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# How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy

Francesco Siccardi



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## Summary

Between August 2016 and the present, Turkey has launched four military operations in northern Syria. Each operation has served specific objectives and was designed to respond to rapidly changing scenarios on the ground. It is possible to identify the key priorities that have informed Turkey's Syria policy over the years. Boiled down to its core, the Turkish government's activism in Syria has been driven by domestic politics and has helped Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) preserve power.

Domestically, Ankara has used the Syrian conflict as a pretext to suppress the rights of the Kurds living in Turkey and limit their parliamentary representation to secure a landmark constitutional reform in 2017. In the following years, successive military operations in Syria have helped Erdoğan connect with increasingly nationalistic constituencies and drum up support around key electoral dates. Finally, after the failed coup in July 2016, the Turkish government's Syria policy played a major role in rebuilding the credibility of the Turkish Armed Forces while redrawing the balance between civilian and military power.

In foreign policy terms, Turkey's military operations in Syria have resulted in increasingly tense relations with the United States. Washington's support for the Syrian Kurds has alienated Ankara to an extent that U.S. policymakers failed to anticipate. The thorniest topic of the day in the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relation—Ankara's decision to deploy the Russian S-400 missile system—is also deeply related to the Syrian crisis. This decision was made in the context of a strategic realignment between Turkey and Russia that has helped both countries pursue their respective objectives in Syria: the survival of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's regime for Moscow and the weakening of the Syrian Kurds for Ankara.

Finally, Ankara's involvement in Syria has also given Turkey new leverage over the EU when it comes to the management of refugee flows. Solving the question of Syrian refugees in Turkey has been a priority of the Turkish government since the early stages of the Syrian civil war—and a main driver of Ankara's policies toward both Syria and the EU.

Overall, Ankara's involvement in Syria has not only been a source of conflict—or rapprochement—with its traditional partners and neighbors across the region. It has also equipped Turkey with new tools for conducting a more aggressive, nationalistic foreign policy.

The strategies Turkey has employed in Syria have boosted the country's image and international role. These operations have secured a seat for Turkey at the negotiating table with Russia and the United States. Ankara has used these tools, these lessons learned, and its new capabilities to inform its revisionist foreign policy posture. Going forward, and with an eye on the country's 2023 presidential election, Turkey will continue to use these tools to reinforce its position in the international arena.



## Introduction

The first Turkish troops set foot in Syria on August 24, 2016, when Operation Euphrates Shield kicked off a series of multiple military missions that took place in the north of the country over the past five years. The Turkish government's activism in Syria marks a defining moment in the trajectory of Turkey's domestic and foreign policies. Boiled down to its core, Turkey's policy in Syria has been driven by domestic politics. Supported by a large constituency across Turkey, this policy has helped Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) preserve power through some politically challenging years following the 2016 coup attempt.<sup>1</sup>

Building on the Turkish government's increasingly nationalist rhetoric and policies, Turkey's operations in Syria have served to weaken political opposition and rally the Turkish people around the flag in the run-up to key elections, by extension consolidating Erdoğan's power.

On the foreign policy front, this approach has translated into increasingly strained relations between Turkey and the United States, whose support for Kurdish forces in Syria has alienated Ankara to a degree few in Washington had anticipated. Turkey's involvement in Syria has also been the centerpiece of a strategic realignment with Russia. The Turkish government has used the question of Syrian refugees to justify Turkey's military involvement in Syria and to pressure the EU to obtain funding and renegotiate sea borders in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Crucially, Turkey's Syrian operations have provided the Turkish government with the blueprint for a more disruptive foreign policy. Since 2016, Ankara has deployed its troops in Libya and aggressively pursued its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkish drones have altered the course of conflicts not only in Syria but also in Libya and the South Caucasus. The lessons learned in Syria have informed a series of Turkish foreign policy moves aimed at altering the regional status quo and, more broadly, triggering a strategic reorientation of Turkey's foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

## The Drivers and Trends of Turkey's Military Operations in Syria

In the early phases of the Syrian civil war, which began in March 2011, Erdoğan's repeated calls for regime change in Damascus marked a break from Ankara's traditional policy of refraining from interference in the affairs of its neighbors. Turkey redrew its network of regional and international alliances in pursuit of this goal, which it later abandoned in favor of more achievable, medium-term objectives (see box 1).

### Box 1: Turkish Military Operations in Syria (2016–2020)

#### 1. Operation Euphrates Shield

**Date:** August 2016 to March 2017

**Location:** Northeastern Turkish-Syrian border between the Euphrates River and the Afrin Canton

**Description:** The Turkish Armed Forces quickly took possession of the town of Jarabulus on the Euphrates River, then moved westward to secure the strip of land up to the border of Afrin Canton.<sup>3</sup> To the south, Turkish troops advanced 19 miles into Syria to take control of the town of Al-Bab in February 2017.

#### Objectives Achieved:

- Remove the forces of the self-proclaimed Islamic State then located east of the Euphrates River
- Take control of a strip of territory linking Kurdish cantons to the east and west of the Euphrates River
- Rebuild the Turkish army's morale and restore Turkey's confidence in its military

## **2. Operation Olive Branch**

**Date:** January to March 2018

**Location:** Afrin Canton

**Description:** After an intense Turkish air campaign in the first days of the operation, Turkish forces employed a mix of traditional military techniques, counterterrorism tactics, and advanced military technology, including the first use of Bayraktar TB2 drones in Syria.<sup>4</sup> After clearing the rural areas north of Afrin of any presence of the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish militia, the Turkish Armed Forces took Afrin in less than a week in March 2018.

### **Objectives Achieved:**

- Remove the YPG presence from Afrin Canton and deter the United States from pursuing further cooperation with Kurdish forces
- Find a possible destination for relocating Syrian refugees hosted by Turkey
- Further improve Turkey's confidence in its army

## **3. Operation Peace Spring**

**Date:** October 2019

**Location:** Northeastern Turkish-Syrian border between the towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain

**Description:** The Turkish forces and their proxies in the Syrian National Army, a coalition of armed opposition groups, swiftly moved into Syrian territory and pushed Kurdish forces away from the border. The hostilities ended ten days later when Turkey reached separate ceasefire agreements with the United States and Russia.<sup>5</sup> The Kurdish forces, without the support of U.S. troops, turned to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to seek protection from the Turkish advance.

