşiğine getirmesi suretiyle yeni bir aşamaya geçmiştir. Türkiye bu süreçte diplomatik ve askeri sert bir kampanya yürütmüştür. Aslında bu süreçte, Türkiye'nin sert politikasının oluşmasında, Suriye'nin PKK desteğinin dışında bazı önemli faktörler de etkili olmuştur. Bir taraftan Türk Hükümeti, Türkiye iç politikasında kamuoyuna yansıyan mafya-devlet ilişkileri gibi bazı olumsuz olayların üstünü örtmek istiyordu. Diğer taraftan, ABD'nin Eylül 1998'de Irak Kürdistanı'ndaki iki lideri, Mesut Barzani ve Celal Talabani, Irak federasyonu altında özerk bir Kürt bölgesinin inşası için uzlaştırma çabası Türkiye'yi hayli tedirgin etmiştir. Türkiye bu gelişmenin Irak Kürdistanı'nda bağımsız bir Kürt devleti için bir önyak olduğunu düşünmüş ve kurulacak Kürt devletinin PKK için yeni bir lojistik üs olacağı kanaatine varmıştır. Ayrıca bu durumun PKK'nin Türkiye topraklarında bağımsız bir Kürt devleti kurma çabalarını artıracığı düşünülüyordu. Bütün bunlar birlikte düşünüldüğünde, Türkiye Suriye'nin PKK'ye destek vermesini engellemek için elinden geleni yapmıştır. Suriye iç politikasının konjonktürel durumu ile Mısır ve İran'ın aktif arabuluculuk girişimlerinin de sayesinde 20 Ekim 1998'de Adana Anlaşması imzalanarak Türkiye ve Suriye arasındaki kriz sonlandırılmıştır. Sonuçta, Suriye anlaşmanın hükümlerini uygulamış, PKK lideri Abdullah Öcalan'ı anlaşma tarihinden önce sınırdışı ettiğini duyurmuş ve kendi sınırları içerisinde PKK faaliyetlerine müsamaha göstermeyeceğini ve PKK meselesinde Türkiye ile birlikte hareket edeceğini kabul etmiştir. Neticede, tarafların anlaşma hükümlerine uyması ile birlikte iki ülke ilişkileri yeni bir safhaya geçmiştir.

Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanı Ahmet Necdet Sezer'in 2000 yılında Hafız Esad'ın cenaze törenine katılması, iki ülke ilişkileri açısından dönüm noktası olmuştur. Ardından, Suriye Devlet Başkan Vekili Abd al-Halim Khaddam'ın Türkiye'ye iade-i ziyareti, bu anlayışı pekiştirmiştir. İkili ilişkiler, AKP hükümetinin 2002'de iktidara gelmesine kadar tedrici olarak gelişmiştir. AKP hükümeti ile birlikte ivme kazanan ilişkiler, Suriye'yi PKK meselesinde Türkiye ile daha fazla işbirliği yapmaya sevk etmiştir.

2000’li yıllara kadar Türkiye ile Suriye ilişkilerinde daima çatışma kaynağı olan Kürt meselesi, 2003 yılında Irak’ın ABD tarafından işgal edilmesinin ardından iki ülkenin Kürt meselesindeki aynı hassasiyetlerinden dolayı müttefik olmalarına yol açtı. Irak Kürdistanı’nda bağımsız bir Kürt devletinin kurulma ihtimali Türkiye ve Suriye’yi endişeye sevketti. Zira geçmiş dönemlerin aksine, Suriye’deki Kürtler de Kürdistan’ın diğer parçalarında yaşayan soydaşları gibi artık bağımsız bir Kürt yönetimini arzulayacak bir politik bilince sahip olmuştu. Yani Türkiye ve Suriye aynı kaygılar doğrultusunda müttefik olmuşlardır. Bütün çabalarına rağmen, Türkiye ve Suriye, Irak’ta özerk bir Kürt yönetiminin oluşumunu engelleyemedilerse de, iki ülke bu ittifak çerçevesinde dayanışmalarını derinleştirmiş ve bağlarını güçlendirmiştir.

