



THE REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE

SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF ANKARA

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

**THE UNPREDICTABLE OUTCOMES
OF EXTERNAL MILITARY EFFORTS:**

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF

US'S INTERVENTION IN AFGHANİSTAN (2001-2022) AND

TÜRKİYE'S CROSS-BORDER MILITARY OPERATIONS IN SYRIA (2016-2022)

Ph.D. Dissertation

Nuri GÖK

International Relations

January 2025



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Prof. Dr. İdris DEMİR

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PLAGIARISM

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

Name, Last name: Nuri GÖK

Signature

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family for their love, patience, and support.



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First and foremost, I would like to thank the faculty of the Social Sciences University of Ankara for providing me with the chance to fulfill one of my life's greatest dreams.

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TÜRKÇE ÖZET

ABD'NİN AFGANİSTAN MÜDAHALESİ (2001-2022) VE TÜRKİYE'NİN SURIYE'YE DÜZENLEDİĞİ SINIR- ÖTESİ ASKERİ HAREKATLARIN (2016-2022), YABANCI ASKERİ FAALİYETLERİN ÖNGÖRÜLEMEZ SONUÇLARI BAKIMINDAN KARŞILAŞTIRMALI ANALİZİ

GÖK, Nuri

Doktora, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü

Tez Yöneticisi: Prof.Dr. İdris DEMİR

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Bu tez çalışması; devletlerin bir başka devletin ülkesinde icra ettiği askeri faaliyetleri ve bu müdahaleye maruz kalan devletler ile müdahaleyi gerçekleştiren devletler açısından ortaya çıkan sonuçları incelemektedir. Bu maksatla çalışmanın odağını yabancı ülkelerin askeri operasyonlarını tetikleyen gerekçeler ile bu operasyonların ortaya çıkardığı olumsuz sonuçlar oluşturmaktadır. Bu hususların incelenmesi maksadıyla ABD'nin Afganistan'a 2001 yılında yaptığı askeri müdahale ile Türkiye'nin 2016 yılı sonrasında Suriye'nin Kuzeyinde icra ettiği askeri operasyonlar birer vaka çalışması olarak detaylı şekilde analiz edilmiştir. Her iki vaka, stratejik hedeflere tam olarak ulaşılmasını engelleyen faktörler ve operasyonların ekonomik ve insani sonuçları bakımından incelenmiştir. Yapılan çalışmalar ışığında devletlerin yabancı askeri müdahaleleri insani kaygılardan çok milli çıkarlarını gerçekleştirmek için yaptığı ancak yapılan bu müdahaleler sonucunda hem müdahale eden devlet hem de müdahaleye maruz kalan devlet için olumsuz sonuçlar ortaya çıktığı sonucuna varılmıştır. ABD'nin Afganistan müdahalesi ve Türkiye'nin Suriye'de gerçekleştirdiği askeri harekâtlar, sebep ve sonuçları itibarıyla büyük farklılıklar içermektedir. Bununla birlikte iki devletin de muhataplarına yönelik askeri üstünlükleri nedeniyle taktik hedeflere ulaşmakta zorluk yaşamaması, her iki tarafında uzun vadede büyük ekonomik ve insani kayıplar ve iç ve dış politikada doğrudan güvenlik eksenli politikalar izlenmesi gibi olumsuz neticelerle karşılaşması gibi bazı ortak özellikler taşımaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Askeri Müdahale, Afganistan Savaşı , Suriye İç Savaşı, İç Savaş.

ABSTRACT

THE UNPREDICTABLE OUTCOMES OF EXTERNAL MILITARY EFFORTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF US'S INTERVENTION IN AFGHANİSTAN (2001-2022) AND TÜRKİYE'S CROSS-BORDER MILITARY OPERATIONS IN SYRIA (2016-2022)

GÖK, Nuri

Ph.D., Department of International Relations

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. İdris DEMİR

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This thesis examines states' military interventions in other countries and their negative consequences on both intervened and intervenor parties. To this end, this study focuses on the triggering factors and negative consequences of foreign military interventions. To make such an analysis, the US's Afghanistan intervention in 2001 and Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria after 2016 were examined in detail as case studies. Both cases are investigated to identify the underlying factors preventing the US and Türkiye from reaching their strategic objectives to the full extent, as well as their adverse humanitarian and economic costs. It is argued that states embrace military interventions to realize their national goals rather than humanitarian concerns; nevertheless, these efforts cause negative consequences for both intervened and intervenor countries. The US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's military operations are fundamentally different from each other in terms of motives and results. Nevertheless, both bear some similarities in that these countries have reached their tactical objectives easily thanks to their military superiority, but they have encountered various negative consequences in the long term, such as great humanitarian and financial losses and the securitization of foreign and domestic policies.

Key Words: Military Intervention, The Afghan War, the Syrian Conflict, Civil War

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANSF	The Afghan National Security Forces
ALP	Afghan Local Police
AUMF	Authorization for Use of Military Force
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAATSA	Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
COIN	Counter Insurgency
DAESH/DEASH/DAISH	Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fi Al-Iraq wa Al-Sham
DoD	Department of Defense
DP	The Democrat Party
ES	English School
ETIM	The East Turkestan Islamic Movement
EU	The European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FSA	The Free Syrian Army
GCC	The Gulf Cooperation Council
GNA	Government of National Accord
GNP	Gross National Product
GWoT	The Global War on Terrorism
HDI	Human Development Index
HDP	Pro-Kurdish Opposition Party
HTS	Hayat Tahrir-al Sham
IJC	The International Court of Justice
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham” or “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria)
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
IS-K	The Islamic State-Khorasan
ISKP/ISIS-K	Islamic State-Khorasan Province
JDP	Justice and Development Party
KRG	The Kurdistan Regional Government
MENA	Middle East/North Africa
MHP	The Nationalist Movement Party
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLF	National Liberation Front
NRF	The National Resistance Front
NSAs	Non-State Actors
OCO	Overseas Contingency Operations
OECD	The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OES	Operation Euphrates Shield
OIC	The Organization of the Islamic Conference
OOB	Operation Olive Branch

OPS	Operation Peace Spring
OSS	Operation Spring Shield
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PRT	Provincial Construction Teams
PYD	Democratic Union Party
R2P	The Responsibility to Protect
RPP	The Republican People Party
SDF	The Syrian Democratic Forces
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SNA	Syrian National Army
SNHR	The Syrian Network for Human Rights
UAE	The United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNHCR	The UN Refugee Agency
UNSC	The United Nations Security Council
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USD	United States Dollar
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WFP	World Food Program
WMD	The Weapons of Mass Destruction
WWII	World War II
YPG	People's Protection Units
3G	The Great Grand Game

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CHAPTER 1

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Background and Aim of the Study

States have been using force against each other for various reasons (Finnemore, 2003, p. 141) from the very beginning. Nevertheless, the use of military power by states often fails to achieve the expected outcomes for both intervening and intervened nations. Immediate impacts may not always be apparent. However, long-term consequences often harm both sides, impacting their economies, political stability, and humanitarian conditions. Recent interventions in Syria and Afghanistan, along with earlier studies, provide a clear demonstration of this reality. Therefore, this thesis critically examines the consequences of foreign military interventions, emphasizing the long-term negative effects on both the intervened nations and the intervening powers.

Although power politics dominated relations among states during medieval times, under the terms of the Treaty of Westphalia, the cardinal principles of non-intervention and sovereignty were established in European politics in the following period. With the rise of imperialism, however, the great powers continued to interfere in other nations' domestic politics under the pretext of protecting fellow religious groups or ethnic affinities. This led to two World Wars, resulting in tens of millions of deaths. In the context of the Cold War, the interventions were minimal and within the poles emanating from ideological concerns, as occurred in Hungary or Panama.

The end of the Cold War spurred secessionist movements fueled by ethnic and religious tensions. As a result, the world has experienced bloody civil wars in different parts of the Earth. In parallel, issues related to ethnic competition were at the forefront of the general national security framework (Weaver, 2008, p. 171). Under the influence of neoliberal reasoning, the intervention came into fashion once again to protect innocent civilians from their merciless regimes, disregarding the fact that the principles of non-interference and sovereignty were the prices paid by all human beings with their blood and prosperity in the preceding century. The so-called Bush Doctrine opened a new page in this cycle, and Afghanistan and

Syria have faced humanitarian tragedy in any dimension. Alongside the respective regimes' brutality, the ill-planned external interventions have played an important role in these results.

Therefore, the author's motivation for doing this research study originated in his own experience that he gained while serving in the military in crisis-ridden regions like Afghanistan, Syria, and other places. It was shocking to witness how military operations were planned and executed without considering the realities on the ground or the intervenors' material capacities and capabilities. The prevailing circumstances were taken for granted as if nothing had happened earlier, and they mistakenly believed that all complex issues would be handled by enforcing hard power. Contrarily, the military intervention in another country, particularly in the context of civil conflict, exacerbated human suffering.

Consequently, as predicted by the author well in advance, the US intervention in Afghanistan ended up with a strategic defeat without achieving any of its strategic goals. Although the US launched its military operation to solidify its global supremacy, its superpower status was tarnished due to defeat against the Taliban in the end. Even though the present circumstances of Syria offer an opportunity for Türkiye to eliminate the threat of terror completely, its military operations in northern Syria have not yet materialized expected results to the full extent.

Apparently, in one way or another, all parties have experienced the direct and indirect negative consequences of foreign military interventions to varied degrees. Because of multi-party external interventions, Afghans and Syrians endure harsh conditions in their war-ravaged countries. In parallel to weakening state authority and deteriorating security conditions, they have become the victims of the regime's brutality or internal conflicts, fleeing their homes and being the subjects of international criminal activities like human trafficking, etc.

Americans and Turks have also faced negative consequences, both economically and politically at differentiated levels. In addition to huge financial costs, Turks had to withstand the consequences of domestic instability in neighboring countries by hosting millions of Syrian and Afghan refugees in their country. Bearing these facts in mind, the US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's recent military efforts in northern Syria deserve close scrutiny, their fundamental differences notwithstanding.

Just after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the US and its allies named the Taliban to be accountable for harboring the perpetrators and launched an offensive in 2002 to overthrow the Taliban government and capture Al-Qaeda leaders. It was

announced that Afghanistan would never be a sanctuary for terrorist organizations thanks to a self-dependent, democratic¹, and credible Afghan government². Nonetheless, the 20-year US occupation did not end up with these objectives but a humiliating defeat against the Taliban for Americans and dire humanitarian conditions for Afghans (Fidan, 2024).

The US sacrificed around twenty-five hundred service members and nearly 3 trillion USD only to suffer a strategic defeat (Seren M., 2021, p. 27), signaling a significant shift in global power dynamics. In addition to these gigantic economic and humanitarian costs, the US's sole superpower status was also tarnished. Presently, the security assurance of the US is being questioned by its traditional partners, and many believe that the defeat in Afghanistan marked a new era of a multipolar world order. Furthermore, so-called radical Islamism was not eradicated in Afghanistan but resurfaced in the following period as DEASH and other forms in other regions, from the Middle East to central Africa.

But essentially the Afghans' lives turned into nightmares once again. The 20-year-long intervention did not make a significant change in Afghan people's living conditions, unfortunately, and they are suffering from hunger, insecurity, and lack of basic services. They are compelled to cope with the ruins left by the four-decade-long wars and successive third-party interventions, in other words. The ruin left was so pervasive that even the relatively stable Taliban, since regaining control in 2021, has struggled to address inflation and rising food prices (IAHE, 2024). Besides, the country is suffering from sporadic conflicts between the Taliban and other opposition groups. Above all, Afghan women, in particular, are exposed to widespread discrimination under the new Taliban rule.

Similarly, peaceful demonstrations turned into a protracted civil war in Syria because of the Assad regime's merciless crackdown and other third parties' interventions with different motives and means. In this context, Türkiye had to get involved in the Syrian Civil War, first politically and then militarily, to address emerging multiple security risks by relinquishing its successful soft-power policies. Nevertheless, Ankara, being reactionary for a long time, has encountered a variety of security problems as well as other challenges, from diplomatic

¹ For the first time, the goal of creating a safe and democratic Afghanistan was stated explicitly during the 2001 Bonn conference (or in the Bonn agreement).

² The central government of Afghanistan, officially known as the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA).

isolation to financial losses due to its own miscalculations and other third parties' counteractions, until very recently.

Under the pressing circumstances, Türkiye's military operations in Syria became mandatory in 2016 to protect its national security, but they turned out to be costly, too. More than 200 Turkish soldiers have lost their lives in the operations, either directly fighting against DEASH³ and PKK/PYD/YPG⁴ or as a result of Russian airstrikes in Idlib. Furthermore, rising military spending, security budgets (Seren, 2020, p. 193), and the payment for Syrian refugees (Yükselen, 2024, p. 67) have put extra burden on Türkiye's already strained economy.

At the time of making the final revision of this research study in accordance with the thesis committee's directives, the Assad regime finally collapsed on December 8, 2024, as a result of opposition forces' quick offensive from Idlib towards Damascus. Contrary to earlier calculations, the Assad regime could not resist the *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS)-led opposition forces and was swiftly ousted within just 12 days. Neither Russia nor Iran came to the rescue this time, as both have become entangled with different crises in their own backyards.

This development was welcomed enthusiastically in Türkiye and Western circles. Ultimately, the departure of a dictatorial regime, which had been ruling his people with an iron fist for the last 54 years, opened the door to a more prosperous and peaceful Syria. Türkiye is considered to be one of the beneficiary powers of the new situation in Syria. Because Ankara-backed groups have overthrown the Assad regime and taken over the government in Damascus, they will probably be in close cooperation with Türkiye during the transition period. This shift could redefine alliances in the region and influence international relations moving forward. In addition, it is anticipated that the majority of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees would return home.

These promising developments may be misleading, though. It is too early to see the true nature of recent developments as they present new opportunities as much as new challenges. Given that Syria is now home to 23 different armed groups with conflicting interests and aims, it is extremely difficult to forecast whether they would be able to unite for

³ DEASH/DAIISH (for *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*), ISIS (for *Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham*) or "*Islamic State in Iraq and Syria*"), ISIL (for *Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant*), and IS (for *Islamic State*) are the acronyms for the same radical terrorist organization, a jihadist group that originated with Al-Qaeda in Iraq. In this research study, the acronym DEASH is used to define this terrorist organization.

⁴ The Democratic Union Party (PYD), or its armed groups, the People's Protection Unit (YPG), are offshoots of the PKK, which is recognized as a separatist terrorist organization by Türkiye, the US, the EU, and many other countries.

a shared objective or not. The possibility of Syria experiencing an ethnic or religious conflict akin to Iraq's is significant and should not be overlooked. Furthermore, it is uncertain how the PKK/YPG groups, who established a US-backed administration in northeastern Syria, will respond to these changing circumstances. More specifically, whether they will accept the newly formed government in Damascus or wish to pursue the objective of an autonomous ruling system as a puppet state of the US remains unclear.

In addition, Israel has grasped the opportunity to exploit the power vacuum and expanded its occupied areas on the Golan Heights, making Türkiye skeptical about this country's long-term goals. It has also been reported that Israel's air forces have conducted 350 air strikes to destroy Syria's military capabilities (Loft & Mills, 2024, p. 33). Furthermore, Israeli officials have publicly announced their intention to collaborate with Druzes and Kurds. This effort aims to create a buffer zone in southern Syria, signaling the fragmentation of the country. Given these developments, preserving Syria's territorial integrity is extremely important for Türkiye's national security. Ankara needs to act cautiously and rationally in this critical period more than at any other time to prevent new regional crises, which would eventually threaten its territorial integrity, national unity, and national security.

As for Syrians, the consequences of foreign powers' intervention are even more painful. In fact, they were suffering not only from the regime's brutality but also from conflicts among armed terrorist organizations and other factions. Half of the country's pre-war population has become refugees or internally displaced people. Almost half a million people have lost their lives, and the country desperately needs 400 billion US dollars for reconstruction, according to the most optimistic estimates (Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 247), even if all conflicts ceased today. The country is ruined economically and politically. More importantly, the qualified human capital, who could recover the country in the after-war era, has already left Syria due to a more than decade-long war and is serving other countries now. In brief, the Syrian people have become the innocent victims of the war that they did not instigate, caught in the crossfire of global and regional powers.

As suggested by these cases, employing military power in another country generally causes more harm than good, without offering practical solutions to existing complex issues in the short term. Indeed, the recent power change in Syria, while seemingly inspiring, has resulted in extensive and enduring human suffering. This suffering has been largely due to the brutal actions of the Assad regime and the involvement of multiple third-party interventions,

which have only intensified the civil war. For this reason, this research study intends to explore in depth the underlying reasons and negative outcomes of third-party military interventions. The motivating factors, timing, and methods of military interventions beg for further analysis.

To this aim, the US-led coalition's Afghan intervention and Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria are deliberately chosen due to fundamental differences and similarities in both cases. So, it is worth starting to explain why the Afghan and Syrian cases were chosen for this research. These cases were selected due to their distinct geopolitical contexts and varying outcomes, which provide valuable insights into the complexities of military intervention

These cases differ in scale, motives, and objectives significantly. Whereas the former one was executed by a superpower to impose its global hegemony based on its national interests, the latter one was conducted by a middle-sized regional power within the framework of changing threat perceptions. As for the immediate objectives, the Bush Administration initiated the intervention in Afghanistan to take punitive actions after the 9/11 attacks by ousting the standing Taliban regime and capturing Al Qaeda leaders. Türkiye's military operations, on the other hand, were carried out to reverse a *fait accompli*, namely the formation of a *de facto* Kurdish state alongside its southern border, which had been regarded as an existential threat to Türkiye's territorial integrity and national security for a long time.

Additionally, the US intervention in Afghanistan ended up with an undeniable defeat; Türkiye has achieved success by mitigating the security risks to a certain extent. Although the US left the Afghan population facing severe humanitarian challenges, a degree of stability and tranquility has been established in the areas that Türkiye controls in Syria. Thus, Türkiye's diplomatic and material support enabled the Syrian opposition groups to gain military and administrative capacity in time, thanks to which they managed to overthrow the Assad regime when the right time came.

Furthermore, some interpreted the US's chaotic retreat as an act of surrender; however, Türkiye remained a significant actor in the Syrian issue during the civil war⁵ and has proved its gamechanger role in the region with the collapse of the Assad regime. The ways that the US and Türkiye engaged in combat groups also varied. After being attacked first, Türkiye, as opposed to the US, chose to focus on terrorist groups like DEASH and the PKK in northern

⁵ Throughout this research study, the terms *internal conflict*, *domestic conflict*, *civil war*, *civil strife*, and *intrastate war* are used synonymously to refer to military conflict with an aim to take overall control of a country.

Syria rather than the Syrian government. The US, on the other hand, directly targeted the Taliban without planning any credible alternative. Lastly, the US carried out intervention with its allies, but Türkiye relied primarily on its military power, with the exception of engaging local proxies.

Despite these differences, these two cases share similarities, and this research study is conducted to compare these resemblances in terms of their causes and consequences. First, although their strategic goals were different, both military operations were initiated to eliminate an imminent terrorism threat. The US and Türkiye have both resorted to military power to curb perceived security risks rather than other options. As such, these countries have spent large amounts of money and put their troops at risk. However, the US might have found a solution to the Al Qaeda issue by cooperating with the Taliban if it wanted badly enough. Türkiye could have exerted much more pressure on its Western allies for multinational intervention before Russia came to the rescue. But they did not opt for these alternatives.

Moreover, due to the asymmetric military power difference with the targeted groups, both countries achieved their immediate goals with relative ease but could not achieve all of their strategic goals. Initial miscalculations and mistakes at both the tactical and operational levels contributed to this outcome. These errors occurred during the planning and execution of military operations. In addition, both military endeavors have had negative impacts on domestic politics and the national economies. Seemingly, upon resorting to hard power, both countries have undergone securitization processes that inevitably resulted in varying degrees of democratic decline.

In addition, the US defeat in Afghanistan is not merely an example of a failed military intervention; it is a development that may lead to significant changes in the global system in terms of its consequences. Likewise, the Arab Spring and the subsequent Syrian crisis affected all of Türkiye's domestic and foreign policies in one way or another in the following period, illustrating how regional upheavals can influence national strategies. For this reason, its involvement in the Syrian civil war should be analyzed from a broader perspective. So, although the US and Türkiye have carried out military operations with different motives and objectives, they have encountered some similar undesired results. Türkiye, only after suffering significant humanitarian and economic losses, seems to have achieved some of its national objectives as of December 2024.

The author's overarching aim in this research study, therefore, is to highlight the unpredictable outcomes of external interventions by focusing on US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's recent military operations⁶ in Syria. For ensuring comparability, the same aspects and differences of these two examples are systematically examined and contrasted to draw a conclusion. To make a comparison of these cases, this study aims to respond to the following research questions, considering the motives, goals, and end-states, as well as the undesired outcomes of both cases in particular:

1. What are the primary motives that drive countries to engage in military interventions?
2. What do international issues and domestic political considerations interplay in decision-making to intervene?
3. What alternative strategies could be employed to address pressing security concerns, and how effective might these alternatives be compared to military intervention?
4. How have the counteractions of other third parties hindered the ability of the US and Türkiye to achieve their national strategic objectives?
5. What effects did the military operations have on Turkish and American domestic and foreign policies?

1.2. The Plan of the Thesis

This research consists of six chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. Following the introduction, which outlines the study's objectives and structure, the second chapter provides a comprehensive literature review of the military interventions. The chapter begins by giving various definitions of intervention and military intervention with an aim to highlight the differences between these two vague concepts. Then, the modality, main drivers, and frequency of interventions are discussed by referring to previous studies and historical cases.

⁶ In the thesis, "*Türkiye's military operations*" is consciously used because Türkiye's military actions in Syria are not suitable to be defined as military intervention. To begin with, Türkiye launched its military offensive in limited areas adjacent to the Syrian Turkish border. In addition, Türkiye resorted to military means in 2016, five years after the Syrian crisis broke out when DEASH came to its gate and began to kill its citizens. In this regard, Turkish maneuvers could be regarded as the manifestation of the self-defense principle.

After that, for the purpose of responding to some specific questions, such as “*Why do states intervene in another state?*” “*Why do states tend to intervene in civil wars? Why do states support specific actors rather than others in civil wars?*” the main premises and relevant concepts of respective international relations theories are introduced to conceptualize the underlying reasons and outcomes of both cases. By doing so, the author seeks to provide a theoretical framework to explain the behaviors of the involved parties.

As the primary focus of this thesis is the underlying motives and unintended results of military interventions, both cases are addressed by drawing on the realist paradigm, which is central to analyzing the characteristics of interventions from multiple perspectives. Therefore, realist perspective for military intervention and internal conflicts is introduced first. To illustrate, neorealist concepts and arguments are utilized to understand Türkiye’s aspirations as a regional power and the US's efforts to maintain global hegemony. Nevertheless, by drawing on neoclassical realist arguments, a specific emphasis has been paid on domestic variables to overcome the limits (*rigid distinction between internal and foreign affairs*) of the realist and neorealist approaches. For instance, in line with Posen’s (1993) articulation, the security dilemma concept is used to understand the power struggle in Afghanistan and Syria within the context of civil war.

This chapter explains the key tenets of several IR theories on military interventions through a comparative analysis. Following an analysis of the typology (modality) and primary drivers of military interventions, the results of previous studies are used to present a clear distinction. This chapter also looks at the relationship between civil war and external intervention. Because civil conflict is one of the primary reasons for third-party interventions, as such, it requires careful analysis. The role of ruling elites of intervener and intervened countries is also investigated, as it is a crucial factor for interventions.

For this reason, this chapter also discusses the most significant liberal and realist arguments concerning humanitarian intervention, drawing on historical events and findings. Realists typically oppose interventions, believing that they disrupt the existing order and exacerbate suffering in the absence of a strong central government. In contrast, liberals advocate for interventions, arguing that justice and the alleviation of human suffering should take precedence over strict adherence to law and order.

Chapter three focuses on the US military intervention, specifically Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, in response to the 9/11 attacks in 2001. While the US conducted these military operations in coordination with its allies, the role of other actors, except for the UK’s, is negligible in terms of their impacts. Therefore, this study focuses on

the US military operations in Afghanistan. The chapter also analyzes the course of military actions, the emergence of insurgency, and the mishandling of counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts, using COIN principles as a framework.

The economic and humanitarian costs of the US intervention in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 for both Americans and Afghans are examined in detail. Following an analysis of the securitization of US foreign policy due to the Afghan and Iraq wars, this chapter also investigates how tactical, operational, and strategic errors contributed to what seemed to be an inevitable defeat. A cause-and-effect analysis is conducted to assess the current humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal. The implications of the sudden US departure on other regional and global powers are also analyzed to predict mid- and long-term consequences.

Chapter four delves into Türkiye's military operations and broader engagements with Syria. Initially, the chapter reviews the development of Arab-Turkish and Syrian-Turkish relations from a historical perspective, which is essential for understanding the current state of affairs. The chapter then contrasts the Justice and Development Party's (JDP's) earlier soft-power policies towards the Middle East with the hard-power strategies employed in the following decade. The four distinct phases of Türkiye's Syrian policy from 2011 to 2022 are analyzed, with particular attention to the concurrent securitization process within Türkiye. The role of the 15 July failed coup attempt in this securitization process is also highlighted.

Pressing issues such as the refugee crisis, increasing defense budgets, diplomatic isolation at both global and regional levels, and democratic backsliding are also explored as direct and indirect consequences of the Syrian crisis. This chapter also underlines the economic and humanitarian consequences that Türkiye has faced as a result of the militarization of its foreign policy, even if it has conducted military operations in Syria compulsorily and on legal grounds. Türkiye cannot be held solely responsible for Syria's devastation; conversely, it has provided security, services, and stability to some extent to the regions under its control. The roles of other actors, including the US, Russia, and Iran, are also examined to underscore this point. The chapter concludes with predictions about Syria's future based on the current circumstances after the power transition in Damascus.

The unintended consequences of the US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria are compared in the fifth chapter. This chapter utilizes scientific data and interviewee observations to highlight the negative results, such as increased (civilian) casualties, refugee crises, political instability, and financial losses for Afghans, Syrians, Americans, and Turks. It provides a general framework to illustrate how foreign

military actions undermined the effectiveness of existing governments in the targeted countries, leading to increased civil conflicts, illicit activities, and widespread insecurity, affecting not only the intervened countries but also neighboring states and the global community.

This study posits that despite their military operations varying significantly, the US and Türkiye have not only encountered economic and humanitarian consequences of their military engagements in Afghanistan and Syria, but they have also undergone militarization and securitization processes. Therefore, with reference to the Securitization Theory of the Copenhagen School, special emphasis is placed on how the executive branch gained dominance while the roles of others diminished in the decision-making process, undermining the oversight functions of other branches of government. The final chapter summarizes the findings of the research study and lays the groundwork for further studies on foreign interventions.

1.3. Methodology

The author has designed this study to examine two distinct cases related to foreign military actions and ensuing civil conflicts. Therefore, comparative-case study research is applied as the methodological template, and a mixed method is utilized to obtain information. Through qualitative methodology, it attempts to examine the characteristics of external interventions and their undesired outcomes for both intervened and intervenor countries. To this end, an in-depth case study of the US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's military operations in Syria is conducted. In addition to examining the parallels and discrepancies between these two contexts, the author intends to investigate the variations in these two unique circumstances with respect to history, ethnic fragmentation, values, and prevailing traditions.

The author seeks to examine the specific motives and tangible consequences of military intervention in this study. For this reason, key normative issues about intervention debates were purposefully ignored to a certain degree. To this end, this dissertation was constructed based on five hypotheses in the light of gathered data and findings of previous research. In order to refute or confirm these hypotheses, the author aims to investigate conflicting interpretations of the same events, i.e., the US invaded Afghanistan to reinforce its global hegemony or mitigate the risk of global terrorism; Türkiye carried out military operations in Syria to protect its national security or realize its interventionist goals.

This thesis argues that countries primarily engage in military interventions to achieve national goals rather than to address humanitarian concerns. Although the idea that interventions can be launched to save the civilian population from their ruthless regimes'

brutality has gained support in the post-Cold War era, states still seek their national interests first and foremost. Nevertheless, the author acknowledges that intolerable humanitarian conditions have influenced the decisions of the US and Türkiye regarding military operations. Indeed, some progress in specific areas like women's rights and child mortality has been achieved in Afghanistan, and millions have been saved in Syria thanks to Türkiye's efforts; however, the national interests seem to have been the main driver for these cases.

The US and Türkiye have carried out their military operations in Afghanistan and northern Syria with different motives. Nevertheless, both faced consequences in their economies, politics, and diplomatic relations. Washington and Ankara achieved their immediate objectives: ousting Taliban rule and clearing DEASH and PKK presence from their southern borders, respectively. However, emerging difficulties due to underlying socio-economic factors have hindered their ability to build on these early gains and achieve their strategic aims. So, the first hypothesis of this study is that:

H1: States employ military interventions to achieve their short and long-term national interests rather than humanitarian causes, but they yield to undesired results in the end even if they reach their immediate objectives.

In retrospect, it is evident that the US followed erratic policies in Afghanistan due to the subsequent administrations' changing priorities and domestic political concerns. Likewise, Türkiye pursued inconsistent policies throughout the Syrian crisis and tried to take a new position according to the emerging risks and dynamic power balance. Ankara sought a quick power change in Syria by supporting the moderate opposition at the beginning. Then, it had to recalibrate its policy to cope with rising security risks such as DEASH and PYD/PKK due to other third-parties' counteractions and changing power dynamics. It seems that the main reason for this situation was the lack of an applicable grand strategy. Apparently, the socio-economic domestic balances in Afghanistan and Syria were not sufficiently examined, and effective contingency plans for different scenarios were not made before the military operations.

In addition, although national interests are frequently defined within the context of foreign affairs, domestic factors are also as important as the issues in relations with other states. Regardless of regime type, ruling elites may use military intervention to bolster their popular support or distract the public's attention from thorny domestic issues. Indeed, domestic factors played important roles in both cases in terms of triggering military operations or retaining power thanks to military successes. Keeping these arguments in mind, the power relations among various ethnic and religious groups in the targeted country and the roles of political

actors in the US and Türkiye are analyzed to determine their impact on the ultimate outcomes of military interventions. Accordingly, the second hypothesis of this study is:

H2: Lacking a grand strategy and insufficient knowledge about the targeted country potentially lead to failure in military intervention.

As previously said, it has been demonstrated that maintaining a careful balance among various ethnic and religious groups is crucial in both cases. Because, engaging these groups with conflicting interests and priorities turned out to be pressing difficulties after military endeavors. Thus, military interventions necessitate humanitarian assistance, a complex and delicate endeavor that requires meticulous planning and execution. For the ultimate success of external interventions, it is essential to meet basic needs of local people. In this regard, establishing an effective government or administrative body is critical for ensuring security, stability, and the provision of basic staples.

Whether pre-planned or reactive, the US and Türkiye were compelled to acknowledge that without improving the living standards of the populations in the regions where they were militarily present, they would face more complex issues, such as insurgency and refugee flows. The US aimed to quell insurgencies, while Türkiye sought to prevent further refugee influxes, leading both nations to engage in development projects. However, they found that the local populations became increasingly dependent on their state agencies rather than developing self-sufficiency. So, the third hypothesis is that:

H3: Unless intervening countries provide security and improvement in life standards to local populations, their efforts are doomed to fail.

One of the main reasons for the US's strategic defeat in Afghanistan was other regional and global powers' policies. Washington could not be aligned with Pakistan and some other countries, which paved the way for insurgency afterward. Furthermore, Washington's unilateral decisions led many traditional allies to alienate themselves from its counterterrorism efforts at some stages. In a similar vein, in another theater of conflict, Türkiye faced significant challenges in advancing its national interests in Syria because of the US's assistance for the PYD/PKK and Russia's and Iran's steadfast support for the Assad regime. So, the fourth hypothesis is that:

H4: Other third-party actors' support or countermoves are decisive variables for intervener countries to achieve their ultimate objectives in military interventions.

This research study posits that not only intervened countries but also intervener countries encounter negative consequences of military intervention on domestic and foreign policies. Because once the military means are employed, it is highly likely that the foreign and

domestic policies are securitized to some extent. Under the influence of a securitized narrative, power is consolidated in the hands of executive branches in the democratic countries. This concentration of power often undermines democratic checks and balances, reducing the influence of legislative and judicial branches in policymaking. In order to validate this argument, the process of national decision-making in the US and Türkiye is analyzed to identify the impacts of militarization processes on domestic and foreign policies.

H5: Military interventions bring about an inevitable securitization in foreign and domestic politics of intervener countries.

With regard to obtaining data, expert interviews, informal discussions, and the author's observations of military operations served as primary sources for this thesis. The respondents of interviews were not chosen randomly, but purposive sampling was employed as a result of meticulous preparations. The interviews were conducted with both retired and active military personnel. These individuals played significant roles in operations in Afghanistan and Syria, allowing them to provide valuable assessments and observations. So, participants' observations significantly contributed to the data collection. In this regard, the US and Turkish officers who used to be battalion commanders and above, or staff officers who served command centers, were preferred to take a bird's-eye perspective of respective military operations. The fact that these personnel regularly met with various state agencies as part of their duties during military operations was another factor in their selection.

In addition to servicemen, the author also interviewed academics, journalists, and TV programmers who have written on the subject. These interviews were based on their observations and assessments to gather primary data. These interviewees were selected based on their nationality and divergent opinions to maintain a certain degree of objectivity. Key informant interviews, for example, with Afghan nationals who either supported or opposed the Taliban and with Syrians who worked for the Syrian regime and opposition during the civil conflict before fleeing to Türkiye in 2014 and 2017, were included to provide a 360-degree view.

To achieve this, the author conducted interviews with twenty different respondents⁷ in total to obtain their firsthand opinions and insights. Through these interviews, the author intended to obtain firsthand information, which is usually missing in Western sources. Even

⁷ The bibliography contains the complete list of respondents as well as other details about the interviews. Due to security concerns related to their backgrounds or current positions in the Turkish Armed Forces, some interviewees agreed to speak anonymously. In order to preserve their anonymity as requested, *their initials* have been used.

though they were on a modest scale in some cases, they enabled the author to make generalizations about the overall situation. Thus, thanks to these observations and evaluations, the general picture could be better understood, and better comparisons could be made.

It was noted throughout the meetings that participants tended to evaluate and express the cases based on incidents that occurred in their immediate environment and through ideological background. There are some variations in the accounts, but they are negligible. Therefore, it was necessary to test the reliability and validity of expressed views during the interviews. The perspectives of the respondents are compared before being incorporated into the thesis. This approach is intended to minimize relative subjectivity.

Interviews were performed in the form of direct conversations, face-to-face or online meetings, by using semi-structured broad question sets (*Annex B*). The summary of the thesis was provided to participants in advance to familiarize them with the study's objectives. The questions were classified according to the template of the research study. Nevertheless, the questions were flexibly designed, in participant or informant interview forms, to allow respondents to express their own experiences and observations in a wider spectrum.

Additionally, at the beginning and end of the interviews, the author asked the participants open-ended questions to elicit their opinions on other subjects. As anticipated, a few participants preferred to skip some questions due to the confidentiality of the data and sometimes gave answers that did not exactly match the directed questions. To make sure about expressed opinions, the transcripts of interviews were shared with the participants and revised where necessary.

In addition to interviews, the author held informal discussions with individuals who were willing to share their perspectives in this manner but declined to participate in interviews. Webinars and seminars have proven to be excellent platforms for gathering information directly associated with the subject. Besides, the author relied heavily on transcripts from past interviews, documentaries, and memoirs of notable politicians and military personnel, particularly US and British Commanding Generals. These sources provided supporting evidence for official publications. Apart from these sources, the author incorporates his observations based on long military service periods in Syria and Afghanistan during critical operational missions into his evaluations and conclusions as primary data.

Furthermore, text-based research and some primary but essentially secondary sources, like subject-specific books, the publications of selected authors, discipline-based reference materials, and journal articles, which make up the core of this study, were referred to. In addition to monitoring media coverage, content analysis of newspapers and other periodicals

is also carried out. The transcripts of legislative bodies' sittings, namely the US Congress and Turkish Grand Assembly, were scrutinized to detect their roles in decision-making processes as well as the impact of securitization policies in their discussions. The data are collected and evaluated to respond to the main research question, "*Which factors played a role in making US military intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria unsuccessful in terms of failing to achieve their strategic goals?*"

This research study employs a quantitative methodology to analyze the undesired outcomes of foreign military interventions. It references various types of relevant literature, including data sets, official publications, statistics, and grey literature. This study focuses on the negative outcomes of external interventions, specifically examining the US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's military operations in Syria. To better understand these outcomes, it is essential to define the key variables involved in the analysis. The dependent variable is the undesired results of foreign military interventions, such as *refugees, displaced people, the cost of war, and declining democratic standards in domestic politics* for the local population and intervener countries as a result of the above-mentioned interventions; the independent variable is the political and economic motives for these interventions.

This comparative case study has some limitations. First, the author has particularly sought to make a more comprehensive analysis on the subject by focusing on a limited number of cases from different perspectives. Therefore, this research is only an attempt to study the US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria with a particular emphasis on tangible results. While this study is limited in scope, it lays the groundwork for further exploration of third-party military intervention. The method employed in this study is applicable for analyzing other third-party interventions regarding undesired outcomes. However, examining these interventions is beyond the scope of this research, as it would require significantly more time and effort.

Secondly, both Afghanistan^[4] and particularly Syria have not achieved full tranquillity. Since the nature of these events is dynamic, anything is possible each day, and it is hard to predict the following developments. Indeed, while finalizing this study, the Syrian opposition put an end to the brutal Assad regime in Syria in December 2024. Nevertheless, Syria is still far from stability and peace yet. The opposition has not been able to exercise

^[4] Even though the US has completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban took complete control of this country in August 2021, Afghanistan is still far from being a stable country. To determine whether Türkiye's military efforts in Syria will have succeeded in achieving the intended objectives, more time must pass before the process is concluded. As a result, care should be taken when interpreting the conclusions drawn from this analysis, since local and global variables could cause the situation in the Syrian theater to alter at any time.

control all over the country. Since these developments are quite recent, it is too early to foresee what would happen in the country. For this reason, this study provides only a snapshot that aims to show the overall situation at the writing stage, covering periods from the onset of the conflicts to the present in both cases.

Third, most of the official documents are still classified, and access to the respective governments' archives was often difficult. Therefore, this research study utilized the documents of international organizations, major academic journals, and news research; as well as related countries' foreign policies regarding Afghanistan and Syria. The data in these sources were compared with the academic reliability in mind because the given variables are different in these published resources. Finally, as the perspectives offered in the interviews and incorporated into the study contain some subjectivity, they should be treated with caution.

1.4. Contribution of the Study

Although foreign intervention is not a new concept, it has become a contested issue in the post-Cold War era as third-party actors have been trying to change regimes that are not cooperating with them or acting against their interests. Nevertheless, as observed in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, a rapid power change through external interventions did not make these targeted countries more stable and safer. On the contrary, these countries were introduced into chaos and dragged into bloody civil wars. This observation raises critical questions about the effectiveness of such interventions. By analyzing causes and consequences of interventions in relation to Afghan and Syrian cases, this study aims to highlight negative results, which might be taken into account in the planning and execution of future external interventions.

In addition, the current literature and intervention theories tend to focus on the motives and methods of intervener countries, alongside the legitimacy and legality of interventions. However, it frequently overlooks the implications for domestic politics. Apparently, the US and Türkiye, like other countries employing hard-power policies, have experienced securitization and militarization processes in their foreign and domestic policies, leading to a decline in the rule of law and democratic norms to some extent. Therefore, this proposed research study also seeks to contribute to intervention debates by highlighting the role of domestic politics in the decision-making process.

What is more, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the relationship between military interventions and ethnic and sectarian conflicts by underscoring the role of determinants of socio-economic factors. For this reason, this study provides a comparative

analysis of the common characteristics of Syrian and Afghan intrastate conflicts. By analyzing how external military interventions lead to a protracted civil war among rival ethnic and religious groups resulting from the power vacuum, this study provides a basis for an enhanced model of foreign states' decisions to intervene in the future.

This study argues that the intervening states generally seek to realize their national interests even while putting effort into alleviating human suffering. Nevertheless, due to conflicting interests of intervening parties, the suffering of the population increases immensely due to the diminishing capacity of central government. For this reason, it is crucial to examine the central government's role in developing countries, standing delicately on ethnic and religious fault lines. However, existing Western theories of internal conflicts and civil wars have paid little attention to the central government's roles in law-and-order enforcement while analyzing intrastate conflicts. Recognizing this oversight, the present study seeks to fill this gap by illustrating the detrimental consequences of a weak central government. So, this research lays the groundwork for further investigation into how third-party interventions can undermine governmental stability and exacerbate ethnic tensions in conflict-affected regions.

CHAPTER 2

2. THEORETICAL DIMENSION OF THIRD-PARTY INTERVENTION AND RELATED CONCEPTS

2.1. Intervention and Military Intervention

Intervention has been a common foreign policy tool since ancient times, and states or non-state actors conduct it through different means. Apart from the full-scale occupation, interventions represent the most direct impact of international politics on the domestic affairs of a given country (Gourevitch, 1978, p. 883). While interventions can take many forms (*Figure 2-1*), this thesis primarily focuses on military (coercive) interventions. Interventions can be conducted through non-coercive ways as well, by using financial and political incentives. Military interventions, on the other hand, require orderly dispatching of military units or preparing to use them in another country if there is resistance (Sullivan & Koch, 2009, p. 710).

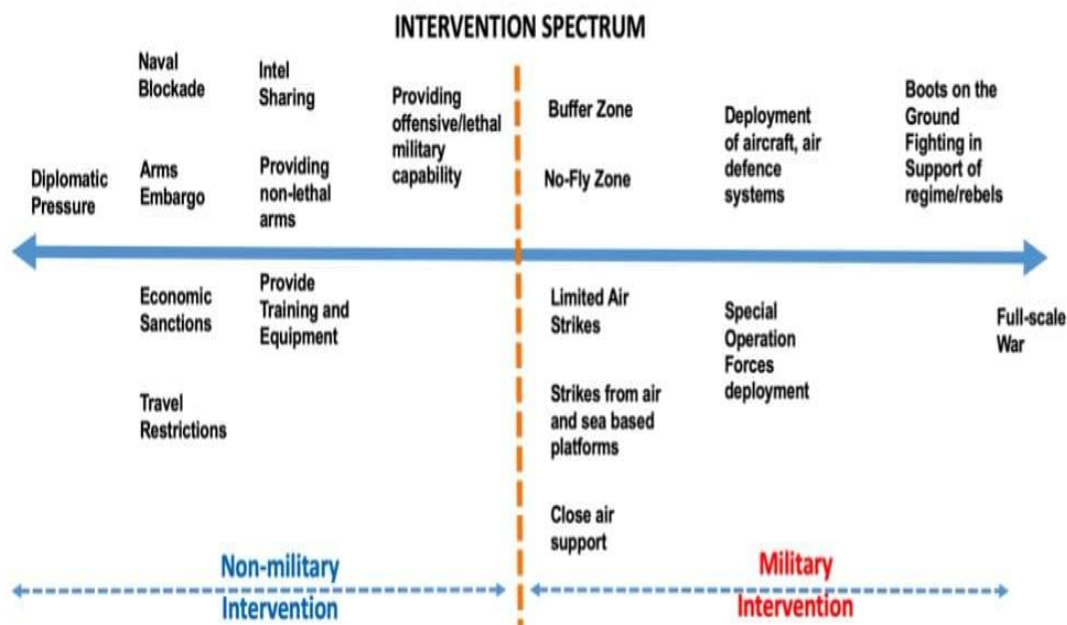


Figure 2- 1: Intervention Spectrum

Source: Böke, 2017, p. 33

Following the devastating results in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, the normative aspect of interventions has become a more prominent topic in contemporary debates. There are conflicting views about the legality and legitimacy of these actions. Although the shared notion of *sovereign equality* requires restraint on any sort of intervention (Finnemore, 2003, p. 20), according to newly emerging consensus, states cannot do everything based on sovereignty and non-intervention principles. Their sovereign rights necessitate protection of their own people from grave human rights abuses, and if they fail or are incapable of doing this, the international community can take initiative (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2020, p. 515).

Despite this new interpretation, the principle of non-interference still remains the governing principle of the international system. It is encapsulated in the UN Charter article 2 (4), as all sorts of intervention are prohibited, with two exceptions (Bozkurt, 2007, p. 23): the purpose of self-defense (*article 51*)⁸, and the UNSC's authority to take coercive measures in accordance with the provision of the Charter (*article 42*)⁹ to maintain or restore international peace and security (Weiss, 2008, p. 50).

As a complex term and concept, there is no universally accepted definition of intervention due to its vague boundaries, various forms, and relative causes. Nonetheless, existing definitions fall into two main categories. In a broader perspective, intervention is defined as any type of act with an aim to make interference in the other states' domestic affairs. According to Stanley Hoffman (1984, pp. 7-8), *any external actions aiming to make an impact on the domestic affairs rather than the foreign relations of a given country* can be defined as intervention. Robert Jackson (2000, p. 250) also defines intervention as *the interference in the domestic jurisdiction of an independent state or its ruling authority against their will by using or threatening the use of military and other means*.

Bull (1984, p. 1) defines this inherently ambiguous concept as *external party or parties' dictatorial or coercive interference in the realm of jurisdiction of a sovereign state or*

⁸ "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defense shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security".

⁹ "Should the Security Council consider that measures provided for in Article 41 would be inadequate or have proved to be inadequate, it may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security. Such action may include demonstrations, blockade, and other operations by air, sea, or land forces of Members of the United Nations".

any independent political entity in broader terms. Similarly, Max Beloff (1968, p. 198) also defines the intervention as *an endeavor by an external party to make an influence on domestic order or external behavior of other states via a degree of coercion*. According to these definitions, interventions often refer to the foreign meddling in another state's domestic affairs against their will. So, interventions in this context may or may not contain coercion at various levels.

In the second group of definitions, the term intervention is conceptualized more narrowly to define the use of force in a coercive manner. In such a way, intervention can be used interchangeably with war or military interference in ongoing interstate conflict (Sullivan & Koch, 2009, p. 709). However, in common sense, it refers to the use of military force by one or more states against another state to realize their national goals. In addition to states, internal organizations, such as NATO's military operation in Libya, and non-state actors can conduct interventions, as exemplified by the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) intervention in the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) or Hezbollah's or other Shiite organizations' intervention in the Syrian Conflict more recently (Tardelli, 2013, pp. 25-6).

In this context, the most extended definition of military intervention is *“the movement of regular troops or forces (airborne, seaborne, shelling, etc.) of one country into the territory or territorial waters of another country, or forceful military action by troops already stationed by one country inside another, in the context of some political issue or dispute”* (Pearson and Baumann, 199, p.4 as cited in Pekşen & Lounsbery, 2012, p.358). Although it is perceived as the last resort, armed interventions become the most viable option to cope with foreign crises when other non-violent tools (such as diplomatic channels, foreign aid, and economic sanctions) fail or are deemed inappropriate. But they are applied rarely because of potential risks.

In comparison with other means of intervention, which might occur accidentally and unintentionally, military interventions are conducted in an organized manner (Tardelli, 2013, pp. 11, 25). Even though they are employed without the consent of targeted countries, in some cases targeted countries accept foreign military voluntarily. Furthermore, unlike other means of intervention, military interventions are conducted to reach more concrete and immediate objectives.

Military intervention has been a common and recurrent practice in foreign affairs since ancient times (Young, 1968, p. 178). Indeed, it is *“une pratique courante, constante et*

universelle” (a practice more common than war itself) (ibid, p. 14). However, it did not use to be so frequent and destructive previously. Until the 20th century, interventions were exceptional cases and mostly applied by the great powers to secure their national interests or to reestablish the balance of power. As the balance of power was an essential principle of the international system until World War I, interventions were rarely resorted to if the balance was tilted or great powers’ interests were compromised.

During the Cold War, the main concern was staying away from a nuclear war within the context of a bipolar system. For this reason, interventions were rare and dangerous in terms of the possibility of dragging the US and USSR into wars (Nye & Welsh, 2017, p. 222). Once again, the superpowers conducted military interventions to realize their national interests. Whereas Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 was aimed at supporting a friendly regime in Budapest, US intervention in Guatemala in the 1950s was conducted to secure economic interests.

With the end of the Cold War, this practice came into fashion again in a new formulation: humanitarian intervention. More recently, humanitarian purposes like stopping ethnic violence, as witnessed in NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, have claimed to prevail over the strategic and political grounds (Pekşen & Lounsbery, 2012, p. 349). However, skeptics argue that, as it was in the Kosovo case, foreign (humanitarian) intervention has always the potential to provoke secessionist movements (Wise, 2013, p. 2). Interventions by third parties, unilaterally or multilaterally, have led to civil wars in most cases, let alone saving innocent populations.

Oran Young (1968, p. 178) argues that military intervention is distinguished by its ultimate aims of making an influence on another state’s domestic political structure or changing it totally. In this sense, military intervention stands for an attempt to safeguard or impose a specific political order in another state or community (Bull, 1984, p. 1). Regardless of its modality and justifying causes, any third-party intervention favors one side against another one; therefore, it does not entail an absolute neutrality (Betts, 1994).

Put it differently, irrespective of their ultimate aims, military interventions target, either directly or indirectly, the incumbent political power of the targeted country (Tardelli, 2013, p. 35). So, interventions alter the balance of power among various ethnic, religious, and ideological factions to some extent. By doing so, interventions, or the expectation of them, result in moral hazard that gives rise to rebellion (Kuperman, 2008, pp. 49-50).

Direct military intervention potentially causes a patron-client relationship (Tardelli, 2013, p. 129) between the intervener party and the local beneficiary. Because the recipient party is extremely in need of this external support (particularly military aid) to push their revolutionary or secessionist agendas or deter another party from achieving its objectives (Regan, 2000, p. 10). To achieve this aim, they act in a way that is compliant with intervener parties' objectives in the targeted country, such as strategic access to critical assets or exploiting natural resources.

As such, military interventions reinforce the domestic actors' dependence on interveners in the short and long term. In other words, intervener parties seek to take advantage of the vulnerability of recipients by providing necessary resources and military support. Nonetheless, based on their findings, Sullivan and Koch (2009, pp. 713-4) point out that military interventions tend to be successful in the short term. In the long term, the success rate has reduced due to increasing domestic sensitivity to casualties and discontent emerging in target countries.

2.2. Third Party Intervention and IR Theories

Third-party intervention, particularly within the scope of internal conflicts, has been discussed widely within IR circles recently. Each IR theory offers different perspectives to analyze the underlying factors or main drivers of foreign interventions. Within this debate, third-party intervention in internal conflicts or interstate wars is one of the primary interests. This part of this research study focuses on the theoretical framework provided by IR theories regarding military interventions in order to link the existing concepts and respective cases.

Realism

In accordance with the *realist paradigm*, the relations among states constitute the main pillar of international relations. Thus, states are regarded as the principal actors in international politics as they engage in power struggles for realizing their own national interests at the expense of others (Erdag, 2013, p. 63). This is a zero-sum game in essence since they only care about their national interests (Arı, 2013, pp. 137-8). In this pursuit, states tend to disregard any moral and legal restrictions (Bull, 2012, pp. 22-3), or they can even violate them when necessary. For *classical realists*, states, like human beings, try to maximize their interests by consolidating their power. Statesmen's or elites' decisions based on rational choice theory play

a pivotal role in defining the interests or power of a given state (Morgenthau H. J., 1949, pp. 13-7).

For *neorealists* (or structural realists), survival is the primary objective of states, and it can only be achievable through military means. In the absence of any overarching authority, the perpetual anarchic nature (Waltz, 1979, pp. 78-96) of the international system is the governing principle. And it restrains states' choices and acts immensely; any state pursues its national interests according to its capacity. In this regard, as the states are primary actors in the international system, neorealists (or realists, generally speaking) are skeptical about the roles and influence of international organizations in ensuring peace and stability.