### **Objectives Achieved:**

- Prevent the formation of an autonomous Kurdish entity along the Turkish-Syrian border
- Find another possible relocation destination for Syrian refugees hosted by Turkey

#### **4. Operation Spring Shield**

**Date:** February to March 2020

**Location:** Idlib Governorate

**Description:** A series of Turkish drone strikes halted the Syrian regime's advance to take Idlib, the last pocket of Syrian territory controlled by rebel forces. The operation ended within a week when Erdoğan flew to Moscow to sign one of many agreements to guarantee a ceasefire in the governorate. In doing so, he maintained a Turkish presence there and prevented refugees from crossing the border into Turkey.

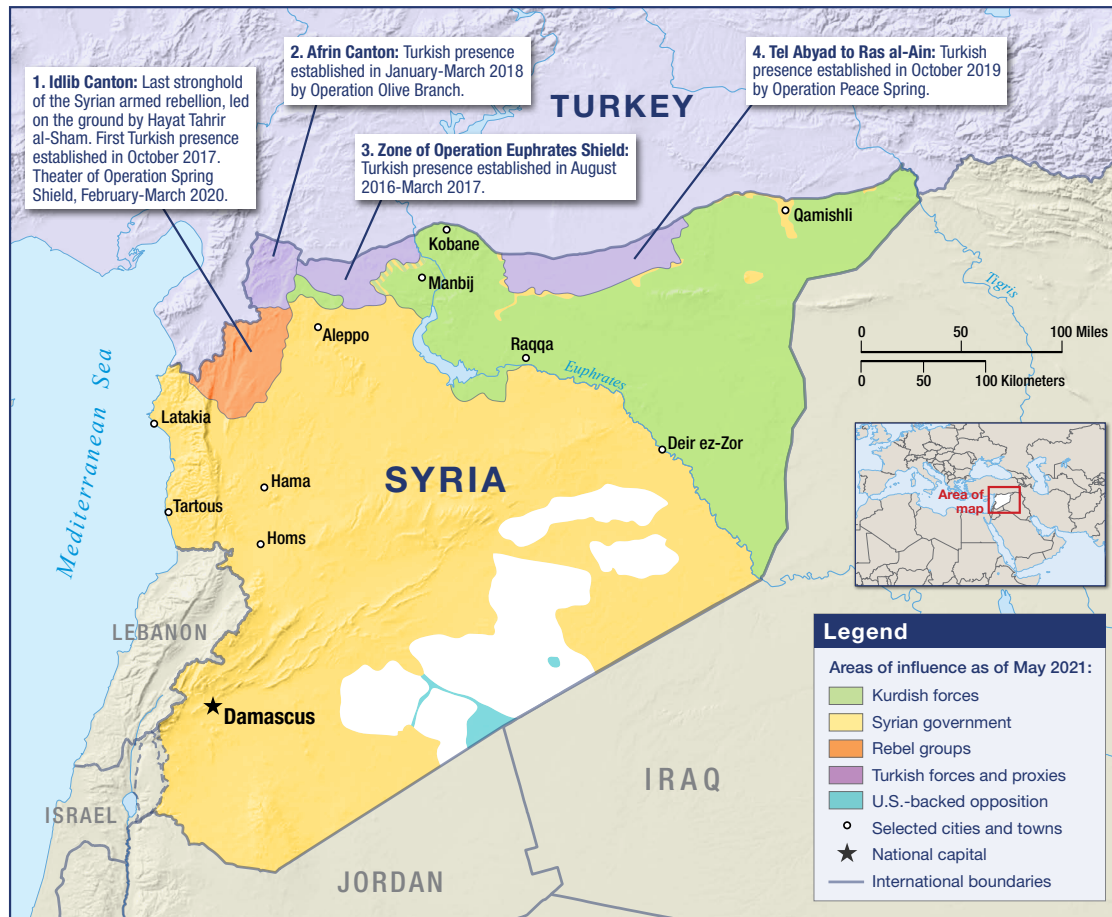
**Objectives achieved:**

- Halt the advance of the Syrian Arab Army toward Idlib and stop the massacre of civilians.
- Prevent an influx of refugees into Turkey

Revitalizing the role of the Turkish army and fighting the self-proclaimed Islamic State were key priorities between 2015 and 2017, when Turkey was shattered by the consequences of the July 2016 failed coup and a series of terrorist attacks by the Islamic State on Turkish soil. Securing possible relocation areas for the Syrian refugees hosted in Turkey became an increasingly important objective from 2018 onward, when social tensions between Turkish citizens and refugee communities became ever more visible and problematic.

However, Ankara has spent most of its political and military resources in Syria on permanently weakening Kurdish forces along the Turkish-Syrian border. This effort has been driven by both foreign and domestic policy considerations and has led to the establishment of several de facto client states in the areas near these military operations. By laying claim to these pockets of territory, Turkey is reaffirming its strategic role in any future deal to end the Syrian civil war (see map 1).

**Map 1. Turkey's Presence in Syria, May 2021**



SOURCE: Adapted from Max Hoffman and Alan Makovsky, "Northern Syria Security Dynamics and the Refugee Crisis," Center for American Progress, May 26, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2021/05/26/499944/northern-syria-security-dynamics-refugee-crisis>.

NOTE: The author made some modifications to the original map such as adding caption boxes and rephrasing some elements in the legend.

## The Domestic Front

The timing and scope of Turkey's military operations in Syria have been deeply rooted in domestic Turkish priorities. In particular, Ankara used the Syrian conflict as a pretext to suppress the rights of the Kurds living in Turkey and limit their parliamentary representation to secure a landmark constitutional reform in 2017. In the following years, successive military operations in Syria have helped Erdoğan connect with increasingly nationalistic constituencies and drum up support around key electoral dates. Finally, after the failed coup in July 2016, the Turkish government's Syria policy played a major role in rebuilding the credibility of the Turkish Armed Forces while redrawing the balance between civilian and military power.

