



Turkey's Foreign Policy Towards Syria

From Neo-Ottoman Adventurism
to Neo-Ottoman *Realpolitik*



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On October 7th, 2017, Turkish troops deployed to Idlib province. This was Turkey's second military incursion into Syria within 14 months, a little more than half a year after 'Operation Euphrates Shield' was declared complete by the Turkish army in late March 2017. While the manoeuver is part of a recent agreement between Turkey, Russia and Iran to enforce a de-escalation zone in Idlib,¹ it is essentially aimed at further isolating the Kurdish-controlled area around Afrin in north-western Syria, preventing any foray of the People's Protection Units (YPG) towards the Mediterranean. By focusing on fighting against the Syrian Kurds, at the risk of undermining the armed opposition in Idlib - particularly Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Nusra), arguably the strongest rebel group in the country - the intervention is representative of a new form of *Realpolitik* in Ankara's Syria policy. This is particularly obvious in light of the vast territorial gains the regime of Bashar al-Assad has made in recent months.

From the late 2000s onwards, Ankara has increasingly interfered in the affairs of its immediate neighbours. Ankara's Neo-Ottoman approach in the Middle East has been especially visible through its engagement in the Syrian conflict after 2011. Through its backing of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Islamist groups, including radical ones, Ankara attempted to remove Syrian

President Bashar al-Assad from power, but ultimately proved unsuccessful in this endeavour due to the timely intervention by Russia and Iran on Assad's behalf in the summer of 2015.

While this Neo-Ottoman Adventurism nearly led to Turkey's complete isolation in the region, as well as its estrangement from its traditional NATO partners, Ankara has embarked on what can be described as a re-prioritisation of its foreign policy towards Syria since mid-2016. Rather than focusing on removing Assad from power, this Neo-Ottoman *Realpolitik* aims to re-establish Turkish influence in Syria and focuses on perceived security threats from the Syrian Kurds. Turkey's Syria policy today is predominantly aimed at Kurdish forces in Syria, namely the YPG, and often with the direct use or threat of military force.

As long as the U.S.'s commitment towards its Kurdish proxies prevails, Turkey's foreign policy options and actions will remain limited in Syria, or risk diplomatic and military escalation. Although Ankara threatens further ground operations, such as in Afrin, it is more likely that Turkey will continue to conduct limited air- and artillery operations as well as smaller ground-incursions with the help of its Syrian rebel proxies against the YPG and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) targets of opportunity.

1. The agreement was struck in the 14 and 15 September Astana talks. Fehim Tastekin, "Turkish deployment may redraw battle lines in Syria's Idlib", *Al-Monitor*, Oct. 2017, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/turkey-syria-idlib-move-may-trigger-fresh-rifts.html>; Metin Gurcan, "Turkey's return riles Syria: It's 'blatant aggression'", *Al-Monitor*, Oct. 2017, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/turkey-syria-what-ankara-has-in-mind-for-afrin-idlib.html>

Ankara will likely attempt to gain political leverage for future military operations and implement face-saving measures in their diplomatic efforts. Recent diplomatic moves have indicated that Turkey will be flexible in terms of who it partners with, be it Russia or the United States, in order to achieve these goals, and will avoid large-scale military confrontations with either party or their immediate proxies.

From "Zero Problems with Neighbours" to Neo-Ottoman Adventurism

The Ottoman Empire was a global power that, at its peak, controlled vast areas of territory in the modern Middle East, North Africa, the Caucasus, and the Balkans, before its ultimate dissolution after World War I. The foreign policy of its successor, the Turkish Republic, has in recent years been described as an attempt to increase Turkish influence in the regions of the former empire. Turkey has positioned itself as a protective power as well as a supporter of the Palestinian cause, has been outspoken about the perceived mistreatment of ethnic Turkmen groups in China, and has put its weight behind Sunni-political groups in Iraq and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.² This shift away from the traditional Kemalist foreign policy, which always emphasized a secular and stable state, oriented towards the West, and avoided meddling with the sectarian and unstable political situations in the Middle East, has been characterized as a form of Neo-Ottomanism.

"Zero Problems with Neighbours" was the term used to describe Turkish foreign policy in 2002, and, by the mid-2000s, Turkey was praised around the world for its diplomatic efforts and initiatives. For example, Ankara acted as a mediator between Syria and Israel in 2008 and improved its diplomatic relations with its neighbours. The ideological creator of this foreign policy paradigm, Ahmet Davutoglu, who became Turkish Foreign Minister in 2009, had outlined in his academic papers his idea of Turkey as a central power that should play a more active role in regional politics because of its central geographic location and history.³ The full extent of Ankara's Neo-Ottoman ambitions, however, only became clear in 2011, when this soft-power approach turned into proxy policies and an increasingly hard-power strategy in the context of the Syrian conflict. The war in Syria can, therefore, be seen as the starting point of what can be dubbed 'Neo-Ottoman Adventurism'.