According to the *offensive* strand of neorealism, states can only guarantee their security by increasing their material capacity (relative power), both militarily and economically, and by undermining the capacities of rival states. This constant and inevitable power struggle paradoxically causes the "*security dilemma*", which ultimately leads to military conflicts between states. In this context, wars are used to gain supremacy, and security, together with economic considerations, serve as the main motives to wage war (Mearsheimer J. , 2007). By doing so, the states can alter the power balance in their favor and secure superiority over potential rivals with an aim for establishing regional or global security pending their capacities.

On the other hand, *defensive* neorealists argue that acquiring sufficient power is the best way to deter opponents from attacking. By enjoying sizable power, military capacity, and engaging in alliances, states can ensure their survival within the context of the *balance of power*. Great power politics occupy a central place in the neorealist camp, and their interests and threat perceptions shape mainly the international system. Within the context of *polarity* or power competitions, great powers interfere in other states domestic affairs to advance their national interests. Thus, for neorealists, third-party interventions are regarded as extensions of power politics employed by states, particularly by great powers, to maximize their national interests.

Neorealism regards the international and domestic realms separately (Tardelli, 2013, p. 78), and domestic factors played a limited role in state behaviors. Therefore, neorealist scholars have difficulty in explaining why domestic changes abroad, such as revolution or domestic power struggle, require employing military force. However, as Aron claims (1966, pp. 99-101), making a rigid distinction between external and internal enemies has become blurry, which would lead to interventions, inevitably.

The neorealist (offensive) theory investigates the global and regional hegemony concepts as well. Within this framework, states try to maximize their power by establishing *global hegemony* as a survival strategy (Mearsheimer J. , 2001, p. 141). Accordingly, the US invaded Afghanistan to balance Russia and China, besides curbing global terrorism (Bağbaşıoğlu A., 2024, p. 6). This provides a theoretical lens to investigate the US unilateral activism in Afghanistan to impose its terms for promoting its global power status.

But it is also applicable to Türkiye's position in the Arab Spring and Syrian crisis, as Ankara was in pursuit of a regional hegemony in the Middle East commensurate with its growing economic and political powers just before the social unrest. Systemic changes in the post-Cold War era, especially following the 9/11 attacks, offered Türkiye an opportunity to assert itself as a regional power (Neset et al., 2021, p. 9). In fact, at that time, Turkish officials frequently underlined the concept of "*regional power*" to highlight Türkiye's place in both regional and global politics (Ozan, 2017, p. 9). But, due to insufficient material capacity, Türkiye's attempt was foiled by other actors.

According to Klosek (2019, p. 6), most states joined the US-led coalition in Afghanistan to develop their relations with the US, not to advance their own national interests. Therefore, the *bandwagoning* concept of neo-realism (Waltz, 1979, p. 126) is attributable to explaining why some states bowed to the US demands while others showed resistance. Because when US President Bush imposed his preemption doctrine, he and his close circle expected such an effect; however, some of its allies hesitated to give their consent, pretty much unlike the Cold War practices. Evidently, the Bush administration simply ignored the importance of persuasion (Rielly, 2008, p. 74) by merely focusing on their mighty power.

The *neoclassical* realist paradigm, by exceeding the limits of neorealism, gives importance to domestic variables alongside external ones in theoretical analysis in specific foreign policy formulation (Rose, 1998, p. 146), including the decision to intervene (Schweller R. , 2006). In contrast to mainstream realist arguments, neoclassical realists claim that states may not always act rationally (Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 245) because of miscalculations in domestic and foreign policies. In line with this premise, domestic politics may not be the primary cause of intervention, but they make an undeniable impact on policy decisions (Dueck, 2009). To illustrate, the role of ideological inclination and public opinion at home has been a driving factor for some of the recent military interventions (Tardelli, 2013, p. 58).

In comparison with other main theoretical paradigms, realist approaches have been relatively silent on military intervention. Nevertheless, classical realist authors provide

valuable insights on intervention. According to Thucydides and Machiavelli, states resort to recurrent interventions to interfere in others' internal affairs (Little, 1975, p. 4). Kissinger and Morgenthau regard third-party intervention as a distinct practice in foreign policy (Aron, 1966). For them, states use this practice as a main tool to pursue their interests, in addition to war and diplomacy (Morgenthau H. , 1967, p. 425). On this, military intervention is bound with war or use of force in international affairs, the degree of which is decided by statesmen according to domestic changes.

Realism suggests that leaders, or statesmen, are also important in states' behaviors (Donnelly, 2013, p. 79), and military intervention is regarded as an available and useful tool for state leaders to advance political and strategic interests. According to Dueck (2009), state leaders are particularly important in determining the critical echelon, beyond which states are ready to intervene. Accordingly, domestic structure and institutions, ideology, and the ambitions of their leaders shape the state's actions in foreign policy. This perspective helps to explain Bashar Assad's mindset and his futile attempts to stay in power during the civil war by using brutal means.

On the other hand, the balance of interests' theory (Schweller R. , 1994, pp. 104-5) suggests that *states rationally decide foreign policies depending on a combination of power and interests*. In their decision-making process, the political and ideational factors play important roles. While domestic conditions serve as primary causes of military interventions, international factors seem to be triggering variables (Dueck, 2009). This perspective provides an explanation of why Türkiye's soft-power-based foreign policies shifted towards a more assertive direction in parallel with the JDP's power consolidation in Turkish domestic politics.

Regarding the underlying factors to intervene, there is a consensus within the realist camp. According to Morgenthau (1967, p. 92), "*Some states have found it advantageous to intervene in the affairs of other states on behalf of their own interests and against the latter's will.*" National interests are the main or even the only drivers for third-party intervention. In other words, states can disregard normative concerns and established rules to achieve their national interests when they feel their security is at stake. In this context, humanitarian intervention, formulated based on liberal values as discussed below, is also used by states as a pretext to further their national interests by force (Bull, 2012, p. 43). In fact, humanitarian intervention is a result of cost-benefit analysis and geopolitical or strategic calculations of states while pursuing their various interests (Jude, 2012, p. 42).

Realist scholars suggest that interventions only take place when clear national interests are at stake (Regan, 1998, p. 754). Whereas realist scholars agree that national interests are the primary triggering factor for interventions, there are differentiating views in terms of defining what the national interest is in essence, whether material or ideational. For classical realists, national interests are defined in material or military power. Morgenthau (1967, p. 97) argues that “*all nations decide to intervene or not in accordance with perceived threats and certain rules. However, these rules must be deduced not from abstract principles*”. On the other hand, for neorealists, maximizing security (Waltz, 1979) or minimizing threats (Walt S., 1987) can be defined as national interest. In this framework, states seek these objectives in their foreign relations when intervening in other states domestic struggles.

Thus, national interests are the pursuit of power in line with concrete objectives. Well-defined national interests ensure consistent pursuit in the implementation of foreign policy (Molloy, 2004). Nevertheless, the definition of vital interests would be problematic. For instance, if military interventions are not carried out to achieve a state’s security or interests needs but for imperial adventures in line with statesmen’s priorities and domestic factors, they would turn out to be counterproductive. For this reason, the majority of realist authors have been opponents of the US's recent interventions in Vietnam, Iraq, and Syria (Walt, 2013).

The external interventions in ongoing intrastate conflicts are also viewed by realists as states’ attempts to realize their strategic interests (Regan, 1998; Findley & Teo, 2006). Put it differently, states intervene in civil conflicts to take advantage of emerging opportunities to increase their sphere of influence. Walt, by referring to the balance of power concept, argues that revolutions provide a “*window of opportunity*” for expansionist neighboring states or urge them to take measures against revolutionary states as per perceived threats (Walt, 1996, pp. 30-33). In this regard, the interventions involve the occupation of targeted countries and installing a new government there (Finnemore, 2003, p. 8).

By and large, the realist approach stresses the importance of state autonomy and sovereignty and the bounded principle of non-intervention. Therefore, realists do not easily welcome the military interventions, particularly humanitarian intervention, because of their selective application and harmful consequences in the recent past. Because it marks a significant deviation from the UN principle of non-interference (Mackenzie, 2010, pp. 138-40).

In fact, the persistent nature of intervention, as a “*convention-breaking*” practice, raises questions among realist scholars. Because Westphalian sovereignty and state autonomy, based on territoriality and exclusion of foreign interference in the domestic realm, are pivotal aspects

of international relations (Finnemore, 2003, p. 4). In this regard, violating the norm of non-intervention poses a threat to international security and peace, as it is one of the most important principles for “coexistence” (Bull, 2012, pp. 69-70).

Nevertheless, in accordance with another realist concept of “*self-help*,” states are to take all measures to ensure their own security, including military intervention (Hoffmann, 1984, p. 11). This dilemma causes friction within realist theory; while non-intervention safeguards state autonomy, intervention is a legitimate requirement for states to mitigate perceived threats to their national security at the international level. In this context, the practice of humanitarian intervention is problematic for realists.

They put forward that Western powers are selective in their interventions. While the Western powers were relatively quick to implement their hard power into [*oil-rich countries*] Iraq and Libya, supposedly to alleviate human suffering (Dunne, 2017, p. 5), they did nothing but only condemn the human rights violations in Chechnya and Xinyang. Besides, western powers were quick to intervene in the regions in which they have vital interests; they could turn a blind eye towards the conflicts despite far more serious humanitarian catastrophes like the Darfur and Yemen wars (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2020, pp. 517, 522). The Syrian case also exhibits the limit of the motto of “*never again*,” despite widespread crimes against humanity. Apparently, the West uses humanitarian intervention as a pretext for getting involved in the affairs of the Global South.

Dhaliwal (2014, p. 6) argues that as a manifestation of their imperialist purposes, the great powers intervene only if they can pursue their benefits, as happened in Kosovo. Therefore, as argued by Franck and Rodley (1973), the intervenor countries employ humanitarian intervention as a cover-up to hide their real intentions. Donnelly (2013, p. 77) also claims that states use humanitarian principles as a driving force in their foreign policy decisions very seldom. In essence, it is manipulated and misused and has become a mechanism used by the strong against the weak (Lis, 2020, p. 8).

Furthermore, humanitarian intervention is a vehicle for imposing Western values on other societies from a Eurocentric standpoint (Yasuaki, 2000, p. 24), as we have witnessed during the US’s desperate attempts in Iraq and Afghanistan. To illustrate, the US has referred to human rights to justify its prolonged occupation during the Afghan war. Indeed, women's rights were particularly emphasized in the media (Aslan, 2017). One of the interviewees, *Mr.*

*Murat Aslan*¹⁰, argues that “the US used women’s rights and their liberation rhetoric in Afghanistan, but it backfired because of the deeply rooted rural culture of the country”.

State and statism are fundamental concepts in realism. From this vantage point, states and their functions are extremely important in third-world countries, which are subject to frequent foreign interventions. There is a direct connection between state authority and the well-being of its citizens since the weakness of a state would lead to a civil war (Collier, 2003, p. 5). As Morgenthau (1967, p. 426) claims, weak states need external support, as seen during the decolonization period; therefore, providing them external military and financial aid would be another driving factor for interventions. Accordingly, the realist paradigm highlights the negative consequences of undermining state power and institutions.

From this perspective, if an external intervention targets the central state apparatus, it paves the way for illegal activities of uncontrolled armed groups, posing a security risk ultimately towards regional and global security (Walter, 2013, p. 656 as cited in Lundgren, 2014, p. 13). In that case, military interventions can also be resorted to mitigating these security risks. By doing so, however, they put peace and security in even more danger eventually due to the extremely weakened state’s ability to enforce law and order (Wheeler, 2000, p. 11). At the end of this vicious cycle, even more people may suffer and get to be deprived of their basic rights (Jackson R. , 2000, p. 291), including life safety.

Although the realist approach does not talk directly about the civil conflicts since domestic issues are not so much important matters in international relations (Stoll, 2011), some scholars apply the important realist concepts to civil wars. Mack (2002, p. 516), for instance, argues that although the concept of “*anarchy*” is only relevant to international relations because there is no overarching authority, it may be able to explain the power dynamics among the warring sides during civil wars following the fall of the central state apparatus.

Barry Posen (1993) also applies the classical realist concept of the “*security dilemma*” (Jervis, 1978) to the newly emerging ethnic conflicts. As he puts it, every ethnic group, being unsure about other groups’ intentions, tends to take up arms in self-defense amid ethnic or religious conflicts to maximize their chance of survival because of lacking overarching power to impose the rule of law, as exactly in the anarchic nature of interstate relations.

¹⁰ Interview (on 7th June 2023) with **Assoc. Prof. Murat Aslan**, a member of the faculty of Hasan Kalyoncu University and a retired officer. He has written his Ph.D. thesis on NATO’s PSYOPS operations in Afghanistan and Bosnia.

In addition to these defensive incentives, the security dilemma might trigger offensive incentives, too. Accordingly, the conflicting factions or their leadership would aim to impose their ideology or culture, controlling natural resources or just promoting their fame by exploiting the power vacuum emanating from collapsing state authority (Stedman 1997; DeFigueiredo and Weingast, 1999, as cited in Doyle & Sambanis, 2000). These arguments highlight the importance of states' law enforcement functions, and as such, they are applicable to the Afghan and Syrian conflicts.

Liberalism

Unlike realism, the liberalist theory does not conceive international relations as a constant power struggle. Instead, sustainable peace and stability can be ensured through cooperation and interaction among states. According to liberal scholars, material power is not the only determinant of international relations. Although the system is anarchic in nature, established norms and rules restrict state actions and urge cooperation. Common financial interests restrain states from using power against each other (Burchill, 2005, pp. 66-7). The liberal turn at the beginning of the 2000s was shaped based on this premise. In this sense, international organizations play an important role in promoting and enforcing international peace, as states sacrifice their sovereignty and autonomy to some extent while being members of this organization and willingly accepting the rules on which these organizations are founded (Terriff, Croft, James, & Morgan, 1999, p. 46).

Thanks to this set of rules, political, economic, and liberal norms can be ensured at national and global scales (Böke, 2017). Liberals argue that democratic states are more prone to interacting with each other peacefully (Erdag, 2013, p. 65). As per this main tenet of *Democratic Peace Theory* (Doyle, 1986, pp. 1154-5), expansion of democracy and free market economy, by force or through intervention more precisely, would be legitimate and justifiable since these actions promote global peace, human rights, and security in the end (Manan, 2015, p. 176).

In fact, in comparison with other time-consuming alternatives like trade sanctions and embargoes, military interventions are often regarded by liberal states as the most viable and quickest way to reach objectives such as humanitarian purposes and protecting civilians against their tyrannical rulers (Kegley & Hermann, 1996, p. 310). In this sense, the regime type is a key factor for the likelihood of interventions and the mode of intervention. However, by analyzing the relationship between overt military operations and democracy, Kegley and Hermann (1996, pp. 315-6) contradict this argument by pointing out that democratic states tend

to intervene in other democratic regimes more frequently than other regime types by various means. Mesquita and Downs (2006, p. 641) also argue that interventions conducted for promoting democratic norms cause only superficial and symbolic changes rather than extensive reforms.

Indeed, the attempt to spread democracy “*at the point of bayonets*” has turned out to be counterproductive in Afghanistan and Iraq (Downes & Monten, 2013) because democratic practices require democratic institutions and norms that cannot be imposed by force. On the contrary, third-party interventions in this manner generally weaken the ill-structured democratic practices in the target countries.

The democratic regime of intervening countries also matters in the formulation of foreign policy, particularly in the decision-making process of interventions. Like realists, liberals also believe that statesmen are crucial in this cycle. Their motivation to maintain political power plays a significant role in determining the state’s policies (Mesquita & Downs, 2006, p. 629). For instance, Western (2005, pp. 20-2) posits that intervention is the result of domestic power struggles among various advocacy groups, who try to shape foreign policies according to their belief and ability to gain public support, which is applicable to both Turkish and US cases in this dissertation.

Liberalists posit that democratic processes and institutions curb the ruling elites’ natural propensity for violence (Burchill, 2005, p. 113) due to public pressure on them. On this, whether they can influence press and public opinion or not is decisive to impose their preference in international affairs, sufficiently lacking which led to the US intervention in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, as military interventions are costly in humanitarian and economic metrics, the failure in reaching promised objectives would undermine leaders’ positions or even threaten their political survival in the aftermath (Mesquita & Downs, 2006, p. 631).

As understood from this perspective, liberal theory offers a different perspective regarding the main drivers of state intervention into civil conflicts. In contrast to the realist paradigm, liberals propose that national interests are not the sole reason for intervention, but states intervene in interstate wars to protect civilians and prevent human rights abuses and ensure a rule-based global order in some cases. To illustrate, although the Somalia crisis in 1992 posed very little direct threat to US interests or international stability (Philipp, 2005, pp. 532-41), unbearable humanitarian conditions such as widespread hunger and massive killings forced the US to intervene despite its public resistance (Jakobsen, 1996).

In this context, the contemporary discussions within the liberal camp focus on the normative dimension of humanitarian intervention¹¹ essentially. Some scholars propose that state sovereignty, although it has been an international norm in place since the 17th century, can be overridden in case respective states violate human rights extensively. These cosmopolitan interventionists prioritize human rights over state authority. To them, it is the international community's responsibility to protect civilians against their tyrannical regimes. For liberal internationalists, on the other hand, the military intervention should be a last resort to put an end to bloody, prolonged civil wars and massive, systematic human rights violations such as ethnic cleansing.

Liberal scholars defend military intervention in civil conflicts on the ground that they pose a serious threat to regional and international security (Hoffman, 1995). Nevertheless, they also claim that self-interested intervention, mostly conducted by great powers, would potentially undermine the rule-governed international system and bring about more instability (Szende, 2012). Therefore, a legitimate authorization, the UNSC in effect, is a prerequisite for any military intervention (Doyle & Recchia, 2011), and they are to be conducted multilaterally, preferably.

English School

As an international relations theory, the English School stands in the middle way, or via media, between realism and liberalism. Proponents of the English School agree the international system is anarchic and states compete for power, as realists presume. However, they argue that the international system is also surprisingly peaceful because of common interests, shared rules, and norms within the context of *international society* (Bull, 2012, pp. 13, 25), which is one of the distinguishing concepts of the English School (Brown C. , 2001). In other words, the English School highlights the primary and secondary institutions among states that facilitate peaceful existence in an environment consisting of politically and ideologically diverse states.

Within the framework of intervention discussion of the English School (ES), humanitarian intervention occupies a central position, as the main source of *great*

¹¹ “the threat or use of force by a state, group of states, or international organization primarily for the purpose of protecting the nationals of the target state from wide-spread deprivations of internationally recognized human rights” (Goodman, 2006, p. 107).

conversation¹². The *order/justice* dilemma, or the *pluralism versus solidarism* debate (Buzan, 2014, pp. 81-101), also constitutes the demarcation line between two different camps in the school (Linklater, 2005, pp. 93-4). As discussed in detail below, while solidarists (Dunne, Linklater, and Wheeler) advocate humanitarian intervention to protect individuals against cruel regimes (ibid., p.95), ES pluralist scholars (Bull, Jackson) oppose this idea on the ground that foreign interventions cause more harm than good for any target country, risking basic rights such as safety of life or shelter (Linklater, 2005; Palabıyık, 2016, p. 239).

Whereas the pluralist wing opposes foreign interference due to the principle of non-intervention as codified in UN Charter Article 2(4)¹³ (Türk, 2015, p. 144), the solidarist wing gives prominence to human rights and individual security; therefore, it gives a green light for humanitarian intervention when necessary. For them, if a sovereign state violates human rights on a large scale or is unable to protect its citizens, other members of the international community are obliged to intervene to protect those innocent people (Evans, 2008, p. 40; Çöçel, 2016, p. 314).

The developments in the post-Cold War era¹⁴ have intensified the debate within ES as ethnic and religious intra-state conflicts became pervasive. Upon the failure of collective security understanding to prevent the massive human rights violations in Rwanda and Bosnia, solidarism gathered momentum through the 1990s (Dunne, 2017, p. 2). As sovereignty is accepted as not only a right but also a responsibility for protecting humanity for a given state (Annan, 1999), humanitarian intervention, as a concept conflicting with the cardinal principle of non-interference, has gained increasing international acceptance (Kardaş, 2013, p. 23).

¹² In actuality, the fight over the *rights of states* vs. *human rights* is crucial to normative theories as a whole, and one of the most popular subjects in this debate is the "*humanitarian intervention*" or *order-justice* dilemma (Eralp, 2014, pp. 220-6). Because humanitarian intervention violates the foundational principles of international law: sovereignty and non-interference (Finnemore, 2003, p. 6).

¹³ "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations."

¹⁴ In that period, the number of UN peacekeeping missions has increased, and the UN played decisive roles in the conflicts from Africa to Central America. As of 1992, around 528.000 personnel were serving under the UN flag. The UN was involved in the conflicts in former Yugoslavia and endeavored to save Muslim Bosnians and Albanians from ethnic cleansing. Nevertheless, the divided structure of the UN Security Council because of Russia's resistance prevented the UN from taking a decisive role. Consequently, NATO intervened in the crises and brought an acceptable stability to the region. Similarly, the UN mission in Somalia ended up with a fiasco, and from that moment onwards, the UN and its member states have been reluctant to participate in similar missions, as sadly witnessed during the Rwandan civil war, which tarnished the UN's fame immensely (Mackenzie, 2010, pp. 128-33).

Nevertheless, the concept remains institutionally complex and normatively contested today (Dunne, 2017, p. 1).

The veto power of permanent members of the UNSC (*P-5*) undermines the effective handling of current crises (Wilkinson, 2007, pp. 92-4). Indeed, because of the Western powers' inertia, notably the US and UK, thousands of Syrians are being murdered at the hands of the Assad regime and its supporters. The Russian and Chinese veto threats paralyzed the UNSC during the Syrian conflict, and the use of chemical weapons went unpunished (Criddle, 2015, p. 480). Protection of the civilian population is a need of the international community, and this protection can only be realized within the normative framework of genuine humanitarian intervention. The Syrian war might have been an ideal opportunity to do so (Sterio, 2014, p. 353).

Unilateral acts bear dangers, too. As we saw in the Second Gulf War, the US launched the Iraq invasion¹⁵ without seeking UN authorization, and that gave rise to tension between the Bush Administration and the UN, understandably (Mackenzie, 2010, p. 139). As indicated by Sterio (2014, p.354), humanitarian intervention is a slippery slope, and it can be used as a pretext to justify the realization of states' aggressive national interests. For instance, Russia referred to humanitarian purposes during the South Ossetia conflict in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea to justify its military incursions (Averre & Davies, 2015, p. 831). In the Rwandan case, the French also pursued their national interests under the pretext of humanitarian justifications (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2020, p. 520).

Regarding the functionality of humanitarian intervention, some argue that it brings more harm than good. To them, the previous application of humanitarian intervention failed to prove to be an effective means to thwart grave human rights abuses (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2020, pp. 510, 518). Conversely, it gave rise to more death and suffering due to the ensuing civil war in the absence of an efficient central government. The international community was hesitant to intervene in the Syrian conflict due to NATO's intervention in Libya, resulting in this country to descend into a civil war following its government collapse (Brooks, 2014, p. 178).

Constructivism

¹⁵ The US invasion of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks enjoyed widespread international support and legitimacy since it had legitimate ground for self-defense. Nonetheless, the UK and the US went to war against Iraq in 2003 without obtaining UN authorization by arguing the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) was imminent and the situation required a preemptive strike. That act intensified the discussion of self-defense rights, and the preemptive attack concept was condemned globally (Amstrong, Farrell, & Lambert, 2012, pp. 136-40).

The constructivist approach provides a convincing account with regard to interventions in international relations by underscoring identities, norms, and ideas. The gravity of constructivism has increased in IR theories as it offers a useful toolkit to analyze identities and non-state actors' behaviors (Reus-Smith, 2005, p. 203), which is necessary to examine respective actors' actions in Afghan and Syrian cases. According to Finnemore (2003, p. 53), norms play twofold roles in interventions, either constraining their likelihood or justifying them under specific circumstances such as protecting civilians. Agents would adhere to established norms or seek to justify their intervention by referring to other rules or seemingly legitimate causes like democracy promotion (Lang, 2002, p. 5).

According to constructivist scholars, interventions result from the interaction between ideational factors and material power (Owen, 2010, p. 27). Accordingly, *Alexander Wendt* contends that identities shape interests and actions (Reus-Smith, 2005, p. 197). In this regard, countries' political culture and threat perceptions are also crucial for defining national objectives, which conforms to Türkiye's position after the Arab Spring. Şen and Şahin (2020, p. 254) argue that although Russia's military capabilities are much behind those of the US, Moscow has been far more successful in furthering its national objective in Syria. Because Russia has been able to consolidate its power and achieve its national goal, whereas the US has been limited in its ability to deploy its hard power on a large scale due to divergent views in Congress and public opinion over military involvement.

In this context, the regime type is important for different reasons. Interveners might aim to change unfriendly regimes in target countries or provide support to like-minded regimes in internal conflicts while alleviating security risks simultaneously. For instance, the Comintern and the Muslim Brotherhood have intervened in domestic conflict because of ideological considerations. As the US was criticized for pursuing quasi-Crusade policies while intervening in Afghanistan, Türkiye was also blamed for following sectarian-based policies (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1400); the constructivist paradigm is useful to investigate these arguments.

When other parties' interventions are deemed threatening, the decision to conduct military intervention may also provide opportunities to form new alliances based on common interests. The rulers of intervening countries or allied factions in target countries can also exaggerate threats to them to gain popular support to execute intervention. In civil wars, insurgents are often disadvantaged in terms of power and require external support from actors who share a similar ideology or ethnicity to compensate for this disparity (Lee & Johnson, 2014, p. 1). As Owen argues (Tardelli, 2013, pp. 43-5), the likelihood of regime change is high

if elites in target countries are polarized on ideological fault lines, which is also applicable to Afghanistan and Syria as they experienced the interventions of multiple parties.

Marxism

Focusing on economic factors, the Marxist approach is fundamentally critical of intervention, particularly military interventions. In line with the general paradigm, the Marxist approach draws a link between intervention and interventionist practices. Accordingly, economic considerations are primary factors in the formulation of foreign policy, and specific foreign policy choices are the culmination of states or interest groups' cost and benefit analysis (Trubowitz, 1998). Fordham (2007, pp. 279-80) also asserts that economic motives make an indirect impact on political decisions via leaders. They have to take into account how economic factors may damage trade and available means, thus undermining political support for them in domestic politics.

Regarding primary drivers of military intervention, Marxist authors argue that capitalist systems impose their will through foreign expansion to find new markets and satisfy raw material needs (Trubowitz, 1998). From this perspective, the purpose of military intervention is to impose the rules of the global capitalist system on new actors who are hesitant to join or remain within the system, thereby ensuring the flow of consumption and production to benefit the private sectors in core countries. Collier (2003, p. 54) argues that low-income states are prone to risk of civil strife 15 times higher than the prosperous nations. Therefore, an indirect correlation would be drawn between military intervention and economic factors. Similarly, Fearon and Laitin (2003, p. 81) argue that lower income is one of the leading factors for civil war and insurgency. So, military interventions, like wars, can be explained as dominant classes' attempts to maintain the existing system (Yalvac, 2014, p. 282).

Through a neo-Gramscian lens, Robinson asserts that the US's attempts to promote democracy are a main tool of the exploitative global system to serve the interests of transnational capital (Robinson, 1996, p. 18). The US has not actually urged a full-fledged democracy via interventionist policies but a "*low-intensity democracy, or polyarchy,*" to satisfy the needs of the global capitalist system.

By close scrutiny, the author argues that even though some humanitarian concerns, such as saving millions of Syrians from Assad's regime massacre, played a partial role, the national interests, particularly security concerns, have been the main drivers of the US Afghanistan intervention and Türkiye's military operations in Syria. The US intervention in

Afghanistan led to an insurgency. This resulted in a civil war between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Similarly, Türkiye's military operations in Syria were undermined by external interventions, which not only thwarted its efforts but also exacerbated the ongoing violence between the opposition and the regime. Therefore, the realist approach, which emphasizes the role of national interests and power dynamics, provides a compelling theoretical toolbox to analyze the US and Türkiye's military efforts in Afghanistan and Syria, respectively, within a cause-and-effect analysis.

In addition, neoclassical premises are applicable to the Syrian and Afghan civil conflicts. For this reason, *the realist theory and its concepts* are employed as the main analytical tools in this research to analyze and compare the US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's military operations in Syria to determine if any independent variables play similar roles in producing undesired results.

2.3. Modality and Frequency of Military Intervention

Generally speaking, interventions are executed by using *economic, ideological, and military* means. While economic and ideological interventions are non-coercive, military intervention entails a degree of coercion. The aim of economic interventions is to affect the economic system or policies of another state by using economic tools. The ultimate goal of ideological interventions is to shape public opinion and dominant rhetoric on the targeted country and its leaders. Any tool like the internet, art, culture, and mass propaganda is utilized to this end. Military interventions are mostly conducted to alter political systems or ruling authorities or safeguard them by force.

Because of their low costs and prospective risks, states generally opt for nonmilitary strategies for intervention like diplomatic negotiations or indirect military assistance (Salehyan, Gleditsch, & Cunningham, 2011, p. 713). However, military interventions are used if they believe that employing military means may quickly and cheaply accomplish national goals or if new security risks require an immediate response. Additionally, statesmen may believe that using coercive force is the best way to alleviate risks or seize chances as the situation changes and presents new opportunities or risks.

Military interventions are conducted in different manners, as indicated above. Depending on the number of participating actors, they are executed *unilaterally* or *multilaterally*. Generally, unilateral interventions are employed if there is a clear power

asymmetry or hierarchical or colonial relationship between the intervener and targeted countries. In some specific cases, unilateral interventions are used in a preemptive fashion to prevent other interveners' actions. As Wight (1978, p. 196) points out, unilateral military interventions are rarely utilized as they run the risk of other parties' interventions. In this framework, the US intervention in Afghanistan is multilateral, and Türkiye's military operations in Syria are unilateral in nature. However, it is hard to make a clear-cut definition in this typology since states cooperate with some local factions of target countries in the course of intervention, as it was the case in both for the US and Türkiye.

Depending on the intervener countries' military presence or lack thereof in the targeted countries, military interventions can also be conducted *directly* or *indirectly* in a variety of ways (Klosek, 2019, p. 8). The direct intervention is distinguishable by overt activities such as orderly dispatching military forces, land, naval, or air units to another country to solve a political dispute or change political order. On the other hand, the indirect military intervention contains a variety of tools ranging from providing military aid, letting one of the conflicting sides use military or naval bases, intelligence provision, or providing safe sanctuary to combatants or other parties.

Although indirect military interventions are publicized in some cases, they are generally conducted covertly and include clandestine activities (Vincent, 1974, p. 9). In this regard, the US intervention in Afghanistan can be defined as direct intervention. On the other hand, Türkiye's involvement in the Syrian conflict can be separated into two periods: Türkiye supported the Syrian opposition morally and militarily between 2013 and 2016, so this period can be called indirect intervention. When multiple security risks became imminent and more dangerous, Türkiye's involvement turned into a direct one from 2016 and onwards.

Analyzing all relevant data from 160 different countries between 1951 and 2004 about the potential of spillover effects from foreign military intervention on neighboring states' stability, Pekşen and Lounsbery (2012, p. 356) classify the interventions into three different categories: *hostile*, *supportive*, and *neutral*. They argue that hostile interventions in nature diminish the central government's capacity to keep full control over its own soil by reducing its coercive and administrative capacity. Therefore, the targeted country turned into a sanctuary for rival groups, and subsequently illegal activities such as the spread of arms, human trafficking, etc., increased. Regan (2002) presents a similar dichotomy by dividing interventions into two main groups: *biased* (equal to hostile and supportive) and *neutral* interventions.

As happened in the Libyan Conflict, states attempt to change the ultimate outcome of the conflict through *biased interventions* to decide who will run the country afterward, which type of economic system will be established, etc. (Gent, 2005). By intervening, external powers enforce their superiority by supporting one or more sides against another, so that the chosen side can dictate its policy to the others (Brown C. , 2002, p. 153). Such acts end up with civil strife, in most cases. Unlike international wars, which are usually short-lived, civil wars are prolonged in ethnically polarized societies (Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000, pp. 2,14).

Many researchers (Findley & Teo, 2006; Leeuwen & Van Veen, 2019; Pekşen & Lounsbery, 2012; Regan, 2002; Doyle & Sambanis, 2000) examined the relationship between military interventions and the duration of civil conflicts. They have found out that military interventions have a significant impact on the longevity of civil wars. Doyle and Sambanis (2000) conclude based on their study that only 57 civil wars out of 190 cases analyzed ended because of third-party interventions, whereas the duration of others prolonged. Lee and Johnson (2014, p. 1) have also found out that the civil wars between 1946 and 2001 lasted more than 2 years due to foreign interventions. By analyzing 150 different cases between the years 1945 and 1999, Regan (2002, p. 57) concludes that the balance of capabilities of conflicting sides, directly affected by interventions, is the main determinant for the duration of civil strife.

Even though its modality is crucial, intrastate wars become protracted due to third-party interventions generally (Lee & Johnson, 2014, p. 1), particularly if conducted at the onset of civil wars (Pekşen & Lounsbery, 2012, p. 348). If they aim to *restore the pre-conflict status quo* by supporting the government, the conflict ends in a shorter time; however, if they seek to *alter the status quo* by giving aid to rebel groups, then most likely the civil conflict prolongs (Regan P. M., 2002, p. 59). According to Mason, Weingarten, and Fett (1999, p. 264), the interventions conducted at the early stages of civil war extend the duration, but the ones carried out at later stages push the sides to the negotiation table.

The conflicting sides always make calculations for possible victory or loss based on the balance of capabilities. In this regard, the timing and makeup of intervention are also decisive factors in the duration of civil war. The earlier intervention to support the opposition increases the likelihood of rebels' victory. The making-up aids of unilateral intervention, the amount or disposition of these aids, is also important in terms of making opposition groups more challenging or not. In short, either the government or the opposition calculates their chances for victory or payoff. Accordingly, they decide to continue or cease the conflicts. So, the balance of capabilities is the most important factor for the duration of conflicts (Regan P.

M., 2002, pp. 61-4). In this regard, neutral interventions tend to prolong civil wars, while biased interventions that support either the government or the opposition can reduce their duration.

Broadly speaking, if a hostile military intervention targets a government or supports opposition groups, then it creates a “bad neighborhood” by diminishing the state’s governing capacity (Walter, 2013, p. 656 as cited in Lundgren, 2014, p. 13). As a result, the availability of weapons increases, and society becomes more militarized; subsequently, armed conflicts between government and opposition or among rival ethnic groups emerge, and they prolong as intervention ensues.

The refugee crises and extremism follow this development inevitably. More importantly, the spread of armed conflict destabilizes neighboring countries and the whole region (Pekşen & Lounsbery, 2012, pp. 350-2). The civil wars resulting from ethnic frictions (Regan P. M., 2002, p. 58) take longer, and if any similar ethnic group lives in these neighboring countries, this fuels the insurgency. In this context, the ruling government sometimes intentionally increases the negative spillover effects of civil war to destabilize the region if neighboring countries support the rebels (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1397). Indeed, the Assad regime made deliberate attempts to do so at the onset of the conflict by releasing extremist Islamist fighters from prisons and evacuating Northeast Syria to YPG/PKK control, both of which posed serious security risks for Türkiye and the region in the years that followed.

To put it succinctly, hostile military intervention tips the balance in favor of opposition groups while simultaneously leaving a power vacuum that terrorist groups can exploit. For example, both Iran and Türkiye suffered the PKK’s attacks following the UN-authorized hostile intervention against the Iraqi regime in response to the invasion of Kuwait in 1991. The power vacuum in northern Iraq was the main reason for the PKK's increasing assaults. As opposed to hostile interventions, supportive interventions, in favor of incumbent governments, are likely to bolster the state's coercive capacity and political legitimacy of the government as well as the military capacity of the regime (Pekşen & Lounsbery, 2012, p. 354).

With this external support, the government can maintain political order in its own territory, and civil war is likely to come to an end in favor of the government. Consequently, as the spillover effect of civil conflicts decreased, the possibility of destabilization over the whole region also diminished. Diplomatic intervention, not containing coercive manner and taking sides, might be described as neutral intervention, as it aims to mediate warring parties to find peaceful solutions to ongoing conflicts (Lundgren, 2014, p. 16). In this framework,

2.4. Driving Factors of Intervention

Third-party military interventions result from power struggles in international or domestic realms; as such, states activate their military means to reach their national interests by creating more favorable conditions in international politics. There are some surface causes for interventions, though. States conduct military intervention either to take advantage of newly emerging conditions or to protect themselves from risks due to altering dynamics. In any case, their interests play a pivotal role in their interventions. In this context, the civil war, with its risks and opportunities, is an important triggering factor for interventions. In this part, the main motives of intervention will be looked at in detail.

In an attempt to identify these particular reasons for military interventions, Michael Findley and Tze Kwang Teo (2006) analyze the interventions after WWII, and they have come to some conclusions considering the variables: *Why do certain kinds of states intervene in ongoing civil wars? When do they decide to intervene? With whom do they side?* Their findings suggest that *possessing a global power status, colonial history, the rivalry between the potential interveners and host country, or any other third-party intervener* are leading factors for the states to decide to intervene or not. Additionally, the intention to prevent *spillover effects* of conflicts nearby is also a forerunner motive. They argue that regardless of any of these motives, the intervener countries take part in civil conflicts to seek to secure their own interests, taking their capacity into account and potential threat to their own national security.

According to another study covering military intervention between 1945-2003, Sullivan and Koch (2009, p. 711) provide a list of leading political objectives of these interventions: *maintaining foreign regime authority, removing foreign regimes, policy change, acquiring or defending territory, maintaining empires, and social protection and order*. Even if these appear to be the primary ones, there are other motives for interventions, such as opening up new markets for the military sector (Şen & Şahin, 2020).

Interventions are essentially determined by the dynamics of the international system as well as the internal politics of the intervening and targeted nations. The states decide to intervene after a long decision-making process; during this period, they follow and evaluate developments closely, and accordingly, they decide the timing of intervention. The sudden change in domestic politics of intervening countries or in targeted countries increases the

possibility of intervention if they provide new opportunities to grasp for elites of intervener countries. Similarly, when the newly changing circumstances reduce the risk costs of military intervention and offer favorable conditions to achieve national goals, statesmen are prone to taking advantage of these emerging opportunities (Tardelli, 2013, p. 129). Contrarily, if new conditions present more dangerous and imminent risks to potential intervener countries, then they reduce the likelihood of interventions.

In this context, military interventions can be conducted to change the regime of another country in case this regime is deemed hostile or weak. In western understanding, antidemocratic and weak states (Collier, 2003) are prone to causing risks for regional and global security as they provide favorable conditions for terrorist organizations and international criminal networks (Lee M. , 2021). Therefore, they need to be controlled through external intervention to spur a democratization process, which is generally deceiving (Downes & Monten, 2013, p. 131). Although the interventions to this purpose produced some positive results in Japan and Western Germany after WWII (Edelstein, 2004), the recent cases in Iraq and Afghanistan have proved that imposing democratic practices via military means is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, because of these attempts, both Iraq and Afghanistan were dragged into civil wars.

The ideological struggle at domestic and global levels is also an undeniable reason for some interventions (Owen, 2010). States might intervene to spread a specific ideology or prevent the expansion of counter-ideology. To illustrate, during the Cold War, the US repeatedly intervened in Latin American countries to counter “communist revolutions” (Gök, 2018). The USSR intervened in the states in its periphery to topple “war-mongering capitalist” regimes, supposedly (Finnemore, 2003, p. 85). Moreover, the colonial history between the potential intervener and the targeted country is also important; the former colonial powers may maintain interests in their former colonies. For instance, France intervened in 14 different civil wars, 10 of which were taking place in its former colonies (Findley & Teo, 2006, pp. 832, 836).

In other instances, as demonstrated by Cuba's involvement in Africa, intervention may be motivated only by ideological affinities between the leadership of two states, endorsing the ruling class of the targeted nation (Falk, 1987). Supporting the separatist movement might also be a motivating factor, especially if the secessionist groups and intervening countries have a close relationship or are just based on the maxim "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," as in the case of Syria's 1980s backing of the PKK. On the contrary, preventing the spillover effect

of separatist war in a neighboring country based on ethnic linkage would also be a motive for intervention (Buhaug & Gleditsch, 2008, p. 223).

In some cases, military intervention might be utilized to realize more specific but long-term foreign policy goals. The alliance relationship, such as retaining international credibility of countries and commitments to their allies, would be an underlying factor for interventions (Sullivan & Koch, 2009, p. 710). Russia and Iran's staunch support for the Assad regime can be explained by the traditional alliance relationships alongside convergent interests. Nevertheless, as Şen and Şahin (2020, p. 244) argue, military interventions or civil wars might cause frictions among the alliance due to conflicting interests, as happened between Türkiye and the US during the Syrian conflict.

Alongside the strategic interests, domestic political considerations are also another factor for military interventions (Neset et al., 2021). The leaders' desire to retain their power would be the main driver for military intervention (Sullivan & Koch, 2009, p. 710). The ruling elites, directly or indirectly, might employ military power for consolidating their power at home or weakening the opposition by translating military success into political gains in domestic politics (Halliday, 1999, pp. 138-9), which might be attributable to the Turkish case, even though the primary motive was to ensure security. Nevertheless, if the humanitarian and material costs start to increase at an unbearable level, the electorate base might alienate from ruling parties, and their political survival becomes risky, as seen in the Soviet and the US interventions in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

In the same vein, military intervention might be used to divert the public's attention from internal problems. A charismatic personality is key to convincing the constituencies that emerging risks are existential. In these practices, leaders put effort into exploiting the "rally around the flag effect" to provide an image that domestic economic and political issues are secondary in comparison with the security risks that a given state is exposed to (Sirin, 2011). State elites seek to expand their popular support by depicting security risks as imminent and existential. As such, they can justify the military intervention to promote national unity among different segments of society.

Religious affinity (Fox, 2001) and threat perception remain among the leading factors for intervention. Indeed, the first examples of interventions of this kind, albeit their execution and justification were totally different from current applications, were seen in Europe during the 100-year war to protect their fellow religious brother (Trim, 2013, pp. 27-8). Michael Grillo

and Juris Pupcenoks (2017) analyze the conditions under which the US people are inclined to support military humanitarian intervention. They also try to find out which psychological factors influence individuals to support the intervention. The study reveals interesting results: if the victims of grave human rights abuses are Christians, then the level of support for intervention increases. Secondly, the use of a chemical weapon, particularly by a Muslim government, is perceived as a threat to US national security, and then the support intervention increases significantly.

The existing literature underscores internal conflicts as one of the most important factors triggering military intervention. In order to fully grasp the foreign intervention of this kind, the dynamics of civil war should be analyzed first. In fact, third parties have repeatedly intervened in civil wars, from civil conflict in ancient Greece to the Arab Spring, and they have changed the course of civil conflicts immensely due to their involvement (Tardelli, 2013, p. 11). Eric Hobsbawn (1994, p. 54) posits that civil strifes and revolutions have played a significant role in shaping domestic and international politics in the 20th century and before. Indeed, as seen in Syria, civil wars stand for important cornerstones in humankind's history with local, regional, and international implications.

According to Modelski (1964, p. 20), internal conflicts cause a demand for external interventions for some reasons. To begin with, both incumbent authority and rebels necessitate foreign aid to access state's resources or lands under rebel groups' control. Furthermore, states are inclined to take advantage of civil wars in other countries (Lee & Johnson, 2014, p. 1). The breakdown of given central authority not only leads to civil conflicts but also provides risks and opportunities for external parties and serves as an incentive for military intervention (Mitchell, 1970, p. 171). Saudi-led interventions in the Yemen civil war and Bahrain uprising can be assessed in this context.

It makes sense to first look at the concept of internal conflict before examining the relationships between it and military interventions. Internal conflict results from domestic power struggles among the parties with clashing interests and aims owing to ethnic, religious, ideological, and economic reasons (Mitchell, 1970, p. 167). According to Tardelli's definition (Tardelli, 2013, pp. 32-3), internal conflict contains three distinctive elements. First, internal conflicts occur within politically independent entities like nation-states or empires. At the onset of civil wars, conflicting sides are subject to a common power within the same defined territory, mostly (Kalyvas, 2006, p. 17 as cited in Lundgren, 2014, p. 18), so internal conflicts are different from interstate conflicts or terrorism.

Second, internal conflicts are the result of two or more blocks competing for control of the country and claiming multiple sovereignty over the whole country or sizable chunk(s) of the country. Both sides seek either revolutionary (changing regime) or secessionist (creating a new state upon the territory of an existing one) agendas. The contending parties also must possess some coercive capacity, armed groups under their control in practice (Tilly, 1993, pp. 8-10). Third, internal conflict occurs when one of these sides employs organized and systematic violence against the people or their properties (Mitchell, 1970, p. 171).

Internal conflicts may go in two different directions: more peaceful and egalitarian order or total disarray. No matter how they end up, they cause dynamic changes together with instability for a short period at least. For this reason, internal conflicts play a conducive role in military intervention. The internal conflicts in principle pose security risks and threaten regional stability and peace by generating some costly consequences like displaced people, arms trafficking, uncontrolled areas, etc. (Lundgren, 2014, p. 13). In that case, external parties intervene to enforce law and order. The US intervention was motivated by the presence of Al Qaeda network in Afghanistan; thus, it can be evaluated in this context.

The instability might be contagious and require effective measures to be taken in a timely manner (Parlar Dal, 2016). Therefore, states can intervene in these conflicts to alleviate risks to themselves. Geographic proximity is an important issue, as a shared border with a country experiencing an internal conflict increases the likelihood of intervention (Murdoch & Todd, 2002, p. 92). The primary aim of intervener countries is to prevent the “spilling over” effect of ongoing conflict in these cases (Mitchell, 1970, p. 167). Indeed, upon encountering multiple spillover effects of the Syrian conflict, Türkiye was forced to carry out military operations.

Interviewed military personnel agreed on the premises laid here:

“Given the growing security threats, Türkiye's reasons and concerns for carrying out military actions in northern Syria are legitimate, but the timing of the operations is debatable. Because Türkiye ought to have taken action far sooner, when DEASH first started to seize territory. Unfortunately, Ankara's failure to take these actions in a timely manner opened the door for US-PYD/PKK cooperation. In addition to this, DEASH and PYD/PKK had enough time to prepare; the late actions also resulted in significantly higher military casualties. The respondents were also of the opinion that Türkiye should have recalibrated its Syrian policy by reaching out to the Assad regime when it noticed the regime would remain in power. If Ankara had engaged with Assad in a way, it would have prevented Russia from stepping into its southern flank and

would not have coped with such multi-faceted security issues, including the refugees.”

In this regard, there is a direct ratio between the intensity of conflicts and the possibility of military interventions (Regan, 1998, p. 767). The more intense the conflict, the more probable human and material loss for intervener countries; therefore, there is an inverse ratio between violence level and interveners’ desire (Mitchell, 1970, p. 177). The burdens stemming from humanitarian intervention have become an even greater problem recently for two specific reasons. The inflicted casualties of countries make quite an impact on the support of nations back. As another striking example, the US nation did not support the intervention in Rwanda due to dramatic losses in Somalia.

In addition, humanitarian intervention is a costly military operation nowadays, particularly when conducted in an overseas nature. Therefore, there is an inverse ratio between the costs of deploying troops and the willingness of taxpayers for these interventions (O’Hanlon, 2000). In this respect, some argue (Seybolt, 2008, p. 4) that the 9/11 attacks have made humanitarian intervention obsolete because governments now focus only on protecting their vital national interests.

Furthermore, while low-intensity conflicts might not generate widespread demographic alteration, high-intensity conflicts put civilian lives in greater danger and resulted in a significant loss of human population and famine. All of these trigger the refugee influx or an increase in the number of internally displaced people. In this case, military interventions come on the agenda to curb refugee flow or to contain the violence in the neighboring country as it is perceived as a threat to national security (Vincent, 1974).

Unilaterally or within coalitions, states may opt to intervene to tackle the security risks because of the movement of populations or just for humanitarian concerns. Under these conditions, humanitarian interventions come to the fore as peculiar forms of military intervention. Although this typology of intervention is generally softened by liberal scholars by highlighting human rights, they are conducted without the consent of political leadership or targeted countries (Tardelli, 2013, p. 34). As such, it is an evident violation of state authority and sovereignty right under the pretext of interveners’ responsibility to protect civilians.

The presence of transnational ethnic affinity increased the propensity of intervention, particularly within democratic regimes (Owen, 2010). Because constituencies exercise

pressure on their ruling elites to protect their relatives in other countries. Alternatively, states would seek to power change in these countries by supporting affinity factions (Regan, 1998, p. 766). Like this, the existence of minority groups with religious affinities in a country at risk of civil war can lead to domestic public pressure on the government of the intervening nation to take preventative action (Fox, 2001, p. 516).

The other parties' acts are also very important variables in this decision-making. Other third parties' interventions or prospects for interventions in ongoing conflicts also increase the chance of another party's intervention in the same conflict. Because states are prone to taking measures to counter their rivals' increasing footprints in any third party's domestic affairs. To this end, they intervene in a preemptive manner (Mitchell, 1970, p. 172). This cycle of interaction often ends up with multiple interventions in the same civil wars (Findley & Teo, 2006), as happened during the 13-year-long Syrian conflict.

Irrespective of surface causes, any military intervention in ongoing internal conflicts represents a choice of intervener party or parties regarding who will rule the country afterwards. As rightly argued by Finnemore (2003, p. 108), third parties employ their military power to change the ruling regime or safeguard their position in accordance with their own interests. The preferences of ruling elites in the intervening countries are decisive about which conflicting side will be supported. From this perspective, military intervention can be described as an attempt to favor one power against another or opt for one political system over others when the existing one starts to collapse or shows signs of decaying and is ultimately contested by various domestic factions (Tardelli, 2013, p. 34).

The power balance inevitably shifts in favor of one of the competing groups when third parties are involved (Mitchell, 1970, p. 167). If a country intervenes to support one side, it drags other third parties to counterbalance by supporting the opposite side. This increases the likelihood of intervention nearly 11 times in favor of the government but four times in favor of the opposition, according to Findley and Teo's analysis (2006, p. 834). By and large, most of the recent Western interventions in this fashion have taken the side of some political actors (Betts, 1994, p. 21). To illustrate, during the Libyan conflict in 2011, despite the UN resolution requiring sheer impartiality, western interveners preferred the opposition over the ruling Gaddafi regime and violated the auspice of the resolution and led to regime change rather than the protection of innocent civilians.

The military intervention defines the outer limits of sovereign control by posing anomalies for international relations (Finnemore, 2003, p. VII). No matter how intervening countries justify their external use of force, from ceasing humanitarian crises to securing their economic interests, any military intervention could potentially affect the *status quo* in the target country by increasing domestic unrest or facilitating the preservation of order. Potentially, military intervention always carries the risk of further death and destruction. Besides, it clashes with the fundamental principles of international order such as self-determination, non-interference, and political independence (Eryücel, 2014, p. 141). When intervention particularly targets regimes, it not only violates the sovereignty of that regime but also reduces the administrative power of the standing regime (Ertuğrul, 2016, p. 444).

When they were asked about their opinion regarding the primary motives of interventions, the participants virtually all agreed that states use military force against each other to achieve their national interests. The actual goals may vary, including seizing additional territory, exploiting untapped mineral resources, or diverting the focus of their populations. However, cases in Bosnia and Kosovo may be considered exceptions to this rule, as the US intervened to counterbalance the Serbian Army and safeguard the defenseless Bosnians and Kosovan Albanians from genocide. Mr. Oğuz Çiçek¹⁶, suggests that “*humanitarian considerations, not power politics, were the driving force for the interventions in the Balkans*”. As for the US Afghan intervention and Türkiye’s military operations in Syria as concerned, there is a consensus that the national interests dictated all actions. However, for the majority of them, Türkiye’s military actions were mandatory for protecting its national security, but the US’s were not.

¹⁶ Interview (on 2nd Sep 2023) with **Mr. Oğuz Çiçek** (ph.d.) who is a retired colonel, former commander of a Turkish brigade in Syria, and an intelligent officer in Afghanistan.