## Using the Syrian Conflict to Silence the Kurds

Weakening Kurdish forces inside and outside Turkey has been one of the drivers of Ankara's military interventions in Syria. After an earlier period in which the Turkish government tolerated the growth of Kurdish activism in Syria, recent years have seen an increasingly harsh crackdown against the Kurdish community. At the same time, the Turkish government has sought to curtail political opposition forces and steer the country's politics in a more nationalist direction.

### The Rise of the Syrian Kurds and the Dismantling of Turkey's Pro-Kurdish Party

The conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—which has been designated a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, and the EU—goes back decades, and Syria has often played a role in it. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Syrian regime offered shelter and protection to Kurdish cadres, including PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. In the late 1990s, Turkey's threat to invade northern Syria finally led then Syrian president Hafez al-Assad to abandon this policy. Öcalan, forced to leave Damascus in October 1998, was captured in Kenya in February 1999.

More recently, successive AKP governments have invested in the relationship with the Kurds to secure their support for the executive presidency that Turkey introduced in 2017—a political brainchild of Erdoğan. Decisions such as the 2002 abolition of the state of emergency in southeastern Turkey imposed fifteen years earlier and the creation in the 2000s of Kurdish television channels were made in this spirit. The two sides established a formal truce in 2013, when Öcalan used his Newroz declaration marking the Kurdish new year to call on Kurds to live in amity and solidarity with Turks under the flag of Islam.<sup>6</sup>

In this phase, Turkey observed and tolerated the rise of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the PKK's Syrian affiliate established in 2003. The Turkish government initially engaged with PYD leader Salih Muslim to try to delink the PYD and the PKK. Trust between the parties started to erode in 2012 when the PYD's military wing, the YPG, took control of large swathes of territory in northern Syria. Turkey's refusal in late 2014 to help Kurdish forces against the Islamic State in Kobanî and the terrorist group's ensuing defeat at the hands of a YPG-led coalition dealt the final blow to the peace process. Ankara started to feel threatened by the emergence along Turkey's southern border of an increasingly autonomous Kurdish entity that could, to an extent, count on Western support. The Kurds, in their newfound position of strength in northern Syria, felt they had as strong a hand as ever: it did not seem far-fetched that their successes in Syria could be replicated in Turkey.

In March 2015, by declaring that “there is no longer a Kurdish problem in Turkey,” Erdoğan officially put an end to the peace process.<sup>7</sup> A few days later, Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), announced his party’s opposition to Erdoğan’s proposed constitutional reform to change Turkey’s system of government to an executive presidency.

The June 2015 Turkish general election provided an opportunity to test these different political strategies. For the first time since 2002, support for the AKP decreased, leaving Erdoğan’s party far from the parliamentary majority he had hoped for and forcing him to enter negotiations to form a coalition government. The success of the HDP, which secured more than 13 percent of the vote and established itself as the country’s second-largest opposition party (after the Republican People’s Party), was another shocking result.<sup>8</sup> Uniting for the first time under the HDP banner, Kurdish candidates now presented Erdoğan with a formidable obstacle to his goal of an executive presidency.

As the HDP fiercely campaigned against the proposed constitutional change, it became clear that the path to an executive presidency would involve quashing the HDP’s resistance and reducing its parliamentary representation. The events of June to November 2015 perfectly illustrate this change in Ankara’s approach. The resurgence of the violent conflict between the Turkish government and the PKK—in part driven by the latter’s attempt to reclaim its central role in the Kurdish camp, to the detriment of the HDP—led to the collapse of the negotiations to form a new governing coalition.<sup>9</sup> At the end of an electoral campaign in which the AKP and Turkey’s pro-government media outlets insisted relentlessly on the connections between the PKK and the HDP, Turkish citizens went back to the polls on November 1, 2015, and conferred on Erdoğan the parliamentary majority he had failed to gain in June.<sup>10</sup> The new result was still not enough to call a constitutional referendum, which requires the executive to control three-fifths of the seats in the parliament, but it was sufficient to create an AKP-led government.

To reinforce the narrative that “the HDP equals the PKK, which equals the . . . YPG [and the] PYD”—as Erdoğan put it a few years later—in the eighteen months after the November 2015 election, the Turkish government deployed its full power to try to curtail the influence of Kurdish political representatives in Turkey.<sup>11</sup> These measures included the detentions of several HDP lawmakers on charges of so-called terrorist propaganda, mostly for comments made about alleged support offered by Turkey to the Islamic State during the siege of Kobani. The arrests were made possible by a May 2016 parliamentary vote to strip HDP members of parliament of their privilege of immunity from prosecution.<sup>12</sup>

Turkey’s first military operation in Syria in August 2016 has to be seen in this context. The mission provided a way to intensify Ankara’s nationalistic rhetoric against the PKK and prosecute any protesters who referred to the YPG as anything but terrorists.<sup>13</sup> In the

course of the operation, the Turkish parliament also approved legislation to allow the state to take control of Turkish municipalities suspected of supporting terrorism.<sup>14</sup> This move was a response to the fact that local government is a traditional Kurdish source of political power. The government dealt the final blow to the HDP in November 2016 by arresting its two leaders, Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. They were charged, once again, with terrorist propaganda.

### Drumming up Domestic Support for the Turkish Government

The end of the peace process with the Kurds meant that Ankara needed a new source of support to press ahead with the project of an executive presidency. Erdoğan therefore established a new alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party, led by the ultranationalist Devlet Bahçeli. This alliance pushed the AKP onto a more authoritarian path and gave Erdoğan a new right-wing, nationalist audience that he needed to please.

Notably, the key moments since 2016 in the Turkish government's fight against the Kurds and its interventions in Syria have coincided with Turkey's major votes: the April 2017 referendum on the executive presidency, the June 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections, and the March 2019 municipal elections (see box 1 above).