Bu çalışmada, 2005-2010 yılları arasındaki dönem Kürt sorunundan azade, parlak ilişkiler dönemi olarak tanımlanmıştır. Suriye bu dönemde PKK’ye karşı sert bir tutum almış ve kendi topraklarında PKK faaliyetlerini sınırlandırmıştır. Buna mukabil, Türkiye güvenlik odaklı dış politika anlayışını revize etmiş ve komşularla sıfır sorun dış politika anlayışını benimsemiştir. Bu dönemde iki ülke ilişkileri stratejik işbirliği politikası ekseninde değerlendirilmiş ve neticesinde güvenlik, ekonomik ve kültürel alanlarda somut başarılar elde edilmiştir. Örneğin, iki ülke arasındaki ticaret hacmi üç katına yükselmiştir. Dahası, karşılıklı olarak vize uygulaması kaldırılmış ve müşterek kabine toplantıları düzenlenmiştir. Bu bağlamda, Ekim 2009 ve Aralık 2010 tarihlerinde “Yüksek Düzeyli Stratejik İşbirliği” toplantıları düzenlenmiş ve bu toplantılarda enerji, ticaret, çevre, ziraat, ulaşım ve sağlık gibi alanlarda birçok anlaşma imzalanmıştır. Bu çerçevede, şu hususu da belirtmek gerekir ki Türkiye’nin Suriye ve İsrail arasındaki arabuluculuk girişimleri de Türkiye’nin Suriye ile geliştirdiği iyi ilişkilerin boyutunu göstermek açısından bu bölümün sonunda anlatılmıştır. Neticede, Kürt meselesi üzerinde mutabakata varan Türkiye ve Suriye 2011 yılına kadar geliştirdikleri iyi düzeydeki ilişkilere sahip olmuştur. 2010 yılının sonuna gelindiğinde, karşılıklı ziyaretler ve ekonomik, siyasi ve kültürel alanlardaki gelişmelere bağlı olarak iki ülke arasında sorun teşkil edecek ihtilafli herhangi bir konu kalmamıştır. Bu yeni dönemde Suriye, Türkiye’nin dış

politikasındaki “komşularla sıfır sorun” anlayışının merkezinde yer almıştır. Bu bağlamda, yukarıda da değinildiği gibi, bu çalışmanın üçüncü bölümünde, iki ülkenin Kürt meselesinden azade geliştirdikleri kültürel, ekonomik ve politik alanlarındaki iyi seviyedeki ilişkiler anlatılmıştır.

Tezin dördüncü bölümünde ise, ilk olarak Türkiye’nin Suriye’ye yönelik dış politika anlayışının 2011 Mart ayında Suriye’deki ayaklanmalar başladıktan sonra nasıl bir dönüşüm yaşadığı anlatılmıştır. Aralık 2010 tarihinde başlamak üzere Arap dünyası politik ayaklanmalara ve protestolara şahit oldu. Protesto ve gösteriler sırasıyla Tunus, Mısır, Bahreyn, Libya, Yemen ve en son Suriye’de ivme kazandı. Ekonomik çöküntü, siyasi yolsuzluklar, baskıcı hükümetler ve ağır insan hakları ihlalleri ayaklanmaları tetikleyen ana unsurlar olmuştur. Ekim 2011 tarihi itibarıyla Tunus, Mısır ve Libya’daki otokrat rejimler devrilmiş ve ayaklanmaları takiben yapılan seçimlerde Fas, Tunus ve Mısır’da İslamcı gruplar seçimleri kazanmış; Müslüman Kardeşler örgütü bölgede yükselen güç olmuştur. Bu bağlamda, AKP hükümeti idaresindeki Türkiye seçim sonuçlarından memnuniyet duymuştur. Zira AKP hükümeti, Müslüman Kardeşler örgütü ile ideolojik bir yakınlığa sahipti ve Tunus örneğinde olduğu gibi, bu gruplar her fırsatta Türkiye’yi model aldıklarını ifade etmişlerdir.