CHAPTER 3

3. 9/11 ATTACKS AND THE US's AFGHANISTAN INTERVENTION

Afghanistan has experienced invasions by major powers throughout history due to its critical geographical position. In addition to constant occupations, Afghanistan's challenging geography hindered the establishment of a capable central administration. In more recent times, the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1979 weakened the already fragile state and social fabric. The Mujahideen groups, which showed serious resistance during the occupation, strengthened their position and became warlords in their local areas with the help of the unstable situation resulting from the invasion. Subsequently, a civil war broke out among these warlords, and the country came to be on the verge of total collapse. As a result of this civil war, the Taliban gained support among the Pashtun groups, dominated the country, and provided a sanctuary for the Al Qaeda organization.

Following this organization's 9/11 attacks on the US, Afghanistan was once again invaded by foreign countries. The US occupied the country with the aim of destroying the terror network, deposing the Taliban rule, and imposing stability. During the occupation between 2001 and 2021, security and socioeconomic conditions barely improved. The attempts to build a stable and functioning government failed, but the Taliban regained strength gradually and managed to defeat the US in the end. The Afghan people continued to struggle with deep poverty in the face of ethnic rivalry and other criminal activities, let alone enjoying peace and prosperity. This chapter examines the primary motives as well as negative results of US intervention in Afghanistan and the US from a historical standpoint.

3.1. The History of Afghanistan and Previous (British and USSR) Interventions

Geopolitically and historically, Afghanistan is critically located at the crossroads of South and Central Asia (*Figure 3-1*) and the Middle East, and due to this strategic position¹⁷ it

¹⁷ Thanks to its strategic location and geopolitical importance, Afghanistan has found a central place in both McKinder's Heartland and Spykman's Rimland theories (Seren M., 2021, p. 4).

is portrayed as “*the Heart of Asia*” (Jahangir & Javaid, 2018, p. 413). Standing at the intersection of trade routes, Afghanistan has always been a good way for foreign countries to reach the riches of India and the waters of the Gulf.

Therefore, it has been invaded by various nations, such as the Iranians, Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, British, and Soviets. In the course of history, the people of this geography acted as a buffer zone between the Arab-Chinese, then the Turkish-Mongolian and Turkish-Persian, then the Russian-British, and finally the Soviet-American empires (Rashid, 2008, p. 8). While Afghanistan has hosted many civilizations, Afghan peoples have long had to contend with endless invasions and be the victims of power struggles and destructions that they were not parties to.

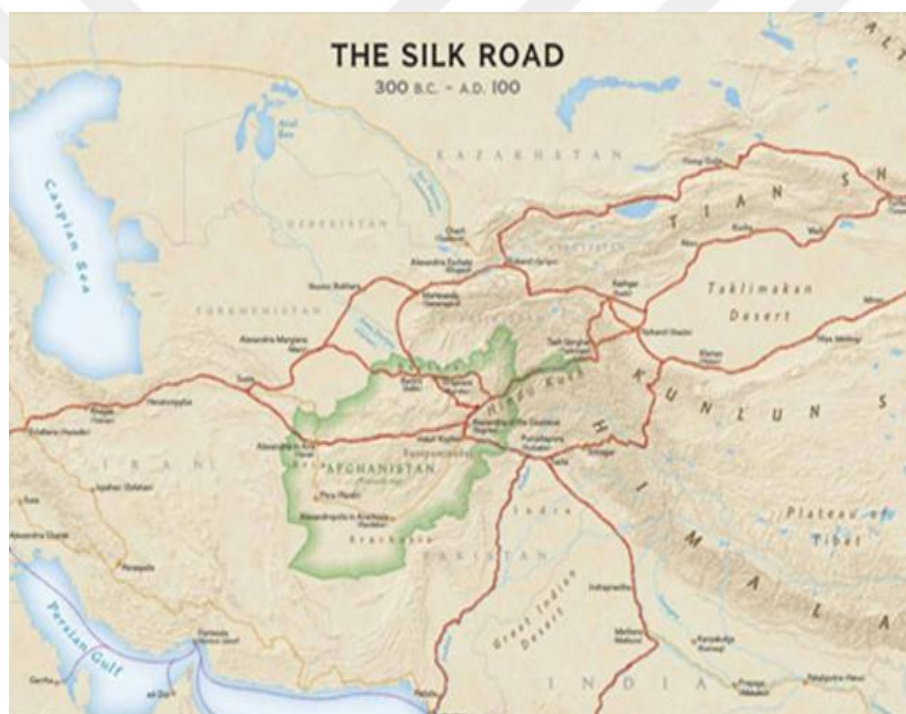


Figure 3- 1 : Afghanistan's Strategic Position

Most of Afghanistan, called *Aryana* in ancient times and Khorasan in the Middle Ages, is covered with mountains. Of all, the Hindukush Mountains are the largest, and they cover and divide the country into three different geographical regions: the central mountainous region, the southern plateau, and the northern plains. This geographical feature, which has constituted an important transportation problem throughout history, has also resulted in the country's having a diverse ethnic structure. Due to this challenging geography, each region had to show self-sufficiency independently of the center; even trade remained at the regional level

for many years and could not spread to the national level. So, the social fabric of the country is shaped by various social and feudal structures based on tribal life. As a result, Islam has served as the only glue that brings people of different ethnic origins together.

This fragmented geographical and ethnic structure (*Figure 3-2*) has been the biggest obstacle to the formation of stable central governments in Afghanistan since ancient times (Kagan, Kagan, Dressler, & Forsberg, 2011, p. 9). Because of these reasons, Afghanistan has not experienced the nation-state process triggered by a centralized and law-based administration. Also, the Afghan nation, being on invasion routes as well as diverse ethnically and linguistically, could not form an effective ruling system. Their rulers' wrong policies and successive external interventions exacerbated the conditions (Nye & Welsh, 2017, p. 268). Hence, the country has also become a safe haven for various criminal organizations in the absence of an effective government. As a result, the country suffered from external interventions and endless bloody civil wars among ethnic groups.

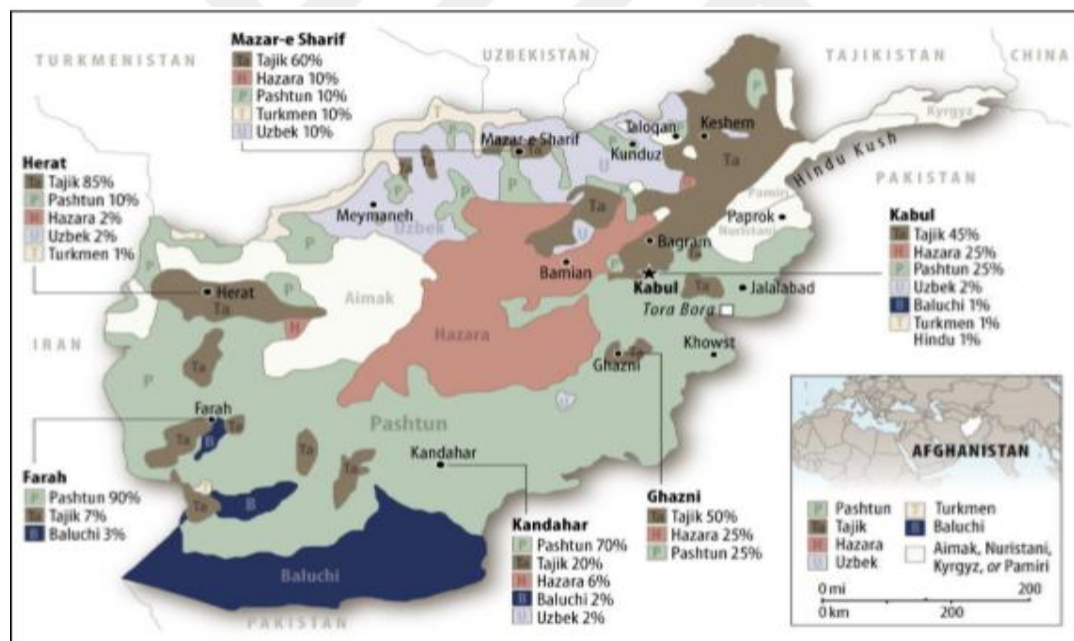


Figure 3- 2 : Map of Afghan Ethnicities

Source: Katzman, 2017, p. 71

Afghanistan, mentioned for the first time in 982 in Muslim sources, accepted Islam with the occupation of the Arab armies. Before gaining independence in 1921, Afghanistan had become a chessboard between the British and Russian Empires. It was invaded by the British in 1839, and the Afghans rebelled against the British at various times (1864, 1868, and 1919).

Although the country enjoyed a gradual modernization, the cycle of coups and political and economic instability dominated the country in the following period.

For the purpose of establishing full control over the country, the Soviet Union started the Afghan invasion on April 27, 1978 (Sever & Kılıç, 2001, pp. 3-7). Mujahideen groups showed fierce resistance against the occupation, and the Soviets were defeated and forced to withdraw from Afghanistan as of February 15, 1989 (Kagan et al., 2011, p.6). After the withdrawal, Najibullah's government remained in power for a while, but soon after, the country became the scene of increasing internal conflicts. These conflicts initially took place as a power struggle within the government, then between the government and its opposition. Facing this opposition, the Najibullah government stepped down on March 18, 1992, and the struggle for leadership began among the Mujahideen groups (Byrd, 2012, p. 7).

In addition to ethnic rivalry, personal interests also played a significant role in the conflict. The UN-backed government was formed under the leadership of *Burhaneddin Rabbani* with the participation of all Mujahideen groups. After a short time, however, deep disagreements developed among the coalition partners, and this turned into conflicts. In this conflict environment, the country was divided among warlords of various ethnic origins and sects and plunged into complete instability (Jackson A. , 2009, p. 8). Paralyzed by foreign intervention, the country fell into an utter quagmire, promoting clandestine terrorist activities and further civil strife.

During this time, refugees¹⁸ who had fled to Pakistan during the Soviet invasion started to return. While the country was divided by warlords, various tribes, and ethnic groups, *Mullah Omar*, a student who studied at the Deobandi Madrasa (Kenneth, 2017, p. 4), founded the *Taliban* with a group of Pashtun Mujahideen madrasa students gathered around him. Most of those students were refugee children who were subjected to a radical anti-Western and anti-Soviet indoctrination during the Soviet occupation (Özer Ö. , 2014, p. 34). In this period, Washington also disengaged from Afghanistan, which paved the way for the country's civil war and the Taliban's rise to power (Yaqin, 2022).

¹⁸ In the last 40 years, internal and external displacement related to conflict, economic factors, natural hazards, and migration has been one of the defining features of Afghan society. The return and reintegration of millions of Afghan refugees have always been a big challenge. The refugee crisis is still a phenomenon in Afghanistan. According to UNHCR, the number of internally displaced Afghans was around 3.5 million at the end of 2021 (IAHE, 2024, p. 29).

While rising to power, the Taliban were able to incite Pashtun nationalism under the guise of Sunni fundamentalism (Sever & Kılıç, 2001, p. 8), with the help of Pakistan (Byman, 2017). In the fall of 1994, the Taliban revolted in Kandahar and took over governance (Collins, 2011, p. 37). Then, with an aim of seizing the power in the whole country as the legitimate state security unit, the Taliban launched an offensive from the south in September 1996.

*Mr. Bülent Tokgöz*¹⁹ claimed that:

“In order to spread the perception of Islamic terrorism, the US turned a blind eye to the Taliban's rise. The US strategists believed that the Taliban could be easily destroyed at the right time and place, but this belief proved misleading”.

*Ms. Natasha Rahim*²⁰ also states:

“The US and Pakistan deliberately created the Taliban as a radical group to undermine the Soviets in Afghanistan without deeply analyzing the dangers in the mid and long terms”.

There were certain conditions facilitating the Taliban's rapid expansion at that time. According to Abdulkader Sinno (2009: 59, cited in Özer, 2014, p. 122), “*Whoever mobilizes the Pashtuns can govern Afghanistan, and it is not possible to maintain control in Afghanistan without their consent.*” Although Pashtuns make up the majority of the nation, Tajiks took control of Kabul because of the internal power struggle within Pashtun groups when the Soviets withdrew. That ignited Pashtun nationalism, because they had been running the country's administration for a long time. Pashtuns, fearful of losing their status, helped the Taliban²¹ immensely (Seren, 2017). As a result, without even engaging in a fight oftentimes, the Taliban seized control of the areas where the Pashtun population was predominant.

¹⁹ Interview (on 10th Oct 2023) with **Mr. Bülent Tokgöz**, who personally participated in fighting in Bosnia between 1991-93 and then in Afghanistan between 1994-96 with the Taliban as a foreign fighter. He is the author of the book “*Cihad'ın Mahrem Hikayesi*,” in which he presents insightful knowledge about the lives and mindset of Jihadists. He made significant contributions to this research study, both with his intellectual viewpoint and first-hand observations.

²⁰ Interview (on 23rd Feb 2024) with **Natasha Rahim**, who is a Pakistani citizen and academician. She has made her master's degree on Afghanistan and external military intervention.

²¹ Seren (2021, p. 6) states that the rise of the Taliban from 2006 onwards can also be attributable to inter-Pashtun tension between the *Durrani* and *Ghilzai* subtribes. Because Durrani held the most critical positions of the state, along with other ethnic groups, during the Karzai governments. On the other hand, Ghilzais, who were primarily rural communities, were excluded. Hence, the Taliban was able to find widespread support among this offended tribe.

As touched upon in the preceding chapter, lack of rule of law and an effective ruling system made rebellious groups' tasks easy in civil conflicts. The Taliban took advantage of these favorable conditions to expand its control over the country. In this sense, the Taliban consolidated its control in a relatively short time by using effective strategies. helping the "*poor against the brutal warlords*" and "*not demanding anything in return for their service from the people they help*", and "*requesting public support only for establishing a just Islamic system*" (Rashid, 2008, pp. 33, 155).

When the Taliban ultimately took control of Kabul in September 1996, they executed the former Afghan president Najibullah, who had ruled the country from 1986 to 1992 and fled to the UN during that time (Sever & Kılıç, 2001, p. 11). Thereupon, *General Rashid Dostum* of Uzbek origin and *Ahmet Shah Mesud* of Tajik origin, who were fighting against each other, formed an alliance against the Taliban. Later, the Shite Hazaras of the Hizb-i Vahdet group living in the Bamyan region joined this alliance, and the alliance was named the *northern Afghanistan Coalition (Northern Alliance)* (Salihy, 2014, p. 62).

The Taliban forces launched a northern offensive to take Afghanistan under its full control. Even though they inflicted 2000–3000 casualties and withdrew initially, they managed to dominate most of Afghanistan until May 26, 1998 (Rashid, 2008, p. 5). In this process, Pakistan's support for the Taliban was an important factor in this quick advancement (Byrd, 2012, p. 7). As it did during the Soviet invasion while funneling US weapons to the Mujahideen, Pakistan provided this aid in the hope that a supportive government would come to power in Afghanistan to balance India (Azizian, 2021, p. 40).

In a similar vein, other regional powers got involved in this fight over Afghanistan. As the internal conflicts intensified between the Taliban and Northern Alliance, other third-parties intervened more and more to exploit favorable conditions in the country. The fundamental cause of this predicament appeared to be the existence of alternate routes to Russia for the transit of oil and natural gas from Central Asia and Azerbaijan to global markets. Pakistan and Iran were striving to support the local factions in Afghanistan so that this transportation could pass over their territory. *Mr. Bülent Tokgöz* stated:

“Every global and regional power has proxy groups in Afghanistan to use when deemed necessary. Iran, for instance, has close ties with Hazaras (Shia), and Tehran has always used these vulnerable groups to exert influence in Afghan politics. While the Taliban struggled with other groups to seize control of the country, Iran made efforts to stop

them because of their Sunni origin. To this purpose, Iran cooperated even with its archenemy, the US”.

As a result of their military gains, the Taliban seized the territories where the pipelines and roads would pass. Because of the Taliban's Sunni identity, Arab governments, particularly Saudi Arabia, supplied major financial support to this organization. Accordingly, whereas other countries still recognized the Rabbani administration as the official government in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE issued their political support by recognizing the Taliban government as the legitimate administration immediately after Pakistan. By doing this, they tried to prevent Iran from having a foothold in the Middle East.

Just after the Taliban seized the rule of the whole of Afghanistan in 1996, *Osama bin Laden* came back to the country. He was beloved in the nation for his help in the struggle against the Soviets (Collins, 2011, p. 1). Soon after, a close relationship developed between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Whereas the former provided sanctuary, the latter gave in return financial, ideological, and military support (Cottey, 2003, pp. 169-70). Afghanistan, with its weak state authority and under the like-minded Taliban rule, offered favorable conditions for Al Qaeda to disseminate its global jihad ideology.

As its stringent Islamic practices increased, the Taliban regime garnered the attention and criticism of the international community. After the Taliban adopted Al Qaeda and its leader, they turned into one of the US's principal enemies since Al Qaeda attacked a number of American embassies and bases in Africa before fleeing to Afghanistan. In response to the US's request, the UN passed Resolution 1333 against the Taliban government, which received support even from Russia as well due to the Taliban's support of the Chechens (Katzman, 2017, p. 6).

3.2. Main Motives of US Military Operation

Following the horrific 9/11 attacks, the US and its allies acted swiftly to impose sanctions on the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Thus, the US's primary goal in intervening in Afghanistan was to punish the Taliban and Al Qaeda in order to send a strong message to potential aggressors. After the attacks, US President Bush was under pressure because America had been attacked on its own land, and security concerns of US citizens had to be addressed without any delay. The widespread sense of vulnerability among Americans pushed the Bush

administration to use punitive measures against terrorism. As a result, US foreign policy experienced a dramatic shift in favor of greater coercion (Rielly, 2008, p. 79). This was, however, seriously misleading.

That's why the US launched "*Operation Enduring Freedom*" in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, even without passing a month after the attacks. Being insulted by attacking at home, preventing any similar assault became a number one priority of the national security department. However, it was an erroneous prediction that eliminating the leaders of Al Qaeda through find-and-eradicate tactics would reduce the threat of terrorism (Connah, 2020, p. 75). The hasty and ill-planned military intervention caused many repercussions. In this part, the US's motives and objectives for the intervention are examined.

In hindsight, it appears that the US officials focused on the results rather than underlying factors while analyzing the 9/11 attacks. By looking at only the tip of the iceberg, they failed to understand the deep-rooted reasons that paved the way for the attacks. In essence, as Noam Chomsky (2008, pp. 35-6) posits, the September 11 attacks were the result of global hatred against US power-based policies during the Cold War and afterwards.

The developments that turned Afghanistan into a failed state started with the Soviet occupation in 1979, as indicated above (World Bank, 2002, p. 125). Perhaps for the first time in history, Afghan tribes put their disagreements aside and resisted the communist occupation at the cost of their lives. The Soviet Union's brutal policies during occupation not only violated all kinds of laws of war but also destroyed the country's already limited infrastructure, disrupted its social fabric, and made state institutions fragile (Jackson A. , 2009, p. 3). The Islamist groups known as the *Mujahideen* gained power thanks to this resistance, with the support of the US and Pakistan (Collins, 2011, p. 30). After the USSR's withdrawal, all of these groups became warlords, establishing unlawful control in their regions, and old hostilities were revived.

Upon cutting off its relations with the whole world, Afghanistan was plunged into a bloody civil war. Under those circumstances, even life safety became a luxury, and the "*Taliban*" emerged and strengthened with the motto of justice and security for all (Jackson A. , 2009, p. 3). In a way, the Taliban and Al Qaeda were side effects of US and USSR interventionism. Washington's desire to counter Soviet expansionism in Central Asia by using Islam resulted in radicalism first and then brought about massive destruction. Indeed, the Taliban regime ended up leaving the country to be occupied once again by a hegemonic power after the September 11 attacks (Kagan et al., 2011, p. 6).

In some ways, increasing US interventionism around the globe fueled Islamic radicalism in the post-Cold War period. As one of the most backward and war-ridden countries,

Afghanistan provided an ideal base for extremists. In the expectation of quick victory (Crawford N. C., 2021), the US and its allies imposed punitive actions by ignoring those realities on the ground. They were unaware that a mighty military could win wars and bring interim stability (Azizian, 2021, p. 23), but eradicating the underlying factors conducive to terrorism could not be solved using solely hard power. Political and social development is the remedy for these problems, and it is time-consuming.

Heavily influenced by Fukuyama's "*end-of-history*" theory and Doyle's "*democratic peace*" theory during this period (Walt, 2021), US policymakers also believed that democratization of Afghanistan and similar weak states would be a solution to increasing radicalism globally. For this reason, as the only superpower after the fall of the USSR, the US reserved the right to overthrow corrupt dictators and brutal regimes to secure ungoverned spaces, which might serve as a sanctuary for terrorists (Azizian, 2021, p. 8).

So, the second objective of the US intervention was to bring democracy and stability to Afghanistan. Being overconfident in their mighty militaries, Westerners envisaged that democracy could be imported as long as there was no armed opposition and a functioning state (Crawford N. C., 2021). With this ultimate goal in mind, US President Bush initiated a modern version of the crusade (Younus, 2024, p. 4) to enforce modern (*western*) values, human rights, and democracy. However, this narrative backfired and promoted Al Qaeda's ideology of "*saving Islam from foreign infidels*" (Connah, 2020, p. 76), not just in Afghanistan but all over the Muslim World.

The proclaimed pre-war objective of "*a self-governing, stable country*" through swift democratic transition was not achieved (Katzman, 2017, p. 7); highest-ranking US officers confessed that the operation "*reached a dead end in Afghanistan*" (Al Jazeera Turk, 2017). Conversely, this endeavor turned out to be counterproductive, and basic human rights steadily deteriorated, at least in Afghanistan (Walt, 2021). This intervention also resulted in disastrous impacts on the Afghan people after the Taliban insurgency became widespread and turned into a civil conflict between the government and them. Because of deteriorating circumstances, millions of people died or were forced to flee their homes after over forty years of unbroken conflict and chaos.

The US intervention was also driven by geostrategic considerations. In accordance with "*Hegemonic Stability Theory*", the US had to retain its hegemony to preserve global stability (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2013, p. 2). To this end, Washington essentially put effort into

maintaining a “unipolar” world order in the post-Cold War period (Walt, 2021). Therefore, keeping China’s rise in check as well as countering Russian southward expansionism in Central Asia necessitated the US to act. In line with these geostrategic objectives, the US made its entry into the region during the Afghan War by using some military bases in exchange for military aid (Crawford N. , 2016, p. 10).

Fortifying its military weight in the regions in which the previous Soviet-American power struggle took place was crucial. According to *Kazemi Qomi* (Tehran Times, 2024), Iran's acting ambassador to Kabul, “*Americans came to Afghanistan under the guise of fighting terrorism, but their major purpose was to restrict and control the neighboring countries*”. He continues, “*The US invaded this country under the false pretext of suppressing the Taliban, causing a humanitarian catastrophe and killing hundreds of thousands of Afghans, despite the fact that no Afghan national was involved in the 9/11 attacks.*”

How much the US intervention in Afghanistan served to further its geostrategic goals is questionable, though. The US’s endeavors to consolidate its global hegemony gave rise to negative reactions and objections from its allies. Because the US employed its military power (coercion) only while disregarding the consent of its allies and collective security paradigm in most cases (Eralp, 2014, pp. 177-81). For many analysts, the US has lost its credibility globally, and authoritarian regimes have gained ground after its strategic defeat in Afghanistan (Bilmes, 2024). In addition, China has become a more influential power in the region. From a wider perspective, Washington has itself undermined its geostrategic efforts through an ill-planned Afghanistan campaign in a way.

By intervening militarily in Afghanistan, the US also fueled a six-nation geostrategic rivalry in the region. Because any third-party intervention also triggers other parties either to protect their vital interests or advance them. Accordingly, the US, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran strived for the control of Afghanistan. This competition evolved into what is now referred to as “*the Great Grand Game (3G)*” eventually. The term 3G encompasses the complex interplay of regional powers vying for influence in Afghanistan, differing from the earlier geopolitical competition characterized by more straightforward colonial ambitions.

Contrary to the former (2G), Afghanistan has evolved as the focal point of 3G, and for this reason, it cost many more Afghans’ lives (Jahangir & Javaid, 2018, pp. 420-4). The sides of 3G pursued different aims; the US and India wanted a managed state of instability in Afghanistan to check the rise of China and deter Russia by maintaining sizable military power.

Russia, China, and Pakistan, on the other hand, aimed for relative peace in Afghanistan, which would give way to a complete withdrawal of US and NATO forces.

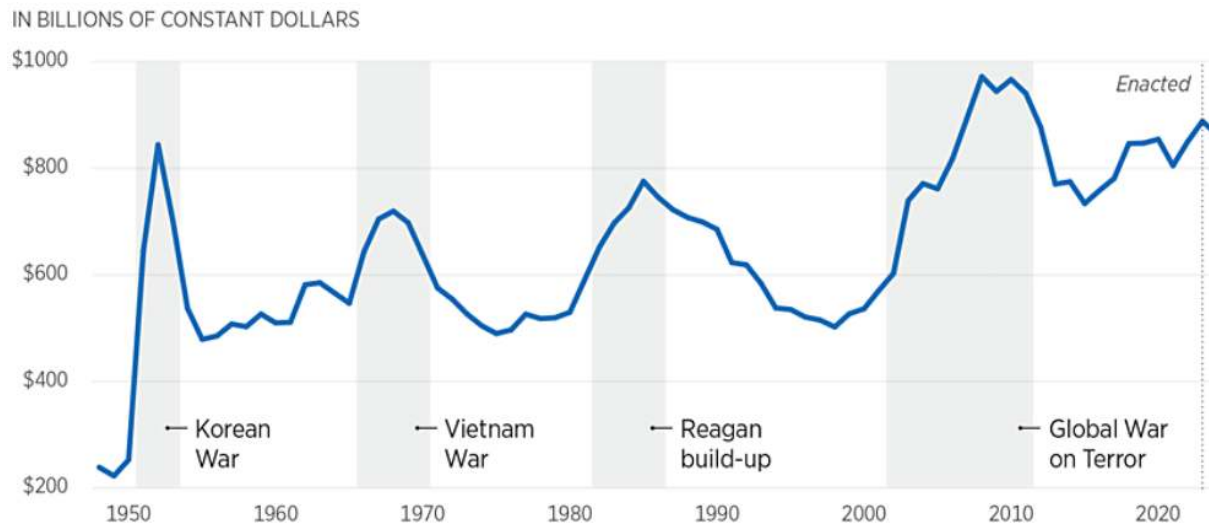
Afghanistan not only turned into a chess table for global power but also it became a theater for the India-Pakistan power struggle. As expected, the power struggle among these global and regional powers was conducive to the rise of terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda, DEASH, etc., and local warlords. They also played their roles in this bloody game as collaborators or practitioners (Jahangir & Javaid, 2018, p. 427).

3.3. Securitization of Foreign Policy and the War on Global Terror Rhetoric

According to Singh (2015, p. 104), US foreign policy has been based on establishing international peace and stability through the promotion of liberal democracy instead of resorting to the use of military force unless it is really necessary. For this reason, it was widely anticipated that with the end of the Cold War, the US, as the only surviving superpower, would accelerate cooperation and conflict resolution through soft power means such as diplomacy, international law, and organization. However, contrary to this belief, military means continued to be the main instrument of US foreign policy formulation (Goodman, 2004, p. 1).

Washington insisted on its obsolete Cold War strategies despite their futility, as the power was much more transferable and distributed among interdependent countries in the post-Cold era (Nye J. J., 1990, pp. 165-7). Although the US restricted itself to the use of military force for humanitarian purposes in some cases during this era, as happened in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo (Azizian, 2021, p. 7), the US-led military operation for liberating Kuwait was the first manifestation of US unilateralism in this period, which undermined the efforts to enhance international cooperation (Mackenzie, 2010, pp. 123-7).

The Afghanistan and subsequent Iraq invasions after the 9/11 attacks represented the culmination of unilateral, neo-conservative, and quasi-imperial policies (Balaam & Dillman, 2014, pp. 2018-20). The attacks also marked the beginning of a new era in which American foreign and domestic politics plunged into a securitization process. As a result of this increasing reliance on military power, oversight by Congress and the media diminished (Eikenberry, 2013, p. 1). Rather than pursuing disarmament, the US military budget increased to 500 billion USD, with an additional 50 billion USD allocated to intelligence (Goodman, 2004, p. 1). Accordingly, US military spending steadily increased during the first decade of the 2000s (*Figure 3-3*).



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2024*, May 2023, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2024/FY24_Green_Book.pdf (accessed September 9, 2023).

Figure 3- 3 : Increasing US Military Spending After Launching GWoT

Since the 9/11 attacks, the US has applied coercive power unilaterally in most cases by putting aside “*soft power*”. As a result, the US looks like a new version of old colonial powers that intervened in different corners of the earth to protect its own vested interests. Instead of promoting a free-market economy and universal human rights, the mighty US power manifested itself as over-militarization and destruction. According to Stephen Walt (2021), the US government seems like a giant “*dinosaur with a little brain*,” alienating itself from its ordinary citizens.

When the attacks occurred, the US decision-makers tried to find an answer to the question of how anyone could dare attack “*the brightest beacon for freedom*” (Sahill, 2019, p. 195). As stated in the official 9/11 Commission Report, the US policymakers never accepted the terrorist attack was driven by increasing worldwide anti-Americanism because of its flawed Middle East policies, particularly (Azizian, 2021, p. 9; Walt, 2021). Rather than analyzing and understanding this phenomenon, Washington launched the *Global War on Terrorism* (GWoT) in accordance with their preventive attack strategy, which became known as the Bush Doctrine afterward.

From that point onwards, a securitization or depolitization process in domestic and foreign policy started, through which the fight against terrorism discourse became more acceptable around the public and academic circles (Sahill, 2019, p. 189). According to Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, pp. 23-8), who are prominent scholars of the Copenhagen School,

politicians frequently use security rhetoric (the speech act) to depict the public issues that are normally within the political debate spectrum, such as the economy, culture, etc., as if they were existential threats.

From this standpoint, securitization is a deliberate choice of political elites and other actors who seek to manipulate societies (Weaver, 2008, pp. 158-9). In other words, governments try to convince the audience/the referent object (the public) to take emergency measures as well as to justify their actions that are inappropriate or unacceptable, like limiting democratic rights and freedom of the press. Indeed, after US President Bush formulated the “*Bush Doctrine*” in parallel with the GWoT, US foreign policy has increasingly centered around combating and defeating terrorism all over the world.

Despite the US's mighty military and geographical distance, Al Qaeda and the Taliban were pointed out as arch enemies who posed an imminent and existential threat to the US and its modern, freedom-loving civilization (Sahill, 2019, p. 190). By referring to Huntington’s “*clash of civilization*” premise²², US President Bush and his advisors successfully established a hegemonic discourse based on modern and civilized world versus barbaric Islam rhetoric (Sahill, 2019, p. 199; Aydemir, 2022, p. 36). In the established binary distinction, Al Qaeda and the Taliban were framed as “*evil*,” the Bush administration depicted itself as the guardian of liberal values (Singh, 2015, p. 100).

It seems that the US has increasingly dragged into a rhetoric of its own making, with very little concern for Afghans (Connah, 2020, p. 78). As indicated by Sahill (2019, p. 197), political discourse has also changed by exploiting not only the enemy (terrorists) but also the complexities of Afghanistan. Through an intensive securitization speech act, not only Al Qaeda’s ideologies but also both the regimes of Afghanistan and Iraq are commonly described either directly or indirectly as undemocratic, barbaric, backward, illiberal, and, more significantly, inherently violent (Crawford, 2021, p. 110).

The US and NATO’s presences in Afghanistan were justified by means of war or terror discourse overall (Bağbaşıoğlu A., 2024, p. 6). In fact, the US also used the 9/11 attacks to justify its intervention in Iraq (Singh, 2015, p. 100) and securitized its foreign policy on purpose to this end. To sustain public support, political elites exaggerated threats and

²² The former US President Trump’s words on 20 January 2017 are meaningful to understand his outlook in this matter. “*We will unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the earth*” (Thimm, 2018, p. 7).

manipulated what the public was told. When some of the truths were revealed, then even more restrictions and monitoring were imposed (Walt, 2021). As a result, US officials have not encountered significant organized domestic grassroots opposition to unpopular conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, quite unlike the Vietnam War experience (Eikenberry, 2013, p. 4). Americans were subjected to so much mass propaganda that, even twenty years after the September 11 attacks, they ranked the threat of terrorism as their top security concern (Phillips, 2023).

According to Weaver (2008, p. 167), religion plays a significant role in the formation of collective identity and making the they-we distinction. Indeed, the US has attempted to justify its occupation of Afghanistan by using religious discourse as a tool for securitization and framing the conflict as a neo-crusade (Younus, 2024, p. 4). In an attempt to materialize Emanuel Kant's idea of "*unjust enemy*" (Singh, 2015, p. 102), "no distinction" was made between the terrorists and their hosts. Even without seeking international cooperation (Goodman, 2004, p. 1), the US launched a new crusade against "uncivilized world" (Younus, 2024, p. 10).

In accordance with the Bush doctrine, the US justifies destroying the potential threats before they attack under the banner of "*preventive impact*" (Sahill, 2019, p. 195), which makes the whole world an operation theater in practice. The public diplomacy was extensively utilized (Aydemir, 2022, p. 35) to convince the US taxpayers that the peril of Islam replaced communist expansionism in the 1950s as the immediate adversary (Walt, 2021). *Ms. Rahim* stated that:

"The US emerged from the Cold War as the sole superpower. In the context of the "*Clash of Civilizations*," the US promoted Christian values and tried to maintain its sole hegemony by demonizing Muslims. Terrorism has been overly exploited by US officials. Until just a few years ago, we, Pakistan, were being identified as a terrorist nation just because 98% of the population is Muslim".

In line with the well-known motto "*inter arma silent leges*" (when the weapons speak, the laws fall silent), security-based policies outweigh other rational policies in domestic and foreign spheres. Once the security policies apply, the national security state expands, and all state apparatus is somewhat affected by this process. Accordingly, governments demand extraordinary rights to deal with them. The primary aim of securitization in this manner is to hold political control of the countries (Tüysüzoğlu, 2015, pp. 202-4). By doing so, democratic norms and procedures are undermined. Power concentrates in the hands of executive branches,

causing the classical separation of branches to become blurry over time. The legislative and judicial bodies fail to fulfill their oversight responsibilities, and the executive branches tend to circumvent existing laws and established rules.

Indeed, after the 9/11 attacks, it only took seven days for *the US House of Representatives* and *the Senate* to authorize almost unanimously²³ the Bush administration to use military force and take all necessary measures (US Congress, 2001). Although the US constitution entrusts the authority to declare war to the legislative branch, this power has been effectively delegated to the executive branch through *the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF)* (Finucane & Brandon-Smith, 2023).

Accordingly, US President Bush was provided an open-ended commitment to launch a global, overt, covert, and lengthy war against not just perpetrators of recent attacks but those who posed a threat to the US in Afghanistan and elsewhere (Crawford N. C., 2021). Public outrage urged the US policymakers to act quickly to take punitive measures as soon as possible and as violently as possible (Connah, 2020, p. 74). Just after the 9/11 attacks, the anti-Muslim sentiment among Americans increased quickly, and the number of attacks targeting Muslims increased five times accordingly (Dunwoody & McFarland, 2018, p. 89). The common threat perception has been reinforced even more by DAESH attacks afterwards. At this stage, H.A.²⁴ shared his very interesting observations:

“In my opinion, the US invasion in Afghanistan was an attempt to appease Americans’ ingrained worries. While I was attending a military course in the US in 2011, the 9/11 attacks dominated the debates during the class and out of office hours. When Osama bin Laden was finally captured in Pakistan in the same year, Americans celebrated this incident so wildly that I was a bit surprised because it had been 10 years since the 9/11 attacks. I realized that because of vivid memories, the US would never be able to come to terms with these tragic events.”

As indicated above, the militarization of foreign policy gained ground in all state departments (Eikenberry, 2013, p. 2). Even though Congress’s oversight powers over the

²³ On September 18, 2001, the US House of Representatives voted 420-1 and the Senate 98-0 to authorize the United States to go to war. US Rep. Barbara Lee of California cast the only vote opposed to the war (Crawford N. C., 2021).

²⁴ Interview (on 16th Jan 2024) with H.A., who is a retired Turkish soldier and attended two different courses in the US while the Afghanistan War was ongoing.

executive body were strengthened after the Watergate scandal, neither the legislative nor judicial branches fulfilled their constitutional oversight responsibilities (Gude & Martin, 2018, p. 11). Contrary to that, the power was concentrated in the hands of the executive branch, the president effectively (Cordesman, 2017, p. 8). As Özdamar and Yanik (2024, p. 1835) point out, rather than rationality, populist politicians' hyper personalization shaped their country's foreign policy.

Under the influence of the traumatic 9/11 attacks and a strong feeling of insecurity, the existing oversight system was suspended in effect. During US President Bush's term, his administration bypassed the Constitution and the system of checks and balances, and this trend did not change significantly during the Obama and Trump administrations. The weight of the State of Defense over national security has grown substantially (Goodman, 2004, p. 2). CIA and military special operations units have gained greater autonomy to conduct those operations all over the world; their personnel numbers and budgets have tripled accordingly²⁵ (Thimm, 2018, pp. 11, 30).

AUMF has exceeded beyond its original purpose, the war on terrorism in Afghanistan, and Congress has been largely absent from the decision-making (Gude & Martin, 2018, p. 1). It has become blurry with whom the US is at war, or which powers are attacking the US due to a lack of specificity in this regard (Finucane & Brandon-Smith, 2023). For instance, when Congress members learned that 4 US servicemen lost their lives in Niger, they were surprised, as they were not aware that the US was at war in that country (Gude & Martin, 2018, p. 1). The subsequent presidents somehow exploited Congress authorization in 2001 and failed to keep Congress adequately updated (House of Representatives, 2006) and submit required reports in the following years (Finucane & Brandon-Smith, 2023).

In this period, security issues occupied a central place in domestic politics, and the fight against terrorism rhetoric has been the common denominator of all administrations during this period (Thimm, 2018, pp. 17,20). Many critical decisions were taken by a small circle in secret, without public knowledge and debate; even truths were masked (Logevall, 2021). According to Professor Linda J. Bilmes (2024), *"Using an unprecedented combination of borrowing, accounting tricks, and outsourcing, presidential administrations, Congress, and the Pentagon*

²⁵ The number of troops under the Joint Special Operation Command (JSOC) has increased from 30.000 to 70.000; similarly, the combined intelligence budget of the CIA surged from 26 billion USD in 1997 to 80 billion USD in 2010 after the 9/11 attacks.

were able to circumvent traditional military budget processes in a way that kept war costs out of the public debate and resulted in trillions being spent with minimal oversight”.

She adds that the financial burden will be on the low- and middle-class citizens in the long run. The Bush Administration’s circumvention tactics, such as dependence on supplemental appropriations, often submitted in the middle of the year and supported by inadequate justification materials, have reduced Congress’s ability to carry out effective oversight (Kosiak, 2008, p. v).

Under the influence of securitization, the US decision to use force against Afghanistan and Iraq was immature and senseless, since the fundamental principle of international relations, *“using military means should be the last resort, not the first,”* was simply ignored from the beginning (Goodman, 2004, p. 1). Even though Freedman defended these military acts as *“defensive liberal wars”* (Singh, 2015, p. 106), democratic values suffered most in the end alongside Afghans and Iraqis.

The increasing militarization has put an extra burden on the already deteriorating US economy in line with skyrocketing military spending. The cost of the Afghan war for the US has turned out to be enormous (Congressional Research Service, 2021, pp. 27, 31). When the Bush Administration mobilized more than half of the US ground forces to conduct military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, American people had to bear the burden of military spending, which amounted to 5 billion USD a month (Goodman, 2004, p. 3). The intelligence community has extensively militarized, and 90% of the 40 billion USD intelligence budget was allocated to the Pentagon only (Goodman, 2004, p. 2).

It appears that history repeated itself. Just as previous declining hegemonic powers, the US military was also overextended by ignoring nonmilitary instruments (Azizian, 2021, p. 50). The GWoT went much beyond Afghanistan and Iraq; the US has carried out counterterrorism operations in 85 different countries since then (Crawford N. C., 2021). So far, approximately 3 million US servicemen have served in different combat zones (Crawford N. , 2016, p. 15) under the name of Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO²⁶) campaigns.

Many critical decisions were taken by considering domestic politics. Although the successors of Bush were fully aware that the Afghan War was unwinnable and combating the

²⁶ Congress and the Executive Branch describe the wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria as Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) (Crawford N. , 2016, p. 2).

Taliban was fruitless, they never made reassessment, always with an eye on reelection (Greentree, 2021, p. 8). By sticking to useless strategy, US President Obama decided to surge US military troops²⁷ as a response to the Taliban's gaining momentum (Malkasian, 2020, pp. 79,80) and to withdraw some of them (*Figure 3-4*), most probably by thinking of foreign policy through the frame of domestic politics.

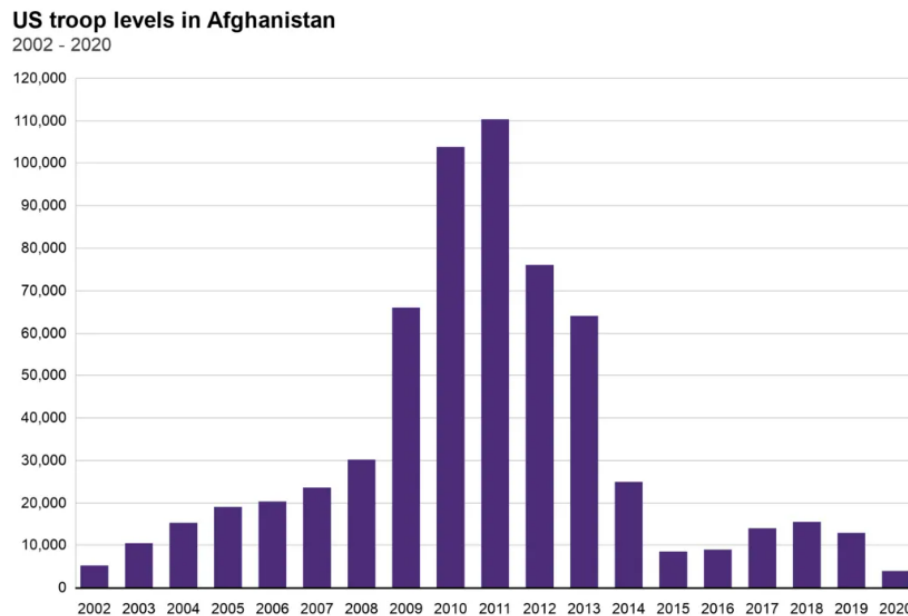


Figure 3- 4 : The US Troop Level in Afghanistan 2002-2020

Source: SIGAR, 2021.

By doing so, Democrat leaders attempted to prove that they could also satisfy US people's security needs (Waldman, 2013, pp. 840-1). When they finally decided to pull out US troops, even some basic military principles were violated by announcing the withdrawal of soldiers in advance (Azizian, 2021, p. 30). So, the Taliban knew via this announcement that time was on their side as they say, "*Americans had all the clocks, but they had all the time*" (Logevall, 2021). Arguably, the intervention was an attempt to protect America's international reputation; however, taking declining public support for the war into consideration, it could also be more attributed to domestic politics afterward.

Due to continuous securitization, the rule of law, democracy, and human rights were also affected negatively (Thimm, 2018, p. 5). The deep-seated fear that the US might be

²⁷ At its height in 2011, the overall number of foreign boots in Afghanistan, including those from other NATO countries, surpassed 130.000 (Bağbaşıoğlu A., 2024, p. 5).

targeted again in its safe land was reinforced by war on terror rhetoric. So, ordinary men and women gave their consent to restricting their liberal rights. Assuming that, the US had the privilege to take advantage of its military power to handle exceptional threats (Singh, 2015, p. 110), defending US interests became the first and foremost priority vis-à-vis civil liberties.

Not only constitutional principles but also the rule of law have been undermined in this period. The use of torture (under the name of enhanced interrogation techniques), inadvertent surveillance of US citizens, indefinite detention without trial, targeted killing through unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and armed drones, and violations of sovereignty rights of other countries (Pakistan, Yemen, etc.) have frequently been used as means of fighting terrorism. The "unlawful treatment" of detainees at Guantanamo and the horrifying abuse of Abu Ghraib captives, including cruel abuse and sexual humiliation, in Iraq (Sahill, 2019, p. 196) were documented and became public afterwards. The terms of the Geneva Convention²⁸ have simply been disregarded, and approximately 100 prisoners died under US custody between 2001 and 2006 (Thimm, 2018, pp. 13-7).

Those were the most notable manifestations of breaching international laws. Rather than using international law to deal with suspected terrorists seized during the Afghan War, the US chose its military tribunals and the suspension of recognized judicial procedures. It overlooked institutions like the United Nations International Court of Justice, which could have given legal procedures based on international law. It also disregarded traditional judicial civil procedures that ensure the rights of the accused, such as legal representation, a timely trial, and access to evidence and witnesses for defense (Goodman, 2004, p. 2).

Although these measures were introduced as exceptional and temporary, they have become standard and permanent in the following period. US officials denied or showed reluctance to accept responsibility for unlawful practices and civilian casualties. Many of them, even those who were responsible for cruel tortures, were granted impunity and never faced criminal charges or disciplinary measures. While all this is happening, civil society (media, non-governmental organizations-NGOs) has not raised their voices enough, partly because of the state of exception and partly because of one-sided propaganda (Thimm, 2018, pp. 25-31). Dramatically enough, according to results of the Gallup Survey in 2013, 65% of Americans

²⁸ The US defended itself for not applying the Geneva Convention for the Taliban and Iraqi insurgents under its custody, but Washington coined a new term "*unlawful enemy combatants of foreign nationality*" for these prisoners and tried them before military courts rather than regular courts.

were supporting targeted killings via drone attacks together with other unlawful interrogation techniques (ibid., pp. 28)

As a result, the US and the West as a whole have lost their credibility not only in Afghanistan and Iraq but also in the rest of the world. Upon seeing the US itself violate the western norms, the third-world countries began to look for more and more alternative authoritarian regimes like China. In addition, Washington's relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds have deteriorated²⁹ due to the former's constant and growing suspicion (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021). To make matters worse, Donald Trump, the former US president, suggested that the US was at war with Muslims.

These missions would cost the US immensely. Even though US policymakers were convinced that a crusading foreign policy would be good for the US, this hard-power-based policy gave rise to a steady deterioration in democracy and eroding security in the US and the rest of the world (Walt, 2021). Also, the US's overly securitized policies have been used by DEASH and other jihadist organizations as a pretext for justifying their global jihad efforts and bloody attacks. In exchange for the US demonization narrative, these radical groups attempt to depict westernization or the US global influence as a total collapse of moral values (Weaver, 2008, p. 175).

In a way, Washington made a mistake by trying desperately to maintain the existing global system by using its muscles (Eikenberry, 2013, p. 3). Rather than promoting democracy and reinforcing human rights, the US opted for using military power to destroy any potential risk that poses a threat to American interests. However, this policy ended up being a total failure. The US has spent around 5 trillion USD on GWoT since 2001 (Cordesman, 2017, p. 7), but it could not destroy the radical Islamic terror network. On the contrary, they have expanded and operated in different regions instead, including the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and the Sahel (Mann, 2019, p. 1). During this time, the violence committed by these groups increased fourfold (Azizian, 2021, p. 12). It appears that the US's securitization measures were completely ineffective. Despite the loss of financial and human resources, almost all the strategic objectives are missed.

²⁹ For this reason, the subsequent Obama administration adopted a softer approach in mutual relations with Muslim countries.

3.4. Unsuccessful State Building and Peace Processes

In the belief that ungoverned weak states lacking democracy, as in Afghanistan, provide favorable conditions for terrorist organizations (Lee M. , 2021), the Bush Administration engaged in a nation-building process in Afghanistan (Foreign Policy, 2021). Supposedly, by spreading democracy and liberal values within an effective nation-state, the intervention would achieve its goal soon (Walt, 2021). Also, as noted by Edelstein (2004, p. 68), indirect rule is more effective in terms of the overall success of occupation. These assumptions, however, were based on a few miscalculations in judgment.

In direct contrast to predetermined goals, the US's nation-state building attempts in Afghanistan ended up being a big failure, and the country has remained a failed state during the 20-year occupation (Seren M., 2021, p. 2). Indeed, former Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General (R) *Mark Milley*, during his testimony to US Congress, said that "*We helped build an army, a state, but we could not build a nation,*" and this was a "*strategic failure*" for him (Matza, 2024).

According to Walt Whitman Rostow's "*modernization theory*" (Rostow, 1960), nations must go through certain developmental stages in order to become a typical nation-state in the modern sense. State-building and nation-building are important stages in this linear cycle, which is a progressive process that takes a while (Marquette & Beswick, 2011, p. 1). In a sense, the Bush administration's endeavor to democratize Afghanistan was an attempt to speed up this natural process. Consequently, it ended up a failure as anticipated, because of predictable reasons.

First, state-building or democratization were regarded as the long-awaited elixir of widespread instability in the underdeveloped world. Nevertheless, except for the Japan and German cases, both were defeated after WWII and had been powerful and efficient state institutions beforehand (Edelstein, 2004, pp. 60-1); the US did not have state-building experience before Afghanistan. Contrary to Japan and Germany, Afghanistan was not a culturally and ethnically homogenous country (Lee M. , 2021). All these factors made the transformation of society and state very challenging, if not impossible.

Second, the process of state building was put into practice without considering realities on the ground. In fact, the emergence of states was not a result of external imposition, but it has been a tumultuous and lengthy historical and socialization process based on bloody internal crises and external conflicts (OECD, 2011, p. 25). In Western-centric understanding,

a territorial state, made up of a territory, government, nation, and society, emerged as a concept from the Westphalian order (Yalvac, 2014, pp. 17-9). Although states are taken for granted as they are indoctrinated through maps shown throughout the education process, the emergence of modern states was neither quick nor easy.

Before the 15th century, Europe was a geography bearing cultural and religious unity under papacy but highly decentralized among kingdoms, lords, etc. Between 1400 and 1559, lands were accumulated in the hands of some families, like the Hapsburgs, as a result of a series of wars and marriages. In the following period, each state was defined as “*inside*” and “*outside*” by inward and outward looking. While the former was regulating the relations between the state and its civil society, the latter regulated the inter-state relations, which marked the onset of the emergence of territoriality (territory belonging to the ruler of state) and territorial states in Europe (Eralp, 2014, pp. 132-5). The notions of territoriality and sovereignty—which refer to *absolute and ultimate control over any given territory*—got interrelated over time and became the fundamental principles of the contemporary global order.

Charles Tilly (1990, p. 54) argues that wars and revolutions have played a significant role in the establishment of states and state systems. Because they forced centralization, taxation, and territorial consolidation by means of a capitalized coercion process. Moreover, the development of the domestic state has also made it necessary to manage violence as well as create and strengthen the state apparatus (Lee M., 2021). The first one refers to *Max Weber*’s definition of a modern territorial state that enjoys a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force, which evolved in a highly coercive manner in the historical process, and it is a distinct and crucial characteristic of any stable state. Nationalism and a sense of common identity were pushed forward by all these changes. Afterwards, they have become essential components of the state-building process (Chong, 2010, p. 630).

On this, *A.Ç.E.*³⁰ and *Mr. Mehmet Kasap*³¹ expressed their views that come close to realist arguments that unless a given state is founded on the basis of a significant victory, it is inclined to be weak.

“Afghanistan was not typical nation states. Even before the US intervention and ensuing civil war, the country has been intervened by great powers through various means and suffered

³⁰ Interview (on 3rd Aug 2023) with **A.Ç.E.**, who is Lt. Colonel and served in Syria and Afghanistan as battalion commander and planning officer, respectively.

³¹ Interview (on 21st Jan 2024) with **Mr. Mehmet Kasap**, who served in Syria as a logistic officer and Afghanistan as a member of the training mission.

from lacking common identity and sense of unity. The fundamental problem remains that Afghanistan did not gain its independence based on its own will and strength. After winning independence war against great powers in the 20th century, the country plunged into domestic power struggle and conflicts in the absence of powerful ruling authority. Therefore, it was hard, if not impossible, to convince the people for common good and vision as Türkiye did a century ago”.