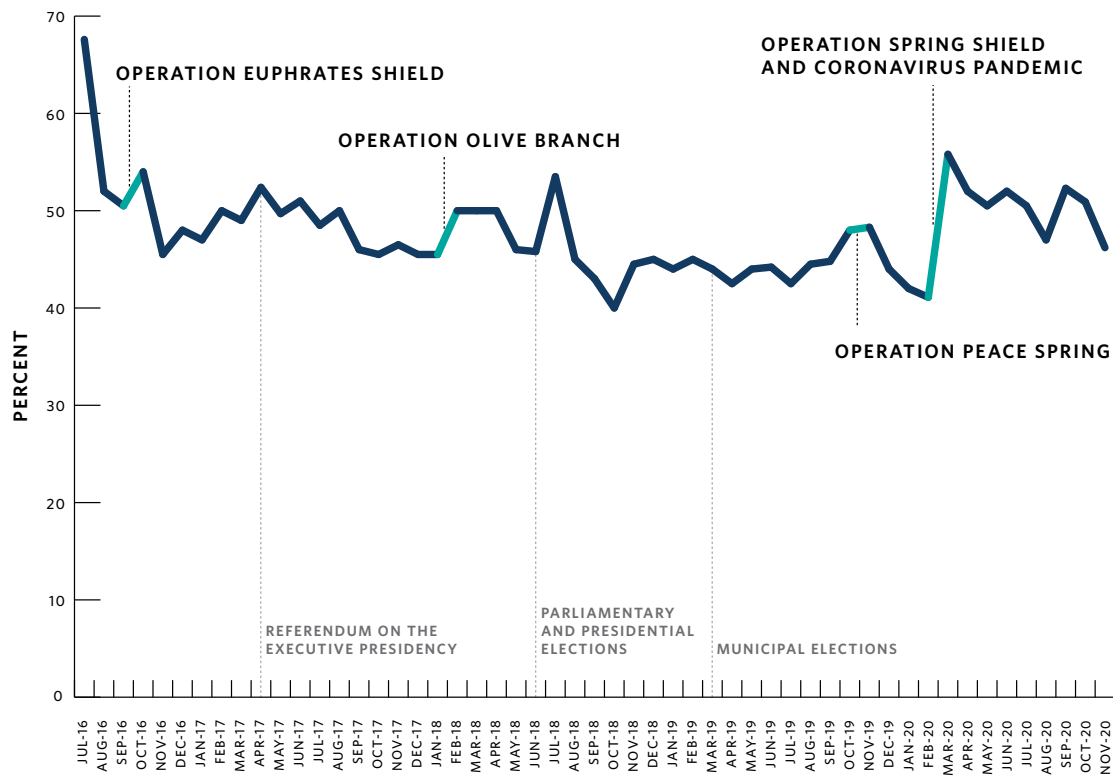
Turkey's military operations in Syria have boosted the Turkish government's increasingly nationalistic rhetoric and weakened its political opponents. Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch were crucial to drumming up the support of nationalists in the lead-up to the April 2017 referendum and the June 2018 elections, respectively. Meanwhile, Operations Peace Spring in October 2019 and Spring Shield in February–March 2020 both followed historic drops in Erdoğan's approval ratings (see figure 1).<sup>15</sup>

Erdoğan's increasingly nationalistic stance went beyond instrumentalizing military operations in Syria and harsh rhetoric against the Kurds. In the run-up to the 2017 referendum, Erdoğan picked a fight with several European governments, including that of Germany, which he accused of adopting policies “not different from the Nazi practices of the past” after political rallies for Turkish citizens in Germany were canceled due to security concerns.<sup>16</sup> Pursuing a domestically driven foreign policy, the Turkish president also tried to persuade Russia and the United States to drop their support for the Syrian Kurds in a final attempt to weaken the Kurdish camp—to no avail.<sup>17</sup>

The AKP's alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party eventually paid off: in the country's 2017 referendum, a razor-thin majority of 51 percent of Turkish citizens approved the proposed constitutional reform.<sup>18</sup> Reinforcing the partnership with the nationalists became crucial to securing Erdoğan's future election as the country's first executive president. Operation Olive Branch was critical in this respect. Turkey's March 2018 military victory against the Kurdish forces in Afrin Canton was quickly followed by an announcement that the presidential and parliamentary elections originally scheduled for November 2019 were to be brought forward to June 2018.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 1. Turkish Military Operations in Syria and Erdoğan's Approval Ratings**



SOURCE: Metropoll, "Turkey's Pulse (surveys)," Metropoll, July 2016–November 2020, <https://twitter.com/metropoll/status/1334408618305785856?lang=en>.

In what Marc Pierini has called Turkey's "perfect path to autocracy," by bringing forward the elections, Erdoğan rode the nationalist wave after the victory in Afrin.<sup>20</sup> Not only that, but he also anticipated the adverse consequences of the foreseeable dwindling of the Central Bank of Turkey's reserves and of impending U.S. sanctions stemming from the Halkbank case, in which an executive at the Turkish state-owned bank was found guilty in the United States of violating sanctions against Iran. Moreover, by holding national elections before the March 2019 municipal elections, Erdoğan avoided the backlash that would later ensue from his party's predictably poor results in the latter contests.

The June 2018 election results were favorable to the AKP but did not give the party a parliamentary majority. Erdoğan therefore formalized the AKP's political convergence with the Nationalist Movement Party into a parliamentary coalition, the so-called People's Alliance.

## The People's Alliance Makes a Nationalistic Turn

Since 2018, the People's Alliance has been steering the Turkish government to the right. On the foreign policy front, this shift has translated into a more assertive stance, with flashpoints in the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, the South Caucasus, and (of course) Syria. On the domestic front, this strategy has gone hand in hand with increasingly nationalistic rhetoric and measures to further undermine the role of Turkey's democratic opposition.

The HDP has remained the target of government attacks. The crackdown has intensified after key moments, such as the AKP's defeat in the March 2019 municipal elections, in which the support of the pro-Kurdish party was crucial to securing the victory of then candidate and current mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, and the October 2019 Operation Peace Spring, on the margins of which seven HDP mayors were removed from office on terrorism charges.<sup>21</sup>

İmamoğlu secured his victory not only by appealing to more centrist AKP voters but also by bridging the gap between the electoral base of the Republican People's Party, which largely includes Turkish nationalist voters, and members of the Kurdish nationalist HDP.<sup>22</sup> It will be more difficult to replicate this alliance at the national level, where matters of foreign and security policy are more divisive. This tentative partnership between the HDP and the Republican People's Party will give the Turkish government another reason to intensify its conflict with the PKK in Turkey and Syria and further incentives to insist that the HDP, the PKK, the PYD, and the YPG are all one and the same. The point will be both to weaken the HDP and to undermine the potential unity of the Turkish opposition front.