Türkiye, Arap dünyasındaki ayaklanmalara fayda odaklı bir nazarla bakmış ve ticari anlamda Arap pazarının en fazla kazanan ülkesi olmak istemiştir. Fakat, Suriye’deki gelişmeler bu planları bozmuştur çünkü Suriye ayaklanmaları diğer Arap ülkelerindeki gibi rejimi devirememiştir. Dolayısıyla, Türkiye Arap dünyasına açılan Suriye kapısının kilidini açamamıştır.

Daha sonra, bu bölümde Suriye krizi ile ilgili kısa bir değerlendirme yapıldıktan sonra, Türkiye’nin Suriye krizine yönelik aldığı tutuma odaklanılmaktadır. Suriye’nin krizi yönetememesi uluslararası arenada ülkeyi zor durumda bırakmıştır. Birleşmiş Milletler, Arap Cemiyeti ve Amerika Birleşik Devletleri Suriye’ye karşı sert bir tavır alırken, İran ve Çin Rusya ile birlikte Suriye’nin destekçisi olmuştur. Bu noktada, Türkiye’nin sergilediği tutumla ilgili iki farklı görüş de ayrıntılı bir şekilde tezde zikredilmiştir. Bir görüş, Türkiye’nin Suriye ile yıllardır derinleştirdiği

ilişkileri heba etmemek suretiyle, Esad rejiminin düşüşüne göz yummak istemediğini ifade etmiştir. Diğer görüş ise, Türkiye'nin Suriyeli muhalif örgütlere kısa bir zaman diliminde verdiği desteği kanıt göstererek Türkiye'nin Esad rejiminin düşüşünü Suriye'deki ayaklanmalar başlar başlamaz desteklediği yönündedir. Bu iki görüş karşılaştırmalı analiz edilerek varılan sonuç şu olmuştur: Türkiye bir yandan Suriye rejimine yönelik gerekli iç reformları yapması gibi çeşitli telkinlerde bulunarak ilişkilerini koparmak istemediğini göstermeye çalışmışsa da, Suriyeli muhalif örgütlere ilk günden itibaren verdiği destekle Suriye rejimine karşı fiili bir karşı duruş sergilemiştir. Bu anlamda, Türkiye, Suriye muhalefatinin Mayıs 2011 ve Ağustos 2011 tarihli toplantılarına ev sahipliği yapmıştır. Daha sonra, Eylül 2011'de Suriye ile ilişkiler resmi olarak kesildikten sonra, Suriye Ulusal Konseyi İstanbul'da bir irtibat bürosu açmıştır. Türkiye, Esad rejimini devirmek için Suriye Ulusal Konseyi ve Özgür Suriye Ordu'su ile açık bir işbirliğine gitmiştir. Neticede, Türkiye ve Suriye ilişkileri bir kez daha Mart 2011'de Suriye'deki geniş çaplı halk ayaklanmalarının başlamasından sonra kötüleşmiş ve Türkiye, Suriyeli muhalif gruplarla işbirliği yaparak Beşar Esad'ın iktidardan düşmesine yönelik politikalar yürütmüştür.

Yukarıda da değinildiği gibi, Türkiye Suriyeli siyasi ve askeri muhalif hareketlere destek vererek Suriye krizine bilfiil müdahil olmuştur. Siyasi alanda Suriye Ulusal Konseyi (daha sonra Suriye Ulusal Koalisyonu olarak değişmiştir) ve askeri alanda Özgür Suriye Ordusu açık bir şekilde desteklenmiştir. Bu hareketlere verdiği destekle Beşar Esad'ı deviremeyen Türkiye, al-Nusra Cephesi gibi radikal örgütlere de destek vermiştir. Türkiye resmi olarak, radikal örgütlere verdiği desteği sürekli inkar etmişse de, bu çalışma Türkiye'nin bu gruplara yardım yaptığına dair bir değerlendirmede bulunmuştur. Dördüncü bölümde, bu argüman güvenilir kaynaklar ışığında anlatılmıştır. Dahası Türkiye, Suriye'ye askeri müdahalede bulunmak ve tampon bir bölge kurmak için değişik platformlarda başta ABD olmak üzere uluslararası kamuoyuna çağrılarda bulunmuştur. Esasen, tampon bölge düşüncesi Suriye'deki gelişmelerin Kürt meselesi ile ilgili boyutunu ilgilendiriyordu. Bu yolla, Türkiye Rojava'ya (Batı Kürdistan) daha rahat müdahale edebileceğini ve özerk bir

Kürt yönetimini engelleyebileceğini düşünmüştür. Fakat Türkiye tampon bölgeyi kurmak için uluslararası toplumun desteğini alamamıştır.