Before the outbreak of the protests during the Arab Spring, Turkey and Syria were on friendly terms. Under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the relationship between both countries improved significantly.⁴ Yet, from the very beginning, Turkey adopted a double-barrelled approach towards the Syrian regime. At the start of the uprisings in Syria in the spring of 2011, several Turkish delegations attempted to convince the Assad Regime to halt its brutal crackdown on the protests, while Turkey, at the same time, hosted the slowly forming Syrian opposition

2. Which led to severe frictions and the end of diplomatic relations with Israel after the death of ten Turkish nationals during the sea blockade of Gaza in 2009.

3. Ahmet Davutoglu, "Strategik Derinlik, Turkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu (Strategic Depth, Turkey's International Position)", *Kure Yayınları*, Sep. 2001.

4. The ratification of a trade agreement in 2007, the introduction of visa-free travel between both countries in 2009, and the start of the joint dam project on the Orontes River in 2001, serve as examples of the improving ties. Turkey also acted as a mediator in a failed attempt to achieve a peace treaty between Syria and Israel. The family of Bashar al-Assad was even invited for holidays in Turkey by then Prime Minister Erdogan in 2009. "Syrias al-Assad family in Bodrum for time off", *Hürriyet Daily News*, Aug. 2008, available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrias-al-assad-family-in-bodrum-for-time-off.aspx?pageID=438&n=syrias-al-assad-family-in-bodrum-for-time-off-2008-08-05>

movement in Istanbul. This suggests a deeply imbedded desire in Turkey's foreign policy from the very outset of the conflict to influence the developments in Syria. This is further evidenced by a statement made by then Prime Minister Erdogan in 2011 in which he characterized the developments in Syria as practically an internal problem for Turkey.⁵

In the summer of 2011, it became increasingly clear that Ankara's leverage over the Syrian regime was not substantial enough to make the regime commit to reform. Having seemingly lost patience with the Assad regime, or as a way of retaliating against the unresponsive Syrian regime, Ankara started to support the Syrian uprising more openly and actively contributed to the transformation of the Syrian opposition into the Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul in August 2011. It is highly unlikely that the inception of the SNC could have taken place without pre-existing support and planning from the Turkish government, further underlining Turkey's fundamental interests in shaping the conflict and its outcome.⁶

In September 2011, Turkey cut all diplomatic ties with the Syrian regime due to the regime's expanding military oppression of the Syrian opposition. It was from this point onwards that Turkey became fully committed to toppling the Assad regime. Turkey's involvement towards that goal can be summarised in two distinct approaches:

First, Ankara increased its diplomatic efforts to end the conflict in Syria. These efforts mostly focused on calling for an international intervention in the conflict and the establishment of 'safe-zones' in Syria on behalf of the armed opposition. While sometimes aggressive in their rhetoric, the statements of Turkish officials like Foreign Minister Davutoglu signified that Turkey would only act in coordination with the international community;⁷ an effort that would ultimately prove futile due to the resistance of Russia and China towards foreign interventions in the conflict.⁸

Second, when it became clear that the UN was unable to come to a consensus on the Syrian issue, Turkey, together with other countries,⁹ began to provide weapons, training and logistical support for the armed opposition in Syria under the leadership of the allied SNC and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). At this stage of the conflict, Turkey was actively contributing to the actions of the international community aimed at solving the conflict. It was determined to support the armed opposition, together with some of its Western allies, to achieve its strategic goal of regime change in Syria.

However, it proved difficult for Turkey and other nations to support the Syrian opposition from the very beginning of the conflict. An important factor in this was the fact that the Syrian opposition was itself fractured between mostly secular, but also more radical Islamist elements. Turkey, for that mat-

5. "Syria unrest: Turkey presses Assad to end crackdown" *BBC News*, Aug. 2011, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14454175>;

6. "Turkey's Hand in the Syrian Opposition", *The Atlantic*, Oct. 2011, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/10/turkeys-hand-in-the-syrian-opposition/247330/>

7. "Turkey calls on major powers to intervene in Syria" *The Guardian*, Oct. 2012, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/19/turkey-britain-us-intervene-syria>

8. There were also efforts made by the Arab League and the UN towards a ceasefire agreement in Syria in early 2012, which was supported by Turkey. Ankara also participated in the establishment of the "Friends of Syria" initiative, a group dedicated to find a solution to the armed conflict in Syria.