These trends are in full swing in the lead-up to Turkey's next general election, currently scheduled to coincide with the Republic of Turkey's centennial in 2023. On June 21, 2021, the Turkish Constitutional Court accepted an indictment lodged by Bekir Şahin, the chief public prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals, against the HDP for alleged links to the PKK.<sup>23</sup> In the next few months, the trial could lead to the dissolution of the HDP and a ban to prevent its members from running for office for the next five years. Four days before the court's ruling, Deniz Poyraz, a member of the HDP, was shot dead by a radical Turkish nationalist who had entered the party's headquarters in Konak, a district of İzmir Province.<sup>24</sup> Captured by the police, the assassin said that he had done what he had because he hated the PKK.<sup>25</sup>

## A New Role for the Turkish Army

As early as the morning after the July 2016 coup attempt, Erdoğan was referring to the previous day's events as a "gift from God" and claiming they were the work of his former allies in the Hizmet Movement, an Islamist group led by preacher Fethullah Gülen.<sup>26</sup> The failed coup provided the Turkish government with an opportunity to curtail once and for all the army's influence on Turkish political life while dealing a serious blow to Erdoğan's former Islamist ally.

In the first year after the failed coup, nearly 140,000 government employees were "dismissed or suspended" from their posts and more than 50,000 people were arrested.<sup>27</sup> The purge did not spare the Turkish Armed Forces: according to a study by the Council of Europe, by December 2016 the number of Turkish military personnel had dropped by more than a third since before the coup attempt.<sup>28</sup> Over the same period, the number of generals and admirals fell by "almost half," according to a Reuters report. All removed personnel were accused or suspected of being members of Hizmet.

The purported attempt to root out Gülenist sympathizers from the ranks of the Turkish armed forces affected not only the quantity of available military personnel but also their quality. The elimination of a large proportion of Western-trained Turkish military officers with experience in NATO command structures was lamented in December 2016 by the alliance's then supreme allied commander Europe, Curtis Scaparrotti, who denounced the "noticeable" effects the purge was having on the alliance's capabilities.<sup>29</sup>

These changes also affected how the Turkish armed forces designed, planned, and executed Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch. As noted by security analyst Metin Gurcan, there were several qualitative differences between the two missions.<sup>30</sup> The shortfalls of Operation Euphrates Shield included fighters' lack of discipline, poor military-civilian coordination, the chain of command's inability to respond to the changing situation on the ground, and a lack of diplomatic coordination with Russia and the United States. Some of these problems were successfully addressed during Operation Olive Branch, which benefited from clearer goals set by civilian decisionmakers, higher troop morale, more efficient coordination among various parts of the Turkish armed forces, better diplomatic coordination, and the ability to deploy new technological capabilities.

One of the objectives of Turkey's 2016 and 2018 interventions in Syria was to rebuild Turkey's public support for the army. According to a series of surveys by Kas University, public trust in the Turkish Armed Forces dropped to a historic low of 47.7 percent in January 2017, a few months after the coup attempt and in the middle of Operation Euphrates Shield.<sup>31</sup> Confidence in the armed forces was back to its usual level of

approximately 60 percent a year later; the rebound followed the proclaimed success of Operation Euphrates Shield and ensured a high level of support for the government's Syria policy in the early days of Operation Olive Branch. Trust in the army dropped again in January 2019, before regaining its usual level in 2020 and 2021.

By that time, the army had amply demonstrated its return to a high level of operational effectiveness, supported by substantial technological advances. The battlefield experience of Turkish-made weapons systems—from multibarrel rocket-launcher systems to unmanned aerial vehicles and air-to-ground precision-guided munitions—has proved the value of the Turkish defense industry, especially to foreign buyers.<sup>32</sup> That industry's export volume rose from \$248 million in 2002 to \$3 billion in 2019.<sup>33</sup> Today, Turkey exports drones—a fundamental component of all Turkish military and counterterrorism operations in Syria since Operation Olive Branch—to countries including Poland, Qatar, and Ukraine.<sup>34</sup> Turkish-made drones have altered the respective courses of multiple conflicts such as the Libyan civil war and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan; in the future, Saudi Arabia, too, might buy them.<sup>35</sup>

In other ways, however, Turkish military operations in Syria have been detrimental to the expansion of Turkey's military-related industries. For example, Operation Peace Spring led several European countries to impose a two-month arms embargo that cost Turkey an estimated \$1 billion and underscored the country's continued dependence on strategic imports.<sup>36</sup>

Turkey's operations in Syria marked an existential change for the Turkish Armed Forces. While the Turkish military's credibility was being rebuilt and its effectiveness was being put to the test, a new balance between military and civilian power in the country was taking shape—with the civilian side prevailing for the first time.

The army's political orientation also started to shift. The generals who survived the 2016 purges were determined to show their loyalty to the regime, for example, by intervening in Syria, a policy they had long opposed in the past. Across the ranks of the Turkish military staff, the purges accelerated a decline in the influence and number of supporters of Ankara's strategic alignment with the West.<sup>37</sup> This Atlanticist faction started to be progressively replaced by a Eurasianist group, whose members consider Russia a valid alternative strategic partner to the United States.

The relationship between these factions is extremely complex, and foreign policy decisions cannot be attributed uniquely to one of these two influences.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, it is unquestionable that, since the purge of the largely Atlanticist Gülenists from the Turkish military's ranks, Turkey and Russia have managed an unprecedented rapprochement. Nowhere has this tendency been clearer than on the ground in Syria since 2016.

## The Foreign Policy Front

In foreign policy terms, Turkey's military operations in Syria have resulted in increasingly tense relations with the United States, a strategic realignment with Russia, and new leverage over the EU when it comes to the management of refugee flows. Overall, Ankara's involvement in Syria has not only been a source of conflict—or rapprochement—with its traditional partners and neighbors across the region. This involvement has also equipped Turkey with new tools for conducting a more aggressive, nationalistic foreign policy.