Bu bölümde ayrıca Suriye'nin PKK'ye verdiği sözde desteği ile ilgili eleştirel bir başlık yazılmıştır. Türkiye medyası ve Türk politikacılar, 2011 baharından itibaren artan PKK saldırılarının arkasında Suriye rejiminin olduğunu iddia etmişlerdir. Aslında PKK saldırıları dış sebeplerin aksine iç sebeplere bağlıydı. Bu bağlamda, Türkiye iç politikasında yaşanan gelişmeler ayrıntılı bir şekilde izah edilerek, bu iddialar çürütülmüştür. Örneğin, Mayıs 2011'de olduğu gibi Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri, PKK Türkiye'deki Haziran 2011 seçimlerinden önce ateşkes ilan ettiği halde, 12 PKK'liyi öldürmüştür. TSK'nın bu tavrını sürdürmesi PKK'nin bu saldırılara cevap vermesi ile sonuçlanmıştır. Verilen örnekten de anlaşılacağı gibi, PKK saldırıları iç dinamiklerle ilintili olmuştur. Bu bakımdan, bu çalışmada Türkiye'nin PKK saldırılarının asıl saikini, Suriye'ye müdahale etmek için çarpıttığı yönünde bir değerlendirmede bulunulmuştur.

Beri tarafta, Suriyeli Kürtlerin politik kazanımları Türkiye'nin Suriye politikasını şekillendiren en önemli faktör olmuştur çünkü Arap ayaklanmaları Kürtler açısından önemli bir dönüm noktası olmuştur. Kürtler tekrar Ortadoğu bölgesinin bir öznesi olmuştur. Suriye Kürtleri, ayaklanmalar başladıktan sonra, rejimin yıkılışını ya da ayakta kalışını da göz önünde bulunduran bir strateji takip etmişlerdir. Neticede, rejimle aralarına mesafe koyarak; Kürtlerin toplumsal hafızası ile geçmiş tecrübelerini, Arap liderlerin Kürtlerin haklarını dikkate almamalarını ve Türkiye'nin Kürt-karşıtı politikalarını da hesaba katarak “bekle ve gör” politikasını yürütmüşlerdir. Suriyeli Kürtlerin izlediği bu politika, Rojava'nın kontrolünü ele geçirip ve güçlerini tahkim etmek suretiyle başarılı olmuştur. Aslında, Suriyeli Kürtlerin asıl gücü PYD olmuştur. PYD, ilk olarak Aralık 2011'de Batı Kürdistan Halklar Konseyi adlı bir mekanizma kurmuştur. Bu mekanizma, Rojava bölgesinde mülki idari amirler ve yerel yöneticiler atamış, sosyal hizmetler görevini yerine getirmiştir. Bunların da ötesinde, halk mahkemeleri ve asayişini sağlayacak bir polis gücü kurmuştur. PYD, daha sonra YPG'nin Temmuz 2012'de Kobané, Afrin, Amude, Derbesiye, Seré Kaniye ve Derik şehirlerinin yönetimini ele geçirmesinden

sonra Rojava'nın özerkliğini ilan etmiştir. Kasım 2013 tarihinde ise “müşterek-ara yönetim” ilanı yapılmış ve bu yönetimin Afrin, Kobané ve Cezire kantonlarını kapsayan yerel ve yasal meclis ve hükümetlerinin ilanı yapılmıştır. En sonunda, Mart 2014 tarihinde de geçici anayasa işlevini yerine getirecek “Rojava'nın Sosyal Sözleşmesi” oluşturulmuştur.