Taking these into account, it seems that Western leaders simply wanted to build an Afghan state that just looked like their own; however, Afghanistan had neither been a strong unitary state (Brinkley, 2013, p. 22) nor was it meeting the basic requirements of a modern state: *defined territory*³², *homogenous population to some degree*, *functioning central governing system*, etc. This narrow-mindedness not only led to failure in creating a nation-state (Foreign Policy, 2021) but also pushed the country into another bloody and endless conflict.

The US and its allies missed the declared ultimate goal of military intervention: the creation of a self-governed, credible, and democratic state of Afghanistan (US President Biden's Remark, 2021). Generally speaking, Washington's ambitious nation-building project did not coincide with the prevailing realities of Afghanistan. As asserted by Seren (2021, pp. 2, 8), the deeply ingrained nationalism, sectarianism, tribalism, warlords, drug barons, and corruption/bribery set the barriers to the nation-state attempts. When the Taliban managed to retake Afghanistan in 2021 after a rapid advancement, many US experts were taken aback (Greentree, 2021, p. 16); nevertheless, there are specific underlying factors that led to this inevitable end.

Firstly, the Afghan government could not be established in a way that all ethnic groups were represented; ethnic affinities prevailed over common interests. The exclusion of Pashtuns from the beginning gave rise to the reemerging Taliban and seizure of the country in the end. The lack of national unity impeded the success of the intervention. After the collapse of the Taliban regime in November 2001, all important Afghan groups, including the Northern Alliance, were invited to a conference convened in Bonn, Germany. Upon the signing of the Bonn Agreement on December 5, 2001, Hamid Karzai was chosen as the head of the transitional government. Karzai's ethnic background and his partners', most of whom were Northern Alliance members and of Tajik origin, caused some fractions even then.

³² The Taliban (like past Afghan governments) have never accepted the British colonial-era “*Durand Line*” as a legitimate international frontier separating Afghanistan and Pakistan (Thomas, 2021, p. 46).

Tajik fell short of reaching their aim: prime ministry, but they managed to check the president's power in the interim government (CFR, 2023). The Constitution of Afghanistan was accepted by Loya Jirga in January 2004. Considering the ethnic diversity, a strong presidential ruling system was created with the aim of laying the foundation for democratic institutions. According to the SIGAR report (2022, p.16), this highly centralized structure of the Afghan government accelerated the fall in 2021. *Ms. Rahim* highlights an important issue at this point that is necessary to shed light on the traditional weakness of central Afghan governments and widespread corruption and illicit economies in the countryside:

“Traditionally, whoever (I mean which tribe in practice) has taken control of the central government in Afghanistan, these groups try to use all resources to their benefit only. Or, by reaching an agreement with the government, the leaders of these tribes enforce control over some of the resources in a way of monopoly. In other words, economic resources have not been distributed equally, and it has always been a source of friction between various ethnic groups and tribes. This situation also promotes an illicit economy in the hands of local landlords. As I put in the framework in my thesis, all these undermine state institutions and trigger foreign interventions.”

Despite Karzai and other Afghan group suggestions, Taliban representatives' participation in the Bonn conference was vetoed by the Bush administration and the Northern Alliance. This move turned out to be one of the greatest mistakes ever made throughout the entire occupation period. If acted otherwise, the war could have been terminated much earlier and peacefully (Greentree, 2021, p. 20). Even though none of the nineteen hijackers are Afghan nationals (CFR, 2023) and most Pashtuns had little sympathy towards Al Qaeda, they were not included in the process of state-building. Conversely, hunting Taliban insurgents rather than building a stable and democratic country became the end itself despite the fact that the organization posed no direct threat to Washington (Greentree, 2021, p. 13).

The Northern Alliance, made up of other ethnic groups, namely *Tajiks*, *Uzbeks*, and *Hazaras*, took most of the critical positions in the new government (Cottey, 2003, pp. 176-7). Before that, Pashtuns, making up the majority of the country, had ruled Afghanistan in the previous three centuries; therefore, watching this power transition to other ethnic groups was a painful experience (Jones, 2008, p. 27).

The first election was held in 2004, and Karzai's slim victory was marred by fraud allegations. Ostensibly, Western policymakers were unaware that Afghanistan had not held elections since 1969 and the necessary prerequisites were not in place not only for a peaceful transition to democracy but also for free and fair elections (CFR, 2023). Indeed, all the

following elections were conducted under the shadow of fraud accusations, and the potential fractions could only be averted by western meddling and delicate power-sharing agreements. Widespread electoral irregularities were ignored by Western powers as the Karzai government was based on delicate ethnic balances and had no alternatives. Nevertheless, following these elections, Karzai started to encounter criticism from both the inside and the outside (Collins, 2011, pp. 80,93).

One of the main reasons for the weakness of the Afghan government was repeated failure in the attempts to engage in intra-Afghan dialogue (SC, 2023, p. 3) because of insufficient encouragement. As aforementioned, despite the Afghan authorities' demands for the integration of the Taliban and other opposite Pashtun groups in the public sphere through the peace negotiations process, they were generally excluded under the influence of the US. Thus, these groups were first alienated and then marginalized, which undermined the legitimacy of the central government in the following period (SIGAR, 2023, p. 16). As a result, the Taliban started to gain increasing support among these groups by exploiting their widespread discontentment. Even after the Taliban seized power back in 2021, no improvement has been achieved on this matter. However, to many, an inclusive government would bring peace for the country.

Secondly, the allocated resources were not used effectively but simply evaporated at the corrupt state mechanism and western contractors (Eikenberry, 2013, pp. 4-5). Miscalculation started with ill-planned state-building, which was incorrectly equated with nation-building. Following the swift fall of the Taliban rule in 2001, US President Bush immediately initiated a “*so-called Marshall Plan*” to make Afghanistan a better place and free from radicalism. But reconstruction spending never came close to the Marshall Plan in the following period (CFR, 2023); the military spending always dwarfed the ones (*Figure 3-5*) allocated for reconstruction and democratizing Afghanistan (Crawford N. C., 2021).

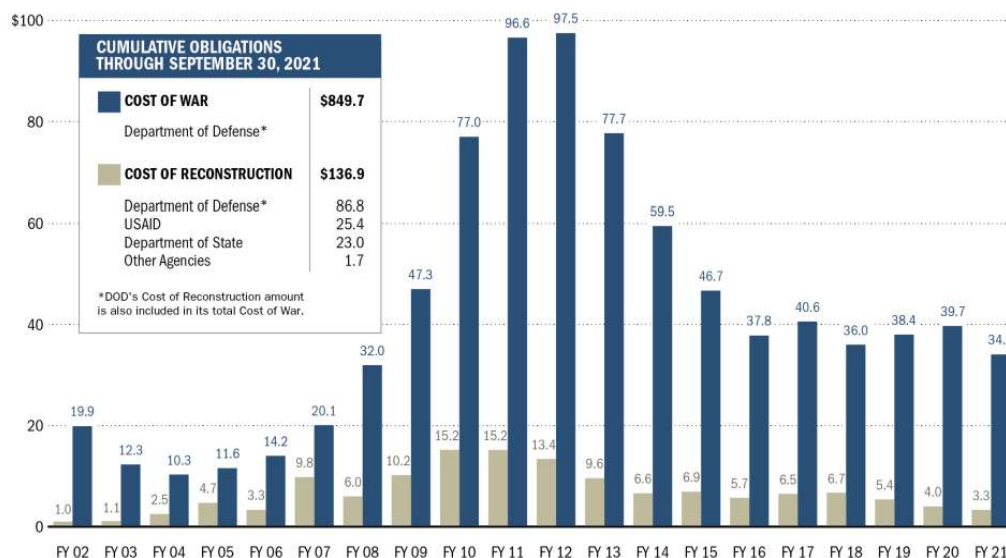


Figure 3- 5 : Military and Non-military Costs in Afghanistan

Source: SIGAR, 2023, p. 23

After realizing the Afghan government's inefficacy, provincial reconstruction teams (PRT) were established under the control of western countries. However, like the Afghan government, PRTs failed to produce positive results due to lacking central control and coordination (CFR, 2023). They became highly dependent on Western foreign aid, which turned Afghanistan into a rentier state practically (Greentree, 2021, p. 15).

Brinkley (2013, pp. 13-4) argues that Afghanistan received a relatively high amount of funds from western countries, especially from the US. Thanks to this funding, there have been some relative improvements in education, health, and road infrastructure; nevertheless, Afghanistan still remains at the very bottom of the country list (180/191) according to the Human Development Index 2021/2022 in each dimension, from infant mortality rate to life expectancy (UNDP, 2023, p. 274). Most of the Afghans were not born when the US launched its intervention in 2001; the median age is just 18 years old (Crawford N. C., 2021), indicating very little improvement and inefficiency of the Afghan government.

Thirdly, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) remained vulnerable and never reached the desired level. Throughout the years of military intervention, such a level of insecurity and widespread violence destabilized the Afghan government since it was unable to impose law and order. Confronting the fact that the war in Afghanistan could not be won without the ability to enforce the law, the US adopted the exit strategy of constructing a strong

and competent ANSF. One of the pre-war goals was also to establish a stable and self-governing Afghan government, as well as a countable army that would allow Kabul to exert control over the entire nation and thwart Taliban advances. Nevertheless, as stressed by US Special Operations Commander Maj. Gen. James Linder, “*growing an army from scratch is not an easy task at all*” (Cooper & Nordland, 2017). Apparently, US officials underestimated this daunting challenge in the beginning.

Considerable funds were allocated to create the Afghan National Army and Police Forces specifically for this purpose. This objective was never met, though, since ANSF continued to be completely unable to function independently despite all efforts and years of funding, assistance, and training (Brinkley, 2013, p. 20). More emphasis was placed on their number than their quality (Thomas, 2021, p. 12). Nevertheless, because of “ghost soldiers,” the real number of personnel has never been known, and the lacking air force and modern equipment undermined the fighting capacity of the Afghan army (Seren M., 2021, p. 22). The ANSF's vulnerability and weakness were exacerbated by a lack of cooperation and monitoring (Azizian, 2021, p. 37). Western countries' biased approaches and the ensuing mutual distrust between foreigners and Afghans also played a major role in the ineffectiveness of the security forces (Seren M., 2021, p. 25).

The ANSF's highly centralized structure and ethnic variety were a constant source of frustration since they were improperly led and instructed. It is impossible to train military people if they are illiterate, as only 14% of ANSF personnel were in 2013. Afghan staffers did not simply know how to use the equipment given to them because they did not have “*the requisite technical expertise*” (Brinkley, 2013, p. 21). Even much earlier than the US leaving the country, foreign officials had known that neither the ANSF nor the Afghan government would stand against the Taliban without coalition forces’ support (Thomas, 2021, p. 9).

Because of widespread corruption within the army, the soldiers were not paid regularly and suffered from hunger at their outposts most of the time; hence, the army and police inflicted high casualty and attrition rates, which also demoralized troops and weakened the government's authority. From time to time, the Afghan Local Police (ALP) forces extorted money from the public and were involved in many crimes, such as harassment and kidnapping (Seren M., 2021, p. 25). Because of low morale within the ranks of the army, many servicemen fled or deserted rather than fighting against the Taliban (Byman, 2017). All of these provide an explanation for why, following the US withdrawal in 2021, the ANSF so readily turned themselves over to the Taliban (CFR, 2023).

Fourthly, the priority was given to security rather than socio-economic development, which undermined the legitimacy of Afghan governments due to inefficient provision of security and stability. From 2001 to 2016, the US spent a total of 783 billion USD, while only 110 billion USD appeared to be dedicated to investment projects that would strengthen Afghanistan's infrastructure (Crawford N. , 2016, p. 7). However, given that Afghanistan's annual GNP was only 19.33 billion USD in 2015 (Afghanistan Ülke Raporu, 2017, p. 2), it is easier to understand how these resources vanished. Stating differently, the total budget for Afghanistan in 2017 was three times lower than the amount spent by the US military in the whole country.

Because of political sensitivity over US casualties (Cordesman, 2017, p. 13), the personnel number of contractor companies³³ outnumbered the deployed US troops in Afghanistan (*Figure 3-6*). In 2018, the contractor personnel (74.033) made up roughly 65% of the total number of US military and civilian personnel in support of OCO operations in theater (Mann, 2019, p. 2). However, according to the 2011 Congressional Commission on Wartime Contracting report (Committee on Armed Services, 2011), *“poor performance by contractors had resulted in wasted resources, missions not being achieved, and the loss of lives”*. US institutions also failed to exercise oversight, leaving the companies free to complete the projects as they wished (Brinkley, 2013, p. 17).

³³ At the beginning of the invasion, for fear that the presence of US troops in a huge number would trigger an Afghan uprising, some services were planned to be conducted via outsourced means (Logevall, 2021). Nevertheless, the number of these contractor companies has mushroomed, and they have never been effective.

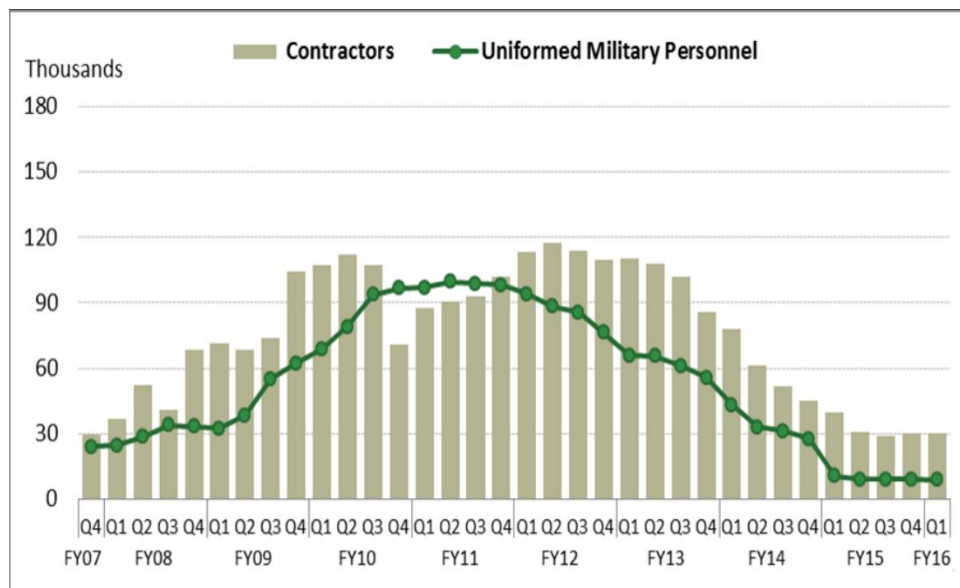


Figure 3- 6 : US Military and Contractor Personnel in Afghanistan (2007-16)

Source: Williams & Epstein, 2017 p.20, as cited in Cordesman, 2017, p. 85

The Afghan government was never capable of enforcing law and order, but instead, local warlords ruled their own areas, and radical Islam triumphed after the Taliban retook Kabul in August 2021 (Greentree, 2021, p. 8). Despite all the international community's efforts, Afghanistan did not achieve stability and self-sufficiency. The failure to establish a strong, transparent central government and to construct a law-based framework was the primary cause of the continuous instability. Corruption has been the most significant impediment to the proper utilization of help. One investigation found that there were 3 billion USD worth of bribes throughout the country (Ahmedzai, 2016).

For the sake of stability, the US ignored the widespread corruption in all Afghan state institutions, but this seriously damaged the legitimacy of the Afghan government and kept it fragile (Azizian, 2021, p. 34). A notable part of this widespread corruption was performed by Western contractors, who prioritized profitable agreements over the advancement of the country's socioeconomic status. Instead of working with the Afghan central government to secure their security, they chose to collaborate with local warlords, which strengthened the corrupt individuals in their local communities (SIGAR, 2022, p. 16). These strongmen exploited the Afghan government's dependence on them and opposed any institutional changes that would put their privileges and illicit profits in danger (Lee M. , 2021). In other words, the

US increased the prosperity of corrupt Afghan elites while alienating ordinary Afghans (Yaqin, 2022).

When the US strategists started building replicas of their own stable state institutions, they ostensibly overlooked the reality that Afghanistan had been experiencing violent insecurity, predatory warlordism, and armed conflict almost continuously since the 1970s (IAHE, 2024, p. 25). All of these led to the ineffective provision of basic services to Afghan people by their government (SC, 2023, p. 16). As a result, the government never gained popular support, as it could not establish rule of law, rein in corruption, ensure security, and perform basic governance functions for better life conditions for ordinary Afghan citizens. In the end, some Afghans, bereft of any of these services, turned to their local leaders or the Taliban, which further undermined the Afghan government's legitimacy and influence (Byman, 2017).

In addition to encouraging criminal activity, terrorist groups, and a high crime rate, corruption also jeopardized the safety, security, and prosperity of the Afghan people (Azizian, 2021, p. 34). Like the Taliban, other radical Islamist groups, namely *the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP)* and *the National Resistance Front (NRF)*, gained ground by taking advantage of the power vacuum (Greentree, 2021, p. 8). In parallel with the illegal opium trade, other types of crimes, such as guns, cigarettes, and human trafficking, became widespread via established opium trade routes (SIGAR, 2023, p. 117).

However, the first and foremost problem, as it has always been, is the poppy trade. In 2014, the poppy cultivation hit record, and 90% of the world's illicit heroin supply was produced from Afghanistan itself (Romano, Calfano, & Phelps, 2015, p. 403). Whenever a ban on opium cultivation was imposed, it turned out to be counterproductive since it caused the prices to skyrocket. The average price of dry opium rose four times between 2021 and 2022 (SC, 2023, p. 13). As a result, cultivation areas increased one-third in the same period despite the Taliban's ban on April 3, 2022 (SIGAR, 2023, p. 116). According to the UN reports, 80% of the world's heroin supply is still being produced in this country (Thomas, 2021, p. 39).

3.5. Taliban Insurgency and Extreme Military and Economic Costs

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the US gained unprecedented international support and carried out a quick military operation in Afghanistan to destroy the terrorist network and depose the Taliban regime. The US Afghanistan intervention seemed to be successful in terms

of reaching its immediate objectives³⁴, quickly overthrowing the Taliban. Nonetheless, the removal of relatively stable regimes resulted in a power vacuum, and eventually the country was plunged into a full-scale insurgency.

Despite the initial successes, the Taliban managed to reorganize due to some unforgivable mistakes. As a response, US military intervention in Afghanistan went beyond its original purpose and turned into a *COIN* operation. Just like the British in the 19th century and the Russians in the 20th century, the Americans also fell into the mistaken belief in the 21st century that they could rule Afghanistan solely by military means (Seren M., 2021, p. 9). As a result, Afghanistan never became a stable and functioning state (Bilmes, 2024), in spite of a huge number of military casualties and economic losses (US DoD, 2024).

In light of the current situation in Afghanistan and looking backward, the author concludes that the US military intervention in Afghanistan ended up with a defeat against the Taliban because Washington did not meet the needs of successful *COIN* operations after the insurgency emerged. The US defeat was not surprising by any means. Even in the middle of the second decade of the war, the Taliban had already gained a much stronger position than in 2001. The Afghan government was controlling little more than half of the country as of November 2016 (Byman, 2017). Fed up with constant conflicts, 80% of Afghan people were supporting peace negotiations with the Taliban (Thomas, 2020, p. 6).

Maybe for those reasons, Washington signed a peace deal with the Taliban on 29 February 2020 in Doha, Qatar, indicating the US accepted that the only way to stop this never-ending conflict was to leave the country. Eventually, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed on 30th August 2021 with a strategic defeat (Crawford N. C., 2021), damaging international reputation (Yaqin, 2022), and causing even more uncertainties.

This defeat not only caused a major setback to the US in geostrategic rivalry but also led to disastrous results for Afghans. Nearly 5 million people were left in need of humanitarian aid, and 3 million of them became completely reliant on UN support during the early phases of the involvement (Cottey, 2003, p. 193). The central government of Afghanistan was never able to provide even the most basic necessities, good governance, and, most crucially, human security (Brinkley, 2013, pp. 14-5) after a 20-year-long state of war. In brief, in any dimension, the US *COIN* campaigns in Afghanistan were unable to accomplish their goals.

³⁴ As a result of its increased self-confidence, the US started another invasion of Iraq, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, on March 19, 2003, as a second phase of the *War against Global Terrorism* under the pretext of searching for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

Arreguin-Toft (2001, pp. 99-100) argues that the strong powers lose the asymmetric war because of choosing the wrong strategy rather than domestic vulnerability. Therefore, to comprehend why the US lost the war against a weak state, it is now necessary to outline the key components of COIN operations. Because it appears that the US's failure to meet the tactical, operational, and strategic demands of successful COIN operations is directly related to its strategic defeat in Afghanistan. One may speculate that the US could have had greater success in Afghanistan if it had complied with the COIN campaign's requirements. But if it did, there is little doubt that the humanitarian and financial consequences would be less harmful for Americans and Afghans both.

Insurgency and COIN are the variants of nonconventional (mostly asymmetric) warfare and require the application of different strategies and tactics. As the gap between the weak and strong powers is widening, the weak sides tend to employ insurgency to realize their strategic and political objectives. Generally speaking, the regular armies do not want to fight against insurgency due to two facts: they are trained and indoctrinated for conventional conflicts (Nagl, 2015), and they cannot use their power and maneuver superiority in such unconventional warfare. Maybe this explains why the strong powers, the US in this case, lost the wars against insurgents (*the Taliban*) lately (Arreguin-Toft, 2001, p. 96).

Edelstein (2004, pp. 58-9) argues that *winning the hearts and minds of the population* is key to any successful occupation. Without providing a sufficient level of stability and security, any administration, including external military intervention, faces a (national) resistance, or insurgency in other words. In this sense, insurgency essentially stems from dissatisfaction and grievances of people, and it is defined as “*an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict*” in the NATO document, JP 1-02.

The insurgency evolves into a protracted and asymmetric warfare in essence, and the insurgents tend to exploit the weaknesses of states in providing for the needs of the population. In this regard, insurgency is a political movement blended with violence. It has been employed by different actors to achieve their political goals throughout history. The tactics or strategy of insurgents are largely dependent on the technology in hand and geography. However, in principle, a successful insurgency requires political and physical sanctuary as well as a supportive population (Arreguin-Toft, 2001, pp. 103-4).

As its name resonates, counterinsurgency refers to “*military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency*” (US DoD, 2006, pp. 1-1). COIN campaigns are complex, time-consuming operations, and they

require the dedication of substantial resources from the outset; otherwise, insurgency can develop and become protracted easily (British Army, 2008, pp. A-1-1). Like an insurgency, COIN has transformed by nature depending on the varied terrains, cultures, economies, and world politics. Unlike the Maoist model that developed on political roots and under unified leadership, contemporary insurgencies are much more complex in terms of different actors and post-conflict conditions. Hence, the present COIN campaigns require dealing with sectarian conflicts in chaotic circumstances mostly (ibid., pp. A-1-11). Therefore, it is crucial to determine the root cause of any insurgency prior to starting planning of the COIN operation.

There are two approaches to COIN campaigns: *enemy-centric* and *population-centric* (US COIN Guide, 2009, p. 14). The enemy-centric (military-led) COIN essentially focuses on finding and neutralizing³⁵ insurgents by using conventional tactics and means; in this sense, it appears to be a conventional war between two enemies with the aim of capturing physical terrain and eliminating adversaries. Different tactics are used for this purpose. For instance, the colonial powers pursued a one-dimensional COIN strategy and used brutal tactics like burning homes and concentrating people into camps to prevent insurgents from getting support to quell insurgency. Similarly, Russia relied on its massive firepower to destroy Chechen guerrillas with minimum concerns for civilian losses in its indiscriminate attacks.

On the other hand, the *population-centric approach* emphasizes other (civilian) dimensions of COIN rather than military means. The underlying principles of population-centric COIN operations are outlined in British Army doctrine as follows (British Army, 2008, pp. A-3-2): *Political primacy and clear political aim; gaining and securing the consent and support of people; coordinated government machinery—a comprehensive approach; effective communication with the people; focused intelligence; and planning for longer-term post-insurgency conditions*. This approach is essentially based on the idea that unless the grievances of people are addressed, it is impossible to stop the insurgency from growing and surviving.

Since insurgents cannot win a war against conventional armies, they have to control the population by exploiting the weaknesses of the local government. The COIN cannot achieve its objectives if the people do not feel protected against the insurgents (Galula, 2006, p. 83). For this reason, COIN forces have to protect the population from insurgents' violence, intimidation, and coercion. Also, any effective COIN has to distinguish insurgents from noncombatants, as well as observe extremely cautiously to not give collateral damage (Fearon

³⁵ Neutralizing refers to killing, arresting and convicting, detaining, or isolating insurgents through various means in this context.

& Laitin, 2003, p. 80). Neutralizing insurgents remains a major principle of COIN; however, killing every insurgent is normally impossible. Hence, the use of force must be in a proportionate manner; otherwise, it might be counterproductive by leading to popular resentment, creating martyrs, and producing cycles of revenge (British Army, 2008, pp. A-1-7; De Tray, 2019, p. 129).

The most effective COIN campaigns aim to integrate and synchronize political and military efforts to reduce the influence of insurgency over the population and to strengthen the legitimacy and capacity of host nation (HN) governments politically and economically (US COIN Guide, 2009, p. 12). Thus, another primary objective of COIN operations is to link people to their government, because this is the best and quickest way to gain support among the population by satisfying their needs (Edelstein, 2004, p. 59).

The support of the population is a decisive element of modern counterinsurgency warfare; therefore, the primary objective should be persuading people that a better life is ahead, not eliminating enemies. Only by protecting its people and providing basic services could a government gain legitimacy in the eyes of people (De Tray, 2019, pp. 127-8). As the government's governance and law enforcement capacity develop, its security forces win the support of the population, and the insurgents are isolated from their base of support.

Considering these principles, it can safely be argued that the US, the mightiest military power in the world, has lost both COIN operations in Afghanistan and failed to win the *"hearts and minds" of people* despite its immense COIN experience. Apparently, the intervention was not planned with long-term vision, as if nothing had been learned from previous COIN campaigns. In this part of the study, the underlying reasons for this failure and its indirect securitization consequences are analyzed with a specific focus on COIN strategy and tactics employed by the US army throughout operations in Afghanistan.

After the speedy fall of the Taliban regime, it was deceptively believed that the mission was accomplished, and the Taliban would not pose a threat anymore. However, from the end of 2003 onwards, a Taliban-led insurgency movement gradually emerged, and the Afghanistan campaign evolved into a COIN operation, and it became the longest war in US history. The US has, undisputably, been unable to achieve its principal strategic aim, which was *"creating a safe, secure, and stabilized Afghanistan"* (NATO COEDAT, 2016, p.9), nor to end the violence in Afghanistan. Both US officials and a majority of Americans much later understood that the war was unwinnable (Zakheim, 2019). Put another way, the US's missteps that led to the insurgency and the COIN operation's failure.

Although it may be controversial to suggest that the Afghan insurgency could have been avoided, the US's regrettable errors had a significant impact on the insurgency's emergence in Afghanistan. Principally, insurgency emanates from people's discontent and grievances; as such, if a state fails to meet the needs or expectations of its population, then it becomes more prone to insurgency (British Army, 2008, pp. A-1-4). Thus, the best way to address these issues is to increase the capacity of the host nation's government before insurgency is established, because once it is established, it is difficult to destroy it.

In spite of this fact, after the quick fall of the Taliban, the US made a futile nation-building attempt while devoting its attention and resources to the war in Iraq (Jahangir & Javaid, 2018, pp. 419-20) before creating a credible and legitimate Afghan government. Consequently, the newly formed Afghan government failed to provide basic services (Brinkley, 2013, pp. 14-5) due to lacking governance and law enforcement capacity. PRTs were established to mitigate these shortcomings, but they undermined the attempts to increase the governance capacity of the Afghan government. In addition, the failure of creating a viable justice system pushed the people towards the Taliban, which offered quick and practical justice amidst a chaotic situation (Çetin, 2013, p. 533). While the Taliban created complaint lines via WhatsApp (Seren M., 2021, p. 32), cases heard in the central government's courts remained unresolved for years.

Despite the fact that the success of any effective COIN operations can be directly correlated with the building up of indigenous security forces (British Army, 2008, pp. A-1-7; Jones, 2008, p. 85), the US failed to create a competent ANSF. They were deliberately kept small in size due to unsustainable expenses (Malkasian, 2020, p. 78), assuming that the Taliban could be beaten easily. Then-Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld denied creating a 200.000-man Afghan Army as it required 466 million USD annually to train and equip them; he gave permission for 50.000 instead (Logevall, 2021). Apparently, his priority was not stabilizing Afghanistan but invading Iraq in the year 2002.

In the absence of reliable, effective security forces, the essential principles of COIN operation—*protection of people and providing a safe and secure environment*—could not be achieved (NATO CoEDAT, 2014, p. 88). The US collaborated with notorious warlords who had been responsible for the bloody civil war in the 90s and many other crimes, from massacres to confiscating lands in the recent history of Afghanistan (Çetin, 2013, pp. 540-1) to stabilize the country. These warlords plundered with impunity (Whitlock, 2019), and this *deja vu* pushed certain tribes into the Taliban's arms (Malkasian, 2020, pp. 82-3).

Upon these developments, the Taliban started to reorganize in the safe Pakistani sanctuaries; training and recruitment moved forward, and the level of violence increased gradually from 2006 onwards in Afghanistan. Over the next three years, the Taliban captured most of the country's south and much of its east, and the US and its NATO allies suffered ever-recorded casualties. At that point, US officials understood they were going to lose the war in Afghanistan (NATO COEDAT, 2016, p.12). In response to the Taliban's increasing momentum, they shifted the nature of the conflict from stabilization to COIN operations.

US top officials, including *General McChrystal* and *General Petraeus*, thought that the COIN operation in Iraq had reached success to some extent by surging troops and the involvement of Sunni groups in the reconciliation process. Therefore, the same strategy, shifting the focus from the enemy to the population through a comprehensive approach, would work in Afghanistan to bring relative stability in the short term. However, it was soon understood that it was impossible to tackle the insurgency in Afghanistan with the application of a similar COIN strategy due to the unique characteristics of the country, deep-rooted ethnic and sectarian divisions, as well as power dynamics (Romano et al., 2015, pp. 400-1; Waldman, 2013, pp. 834-5).

After the US increased the number of its soldiers in Afghanistan, the war turned into a typical COIN campaign. Nevertheless, the US made the same mistakes on a tactical, operative, and strategic level, which paved the way to the loss of the war in Afghanistan. To start with, the overconfidence over US military victories and strong attachment to military means led to the failure (Logevall, 2021). Even though there is a consensus that "*an insurgency cannot be defeated by military means alone*" (NATO CoEDAT, 2014, p. 101), it was mistakenly believed that the peaceful solution could be reached by solely military means.

On the other hand, according to Edelstein (2004, p. 60), if indigenous populations feel their life standard improve and their basic needs are met, they cooperate. Thus, the likelihood of resistance decreases. Despite this fact, the US has spent a great deal of resources on its own soldiers instead of improving the infrastructure of Afghanistan. The US Congress approved around 137 billion USD in aid for Afghanistan, only 26% of which was allocated to development projects; the rest went to ANSF (Thomas, 2020, pp. 9, 11).

From the outset of the insurgency, in line with its securitization policy at home, the US has chosen an enemy-centric COIN approach in the Afghan war. It provided support to the Northern Alliances or other warlords with its air force or special forces with a limited number. By attaching too much importance to force protection (Azizian, 2021, p. 28), US ground forces carried out old-fashioned search-and-destroy operations mainly in urban areas to a limited

extent. They preferred to be stationed in well-protected bases behind the thick concrete walls or far away from villages in rural areas.

From this vantage point, it appears that international forces did not help Afghans with security, as the government is having difficulty setting up its security forces. Many were therefore unable to oppose the Taliban's rule in their neighborhood. Nevertheless, establishing law and order, providing basic staples, and refraining from abusing the population are important steps to win popular support in occupied countries (Edelstein, 2004, pp. 58-9).

Secondly, very little consideration was given to understanding Afghanistan's socio-cultural background. Although the tribal culture and religious characteristics of rural Afghan society were defined as "*abnormal*" or "*peculiar*" by Westerners, those characteristics, in fact, had been ruling the country for centuries (Gürcan, 2016, p. 31). Traditionally, Afghanistan has been a deeply fragmented country by complex regional and ethnic fault lines, and these fragmentations are reinforced by the support given by external powers to secure their interests. In spite of their democratic credentials, the Afghan leaders lacked charismatic leadership or an ideological background; conversely, they had merely popular support (Byman, 2017). In this way, the bargaining power among them has resulted in the central Afghan government, which in turn has eroded the central government's ability to rule.

If the US policymaker had attached more consideration to the ethnic and tribal networks of Afghanistan's society, they would have been more successful winning their hearts and minds (Connah, 2020, p. 80). Afghanistan's very xenophobic rural population, roughly 70%, tends to see any foreign troop presence as a threat (Romano et al., 2015, p. 402). As argued by Edelstein (2004, p. 51), there is an inverse ratio between the duration of occupation and its success. If it takes longer than expected, a national resistance emerges.

Indeed, there was a decline in public support for the US and the Afghan government because of their prolonged occupation of Afghanistan, as indicated by Seren (2021, p. 30). Therefore, the Afghan government never enjoyed popular support outside of Kabul as it was associated with foreign invading power (Logevall, 2021). For the majority of Afghans, the Taliban were doing righteous and honorable acts while trying to remove the US from Afghanistan (Malkasian, 2020, pp. 83-4). *Mr. Tokgöz* asserts that:

“The US was defeated by the Taliban because they never understood the moral values of the Pashtun rural community; when they tried to change well-established codes and traditions, they ignited the hostility automatically.”

Thirdly, from the beginning, the COIN operation has been conducted without a clear strategy and operational plan for military forces (NATO CoEDAT, 2014, p. 34). The end state of the operation “*whether capturing the last Taliban fighter or creating a self-dependent state*” was not defined in concrete terms (Gürcan, 2016, p. 29). In due course of operation, the US did not abide by its declared primary strategic aim of “*establishing a stable, functioning state*” (Waldman, 2013, p. 825), but “*defeating the Taliban*” became an end itself. However, having a clear roadmap and exit strategy is crucial for the success of intervention (Edelstein, 2004, p. 65). Seemingly, the US engaged in conflicts with the Taliban without a coherent grand strategy, lost its way, and was never able to recover (Logevall, 2021). Due to these fundamental mistakes and persistent short-termism, the whole intervention turned into merely counterterrorism and an ill-defined mission of liberal state-building (Lee M. , 2021).

One of the most obvious shortcomings was the lack of strategic thinking and leadership throughout the US operations. Even high-ranked generals complained about not knowing what to do in Afghanistan (Whitlock, 2019). The overall policy, based on military power only, aimed at short-term operational achievements rather than their long-term strategic impacts. Besides, the frequent rotation of top commanders limited the consistent implementation of strategy, if there was any.

Many critical decisions were taken by considering domestic politics; subsequent US governments distorted the statistics to mislead the public (Whitlock, 2019), and the neoconservative vision of democracy excluded all other possible courses of action (Waldman, 2013, p. 834). This ideological motivation became the main driver of US foreign policy; reconciliation has never been regarded as an alternative (Connah, 2020, p. 78).

Fourth, throughout operations, the US did not put in the necessary effort to distinguish civilians from insurgents; the civilian casualties and collateral damages were ignored most of the time. However, as Arreguin-Toft (2001, pp. 113-4) indicates, increasing human suffering enables the insurgents to gain popular support. Indeed, airstrikes and night raids heightened a sense of oppression among Afghans and triggered in many an obligation to resist. The collateral damage resulting from a full-scale, disproportionate, and indiscriminate military offensive fueled anti-US and anti-Western sentiment throughout the Middle East and elsewhere. These attacks also triggered a sense of injustice among the public so that radical groups could have a chance to find much-needed recruitment as well as validate their causes (Antunes & Camisao, 2017, p. 20).

There have been a lot of reported common human rights abuses by US forces, but especially by US-ally Northern Alliance forces (Cottey, 2003, pp. 180-1). US authorities tolerated the unlawful treatment of Taliban prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp, which was also bitterly criticized by the international community (Çetin, 2013, p. 538). They opted for their military tribunal instead of the UN Court of Justice or civil court for the trial of suspected terrorists; they were tried without any attorney (Goodman, 2004, p. 1). Such acts not only fueled Afghan animosity but also paved the way for Islamist extremism to spread to other regions. The US authorities denied the basic principles of international law and institutions, and as such, it squandered the moral advantage of the 9/11 attacks (Rielly, 2008, p. 81).

Fifth, the US and coalition forces have been unable to eradicate illicit financial activities, particularly poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. In fact, this illegal revenue was essential to the COIN campaign's success since the money provided insurgents with logistical assistance (US COIN Guide, 2009, pp. 7-8). Although its trade had been in decline before the US operation, poppy cultivation made a peak again after the insurgency emerged. So, it became the main financial source for the Taliban to continue the insurgency. Any efforts to limit the opium trade backfired and further alienated the Afghan people because it was the only industry that was able to survive, and many Afghans relied on it for their daily needs (Whitlock, 2019).

Additionally, the failure in fighting against mass corruption undermined the popular legitimacy of Afghan governments (Brinkley, 2013, p. 19) and pushed people falling into the Taliban's hands who had reputation for incorruptibility (Zakheim, 2019). The corrupt elites' acts were being justified by US think tanks in the name of democracy, but in reality, the Afghan government was losing the hearts and minds of its people (Yaqin, 2022). Believing that the US would come to rescue, when necessary, the Afghan government never tried to be self-dependent by building an effective army, eradicating corruption, and improving public services as planned at the beginning.

Sixth, Washington, apparently, focused on their strategic objectives during the occupation, which is detrimental for the ultimate success of the operation (Edelstein, 2004, p. 73), while ignoring the security concerns of other parties. The US did not seek any cooperation with regional and other global powers. Consequently, Afghanistan became a theater for the India-Pakistan power struggle. Jahangir and Javaid (2018) state that Pakistan's participation in the Afghan war was a significant contributing reason for the US's failure. Perceiving India's increasing influence in Afghanistan as a serious threat to its national security, Pakistan restarted support for the Taliban. Because the US authorities have done nothing to alleviate their worries.

As a rule of thumb, external support is crucial for insurgency movements in terms of prolonging insurgency (Regan P. M., 2002, p. 55). The US was understandably deterred from eliminating Al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan since Pakistani authorities provided the Taliban with financial support, safe havens, and logistical support (Byman, 2017). Nevertheless, as indicated by Jeremy Record (2007, as cited in Yalçın, 2020, p. 32), as long as external support persists, it is extremely difficult to quell insurgency.

In retrospect, the US seems to have achieved its initial objectives in Afghanistan by overthrowing the Taliban regime. But it doesn't appear to have achieved any of the other mid- and long-term objectives, establishing an independent and stable Afghan state. Despite the dedication of huge human and material resources³⁶ to the Afghan war, the US lost the COIN campaign against the Taliban-led (Haqqani network and other actors have played roles) insurgency. Apparently, the US miscalculated its power and misjudged the Taliban's capacity due to lacking comprehensive knowledge of Afghan culture and power dynamics in the country. More importantly, it planned and conducted the COIN campaign without observing the underlying principles, which brought an inevitable and painful loss.

3.6. The US Withdrawal and Destructive Results

Many were surprised by the Taliban's quick takeover when US President Biden finally decided to halt the never-ending conflict in Afghanistan (Thomas, 2021, p. 9). Actually, with the signing of the Doha Agreement with the Taliban in 2020, the US gave a signal for surrendering to the Taliban, which demoralized the Afghan government and army (Matza, 2024). As predicted, without US support, the Afghan government swiftly collapsed, and President Ghani fled just before the Taliban captured Kabul on 15th August 2021 (SIGAR, 2022, p. i).

The world saw numerous tragic sights during the evacuation efforts, illustrating just how unprepared the US was for the Taliban's rapid push on the capital and how Washington had to abandon a large number of its soldiers and contractors (Thomas, 2021, p. 12). The Taliban's quick and relatively easy victory proved the US's undeniable defeat (Greentree, 2021, p. 8) against "disorganized" and medieval insurgents, but at the expense of the huge amount of humanitarian and economic costs both for Americans and Afghans (TRT Haber, 2023).

³⁶ According to optimistic calculations, the intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq cost nearly 5.4 trillion USD and approximately 15,000 American lives altogether (Azizian, 2021, p. 1).

The collapse of the Afghan government and, following the Taliban takeover, almost all of the functioning institutions of the state also collapsed, and Afghan people encountered unprecedented humanitarian consequences across all 34 provinces. The worsening security situation is putting the country's economy and people's welfare in danger (Thomas, 2021, p. 75). The Afghan economy has been in decline, and 97% of the country's population now lives in poverty (SIGAR, 2023, p. 27). Concordantly, the failing basic services deteriorated even further (Wintour, 2022). Alongside health, water and sanitation services have been paralyzed. Lack of funds and maintenance have worst affected the water and sanitation systems, and only one-third of the population has access to safe drinking water now (IAHE, 2024, p. 50). Most government employees could not get their salaries (Smith, 2024), which also undermined public services.

The US withdrawal put an end to a two-decade-long war, and relative peace and security have been assured (Smith, 2024) since the Taliban took over. Nevertheless, security is still the most pressing issue in Afghanistan. According to various reports, some US assets and arms fell into the Taliban and other organizations' hands in the wake of Washington's withdrawal. The utilization of these modern assets would intensify the conflict between the Taliban and its rival groups, which would be a further destabilizing factor for regional security. That's why Afghan President Ghani left the country to avoid another civil war, according to his statement on social media account (SC, 2023, p. 13).

However, new internal conflicts are always a possibility. The Taliban has been facing resistance from some opposition groups³⁷, primarily the ISKP/ISIS-K and NRF that are active in Panjshir Province (SIGAR, 2023, p. 99). To reduce the pressure, it has allowed IS-KP to attack Central Asian neighbors (Yaqin, 2022). It is reported that there are currently between 8.000 and 10.000 foreign terrorist fighters in the country (Seren M., 2021, p. 32).

Chinese and Russian leaders are also worried about reemerging Islamist radicalism that might instigate their own Muslim population. According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, extremist terrorist groups, like Al Qaeda, are taking advantage of the political vacuum

³⁷Anti-Taliban resistance consists, notably, of the South Asian branch of the Islamic State and remnants of the former security forces. They are dispersedly present in Afghanistan, and it is hard to gauge their actual power. Nevertheless, Islamic militant groups remain a main source of concern for Westerners, and the Taliban rule is perceived as a bulwark against it. Indeed, the Taliban handled these groups brutally, and clashes have decreased significantly in recent years (Crisis Group, 2024, p. 8). In addition to these organizations, more than twenty radical organizations including Hizb-i-Islami, the Haqqani Network, and Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), take shelter in Afghanistan presently (Seren M., 2021, p. 5).

in Afghanistan to regain a foothold³⁸ following the US departure (TRT Haber, 2023). Regional powers, as their rebel groups took shelter in Afghanistan comfortably, engaged with the new Taliban authorities to alleviate their security concerns (Smith, 2024).

The catastrophic outcomes would have a long-term adverse impact on international peace and security. There may be significant regional ramifications from the growing security threats. Other regional powers are already at risk from the burgeoning extremist organizations. Pakistan considers terrorist groups to be its main regional adversaries (Thomas, 2021, p. 47). Islamabad has been blaming the Taliban for being unwilling to prevent the Pakistani Taliban's (or *TTP's*) increasing attacks in its territory or even providing the group with safe haven (*Figure 3-7*). As a result, relations between the two countries have strained recently (Crisis Group, 2024, p. 14). The border dispute between Kabul and Islamabad is important because the Durand Line also carries a political meaning regarding the unification of all Pashtuns (Seren M., 2021, p. 7), which poses a security risk for Pakistan's national unity.

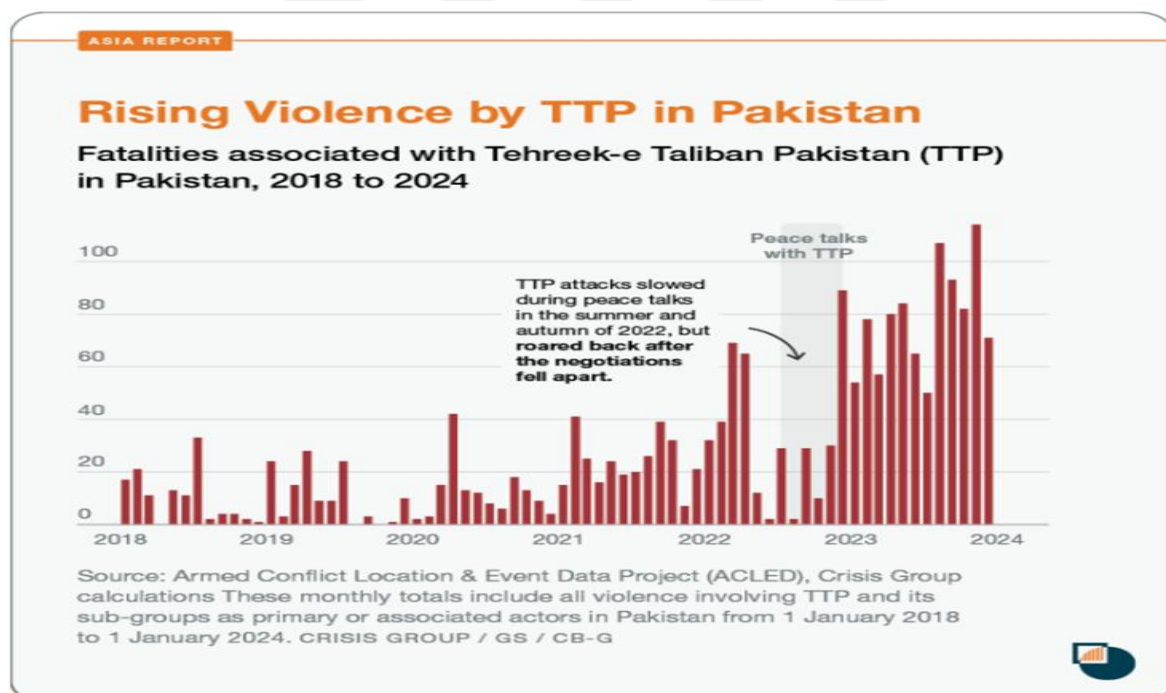


Figure 3- 7 : TTP's Increasing Attacks in Pakistan

Source: Crisis Group, 2024, p. 14

³⁸ The IS-KP attacked the Russian embassy in Kabul in September 2022, which raised Moscow's concerns about the Taliban's control over the country (Binley, 2022).

While both anti-Taliban and Taliban organizations are radical-Islamist, their ultimate goals are different. The latter is still pursuing universalist Caliphate ideals, whereas the former has nationalist objectives. As a result, these groups have frequently fought with each other (Thomas, 2021, p. 26). The country is on the verge of plunging into a new spiral of violence, seemingly. If former Afghan army members who were trained and armed by the US or NATO join these groups, the level of potential risks would be more frightening for ordinary Afghans. Afghans were forced to flee from violence because they were unable to get basic services or security, which are essential humanitarian needs.

After the US withdrawal and the Taliban's recapture of power, Western donors abruptly ceased development aid, which had covered 75% of the spending of the previous US-backed government (Smith, 2024). As a result, the Afghan people faced a large-scale humanitarian disaster (Foreign Policy, 2021). According to Gallup Reports, Afghans continue their lives under the gravest conditions on the planet (SIGAR, 2023, p. 67).

The fundamental human rights have been deteriorating immensely, particularly for the women in the country under the new Taliban regime (Smith, 2024). In addition to the 2004 Constitution, all laws and regulations enacted during the previous period were either suspended or abandoned by claiming they were conflicting with sharia law (SC, 2023, pp. 3, 10). To illustrate, the Taliban has abolished the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which used to be a key body to promote women's rights through law. In its place, the notorious Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice has been formed to curtail the rights of women even more (Tanno, 2022).

Despite the announced general amnesty in August 2021, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and torture and ill-treatment against former government officials and ANSF members became common practices (SC, 2023, p. 8). As happened during the previous Taliban rule, the basic human rights and freedom as well as the dignity of people are being violated through cruelty and torture practices before the eyes of the international community. After consolidating its power, the Taliban's rule progressively hardened and became more authoritarian in 2022 (Felbab-Brown, 2023).

The Taliban's repressive attitude harmed the rights and development of Afghan women significantly as well (Thomas, 2021, p. 32). This approach was defined as "*gender apartheid*" by the UN and other authorities (IAHE, 2024, p. 27), and the new administration faced massive sanctions, from non-recognition to ending development assistance from donors.

The drastic rollback of freedoms that Afghan women have experienced, particularly noticeable in towns and cities where they have been refrained from going to parks, public baths, gyms, and beauty salons (Smith, 2024).

In a way, half of the Afghan population has become hostages of their own government. Even though equal access to education is essential for Afghanistan's socioeconomic growth (Wintour, 2022), the Taliban administration forbade girls from receiving an education beyond the sixth grade (SIGAR, 2023, p. 27). The widespread discrimination and inequality overshadow long-term development attempts in the country.

Two interviewees, both Afghan nationals, A.S.³⁹ and S.K.⁴⁰ put forward conflicting views about women's rights in Afghanistan after the Taliban seized control in August 2021.

According to S.K., *“Taliban government has reimposed archaic laws from the fifteenth century on Afghan society, primarily suffocating women. The world has turned a blind eye to all this happening, and it is unfair”*.

A.S. suggests, on the other hand, *“the main problem is the financial crisis in Afghanistan presently, and women are being affected utmost because of pressing economic issues. Therefore, finding an effective solution is a top priority. The West has been undermining the Taliban government's efforts for economic recovery; by doing so, they are punishing women indirectly. Besides, after the Taliban retook power, the security and stability were barely achieved, which is beneficial for everybody, women in particular”*.

Upon facing increasing international pressure (Thomas, 2021, p. 29) and surprising women demonstrations at home (Wintour, 2022), the acting Minister of Higher Education announced in September 2021 that women could continue their education at universities as long as they attended gender-segregated classrooms and dressed in Islamic gear. If they were in a class taught by a male teacher, they also had to be seated behind the curtain (Thomas, 2021, p. 33).

However, the Taliban continued to tighten its control over women's rights by announcing its decision to suspend women's higher education and employment in national and international NGOs in December 2022 (SC, 2023, p. 1) on the grounds of non-compliance with

³⁹ Interview (on 16th Oct 2023) with A.S., who works for the Afghanistan Consulate in Istanbul as a clerk. He supports the Taliban in principle.

⁴⁰ Interview (on 6th Oct 2023) with S.K., who studied in Türkiye and went back to Afghanistan after graduation to be a government employee. He has lost his job after the Taliban's takeover in August 2021.

the Islamic hijab' and other alleged breaches (IAHE, 2024, p. 68). International organizations and donor countries suspended their humanitarian programs in protest. As a result, the Taliban's decree of ban exacerbated the women's conditions. The further restrictions deprived them of accessing basic services provided by the UN and its affiliate agencies, particularly in rural areas.

Even though violence-related casualties have dramatically reduced after the Taliban's takeover of the country (MSF, 2022, p. 5), from 2021 onwards, nearly half of Afghanistan's population has been suffering from various humanitarian crises stemming from lacking adequate food (Crawford N. C., 2021), a coronavirus pandemic, internal conflicts, natural disasters, and drought. In the absence of peace and stability as well as basic services, the living conditions of Afghan people are unbearable one way or another (Thomas, 2021, p. 35).

The already dire circumstances were made worse by two distinct recent occurrences. According to US President Biden's directive, on February 11, 2022, the US froze Afghanistan's desperately needed 7 billion USD in central bank deposits stored at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. These asset freezes and additional banking restrictions⁴¹ made things worse and disrupted the flow of goods to satisfy Afghans' urgent needs. Upon facing international and domestic criticism regarding the Afghans' desperate situation, the Biden Administration admitted to allowing half of these funds for humanitarian purposes (ibid., p. 8). Continued US sanctions made the situation more complicated, and the international community has been typically reluctant to donate aid funds to address this ostensibly deepening humanitarian crisis (Wintour, 2022).