### U.S.-Turkey Divisions Over the Syrian Kurds

Since 2015, Syria has been one of the most contentious issues in the relationship between Turkey and the United States. Washington's support for the Syrian Kurds has alienated Ankara to an extent that U.S. policymakers failed to anticipate. Today's thorniest bilateral topic is Turkey's deployment of the Russian S-400 missile system, which led to U.S. sanctions against Ankara and Washington's decision to expel Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program.<sup>39</sup> The decision to deploy the S-400 missile system has been made in the context of a strategic realignment between Turkey and Russia that has helped both countries pursue their respective objectives in Syria.

While former U.S. president Barack Obama initially saw an alliance with Turkey as a cornerstone for a strategy of dialogue with moderate, democratic Islamic governments, it was on Syria that differences began to emerge. When Obama decided not to act after the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons in 2013, despite declaring the previous year that such a move would be a redline, it was clear to Erdoğan that the United States and Turkey had different plans for Syria's future.

The relationship between Erdoğan and former U.S. president Donald Trump was decidedly cozier. The two leaders often had direct conversations, and Trump even sided with Erdoğan against the advice of his own administration, notably on the matter of withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria.

Over the last few years, other flashpoints in the relationship have included Turkey's extradition request for Gülen from his self-imposed exile in the United States after the 2016 failed coup; the case against Halkbank; and the 2018 release of American pastor Andrew Brunson, who had been detained in Turkey and charged with involvement in the 2016 coup attempt.

However, the countries' core disagreement has been over U.S. support for the YPG. In many ways, this is a story of mutual misunderstandings and miscalculations.<sup>40</sup> At the time of the battle of Kobanî in late 2014 and early 2015, Turkey failed to fully grasp the United States' eagerness to defeat the Islamic State. Had Ankara done so, it could have put itself forward as a reliable partner on the ground. Instead, to defeat the Islamic State in Kobanî, Turkey offered the services of a Sunni force that Washington did not think was up to the task.<sup>41</sup> It did not help that Turkey had armed and supported anti-Assad rebel groups and enabled access to Syria for scores of foreign fighters, who eventually coalesced into the Free Syrian Army, later succeeded by the Syrian National Army. Turkey failed to predict that some of these rebels could eventually lead a jihadist surge.

Conversely, the United States underestimated the damage its support for the YPG would do to the country's relationship with Turkey. Running out of options in Syria, the Obama administration reluctantly decided to set up a "temporary, transactional, and tactical" relationship with the YPG, which U.S. policymakers considered the most effective military partner on the ground.<sup>42</sup> After the battle of Kobanî, Washington continued to indirectly channel weapons to the YPG via the newly established Syrian Democratic Forces, a group under de facto Kurdish control.<sup>43</sup> The distinction between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the YPG, while legally valid, always left Turkey unimpressed. The widespread belief in Washington that supporting the YPG would not irreparably damage bilateral relations with Ankara proved wrong.<sup>44</sup>

The situation on the ground reflected these trends. The United States' difficulty in keeping Kurdish forces under control—in the Syrian town of Manbij in the summer of 2016, for example—was one of the triggers of Operation Euphrates Shield.<sup>45</sup> From January to March 2018, Operation Olive Branch was partly aimed at deterring the United States from backing the PYD.<sup>46</sup> A step in this direction was the June 2018 agreement between Ankara and Washington to conduct joint patrols around Manbij, which by then was no longer under Kurdish control.<sup>47</sup>

In the summer of 2018, Ankara started to intensify its pressure on Washington to allow a third Turkish operation in Syria, this time targeting YPG-controlled territories along the northeastern portion of the Turkish-Syrian border. By that time, the Syria policies of the Turkish and U.S. governments had become strategically incoherent and geopolitically incompatible.<sup>48</sup> With the Islamic State neutralized, the Turkish government's main objective in Syria remained weakening the YPG. Meanwhile, Washington did not trust Ankara's motives and alliances with various Syrian opposition groups—or Erdoğan's increasingly positive relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

And yet, Trump's December 2018 decision to pull U.S. troops out of Syria allegedly came after a phone call with Erdoğan.<sup>49</sup> Operation Peace Spring took place almost a year later and was an undisputed success for Turkey. In a couple of days, the Turkish Armed Forces and their proxies took control of a 62-mile strip of land between the border towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain and pushed the YPG away from the frontier.

Any future mending of the U.S.-Turkey relationship will depend on a positive solution to the Syrian crisis. Turkey will need to decide what role it wants to play in the future of its southern neighbor and to what extent it can tolerate a strong Kurdish presence there. A change of attitude toward the Syrian Kurds is not unrealistic: Ankara has positive links with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and is working to delegitimize the PKK among Iraqi Kurds.<sup>50</sup> Much will depend on the United States' next moves. Any withdrawal of U.S. support for the YPG will most likely take place in the context of broader renegotiations between Ankara and Washington.<sup>51</sup> In such a reset attempt, the United States would presumably ask Turkey to rethink some of its recent strategic decisions, the first and foremost being its alignment with Russia.

## **Turkey-Russia Cooperation and Competition in Syria**

Several experts have dissected the changing relationship between Turkey and Russia in recent years. Descriptions of the two countries' ties range from "cooperative competition or competitive cooperation" and "a marriage of convenience" to "adversarial collaboration," with the most evocative label being "fire and ice."<sup>52</sup>

Since 2011, Syria has been one of the main theaters in which the relationship between Moscow and Ankara has unfolded. From the beginning, Russia's primary interest has been the survival of the Assad regime, while Turkey's objectives have shifted from regime change in Damascus to the weakening of YPG forces.