9. Particularly the U.S., the UK, France, Saudi Arabia and Qatar; see also: "US and UK suspend non-lethal aid for Syria rebels" *BBC News*, Dec. 2013, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25331241>;

ter, tried to forge this mix of nationalist, moderate Islamist and hard-line Islamist groups into a coherent faction within the framework of the SNC. However, the perceived domination of the Muslim Brotherhood and its dependence on Turkish support led to an unwillingness by secular and especially Kurdish opposition groups in Syria to join the SNC.¹⁰

Over the course of the next two years, the conflict in Syria was characterised by extreme violence. It slowly became clear that the internal power struggles between the secular and nationalistic forces and their failure to work together resulted in an armed opposition that was increasingly shaped by more radicalized groups such as HTS and Ahrar al-Sham. In light of the perceived weakness and increasing marginalization of the FSA, Turkey - supported by Saudi Arabia and Qatar - began to shift its support towards these hard-line forces.¹¹

In winter 2013, the U.S. and UK suspended lethal-equipment deliveries to the Syrian opposition due to the increased influence of radical Islamist forces.¹² It is at this point that Turkey truly embarked on what can be called Neo-Ottoman Adventurism. Instead of staying in line with its Western allies, who were growing increasingly worried that they were supporting the very terrorist organisations they swore to fight against in the War on Terror, Turkey continued to support Islamic extremist opposition factions in order to achieve its strategic goal of regime change in Syria.¹³

Furthermore, it has been argued that Turkey overestimated the commitment of the international community (especially the U.S. under President Barack Obama) to support the Syrian opposition and its secular or nationalistic elements. The truth of the matter was that Turkey supported all forms of armed groups in Syria from the start and was apparently willing to risk the empowerment of Islamist groups, as long as it would lead to the defeat of Assad and the establishment of a Turkey-friendly regime in Syria. The continued support of more radical Islamist groups, especially after the end of 2013, was, therefore, a strategic move by Turkey, putting regional ambitions before its commitment to its Western allies. To this end, Turkey not only facilitated the delivery of Qatari and Saudi arms and equipment to more radical groups, but also tolerated the inflow of foreign Jihadists and fighters into Syria through its southern borders, many of whom would later join groups like the Islamic State (ISIL) and HTS.¹⁴

U.S. - Turkish relations were strained from the beginning of the conflict, as the U.S. declined repeated calls by Turkey to enforce no-fly zones in Syria in order to neutralise the regime's air superiority.¹⁵ Furthermore, Turkey's insistence on supporting the opposition, now seen by many as an entity controlled by radical Islamist groups, gradually isolated Ankara from its Western allies in Syria. On top of that, the rise of ISIL in the summer of 2014 changed the dynamics of the conflict, and Western

10. Meliha Benli Altunsik, "Turkey at a Crossroads - The Inflexibility of Turkey's Policy in Syria" *Mediterranean Yearbook* 2016, Sept. 28, 2016.

11. "Special Report: Syria's Islamists seize control as moderates dither", *Reuters*, Jun. 19, 2013, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-rebels-islamists-specialreport-idUSBRE95I0BC20130619>

12. "Britain and US suspend non-lethal aid to Syrian rebels", *The Telegraph*, Dec. 2013, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10510498/Britain-and-US-suspend-non-lethal-aid-to-Syrian-rebels.html>

13. Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam are the main rebel groups supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Both are fighting for an Islamic state in Syria under Sharia law.

14. Faysal Itani and Aaron Stein, "Turkey's Syria Predicament", The Atlantic Council, May 2016, available at: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/turkey-s-syria-predicament>

15. Simon Tisdall, "Turkey calls on major powers to intervene in Syria", *The Guardian*, Oct. 2012, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/19/turkey-britain-us-intervene-syria>

interests, particularly those of the U.S., started to collide with Turkish interests in the region.

The territorial gains in Syria and Iraq as well as the horrible atrocities committed by ISIL led to a change of strategy by the Obama administration. The initially half-hearted approach to toppling the Assad regime was abandoned for the sake of destroying ISIL. Turkey was heavily criticised by the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL for its reluctance to join the fight against ISIL and its lack of commitment to controlling its borders to stop Jihadist fighters from joining the group.¹⁶ The international pressure, combined with the continued threat of a terrorist organisation like ISIL massively gaining ground along the Turkish border, finally convinced Turkey to join the U.S.-led coalition against the group in September 2014. Subsequently, Turkey began to train Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan, opened up Incirlik airbase for coalition warplanes, and began airstrikes of its own against ISIL targets in the summer of 2015.¹⁷