The Taliban regime banned women and girls from working for national and international aid organizations by making Afghan women reach international assistance almost impossible (Felbab-Brown, 2023). In response to this decision, many organizations, including the UN, suspended their operations in the country. The World Bank stopped funding numerous projects in Afghanistan because it refused to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate rulers in Kabul (Thomas, 2021, p. 39). The prohibition has detrimental effects on Afghanistan's long-term socioeconomic development and stability in addition to its immediate humanitarian needs (SC, 2023, p. 2).

⁴¹ Apart from the US decision to freeze 7 billion USD overseas assets of the Afghan Central Bank Government, additional 2 billion USD assets held in European banks and in the UAE were also frozen, which triggered a major liquidity crisis (MSF, 2022, p. 13).

When the Taliban seized power in Kabul, foreign governments and donors halted their development assistance immediately. After that, the country faced a staggering financial crisis, and the real GDP contracted 26% (*Figure 3-8*) in the following two years (The World Bank, 2024, p. 13). Millions of Afghans plunged into extreme poverty (Smith, 2024). According to the UNHCR, more than half of the population, 28.3 million people to be exact as of 2023, rely on some form of humanitarian assistance. The number of needy people keeps rising each year, up from 24.4 million in 2022 and 18.4 million requiring the largest humanitarian aid in the world (SC, 2023, p. 12). More than 10 million Afghans have been receiving food packets and cash stipends from the World Food Program (Felbab-Brown, 2023). What is more, data show that only 10% of Afghans succeed in their urgent search for a suitable place to live, despite 73% of them attempting to do so (SIGAR, 2023, p. 67).

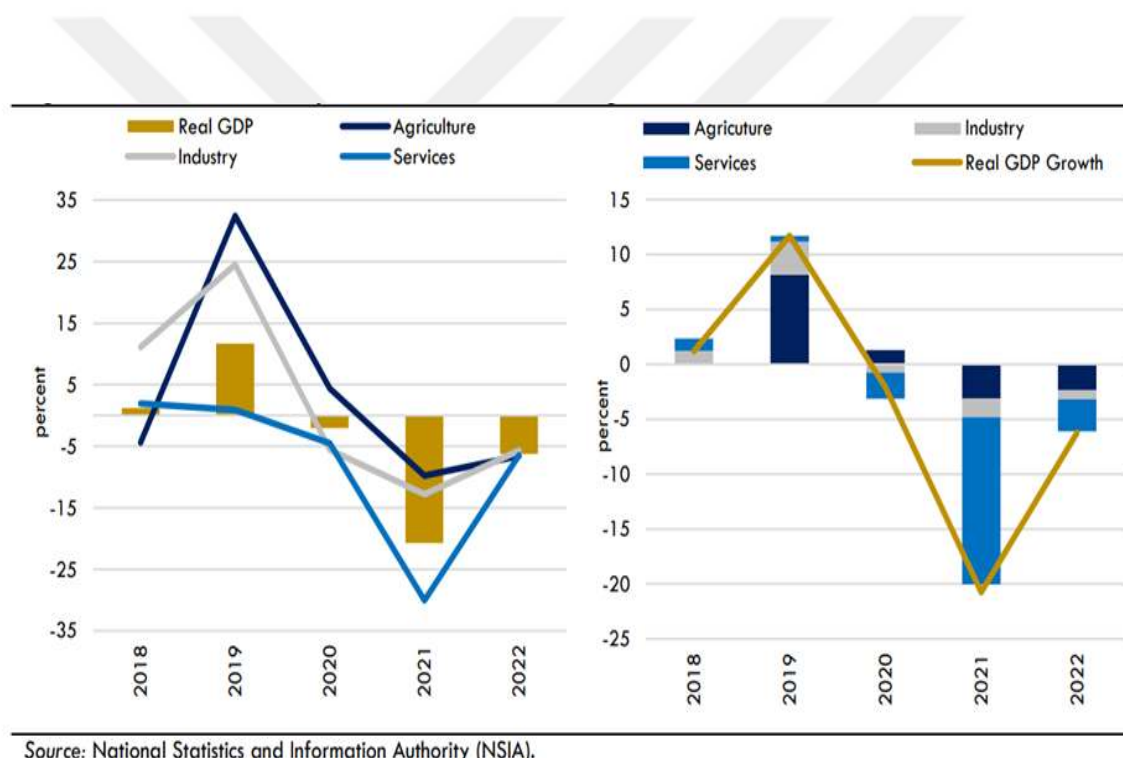


Figure 3- 8 : The Real GDP Contraction after the Taliban Takeover

Source: The World Bank, 2024, p. 13

The new Taliban administration banned the opium trade⁴² aiming to cooperate with the West and other countries, but it gave rise to the unemployment crisis. Nearly half a million

⁴² The prohibition on the opium cultivation resulted in an astounding loss of income for Afghan farmers of 1.3 billion USD, or around 8% of the country's GDP. UN sources claim that the value of the opiate economy has shrunk by 90%, the area under cultivation has decreased by 95%, and it has cost Afghans 450,000 jobs (The World Bank, 2024, p. 9).

Afghan farmers who used to earn their lives in poppy fields became jobless suddenly (Smith, 2024). The employment pressures were worsened with the return of more than half a million Afghan migrants⁴³ from Pakistan and Iran. The unemployment rate is much higher among women (The World Bank, 2024, p. 14) due to the Taliban's restrictive policies.

Afghans have little or no access to healthcare owing to a combination of declining economic conditions and a further weakened public health system (MSF, 2022, p. 3). The situation in the rural areas is more tragic. A certain degree of malnutrition and poverty led to people being forced to sell their body parts (Wintour, 2022) or their children (Kumar, 2022). Whereas 13.3 million Afghans practically have no access to health care, the remaining 18.1 million are desperately in need of medical supplies. The degraded water systems led to an increase in preventable illnesses such as acute respiratory and diarrheal, especially in urban areas. As there are not enough emergency services available, the rate of infant mortality has been rising steadily (SIGAR, 2023, pp. 93-5). Because of malnutrition and restricted access to healthcare, mortality rates among girls are 90% higher⁴⁴ than among boys (MSF, 2022, p. 18).

In addition to dramatic economic downfall, political rights and media freedoms have also declined under the new Taliban's rule. A newly established political party, under the influence of western powers, and media organs were outlawed, and the Taliban created a single-party ruling system in effect. Demonstrating no tolerance for any form of dissent, the Taliban silenced any opposition. Whoever attempts to fail to enforce strict rules has been arrested and tortured sometimes (Smith, 2024). Even former politicians or academics choose their words carefully before the public.

Taking these negative results into consideration, it can be safely argued that Afghanistan has been decimated and has faced the gravest consequences following the US's 20-year-long intervention. However, the US itself has also been negatively affected due to its strategic myopia (Greentree, 2021, p. 9). Although it was planned completely differently, the Afghanistan intervention turned out to be the US's longest and most costly (*Table 3-1*) war in the end (Crawford N. C., 2021). Although the Taliban was weakened by a two-decade-long foreign occupation (Tehran Times, 2024), they swept into Kabul and grabbed control of the war-torn country easily after the US departure.

⁴³ On average, each year before 2021, some 500,000 undocumented migrants returned from Iran and Pakistan (IAHE, 2024, p. 29).

⁴⁴ According to a survey conducted in 2022, 62.5% of respondents believe women face worse obstacles to accessing healthcare in comparison to men (MSF, 2022, p. 7).

The approval of US President Bush's securitization policies and War on Terror rhetoric came at a cost to US taxpayers (Ahmedzai, 2016, p. 25). The Afghan (*together with Iraq*) war has turned out to be more than five times more expensive than WWI and nearly 2.5 times more expensive than the Vietnam War (Cordesman, 2017, p. 8). When considering the expenses and consequences of the Afghanistan war on an economic, humanitarian, financial, and political level, the negative effects have gone beyond even the most catastrophic projections for Washington.

Table 3- 1 : Cost of US's Major Military Campaign in the Past

Conflict	Cost (<i>Billion USD of 2008</i>)	Defense Share of GDP in the Peak Year (%)
World War I	227	16.1
World War II	3,452	37.8
Korean War	456	14.2
Vietnam War	518	9.5
Gulf War*	91	1
Afghan War**	5000 (estimated)	11.1

*Costs were shared with US allies mostly.

** This figure includes the long-term medical care and Veteran Benefits payment by 2050 (Crawford N. , 2016, p. 3).

Source: Adopted from Kosiak, 2008, pp. 31, 33

Throughout the US's militarily 7.262-day presence in Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands of US soldiers served in the country. To satisfy their basic needs and carry out military operations, considering force protection primarily was a costly endeavor for the US government, as explained earlier. Considering the US spent 12.9 billion USD to cover the expenses of its relatively small military contingent (8.600 troops) in Afghanistan in FY 2021 (Thomas, 2021, p. 68), it is explicit how costly the Afghan War is for the US citizens.

The US Congress allocated more than 1 trillion USD directly to pay the costs of the Afghan war in this period. The budget of the Department of Defense realized more than 2.3 trillion USD, and most was spent on these operations (Thomas, 2021, p. 47). These figures do not include the expected additional 2 trillion USD in medical and disability care costs for

veterans by 2050⁴⁵ (Crawford N. C., 2021). As the veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq often come back with multiple traumas and serious wounds, the costs for veteran care of GWOt seem to be comparatively greater than four past conflicts (Crawford N. C., 2021, p. 17).

The involvement of the US in Afghanistan has resulted in extensive and detrimental humanitarian outcomes for both Afghans and Americans. During the Afghan War, 2,455 US servicemen were killed and 20,722 were wounded in action, while 160 thousand Afghan civilians lost their lives and many more were wounded due to conflict (Greentree, 2021, p. 8). Only two-thirds of all casualties were from the US (Thomas, 2021, p. 43). A significant number

Table 3- 2 : Casualties of Allies in Afghanistan

Years	US	UK	Others	Total
2001	12	0	0	12
2002	49	3	18	70
2003	48	0	10	58
2004	52	1	7	60
2005	99	1	31	131
2006	98	39	54	191
2007	117	42	73	232
2008	155	51	89	295
2009	317	108	96	521
2010	499	103	109	711
2011	418	46	102	566
2012	310	44	48	402
2013	127	9	25	161
2014	55	6	14	75
2015	22	2	3	27
2016	14	0	2	16
2017	4	0	0	4
2018	14	0	5	19
2019	24	0	2	26
2020	7	0		7
Total	2448	455	689	3592

of other NATO nations, most notably the UK (*Table 3-2*), also suffered greatly. After returning to the US, many veterans experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (Crawford N. , 2016, p. 15) on a psychological and physical level. Alongside with servicemen and women, more than 4,000 contractors and US civilians have lost their lives (Seren M., 2021, p. 27) in Afghanistan while working for US operations.

The US has been paying the price of its miscalculation and mismanagement of the Afghan War politically, too. These gigantic financial costs may be even less significant than the damage to US soft power globally (Nye & Welsh,

2017, p. 269). The rapid and humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan led to questioning of

⁴⁵ Taking long-term medical care and disability compensation for service members, veterans, and families, military replenishment, and social and economic costs into consideration, the Iraq and Afghanistan war is the most expensive war in US history, with a total cost somewhere between 5 and 8 trillion USD by 2053 (Cordesman, 2017, pp. 23-4; Crawford N. , 2016, p. 28). In March 2008, it was calculated costs per troop/year in Afghanistan as average some 775,000 USD (Kosiak, 2008, p. 38), which is very dramatic because per capita in Afghanistan was just 383 USD in the same year.

US credibility as a strategic partner among regional and Middle Eastern countries. According to Seren (2021, p. 30), the US's defeat in Afghanistan also led to damage to its hegemonic power status.

Indian officials, for instance, raised their worries about whether they could depend on the US or not to balance China regarding regional politics in the following period. Thus, India is aftering engagement with the Taliban regime to mitigate potential losses (Thomas, 2021, pp. 54-5). Similarly, many European countries criticized US President Trump's decision to make a peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020 and US President Biden's decision for the US withdrawal without consulting them. For them, these decisions were made without adequate planning and preparation (Thomas, 2021, p. 43).

As mentioned above, the US withdrawal created a power vacuum to be filled and exploited by radical organizations in Afghanistan and other global players (Greentree, 2021, p. 8). By leaving the country abruptly, the US has lost its military weight and intelligence-gathering capabilities in Central Asia. This could extremely restrict the US in its counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan and elsewhere (Thomas, 2021, p. 27). In fact, just because of these developments, the US could fall behind in the forthcoming geostrategic rivalry over Afghanistan. Some regional countries and organizations are already seeking to engage the de facto Taliban rule in Afghanistan (SC, 2023, p. 6). While many countries closed their embassies after the Taliban takeover, China, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran kept open their diplomatic missions, interestingly (Ghosh, 2022).

Many people worldwide saw the US withdrawal as an obvious indicator of the US and Western Alliance's declining power. As the US steps down, China and Russia are predicted to step in to strengthen their positions of supremacy in the area (Fischer & Stanzel, 2021, p. 1). This move could intensify geostrategic rivalry between the West and Eastern Powers (Greentree, 2021, p. 8). Probably, Russia and China would increase their influence in the region militarily and economically. Whereas Russia has an advantage over China in terms of military presence, China might try to expand its economic activities in Afghanistan. Pakistan, having been a destabilizing factor in Afghanistan, would likewise be looking to expand its influence in the following period (Thomas, 2021, p. 49). *Mr. Tokgöz* and another interviewee think otherwise. They postulate that:

“the US deliberately vacated Afghanistan to drag China into this country. China, with its atheist/communist ideology, will also clash with the extremely conservative Afghan community, sooner or later,

and it will be the next victim of this so-called infamous graveyard of empires. Maybe that's why Beijing has been dragging its heels on further engagement".

Although Moscow and Beijing are deemed the primary beneficiaries of the US departure from Afghanistan (Fischer & Stanzel, 2021, p. 1), Russian and Chinese officials are worried about the potential resurfacing of radical Islamism in the region. They are holding the US responsible for pressing risks and other humanitarian consequences consistently (Wintour, 2022). One of the Chinese diplomats explicitly blamed the US for the human catastrophe in Afghanistan by not fulfilling its responsibility in terms of rebuilding the country as well as blocking the attempts for international donation campaigns⁴⁶. Additionally, he demanded that Afghan finances be unfrozen to facilitate foreign relief and ease the humanitarian catastrophe (Ghosh, 2022).

China will pursue realizing its economic and financial security interests in Afghanistan. Beijing's support for the Taliban is crucial to dealing with economic and financial issues. In return, the Taliban could give Chinese companies priority to exploit Afghanistan's untapped natural resources like copper and lithium to satisfy their raw material needs. In return, the Taliban could give Chinese companies priority to exploit Afghanistan's untapped natural resources like copper and lithium to satisfy their raw material needs (Fischer & Stanzel, 2021, p. 4). Indeed, Beijing already signed a contract with the *de facto* Taliban government for the exploitation of the Amu Darya River oil fields in Faryab, Jowzjan, and Sar-e-Pul Provinces for a 25-year period (SC, 2023, p. 7). China has become the second-largest trading partner of Afghanistan recently by overtaking India (Crisis Group, 2024, p. 14) thanks to this developing economic engagement. The completion of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also significant for Afghanistan as a landlocked country.

Nevertheless, new circumstances do not provide a problem-free situation for China. As previously stated, China's first and foremost concern is the spillover effects of radical Islamism in Afghanistan and their implications. From the Chinese vantage point, the Taliban's close relations with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) are worrying (Ghosh, 2022). In exchange for close cooperation and diplomatic support, Beijing demands from the Taliban that it stop its ties with this organization, which seeks to establish an independent Islamic state for the Muslim Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province.

⁴⁶ Even though the US does not recognize the Taliban, it remains the largest donor to Afghanistan, having appropriated more than 2 billion USD since August 2021 (SIGAR, 2023, p. 102).

The Taliban's spokesperson has already expressed their intention to work with China and insisted that the Taliban would not tolerate ETIM operating in Afghanistan (Thomas, 2021, pp. 48-9). Another direct result of US withdrawal for China will be in East Asia. Now that the US has completed its retreat from Afghanistan, the Indo-Pacific will be its focal point in the years to come, as announced previously (Fischer & Stanzel, 2021, p. 2).

Like China, Russia is also concerned about the radical organizations in Afghanistan. Bearing in mind that Russia has suffered from fundamentalist Islamic groups in Afghanistan and Chechnya; therefore, any instability in Afghanistan is to be curbed before spreading to Central Asia. For this reason, Russia could increase its military power in this region and present itself as a security guarantor (Fischer & Stanzel, 2021, p. 3). However, in general, Russian authorities are happy that the US and NATO have left the area. Additionally, Moscow views this action as more proof of the Western alliance's demise and as a tangible step closer to a multipolar global order. Additionally, it has once again demonstrated that the EU cannot move without US backing (ibid., pp. 1-3). It should be borne in mind that, having seen catastrophic results, the American people may be less willing to undertake overseas engagements in the future (Nye & Welsh, 2017, p. 269).

CHAPTER 4

4. TÜRKİYE'S MILITARY OPERATIONS IN SYRIA

4.1. The History of Türkiye-Syria Relations

4.1.1. The Ottoman Period

Turks and Arabs share a common cultural and religious history; therefore, Türkiye's relations with the Arab World and particularly with the Middle East are deeply rooted and complex. Following *Selim I.'s* (*Turkish: Yavuz Sultan Selim*) conquest of the region, the Ottoman Turks ruled the Arab world for four centuries, from 1517 to 1918. During this long period, any social and political changes mutually influenced Turkish and Arab societies within the Empire. Among the Ottoman subjects, the Syrians were the closest to the Turkish lifestyle and ruling system due to geographical proximity and socio-cultural affinities.

Even though the bitter defeat in the Great War made the Ottoman armies retreat from Arab regions, the Ottoman lifestyle and the governance system that had been established in the preceding four centuries seemed to continue shaping the history of the region and its people (Provence, 2017, pp. 4-6). However, Türkiye's relations with the Arab world have been an ebb and flow during the 20th and early 21st centuries depending on domestic and international developments.

Until the 19th century, the Ottoman rule through local governors (*Vali*) was relatively successful in Syria (Demir Ş. , 2011, p. 693). The Ottoman administrative system divided the country into four vilayets: *the Vilayet of Aleppo, the Vilayet of Day Az-Zor, the Vilayet of Damascus, and the Vilayet of Beirut*, all of which were called '*Bilad-u-Sham*,' consisting of present-day Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Iraq (Khan & Khan, 2017, p. 588). The Ottomans attached great significance to Syria due to its economic potential and strategic location, and the rights of different ethnic and religious groups were observed carefully accordingly, which was a key to a successful administration in such a religiously, ethnically, and socially fragmented country⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ Then-Syrian community was as complex as of today, consisting of a majority of Sunni Muslims (70%) and other religious minority groups such as Alawites (a sect of Shias), Druze, Turkmen, Assyrians, and Christians. In

From the 19th century, the Ottoman ruling system in Syria started to lose its efficiency like other regions. As the Ottoman Empire weakened, *Muhammad Ali Pasha* (the Ottoman's Suzerain Egyptian Governor) turned his eyes towards the region. A war broke out in 1839 between the Ottoman Army and Muhammad Ali Pasha's Egyptian Army. Upon the Ottoman side's defeat, Syria fell under the Pasha's control (Uçarol, 2006, p. 171). Nevertheless, the European Power intervened soon, as they perceived Muhammad Ali Pasha as a greater threat to themselves than the Ottoman state (Arslan, 2018, p. 8). After this intervention, the Egyptian Army was forced to retreat and the Ottoman rule in the region was reconsolidated. Nevertheless, after their intervention, the British and French increased their influence in the region. With Napoleon's invasion in Egypt (*in 1798*), patriotic nationalism spread across the region, which gave rise to domestic fights among local tribes as well as general discontent (Demir Ş. , 2011, p. 693).

Thanks to *Sultan Abdulhamid's* (II) pro-Islamic policies, Syrian Muslims started to play an important role in the ruling system (Opruklu, 2006, p. 43). Those policies coincided with economic flourishing in the region because of increased trade through the Mediterranean as well as newly established railroads. The Syrian population was content with the Ottoman system in the second half of the 19th century, despite Christian separatism and some local riots. However, the Young Turk revolution of 1908 fueled the nationalism that was already forming among other ethnic groups, and separatist movements in Syria and the Arab world gained momentum (Arslan, 2018, p. 11).

Under those circumstances, the Ottoman State was forced to join WWI on the Germans' side (Ahmad, 2002, pp. 31-40). Syria became a military garrison and headquarters for the Ottoman IV. Army under the command of Cemal Pasha (Arslan, 2018, p. 12). Upon this development, France and Britain engaged in the partition of Ottoman lands according to their pre-war plans and secret agreements, namely *Sykes-Picot* (Khan & Khan, 2017, p. 589). Simultaneously, the British instigated tribal Arab leaders, including the ruler of Hejaz, *Sherif Husayn*, by promising independence to weaken the Ottoman defense (Opruklu, 2006, p. 35). Soon afterwards, the Ottoman southern front collapsed, and the Turkish Army withdrew towards Anatolian lands. Not only WWI but also Turkish rule in the Middle East came to an end with this defeat. However, the Arabs did not achieve their political independence as

addition, Syrian people were divided socio-economically as well between a rich urban population and poor countrymen and nomads (Khan & Khan, 2017, p. 589).

promised, but the French Mandate Regime (against the will of the Syrian people) was established in Syria instead (Opruklu, 2006, p. 21).

However, the Middle East has never found a suitable substitute for Turkish rule in terms of providing stability and order after the demise of the Ottoman State (Kaplan, 2023). Syria was also far from being a stable and prosperous country in the 20th century. Deeply disappointed with French occupation in the post-WWI period, Syrian people sympathized with and supported the Anatolian Independence movement under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha (Provence, 2017, pp. 135-7). From time to time, Turkish-Arab joint maneuvers put French occupiers in a difficult position in Syria and Anatolia.

Inspired by this movement, Syrian people also started an insurgency against French rule in the post-WWI period (Opruklu, 2006, p. 122). Nevertheless, they did not receive support from the Turkish nationalist movement in Anatolia due to the fact that the latter was also in an existential war against the British-backed Greek Army in the west and Russian-backed Armenians in the east. For the purpose of securing its southern border and focusing on the western front, the Ankara government reached an agreement with France in 1921, making Syrian Arabs disappointed (Uçarol, 2006, p. 579).

4.1.2. The Republican Era

It is necessary to first examine Arab-Turkish ties from a wider perspective to gain a better understanding of bilateral Turkish-Syrian relations during the Republican era. Following WWI, Türkiye adopted a Western-oriented foreign policy under the top-down modernization strategy with the establishment of the modern Turkish state. Since other ideologies were unable to prevent the Ottoman State from collapsing, Turkish elites felt that nation-building based on *Turkish identity* was the best way to maintain national sovereignty in the post-Ottoman era (Kösebalaban, 2011, p. 1). This perspective on nation-building not only influenced domestic policy but also shaped Türkiye's foreign relations in the region, particularly with Syria.

Aiming for the preservation of the *status quo* (Özcan, 2008, p. 86), Türkiye had relatively limited ties with the Arab world until World War II, except for two issues: *Sancak* with the French Mandate Regime in Syria and *Mosul* with the British and Iraqi Kingdoms (Oran, 2009, p. 615). Per the terms of the Lausanne Agreement, Mosul and Hatay (*Alexandretta*) provinces were left out of Türkiye, although they were defined as parts of the

Turkish homeland according to the National Act (*Misak-ı Milli*). Türkiye's principal goal in foreign policy was to retake these regions in the early republican period.

Nevertheless, Ankara was forced to give up its claims to Mosul due in part to the Kurdish revolt and in part to its desire to avoid starting another war. As for Hatay, the country achieved its goal by taking advantage of polarization among European powers (Kösebalaban, 2011, pp. 58-9). Syria never accepted France's relinquishing Hatay to Türkiye on the verge of WWII and continued its claims over the province, despite the majority held by Turkish people. This issue has always soured the mutual relations of neighboring states. Following their independence in the post-war era, Türkiye's relations with the Arab nations, particularly with Syria, did not progress to the anticipated degree (Özcan M. , 2008, p. 93). Türkiye became the first Muslim country to officially recognize the state of Israel in 1949, which strained mutual relations even more.

Having faced the Soviet threat against its territorial integrity and security in the immediate post-WWII period, Türkiye attached itself to Western powers. Accordingly, a 27-year-long Republican People Party (RPP) single-party rule was abolished, and the Democrat Party (DP) ascended to power with the 1950 election. DP leaders did not change Türkiye's western-oriented foreign policy; they even pursued more pro-Western policies by dispatching Turkish soldiers to the Korean War and becoming a member of NATO.

DP followed an "active" policy towards the Arab states, trying to be the leading country in the region. The party put effort into attaching the Middle Eastern countries to the Western security system through the Baghdad Pact and CENTO to counter Soviet expansionism (Hale, 2013, pp. 93-4). Türkiye's active endeavors to establish a collective defense with other Middle Eastern countries failed due to Nasir's Egypt opposition. From 1954 onwards, Türkiye's relations with some Arab countries started to deteriorate since Türkiye was deemed the vanguard of colonial powers' interests in the region (Davutoğlu, 2004, p. 410).

Ostensibly, Turkish decision-makers believed that only by attaching to the Western defense bloc could Turkish independence and territorial integrity be defended. Nevertheless, those choices caused more friction between Türkiye and Arab countries as they found themselves at different poles. And what is worse, Türkiye sided with the British in the Suez crisis and supported France against Algerian rebels (*albeit providing arms to the Algerian Liberation Army secretly*) (Bakır, 2024, p. 141; Kösebalaban, 2011, p. 80). As a result of these

policies, not only was Türkiye stigmatized as "*the servant of imperialism in the Middle East*", but it also had to handle the Cyprus issue by itself (Oran, 2009, pp. 615-7).

The strained relations between Türkiye and Syria persisted in this period. During the Cold War, they were in opposing ideological groups. The USSR expanded its influence in the Middle East because of the Suez Canal conflict. From then on, this region became one of the front lines of the Cold War, and *Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya* became Soviet client states (Service, 2020). Ankara, on the other hand, attached itself firmly to Western powers (Kösebalaban, 2011, p. 82).

Irritated with the increasing communist influence in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, Türkiye made some attempts to reverse its encirclement by a communist wave from north to south. To this aim, Ankara mobilized and amassed troops at the Syrian border in 1957; the armed conflict between sides could be barely averted by means of Saudis' and UN mediations (Arslan, 2018, p. 19). In retaliation, Syria united with Nasir's Egypt, and the United Arab Republic was established, forming an anti-Turkish front in the Middle East (Şahin & Mavruk Cavlak, 2018, p. 165).

Later, Türkiye tried to mend its damaged relations with the Arab states to secure their backing regarding its Cyprus policy after realizing the unfavorable effects of sacrificing its interests to those of the West. However, the main goal was to mitigate the negative effects of the 1973 oil crisis following the *Yom Kippur War*, considering its economy. Contrary to its policy in the 50s, Türkiye pursued a bit more pro-Arab policy in the 60s by forbidding the US to use its İncirlik base to support Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israel war. During the 1973 War, Israel's attacks were condemned, and medical aid was provided to Arab states. As an attempt to deepen its relations with the Muslim world, Türkiye joined the newly formed *Organization of the Islamic Conference* (OIC) despite the opposition of its secular establishment and constitution (Hale, 2013, pp. 123-5).

Türkiye's relations with the Middle East were governed by its economic concerns in the 1980s. After adopting a market economy, the oil-rich Middle Eastern countries were good bazaars for Türkiye's export-oriented economy. Under the pragmatic leadership of Özal, Türkiye strengthened its relations with the Arab states and refrained from choosing a side in the Iraq-Iran conflict, given that both nations relied heavily on Türkiye for their economies. In the 80s, two issues began to dominate Turkish-Syrian relations: *Syria's overt support of the PKK* (Nye & Welsh, 2017, p. 271) and *sharing the water of the Euphrates River* (Carley, 1995,

p. 16). The construction of the Ataturk Dam made the issue even more complicated since Syria demanded more water than the previously agreed level (Hale, 2013, pp. 130-2).

To demonstrate its determination, Türkiye stopped the river from flowing to fill the dam's reservoir. Syria retaliated in kind, stepping up its backing for the PKK and giving its leaders a safe haven (Kanat, 2012, p. 234), primarily Abdullah Ocalan, and training camps for its elements, contrary to the agreement signed in 1987⁴⁸ (Tokmajyan & Khaddour, 2022, p. 4). By playing the Kurdish card, Syria aimed to force Türkiye to concede the Water of Euphrates (Özcan M. , 2008, p. 117).

Because of the Gulf War, Türkiye faced different security risks between 1991 and 1993. The looming *de facto* Kurdish state in northern Iraq became the number one security threat to Türkiye. To prevent such a development, Ankara sought to develop its relations with Syria and Iran. The Turkish foreign minister discussed the security issues with his Syrian counterpart and President Assad in Damascus. Türkiye and Syria agreed on border security and protection *status quo* in the region, but they could not reach an agreement on water-sharing issues (Oran, 2009, pp. 254-7).

These two issues remained the main drivers of Turkish-Syrian relations in the 1990s. Upon seeing that the water issue could not be solved through bilateral talks with Türkiye, Syria took the issue to international platforms, primarily the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Arab states siding with Syria formed a united front against Türkiye and demanded Ankara revise its water policy according to international laws. In addition, Syria signed a military cooperation agreement with Greece that was the final straw for Türkiye. As a response, Türkiye hardened its policy towards Arab states and particularly towards Syria. Simultaneously, Türkiye deepened its cooperation with Israel, especially in the military domain, which marked the changes in its traditional strict neutrality policy (Hale, 2013, p. 128).

Syria consistently denied its backing for the PKK (Carley, 1995, p. 17). On the other hand, in 1998, Ankara hardened its policy on its southern neighbor and threatened to use military force by mobilizing 10 thousand soldiers along the Syrian border (Tür, 2010). To solve the problem, it issued an ultimatum demanding Syria expel Ocalan and close all PKK camps in Syria (Öztiğ, 2019, pp. 118-9). Thanks to Egypt and Iran's mediation, a potential military conflict was averted, and Syria bowed to Türkiye's demands by expelling Ocalan. The Adana Protocol was signed to show officially the end of Syria's support for the PKK. After his father

⁴⁸ The agreement dated 17th July 1987 and was published in the Official Gazette on 10 December 1987.

passed away in 2000, Bashar Assad took over. On his first overseas visit, Turkish President Sezer attended the funeral and was greeted cordially by Assad. Politically and economically, bilateral relations began to develop quickly after that (Özcan M. , 2008, pp. 117-8).

4.1.3. The Justice and Development Party Term, Liberal and Realist Paradigm Shifts

The Justice and Development Party (JDP-AK Party) came to power in 2002 after one of the most destructive economic and political crises in Turkish history. Like many other domains, Turkish foreign policy experienced notable transformations. Instead of Türkiye's traditional security-oriented and hard-power-based foreign policy, a liberal, soft-power-based foreign policy was adopted. Thanks to this policy as well as the new opportunities that emerged after the 9/11 attacks, Türkiye significantly increased its influence in the Middle East by putting a high priority on strengthening ties with the Arab and Muslim countries (Jabbour, 2022, p. 7). So, it became the most influential regional power with its dynamic diplomacy and growing economy by 2010.

In line with the “*strategic depth*” concept and the “*zero problems with the neighbors*” policy, Türkiye was mediating the regional crises such as Syria-Israel, Israel-Palestine, and the Iraqi Civil War. Indeed, Turkish foreign policy in this period was visionary and proactive (Bakır, 2024, p. 146); nevertheless, as explained in detail below, the Arab Uprising and ensuing developments caught Turkish decision-makers unprepared.

The other powers' involvements in regional crises and Ankara's own miscalculations regarding the Syrian conflict caused unprecedented security threats for Türkiye: a *de facto Kurdish state* in northern Syria, *millions of refugees*, and *regional isolation* for a long time. Worsening political and security situations affected Türkiye's foreign and domestic policies (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 6). Türkiye then had to shift its foreign policy towards a tactical-reactive mode by using its military power to address these security risks (Bakır, 2024, p. 147). In doing so, Türkiye was able to stop the establishment of a Kurdish state along its border with Syria, but it also suffered certain unfavorable political and economic consequences.

The JDP came to power with the election held in November 2002 (Akkas, 2022). The newly formed government continued or even accelerated democratic reforms to meet Copenhagen's criteria for achieving the country's long-standing aim: *to be a full member of the European Union (EU)*. By doing this, the JDP leadership, which sought to increase its relations with the Middle Eastern countries (Natil, 2016, p. 76), attempted to abandon the conventional

security-oriented foreign policy in favor of a more proactive and liberal strategy based on soft power. To this end, Türkiye's foreign policy had to undergo a de-securitization process per domestic liberalization and democratization that were inescapable requirements for EU membership (Kösebalaban, 2011, p. 182). By this turn, it was also aimed to reassure the Kemalist establishment and Western countries that were dubious about JDP's political Islamic background.

This new policy, particularly in the Middle East, was essentially a continuation of Turgut Özal's policies in the 1980s seeking to strengthen its trade relations with the region. However, the JDP government placed equal importance on developing political and security relations with those nations as it did on strengthening economic ties (Başkan, 2019, p. 88). This liberal, humanitarian, and value-based approach was coined as the "*strategic concept*" or "*zero problems with the neighbors policy*" by Ahmet Davutoğlu⁴⁹ (2004, p. 4), who served as a political advisor, foreign minister, and finally prime minister in successive JDP governments. The basic tenets of Türkiye's Middle Eastern policy were exerting soft power, finding a peaceful solution to regional disputes through political dialogue and rhythmic diplomacy, and creating a peace zone through economic interdependence (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 4). By employing cultural and historical affinities, the JDP aimed to increase Türkiye's sphere of influence in the regions once ruled by the Ottomans (Natil, 2016, p. 75).

The domestic and international conditions were favorable for the JDP's pursuing pro-Islamic liberal policy (Kösebalaban, 2011, p. 4). As for domestic conditions, the traditional principles of Kemalist foreign policy: "*Westernization*," "*balance of power*," and *status quo* fell short of satisfying the needs of modern Türkiye's developing economy and ambitious society in the first place (Işıksal, 2018, p. 18). Therefore, Erdoğan and his party received the support of a broad coalition of conservatives, liberals, Kurds, and certain left-wing politicians, who had fed up with military intervention in state affairs, particularly after the postmodern 1997 coup, and wished to further democratize the country (Dalay & Toremark, 2023). Steps for democratization undermined the Turkish Army's traditional influence on domestic politics (İnat & Cicioğlu, 2024, p. 89). Indeed, in parallel with the EU negotiations, the government

⁴⁹ Ahmet Davutoğlu was blamed for problematic issues in Turkish foreign policies in the following years and forced to resign from the prime ministry, demonstrating the undesirable consequences and miscalculations.

made an effort to bolster civilian oversight over the army and eliminate Ankara's bureaucratic tutelage regime (Neset et al., 2021, p. 13), which was also known as the "*deep state*"⁵⁰.

In addition, Türkiye was still struggling with its financial crisis, and developing economic relations with the Middle Eastern countries was deemed inevitable for economic recovery. What is more, the Turkish people were willing to give the JDP a chance at success because they had had enough of the economic and political instability brought on by a succession of weak coalition governments in the 1990s. Lastly, the EU membership bid, which was beneficial for Ankara in various ways as detailed below, required the use of soft power rather than hard power and peaceful solutions to conflicts.

In terms of international factors, the US occupation of Iraq demonstrated that external military intervention was not an effective way of imposing democracy. When the US and other Western powers decreased engagement in the region, Türkiye filled the power vacuum (Altunışık, 2010, p. 10). Additionally, Iran's growing influence in post-war Iraq caused common threats for Türkiye and the GCC countries, and bilateral engagement was strengthened far more than it previously was to mitigate those risks (Dogan-Akkas & El-Berni, 2022, p. 6). Furthermore, Türkiye's ban on the US from using its bases for Iraq's occupation, thanks to the Turkish Parliament's veto on March 1, 2003, increased Türkiye's prestige in the Middle East, particularly among the Arab public. In addition, the political Islamist background of the JDP's core leadership also facilitated a new opening toward the Muslim world.

Unlike Erbakan, Erdoğan skillfully managed to do this without disregarding Western-oriented foreign policy and appalling secular opposition⁵¹ in Türkiye in the early years of his tenure. Taking all those factors into account, the JDP successfully initiated an "*active engagement*" policy towards the Arab and Muslim world by benefiting from the Western and Eastern identities of Türkiye (Özcan, 2008, p. 104). The rejection of the Ottoman legacy in previous periods was deemed a strategic mistake as it could contribute to Türkiye's global importance as a soft power means (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 11).

In accordance with liberal/neoliberal theory, developing economic relations paves the way to peaceful solutions to conflicts. Accordingly, the mutual economic ties with Middle Eastern countries played a significant role from the onset of the JDP period. In line with this approach, Türkiye sought to strengthen its economic relations with the Middle Eastern

⁵⁰ Davutoğlu (2004, p. 37) contends that the problematic legitimacy relationship between the deep state and the general will of public was the cause of Türkiye's past foreign policy failures.

⁵¹ *Westernization* and *democratization* had also been important tenets of foreign policy in the Republican Era (Gönlübol & Kürkcüoğlu, 1995, p. 371), before the JDP came to power.

countries to create a peaceful and stable region like the EU zone (Işıksal, 2018, p. 19). It was believed that if economies interacted, regional countries would stop supporting terrorism and using force against each other to achieve their financial goals.

Accordingly, foreign direct investments (FDI) of the GCC countries were used by Türkiye effectively for economic recovery, but at the same time, it has increased its investments in Egypt and other Arab states (Altunışık, 2010, p. 19). Free trade agreements were signed with different countries. As a result of these developments, Türkiye's trade volume with 22 Arab League member states doubled between 2002 and 2008 and reached 40 billion USD in a year (Kösebalaban, 2011, p. 177). Put differently, Türkiye translated its historical cultural bonds with the region into tangible results in the economic sphere.

Türkiye has also adeptly used its developing economic ties to normalize its diplomatic relations with the neighboring countries. By breaking taboos, Türkiye initiated economic cooperation with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which was regarded as an existential threat to Türkiye's territorial integrity previously (Demir İ. , 2007, p. 197). In May 2012, an agreement was signed to transfer Kurdish oil and gas to Türkiye (Işıksal, 2018, p. 21). More crucially, the superiority of Türkiye's emerging export-oriented economic model was used to encourage Arab states suffering serious socioeconomic issues to implement political and economic reforms as Türkiye did in line with its EU candidacy (Altunışık, 2010, p. 19).

In parallel to its economic weight, Türkiye's diplomatic influence (*soft power*) also grew in the Middle East. A Turkish diplomat, *Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu*, was selected as secretary general of OIC for the first time with the support of Arab states in 2004 (Aras, 2005, p. 95), and the GCC declared Türkiye as the first-ever strategic partner on September 2, 2008 (Başkan, 2019, p. 88). It is significant since this was the GCC's first to recognize any non-Gulf country as a strategic partner (Dogan-Akkas & El-Berni, 2022, p. 4). In addition, Türkiye won the election for a non-permanent member of the UNSC with a record 153 votes in 2008 (Gözen, 2021, pp. 58-9).

During this period, Türkiye pursued active (*rhythmic*) diplomacy and played a positive interlocutor role in some intrastate and interstate issues, too. Unlike Iran, which was mainly considered a destabilizing actor, Türkiye was deemed a “*constructive actor*” or “*honest broker*” in the regional conflicts (Altunışık, 2010, p. 14). As a dependable partner for both parties, namely Israel and Palestine, Türkiye supported the Palestinian peace process. Türkiye aimed to create a stable and peaceful region. As part of this strategy, it acted as a mediator in the

Syrian-Israeli negotiations (Stein & Bleek, 2012, pp. 138-41). In 2010, Türkiye launched a new initiative between Western powers and Iran to remove the threat of nuclear weapons from the region (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016, p. 4), which was a serious issue for Türkiye as well.

As stated above, Türkiye played a constructive role in the peaceful settlement of domestic issues, too. It mediated the talks between the Hamas and Fatah factions in Palestine and played the same role in Lebanon between Shia and Sunni groups. In the similar vein, Türkiye brokered the negotiation between the US and Sunni groups for a more effective political process (Altunışık, 2010, p. 14) as well as played a conciliatory role between Sunni and Shia groups in Iraq in order to encourage their participation in the 2005 parliamentary elections (Işıksal, 2018, p. 20). Ankara also put efforts into settling border issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Romano, 2020). Türkiye's utmost caution in not taking a side and positioning itself at an equal distance with all parties facilitated its mediation endeavors during that era.

Türkiye's strategic alliance with NATO and its bid for EU membership acted as a catalyst for not only its democratic transition and economic progress at home but also developing relations with the Middle East. The prospect of full EU membership strengthened its standing internationally (Neset et al., 2021, p. 9) and regionally. Türkiye, with its thriving market economy, embracing of democracy, and moderate Islam, began to be considered a role model for Arab states (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 13). Maybe because of that reason, the press conference at which Türkiye's EU candidacy became official was followed by 200 representatives of the Arab media (Aras, 2005, pp. 89-90).

For Arab states, Türkiye was the gateway for access to the Western economy and Western lifestyle (Altunışık, 2010, p. 18) thanks to its speedy democratic and economic transformation between 2003 and 2007. It was not a coincidence that Turkish soap operas became immensely popular among Arab audiences, and the number of Arab tourists visiting Türkiye increased incredibly in this period in a way to conjure up accessible modernity (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013, pp. 17-9).

Nonetheless, the EU accession process slowed down after 2007, partly due to *Merkel and Sarkozy's* blockage (İnat & Cicioğlu, 2024, p. 76) and because of nationalist (*ulusalci*) opposition in Türkiye. In response to this development, Türkiye started to add more weight to its relations with the Arab and Turkic states, and the Muslim world at large to play a leadership role at the regional level (Ataman & Yeşiltaş, 2024, p. 9). The religious and cultural ties with

those states became more and more apparent in the public sphere (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 4).

Meanwhile, the US and Türkiye launched a new initiative to restore their strained relations in the White House meeting between US President Bush and then-Prime Minister Erdoğan on November 5, 2007. From that point onward, Türkiye and the US had convergent policies regarding the democratic reformation in the Middle East within the context of the US-led *Broader Middle East Initiative*, in which Türkiye played a significant role (Noi, 2024, p. 112).

Whereas Türkiye's regional policies were coherent with the US's, particularly after US President Obama's election, relations with Israel deteriorated after 2004. In fact, the JDP managed to pursue a balanced policy between Israel⁵² and the Arab states for not appalling its own secularist establishment and its western allies. However, Israel's increasing aggression against Palestinians strained bilateral relations. The collapse of Israeli-Syrian peace talks because of Israel's operation toward Gaza in 2009, during which Türkiye felt deceived by Israel, was a critical turning point in Turkish-Israeli relationships. Then, Erdoğan and other Turkish officials publicly took a more critical stance against Israel. The well-known “*one-minute*” incident occurred in Davos, and Israel's foreign minister's public humiliation of the Turkish ambassador was the last straw that broke the camel's back (Hale, 2013, pp. 229-32).

For the Israeli side, there were also some unnerving developments. Türkiye's official recognition of democratically elected Hamas and mediation attempts for Iran's nuclear program, as well as deepening ties with Syria, led to widening the existing gap between the two countries. The Mavi Marmara flotilla incident, resulting in 9 Turkish citizens losing their lives due to Israel's attack, not only brought Turkish-Israeli relations to a historical low but also created an additional wedge between Ankara and its Western allies (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016, p. 4). With the instigations of the Jewish lobby in the US and Israeli officials, these developments were portrayed as an “*axis shift*” of Türkiye's foreign policy from traditional Western-oriented principles toward the Arab and Muslim world beyond (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 5).

After its re-election in 2007, the JDP started to pursue a more assertive and relatively independent foreign policy commensurate with Türkiye's growing national economy and

⁵² Trade volume between Türkiye and Israel tripled in this period of the JDP Term from 1.3 billion US dollars in 2002 to 3.38 billion US dollars in 2008 (Esmailzadeh, 2014, p. 331).

developing soft power capacity. Accordingly, Ankara demanded to have a greater voice in the Middle Eastern issues (Işıksal, 2018, pp. 19-20). Türkiye's increasing influence coincides with the Western powers' indifference to the region, and Türkiye seemed to be a central actor in many issues, from defending Palestinians' rights to criticizing Israel's nuclear weapons (Stein & Bleek, 2012, p. 143).

The new attitude in foreign policy was labeled as *Neo-Ottomanism*⁵³ by those critical of Türkiye (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016, p. 8), as such "drifting" away from its Western orientation (Maziad & Sotiriadis, 2020). But these arguments were a bit superficial. Because Türkiye had just been trying to diversify its foreign policy (Ataman, 2024, p. 46). Many attribute this policy shift to "*autonomy theory*," implying that rather than merely shifting its ideology or bloc allegiance, Türkiye sought a more independent behavior in its foreign policy conduct (Neset et al., 2021, p. 36). As a rising middle power, Ankara took a more assertive stance on regional issues, which was misinterpreted by Western powers as abandonment of secular democracy (Dost, 2023) and expansionism.

It is fair to say that despite soured relations with Israel, Türkiye's Middle Eastern policy during the first decade under JDP rule was commendable (Cafiero & Wagner, 2016). With the help of its idealistic and soft-power-based foreign policy as well as its economic success, Türkiye seemed to be a prominent power and an "*ideal model*" (Telhami, 2011) for the Arab public for much-needed transformation in the region. Positive Arab opinion of Türkiye reached its climax in 2011 (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2011, p. 23). Erdoğan was extremely popular among the Arab public; he also ranked as the most admired leader in the world in 2010 and 2011, according to the results of another poll (Telhami, 2011). In summary, just before the eruption of the Arab Spring, Türkiye appeared to have the upper hand in the Middle East.

By the time the Arab Spring broke, Syria was the most visible and successful example of the JDP's no conflicts with neighbors policy. When it came to power first, the JDP attached significant importance to improving the relationships with Syria because of the risks stemming from the US's Iraq invasion (Tür, 2010). With this impetus, pressing issues, *i.e.*, *water sharing and Hatay*, were ignored (Yeşilyurt & Akdevelioğlu, 2009, p. 44). As Türkiye filled the power

⁵³ According to Maziad and Sotiriadis (2020), *Turkish Neo-Ottomanism* differs from other Islamic ideological models in that it focuses on a revival of a "greater Türkiye" that renews a classical, civilizational model of the Ottoman Empire's legacy anchored by economic, military, and political power.

vacuum in the region, the Turkish-Syrian relations improved quickly in every sphere, from security to tourism.

In this period, the Turkish-Syrian relations experienced their historic peak. Thanks to President Sezer's attendance at the Hafez Assad funeral in 2000 and Bashar Assad's return visit in 2004, both of which were the first time in the countries' history, diplomatic relations gained new momentum (Kanat, 2012, p. 244). At the end of the same year, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan paid a visit to Damascus, where a free trade agreement was signed. The bilateral relations reached the strategic level with the establishment of the "*High Level Strategic Cooperation Council*" and the lifting of visa requirements in 2009 (Tür, 2010). Türkiye and Syria held a number of joint cabinet meetings in the following period (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018, p. 16). Furthermore, Türkiye played a mediating role in the Israel and Syria peace negotiations until the process collapsed with Israel's Gaza attacks in 2009.

Thanks to increasing mutual trust and frequent face-to-face meetings, the trade volume quadrupled between 2003 and 2008 and reached 2.5 billion USD in 2011 (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 16). The tourism sector also experienced swift growth, with a 3% increase annually by 2011 (Işıksal, 2018, p. 20). The number of Turks and Syrians visiting each other's countries increased steadily and hit a record just before the Arab Spring (*Figure 4-1*). The economic activities increased at a rapid pace and resulted in mutual benefits (Gözen, 2021, p. 359) that Türkiye and Syria decided to enlarge the free trade zone towards Jordan and Lebanon, and these four states, namely the *Levant Quartet*, signed a free trade agreement in 2010 (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018, p. 16). By 2009, Türkiye's trade volume with these three countries had reached 3.5 billion USD, accounting for 10% of the country's total trade volume.

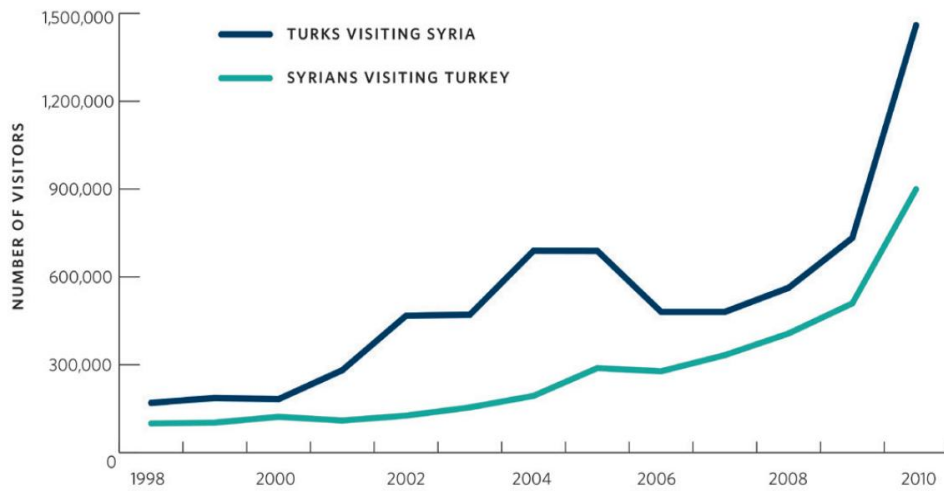


Figure 4- 1 : Number of Turks and Syrians Visiting Each Other's Countries, 1998–2010

Source: Tokmajyan & Khaddour, 2022, p. 5

Military relations improved significantly as well; the Turkish and Syrian Armies conducted a joint military exercise, albeit on a small scale, in April 2009 (Tür, 2010). Briefly, in line with the JDP's soft-power approach, bilateral relations between Türkiye and Syria, like those with other Arab countries, improved remarkably between 2002 and 2011. It was widely believed that to improve mutual ties even further, both countries and their peoples were prepared to put the long-standing disagreements behind them. Generally speaking, the relationship between the two countries was promising. It was projected to move towards regional integration before the Arab Spring. Although increasing relations with Syria were regarded as a threat to Israel by the USA, Türkiye was thought to be close to attaining its ultimate goal of *establishing a stable and peaceful zone in its immediate environment*, right before the Arab Uprising.

4.2. Arab Spring and Syrian Civil War

In the wake of long-term socio-economic unrests, the Arab Spring erupted suddenly and swept across the region. This bottom-up movement not only affected the authoritarian regimes in the region (Kaplan, 2023) but also shook the main pillars of Türkiye's Middle Eastern policy (Natil, 2016, p. 77). Like many other regional and international powers, Türkiye was also caught unprepared for the Arab Spring (Hale, 2013, pp. 142-3). For this reason, when

the Arab Spring began in Tunisia, Türkiye was cautious of the developments because the outcomes of the spring were unpredictable.

However, after the relatively swift fall of authoritarian leaders in Tunisia and Egypt, Turkish decision-makers started to consider the Arab Uprising as a “*naturalization process of abnormal order*” (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016, p. 5) or a “*grand restoration*” of Islamic civilization (Kirişçi & Sloat, 2019, p. 6), as well as a historical opportunity to increase Türkiye’s sphere of influence in the region (Özcan T. , 2011; Jabbour, 2022, p. 8). It was expected that the ascending of the Muslim Brotherhood or its affiliated factions to power in the Arab states that were governed by authoritarian leaders previously (Romano, 2020) served as a catalyst for Türkiye’s regional leadership (Neset et al., 2021, p. 33).