Türkiye'yi rahatsız eden esas husus, Rojava'daki egemenliğin PYD'nin elinde olması olmuştur. Türkiye'nin Mesut Barzani ve onun himayesindeki Kürt Ulusal Konseyi (PYD hariç, on beş Suriyeli Kürt partisinin çatı örgütü) ile dirsek teması bunun bariz bir kanıtı olmuştur. PYD, Rojava'da gücü elde ettikten sonra, Türkiye sınırda güvenlik önlemlerini arttırmış ve füze bataryaları gibi ağır silahları sınır bölgesine göndermiştir. Şunu da belirtmek gerekir ki PYD, Suriye'de ayaklamalar başlamadan önce Rojava'da ciddi bir güce sahip olmamıştır. Fakat ayaklanmalar başladıktan sonra hızlı manevra kabiliyeti sayesinde hemen mevzi almış ve askeri alanda hemen organize olmuştur. Bu sayede Seré Kaniye bölgesi hariç diğer Kürt bölgelerini çatışmalardan uzak tutması PYD'yi ciddi bir halk desteğine kavuşturmuştur. Sonuç olarak, PYD'nin bu güç kazanımı Türkiye'nin muhtemel bir Kürt yönetimine karşı pozisyon almaya sevk etmiştir. Türkiye, Suriyeli Kürtlerin katalizör gücü olan PYD'yi frenlemek ve gücünü yok etmek için çeşitli örgütlerle, yani Suriye Ulusal Konseyi, Özgür Suriye Ordusu, Kürt Ulusal Konseyi, al-Nusra Cephesi, DAİŞ ve Kürdistan Bölgesel Yönetimi ile işbirliğinde bulunmuştur. Türkiye, İlk olarak, özerk bir Kürt yönetiminin oluşmasını engellemek adına PYD'yi SUK'a entegre etmek için büyük bir uğraş vermiştir, fakat PYD Kürtleri özne ve ayrı etnik bir kimlik olarak tanımayan SUK'a katılmamıştır. Bunun yerine, Suriye'ye dış müdahaleyi reddeden Demokratik Değişim için Ulusal Koordinasyon Komitesi'ne katılmıştır.

Ankara PYD'yi, PKK'nin Suriye kolu olarak tanımlamış ve PYD'nin artan gücünü Suriye rejiminin yardımlarına nispet etmiştir. Bu noktada, bu bölümün amacı bu gerçek dışı iddiaları, güvenilir kaynaklar ışığında çürütmek olacaktır. Özetle, bu bölümde Suriyeli Kürtlerin politik kazanımlarının Türkiye'yi nasıl bir pozisyon almaya zorladığı ve bu pozisyonun iki ülke ilişkilerini nasıl kötüleştirdiği

anlatılmıştır. Ayrıca, Kobané şehrinde yaşanan olaylar çerçevesinde, Türkiye'nin Suriye ve özellikle Rojava politikasının çöküşü anlatılmıştır.

Dördüncü bölümün odaklandığı başka bir nokta, Türkiye'nin Rojava'daki Kürtlerin bir güç olarak ortaya çıkmasından sonraki politikaları olmuştur. AKP hükümeti, PYD'yi PKK ile eşitleyerek, Kürtlerin hak kazanımlarını terörize etmeye çalışmıştır. Rojava'da özerk bir Kürt idaresinin belirlediği vakitten itibaren, Türkiye bu yapılanmayı önleyici politikalar üretmeye çalışmıştır. Bir yandan Suriye Ulusal Konseyi ve Özgür Suriye Ordusu'na PYD'yi sınırlandırmak için yardım yapılırken, diğer yandan da Mesut Barzani himayesindeki Kürt Ulusal Konseyi aracılığıyla PYD'nin gücü dengelenmeye çalışılmıştır. Bu politikalarında akamete uğrayan Türkiye, PYD'nin gücünü kırmak için al-Nusra Cephesi gibi terörist organizasyonları desteklemiştir. Türkiye'nin bütün çabalarına rağmen, Suriyeli Kürtler, al-Nusra gibi terörist organizasyonları başarılı bir şekilde püskürtmüş ve Temmuz 2013'ten itibaren önemli politik kazanımlar elde etmiştir. Özetlemek gerekirse, Türkiye'nin PYD'yi zayıflamak için başvurduğu bütün merciler etkisiz kalmıştır.