Much more critical to Turkey than the fight against ISIL was the fact that the U.S. was looking for a reliable partner on the ground to fight this new threat, and they found it in the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the YPG. The PYD itself is considered by Turkey to be closely associated with the PKK and took over extensive amounts of territory after the Syrian regime's withdrawal from the Turkish border in the summer of 2012.¹⁸ The attempted merging of the PYD's territories in Afrin, Kobani and Jazira quickly led to conflicts with more radical

elements of the overwhelmingly Arab-led insurgents of the Free Syrian Army close to the towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain between 2012 and 2013. At first, Turkey tried to push the PYD to join the Turkish-backed opposition in Syria and negotiated a ceasefire agreement with the PKK in 2013. At the same time, Ankara supported other Kurdish groups, which were more aligned with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, in order to undermine the PYD's influence in Syria. Nevertheless, the PYD emerged as the dominant group along the Syrian - Turkish border and, therefore, grew to be a perceived long-term threat to Turkey's security interests because of its affiliation with the PKK.¹⁹

When ISIL forces began their siege of the YPG-held town of Kobani in the summer of 2014, Turkish troops effectively closed off the border region around the town, making it impossible for Kurdish forces to assist the besieged YPG troops. This led to an outrage in the Kurdish community in Turkey, as Turkey was accused of directly supporting ISIL.²⁰ Although Ankara eventually did let Peshmerga from the KRG and FSA forces assist in the liberation of the town, it was perceived as yet another attempt to weaken YPG influence in the region, instead of supporting the Kurds in their fight against ISIL. Thus, Turkey's foreign policy decisions in regard to Kobani not only made Turkish intentions towards the YPG clear, but were also a factor in the failure of the peace process and the resumption of hostilities between the Turkish government and the PKK in 2015. Furthermore, at that time, the

16. Bayram Balci, "Why is Turkey still so reluctant to join the coalition against the "Islamic State"?", Carnegie Moscow Center, Oct. 2014, available at: <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=56901>

17. "Turkey carries out first ever airstrikes against ISIS in Syria", *The Guardian*, Jul. 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/24/turkish-jets-carry-out-strikes-against-isis-in-syria-reports>

18. "Turkey says it bombed Kurdish terrorists in Syria and Iraq but US Kurdish allies say they were hit", *The Telegraph*, April 2017, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/25/turkey-says-bombed-kurdish-terrorists-syria-iraq-us-kurdish/>

19. Itani and Stein, 2016.

20. "Kobani: Anger grows as Turkey stops Kurds from aiding militias in Syria" *The Guardian*, Oct. 2014, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/08/kobani-isis-turkey-kurds-ypg-syria-erdogan>

U.S. began actively targeting ISIL positions and supporting the YPG's defence of Kobani with airstrikes. Since then, the U.S. has come to rely on the YPG as the only effective ground forces to combat ISIL in Syria.

While these were setbacks for Ankara, the overall goal of defeating the Assad regime in Syria seemed imminent in the summer of 2015, as a Turkish, Saudi and Qatari-supported coalition of Islamist rebel groups was on the verge of entering the Latakia province after a set of military victories in Idlib, eastern Homs and Deraa.²¹ However, the timely intervention of Russia in September 2015, combined with increased Iranian involvement, suddenly made the fall of the regime look highly unlikely. Over the course of 2016, it became increasingly clear that Turkey's foreign policy of Neo-Ottoman Adventurism was doomed to fail in Syria.

Ocalan and al-Baghdadi instead of Assad - Turkey's new Neo-Ottoman *Realpolitik* in Syria

In mid-2016, Ankara began to slowly revise its Neo-Ottoman Adventurism approach. Up to this point, the major interest for Turkey in Syria was toppling the Assad regime. Secondary to Ankara, was the fight against ISIL and the containment of the YPG along its borders.

Considering the reality on the ground in Syria, toppling Assad seemed to have become an impossible task for Turkey to

achieve. The Syrian regime, with support from Russia and Iran, began to push back the Turkish-backed opposition on all fronts and was advancing on Aleppo, a major opposition stronghold.²² Ankara's other two foreign policy objectives in Syria, however, became increasingly pressing, as ISIL committed several suicide and rocket attacks against Turkey and still held the area around al-Bab, close to the Turkish border.²³

On top of that, as the primary ally of the U.S. to combat ISIL in Syria, the YPG not only received logistical support, weapons²⁴ and military-training by the U.S., but also effectively managed to conquer the entire territory east of the Euphrates River along the Syrian-Turkish border, with only a small pocket of ISIL-controlled ground in the Northern Aleppo province keeping the YPG from uniting with its forces in Afrin.²⁵ Domestically, Turkey experienced several deadly terror attacks due to its conflict with the PKK, severely undermining its national security. The conflict with the PKK intensified dramatically after the end of the 2013 ceasefire agreement, leading to a resumption of hostilities in the Kurdish-dominated regions of Southern Turkey. The attempted military coup in July 2016 and subsequent purges also weakened the capabilities of Turkish security institutions, further straining Turkey's resources. Moreover, Turkey still had to deal with the three million refugees it hosted from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the resulting socio-economic pressures.²⁶