Like Türkiye, the West also embraced the developments enthusiastically at the beginning (Noi, 2024, p. 115). The Obama Administration in the US perceived the Arab Spring as a facilitator for democratic transition in the Middle East, which would ultimately lead to full integration of the region into the international community (Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 247). In this regard, the Western powers stated that Türkiye would be a model for this democratic transformation with its unique characteristics, reconciling democracy and secularism (Joobani & Adısönmez, 2018, p. 50).

As understood from Erdoğan’s address during his visit to Cairo after the revolution, in which he called Muslim countries to make reforms towards secularism, Türkiye was also ready to play this role (Aydıntaşbas & Bianco, 2022, p. 4). At that time, Türkiye’s approach was consistent with those of its Western allies, both desiring speedy and peaceful democratic transitions. For this reason, Ankara provides an overabundance of support to democratic transition during the early phases of the Arab Spring (Neset et al., 2021, p. 33).

Accordingly, putting aside its ambivalent position, Türkiye declared its support for demonstrators demanding democratic reforms and the establishment of governments based on popular support and legitimacy (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 6). While the protests were ongoing in Egypt, Erdoğan called for Mubarak’s step down in line with the request of the masses. He was the first leader to do this, and it was a bold move considering the close ties between Egypt and Ankara at that time (ibid., p. 9). The Brotherhood-affiliated Muhammed Morsi won the presidential race in Egypt through the first-ever democratic election in June 2012. Türkiye, along with Qatar, rushed to provide diplomatic and financial support to the new regime (Natil, 2016, p. 77).

However, for various reasons, western countries and the Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, did not welcome this development. Ankara’s aspirations for

welcoming friendly regimes in the region caused friction with other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 5) in the following period. The Gulf monarchies perceived the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as a grave and immediate threat to both their future and the stability of the region. While Türkiye embraced the popular uprisings, they began to support the anti-revolutionary powers to preserve the regional order intact (Jabbour, 2022, p. 9).

Regarding the Western powers, they lost their initial enthusiasm upon seeing that free and fair elections across the Middle East gave rise to the emergence of anti-Western governments, as occurred in Palestine in 2006. Their support for the Arab Spring faded away gradually as they put their interests in first place. In other words, once again national interests prevailed over liberal principles. By virtue of those stances, Mohammed Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood-backed government were deposed by the Egyptian military in July 2013.

This incident coincided with the anti-government Gezi protests in Türkiye, and Erdoğan and his friends described both as a plot against democratically elected governments in the Middle East (Gasparetto, 2019). Türkiye's fierce criticism of the coup and its welcoming Brotherhood leaders who fled from Egypt not only resulted in a total collapse of its diplomatic relations with Egypt (Başkan, 2019, pp. 92-3) but also deteriorated its relations with the Gulf Monarchies, primarily with the UAE and Saudis, who were trying to maintain the *status quo* in regional politics (Yeşiltaş, 2017), as indicated above.

Although the Arab Spring has made an impact on almost all Arab states in one way or another, the ones in Syria, Egypt, and Libya were the most important for Türkiye in terms of economic and political consequences. Partly because of its erratic policies and mostly due to other powers' interventions, the Syrian crisis has evolved into a bloody sectarian civil war, which has posed the greatest security threats to Türkiye since WWII (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 4). Nevertheless, to understand Türkiye's somewhat inconsistent Syrian policy during the Arab Spring, its position in the Libyan conflict should be examined first.

When the popular uprising canalized towards Libya and Syria to overthrow the last two remaining anti-western regimes in the region (Işıksal, 2018, p. 22), Türkiye adopted a hesitant and neutral position considering its good ties and economic interests, unlike its position in Egyptian crises (Natil, 2016, p. 77). Considering its interests and 30.000 Turkish citizens living in this country, the Libyan case presented a complicated problem to Ankara (Hale, 2013, pp. 142-3).

Ankara declared its opposition to any external intervention at first (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 8) and tried to convince Colonel Gaddafi to implement democratic reforms. Nevertheless, realizing that it was left out of the process by Western powers (Öztop, 2019, pp. 112-3), Türkiye also intervened in the process by supporting NATO operations. This “U” turn demonstrated the limit of Türkiye’s soft power policy in the constantly changing dynamics of the Middle East. Moreover, Turkish officials also understood that it was almost impossible to achieve the nationalist interests in this region unless applying hard power (Gözen, 2021, p. 397).

After realizing that its efforts yielded no tangible results and that NATO's intervention led to a regime change in Libya and a subsequent bloody civil war. Expectation for an easy power change⁵⁴ (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 5), as had happened in other countries, was the beginning of crucial mistakes made by the JDP decision-makers transforming the Arab Spring into the “*Turkish Autumn*” (Işıksal, 2018, p. 28), for a while at least. The country found itself in a difficult position in the face of emerging risks and threats to its national security (Yükselen, 2024, p. 64). As a result, Ankara was forced to renounce its zero-problem approach to address multiple threats (Noi, 2024, p. 115) emanating from the instability in neighboring countries. The Syrian conflict marked the beginning of a major shift in Turkish foreign policy from a soft-power to hard-power direction.

The Syrian conflict erupted in 2011 when the Arab Spring finally reached. People held demonstrations in the beginning to seek more freedom and economic prosperity. The Syrian Army attempted to suppress these peaceful aspirations using force violently. In response to the Assad regime's aggression, opposition groups grew more extremist. As a result, the Syrian conflict shifted from a peaceful rebellion to a sectarian civil war (Nye & Welsh, 2017, p. 271), with the rise of Sunni extreme groups, an influx of foreign fighters, and increasing external interventions directly or via proxies. One of the interviewees⁵⁵, a Syrian national, indicated that “*if the Assad Regime had imposed reforms by eliminating rampant corruption, the rebellion would not have turned into a civil war*”. Unfortunately, however, Syria has experienced one of

⁵⁴ In fact, there were indications of a sudden shift in power. For example, Riyad Hijab, the former prime minister of Syria, claimed that the regime was about to fall when he fled to Jordan on August 6, 2012, after losing control of 30% of the country (The Guardian, 2011).

⁵⁵ Interview (on 15th Sep 2023) with **S.M.A.**, who is a Syrian teacher who fled to Türkiye in 2014 after his hometown, Aleppo, was targeted by the regime. He worked in a Turkish university between 2014 and 2021, but then he moved to the UAE due to the increasing anti-refugee attitude in Türkiye.

the most violent civil wars in history, with multiple third-party interventions to support either the regime or the rebels.

According to general belief, the Syrian conflict arose because of pre-existing conflicts between various ethnic and religious groups (*Figure 4-2*). In fact, the Assad regime relied on its solidly minority Alawite (Nusayri) community and the fragile alliance with other minority groups such as Christians and Druzes (Karimi & Shafae, 2018, p. 65). Although Alawites constituted the main core of the regime, it did not consist only of them. The support of the Sunni merchant class in Aleppo and Damascus was an important element in the protection and continuation of the regime (Kılıç, 2019, p. 26).

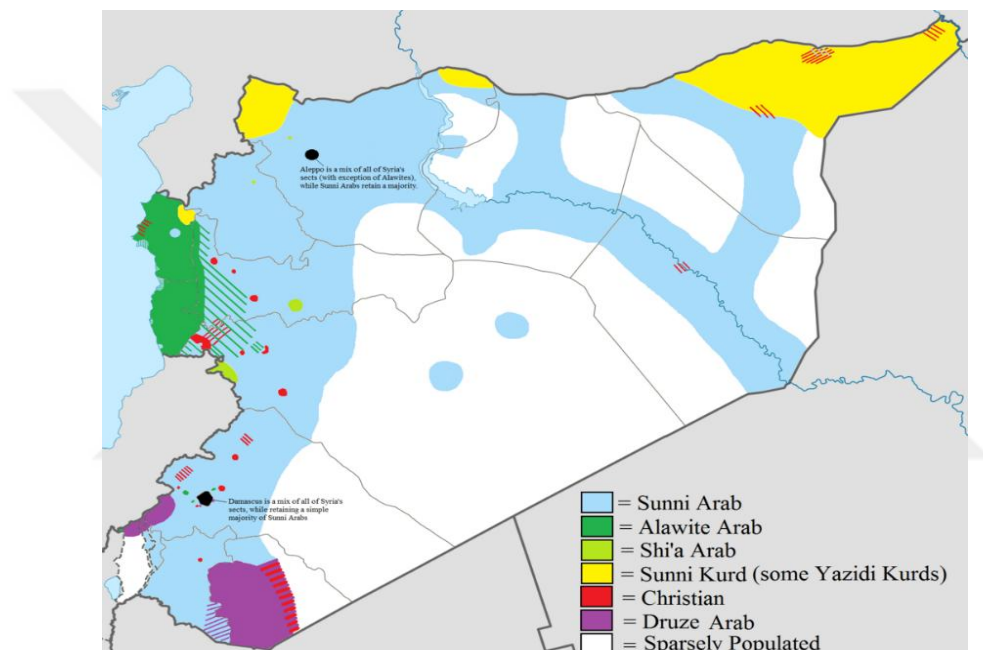


Figure 4- 2 : Map of Syrian Ethnic and

However, Ibold (2019, p. 10) argues that the socio-economic problems triggered the civil war⁵⁶. In 2010 Syria was one of the most corrupt countries in the world, 127/180 to be precise, and wealth was being concentrated in the hands of a limited number of Baath regime officials. When the civil uprising started in March 2011, Syria had been ruled by one family, enriching itself at the expense of the great majority of Syrians, in practice (Karimi & Shafae, 2018, p. 62). The respondent, who witnessed the emergence of the crises firsthand, likewise argues that the preceding economic crisis was the primary cause of the Syrian uprising (*he*

⁵⁶ Robert Kaplan (2023) also argues that “*the Arab Spring demonstrated not merely a yearning for democracy but also the rejection of tired and corrupt dictatorial rule*”.

called all this happening not an uprising but a revolution by emphasis). He stated that “*an ordinary public teacher was unable to buy a house even after 40 years of teaching with an average pay.*”

As a matter of fact, when Bashar Assad came into power, he created his own bourgeois through his opening policies and economic reforms at the expense of the rural population who had supported the regime till then (Çavuşoğlu, 2022, p. 24). A record-breaking drought that lasted from 2006 to 2010 made socioeconomic issues worse and pushed farmers to migrate to cities, which led to an unprecedentedly high unemployment rate (Laub, 2023). Another interviewee, *Mr. Nidal Mahmud*⁵⁷, also agreed that alongside not having freedom of speech and ethnic fragmentation, economic factors played an important role in the Syrian Revolution. He says:

“As a person who used to live in Syria, I think main reason for social unrest was that Syrian lacked a lot of things before the Arab Spring. The economy was bad, we did not have technology, for instance we did not have even credit cards to purchase items. The situation comparing with surrounding and European countries was bad. Before the war, Syria was crippled by immense economic burdens such as high unemployment, stifling corruption and the widespread drought that had a substantial impact on the country’s agriculture sector and led to significant displacement of residents both internally and externally. These were the economic stressors that after all have clearly raised the population’s anger with the government. Basically, Syria was being run by a big mafia, government, or Assad family I mean. These people had everything; the rest of the people had nothing. Except them, there were no rich people in Syria. My father had a title, but even we were not high-class citizens, middle class or poor would be more appropriate to define our status. So basically, people had enough of Assad and his family before the revolution”

Regardless of the true nature of conflicts, the human and financial costs of the Syrian conflict have been very destructive, according to data from the United Nations. In addition to the damaged hearts and minds, more than half a million people have been killed, and half the country’s population has become displaced or refugees, scattering over 130 countries. By the end of 2018, real GDP had lost 54% of its pre-conflict level. Almost 90% of the Syrians live in poverty; children's life expectancy in the country has been reduced by 13 years since the beginning of the conflicts (Reuters, 2021).

⁵⁷ Interview (on 10th May 2024) with **Mr. Nidal Mahmud**, who is a Syrian computer engineer who fled to Türkiye in 2017 after working for both the Syrian opposition, firstly, and then for the Syrian Regime for cyber-attack purposes. He observed all the phases of the Civil War firsthand in his hometown, Damascus. He had a chance to look at the war from opposing perspectives, which is important for this research study.

While all this was happening, Türkiye had to recalibrate its Syrian policy depending on changing domestic and global developments, by and large. Incoherent policies have evolved into four phases: calling for political reforms (March 2011–September 2011); the attempts to change the regime and support opposition groups (fall 2011–summer 2013); isolating itself amid the growing threat posed by the PKK/PYD (summer 2013–summer 2015); and, finally, directly engaging militarily in the conflict (summer 2015–2022) (IMMAP, 2022, p. 10).

In the beginning, Erdoğan tried to convince Bashar Assad to initiate a democratic reform process for a controlled democratic transition (Stein & Bleek, 2012, p. 146). To this end, Erdoğan talked with Assad on the phone, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Intelligence Service Head Hakan Fidan visited Damascus, and President Gül sent a letter to Assad (Gözen, 2021, p. 313). In this period, Ankara wanted Bashar Assad to be Syria's Gorbachev, but he opted for being Milosevic instead (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 9). Simultaneously, Türkiye also gave full support to diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful solution to the crisis (Polat, 2020, p. 60).

Even though it was denying the military intervention at this stage, Türkiye stepped further and imposed economic sanctions on Syria after the Arab League's decision to do so (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 17), in reaction to the regime's increasingly brutal repression and widespread human rights violations. Soon afterwards, however, Ankara apprehended that Assad's remaining in power was deteriorating the humanitarian conditions in Syria and posing a grave security threat to Türkiye; it became more vocal about the necessity of humanitarian intervention (Tokmajyan & Khaddour, 2022, p. 6).

Having seen no signs of multinational intervention, Türkiye adopted a new strategy to oust the regime from power by supporting the opposition groups since it was considered the best policy to reach a peaceful solution for the Syrian conflict (Öztığ, 2019, p. 120). To this end, Türkiye also hosted the leading figures of the Syrian opposition in İstanbul at a conference on March 30, 2012, which caused significant tension between Ankara and Damascus. Syrian officials publicly interpreted this move as Türkiye's declaration of war (Kılıç, 2019, p. 42). In the meantime, Türkiye demanded the creation of a buffer zone to prevent the influx of refugees, but this was not approved by its Western allies (Natil, 2016, p. 78). Then, Türkiye allowed the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to coordinate rebel groups against the regime in its territory (Başkan, 2019, p. 90).

Nevertheless, this policy has failed owing to a few miscalculations and misjudgments. To begin with, other regional and global powers' intentions and possible acts could not be predicted. It was believed that the Western powers would carry out a military incursion to remove the Assad regime, as happened in Libya, and the regime would fall swiftly (Natil, 2016, p. 83). Yet, having learned their lesson in Libya, China and Russia strongly opposed regime change through military intervention. Therefore, they used their veto powers in the UNSC to block any attempts to this purpose in Syria (Findley & Teo, 2006, pp. 14-5). Ankara did not fully acknowledge the US's reluctance to engage in ground operations following its experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, it underestimated the strong support that Russia and Iran provided to the Assad regime, which was a key ally in the region (Gözen, 2021, p. 433).

Moreover, the strength and resilience of the Assad regime were underestimated by Ankara. The entire system in Syria was being tightly controlled by the Mukhabarat and secret police, and the military leaders showed loyalty to the regime due to close family ties. Although the regime was regarded as a pure minority-Alawite rule, it managed to receive substantial support among the middle-class Sunni and other minority groups (Ferris & Kirişci, 2016, pp. 19,23), following the radicalization of some factions in opposition. On the other hand, the capacity of Syrian rebels was exaggerated without acknowledging their lack of organization and capability (Işıksal, 2018, p. 26).

Furthermore, Syria's prevailing anti-colonial sentiment based on the Baathist ideology and unique historical experience was also ignored by Turkish policymakers. In fact, there had been some suspicion among the Arabs, dating back to the Young Turk era (Carley, 1995, p. 16), regarding Türkiye's presence in the region, which presented difficulties for Ankara pursuing its policies at the later stages of the Syrian crisis. Although Türkiye declared its attachment to the territorial integrity of Syria on each platform, Maziad and Sotiriadis (2020) speculate that Ankara's support for the transnational Muslim Brotherhood and its alliance with Qatar exacerbated existing fears for Turkish (*cultural*) expansionism in the region.

4.3. Emerging of DEASH and Multiple Security Threats

Following the failure of Türkiye's plan A, which envisaged the rapid fall of the Assad regime and the rise of pro-Turkish forces to power in Syria, developments started to spiral out of Ankara's control, and Türkiye was confronted with a variety of security concerns (Yeşiltaş,

Seren, & Özçelik, 2017, p. 14): *the emergence of a de facto Kurdish statelet along the Syrian border and the DEASH in Eastern Syria, the refugee influx towards its soil, the strained relations with the western allies and the Arab states, dealing with the radical-Islamist groups in the areas under its control, bitter economic losses, and so forth. As a result of these emerging security issues, Türkiye applied more security-oriented policies, which paved the way to more challenging conditions for Turkish foreign policy, unfortunately.*

As regional and global third-party actors supported their proxy groups to advance their geopolitical interests with various agendas (Laub, 2023), Syria became a battleground for multiple conflicts fueled by foreign forces. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah have always backed the Assad government to safeguard their key ally and regional interests (Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 248). Iran, in desperate need of a friendly government in Damascus, has dispatched volunteer Shia fighters from the region commonly referred to as the Shia Crescent to fight alongside the regime. Hezbollah has also served alongside Iranian forces as a key Assad ally throughout the Syrian civil war (Van Veen, 2019).

Russia, to protect its vested interests in the region, actively participated in the Syrian crisis and supported the Assad regime at any cost for various reasons. After witnessing the impact of NATO operations in Libya, which altered the regime and diminished Russia's influence in the Arab world, the protection of the Assad regime took on strategic importance for Russia. In the diplomatic realm, Russia blocked any attempt in the UNSC for humanitarian intervention in Syria. Even after the chemical weapons were used against civilians in 2013, the Assad regime could not be held responsible for this crime against humanity (Şen & Şahin, 2020, pp. 248,252).

Secondly, in addition to being the closest ally in the region since the Soviet's time (Carley, 1995), Syria had been one of the most important customers for Russian-made weaponry. This arms-selling increased particularly after the Syrian war (Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 252); therefore, the protection of the regime constituted a significance for this lucrative trade as well. Under these circumstances, Russia aggressively intervened in the conflict when the Assad regime came on the verge of falling in October 2015 (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 6), shifting the balance towards the regime's side⁵⁸. Contrary to Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, which

⁵⁸ The US has lost its hegemony in the Middle East after Russia penetrated the region thanks to the Syrian Civil War (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 4).

experienced regime change in the course of the Arab Spring, the Syrian Baath regime managed to stick to power thanks to Russian support (Ibold, 2019, p. 9).

When the Syrian conflict erupted, Türkiye had convergent policies with the US and the Sunni Gulf monarchies for different reasons. While western powers and Türkiye were considering the fall of Assad as key to a bloodless transition, the Gulf monarchies pursued this approach to diminish Iran's influence in the region (Cafiero, 2024). However, after DEASH emerged in 2014, Türkiye's position became more complex. Consequently, its allies' policies began to differ. The US virtually involved itself in the conflicts by providing direct air support and sending its special forces to help the PKK-affiliated elements in eastern Syria (Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 248).

According to Larrabee (2016, p. 70), whereas the US was collaborating with the YPG/PYD to defeat DEASH, Türkiye claimed that priority had to be given to overthrowing the Assad regime as it was the root cause of the emergence of terrorist activities, including DEASH and PKK. Contrary to Türkiye's position, US officials worried⁵⁹ that a speedy toppling of the Assad regime might result in the collapse of all law and order in Syria, and thereby DEASH would expand its influence in the region.

In parallel to DEASH's increasing effectiveness in the region, Hezbollah and other Shia militia groups intensified their military support for the regime. Indeed, the Syrian conflict evolved from peaceful rebellion to a sectarian civil war after the rise of radical Sunni groups like al-Nusra and DEASH and the influx of foreign fighters in favor of or against the regime. The possibility that DEASH or other radical groups would replace the Assad regime if it fell sparked growing fears for the fate of Syria's minorities and moderate opposition, too (Findley & Teo, 2016, pp. 14-7). The Syrian interviewee shared his observations:

“While we were still in the hope of a speedy and smooth transition to democracy, these radical groups began to mushroom all over the place. Nobody invited them; they came to Syria not to protect civilian people or support revolution but to impose their brutal rule. Just because of their senseless acts, not only did the revolution lose its momentum, but we also lost our hopes”.

⁵⁹ The attack by radical Islamists on the US Benghazi consulate in 2012 that resulted in the death of Ambassador Christopher Stevens has changed US Middle East policies substantially under the influence of the press and public (Jablonski, 2022, p. 50).

Of the security problems Türkiye faced, the establishment of a *de facto* independent Kurdish state in Syria was unquestionably the most serious one. The Syrian Army withdrew from northeastern Syria in order to combat the Sunni opposition, producing a power vacuum that enabled Kurdish organizations to realize their long-term objective (Kaya & Whiting, 2017, pp. 79-80). By filling the void quickly, YPG/PYD, deemed by Türkiye as a branch of the PKK (Hlavsova, Tamchynova, & Havlova, 2018, p. 34), seized control of towns in the region and expanded its territorial control by expelling other ethnic groups. In 2016, the YPG/PKK announced its plan to form a *so-called* federative governance by uniting the cantons of *Jazerra*, *Ayn el-Arab*, and *Afrin* (Öztop, 2019, pp. 121-3), with an aim to establish a terror corridor on Türkiye's southern border, which posed an existential threat to Türkiye's territorial integrity.

Like YPG, DEASH also controlled a sizable area in northeastern Syria in the absence of the regime's forces in 2014. After that, the Western powers' Syrian policies started to diverge from Türkiye's. While Türkiye's Syria policy increasingly became more centered on removing Assad from power (Akmehmed, 2015), the US and other Western countries prioritized the defeat of DEASH because of the murder of US hostages (Larrabee, 2016, p. 70). Seeing them as the only available and dependable ground forces after the Kobani siege (Laub, 2023), the US increased its support for the YPG/PKK to defeat DEASH.

This development rang alarm bells in Ankara because, from the Turkish perspective, the Kurdish factions in Syria (under the banner of Syrian Democratic Forces-SDF⁶⁰) were on the way to building a *quasi*-state similar to the one in Iraq under US protection and support (Strategic Comments, 2019). As such, YPG/PKK posed grave threats not only to Türkiye's national security but also to regional peace and stability at large (Fidan, 2024, p. 19). Türkiye found this situation intolerable. As a result, its ties with the US and other Western allies have deteriorated.

The radicalization of some segments of the Syrian opposition and the emergence of DEASH also negatively impacted the effectiveness of Türkiye's Syrian policy and posed a security risk in various ways. Through its cells, this extremist organization recruited militants and perpetrated violent attacks in Türkiye. Although Türkiye joined the fight against DEASH under the international coalition, its priority was to eliminate the creation of any Kurdish

⁶⁰ With the incorporation of large numbers of Arab and Assyrian elements, the YPG later developed into a larger coalition called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). However, within the SDF, the YPG remains the main fighting force (Çevik, 2022, p. 3). By means of this move, the US tried to portray SDF as a legitimate actor in Syria (Yeşiltaş et al., 2017, p. 53).

territory in northern Syria (Ibold, 2019, p. 13). Akbarzadeh and Barry (2016, p. 7) claim that the Turkish government did not take strong action against these so-called *jihadists'* crossings⁶¹ to Syria in hopes of overthrowing the Assad regime as soon as possible.

However, totally opposite to this claim, Ankara followed a "zero tolerance" policy towards the passage of foreign terrorist fighters. As the Syrian border is long and difficult to control (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1407), though, Türkiye became a transit country for terrorists unintentionally who cross from Europe to Syria to join the DAESH organization (Polat, 2020, p. 52). On the other hand, the YPG/PKK and the Assad Regime portrayed themselves as democratic forces fighting DEASH and other extremist organizations to justify their acts and win over the West. *Mrs. Barçın Yinanç*⁶² made the following statement:

“President Assad sensibly released⁶³ the suspected radical Islamist fighters under the guise of general amnesty when the West and Türkiye were involved in the Syrian Civil War to overthrow the regime. He did this to provoke the public in the West to be more alert to radical Islamism, and in the end, this tactic benefited the Assad government. I am still worried about these jihadists. If Assad would lay their evacuation as a prerequisite for a peace deal, where they are going is most likely to Türkiye. Fair enough, we have them enough already!”

Consequently, Western backing for moderate opposition parties declined (Hlavsova *et al.*, 2018, p. 31). Whereas YPG/PKK turned out to be dependable partners, the Assad regime was an increasingly tolerable partner for Western countries to fight against radical Islamist groups (Ferris & Kirişci, 2016, p. 23; Kaya & Whiting, 2017, p. 81). *Mr. Mahmud* states similarly at this point:

“I think the Syrian Revolution has failed due to two main reasons: First, *fragmentation of opposition*: Syrian opposition was typical of division between internals, and it was also harder to coordinate due to leadership breakdown or directionless plans. Second, *Militarization and Radicalization*: Which is reflected in the fact that the non-violent

⁶¹ Following DEASH's global Jihad call, it is estimated that 12.000 foreign fighters from 80 countries in 2014, 30.000 from 100 countries in 2015, and 40.000 from 110 countries between 2016 and 2017 left their countries and reached Syria and other conflict zones to join other radical organizations, especially DEASH (EGM, 2022, p. 39). Most of those crossings were made through Türkiye.

⁶² Interview (on 23rd Sep 2023) with **Mrs. Barçın Yinanç**, who is a senior journalist and TV commentator on the Middle Eastern issues.

⁶³ To undermine the rebellion, the Assad regime released hundreds of Islamist extremists from prison in the middle of 2011. Later, they would form radical organizations like Ahrar al-Sham (Laub, 2023).

demonstrations of the early days soon got militarized, and as the war continued, it obvious became more and more religious and attracted extremist groups, which had an adverse consequence in the fight for democracy at the beginning.”

From then on, the Western powers began to dissociate themselves from the brotherhood-linked anti-Assad bloc as they pushed power change into the background (Ozan, 2017, p. 10). However, Türkiye persisted in its policies because the weakness of the Assad regime was conducive to the emergence of new terrorist organizations, including the PKK/YPG, from the Turkish perspective. In addition, the regime’s brutality was also a main triggering factor for the refugee flow towards the Turkish border. These varying attitudes unavoidably led to tensions in Ankara's ties with the US and its European allies (BBC News Türkçe, 2022). As countering the emerging Kurdish independence initiative became the lynchpin of Ankara’s Syrian policy, Türkiye found itself increasingly isolated in Syria.

Conflicts between DEASH and the YPG/PKK in eastern Syria have negatively affected Türkiye’s security at home and abroad in multiple ways. To begin with, violent clashes between these terrorist groups also put extra tension on the already existing ethnic and sectarian divisions in Türkiye, particularly between Sunni-Alawites and Turk-Kurds. From time to time, particularly attacks occurred in border towns; the main opposition party, CHP, accused the JDP of pursuing a sectarian foreign policy by supporting jihadists and Salafis. On the other hand, the government blamed CHP for being pro-Ba’athist (Okyay, 2017, p. 841).

The Syrian conflict left more long-term impacts on Turkish domestic and foreign policies as well as the security perception. When DEASH started its offensive towards Kobane in the fall of 2014, Ankara faced an increasing demand for intervening in Syria. HDP and its leaders called on the government to open a corridor for PYD/YPG elements to Kobane to reinforce their forces there. But when these demands were not fulfilled, HDP urged its followers to stage massive demonstrations in the streets in October 2014. Upon these calls, Turkish citizen Kurds took the streets to protest their government, known as the *6-8 October incidents*, for not supporting the YPG/PYD in Kobane⁶⁴ against DEASH (Ibold, 2019, pp. 47-

⁶⁴ These demands were not met, but Türkiye allowed the passing of KDP’s Peshmergas from Iraq at the end of October to support Kurdish groups in Kobane against DEASH (Hatipoğlu, Gökçe, Dinçer, & Saygın, 2016, pp. 184,193). In addition, 180.000 Kurds were also admitted to Türkiye by providing a humanitarian corridor (Okyay, 2017, p. 843).

9). The incidents resulted in the deaths of 53 people and the injuries of hundreds more. Many public assets were also seriously damaged (İnci, 2019, p. 585).

Secondly, the developments in the Syrian crisis ultimately ended the peace process between the Turkish government and the PKK (Ozan, 2017, p. 29). With an aim to increasing democratic standards, the process started in 2009 with the Oslo talks. PKK's sporadic attacks, along with developments in Syria, raised concerns regarding the peace process. Nevertheless, the Turkish government demonstrated its determination to see it through. To this end, Türkiye took an important step by enacting a law to give a legal framework to the process on July 16, 2014 (Küçükali & Balıkçılar, 2019, p. 359). However, "the emotional rupture" between the government and HDP because of the 6-8 October incidents brought about the failure of the whole process (Okyay, 2017, p. 844), directly or indirectly.

The collapse of the peace process led to many repercussions for Türkiye's domestic politics and security. As elaborated in the following chapters, security-oriented policies gained a premium once again. Besides, Türkiye had to cope with more imminent and dangerous consequences for national security as well. In accordance with the newly adopted strategy, the PKK sought to carry the conflicts in urban areas. Gaining confidence from the conflicts in Kobane, the PKK attempted to create controlled areas in Türkiye to repeat what it did in Kobane, in other words. According to Karaağaç (2023, p. 5), the PKK's ringleaders changed their strategy because they believed that using urban terrorist tactics would make it easier to realize the goal of an independent Kurdistan. The trench incidents in 2015 and 2016 were a clear example of this approach in action.

Accordingly, taking advantage of political uncertainty and instability after the June 7, 2015, election, the PKK immediately attempted to create autonomous areas in Türkiye. Subsequent analysis revealed that the PKK used this process not to lay down their weapons but, on the contrary, to create new stockpiles and weapon warehouses in urban areas (Güllüpınar & Fidan, 2017). With the help of municipalities under HDP control and inspired by the lessons learned and strategies developed in Kobane, PKK-affiliated groups started digging trenches and building barricades in cities. And they declared so-called self-ruled administrations⁶⁵ 19 different town centers (*Diyarbakır, Nusaybin, Cizre, Silopi, etc.*) as of July 2015 (İnci, 2019, p. 592). When the PKK put its urban warfare strategy into effect in these

⁶⁵ When the so-called self-ruled administrations declared, full independence was announced as the ultimate objective (Karaağaç, 2023, p. 6).

areas (İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2017), in line with Öcalan's so-called democratic autonomy calls, Türkiye found itself against a dual threat to its national security and territorial integrity.

Facing these imminent and direct threats, Türkiye also developed a two-stage strategy and employed its military power increasingly when national security was deemed to be at risk. Accordingly, it was decided to neutralize the terrorist elements within the country first. In response to the murders of two police officers by the PKK on July 22, 2015, in their houses while they were sleeping in Urfa Ceylanpınar, military operations, known as trench *operations* afterwards, were initiated to clear cities of PKK elements (Bayır, 2021, pp. 29-30). In the course of these operations, 859 security personnel lost their lives, and 4711 were wounded (İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2017). Furthermore, the PKK's spreading of terrorism to the city resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and billions of dollars in financial losses (Güllüpınar & Fidan, 2017, p. 728).

The trench incidents apparently aimed to weaken Türkiye's interests in Syria by keeping it engaged with the PKK at home. Thus, they also made it obvious what terrible outcomes may have resulted from Türkiye's failure to engage decisively on the Syrian crisis.. In response to these threats, Türkiye recognized the need for a more robust approach and subsequently developed a new counter-terrorism strategy in accordance with a preventive security doctrine. From then on, Türkiye began to counter potential and actual threats beyond its borders (Ataman, 2024, p. 42), which led to military operations in Syria afterwards.

DEASH and YPG/PKK's presence and actions also caused serious problems for Türkiye. The brutality of DEASH pushed the moderate groups towards the Assad regime, so the resiliency of the regime increased (Findley & Teo, 2006, p. 16). DAESH also captured the regions along the Turkish-Syrian border and launched rocket assaults on Türkiye from these areas (Strategic Comments, 2019). Its attacks against Turkish security forces and citizens, attempts for militant recruitments via organized cells (Okyay, 2017, p. 842), as well as concurrent suicide attacks in Istanbul and Ankara forced Türkiye to adopt active preventative measures against this extremist organization, too (Bayır, 2021, p. 42).

Türkiye has also faced the issue of refugees because of the Syrian crisis, which arose from the brutal and protracted full-scale sectarian conflicts in Syria (Ferris & Kirişçi, 2016, p. 17). Because of the regime's oppressive practices, such as random arrest and torture (Findley & Teo, 2006, pp. 14-7), as well as systematic human rights violations like rape in detention (Ferris & Kirişçi, 2016, p. 17), Syrians fled from their hometowns. As a result, Türkiye has had

to cope with a huge refugee crisis on its soil (Bağbaşıoğlu, 2016, pp. 112-3). The flow of refugees was reinforced by DEASH and PKK's demographic change endeavors, and particularly Russia's indiscriminate air assaults, from time to time.

Türkiye employed an open-door policy for Syrian refugees, who were fleeing from the persecution of the Assad regime and other terrorist organizations (Polat, 2020, p. 90). As a result, Türkiye hosted around 4 million of them throughout the Syrian civil war, accounting for the most significant demographic shift since the 1923-4 population exchange with Greece (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 12). Türkiye has allocated a sizeable budget for the refugees as discussed in the next chapter. And the Western countries' unwillingness to accept burden-sharing⁶⁶ placed an enormous burden on Türkiye's already fragile economy.

To prevent the influx of refugees, Türkiye demanded the creation of a buffer zone in northern Syria (Öztiğ, 2019, p. 120); nevertheless, this extremely needed demand was not met by its NATO allies and other European countries (Natil, 2016, p. 78; İnat & Cicioğlu, 2024, p. 92), and it became another thorny issue in Türkiye-West relations⁶⁷. While Türkiye has been complaining about not receiving adequate support from Western countries to deal with refugees on their soil, its NATO allies have been blaming Türkiye for letting these refugees illegally cross towards Europe (Strategic Comments, 2019).

The refugees caused some indirect consequences. There was mass propaganda regarding Türkiye's alleged support for radical Islamist groups. In fact, Türkiye was the only NATO country with boots on the ground in the fight against DAESH (Fidan, 2024, p. 19), and Türkiye's military operations caused significant harm in the ranks of this organization, which facilitated its ultimate defeat. On the contrary, the European countries used the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to clean up the Islamic extremism in their own backyards (Savicheva, 2018, pp. 968) while accusing Türkiye of being the '*jihadist highway*' (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016, pp. 6-8). Nevertheless, this resulted in a negative perception of Türkiye in the West.

Apart from the Syrian refugees within its borders, Türkiye has also been forced to afford protection for an additional 4 million Syrians in Idlib and 3.5 million in the northern

⁶⁶ Despite mutual agreement on this matter, only 5% of Türkiye's expenditures were indirectly paid by the EU until 2016 (Bağbaşıoğlu, 2016, p. 118).

⁶⁷ Türkiye's demand for a safe zone in northern Syria and more cooperation from its NATO allies based on IV and V articles of the NATO agreement to curb refugee influx became a priority, but these demands were not satisfactorily responded (Strategic Comments, 2019).

Syrian territories it controls, which combined make up half of the pre-war Syrian population. To encourage reverse immigration and restore safety and security to the areas under Turkish control, Ankara initiated numerous development projects in northern Syria (Adar, 2020a, p. 3). Furthermore, new governing bodies were established to reduce regions' economic and political dependency on Türkiye (Baladi, 2021), and Ankara also put in an effort to centralize and restructure factions into the Syrian National Army (Outzen, 2022).

Unlike the Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan crises, Türkiye has met all the costs of these reconstruction projects (Polis Akademisi, 2020, p. 9). Some observers called these attempts Ankara's Turkification endeavors (Yüksel & Van Veen, 2019, pp. 1-3) or demographic engineering efforts, as it has extended its administrative structures and practices into northern Syria (Adar, 2020a, p. 1). However, these claims indicate a common stereotype based on fake news and ideological tendencies. Therefore, *Mr. Aslan* contradicts these arguments firmly:

“The West is condemning Türkiye for its development efforts in northern Syria, including health care, education, and other services, while doing little to help these people. This is an example of typical hypocrisy. How these people survive in the absence of essential services is the question that needs to be answered. Türkiye has been sincerely trying to increase the capacity of local councils there to satisfy civilians' immediate needs, not for revisionist purposes. Of course, Türkiye cannot leave these people at the mercy of the brutal Assad regime. In essence, the Western people are fully aware of this situation, but they act as if Syrians are not exposed to the most dramatic conditions since WWII. On top of that, by imposing the Caesar Act⁶⁸, they made it even harder for these people receiving aid from foreign providers.”

Indeed, Türkiye's administrative and financial support to the Syrian opposition in northern Syria made them able to govern themselves during the civil war and gain an administrative capacity. This capacity not only prevented further refugee flows towards Türkiye but also would be a facilitating factor for a smooth transition in the post-war period. When they assumed control of the government in Damascus following the fall of the Assad regime, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) members stated that restoring the rule of law and the nation's damaged infrastructure was their top priority. Undoubtedly, the administrative

⁶⁸ The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, also known as the Caesar Act, is United States legislation that sanctions the Syrian government, including Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, for war crimes against the Syrian population. The Act was signed into law by US President Trump in December 2019 and came into force on June 17, 2020.

capabilities they established in the Idlib province with Türkiye's assistance had a significant role in these well-founded conclusions. If they apply these experiences for the benefit of the people, as they say, Syria may reach peace and prosperity sooner than expected.

4.4. Türkiye's Military Operations and Foreign Policy Shift from Soft Power to Hard Power

In hindsight, Türkiye's foreign and particularly Middle Eastern policy seems to be very different in the second decade of the 2000s from that of the first decade. The JDP's attitude towards the region and its foreign policy tools changed significantly because of some domestic and regional developments. Several scholars have analyzed this policy shift. Gözen (2021, p.508) postulates that the constitutional referendum held on a symbolically important date, 12 September 2010, was a turning point in the JDP policies. Accordingly, upon winning that referendum with 58%, the JDP and Erdoğan took a more assertive and adventurous foreign policy to implement their neo-Ottoman agenda, albeit never declared officially. Zanotti and Thomas (2023, p. 6) attribute this turn to Ankara's attempts to have greater independence in its actions as a rising regional power or a central power within a multipolar system.

These represent a one-dimensional perspective, though. Because there are too many variables to fully explain why Türkiye made this mandatory turn, even though it was an evident manifestation of a clean break from preceding non-interventionist policies. Essentially, the constantly changing regional dynamics forced Ankara to take a more assertive stance to address newly emerging risks (Bakır, 2024, p. 148). Namely, other third-party interventions in the Syrian conflicts (particularly Russian and Iranian), US support to YPG/PKK, anti-Turkish alliances in the Eastern Mediterranean, and other places posed direct and indirect threats to Türkiye's territorial integrity, political stability, and democracy (Noi, 2024, p. 16). Therefore, regional power dynamics and pressing threats forced it to harden its foreign policy.

Professor Yeşiltaş (2017) is of the opinion that Turkish soft power and diplomacy turned out to be insufficient on their own to promote Turkish national interests in the region. Therefore, Türkiye has shifted its policy towards hard power to effectively address newly emerging security threats. For Ataman and Özdemir (2018, p.19), a turn towards a more realistic and pragmatic foreign policy was mandatory to prevent the threats resulting from the Syrian conflict. Yalçın (2020, p. 266) similarly argues that Ankara was forced inevitably to

resort to force due to the fact that its allies were turning a deaf ear to Türkiye's security concerns.

Some attribute this policy change to growing anti-Western and anti-US sentiment in Türkiye. For sure, Ankara's pursuit of a more autonomous foreign policy, by putting its own interests first, frustrated its western allies (İnat & Cicioğlu, 2024, p. 91). However, as Maziad and Sotiriadis (2020) posit, Türkiye's political shift should not be interpreted as a euphemism for "anti-Western" political orientation and expansionism. Actually, Erdoğan embodies a new ideological model that aims to revitalize the glory of the Ottoman past and reintroduce Turgut Özal's policies in the 1980s. A grand narrative of "*Türkiye rising*" or "*the new Türkiye*" was purposefully employed to garner public support for this goal.

In this context, a special emphasis has been placed on the "local and national" (*Yerli ve Milli*) production of the defense industry⁶⁹ (Davutoğlu, 2004, p. 42) due to its crucial role in supporting Türkiye's increasingly autonomous and assertive foreign policy (Neset et al., 2021, p. 47). Indeed, Türkiye's increasing defense industry constituted one of the main pillars in its foreign policy endeavors in this period (Ataman, 2024, p. 41). As a result, Türkiye became the 12th largest arms exporter as of 2022 (Wezeman, Gadon, & Wezeman, 2023, p. 2), which has been a source of pride for Turks as well as an integral part of Erdoğan's election campaigns.

Whatever the true nature of this policy shift might be, the main tenets of Turkish foreign policy reversed to the traditional security-oriented, hard-power-based approach from the principle of "*settling problems with peaceful means*". Since then, Ankara has increasingly resorted to military means to address national security issues, as in Syria, northern Iraq, and the Aegean Sea. By doing that, Türkiye essentially abandoned its "strategic depth" concept (Işıksal, 2018, p. 24), and its position in the Middle East in the 2020s is totally different from ten years ago.

As a result, neither well-functioning Turkish democracy nor the booming economy were as appealing to the Arab masses as they were in the 2010s. Turkish foreign policy, having grave concerns about the regional developments, turned in an isolationist direction from 2013 onwards (Noi, 2024, p. 98). Unfortunately, the "zero problems with neighbors" policy almost ended up with "*zero friendly regional neighbors*" at the end of the second decade of the 2000s (Romano, 2020). Dogan-Akkas and El-Berni (2022, p. 11) claim that Türkiye has become

⁶⁹ Tuna also asserts (2024, p. 36) that Türkiye's efforts to combat terrorism and its growing defense sector are positively correlated. The recent significant successes are largely attributable to domestic industrial production of weapons, tools, and equipment.

practically a pariah state in the region because of interfering in Arab affairs. The Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War represented a watershed in Türkiye's policy shift with their underlying reasons and consequences.

With respect to Türkiye's shifting Middle Eastern policy, the failed 15 July coup attempt against the JDP government and Erdoğan accounted for a main turning point. Because Turkish officials began to see all domestic and regional issues through a security lens after that. The increasing (reverse) securitization of Turkish foreign policy has had an adverse impact on Ankara's relations with all parties concerned (Joobani & Adısönmez, 2018, p. 46) one way or another. For some (Kirişçi & Sloat, 2019, p. 2), the securitization process had been in place since the Gezi Parkı protests, which coincided with the military coup in Egypt. Aydıntaşbas and Bianco (2022, p. 6) claim that Erdoğan and his close circles perceived both incidents as an attempt to restrain Türkiye's growing influence in the region.

However, it should be noted that despite the deteriorating security situation due to the changing dynamics of the Syrian conflict, Türkiye restrained itself from using military power in the country and abroad until the PKK's urban terrorism strategy left Ankara no choice but to use hard power in 2015. Only after the PKK reintroduced the conflict-oriented tactics in town centers, demonstrating a lack of interest in a continuing peace process, and in response to its attacks on security personnel and civilians within its borders, did Türkiye begin using its military.

Understandably, the securitization/militarization tendency has become more visible following the attempted 15 July coup (Maziad & Sotiriadis, 2020). Later, a "siege" discourse led to evaluation of any domestic and external developments through a security perspective, as indicated by Aydıntaşbas and Bianco (2022, p. 7). The multiple threats and its allies' indifferences to Türkiye's genuine concerns evoked "*Sèvres syndrome*," which is based on a deeply rooted fear of dismemberment through foreign intrigues and interventions. The US and EU's cooperation with Kurdish groups in Syria and their reluctance in showing solidarity with Türkiye after the failed coup reinforced this fear.

After the putschists launched their brutal and bloody 15 July coup attempt, the US and EU states failed to declare their support for the democratically elected Turkish government (Çağaptay, 2020). Even worse, the US rejected repatriating *Fethullah Gulen*, the mastermind of the coup, which resulted in a crisis of confidence between the sides (İnat & Cicioğlu, 2024,

p. 91). Turkish leadership rightly regarded the failed coup attempt as the product of a vast global conspiracy against Erdoğan and the JDP (Aydıntaşbas & Bianco, 2022, p. 7).

Having growing concerns over national security and domestic stability, Turkish decision-makers began to analyze regional issues from a security prism and opted for unilateral actions and militarized foreign policy (Jabbour, 2022, p. 16). As Neset et al. (2021) suggest, the idea of loneliness is a component of the "siege mentality" and the "general feeling of insecurity," which is exacerbated by the fact that Türkiye has few allies in a challenging and unstable area. This widespread threat perception towards the US and the rest of the West was shared with all quarters of the public (*Table 4-1*).

Table 4- 1 : Turkish Public Threat Perception as of 2019

COUNTRY	YES	NO	I DON'T KNOW
USA	70,0	16,6	13,4
ISRAEL	66,7	17,5	15,8
SYRIA	65,4	19,3	15,3
IRAN	59,0	22,0	19,0
GREECE	58,9	23,0	18,1
ARMENIA	58,6	22,5	18,9
IRAQ	56,5	24,8	18,7
RUSSIA	55,0	26,6	18,4
UK	54,7	26,6	18,7
GERMANY	48,7	32,8	18,5

Source: Aydın.M., et all. (2020). Quantitative Research Report on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy-2020. İstanbul, Kadir Has University and Akademetre

Gözen (2021, p. 530) argues that the securitization process reached its peak with the second Independence War rhetoric in domestic politics as well as the military presence in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Qatar. Nevertheless, Türkiye found itself in the middle of many developments after the Arab Spring (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 6), most of which posed direct security threats to its national security. For this reason, as Ataman (2024, pp. 42-3) points out, Türkiye had to establish itself as a game-changer by engaging in the regional power struggle militarily in order to protect its national interests, which necessitated an increase in military deterrence, too (Seren, 2020, p. 211).

Türkiye's relations with the EU have not been on good terms on the grounds that Türkiye drifted away from the rule of law and fundamental human rights, either. The EU accession talks have stalled since 2016, and eventually, the European Parliament called upon the Council of the EU to suspend the negotiations in 2019 (Stanicek, 2019, p. 2). However, according to Ataman and Yeşiltaş (2024, p. 10), this conflict was not caused by a decline in Turkish democracy or a militarized foreign policy but rather by Ankara's rejection of the EU's imposed policies on Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean as well as conflicting goals in the international system.

According to some analyses (Strategic Comments, 2019), being suspicious of Western countries' attitudes and feeling more threatened, Türkiye restored its relations with Russia⁷⁰, which declared its support for President Erdoğan immediately after the coup attempt. The growing cooperation with Russia provided Türkiye with more room for maneuver to put its Syrian policy into practice at the expense of more reliance on Moscow for a while. On the other hand, Türkiye's increasing alignment with Russia and subsequent procurement of the Russian-made the S-400 missile system further strained Türkiye's relations with its western allies.

As for the US, bilateral relations were in crisis due to the US's support for the YPG/PKK and divergent policies in the Syrian civil war (Çağaptay, 2020). Whereas Türkiye steadfastly criticized the US for collaborating with PYD (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 8), the US declared its intention to work with Assad for the future of Syria (Savicheva, 2018, pp. 970). Türkiye has also been resentful of its allies' indifference to Syrian refugees. Although its western allies believed that Türkiye was attempting to draw them into the Syrian conflict for its own reasons, Ankara claimed that a member country's desire to unite against any perceived threat was appropriate for the spirit of NATO (Strategic Comment, 2019). Yalçın (2020, p. 187) asserts that Türkiye has been purposefully isolated in Syria by the West. Given these developments, Ankara decided to take a more assertive and autonomous attitude in Syria to eradicate the security risks.

Military Operations

As detailed above, Türkiye remained neutral and perplexed in the early stages of the Syrian conflict for several reasons. To begin with, the Middle East has been traditionally perceived as dangerous territory to be stayed away from in the eyes of Turkish officials and the

⁷⁰ Both countries came on the verge of war after shutting down a Russian fighter jet violating Turkish airspace while targeting Syrian opposition forces in 2015.

public. Therefore, throughout its Republican era, Türkiye had successfully managed to pursue a non-interventionist foreign policy toward its neighboring countries (Joobani & Adisönmez, 2018, p. 42). Maybe for this reason, around 70% of the public was against any sort of involvement in the Syrian conflict at the beginning (Hlavsova *et al.*, 2018, p. 48). Furthermore, any involvement in the Syrian crises might cause the Turkish population's ethnic and sectarian fault lines to become more polarized.

Nevertheless, the worsening circumstances in Syria led to a fresh power vacuum and the rise of DEASH afterward. This radical organization made vast territorial gains in a short period. During this time, Türkiye was exposed to attacks from both the PKK and DEASH against its citizens and tourists as well. As a result, Türkiye's main security priority became stopping these cross-border attacks, eradicating DEASH's territorial presence, and eliminating the creation of a Kurdish statelet in northern Syria before it was even born (Öztığ, 2019, p. 117).

Many believed that the Syrian conflict, with weakening government authority, provided ideal conditions for a Kurdish independent state. Even Masoud Barzani stated the Syrian war marked the end of the “*Sykes-Picot era*” and inevitable steps towards a sovereign Kurdistan (Kaya & Whiting, 2017, p. 79). According to Joobani and Adisönmez (2018, p. 52), however, Türkiye considered the emerging Kurdish belt along the Syrian border as an existential threat, believing that such a move might provoke its own Kurdish population.

In order not to miss this golden opportunity, PYD/YPG declared autonomy on November 13, 2013, and engaged to establish self-rule like the existing one in northern Iraq (Taşdemir & Özdemir, 2017, p. 54) by uniting three regions and six cantons on the Turkish border and pushing other minority groups towards Türkiye (Polat, 2020, p. 57). By doing so, YPG/PKK took a step further and started to implement Abdullah Öcalan's, *the founder of the PKK*, democratic autonomy strategy after self-declaration of autonomous administration of North and East Syria under the name of the Rojava transnational administration (Okyay, 2017, p. 836).

In response to these developments, Türkiye's strategy towards the Syrian conflict shifted from power changing to impeding the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state. To this end, Ankara conducted cross-border military operations to establish territorial control on its southern border (Leeuwen & Van Veen, 2019, p. 1). To put it another way, Türkiye had to take a more assertive and power-based foreign policy to tackle emerging security risks

(Joobani & Adisönmez, 2018, p. 51) by relinquishing its traditional policy. Under these circumstances, Türkiye has launched four military cross-border offensives into Syria (*Figure 4-3*), namely *Operation Euphrates Shield (OES)* in 2016, *Operation Olive Branch (OOB)* in 2018, *Operation Peace Spring (OPS)* in 2019, and *Operation Spring Shield (OSS)* in 2020 for achieving some practical goals.