Önemine binaen, tezde değinilen başka bir konu ise Türkiye'deki Kürt-karşıtı çevrelerin ortaya attığı sözde PYD-Esad rejimi işbirliği olmuştur. Bu çalışma olay ve olguları nesnel bir şekilde değerlendirerek, bu iddiaları çürütmüştür. Örneğin, bahsi geçen çevreler, Temmuz 2012'de Esad rejiminin Rojava'da bir plan dahilinde PYD'ye güç ortamı yarattığını iddia etmişlerdir. Halbuki bu çalışma, bahsi geçen tarihte, Şam'daki intihar saldırılarından sonra oluşan kaotik ortamda PYD'nin bu durumdan istifade ederek Rojava'daki şehirlerin kontrolünü ele geçirip gücünü pekiştirdiğini tespit etmiştir. Ayrıca, PYD'nin Rojava hakimiyetini aldıktan sonra Esad rejiminin PYD'nin silahlı kanadı YPG'ye karşı karadan ve havadan yürüttüğü operasyonlar da iddia edilen gizli ortaklığın sözkonusu olmadığını ispat etmiştir.

Yukarıda da bahsedildiği gibi, Türkiye PYD'nin Rojava'da özerklik ilanından sonra, yeni bir politika izlemeye başladı. Türkiye bir yandan PYD eşbaşkanı Salih Müslim ile görüşüp PYD'yi özerk yapıyı lağvedip, gücünü Suriye Ulusal Koalisyonu ile birleştirmeye teşvik ederken, bir yandan da radikal terörist organizasyonlara PYD'yi

tedip için desteğini sürdürdü. Bu bağlamda, Ekim 2014 tarihi Türkiye'nin Rojava politikasında önemli bir yer teşkil etmektedir. Bu tarihte DAİŞ, Kürt özerk bölgesinin üç kanton şehrinden biri olan Kobané'yi kuşatmıştır. Türkiye'nin bu duruma yönelik duruşu hayli ilginçtir. Örneğin, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, PYD'yi DAİŞ ile eşdeğer tutan ifadelerde bulunmuş ve 7 Ekim 2014 tarihinde, "Kobani düştü, düşecek," ifadesinde bulunarak Kürt-karşıtı duygularını bu şekilde tercüme etmiştir. En sonunda, Türkiye bütün isteksizliğine rağmen ABD'nin baskısıyla Kobané mültecilerine kapılarını açmış ve Kürdistan Bölgesel Yönetimi'nin askeri gücü peşmergenin Türkiye sınırlarından geçerek Kobané'ye geçişine izin vermek zorunda kalmıştır. Bu çalışma, Kobané örneği üzerinde Türkiye'nin Suriye'de ve Rojava'daki politik hezimetini anlatmış ve Kobané politikasının Türkiye'nin Kürt-karşıtı politikalarının çöküşünü simgelediği değerlendirmesinde bulunmuştur.

Genel olarak Türkiye, Suriye krizine karşı bağımsız bir politika yürütememiş ve Kürt meselesi Türk dış politikasının en belirgin faktörü olmuştur. Neticede, Türkiye'nin Suriye ve bilhassa Rojava bölgesiyle ilgili stratejisi başarısız olmuştur. Bu stratejiye göre dört ya da altı ay gibi kısa bir zaman zarfında Esad rejimi düşecek ve Müslüman Kardeşler grubu iktidara gelecekti. Böylece, PYD'nin gücü engellenerek Rojava'da özerk bir Kürt yönetiminin oluşumu önlenecekti. Fakat Beşar Esad iktidarını korudu, muhalif hareketler birçok parçaya bölündü ve PYD Rojava'da özerk bir yönetim ilan etti.

Sonuç olarak, Kürt meselesi, Türkiye'nin iç meselesi olduğu için, Suriye ile ilişkileri 1980 ve 2014 yılları arasında bu mesele yüzünden derinden etkilenmiştir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma Kürt meselesinin Türkiye'nin Suriye ile ilişkilerini bahsi geçen tarihlerde hangi boyutta etkilediğini anlatmaya çalışmıştır.

B. TEZ FOTOKOPİSİ İZİN FORMU

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