21. Samia Nakhoul, "Russia props up Assad as he reinforces coastal heartland", *Reuters*, Sep. 2015, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-assad-insight-idUSKCN0RS1MP20150928>

22. Mohammed Al-Khatieb, "After Iranian, Russian military advances Syrian opposition suffers setback in Aleppo", *Al-Monitor*, Oct. 2015, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/10/syria-regime-aleppo-attack-opposition-lack-arms.html>

23. Examples for ISIL attacks against and inside Turkey: Bombing of the municipal cultural centre in Suruç with 34 dead and 100 people injured on 20 July 2015; The Elbeyli incident on 23 July 2015, where ISIL fighters attacked a Turkish border outpost, killing one and wounding five Turkish soldiers; The First 2016 Istanbul bombing on 12 January 2016, with 12 people dead; ISIL rocket attacks against the Turkish province of Kilis with several civilian casualties in April 2016.

24. Weapons were first delivered to the YPG during the siege of Kobani in 2015. Since May 2017, the US has also officially armed YPG units for the Raqqa campaign against ISIL.

25. Altunisik, 2016.

26. *Ibid.*

Ankara's diplomatic standing equally suffered due to the policies it pursued. Turkey's relationship with Assad's allies - Russia and Iran - was already strained at the beginning of the conflict. After the Russian intervention and the downing of a Russian jet by Turkey in November 2015, the situation escalated into a full-blown diplomatic crisis between Moscow and Ankara.²⁷ Turkey was increasingly limited in its actions in Syria because the Russian military presence made it impossible for Ankara to directly intervene on the side of the rebels or to combat ISIL. The Turkish government also isolated itself from its Western allies due to its continued support of more radical opposition elements, and from the U.S. due to its harsh criticism of American support for the YPG. The U.S. partnership with Syrian Kurds resulted in a new low-point in U.S.-Turkey relations, but also meant that Turkey was risking a potential escalation with one of its NATO allies in case of bigger military operations against the YPG.

The early Turkish foreign policy slogan of "Zero Problems with Neighbours", marked by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu seemed ironic by mid-2016, given Ankara's international isolation and waning influence in Syria. Having apparently realised its predicament and the failure of its Neo-Ottoman adventurous policies, Ankara began to slowly reconsolidate its foreign policy approach in Syria in the following months. The stepping down of then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the inauguration of his successor Binali Yildirim can be seen as the turning point in Turkish foreign policy in Syria. In his first speech in parlia-

ment on the 24th of May, 2016, Yildirim announced Turkey's new approach of "More friends, fewer enemies", directly related to Turkey's current isolated position.²⁸

Following his announcement, Turkey quickly sought to normalise relations with Russia and, by the end of June, had officially apologised for shooting down the Russian jet in 2015.²⁹ This rapprochement was followed by a shift of Ankara's priorities in Syria. Instead of focusing on regime change, a by now hopeless endeavour, Turkey focused its efforts on combating the YPG along its border, or at least implement a strategy of containment.³⁰ The fight against ISIL was expanded in order to remove the threat of attacks by the group along Turkey's southern border, to regain the trust of the international community, and, through this, gain increased political leverage against the YPG. The ousting of Assad was, and still is, a primary interest for Ankara, although it is now much less of a priority and has been relegated to what could be called a face-saving policy for Turkey.

It needs to be stressed that this was in no way a radical shift of Turkish foreign policy in Syria or an abandonment of Ankara's Neo-Ottoman ambitions in the Middle East. Rather, Turkey's foreign policy shifted to a Realpolitik approach by accepting the realities on the ground and by focusing on more critical long-term security concerns. The Neo-Ottoman Adventurism approach was, after all, idealistic and based on Turkey's own wrong perception of its regional influence and power. Turkey's goal of regime change in Syria was pursued almost single-

27. Nick Tattersall and Vladimir Soldatkin, "Russia and Turkey refuse to back down in row over jet downing", *Reuters*, Nov. 2015, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-erdogan-idUSKBN0TE0QT20151125>

28. Kaya Genc, "Turkey Is About to Change", *The HuffPost*, May 2016, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kaya-genc/turkey-foreign-policy-prime-minister_b_10132124.html

29. Nick Tattersall, Jack Stubbs and Jeffrey Heller, "Turkey mends fences with Israel, Russia in foreign policy reset", *Reuters*, Jun. 2016, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-israel-russia-idUSKCN0ZD29U>

30. Katerina Dalacoura, "A new phase in Turkish foreign policy: Expediency and AKP Survival", *MENARA*, Feb. 2017.

mindedly and, while nearly successful, ultimately ignored long-term consequences of diplomatic isolation and strengthening of radical Islamist groups.