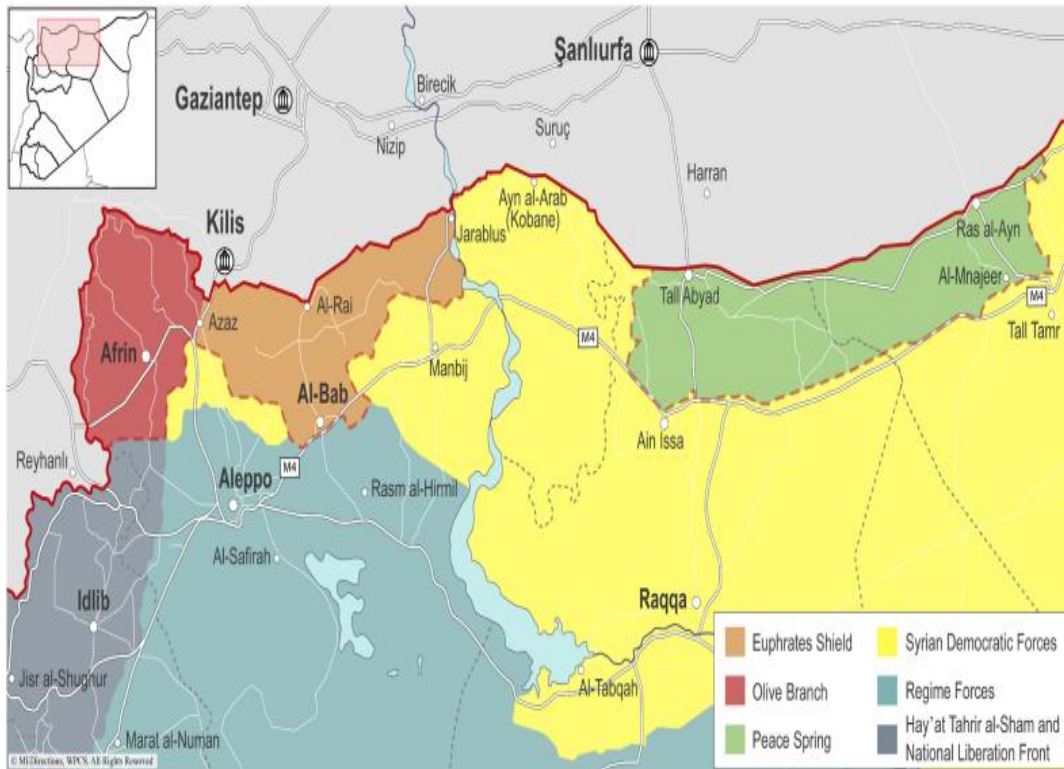


Figure 4- 3 : Türkiye's Military Operations in Syria

Source: Al-Hilu, 2021, p. 3

First, the US's support for YPG/PYD posed an evident threat against Türkiye's national security and its territorial integrity in the long run; therefore, Türkiye could not tolerate the establishment of a Kurdish governance entity alongside its border. Second, Türkiye was a neighbor and was already experiencing a severe refugee issue, which was expected to worsen unless action was taken. Third, based in northern Syria, YPG/PKK and DEASH terrorists launched mortar and artillery attacks upon Turkish border towns, inflicting heavy casualties. These ongoing assaults required an imminent response under public pressure, which was also an important factor (EGM, 2022, pp. 179-184).

Fourth, Türkiye aimed to avoid being sidelined in the Syrian debate and sought a stronger influence through military action, as suggested by Cafiero and Wagner (2016). Finally, for Hlavsova *et al.* (2018, pp. 44-53), President Erdoğan wanted to prove that the Turkish Army was under his control after the 15 July failed coup attempt and was still capable of reshaping regional dynamics. It was essential to send a firm message to other actors, as it was widely predicted that the Turkish Army would be less professional and less capable after the coup attempt (Outzen, 2022).

As the general security situation in Syria deteriorated, Türkiye declared the crossing of the YPG/PYD on the western bank of the Euphrates River to be its red line (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1414). However, relying on US support, the YPG did so in 2016, leaving very little choice for Türkiye other than to use force. Alarmed by this imminent threat to its own security, Türkiye launched its first cross-border military operation, *Operation Euphrates Shield (OES)*, in Syria in August 2016 (Öztiğ, 2019, p. 122). The immediate goals of the operation were to protect the Turkish border by clearing border areas, between Azaz and Al-Bab, of DEASH elements (Yeşiltaş, 2020, p. 102) and preventing further territorial expansion of YPG/PKK in northern Syria (Okuy, 2017, p. 840).

Although the Turkish army encountered many difficulties in the Al Bab phase of the operation (Yalçın, 2020, p. 24), Türkiye achieved driving DEASH fighters 100 km away from its border by taking the town of Jarablus on the Euphrates River and DEASH stronghold Al-Bab, as planned. Even though Manbij remained outside Türkiye's control to avoid potential conflict with the US (Bayır, 2021, p. 31), Ankara prevented the YPG/PKK from expanding its control to the western bank of the Euphrates River along the Turkish border (Reuters, 2017). More crucially, as indicated by Ataman and Özdemir (2018, p. 29), Türkiye made it clear that any action endangering its national security in northern Syria would not be tolerated.

Even though OES reached its initial objectives, Manbij remained the core center of YPG/PKK activities. Besides, the US continued to support the YPG and even announced its plan to establish a so-called border force with around 30.000 armed personnel with the participation of YPG/PKK militants. Worried about this new development and the YPG/PKK's increasing presence in Afrin, Türkiye launched its second operation, *Operation Olive Branch (OOB)*, in January 2018 to put an end to the YPG/PKK's presence in the western part of the Euphrates (Öztiğ, 2019, p. 123) by extracting terrorist elements from Afrin (EGM, 2022, p.

243). Although the objectives of the operation were mostly achieved, Tel Rifaat⁷¹, a town used by PKK-affiliated groups to attack Turkish troops in Syria, could not be taken under control because of Russian resistance.

After stabilizing the west of Euphrates, Türkiye turned its attention to northeast Syria, which was under the control of PYD/PKK then. Türkiye had been proposing a “*safe zone*” in northern Syria for a long time to prevent PKK attacks and relocate Syrian refugees in those areas (Tuncel & Ekici, 2019, p. 63); nevertheless, this was not accepted by other respective parties as indicated above. Upon this, to eliminate YPG/PKK’s attempts to establish a “*controlled area*” there and prevent further demographic alterations, Türkiye launched its third “*Peace Spring*” operation (OPS) on 09 October 2019 (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 10) with the aim to drive out YPG/PKK elements from the towns adjacent to its border (Neset et al., 2021, p. 40).

Although Ankara pushed away YPG/PKD groups from its border from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ain (Tokmajyan & Khaddour, 2022, p. 14), and controlled a 120-km area adjacent to the Turkish border (Polat, 2020, p. 80). Nonetheless, it failed to establish a 30-kilometer-deep (*extending to the M-4 motorway*) and 480 km-long safe zone along its southern border as planned at the beginning of the operation to provide safe spaces for Syrian refugees in Türkiye. After the US and Russia’s intervention (Humud & Blanchard, 2020, p. 13), Neset et al. (2021, p. 41) claim that Ankara compromised its earlier demands to settle, not wishing for an armed conflict with the US troops deployed in the region.

While carrying out military operations in Syria, Türkiye continued its diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict. In accordance with the *Astana Memorandum*, which was signed with Russia and Iran in October 2017, four de-escalation zones were created to protect civilians in Syria. Türkiye dispatched some military units into the province of Idlib as a guarantor country to ensure civilian safety. Nonetheless, in an attempt to put an end to the revolution, the Syrian government launched a significant military campaign against this region (Melrose, 2018, p. 24). Air attacks resulted in the deaths of 34 Turkish soldiers, marking the deadliest single incident for Türkiye since the start of the Syrian War (Aydın-Düzgüt, Balta, & O'Dohohue, 2020, p. 11).

⁷¹ After the fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, both Manbij and Tal Rifaat were liberated by SNA forces within days; as such, the presence of YPG/PKK on the west of the Euphrates came to an end.

Türkiye, then, engaged in direct confrontation with the Assad regime for the first time by initiating its fourth “*Spring Shield*” operation (OSS) after a week from an air attack on February 27, 2020, to protect civilians of around 4 million as well as to show its determination by increasing military power in the region rapidly (Yeşiltaş, 2020, p. 103). A week later, President Erdoğan visited Russia, whereupon Ankara and Moscow signed the March 2020 memorandum (Humud & Blanchard, 2020, p. 16), in which Türkiye pledged to “eliminate all terrorist groups” in Idlib.

Of these operations, the first one, OES, was supported by the Western powers since it also targeted DEASH; the others were bitterly criticized by the West and many Arab states. Türkiye was successful in these military operations in general; nevertheless, as Yalçın (2020, p. 24) posits, as the Turkish army gained experience and acclimated to the new terrain, its relative success grew with time. Neset et al. (2021, p. 47) also argue that the Turkish Armed Forces’ ability to conduct joint military operations successfully and seize control of territories abroad was impressive, considering the massive discharges⁷² from the army during the purge in the aftermath of the 15 July coup attempt.

According to Taşdemir and Özdemir (2017, pp. 59-63), the UN Charter's Article 51, which guarantees the right to self-defense, served as the legal foundation⁷³ for these operations. In this respect, Türkiye's action was justified and lawful because it could not tolerate the establishment of a *de facto* Kurdish statelet close to its border (Kaya & Whiting, 2017, p. 86). Broadly speaking, Ankara has been successful in its hard-power-based Syrian policy so far in that it has banned the creation of a terror belt alongside its southern border and diminished the military capacity of YPG/PKK significantly. But Türkiye's ultimate objective of eliminating the PKK-affiliated YPG factions remains unfulfilled.

There are claims that Türkiye sought some other long-term objectives in Syria with these military operations. Accordingly, Ankara used the Kurdish issue as a pretext to cover its goals. Hlavsova et al. (2018, p. 44) claim, for instance, that Türkiye supported Sunni opposition

⁷² Apart from discharges of 24.706 military personnel across all branches (Akgün, 2023), the number of generals/admirals decreased from 326 to 199 as of July 2017, and 59% of general staff officers were also discharged after the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016 (Neset et al., 2021, p. 47).

⁷³ Even though Turkish MoFA cites the right to self-defense as outlined in Article 51 of the UN Charter (Turkish MoFA, 2024) as the legal basis of operations in Syria, *Annex 4 of the Adana Agreement* signed in 1998, which granted Türkiye the right “to take all necessary security measures inside Syrian territory to a depth of 5 km,” has also been cited by Turkish officials to justify the military operations in northern Syria (Tokmajyan & Khaddour, 2022, p. 4).

because it was consistent with President Erdoğan's unique foreign policy, which blends nationalism and Islamism, aiming at a Sunni-Islamic identity for Türkiye. They argue that Sunni sectarianism was a new dimension of Erdoğan's foreign policy with "*an undeniable domestic appeal*". In hindsight, however, pressing security issues dictated these operations rather than ideological consideration. In addition, from the outset, Türkiye affirmed its commitment to Syria's territorial integrity (MGK, 2016), and these military operations even contributed to Syria's stability and territorial integrity (Polat, 2020, p. 91).

4.5. Economic and Political overburdens of Syrian Policy and Implications on Domestic Politics

To address multi-faceted and unprecedented security risks resulting from the Syrian crisis, Türkiye initiated transborder military operations in northern Syria. Even though these operations achieved immediate success, they produced or could not solve many standing issues: *the de facto Kurdish state in northern Syria, radical Islamism in the regions under its control (Idlib), overdependence on historical enemy Russia, deteriorated relations with NATO allies, securitization in domestic and foreign policies, increasing defense spending, financial losses, regional isolation, and many more*. For these reasons, this section outlines these unfavorable consequences of the Syrian conflict that Türkiye has had to endure until very recently.

First and foremost, despite these operations, PKK's influence in Syria has increased since 2011, as covered in Chapter 5. YPG/PYD currently controls about one-third of all Syrian territory. Furthermore, the PKK and other organizations' perpetrated assaults on the Turkish presence in the region resulted in many deaths for Turkish forces and their proxies (Leeuwen & Van Veen, 2019, pp. 5-7). At some stage, extremist groups turned their attacks into Türkiye (Okyay, 2017, p. 838). Attacks by DEASH elements in Al Bab, for example, cost the Turkish army nearly two special operation battalions and a tank company in a single day during the OES (Neset et al., 2021, p. 43). In addition, as elaborated in the next chapter, very few Syrian refugees went back to their homeland as the safe zones could not be established.

Because of dynamic changes in regional power balance, Türkiye's main regional rival, Russia, established itself as the dominant actor in the Syrian Civil War (Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 244) for a long time. Aydın-Düzgit et al. (2020, p. 12) note that Türkiye could have undertaken Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch only after receiving Russia's green

light. There was an irritating possibility after the Astana Memorandum for Russia's attack on Turkish forces again by invoking the provisions of the memorandum (Neset et al., 2021, p. 11) since Türkiye guaranteed to separate moderate opposition groups from jihadists in the areas under its control.

In fact, Türkiye came to close in direct confrontation with this Russia and the Assad regime in Idlib in many cases. Türkiye had immense difficulty in exercising control over the last stronghold of opponent groups after HTS seized control of most of the region after defeating the Turkish-backed *National Liberation Front* (NLF) there. Leeuwen and Van Veen (2019, p. 8) assert that the visible function of Turkish elements was to prevent any regime's attacks against HTS⁷⁴ and subsequent refugee influx toward Türkiye. Mrs. Barçın Yinanç also asserts:

"If Russia had ordered the Syrian Regime to march towards Idlib, a new wave of refugees would have begun to enter Türkiye, eventually disrupting Erdoğan's position. Being aware of this fact, the regime's potential northward campaign was used by Russian President Putin as blackmail in bilateral relations."

While Türkiye's military operations in Syria addressed significant threats to national security and unity, they also resulted in diplomatic and economic challenges. Above all else, the Turkish economy was strained because of the increasing defense budget and the 4 million Syrian refugees (Öztürk & Çoltu, 2018, p. 192). Military expenditure surged by about 40% between 2015 and 2019, from 12.3 billion USD to 20.448 billion USD, despite the decline in the GDP (Neset et al., 2021, p. 43).

As previously mentioned, Turkish foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, evolved into the securitization/militarization process in parallel with continuously changing regional dynamics. There are conflicting views regarding this policy shift; nevertheless, it produced both favorable and adverse consequences afterwards. To begin with, once military power was employed, every issue was evaluated through the prism of security, and the "*fight against terrorism*" rhetoric dominated both Türkiye's foreign and domestic politics, which led to an inevitable decline in democratic standards and practices at home (Zanoti & Thomas, 2020, p. 2).

⁷⁴ This role was crucial to the subsequent collapse of the dictatorship in 2024. Because by acting wisely and promptly in 2020, Türkiye prevented the Assad regime from destroying HTS and other related elements. Following that, HTS was able to initiate an offensive that resulted in the simultaneous fall of the regime and the capture of Damascus by developing a notable fighting capacity in Idlib in advance.

The emergence of the conservative-nationalist alliance reinforced this trend. Ankara was also blamed for breaching human rights due to the conduct of its proxies. According to reports, parties supporting the FSA violate human rights during the operations in Syria (Amnesty International, 2019; McKernan, 2019). Türkiye was also accused by right groups of not taking necessary precautions to protect civilians in its military campaigns (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

After realizing that the hard-power-based foreign policy in Syria was effective in achieving short-term objectives and prevented the creation of a *de facto* Kurdish state along the Syrian border due to *fait accompli* (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018, p. 29), it was increasingly applied in other regions, ranging from Libya to the Eastern Mediterranean, in the ensuing years. Ankara utilizes its military not only because of rising expectations in the region and beyond (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 6) but also as a balancing power in the region. But it is far from certain how much this policy shift will advance Türkiye's interests in the medium and long run. Due to its meddling in inter-Arab affairs and increasing use of force to solve regional disputes, Türkiye has already endured some severe diplomatic and financial consequences and has been more isolated within the region.

One of these negative consequences is the deteriorating political and economic relations with the GCC countries. As indicated above, Türkiye's ties with these countries significantly developed after the JDP came to power and reached their peak in 2011, just before the Arab Spring. However, some analysts (Cafiero, 2024; Habibi, 2019, p. 2) argue that because of Türkiye's adamant (*military*) support for Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups, bilateral relations have strained seriously, leading Ankara into a diplomatic abyss (Jabbour, 2022, p. 12).

The different attitudes of the sides surfaced during the Egyptian coup, while Türkiye and Qatar strongly opposed that incident; the Saudis and the UAE backed the plotters. However, because of convergent policies in the Syrian crisis, ousting the Assad regime, the diplomatic war did not intensify, and mutual pragmatism governed the relations until the Gulf Crisis. In spite of conflicting interests and competing priorities with regard to the Arab Spring, Ankara and Gulf Monarchies managed to maintain their cordial ties by compartmentalizing issues (*ibid.* p.9). The turning point was reached in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt waged a diplomatic war against Qatar to dissuade it from supporting Islamist policies and pursuing pro-Turkish policy by imposing a political and economic

embargo and demanding the closure of the Turkish military base⁷⁵ in Qatar (Başkan, 2019, p. 97).

Conversely, this move pushed Qatar much closer to Türkiye. Ankara actively intervened in the Gulf crisis on the side of Qatar rather than remaining neutral (Habibi, 2019, p. 3) by providing military, political, diplomatic, and economic assistance (Ataman, 2024, p. 45). Within two days, the Turkish parliament ratified military deals signed in 2015, and Türkiye deployed 5.000 troops to protect Qatar against any external threats (Yeşiltaş, 2017). Türkiye proved that it could be an external stabilizer for regional conflicts with its increasing military capacity.

However, Cafiero and Wagner (2016) argue that the return of Turkish soldiers to the Gulf after a century was deemed by the UAE and Saudis a sign of Türkiye's long-term revisionist and neo-Ottoman ambitions⁷⁶. Dogan-Akkas and El-Berni (2022, p. 5) also maintain that Türkiye's aggressive entry in the Gulf resurrected the anti-Ottoman legacy, and GCC countries began to perceive Türkiye as a regional threat. This marked a serious breaking point in the already strained relations and ushered in an era of mutual distrust, resentment, and open confrontation (Jabbour, 2022, p. 10), lasting until recently.

As a reaction to Türkiye's action in the Gulf crises, Saudi Arabia held a meeting with the YPG and even worse donated them 100 million USD (Başkan, 2019, p. 86), which irked Ankara very much. As the diplomatic rift escalated, the Arab states condemned Türkiye's military actions in Syria, and they began to follow a more assertive policy in the Libyan crisis (Gasparetto, 2019). Diplomatic tension continued as a proxy confrontation on these fronts (Jabbour, 2022, p. 10).

While the Saudis, the UAE, and Egypt backed General Khalifa Haftar (Telci, 2020, p. 48), Türkiye and Qatar provided military and financial support to the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) (Çağaptay, 2020). In response, the UAE normalized its relations with the Assad regime to counter Turkish expansionism in the Middle East,

⁷⁵ After its establishment in 2014, the Turkish military base in Qatar created diplomatic and political tension among the Gulf states. Its termination was one of the matters on the list of the 13 demands by the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) during the Gulf crisis in 2017 (Dogan-Akkas & El-Berni, 2022, p. 4).

⁷⁶ In his address at the UN General Assembly in 2020, the UAE's foreign minister, Abdullah bin Zayed, blamed Türkiye for "*having colonial delusions of restoring their domination and colonial rule over the Arab region and the Horn of Africa*" (MEE, 2020).

supposedly. In addition to its initiative for readmitting Syria to the Arab League⁷⁷, Abu Dhabi reopened its embassy in Damascus back in 2018. In a visit that held significant symbolic importance, the UAE also hosted Syrian President Assad in 2022 (Cafiero, 2024).

Türkiye heightened its profile in Libya, too. Telci (2020, p. 42) asserts that Ankara militarily intervened in the Libyan civil war both to rescue the GNA from falling and to save the signed “maritime border agreement” with the GNA earlier. Aydıntaşbaş and Bianco (2021, p. 3) put forth that this move not only irked regional powers (Egypt, Israel, and Greece) but also inflamed the soured relations with the Gulf monarchies. From the Turkish perspective, however, the situation was quite different. The assertive policies yielded positive results. Thanks to Ankara’s smart interventions in the Gulf and Libya, Türkiye’s national interests were protected adeptly, and regional crises were averted before turning into a full-scale military conflict (Bakır, 2024, p. 148). This move, in line with the Blue Homeland doctrine, was manifesting Türkiye’s increasing footprint regionally (Outzen, 2022).

Other actors viewed these developments through a lens of regional security concerns. At the Arab League meeting on September 9, 2020, the Egyptian foreign minister described Türkiye’s increasing military activism in Syria, Iraq, and Libya as *the most significant emerging threat to Arab national security* and called for Arab unity to stop Türkiye’s military operations (İdiz, 2020). This sentiment was echoed by other regional powers. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt formed an anti-Turkish coalition in the Eastern Mediterranean, as elaborated below (Romano, 2020).

This so-called “*new cold war*” continued between 2017 and 2021 in different corners of the Islamic world, from the Horn of Africa to the Balkans, and not only impeded Türkiye’s sphere of influence but also undermined its economic and diplomatic interests (Cafiero & Occhiuti, 2020). To provide a clear example, it was rumored that Türkiye lost the UNSC non-permanent membership candidacy in 2014 because of the anti-campaign by Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Başkan, 2019, p. 93). Similarly, pro-government Turkish media claimed that the UAE supported the 2019 coup in Sudan to undermine Türkiye’s economic and political influence over this country (Aydıntaşbaş & Bianco, 2022, p. 9).

As aforementioned, the economic relations with the GCC countries were extremely crucial for Türkiye after the JDP came to power. Indeed, the trade volume had increased ninefold from 1.49 billion USD to 19.6 billion USD in the first decade of the JDP term

⁷⁷ Bashar Assad and Syria were welcomed back into the Arab League on May 7, 2023, after a 12-year suspension.

(Jabbour, 2022, p. 7). This remarkable increase signifies a substantial strengthening of economic ties between Türkiye and the GCC countries in that period. Despite the conflicting interests in the Arab Spring and ensuing Egyptian coup, Türkiye's economic relations seemed to be relatively stable with the Gulf States for a while. Stein and Bleek (2012, p. 142) claim that Türkiye acquiesced in the suppression of anti-government uprisings in Bahrain⁷⁸ considering its economic interests that exemplified the paradox of its humanitarian approach.

Despite initial stability, which appeared resilient in the face of regional turmoil, the dynamics shifted dramatically after the Gulf crisis and Türkiye's protest of the murder of Saudi journalist *Jamal Khashoggi* in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Türkiye's economic relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Table 4-2) began to deteriorate. To illustrate, Türkiye's exports to the UAE, its biggest trading partner in 2017, dramatically declined 66% in 2018 (Habibi, 2019, p. 4).

Table 4- 2 : Türkiye's Declining Economic Ties with GCC After the Gulf Crisis

	EXPORT (USD in millions)				
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Saudi Arabia		3473	3172	2735	2636
UAE		4631	5407	9184	3138
	FDI (USD in millions)				
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Saudi Arabia	1811	1239	994	891	625
UAE	6847	4573	3585	4079	2997

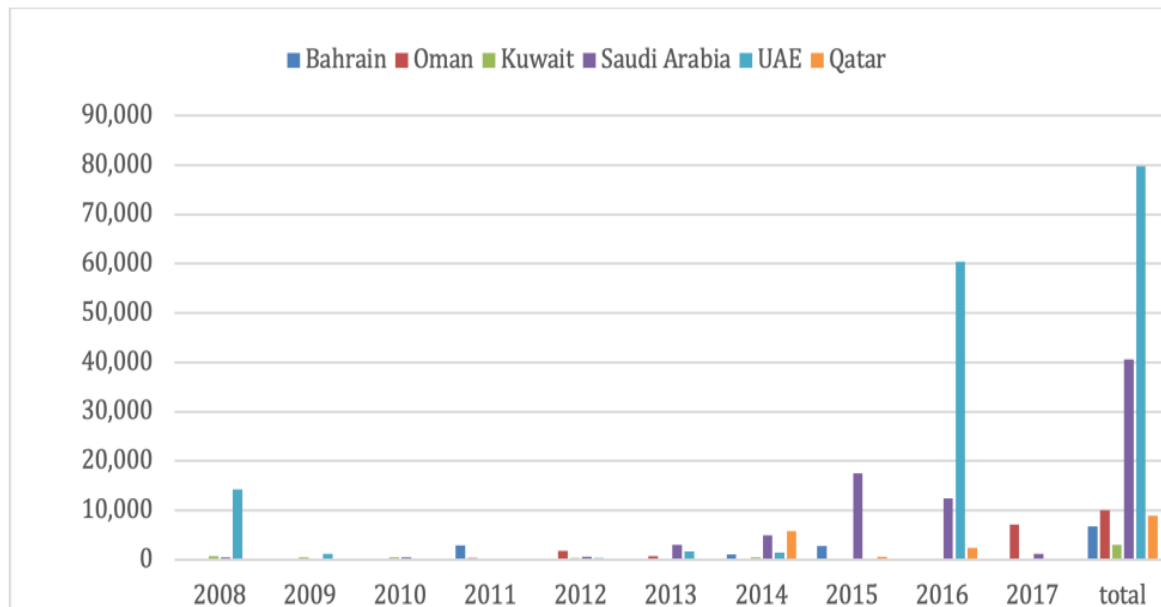
Source: Habibi, 2019, pp. 4-5.

Afterwards, the Saudi Kingdom initiated an undeclared boycott of Turkish goods as part of economic retaliation against Türkiye (Dönmez, 2020). As a result, Türkiye's exports to this country decreased dramatically to 189 million USD from 2.5 billion USD in 2020 and 3.2 billion USD in 2019 (Jabbour, 2022, p. 15). Different sectors have been significantly affected by these souring relations. Türkiye's flourishing military exports⁷⁹ to GCC countries came to almost a halt (*Figure 4-4*), as an obvious example of this (Dogan-Akkas & El-Berni, 2022, p.

⁷⁸ According to Lindenstrauss (2012, p. 10), Türkiye deliberately showed a low profile in this uprising in order not to highlight the Shiite-Sunni divide, which would put Iran and Saudi Arabia in direct confrontation.

⁷⁹ Due to developing diplomatic relations, military exports to GCC countries increased, and before the Arab Spring, the Saudis and the UAE were among Türkiye's top ten clients (Jabbour, 2022, p. 7).

7). Despite the Turkish government's desperate attempts to attract FDI to satisfy its foreign currency deficit, Saudis' real estate purchases in Türkiye declined sharply after the Gulf crisis (Habibi, 2019, p. 5). There were also further ramifications in the political and strategic domains. Idiz (2020) argues that the Gulf states began to normalize their relations with Israel under the name of the *Abraham Accord* to balance Türkiye in the region.



Source: *The Observatory of Economic Complexity* (2019), <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en>

Figure 4- 4 : Turkish Military Exports to GCC Countries (*in the thousands of USD*)

Türkiye's military engagement in the Syrian and Libyan conflicts, as well as the eastern Mediterranean, negatively impacted its relations with the NATO allies as well. For Gözen (2021, p. 524), Türkiye's "*Mavi Vatan*" (Blue Homeland) doctrine could be evaluated as the extension of the securitization process of Turkish foreign policy and led to a dispute with Greece, the Greek Cypriot administration, and France because of conflicting interests both in the Mediterranean and Libya (Aydıntaşbas & Bianco, 2022, p. 3). Nevertheless, this doctrine was developed to address emerging regional challenges. It manifests Ankara's adaptability in protecting its national interests (Fidan, 2024, pp. 14-6).

In reaction to Türkiye's assertive stance, France advocates for EU sanctions against Ankara. Maziad and Sotiriadis (2020) also assert that Egypt, Greece, the Greek Cypriots, and Israel formed an anti-Turkish alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean due to Erdoğan's

belligerent rhetoric and violations of Greek airspace and maritime zones. According to Çağaptay (2020), these nations increasingly cooperated on security/military issues, and they even ventured to conduct combined naval drills to demonstrate their strength. However, as indicated above, Türkiye's actions were reactionary, and the application of a more assertive stance aimed at limiting Greece's maximalist policies (Balkan & Yeşiltaş, 2024, p. 232).

According to some reports (Zanotti & Thomas, 2023, p. 7), the US has expanded its military presence in other regional countries (i.e., *Greece, the Greek Cypriot Administration, and Jordan*) because of concerns related to Türkiye's increasingly unilateral actions⁸⁰. In fact, these arguments are mostly reductionist. The post-Cold War developments have brought about a new international order, but the US is attempting to address new international issues using outdated strategies. This approach occasionally overlooks Türkiye's concerns and interests, complicating Ankara's position (Yükselen, 2024, p. 65). In an interview with her, *Assoc. Prof. Merve Seren Yeşiltaş*⁸¹ commented that:

“Contrary to claims that Türkiye has been pursuing more revisionist policies in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, it has been slow to respond to the pressing security risks and promising opportunities. Türkiye is recalibrating its power and national objectives in tandem with events in the Middle East and other regions as the global power balance shifts. Ankara hardly accepted that there were moments when their interests and those of the West could not coincide. As such, it must cooperate with its traditional allies or seek its national goals where necessary by calculating its material power for sure.”

Because of growing regional polarization on ideological lines, Türkiye and some regional countries treated their relations as if they were a zero-sum competition (Jabbour, 2022, p. 11) for a while. Even Saudi Arabia showed solidarity, with Türkiye's adversaries being uneasy about Türkiye's increasing footprint in the Gulf Region (GIF, 2020). Türkiye seems to be isolated in this legitimate cause. It has difficulty imposing its rights regarding the exploration of Mediterranean hydrocarbon resources.

⁸⁰ In March 2022, congressional hearing testimony, Alan Makovsky (Türkiye expert) said that while the United States should make efforts to keep Türkiye in the “Western camp,” Turkish “equivocation in recent years” justifies the United States building and expanding military facilities in Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece to “hedge its bets” (Zanotti & Thomas, 2023, p. 7).

⁸¹ Interview (on 2nd October 2023) with **Assoc. Prof. Merve Seren YEŞİLTAS**, who has been working at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University (Department of International Relations) and is an expert on both Afghanistan and Syria.

The rift between Türkiye and the US regarding the Syrian war also paved the way for Russia to increase its influence in Syria and across the region. Russia and the Assad regime signed a deal allowing Russia to use air (*Khmeimim*) and naval bases (*Tartus*) in Syria for another 49 years (Lavrov, 2018, p. 52). Moscow's centuries-old geopolitical objective of accessing warm waters was thus accomplished. Apparently, Russia intends to maintain its presence in the region for the foreseeable future⁸² by using Syria as a springboard and stronghold to increase its influence.

Unfortunately, Türkiye has been encircled by its historic archenemy not only from the north after the annexation of Crimea but also from the south practically. In case Russia had induced the Assad regime to recapture Idlib or support the Kurdish groups overtly or covertly, this would have put Türkiye's national security in great danger from 2015 to 2024. For this reason, Ankara's Syrian policies became overdependent on Moscow (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2020, p. 8) during this period. Moreover, even Türkiye's NATO membership is being questioned due to its close cooperation with Russia (Strategic Comments, 2019). *Mrs. Barçın Yinanç* emphasized that:

“The growing Russian influence in Syria and the Middle East outranks other significant negative consequences of the Syrian War for Türkiye. With Russia's incursion into the Mediterranean, the existing asymmetrical power balance between the two countries grew much more. Ankara and Moscow will eventually come into confrontation with one another due to conflicts of interest. In the long run, President Erdoğan's highly volatile cooperation with Putin—basically an expression of rage—would prove to be costly for Türkiye”.

4.6. Türkiye's Rapprochement with the Middle Eastern Countries

In retrospect, Türkiye achieved some of its national goals by resorting to hard-power security policies in Syria. These goals included preventing the formation of a de facto Kurdish statelet in northern Syria and limiting the flow of refugees. Additionally, Türkiye aimed to impede the creation of an energy corridor in the Eastern Mediterranean that excluded it, as this would be detrimental to its vital interests (Aydıntaşbaş, 2022, p. 4). Nevertheless, these

⁸² At the time of the final revisions of this thesis, negotiations regarding the fate of these bases were continuing between Russia and the new administration in Syria. Russian officials have declared their intentions for retaining their influence in the country by cooperating with the new Syrian regime. According to Russian media, Moscow has secured the fate of the bases as part of a deal (Katz, 2024; Euronews, 2024).

successes came at the expense of its soft power and increasing economic and political burdens (Bakır, 2021).

As a direct result of the Syrian crisis, Türkiye's military spending surged 25% from 2010 to 2014, even before launching military incursions in Syria (Akmehmed, 2015). Also, there was a dramatic increase in the defense budget between 2017 and 2019 (Seren, 2020, p. 200), which contributed to the current account deficit (Bakır, 2021). From 2018, Türkiye's economy plummeted significantly with increasing inflation and the fall in living standards in parallel. The decreasing trade with the Gulf countries and increasing number of refugees were contributory factors prior to the coronavirus pandemic and related economic troubles. As a matter of fact, Türkiye has faced the toughest economic conditions under the JDP rule, partly owing to the negative consequences of its Middle Eastern policy.

In addition to economic challenges, Türkiye also faced significant political ramifications. Ankara found itself in frustrating diplomatic isolation from the Middle East to Europe (Aydın & Baycar, 2022). Ultimately, in stark contrast to the favorable developments of the preceding decade, as of 2015, Türkiye lacked an ambassador in Egypt, Syria, Israel, Libya, and Yemen. As indicated above, even allied countries a decade ago positioned themselves in anti-Turkish blocs and engaged in diplomatic relations at the expense of Türkiye partly because of Ankara's bellicose foreign policy. Saudis' increasing cooperation with Israel, Greece, and the Greek Cypriots on energy issues, particularly joint military exercises, rang alarm bells in Ankara (Jabbour, 2022, p. 13).

As the interests and expectations diverged with regional and global actors, Ankara adopted an isolationist foreign policy, driven by its moral principles (Noi, 2024, p. 117); some officials of JDP called this "*precious loneliness (değerli yalnızlık)*" (Gözen, 2021, p. 434). However, this approach turned out to be costly, and Türkiye has paid high prices for the constantly changing Middle Eastern politics while pursuing its legitimate strategic goals. To address the serious difficulties it has recently encountered, Ankara had to de-escalate its foreign policy in light of the prevailing reality on the ground and adopt a more cautious and neutral Middle Eastern policy while taking into account its capacities and respecting the rights of other parties.

In addition to these, there are some other geostrategic reasons for Turkish-Middle Eastern rapprochements, which served as a facilitating factor. First of all, both parties came to the realization that regional rivalry, both politically and economically, had not benefited their

interests and had instead placed a needless burden on them (Aydın & Baycar, 2022). The dynamic nature of regional developments forced sides to make a pragmatic turn. Accordingly, Türkiye and Gulf monarchies have managed to find a *modus vivendi* allowing them to seek their national interests without pushing others' "red lines" (Jabbour, 2022, p. 20).

Secondly, after the Biden administration came to power in Washington, the focus of US foreign policy shifted from the Middle East to East Asia. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan ignited Gulf countries' security concerns and yielded geopolitical transformation in the region (Duran, 2022). Amidst emerging security risks, Ankara, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi readjust their foreign policies to diversify partnerships and enhance cooperation (Jabbour, 2022, p. 12). While GCC welcomed Türkiye's de-escalation efforts in their bilateral relations to counterbalance Iran's influence in the area (Aydın & Baycar, 2022), Türkiye sought to escape regional isolation by improving relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia (Jabbour, 2022, p. 12).

Thirdly, Türkiye has faced the truth that authoritarian regimes have managed to repress the demand of the masses for change in the region. Akkas (2022) suggests that rather than expecting democratic change in the region through the Brotherhood, Ankara tried to reach out to Gulf monarchs⁸³ (albeit authoritarian) to remedy the economic decline. Fourth, the intensified struggle for hydrocarbon resources among regional actors also drove the rapprochement (Jabbour, 2022, p. 13). The formation of an anti-Turkish alliance isolated Türkiye from cooperative energy initiatives in the Eastern Mediterranean, posing a significant security risk (Yesiltaş, 2024).

Shared interests in the region prompted both sides to soften their harsh rhetoric. Upon this development, Ankara aimed to reconcile its relations with Egypt and Israel to wedge into their alliance with Greece and Greek Cypriots (Dalay.G, 2022, p. 6). With the developing ties between Türkiye and these countries, the East Med Gas Pipeline Project, initially planned to bypass Türkiye, is being reconsidered. A new pipeline crossing through Israel's Leviathan gas fields to Türkiye and onward to Europe would position Türkiye as an energy hub (Aydıntaşbaş, 2022, p. 5). The EU would welcome such a scenario as it lessens Europe's reliance on Russia.

These shared geostrategic goals notwithstanding, Ankara's first and foremost priority to restore its strained relations with these wealthy countries is to put its sharply declining

⁸³ President Erdoğan tried to reach out even to the Assad regime in Syria, which was a potent symbol of a realpolitik turn in Turkish foreign policy during that period.

economy back on the right track, as indicated above (Cafiero G., 2022). Ankara desperately needed foreign capital to cope with a severe financial and external debt crisis (Jabbour, 2022, p. 13). Dalay (2022, p. 3) argues that Türkiye can only thwart another devaluation and short-term payment crisis by rehabilitating its relations with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh in the absence of alternative resources due to Ankara's strained relations with the West.

Indeed, as indicated by Dogan-Akkas and El-Berni (2022, pp. 13-4), during the 2018 banking and currency crisis, the financial support from Kuwait and Qatar came to the rescue just in time to recover the losses in the Turkish lira. Additionally, developing relations in defense positions the Gulf states as ideal markets for Türkiye's burgeoning defense industry (Duran, 2022). Indeed, the GCC countries expressed their interest in procuring Türkiye's game-changing military technology, particularly drones, after proving their effectiveness in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine to use against Iranian-backed militias in the region (Jabbour, 2022, p. 15). What is more, Aydıntaşbaş (2022, p. 7) purports that once calm returns to the region, Türkiye could set up the necessary conditions for the return of one million Syrians, which would relieve the financial load and Turkish electorate discontent prior to the 2023 election (Jabbour, 2022, p. 13).

According to Akkas (2022), this explains why Ankara approached the UAE first, after blaming it for backing the 15 July failed coup and betraying the Palestine Cause by signing the Abraham Accord with Israel. Although most people did not support this reconciliation, President Erdoğan pushed it anyway because economic problems necessitated speedy solutions. Despite criticism from the Turkish opposition, Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited in November 2021, marking a new era in bilateral relations, Crown Prince *Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's* visit in November 2021 and Erdoğan's return visit in February 2022 marked a new era of normalization in bilateral relations. The UAE announced immediately a 10 billion USD fund for investments in Türkiye (Jabbour, 2022, p. 14), and the central banks struck a 5 billion USD currency swap agreement that met Ankara's expectations as a positive outcome of these improved relations (Dalay.G, 2022, p. 5).

As for Saudi Arabia, the normalization attempts were more painful and lengthy. Having tested its historic lowest point, the mutual relations revitalized only after Türkiye made a huge sacrifice by transferring journalist *Jamal Khashoggi's* murder trial to Saudi Arabia in return for economic interests (Akkas, 2022), which exemplifies realpolitik's victory over liberal ideas. After President Erdogan's visit to Riyadh in May 2022, and Saudi Crown Prince *Mohammed bin Salman's (MbS)* return visit in June 2022, both sides opened a new page in

mutual relations (Cafiero G., 2022). As a culmination of a softening stance, central banks signed a 15 billion USD swap agreement, reportedly (Aydıntaşbaş, 2022, pp. 6-7). In this context, the Israeli president visited Ankara on March 9, 2022 the first visit by an Israeli head of state since 2008 (Dalay.G, 2022, p. 8), which was interpreted as Ankara's attempt to mend its ties with the West due to a deepening financial crisis.

Surprisingly, Türkiye has also tried to mend its relations with Egypt in more recent times. Since 2013, the diplomatic relations between Ankara and Cairo have deteriorated because of Türkiye's quick support of the Muslim Brotherhood government and its allied organizations. Türkiye also denounced the conspirators' 2013 military *coup d'état* that overthrew Mohammed Morsi's administration (İdiz, 2022). After recalling ambassadors, the relations between these two important Muslim states totally ruptured; they engaged in an ideological and geopolitical struggle at a regional level (Yesiltaş, 2024). Under the influence of intensifying geopolitical rivalry, both countries were dragged into opposite sides in Libya and the Mediterranean.

After it became apparent that Türkiye could not afford to continue with similar policies, Ankara has prioritized reestablishing mutual ties lately because of arising needs in the Mediterranean and the ever-lasting Syrian conflict. After realizing the futility of maintaining its support for the Brotherhood at the expense of its diplomatic ties with Egypt (Jabbour, 2022, p. 14), the Turkish government gradually applied pressure on Egyptian dissident networks and Muslim Brotherhood-linked media outlets in Istanbul to stop or moderate their anti-Sisi broadcasting⁸⁴. Although the Egyptian side was hesitant and laid down many conditions for normalization at the beginning, President Erdoğan's handshake with his Egyptian counterpart, *Abdel-Fattah Sisi*, in Qatar during the World Cup Opening Ceremony signaled that a new page was about to turn in bilateral relations (Duran, 2022).

As emphasized by Aydıntaşbaş (2022, p. 6), after a decade-long public criticism and systematic charges, many people rarely thought Erdoğan and Sisi could ever reconcile and mend their relationship⁸⁵. Despite widespread skepticism, President Erdoğan, while answering

⁸⁴ For instance, on April 29, 2022, the Mekameleen Satellite Channel announced its departure from Türkiye, citing "*circumstances that are not hidden from anyone*" as the reason (Dalay, 2022, p. 3).

⁸⁵ In the aftermath of the 7th October attacks, the emerging security risks and changing paradigm accelerated the normalization process between Türkiye and Egypt. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi paid a visit to Ankara on September 4, 2024, and President Erdoğan paid a return visit on December 19, 2024, to attend a summit of developing nations (D-8) and was warmly welcomed.

questions, stated that considering Türkiye's interests, he was willing to improve regional partnership, including Egypt and even Syria (İdiz, 2022).

There has been an unavoidable link between the new circumstances in the post-Arab Spring era and Türkiye's Syrian policy. Ankara took some initiatives to turn the developments in its favor and supported the Syrian opposition at the beginning. However, the ever-changing balance of power has confronted Türkiye with major security risks. Ankara initially sought to eliminate these risks through hard power and an isolationist policy. However, this approach ultimately led to significant economic and diplomatic challenges.

After this point, Türkiye normalized its relations with regional countries. After turning to realpolitik, Ankara has once again proved with the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria that it is the most influential regional actor. All these explicitly proved that whenever Türkiye resorts to its smart power (*or its soft power in combination with its hard power where necessary*), it is successful in reaching its objectives in the Middle East. Conversely, if Ankara tries to achieve its goals by applying hard-power policies without considering the gap between its aims and means, the country encounters unprecedented risks in this volatile region.

CHAPTER 5

5. COMPARISON OF TWO CASES IN TERMS OF UNDESIRE RESULTS AND MISTAKES LEADING TO THE FAILURE IN ACHIEVING LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES

The scale and motives of Türkiye's military engagement in northern Syria and the US intervention in Afghanistan are different from each other, as discussed in earlier chapters. Because Türkiye has emerged as a beneficiary in the recent power change in Damascus after the Assad regime's collapse. Although there are still many uncertainties in Syria, Türkiye has established itself as a gamechanger country when its interests are at stake. Hence, even in the face of very challenging circumstances in northeastern Syria, Ankara would be able to turn things around and accomplish its strategic objectives in the following period. On the other hand, the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan was mostly viewed as a strategic failure since it failed to achieve any strategic objectives.

Despite these fundamental differences, these two cases share some resemblances in terms of their immediate objectives and results. In this chapter, these differences and similarities of both cases are compared by focusing on the planning and executing phases of military operations and the impacts on intervened countries to find common negative (or positive, if there are any) outcomes of military efforts in another country. The consequences of these military activisms on the US and Türkiye are also analyzed considering political and socio-economic results during and post-intervention periods.

In terms of their goals, the US invasion of Afghanistan and Türkiye's military operations in Syria differ in nature. The US carried out its military intervention to eliminate terror networks based in Afghanistan. Washington actually aimed at an immediate punishment of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization and the Taliban regime that sheltered it in reaction to the 9/11 attacks. By doing so, Washington wished to give a strong message to other adversaries about what they would encounter if they attacked the US. On the other hand, Türkiye's military actions were to cope with emerging security threats to its unity and territorial integrity. In that, Türkiye has been reactionary.

The ultimate goals of military operations differed as well. The US-led coalition sought to overthrow the Taliban regime and replace it with a friendlier one. As such, they aimed

to bolster Washington's footprint in Central Asia so that it could advance its geopolitical goals. On the other hand, excluding its support for the Syrian moderate opposition between the years 2011 and 2014 for a rapid power change, Türkiye sought to eradicate terror threats along its border and establish safe areas for sending Syrian refugees back to their countries.

The targeted areas and the way of conduct also differed. While the US and its allies conducted an overseas military expedition from North America and Europe against a Central Asian state, Türkiye's operational area was limited to northern Syria, which is adjacent to its longest land boundaries. Whereas the US targeted the ruling regime, Türkiye engaged in conflicts only with DEASH and PYD/PKK terrorists during military operations.

These huge differences notwithstanding, the two cases are similar in some dimensions. To begin with, both the US and Türkiye initiated military operations in response to terror attacks, claiming the lives of their citizens. Therefore, both actions were justified under the UN Charter, which grants the right to self-defense against terrorist organizations. In a broader perspective, both countries applied their hard power-based foreign policy to realize national interests. Furthermore, even though both operations were launched to satisfy immediate security concerns, they ensued with socio-economic development efforts to bring some degree of stability to the targeted areas. Hence, both interventions can be framed as humanitarian efforts to some extent, even if this was not a primary concern initially.

Additionally, both military actions have reached their immediate objectives with relative ease. US forces overthrew the Taliban and apprehended Osama bin Laden in 2011; Türkiye drove DEASH out of its borders and eliminated the majority of YPG/PKK's elements in the western Euphrates River region. Nonetheless, neither of them was successful in realizing the ultimate objectives so far because of the mistakes made at tactical, operative, and strategic levels. This chapter also, therefore, thoroughly investigates these tactical, operational, and strategic mistakes. Finally, due to their military operations, the US and Türkiye have both experienced considerable humanitarian, economic, and diplomatic problems. After employing military power, these countries have undergone various levels of securitization, and this has had varying degrees of negative impact on democratic institutions and practices.

Within the scope of this study, all respondents were asked to compare these cases, considering their similarities and differences.

Nearly every interviewee claims that despite reservations about the timing of Türkiye's military actions, the country has been compelled to take unilateral action to address safety risks arising from the Syrian quagmire. There were differing opinions on the purpose of the US invasion of Afghanistan. Some claimed the US was there to

exploit Afghanistan's subterranean resources, while others said the US was trying to maintain its position as the world's preeminent force. Few respondents believe that the US intended to reduce terrorism in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, the majority of respondents stated that Türkiye moved a bit sluggishly to take necessary actions. Accordingly, Ankara should have intervened in the Syrian crises before DEASH expanded its control in Northern Syria, and the US and PYD/YPG started to cooperate well in advance.

Mrs. Yinanç, however, contradicted the notion that Türkiye had to defend its interests by addressing emerging security risks in Syria, claiming that Türkiye itself exacerbated the conflict by meddling in Syria's internal affairs, a mistake she deemed unforgivable.

Drawing on these opinions and other findings of the study, both cases are analyzed in the comparative context. The US and Türkiye seem to have achieved varying levels of success⁸⁶ in Afghanistan and Syria in terms of curbing the security risks, for which they played a degree of roles in their evolutions. However, Ankara has not been able to eradicate YPG/PKK threats in Syria completely and relocate the Syrian refugees so far. The US also lost the war against the Taliban in 2021 without reaching any of its strategic objectives.

From this vantage point, military actions have resulted in a seemingly inevitable failure because of the common mistakes; besides, they have caused some negative results in the targeted country as well as in the backyards of the US and Türkiye. In order to shed light on the underlying factors and common miscalculations that hindered the US and Türkiye from achieving their ultimate goals, the current state of affairs of both countries is examined in the following section.

5.1. Disregarding Socio-Cultural Factors in Planning and Execution Phases

As a rule of thumb, every military operation requires a detailed understanding of the country's conditions and meticulous planning. When a military operation is conducted in a

⁸⁶ Although it will be late, Türkiye will be able to realize its strategic objectives if it can terminate the YPG/PKK's presence in Syria on terms agreed upon with the US and preserve Syria's territorial integrity. But as of December 2024, Syria is at risk of sectarian conflict and disintegration like that of Iraq. If this worst-case scenario materializes, Türkiye may face greater security risks.

foreign country, factors such as demographics, economic and political dynamics, and ethnic fault lines must be carefully considered. Afghanistan and Syria were among the developing countries in Central Asia and the Middle East grappling with ethnic and sectarian divisions long before the US-led invasion and Turkish military operations. These divisions significantly influenced the strategies employed by foreign military forces, often leading to unexpected challenges. In addition, both countries had a suppressive regime, the Taliban and the Assad regime, respectively, that had been ruling their countries with strict rules.

Additionally, any foreign intervention would have opened Pandora's box in such ethnically and religiously diverse countries since these groups have priorities in the absence of effective overarching authority (Edelstein, 2004, p. 69). Therefore, intervening in the conflicts between governments and opposition groups without planning for the replacement of regimes and peaceful transition processes in advance, whether through military or other means, would be crucial mistakes impeding successful outcomes (Denison, 2020, p. 5). What is more, the new regime should be able to address the security and humanitarian needs of the population to gain public support. Otherwise, it cannot consolidate power in a country and enjoy international recognition.

Bearing these principles in mind, it seems that the US and Türkiye have not made sufficient preparations and plans before launching their military operations, which constituted a critical mistake. They also neglected the socio-economic factors to some extent by believing in a relatively rapid and peaceful power transition. In the end, however, they had to deal with humanitarian issues such as refugees, IDPs, and increasing illegal activities.

The US-backed Afghan governments, which came to power after the overthrow of the Taliban regime, never gained national legitimacy in the country, partly due to their corrupt structure and partly due to the exclusion of Pashtun elements. Continuous power struggles among the anti-Taliban bloc, coupled with widespread favoritism, rendered state institutions fragile and ineffective. By taking advantage of the weakness of the central government and the Afghan National Army, the Taliban managed to regain control in the south and southeastern parts of the country; then this initiative turned into a nationwide, full-fledged insurgency. Given these conditions, the US needed to proactively engage with the Taliban to facilitate the formation of a legitimate Afghan government much earlier than 2020.

Andrew Cottey (2003) argues that the US, for hiding the negative impacts of its intervention, reluctantly started to implement a nation-building process with an aim to control the country through a central government. Nevertheless, the difficulties encountered demonstrated that nation-building through foreign intervention was more complex than

initially anticipated. In the interview, Mr. *Bülent Tokgöz* asserted that “*the US and its allies had never fully comprehended the nature of rural Afghan society*”. Speaking in an interview, Professor *Murat Aslan* also said that trying to impose Western civic principles on a conservative, rural Afghan community has backfired.

For instance, the theme of liberating Afghans, particularly the victimization of women, was extensively used in US propaganda efforts, such as media campaigns and political speeches, to justify military intervention (Aslan, 2017, p. 192). However, these themes of liberation and victimization have not resonated meaningfully within rural Afghan society. It should have been recognized that constructive political dialogue, not asymmetric warfare, would have alleviated their suffering (Connah, 2020, p. 76). Since the US did not engage in such an effort, it appears that women's rights were utilized as a tool to garner popular support for the invasion.

Furthermore, as indicated by Brinkley (2013), forming a nation without considering the cultural diversity and economic instability of Afghanistan was a grave mistake that exacerbated the current problems. In actuality, the US miscalculated by failing to take the unique challenges of Afghanistan into account, which include the country's multiethnic and sectarian population. Because of this, it was difficult for various groups to share political power between the national government and local leaders, who were only convinced not to compete with Kabul by being offered more autonomy.

Natasha Rahim (2023, pp. 8-34) posits that any external military interventions potentially contribute to the deterioration of the security situation. Because the existing power balance among various ethnic and religious groups can collapse suddenly. This creates a power vacuum that is often filled by ethnic or religious minorities, while previous rulers and their groups become marginalized. Such a development intensifies political rivalry among these groups, serving as a destabilizing factor in the intervened countries. Eventually, the capabilities of newly formed governments in creating national unity and law enforcement are hugely disrupted, so overall domestic security weakens.

As described above, one of the biggest obstacles to achieving a satisfactory power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan is the rivalry among various ethnic groups and different Pashtun communities (Romano et al., 2015, pp. 400-1). A number of analysts consider the Bonn Conference's exclusion of Pashtuns from the state building to be the “*original sin*” (Hassan, 2023, p. 39), which limited the central government’s control in Kabul only and was conducive to the burgeoning insurgency ultimately. Considering that the Pashtuns had been ruling the country since its establishment in 1747, the destructive results should have been

predicted. *Ms. Rahim* also identified this as one of the US's critical mistakes in Afghanistan, stating:

“If the US government had made an agreement with them, everything would have been different because Pashtuns contributed to the insurgency much more than other ethnic groups. And this destabilized not only Afghanistan but also Pakistan and some other regional countries.”