Overall, both sides have benefited from the relationship in different ways. Turkey has managed to remove all hints of a Kurdish presence from its border with Syria and is well positioned to play a role in any political process that will end the conflict. Additionally, Erdoğan has been able—at times—to leverage his relationship with Putin and boost his international standing while securing Russian support in key economic sectors, such as energy and tourism.<sup>53</sup>

Conversely, Russia has been able to restore Assad's control over almost all of Syria. With U.S. troops retreating from the north of the country, Moscow has exploited Ankara's tensions with the Kurds to bring the YPG closer to the Syrian regime.<sup>54</sup> By taking advantage of the situation on the ground, especially in Idlib, Russia has created leverage over Turkey. Finally, through its relationship with Ankara in Syria and beyond, Moscow has been able to drive a wedge between NATO allies, primarily by deploying the Russian S-400 missile system at the heart of the alliance's security architecture.<sup>55</sup>

## Competitive Cooperation: Turkey Secures Its Seat at the Syrian Table

In the summer of 2016, several factors led Turkey and Russia to reach a rapprochement. While Turkey calculated that a pact with Russia would help keep the Syrian Kurds in check, Moscow saw the value in closer ties with Ankara, too. The Kremlin's primary interest remained the survival of the Assad regime, but a closer relationship with Ankara allowed Moscow to harm U.S. interests in the region in at least two ways. First, the S-400 dispute created a vulnerability on NATO's southern flank. Second, allowing Turkey to combat the YPG meant weakening a major U.S. ally in the region.

Erdoğan's August 2016 visit to Saint Petersburg resolved the two countries' prior spat caused by Turkey's November 2015 downing of a Russian aircraft. The two leaders also discussed a vast array of issues of common interest, from energy to trade to foreign policy. At the time, only a few analysts predicted the possibility that Russia could play Turkey off against the West.<sup>56</sup>

The new partnership bore its first fruit shortly after the Saint Petersburg meeting, when the Russians tolerated Turkey's first incursion into Syrian territory. Operation Euphrates Shield unveiled the new power dynamics at play in Syria: Russia was keen to accept Turkey's increasing activism with an eye toward its own long-term objective of weakening the Islamic State, the YPG, and the United States. For the same reasons, Operation Olive Branch in Afrin and Operation Peace Spring in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain later enjoyed the Kremlin's tacit approval.

Operation Euphrates Shield also marked an official U-turn in Ankara's Syria policy. In December 2016, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu made clear that Turkey was giving up its initial objective of ousting Assad and opting instead to play a broader role in the Syrian crisis through the framework of the Astana peace process.<sup>57</sup> This structured dialogue, an alternative to the Geneva peace talks led by the United States, was first convened in December 2016 and was another tool designed by Russia to drive Turkey further away from the West.<sup>58</sup> The Astana format was successful in capturing the diplomatic momentum. This gave Erdoğan the international prominence he later repeatedly enjoyed on multiple occasions including from the podium of the 2018 United Nations (UN) General Assembly, during a September 2018 visit to Berlin, and at the November 2018 Istanbul summit on Syria.<sup>59</sup>

The Astana process was far less effective at fixing the situation on the ground in Syria than it was at enabling geopolitical posturing. Successive agreements among Russia, Turkey, and Iran did bring some stability to certain parts of Syria, by establishing deescalation zones between the regime and the rebels, for instance. But these deals also diminished the prospects for a comprehensive approach to postconflict Syria.<sup>60</sup>

The current situation in Idlib is a testament to this. Established as one of four deescalation zones in 2017, Idlib remains the last stronghold of the Syrian armed rebellion as of this writing.<sup>61</sup> Over time, almost a dozen agreements between Turkey and Russia have effectively



preempted a full-scale attack by the Syrian regime on Idlib Governorate and an inevitable influx of refugees to Turkey. Ankara and Moscow have been unable, however, to provide a way out of the stalemate between the rebels and regime forces, illustrating the difficult nature of the Turkey-Russia relationship.

### Cooperative Competition: The Road to Idlib

Tensions between Turkey and Russia took a turn for the worse in late 2019 and early 2020, when Turkey's assertive foreign policy led to a watershed moment with Ankara's traditional allies.

One of the theaters of this increasingly competitive relationship was Libya, where Turkey and Russia sat on opposite sides of the conflict between the UN-recognized, Tripoli-based Government of National Accord and the rebel forces led by General Khalifa Haftar. In exchange for Turkey's military support, the Government of National Accord in Tripoli agreed to recognize a set of maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean favorable to Turkey.<sup>62</sup>

Developments on the Libyan front went hand in hand with an increasingly chaotic situation in Idlib.<sup>63</sup> Starting in May 2019, and then more intensely from December onward, the Syrian regime's forces, backed by Russia, conducted a series of offensives to retake the governorate. Damascus's troops advanced to encircle Turkish observation outposts and displaced over 1 million people along the way.<sup>64</sup> In early 2020, the Turkish military mobilized to retake strategic portions of territory, specifically along the M4 and M5 highways and at their intersection in Saraqib, a crucial node for controlling northern Syria.

Tensions escalated on February 27, 2020, when the Syrian Air Force, again backed by the Russians, conducted an airstrike that killed at least thirty-three Turkish soldiers in the village of Balyun.<sup>65</sup> While Ankara decided to turn a blind eye to Moscow's involvement, it responded to the attack by launching Operation Spring Shield to halt the Syrian regime's advance on Idlib. Once again, the military operation was concluded by an agreement between Erdoğan and Putin. Turkey lost military momentum by agreeing to a ceasefire but was able to keep most of Idlib Governorate from the Syrian regime's control, again preventing internally displaced people from crossing into Turkish territory and maintaining a degree of influence in talks on Syria's future.<sup>66</sup>

All the political dynamics and competing interests in the Syrian civil war converge on Idlib. There, Turkey will not take action to eliminate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Islamist rebel group that is ruling the governorate and is one of the last remaining obstacles to Russia's longtime objective of reuniting Syria under Assad. Russia, in turn, will not support a full regime advance in Idlib because doing so would probably trigger a Turkish military response to prevent a massive influx of refugees into Turkey. This development would drive a wedge between the two reluctant allies and force Moscow to give away leverage over Ankara it has not been shy to use—by attacking Turkish proxies in Idlib, for example, in response to Turkey's activism in Libya and the South Caucasus.<sup>67</sup>

## Using Refugees to Make Foreign Policy: EU-Turkey Relations at a Turning Point

Solving the question of Syrian refugees in Turkey has been a priority of the Turkish government since the early stages of the Syrian civil war—and a main driver of Ankara’s policies toward both Syria and the EU. This aim has also been a source of legitimacy for Erdoğan, who has repeatedly used it to justify Turkey’s military involvement in Syria and as an instrument to pressure the EU to obtain funding and renegotiate sea borders in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>68</sup>