Ankara's rapprochement with Moscow in June 2016 paved the way for new policy options for Turkey in Syria that had previously been denied by the Russian military presence. On the 26th of August, 2016, Ankara announced the start of 'Operation Euphrates Shield' and its military intervention in the Syrian conflict in an attempt to create a secure corridor from the Turkish border to the town of al-Bab.³¹ According to President Erdogan, the operation's aim was to fight against ISIL and Kurdish terrorist groups in Northern Syria to protect Turkish national security interests. Indeed, the operation's objective was to achieve several different goals at once: to prevent the establishment of a coherent YPG-controlled area along the Turkish border by blocking the connection of the YPG-controlled cantons of Afrin and Kobani, to drive ISIL from the Turkish border and show Turkey's commitment to fighting the group, and, finally, to form an area of retreat for the Turkish-backed opposition in Syria.³² Additionally, Ankara hoped some of the three million Syrian refugees in Turkey would be able to return to their homes in these areas once they were secured.

Subsequently, Turkey pulled back allied FSA groups from Aleppo in apparent preparation for 'Operation Euphrates Shield', shortly before the start of the Syrian government's offensive on the city.³³ Ankara was also surprisingly silent on the indiscriminate

airstrikes by Russia and the regime during the siege of Aleppo, especially considering its past aggressive rhetoric in such cases. Russia, on the other hand, allowed the Turkish air force to conduct missions in Syrian airspace, something which had been impossible until then due to the diplomatic row and the presence of Russian S-300 and S-400 anti-aircraft weapon systems.³⁴ A unilateral move by Turkey would have surely led to military retaliation by Russian forces, especially in light of the incident with the Russian airplane that Turkey had shot down in 2015. This indicates that there seems to have been an implicit agreement between Russia and Turkey regarding 'Operation Euphrates Shield' and Aleppo. It should be kept in mind that Aleppo was, at the time, still a major rebel stronghold and symbol of the Syrian revolution, which had almost been successful in overthrowing the Assad regime less than two years earlier. That Turkey was now willing to 'sacrifice' Aleppo to be able to launch 'Operation Euphrates Shield', clearly highlights Turkey's shifting interests in Syria and pragmatic approach to pursuing those interests.

'Operation Euphrates Shield' officially ended on the 29th of March, 2017. Turkish and FSA troops had, until then, successfully liberated an area roughly encompassing the cities in the triangle between Al-Bab, Azzan, and Jarablus. Although it achieved its objectives of driving ISIL back from the Turkish border, preventing a fusion of YPG territory and establishing a safe zone for the Turkish-backed opposition, the operation soon reached its natural limits. Russia and the U.S. started to deploy ground troops along-

31. Sam Heller, "Turkey's 'Turkey First' Syria Policy", *The Century Foundation*, Apr. 2017, available at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkeys-turkey-first-syria-policy/>

32. Galip Dalay, "Turkey's Unpalatable Choices in Syria", *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, Mar. 2017, available at: <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkeys-unpalatable-choices-syria>

33. Sam Heller, 2017.

34. Jonathan Marcus, "Russia S-400 Syria missile deployment sends robust signal", *BBC News*, Dec. 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34976537>

side regime and YPG forces, respectively, to contain Turkish expansion and attacks against its proxies on the ground. Furthermore, the combined FSA and Turkish forces were weaker than expected, resulting in a longer operation, more casualties, and a failure to push the YPG back to the eastern side of the Euphrates River.³⁵

Ankara's new-found pragmatism also became apparent on the diplomatic level. Together with Russia, Turkey sponsored the Astana Peace Talks. The first meeting between Russia, Iran and Turkey resulted in a ceasefire agreement on December 28th, 2016, which laid the groundwork for further negotiations between the various Syrian factions.³⁶ Although there were widespread violations of the ceasefire agreement, a second round of Astana peace talks was held on the 23rd of January, 2017 between Russia, Iran, the Syrian regime, Turkey and the Syrian opposition groups.³⁷

It is worth mentioning that these talks excluded Kurdish YPG forces as well as more radical groups such as HTS from the agreement, which contributed to a schism inside the areas controlled by the Syrian rebels. Following the exclusion of radical Islamist groups from the ceasefire agreement, violent clashes erupted in the Idlib province between radical Islamist and more moderate opposition groups. Turkey seemed eager to make a clear cut between Ahrar al-Sham and HTS by including the for-

mer into the ceasefire agreements while excluding the latter. This led to a divide inside Ahrar al-Sham itself and the defections of prominent members to HTS.³⁸ Tightened control over the Syrian opposition would directly consolidate Ankara's foothold in Syria by making sure its authority over the armed opposition is not challenged by radical extremist groups and remains firmly in the hands of Turkish-backed Ahrar al-Sham. This struggle for dominance and political direction is apparently the reason for the recent clashes in Idlib.³⁹ Syrian opposition groups were forced to accept Turkey's influence and political agenda, or join groups such as HTS and face global anti-terror efforts as well as Syrian regime forces.⁴⁰

So far, there have been four more rounds of peace talks in the Kazakh capital, which resulted in an agreement between Russia, Iran and Turkey to create de-escalation zones inside Syria. These de-escalation zones aimed to halt hostilities between the Assad regime and opposition forces, ensure humanitarian assistance, facilitate the return of IDPs, and begin the reconstruction of critical infrastructure. By engaging Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime on a diplomatic level, Ankara was able to gain a seat at the most advanced peace talks. This move also allowed Turkey to exclude the YPG from any peace deals, as well as tighten its hold over opposition groups by excluding radical Islamist elements.

35. Cengiz Candar, "Operation Euphrates Shield: A post-mortem", *Al-Monitor*, Apr. 2017, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/04/turkey-post-mortem-in-syria.html>

36. "Turkey and Russia 'broker ceasefire deal for all of Syria'", *The Telegraph*, Dec. 2016, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/28/turkey-russia-broker-ceasefire-deal-syria/>

37. The Astana talks directly include opposition groups in the negotiations, unlike the Geneva peace talks where the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) acts as the umbrella body for the opposition.

38. Abu Jaber, former leader of Ahrar al-Sham and dozens of other Ahrar al-Sham commanders have reportedly defected to al-Nusra Front on the 28th of January, 2017.

39. Idlib province in Syria witnessed intense clashes between Ahrar al-Sham and HTS in July, with Ahrar al-Sham ultimately being pushed back from strategic locations near the Turkish border. A ceasefire agreement following the clashes has subsequently been violated by both groups on a regular basis. Mona Alami, "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham plots its next move in northern Syria", *Al-Monitor*, Aug. 2017, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/syria-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-agreements.html>

40. Dylan Collins, "Idlib's rebel split: A crossroads for the Syrian opposition", *Al Jazeera*, Feb. 2017, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/01/idlib-rebel-split-crossroads-syrian-opposition-170131134053716.html>

Turkish rapprochement with its NATO ally, the United States, remains ambiguous. Turkish officials have repeatedly stated that the U.S. must stop its support for the YPG and heavily criticised President Trump's decision on May 9th, 2017 to arm the YPG for the joint operation against the ISIL-held city of Raqqa, which began on June 6th, 2017.⁴¹ On the other hand, Turkey renewed its call for the removal of Assad and offered full support for U.S.-led measures in the aftermath of the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack and subsequent U.S. cruise-missile bombardment of a Syrian airbase in the beginning of April, 2017.⁴² Although Turkey has clearly prioritised its fight against the YPG since mid-2016, its recent behaviour hints at Ankara's willingness to be flexible in its current foreign policy priorities in Syria, given its limited policy options. Another possibility is that these statements were made to reassure Turkish-backed rebel groups that Turkey remains committed to the fall of the Assad regime, all the while not having any real consequences for the Turkish strategy in Syria. In any case, U.S. support for the YPG continues to be a critical strain on U.S.-Turkey relations and presents a significant threat to Turkish interests.

Conclusion and Outlook

Turkey's recent actions in Syria are a good reflection of its decisive shift in foreign policy towards combatting the YPG in Syria, as well as increased pragmatism in regard

to achieving that goal under its new approach of Neo-Ottoman *Realpolitik*. Yet, as in mid-2016, Turkey now once again stands at a crossroads with its foreign policy in Syria and only has limited options. Ankara's fight against the YPG can only be escalated to a certain degree without risking a direct confrontation with the U.S. and Russia.⁴³ Similarly, as long as Russia and Iran back the Assad regime, Turkey will not succeed in achieving regime change in Syria with military means. It can, therefore, be expected that Ankara will continue to pursue a diplomatic approach that will try to isolate the YPG in Syria and to convince the U.S. to stop its support for the group.