The arrival in Turkey of 3.6 million Syrian refugees between 2011 and 2021 represented the country’s most significant demographic shift in over a century.<sup>69</sup> The situation became particularly delicate in 2014, when over 1 million Syrian refugees arrived in Turkey.<sup>70</sup> In the years that followed, the Turkish government tightened its control over its southern border and started planning for the creation of safe zones in northern Syria for relocating refugees. In the meantime, social tensions between Syrian and Turkish populations in Turkey started to unsettle local communities, arguably contributing to the AKP’s defeat in the March 2019 municipal elections.<sup>71</sup>

Ever since the November 2015 and March 2016 EU-Turkey refugee deals, Turkey has used the management of refugee flows as a tool of political pressure. This tactic has gone hand in hand with the Turkish government’s revisionist policy in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>72</sup> Erdoğan made this link explicit in late 2019 when, in response to European leaders’ condemnation of Operation Peace Spring, he threatened to “open the gates” to Europe for the millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey.<sup>73</sup>

This threat eventually materialized in February 2020, a few days after the Balyun attack and the resurgence of violence in Idlib. The Turkish government unilaterally opened its borders with the EU, and thousands of migrants and refugees started amassing at Turkey’s border with Greece. The EU’s solidarity with Greece, which sealed the border, led to the failure of the operation.<sup>74</sup> Yet, even though the refugees were repatriated, the stunt provided political cover for Turkey’s fourth military intervention in Syria: Operation Spring Shield.

Erdoğan used refugees as a tool of political pressure again in March 2021. On the tenth anniversary of the start of the Syrian civil war and in the lead-up to that month’s European Council meeting, he reminded European leaders that the West’s “most sensible option is to throw their weight behind Turkey” in Syria and that “failure to share Turkey’s burden may result in fresh waves of migration towards Europe.”<sup>75</sup>

The EU-Turkey refugee deals have become a blueprint for Europe’s strategy of externalizing migration management to its neighbors.<sup>76</sup> The EU will need to keep pursuing this approach as long as disagreements continue among member states over how to manage refugee flows. European leaders confirmed this stance in their conclusions to the June 2021 European Council meeting, in which they reaffirmed that partnerships with refugees’ countries of

origin and transit form an integral part of the EU's external action.<sup>77</sup> This trend undoubtedly plays into Turkey's hands and gives Ankara leverage over the EU and its member states. Events in the summer of 2021 in Libya, where the coast guard is increasingly being trained and equipped by the Turkish government, point in the same direction.<sup>78</sup>

Promoting a sustainable political solution for the future of Syria would help the EU be able to deprive Turkey of some of its leverage. However, the EU has a meager track record in this respect. The union has never been involved in any substantial diplomatic process on Syria, with the Astana format capturing the diplomatic momentum early on. Moreover, Brussels has so far struggled to find effective ways to support Syrian civil society and the Syrian population at large; Europeans generally have been reluctant to take any action that could empower the Assad regime.<sup>79</sup>

In the meantime, Turkey has created several de facto client states in the areas occupied during its military operations in Syria.<sup>80</sup> Turkey administers these pockets of territory through its adjacent provincial governments: those of Kilis and Gaziantep for the zone occupied by Operation Euphrates Shield, that of Hatay for Afrin Canton, and that of Şanlıurfa for the strip of land between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain. In all three areas, to varying degrees, Turkey has invested in integrating local economies and infrastructure into the Turkish system by becoming the main provider of services, humanitarian aid, and security.<sup>81</sup> The status of these territories will present a crucial question if and when a united Syrian government is created within the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for a ceasefire and a political settlement in Syria.

## A New Foreign Policy Toolbox for Turkey's People's Alliance

Turkey's foreign policy has become increasingly assertive in the past five years.<sup>82</sup> The convergence between the AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party, formalized into a governing coalition from 2018 onward, has reoriented Turkish foreign policy toward revisionist postures that aim to alter the regional status quo and project Turkish power in new ways in neighboring regions.<sup>83</sup>

As political scientists Zenonas Tziarras and Jalel Harchaoui have observed, the new, revisionist features of Turkey's foreign policy include embarking on military interventions abroad, engaging in demographic engineering and political interference, and using proxies to advance Ankara's geopolitical goals.<sup>84</sup> In all these respects, Turkey has used Syria as a test case and a training ground.

In the early phases of the Syrian civil war, Erdoğan's repeated calls for regime change in Damascus marked a break from Ankara's traditional policy of no interference in its neighbors' affairs. Turkey's August 2016 military intervention in Syria was the army's first operation of its kind since the 1974 invasion of Cyprus and some sporadic missions against the PKK in Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s.

The deeper reason behind Turkey's interventions in northern Syria—the fight against the PKK and its regional offshoots—is nothing new in recent Turkish history. The scale and ambition of the Syrian operations are new, however. While the specificities of the Syrian civil war have created especially fertile ground for Turkey's perceived enemies, the strategies Ankara has deployed in response have rarely been seen before. These have included completing the Turkish army's transformation into an expeditionary force, boosting the production volumes and technical level of the Turkish defense industry, and investing in several client states along the border for relocating Syrian refugees.<sup>85</sup> On the ground, the use of the Syrian National Army as a proxy force might have proved ineffective at times, but this approach has allowed Turkey to retain control of the areas in which it has an interest. In Idlib, the presence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which is friendly to Turkey, has enabled Ankara to maintain a certain level of control over the governorate.

Finally, Turkey's interventions in Syria have boosted Ankara's image and international role. The operations have secured a seat for Turkey at the negotiating table with Russia and the United States. On these occasions, Ankara has portrayed itself as a power in the middle—the indispensable partner for both Moscow and Washington to reach effective agreements in the region.<sup>86</sup>

Turkey has used this toolbox, these lessons learned, and its new capabilities to inform its revisionist foreign policy posture. Without the conflict in Syria, the world would not have seen Turkish troops in the Libyan desert or Turkish drones in the skies over Nagorno-Karabakh. Going forward, and with an eye on the 2023 presidential election, Turkey will continue to use these tools to reinforce its position in the international arena.





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