Yet, with the U.S. armament of YPG fighters and Washington cancellation of military support for the FSA,⁴⁴ it has become clear that Turkey and U.S. interests will not converge anytime soon on a diplomatic level, leaving Turkey no other option than engaging in diplomacy with Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime. It is highly likely that Turkey will stay committed to the peace process outlined during the Astana talks and implement a face-saving strategy in Syria.⁴⁵ With the announcement of the de-escalation zones and the exclusion of more radical rebel groups such as HTS from the cease-fire agreement, Ankara seems to be trying to tighten its hold on the Syrian opposition, which is currently dominated by said radical groups in the area around Idlib. There have also been reports that Turkey is consolidat-

41. Even going so far as to indirectly threaten US-forces with retaliation by Turkey. Paul Mcleary, "Turkey Threatens US-forces in Syria as Putin Presses for Safe Zones", *Foreign Policy*, May 2017, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2017/10/19/next-round-of-astana-talks-on-syria-set-for-oct-30-31-kazakhstan-sayshttp://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/03/turkey-threatens-u-s-forces-in-syria-as-putin-presses-for-safe-zones/>

42. Tulay Karadeniz and Humeyra Pamuk, "Turkey calls for Assad's ouster, says supports U.S. missile strike", *Reuters*, Apr. 2017, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKBN1790P4>

43. Russia established a military presence there in the form of a "reconciliation centre" to train YPG troops in March 2017. "Syria war: Russia denies aiding Kurds to set up a military base", *BBC News*, Mar. 2017, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39335029>

44. Josie Ensor and Luna Safwan, "Donald Trump ends covert CIA aid to Syrian rebels in 'win' for Russia", *The Telegraph*, Jul. 2017, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/20/donald-trump-ends-us-programme-supporting-syrian-rebels-fighting/>

45. This probably means that Turkey will aim to take part in a post-conflict settlement as a relevant political party and try to make the Assad regime commit to reforms to report at least a partially success in its struggle in Syria.

ing its foothold in its administered territory in Northern Syria by relocating Turkmen families into the area and by re-establishing civil administration and services, giving it potentially more leverage for settlement-negotiations.⁴⁶

On the military level, Turkey has more than just indicated its interest in removing the YPG from Afrin with its military projection and artillery attacks as of mid-August, 2017. While Afrin seems like an opportunity for further extension of Turkish operations against the YPG, the U.S. would be extremely critical of a move against its YPG allies on the ground, and Russian support for such an operation is anything but certain.⁴⁷ It is, therefore, highly unlikely for Turkey to launch an operation against Afrin without consent by the U.S. or at least Russia, as it would mean direct confrontation with their troops and proxies on the ground. The proposed strike against Afrin by Turkish officials is in a way representative of Turkey's limited options in Syria, as Turkish security interests directly collide with U.S. and Russian interests in Syria. This constrains Ankara, for the most part, to a wait-and-see approach for new opportunities to arise in the region. How the U.S.-YPG alliance will continue now that ISIL has been largely defeated in Syria, could potentially give Turkey more room to manoeuvre and for new policy options. As a result, it is more likely that Turkey will continue to perform air and artillery strikes against YPG targets of opportunity in Syria.

It remains to be seen how long an alliance like NATO can survive such conflicts of interests between its members, as can be observed in Syria. Turkey seems to have become flexible regarding its partners and is

focused on its own strategic interests rather than those of its Western allies. It is no longer unthinkable to assume that the crisis in Syria could signify a long-term political shift for Ankara towards closer relations with Russia, Iran and China, should their goals align with Turkish security interests. A recently-struck deal between Ankara and Moscow for the delivery of advanced Russian S-400 air defence missiles serves as a striking indication that the Kremlin increasingly aims to lure Turkey out of the NATO framework.⁴⁸

What is clear is that Turkey's Neo-Ottoman ambitions are here to stay in one form or another. Turkey's self-portrayal as a protective power for Turkmen groups in Iraq and its continued intrusions into Iraqi territory to fight the PKK and have already led to a series of diplomatic standoffs with Baghdad. Ankara's position in the diplomatic crisis between the Gulf Cooperation Council and Qatar is another clear indicator that Turkey has not given up on its quest for political influence and regional hegemony. With its regional aspirations, Ankara's Neo-Ottoman policy will continue to have a significant impact on the Middle East in the future.

46. "Turkey making itself at home in Syria", *Al-Monitor*, May 2017, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/turkey-syria-ankara-set-up-state-structure-northern-parts.html>

47. Metin Gurcan, "Ankara's offer to Moscow: Give us Afrin for Idlib", *Al-Monitor*, July 2017, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/turkey-russia-offer-moscow-idlib-in-return-for-afrin.html>

48. "Turkey signs deal to get Russian S-400 air defence missiles", *BBC News*, Sep. 2017, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41237812>