The US officials mistakenly failed to encourage an acceptable power-sharing agreement among all ethnic and religious groups that would be an easy and plausible solution at the beginning. The US expelled other Pashtun factions from the newly formed Afghan government. This Kabul-centric government, dominated by the Northern Alliance comprised of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, led to new conflicts (Cottey, 2003, pp. 176-7). These mistakes drove certain tribes into the arms of the Taliban, providing the movement with fighters, a support network, and territory from which to launch attacks.

In the process of establishing a state in Afghanistan after 9/11, the US and its allies ignored the country's demographics and power structure, treating it as a "*tabula rasa*" (Hassan, 2023, p. 4). The highly centralized, western-style state-building process was imposed on Afghan society, disregarding its historical facts and social fabric. Nonetheless, because of its rugged topography and diverse ethnic and religious population, Afghanistan has always presented difficulties to its rulers who sought to establish a strong central state. In order to bridge the gaps in this regard, a fruitless democratization campaign was initiated based on the idea that promoting democracy could reduce support for terrorism (insurgency) (Rahim, 2023, p. 71).

Traditionally, local powerbrokers and tribe leaders have exercised considerable control over their respective regions (Seren M., 2021). For this reason, the US's desire to establish a centralized government structure to keep it under its control effortlessly was not congruent with the realities on the ground. Because these local figures, community elders in most cases, are regarded as the custodians of traditions and social order, particularly in rural areas, any attempts to create an effective government were in vain without convincing these influential figures. Their diverging and conflicting interests from time to time set an obstacle in front of national unity. Therefore, from the onset, these power holders resisted the centralization of the ruling system for fear that their grip on power would be undermined.

In addition, these figures have become important tools of endemic corruption and widespread human rights violations. Local power holders, who had been suppressed

throughout the Taliban term, saw a window of opportunity to assert their will and further their financial interests. In the absence of law enforcement, these local strongmen used escalating political violence to seize control of a sizable portion of the country. They did not hold back from using brutal force if they believed that their power and interests were in danger.

To illustrate this point, Gulbuddin Hekmetyar and Rashid Dostum have perpetrated numerous atrocities. As they saw the use of force as legitimate, convincing them to lay down their weapons and acknowledge the authority of the national government has never been possible (Lee M. , 2021). The Afghan public was consequently forced to choose between the unfair treatment of local warlords and the civilian casualties brought on by US attacks.

Moreover, the US officials also failed to fully grasp the reality that most Pashtuns had little sympathy for Al Qaeda's Arab fighters (Logevall, 2021), but the coalition manhunting air campaign targeted indiscriminately Taliban with them, which caused a joint front against the US and NATO units (Greentree, 2021, p. 12). In the interview, *Mr. Tokgöz* reiterated this point as well. He said that "*the Taliban, in contrast to Al Qaeda, never sought a worldwide caliphate and remained to be a local organization*". It appears that the insurgency would not have spread to a point of such scale if the US and its allies had made the appropriate evaluations and, where feasible, distinguished between Taliban fighters and Al Qaeda members.

Afghans are suspicious of foreigners due to a history of invasions, including those by the British in the 19th century and the Soviet Union in the 20th century. Being aware of this fact, rebel groups exploit the presence of foreign forces as a means of recruiting and gaining support from the public (Rahim, 2023, p. 35). Seren (2021, p. 30) also claims that, given that the US-led occupation lasted too long, support for the Taliban-led insurgency grew while support for the central government decreased. Notwithstanding these well-known facts, US policymakers failed to recognize the underlying cultural reasons that contributed to the increase in Taliban resistance.

For an average Afghan, resisting a foreign occupation means standing up for their honor, their country, and, above all, their religion. Many Afghans believed that the Taliban, in their efforts to drive the Americans out of Afghanistan, were acting honorably and morally; in contrast, the army and police fight for power, while Taliban members fight for their beliefs. Because of this, Malkasian (2020, pp. 83-4) rightly asserts that it was obvious from the start who would prevail in the conflict.

In addition, US strategists miscalculated by attempting to draw parallels between the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. They overlooked the significant differences in these countries' socioeconomic conditions, ethnic and religious compositions, and geographic

characteristics. In an attempt to quell the rebellion, General Petraeus has once again employed a comprehensive approach strategy in Afghanistan, but no positive results were achieved (Malkasian, 2020, p. 47) because of the aforementioned striking differences.

Finally, the US officials failed to understand the significance of the poppy industry for both the Afghan economy and the funding of insurgency activities. Washington did not offer a sustainable economic substitute for the illicit market. As a result, local landlords felt compelled to side with the Taliban for fear that they would lose their primary source of income (Romano et al., p. 403). Seren (2021, p. 2) states that all these factors not only contributed to the US's disastrous failure but also turned Afghanistan into an utterly collapsed state.

In the same way, Türkiye was unable to predict the next stage and devise an appropriate strategy to get ready for it, neither when it backed the Syrian opposition nor when it launched a direct military intervention. After breaking its ties with the regime, Ankara started to support the Syrian National Council (SNC) financially and morally (Jabbour, 2022, p. 9) with the hope that the Assad regime would be replaced by moderate Islamist factions (Okay, 2017, p. 834). Nevertheless, it soon became apparent that the SNC could not achieve all-inclusiveness and legitimacy due to Brotherhood domination (ibid., p.835). In fact, the Syrian opposition was too weak to replace the regime because of internal divisions and conflicting interests (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1404).

Turkish decision-makers made certain wrong assumptions about the Syrian conflict right from the start. It was untrue to presume that the fall of the Assad regime would be quick and unavoidable, as it was minority rule in essence and backed by only Alawites. However, thanks to other third parties' (particularly Russia's and Iran's) support and constantly shifting dynamics and threat perceptions, the regime managed to stay in power for another 14 years.

As legitimate and nonviolent demands of the Syrian people evolved into a complex, protracted, and sectarian civil war (Karimi & Shafaei, 2018, p. 63), other minority groups began to fear the rise of fundamentalist groups like DEASH, Al Nusra, and HTS (Findley & Teo, 2006, pp. 14-7). Although they were de facto allies for demonstrations calling for reforms, Christians and Druzes started to increase their backing gradually for the Assad regime upon seeing growing threats emanating from the radicalization of opposition in Syria (Ferris & Kirişci, 2016, p. 19).

To incite terror among other minority groups and strengthen its support, the Assad regime depicted the opposition as Islamic extremists throughout the Syrian civil war. Laub (2023) argues that since the regime was not only authoritarian but also kleptocratic, some segments of the Sunni population, alongside other minority groups, also gave support to the

Assad rule, fearing revenge if the opposition took control of the country. Sunni elites provided significant support to the regime due to their secularist and economic concerns. In contrast, middle- and lower-class Sunnis, having been neglected socioeconomically, became increasingly supportive of the opposition. According to Ferris and Kirişci (2016, p. 23), the moderate opposition was unable to persuade the Syrian people that they would be an ideal replacement for the regime because of their disorganized organization and some radical actions.

The consensus in Ankara at the beginning of the conflict was that the oppressive regime of the Alawites (Nusayris) was the primary cause of popular disagreement. However, it was not the sole cause; rather, a combination of various factors triggered the uprising. Syria was, in essence, an economically fragile country, and socio-economic problems were driving factors for uprisings as much as ethnic and sectarian fragmentations (Ibold, 2019, p. 10). According to Transparency International data, Syria was ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world (Karimi & Shafae, 2018, p. 64). The wealth was concentrated in the hands of the regime's close circle (Mozayek et al., 2022, p. 5). The fact that people were calling for higher living standards prior to democracy and freedom was obviously ignored by the Turkish authorities.

Türkiye, more or less akin to the US, could not manage to adopt all-inclusive actions either. Ankara has initially engaged with PYD leader Salih Muslim⁸⁷ to try to delink the YPG/PYD and the PKK. Then, it attempted to engage in the non-PKK-aligned Kurdistan National Council (KNC) to establish a counterforce against the PYD (Ülgen, 2021, p. 11; Okyay, 2017, p. 835). However, Siccardi (2021, p. 8) claims that not sufficient effort was given to keep Syrian Kurds⁸⁸ in check afterwards. In an interview with her, *Mrs. Yinanç* said that in 2012, she was told by a high-level Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs official that Salih Muslim was a legitimate authority for Türkiye. She was surprised at how swiftly this strategy transformed in parallel with traditional security-based policies. According to *Mr. Mahmud's* observations, “many Syrians think that Türkiye is in their country to take control of Kurds in the north”.

⁸⁷ According to İdris Baluken (who was then- a HDP MP), *Salih Muslim*, *Sırrı Süreyya Önder*, and *Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu* together coordinated and directed Türkiye's *Shah-Euphrate Operation* from İstanbul on 22nd Feb 2015 (TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, D.26.C.10, B.54. p.787).

⁸⁸ Türkiye has failed to take advantage of the power struggle among different Kurdish factions in Syria. Although it reached out to the Kurdish National Council (ENKS), which has close ties with Nechirvan Barzani, this attempt did not produce any positive result afterward. Instead, almost all Syrian Kurdish groups began to operate PKK-linked SDF, which marked another diplomatic failure of Türkiye.

Bearing in mind that the Kurds constitute 10% of the Syrian population and are a traditionally suppressed political group in Syrian politics, Türkiye should have developed an effective strategy of engagement with them. From the onset, it was evident that the Kurds would seek more international recognition. This was particularly true in light of the power vacuum. Instead of engaging with them, Ankara felt compelled to confront these groups, perceiving a threat in the support that the West provided. Indeed, the YPG/PYD's increasing influence in Syria posed two-dimensional threats to Türkiye.

The territorial gains of these groups, particularly after the Kobane conflicts, exposed Türkiye to the spillover effects of this ethnic-based conflict (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1400). In fact, the domestic conflicts between the PKK and Turkish security forces intensified and brought about the eventual end of the peace process. The diverging security concerns also led to the deterioration of the relations between Ankara and Washington. This shift in focus not only intensified domestic conflicts but also altered international alliances, notably with the US. Whereas Türkiye gave priority to safeguarding its own territorial integrity (Okyay, 2017, p. 844), the US focused on defeating DEASH and recognized the YPG/PYD as a reliable partner for this purpose (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1414).

In addition, very little contact was established with Shia or Christian minority groups in Syria, maybe because of Türkiye's cohort of gradually radicalized pro-Muslim Brotherhood groups (Ülgen, 2021, p. 9) throughout the civil conflict. Türkiye's involvement in the Syrian crisis was perceived by these groups as a regional "Sunnification" project (Okyay, 2017, p. 841) or aggravating the civil war (Cagaptay, 2020, p. 3). Therefore, it would have been harder for the Assad regime to win over other religious communities if Ankara had adopted a more balanced policy that included them.

5.2. Over-dependency on Military Power

As highlighted in previous chapters, foreign military interventions can upset the balance of power among various interest groups; military means should only be used as a last resort. Such interventions tend to escalate existing confrontations between governments and militants or incite conflicts among opposing factions (Rahim, 2023, p. 36). Furthermore, earlier research indicates that, in general, external interventions do not result in stability and tranquility over the long term. Indeed, the US military intervention in Afghanistan and third-party state

and NSA actors' intervention in the Syrian conflict did not provide solutions to existing issues but instead intensified some of them.

When the US and its allies launched their war against the Taliban-led Afghanistan in 2001, they pledged to establish an independent, peaceful, and democratic state where terrorist organizations could no longer find refuge. Ultimately, though, the US invasion brought about severe consequences for the Afghan people due to political unrest, a lack of security, and economic hardships, as well as culminating in a humiliating defeat for the US itself. Even though it was in the best interests of the US (Nye J. J., 1990, pp. 167-9), the nonmilitary components of national power were rarely mobilized during the 20-year US occupation.

Even though US leaders realized after a few years in Afghanistan that military force alone was insufficient to achieve goals, hard-power-based policies persisted. Instead of investing in Afghanistan's infrastructure, significant funds were diverted to the US military and ANSF's expenditures. Indeed, the US Department of Defense spent nearly 850 billion USD on warfighting and 150 billion on the Afghan Army, but the sources allocated for the reconstruction of Afghanistan were dwarfed (Hassan, 2023, p. 34).

As suggested by Joseph Nye (1990, p. 159), the use of hard power in foreign policy has become more costly and dangerous even for great powers than previous eras. Neither US President Bush nor his successors seriously considered viable alternatives to military action. Depending on the situation at home, they would either add or remove US soldiers (Malkasian, 2020, p. 80). They never made any significant changes to the war's course. After 17 years of exhaustion for both sides, the Trump administration initiated the first significant peace talks.

However, the US would have opted for other options rather than employing military power. Because when the US threatened to use military force against the Taliban rule unless they turned over Osama bin Laden and other top Al Qaeda figures in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban agreed to hold Osama bin Laden's trial within the territory of Afghanistan in response to the US ultimatum, provided that there was sufficient evidence of his involvement in the attacks (Rahim, 2023, p. 44).

Despite those evident indications of cooperation⁸⁹ as well as no Afghan national perpetrator involved in these attacks, the Bush administration launched a "war on terror" anyway, believing that military strength could solely address the threat posed by global

⁸⁹ It should also be remembered that the Taliban was seeking international recognition before the September 11 attacks and even completely banned the poppy cultivation for this purpose. Therefore, if the necessary evidence was produced, it would, of course, be possible for Osama Bin Laden and those responsible to be tried in a sharia court for this atrocity that took place before the eyes of the world.

terrorism. This decision was made despite experts' and former generals' warnings that it was overly simplistic and one-dimensional (Hassan, 2023, p. 18). As if nothing had been learned from its proxy war against the Soviets previously, Washington repeated the same mistakes. However, previous British and Soviet invasions had already clearly proved that even the mighty military powers of superpowers would be insufficient in Afghanistan's harsh terrain.

Initially, Taliban fighters could not withstand the overwhelming military supremacy of the US-led coalition, and Washington achieved its early objectives with relative ease. For the next three years, it was widely believed that the Taliban no longer posed a significant threat, and the focus shifted to the Iraq War. Furthermore, there was no attempt at reconciliation, including with Pashtuns on the opposition side and the Taliban (Malkasian, 2020, p. 79). The Taliban stepped up their attacks on coalition forces after realizing there was no place for them in the future of Afghanistan, and this led to the longest and bloodiest war in US history. In other words, the US's steadfast use of military force and lack of desire for a diplomatic solution during that crucial era, which ran from 2001 to 2004, created the conditions for a broad insurgency.

As the insurgency grew more organized and costly for US forces, Washington decided to focus more of its efforts on building up the Afghan National Army starting in 2006 instead of attempting to engage with the Taliban and address the underlying reasons for the insurgency. However, despite the significant financial support, continuous training, and presence of US advisors, the Afghan Army, like the Afghan Government, never developed the capacity to operate without coalition backing (Seren M., 2021, p. 22) due to a number of fundamental issues.

While the new security institutions were formed, the western model and regulations were imitated by overlooking the contextual realities of Afghanistan, leading to operational challenges and frictions with local communities (Rahim, 2023, p. 47). Therefore, factionalism and nepotism have undermined the sense of unity within the national army and police forces. As a result, the Afghan security forces could not withstand the Taliban when the US withdrew its troops, and the Taliban retook the whole country within just two weeks. When she was asked for more elaboration in an interview with her, *Ms. Rahim* added:

“The Afghan National Security Forces have never been capable because the Taliban had enough support among some tribes, first of all. They also had control over the resources within those areas. In addition, the tactics of the national army were horrible. Shortly, the Taliban indisputably managed to control people and areas. I

have many friends in Afghanistan, and they told me that the pro-US Afghan government was only capable of controlling Kabul, not the rest of the country. The Taliban had widespread support among Pashtuns, who hold a majority in Afghanistan”.

Türkiye has also increasingly resorted to its military power recently. As explained in preceding chapters, the Syrian Civil War acted as a catalyst for Türkiye’s foreign policy shift. By pursuing and benefiting exponentially from the soft-power pragmatic approach in the first decade of the 2000s (Dost, 2023), the JDP marked a paradigm shift in Republican history and produced many positive results, which was a silent revolution for many (Ataman, 2024, p. 34). Nevertheless, the Arab Spring and Syrian Civil War reversed the momentum, and Ankara has been forced to adopt traditional, realpolitik-dictated hard power policies to ensure its national security.

Actually, Türkiye had a long tradition of emphasizing hard-power-based policies before the JDP era, and quick regional changes after the Arab Spring proved once again that hard power is the prevailing form of action in the Middle East (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 27). Indeed, after establishing itself as a gamechanger country in Syria through military involvement, the Turkish Army became an expeditionary force (Siccardi, 2021, p. 20), proving its effectiveness in Libya, Azerbaijan, and other places. In fact, Türkiye's military power, together with its developing defense industrial capabilities, constitutes one of the important pillars of Ankara’s foreign policy nowadays (Ataman, 2024, p. 41). As the Turkish army’s operations and presence within NATO or unilaterally have extended beyond the immediate neighborhood of the country (*Figure 5-1*), Türkiye’s increasing footprint is being felt from the Balkans to central Africa (Outzen, 2022).

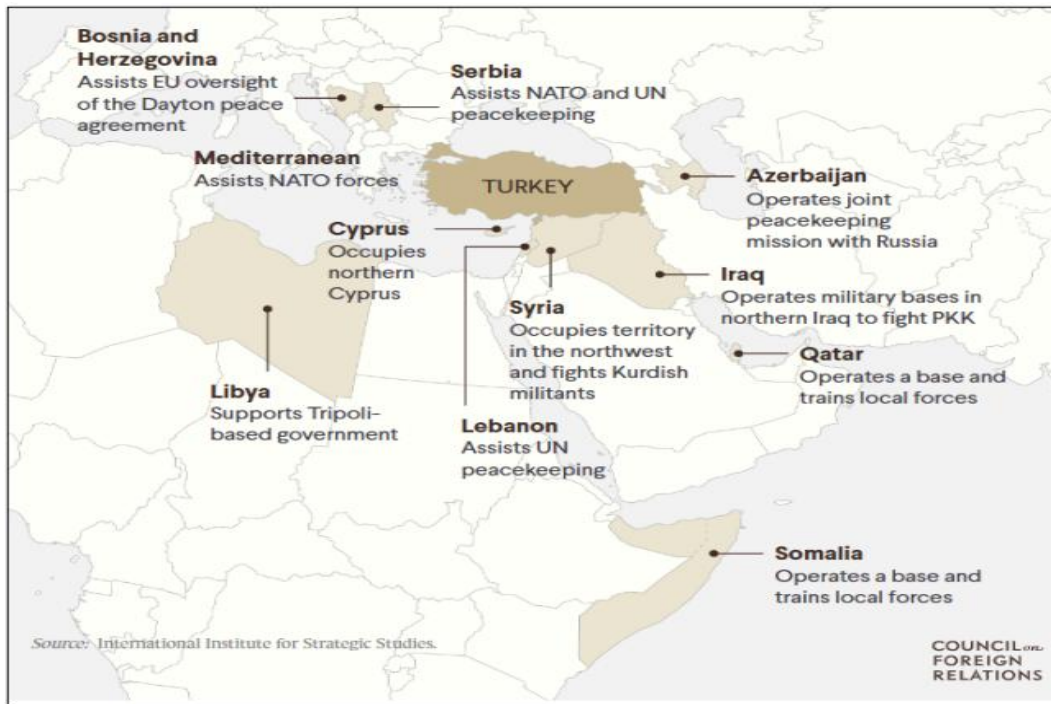


Figure 5- 1 : Military Presence of the Turkish army as of 2023

As far as the Syrian conflict is concerned, the use of hard power was not Türkiye's first choice at the beginning because of good relations with Damascus and beneficial soft-power policies in the preceding period. Other options were available. One was to increase pressure on the Assad regime for political reforms. In fact, the regime signaled its willingness for reforms by lifting long-standing emergency law on April 19, 2011, and allowing the formation of political parties on August 19, 2011, despite its intensifying crackdown on a peaceful uprising. Finding these steps cosmetic, Ankara put itself, a bit hastily, into the anti-Assad camp and started to support the opposition explicitly (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1400).

Second, even after the Assad regime showed resistance to putting the reforms into practice, Türkiye could have called for civil disobedience in Syria to urge a peaceful transition, as happened in Egypt, rather than providing material support to the armed opposition. Third, Türkiye could have put more effort into multinational intervention under NATO or the Arab League auspices to protect Syrian people rather than unilateral actions. However, due to a lack of a coherent grand strategy (Neset et al., 2021, p. 8) and an inability to anticipate dynamic changes in the theater, Ankara was ultimately forced to utilize its armed forces to mitigate multifaceted security concerns.

Türkiye's military involvement in the Syrian crisis, however, led to significant repercussions for its relations with other countries and the various groups in Syria (Parlar Dal,

2016, p. 1400). According to Cagaptay (2020, p. 3), while the Turkish Army's incursions into Syria did indeed eliminate some immediate threats, Ankara's military engagement in the northern part of the country also opened Pandora's box, yielding unexpected consequences, including fighting against PYD/PKK militias backed by the US and intermittent clashes with Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime.

In retrospect, Türkiye appears to have used its military might to address the security risks triggered by the Syrian crisis, which are largely beyond its control. Accordingly, Turkish strategists were unprepared for the emergence of DEASH in northern Syria and the US's backing of Kurdish factions associated with the PKK in their conflict with DEASH. In the end, Türkiye's territorial integrity and national security were under peril from both DEASH and the *de facto* Kurdish statelet. However, according to Mahalli (2016, pp. 81-116), Türkiye itself contributed to the protracted civil war in Syria by encouraging an insurgency and providing moral and political support, even conveying the Syrian opposition in Antalya on May 31, 2011, while demanding reforms from the Assad regime.

Mrs. Yinanç agreed with the claim; she articulated that “without Türkiye’s backing, the opposition would have never been so demanding, and the Assad regime would have never found such staunch support among other ethnic groups. The Assad regime adeptly used the hostility of the Syrian people to foreign intervention and anti-colonialism to form a broad front with the participation of secular elites and minority groups. Türkiye’s interference in Syrian affairs through indirect or direct means aided hugely the regime’s efforts. For sure, Ahmet Davutoğlu’s statement, then-foreign minister, about praying in the Umayyad Mosque⁹⁰ instigated Syrian people’s concerns about Turkish revisionist policies.”

In the early stages of the Syrian conflict, Türkiye was not militarily involved, but from late 2011 onwards, Ankara adopted an interventionist regime change policy in Syria together with Western and Gulf countries (IMMAP, 2022, p. 11) and played an important role in establishing the FSA. With this move, Türkiye championed the regime change in a neighboring country, which marked a radical departure from the established principles of Turkish foreign policy: *no interference in the domestic issues of neighboring countries* (Ülgen, 2021, p. 9). For

⁹⁰ Ahmet Davutoğlu, in a reportage later, claimed that “he did never say, “*We will have a Friday prayer at Damascus Umayyad Mosque*’, everybody knows who actually did say that”, a reference to President Erdoğan (Aydın & Baycar, 2022). Just after the fall of the Assad regime, Turkish Intelligence Chief, İbrahim Kalın, paid a symbolically important visit to Damascus and prayed in the Umayyad Mosque on December 12, 2024.

Cagaptay (2020, p. 3), by this turn, not only did Ankara risk its soft power standing in the region by endorsing material and financial backing for Syrian opposition forces, but it also alienated certain ethnic groups that might have opposed Assad but had no desire for external intervention.

Ankara also lagged in keeping up with developments and making appropriate adjustments afterward. The Syrian Army withdrew from the country's north and east in order to bolster its position in the center as hostilities between the opposition and the Assad forces intensified in Aleppo and other urban areas. This new power void was filled by DEASH and YPG/PKK. In the meantime, moderate opposition faltered due to exhaustion, fragmentation, and infighting (IMMAP, 2022, p. 10). Simultaneously, other external powers were also actively involved, supporting conflicting sides in order to expand their sphere of influence through a variety of means, such as direct military intervention or providing material support to parties engaged in conflict (Makdisi, Hazbun, Gündoğar, & Dark, 2017, p. 4).

With the rise of DEASH and US support for the YPG in 2014, Türkiye's situation got more complicated. Nevertheless, Yavuz (2015) asserts that Ankara continued to pursue its regime change policy despite having insufficient resources to do so. In addition, the Turkish government became involved in a dispute with Washington due to divergent interests (Larrabee, 2016, p. 70), even after Washington signaled to cooperate with the Assad regime. As a result, Türkiye faced a two-dimensional threat. It had to alter its Syrian policy fundamentally to eliminate DEASH units at its border and prevent the PKK/YPG from creating a terror corridor stretching from the Iraqi border to the Mediterranean (Bayır, 2021, p. 30).

These changing circumstances compelled Türkiye to its regime change agenda and reprioritize the objective of its Syrian policy (Ülgen, 2021, p. 10). Accordingly, Türkiye started to pursue more unilateral and assertive policies in Syria. Çevik (2022, p. 2) states that Ankara's overall strategy shifted from being defensive to offensive and aimed to create safe zones so as to counter security threats beyond its borders⁹¹. Since August 2016, Ankara has conducted four major military operations in Syria to achieve various objectives: containing the influence of YPG/PKK PYD and eradicating DEASH first and foremost (Ülgen, 2021, p. 10), preventing further refugee influx, and resending them back by creating safe zones if possible.

The first one, namely "*Euphrates Shield*," was carried out in August 2016 against DEASH elements in the border area and YPG/PKK elements who were seeking uniting areas

⁹¹ Türkiye has applied the same strategy in northern Iraq recently by maintaining military presence in the established military bases to disrupt the PKK's logistic lines as well as freedom of movement (Çevik, 2022, p. 3).

by capturing the strategic al-Bab town. The second cross-border operation, '*Olive Branch*', was conducted in Afrin to dislodge PKK militants from the city. In November 2019, Türkiye launched its third military incursion, '*Peace Spring*,' in order to stabilize the eastern side of the Euphrates River. Finally, in February 2020, Türkiye conducted a fourth operation known as '*Spring Shield*' to prevent further refugee influx because of the regime's northern advancement.

By launching these military operations, Türkiye has achieved partial success. After establishing military bases in Syria, Türkiye has managed to keep the terrorist elements away from its borders. Thanks to this maneuver, very rare military conflicts have occurred in Türkiye since then, as indicated by Çevik (2022, p. 5). According to England and Pitel (2022), however, as the military means became the lynchpin of Turkish foreign policy, Ankara encountered a variety of regional and geopolitical challenges. For instance, the militarization of Türkiye's Syrian policy has put Turkish troops into foreign combat zones, cost Ankara billions of dollars, and soured its relations with Western partners and Arab powers.

In addition to these, although they were pushed back from the Turkish Southern border and took defensive positions, the PKK and other linked factions still have some degree of fighting capacity (Özçelik & Acun, 2018, p. 9; Çevik, 2022, p. 5). Türkiye's military operations caused great casualties at the ranks of the PKK (Polat, 2020, p. 68), but the current *status quo* proved that the complete military eradication of the PKK/YPG is hardly difficult, if not impossible. Unless Ankara reaches a consensus on this matter with the US, finding a decisive solution to this problem will be challenging, even after the collapse of the Assad regime.

The costs of military operations are generating an enormous burden for the national economy. Even though there are no openly available reliable figures, the World Bank estimated that Türkiye's GDP decreased by 1.5% as a result of the Syrian conflict (Neset et al., 2021, p. 49). Building an 873 km-long stick border wall and permanent military installations were expensive requirements for minimizing security risks. In addition, apart from its deployed soldiers in Syria (estimated around 5.000), Türkiye has also been training, arming, and paying salaries of more than 50.000 Syrian National Army (SNA) members.

The socio-cultural and training differences between Turkish units and SNA elements made it difficult to conduct joint operations (Yeşiltaş et al., 2017, p. 46). On top of that, Türkiye was accused of human rights violations due to the misconduct of these elements (England & Pitel, 2022). In addition, the disarmament of SNA and other rebel groups with varied ideologies and goals on the ground (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1404) would be a long-term issue for Türkiye after the fall of the regime. Because, as Abrahams (2008, pp. 87-93) argues, it is extremely difficult to convince armed rebel groups once they take up arms. Therefore, it is also doubtful

how these groups will react to laying down their weapons or joining the new Syrian national army.

Of all of the negative consequences of Türkiye's application of military force in Syria, the most detrimental one is the internationalization of the Kurdish issue. It has indeed become a much more complex question now by drawing in other actors, including Türkiye's NATO allies (Çevik, 2022, p. 5). Although Ankara has dedicated most of its political and military forces in Syria to rooting PKK presence out, the YPG (SDF) forces are controlling almost one-third of Syrian territory presently, as discussed in detail below.

Furthermore, entrenched historical prejudices and mutual distrust were revitalized by Türkiye's military activism in Syria (*and Libya*). Some regional countries regarded Ankara's actions as revisionist aspirations due to the memory of the Ottoman era (Jabbour, 2022, p. 17). According to Kutlay and Öniş (2020, p. 1091), Ankara found itself in regional isolation for some time because of conflicting interests as well as Türkiye's unilateral and ambitious policies. Türkiye has just started to restore mutual relations with Middle Eastern countries. However, these attempts produced a transactional partnership rather than a genuine long-term alliance (Jabbour, 2022, p. 16).

Parlar Dal (2016) posits that the internal conflicts are contagious and regional countries tend to intervene to protect their interests or prevent negative spillover effects on regional security. And this tendency becomes particularly high if one of the neighboring countries is involved in the civil conflicts. In this sense, Türkiye's military presence in Syria also gave rise to other third parties' increasing military activism, or *vice versa*. Besides, the regime, which had willingly been seeking to transnationalize the civil conflict from the beginning, found an opportunity to strengthen its hand with Türkiye's military involvement (ibid. p. 1400). All in all, by conducting military operations in Northern Syria, Türkiye has achieved short-term gains; however, how much the current situation satisfies Ankara's long-term security and economic needs is a big question mark.

5.3. Lacking cooperation with Other Regional Powers

Long-lasting civil wars draw a large number of foreign actors due to internal tensions (Regan P. M., 2002; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Thus, consideration should be given to the objectives and methods of other powers when a country decides to interfere in a different country. These powers attempt to protect their national interests either explicitly or indirectly

if they believe they have a stake in a particular intervened country. In retrospect, the US did not sufficiently collaborate with regional powers and its allies prior to and throughout the invasion of Afghanistan. Moreover, Washington did not alter its policies in response to the shifting balance of power.

In a similar vein, Türkiye has misinterpreted the goals of other regional actors and its allies in the Syrian conflict. Ankara has committed grave errors by failing to reach out to all Syrian factions and their supporters to establish common ground. Only after facing isolation diplomatically and economically did the Turkish government realize that its means were not adequate to reach its objectives. Owing to miscalculations from the onset of the Syrian conflict, Ankara has alienated some groups in Syria that were supposed to cooperate with Türkiye due to common historical and cultural ties.

When the US was attacked at home and suffered a significant number of civilian casualties, it garnered overwhelming support at the start of the Afghan War. Allies employed NATO's Article 5, which guarantees collective security, to back the US once and for all. Despite this widespread backing, US decision-makers opted to act solo because they believed it was in their own best interests from the start. In a way, the US split the world in two after the September 11 attacks, declaring, "*You are either with us or against us*" (Bayır, 2021, p. 16). Hassan (2023, pp. VIII, 16) posits that even though the Bush administration was in a hurry to call for international solidarity and its partners were willing to contribute, the US's self-interested, warmongering attitude marginalized them afterward.

The US felt alienated by the lack of solidarity shown by its longtime allies during the Iraq War. Nevertheless, the US was never able to coordinate effectively with its allies under the influence of "war on terror" discourse. The US made the decision to invade Afghanistan independently, paralleling its unilateral choice to engage in peace negotiations with the Taliban in Doha. Hence, its traditional partners have openly criticized US policy, and the US has lost their support as a result of its frequently controversial decisions. According to Bağbaşıoğlu (2024, p. 11), this development has been interpreted by many as the decline of US power in the international system.

The US has also misread and underestimated the influence of regional powers on Afghanistan. Pakistan, for instance, has played a disruptive role in the Afghan War. Feeling threatened by India's growing influence on the western-backed Afghan government, Islamabad provided the Taliban with material support and sanctuary, which was essential for reorganizing

(Malkasian, 2020, p. 84). Many US officials attributed the Taliban's endurance capacity to active or passive support of Pakistan's intelligence service (Congressional Research Service, 2021, p. 45). Being aware of that historical partnership with Pakistan and the Taliban (Hassan, 2023, p. 9), instigated by the US itself during the Soviet occupation, the US official should have done more to alleviate Pakistan's security concerns.

Ms. Rahim emphasized that:

“From the Pakistani perspective, the security of Afghanistan is directly linked to Pakistan's security. Afghanistan is also a buffer state between Pakistan and India. Therefore, Pakistan always has to watch out for what is going on in Afghanistan.”

Mr. Tokgöz also added:

“Pakistani officials believed the West would denuclearize their country once the Afghan operation was completed. They had no choice but to support the Taliban because of this anticipation. To keep the US engaged in Afghanistan, Pakistan created a fake Taliban (in smaller size) in its territory and sacrificed this group as leverage against the West.”

In a similar vein, the US has not given weight to the roles and interests of other actors. Despite their disapproval of the Taliban's Islamist ideology, China and Russia are concerned about the growing presence of US military forces in their region. Moreover, India has opted to enter Afghanistan on its own terms rather than working with the US (Congressional Research Service, 2021, pp. 49-54). For fear of instability in Kashmir induced by *de facto* Taliban authorities, New Delhi kept its diplomatic mission in Kabul after a temporary drawback. India's engagement with the Taliban serves two purposes: balancing China's influence and encouraging Afghanistan-Pakistan tension (Crisis Group, 2024, p. 38).

As for Iran, even though this country contributed positively to the Bonn Conference, it was well known that its most pressing security concern was the US military presence in the region. Therefore, putting an end to such a presence was the number one priority for Iranian officials (Tascano, 2012, p. 3). However, the Taliban's return to power introduced new security challenges for Tehran. For instance, the IS-KP and associated jihadist groups launched cross-border attacks in Shiraz in October 2022 (Crisis Group, 2024, p. 42). In this broader context, the historical Great Game has resurfaced in Afghanistan with the participation of six powers

because of their diverging and conflicting interests (Jahangir & Javaid, 2018, p. 427). This situation has been exacerbated by the US's reluctance to cooperate and collaborate with those influential powers in a timely manner.

As explained in the previous chapters, Türkiye increased its footprint in the Middle East under the JDP government mostly because of its soft-power-based policies. Cagaptay (2020, p. 2) posits that in parallel to its growing political and economic clout, President Erdoğan started seeking a more assertive role for Ankara in regional and world affairs. In line with this perception, Ankara esteemed itself as a role model for other Muslim countries even before the Arab Spring. Although its power became insufficient to change the course of the Libyan conflict, Ankara was willing to play a leading role in the Syrian conflict from the beginning. Yet, Turkish officials mistakenly overlooked the aims and interests of other external powers, and they failed to adapt to changing circumstances over the course of civil strife.

Erwin van Veen (2019) contends that the Syrian conflict has been one of the most involved⁹² civil wars. The ever-changing dynamics of the war forced the intervener countries to shift their partnerships. At the beginning, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah tried to keep the Assad regime in power to protect their interests. On the other hand, Türkiye, along with western powers and the Gulf countries, gave support to the opposition for the overthrow of the regime (Ibold, 2019, p. 11). Turkish officials could not grasp the real intentions and deeply rooted worries of all parties. They could not predict the plausible consequences of other parties' intervention in the Syrian War. In fact, Türkiye could not reach the expected outcomes in Syria primarily due to Russia's and Iran's diplomatic and military support for the regime.

Syria, under the rule of Bashar Assad, was extremely important for Iran in terms of national survival. Syria was a vital component of the so-called Shiite crescent, which Iran had been using to increase its influence throughout the whole region. The Iranian policymakers knew that if the Assad regime was replaced by a Sunni government, his strategic goals would have been undermined. Without a friendly regime in Damascus, Iran would not be able to provide assistance to Hezbollah and other proxies, either (Van Veen, 2019). Laub (2023) infers that Tehran made significant investments in the regime because of these motives, dispatching its paramilitary Basij groups and other foreign Shia militias to fight in Syria.

⁹² Sadly, the Syrian interviewee said that just 15% of their country was being governed by Syrians in the course of the civil war.

Similarly, as suggested by England and Pitel (2022), Russia could not tolerate the fall of the Assad government due to its interests in the eastern Mediterranean. For Aydın-Düzgit et al. (2020, p. 12), Turkish analysts failed to fully appreciate historical ties between Moscow and Damascus and to predict Russia's intervention in the Syrian crisis. In addition to its interests in the region, the potential impacts of Islamic extremism on its own soil also triggered Russia's intervention in Syria (Averre & Davies, 2015, pp. 819-21). Thus, Moscow intervened aggressively in the Syrian conflict to safeguard its vital interests.

After the Assad regime consolidated its power back, Russia gained enormous influence in Syria until recently, which was not in the best interests of Türkiye in Syria and elsewhere. Whereas Russia was protecting the Assad regime and advancing its interests in the region, it was undermining Türkiye's security and territorial integrity at the same time (Güler, 2024, p. 132). Aydın-Düzgit et al. (2020, p. 9) rightly highlight that Türkiye's reliance on Russia for energy sources and trade causes "asymmetric interdependence," and a huge power imbalance left Ankara with little choice but to be on good terms with Russia in Syria for a long time.

Ankara's assertive Syrian policy, even if it was driven by legitimate concerns, led to the marginalization of Türkiye among its Western allies (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1400). Ozan (2017, p. 10) asserts that in comparison with Western counterparts, Türkiye was sluggish to adopt a new position in response to newly emerging conditions. When the priorities began to diverge between Ankara and its NATO allies, Turkish policymakers failed to calculate the negative consequences of this situation.

During the time of the siege of Kobane in 2014, Ankara failed to comprehend the US' willingness to defeat the Islamic State. Not wanting its own boots on the ground (Walt, 2013), the US was in search of a reliable partner. According to Cagaptay (2020, p. 4), Türkiye's denial of waging a war against DEASH was one of the biggest mistakes of Türkiye's foreign policy in recent times, yielding complex problems afterwards. For some (US Congress, 2024), if Türkiye had done so, it would reclaim the initiative in the Syrian conflict and could keep YPG/PKK in check. In an interview, *Mrs. Barçın Yinanç* asserted that she received information from sources indicating that "*Türkiye was making preparations to launch a rapid yet strong military operation to seize Kobani from DEASH*". However, the plan changed at the last minute, and Ankara ultimately lost the initiative.

However, from the Turkish perspective, the US demanded Türkiye choose one of two terrorist organizations that pose an equal threat to its national security (İnci, 2019, p. 584). Additionally, the US failed to realize that both terrorist organizations grew stronger due to the lack of authority in Syria. If a peaceful transition had occurred with a multiparty intervention, both organizations could have been prevented from posing such a security risk. Moreover, after the OES, the US rejected Türkiye's offer of a joint operation to free Al-Raqqah from DAESH's control. This raised questions in Ankara about whether the US's support for YPG/PKK in Syria was only to destroy DAESH or to establish a puppet state for its long-term goals (Polat, 2020, p. 70).

England and Pitel (2022) are of the opinion that as a reaction to Türkiye's reluctance, the US picked the YPG as a reliable partner, and it set up a "*temporary, transactional, and tactical*" relationship with them (Siccardi, 2021, p. 16). Türkiye also failed to predict the marginalization of some of the opposition that it supported (Ülgen, 2021, p. 9). However, irked by this development, the US and other western powers increased their support for the PYD/PKK, seeing it as a moderate and secular partner, which clearly undermined Türkiye's national security (Ülgen, 2021, p. 10). On the other hand, while complaining about western allies' indifference to its own security concerns, Türkiye did not put sufficient effort into alleviating its western allies' sincere radical-Islamism worries.

5.4. Economic and Military Costs

Generally speaking, external military interventions bring about destructive economic and humanitarian consequences for intervened countries in the long run. Even though they pave the way for some degree of stability and reduce the bloodshed, they leave the long-term negative impacts behind as they undermine the law enforcement and service-providing capacities of local governments. As this research study suggests, these interventions not only affect the countries being intervened but also have significant repercussions for the countries that engage in such actions. Of them, financial and humanitarian are the most easily measured. Apart from that, there are additional byproducts that have long-term effects, like securitization and democratic downgrading.

These detrimental outcomes have been experienced by Afghanistan and Syria as a result of multi-party external military activism. The information that has come to light indicates that the economic and humanitarian effects exceeded even the worst predictions. These

countries' wealth and capacity for development have been drained by years of armed conflicts. The US and Türkiye have also suffered greatly because of their military involvement in those countries. Nevertheless, before turning to details, it is important to distinguish between Türkiye's military activities in Syria and the US's engagement in Afghanistan. Because the US itself started the entire process, Türkiye has primarily been reactionary.

The 20-year-long US occupation of Afghanistan and state-building endeavor has brought some relative improvements in education, health, schooling, and road infrastructure in the country, according to the UN Human Development Index (HDI, 2023). Nevertheless, the longest nation-building effort in history, which continued between 2001 and 2021 and was supported by the UN and NATO, has failed (Seren M., 2021, p. 18). Afghanistan still remains at the very bottom of the country list in each area, from infant mortality rate to life expectancy, which barely reached 62 as of 2021 (UNDP, 2022, p. 279). Furthermore, persistent poverty, the shortfall of development, and notable disparities in service accessibility between rural and urban areas remained the bedrock problems (IAHE, 2024, p. 26).

When the US and its allies withdrew at the end of 2021, the Taliban retook the country, and the Afghans faced a terrible humanitarian crisis once again. In addition to the cumulative effects of the conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, drought, displacement, chronic poverty, and lack of development resulted in total chaos and the immediate need for humanitarian relief for the majority of Afghans (IAHE, 2024, p. 5). However, the Taliban's restrictions and limited accessibility meant that these urgent needs remained unattended.

The humanitarian and economic costs of the US intervention in Afghanistan reached an unprecedented level by any metric. Even according to the significantly underestimated data, more than 48.000⁹³ Afghan civilians have been killed, and at least 75.000 have been injured since 2001. The civil war inflicted a great number of casualties on Afghan security forces; at least 66.000 Afghan security personnel lost their lives in this period (SIGAR, 2021, p. 1). During the peak time of conflict, monthly casualty rates of Afghan security forces were between 600 and 800 on a monthly basis and 8.000 and 12.000 on an annual basis (Seren M., 2021, p. 22).

The population of all 34 provinces has been affected by the violence in some way or another; many of them were forced to flee. According to UNHCR, 2.072.657 Afghan refugees

⁹³ Because of the security circumstances in Afghanistan, most of the losses were not reported, which explains why this figure varies between sources. For example, according to another report, this figure is 160.000 (Greentree, 2021, p. 8).

are living in Afghanistan's neighboring countries, and it is estimated that around two million displaced (IDP) Afghans live under very bad conditions (SIGAR, 2023, pp. 122-3). In just 2021, nearly 700 thousand people became new IDPs (Wintour, 2022).

Socio-economic indicators also paint a gloomy picture. As the most concrete indicators of no improvement under the conditions of the US's long-lasting, unwinnable "war on terror," Afghanistan has faced unprecedented levels of humanitarian, climate, and economic crises. Most of the people are even deprived of basic needs, and the country continues to face the highest levels of hunger in the world, according to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) (SIGAR, 2023, p. 63). Almost two-thirds of Afghans needed immediate humanitarian assistance in 2022. In light of these alarming conditions, UN Secretary General *Antonio Guterres* urged the relevant parties to assist the Afghan people, expressing shock at the steadily worsening situation (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Although there are some positive signs⁹⁴ (Bryd, 2022), the Afghan economy has not fully stabilized yet. The international exclusion of the Taliban, coupled with US President Biden's decision to freeze Afghan funds, has exacerbated the economic crisis. The World Bank projects that Afghanistan's real gross domestic product (GDP) fell by an accumulated 30-35% between 2021 and 2022. In addition, the United Nations estimates that 97% of Afghans now live below the poverty line (SIGAR, 2023, p. 27). The collapse of government services had a devastating effect on Afghans' quality of life because their country was heavily dependent on foreign development assistance (IAHE, 2024, p. 5). Donors had suspended this aid in part due to Taliban control and in part due to the Taliban's restrictive regulations against women.

In light of the data, it can be claimed that the US could not reach its objectives: *creating effective state capacity and stability in Afghanistan*. Conversely, Afghans faced multiple adverse consequences (Rahim, 2023, p. 47). Even though the US government spent 145 billion USD trying to rebuild Afghanistan, its security forces captured the lion's share rather than other institutions, which manifests that the US officials always placed a premium on security rather than reconstruction (*Figure 5-2*). Nonetheless, the Afghan government and security forces have never become efficient enough to provide essential services and security; they suffered from dependency syndrome⁹⁵ and widespread corruption.

⁹⁴ The Taliban collected customs and taxes far more successfully than the US-backed Afghan government (Felbab-Brown, 2023).

⁹⁵ The Bush administration raised reconstruction funds more than four times from 2002 to 2005 after acknowledging by 2003 that nation-building was unavoidable. By 2004, US rebuilding expenditures were beyond

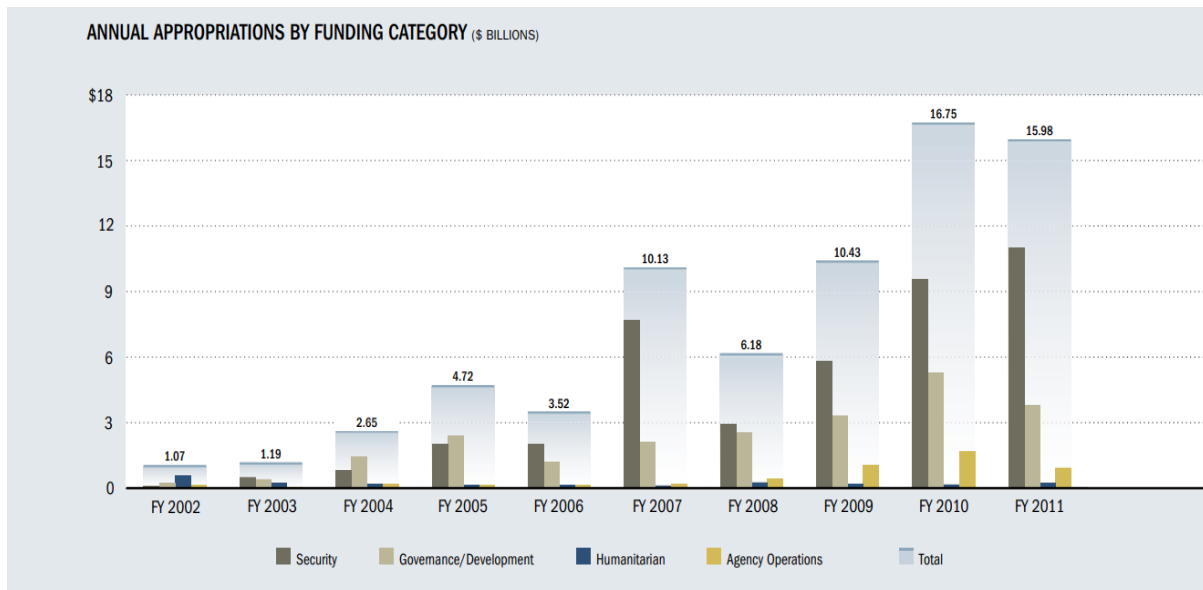


Figure 5- 2 : The Categories to the US Fund allocated in Afghanistan

Source: SIGAR, 2021, p. 5

The foreign aid fostered a corrupt and dependent rentier state rather than promoting an effective, responsible, and inclusive ruling system (Greentree, 2021, p. 16). The US could not empower the domestic institutions enough, and they collapsed swiftly in the aftermath of US withdrawal, as anticipated by many. Therefore, widespread corruption and security concerns could not be solved. A World Bank report in 2016 revealed that as much as 40% of foreign funds for development projects were siphoned off due to systemic corruption and lack of oversight (Rahim, 2023, p. 57). Because of the pervasiveness of endemic corruption, the successive Afghan governments failed to gain legitimacy (SIGAR, 2023, p. 16). The US officials turned a blind eye to the Afghan government's and local warlords' repressive and corrupt actions (Logevall, 2021). Connah (2020, p. 77) suggests that Washington's unwillingness to tackle these issues not only undermined its presence but also fueled anti-American sentiment in the region.

The US and Afghan governments could not destroy a deeply established drug trade; the issue still remained the most pressing one. Afghanistan continues to provide almost 80% of the global supply through various cross-national networks (TRT Haber, 2023). Illegal networks and terrorist organizations exploit these trade pathways to transfer guns, cigarettes,

the upper bound of a nation's theoretical absorbable capacity, or 45% of Afghanistan's GDP, the upper range of a country's theoretical absorptive capacity. While economists and aid experts dispute where this threshold lies (some estimate it to be as low as 15%), there is a broad consensus that aid saturation is reached at or below 45% of GDP. The US's funding would remain above that threshold range for another decade (SIGAR, 2021, p. 9).

and victims of sex trafficking (SIGAR, 2023, pp. 116-7). The drug trade and warlords' cartel on it function as destabilizing factors and pose challenges to security. Human rights, especially those of women⁹⁶, have suffered greatly in recent years (*as explained in detail in Chapter 3*).

The results of long-term intervention have been destructive for the US as well. Washington has incurred significant financial and social costs that go beyond the war budget (Kosiak, 2008, p. i). About 2.400 American troops and 1.150 allied troops were killed (*Table 5-1*), and 20.666 US troops were injured (SIGAR, 2021, p. vii) in this one of the world's deadliest conflicts. Apart from these traumatic humanitarian consequences, US taxpayers have been suffering steadily increasing military spending throughout the year. In addition to direct war costs, indirect macroeconomic costs such as increasing oil prices and less economic growth (Kosiak, 2008, pp. 70-5) played a significant role in the 2009 financial crisis. The valuable economic resources, which gained higher borrowing rates, were wasted on this never-ending war instead of investing in public infrastructure and services (Watson Institute, 2024).

Table 5- 1 : Casualties During the Afghan War

CASUALTIES OF ALL SIDES IN THE AFGHAN WAR			
	Afghanistan	Pakistan	Total
US Military	2.324		2.324
US DoD Civilian	6		6
US Contractors	3.917	90	4.007
ANSF Members	69.095	9.431	78.526
Other Allied Troops	1.144		1.144
Civilians	46.319	24.099	70.418
Opposition Fighters	52.893	32.838	85.731
Journalists	74	87	161
Humanitarian Aid Workers	446	105	551
TOTAL	176.218	66.650	242.868

Source: Watson Institute

The defense and intelligence budgets increased dramatically over the course of intervention (Foreign Policy, 2021). At the height of the surge, the US was spending

⁹⁶ The words in the quote, “*Since the day they took power, I have not been allowed to enter my school. They are excluding us from society by not allowing us to work alongside the men... All my classmates whom I am still in touch with are in the same situation. All of them are demotivated and depressed. I have lost my self-esteem during this last year*” is meaningful to understand how educated Afghan women see the recent changes from their perspective (IAHE, 2024, p. 32).

approximately 110 billion USD per year in Afghanistan, roughly 50% more than annual US federal spending on education (Malkasian, 2020, pp. 79,80). The "*Ghost Budget*," which was allocated to OCO funding techniques in order to transfer war spending to domestic security budgets and spend money on conflicts, will continue to be a major source of headaches (Bilmes, 2024). According to Aslan (2017, p. 4), the governments of US allies ultimately lost elections because they were unable to bear the financial burden of a protracted war in Afghanistan.

Despite these enormous costs, the US was unable to realize its main objective, stabilizing Afghanistan so that this country would not be a safe haven for organized terrorist networks anymore to use attacks on the US again (US President Biden's Remark, 2021). Press, social media, and US officials all indicate that what occurred was completely opposite. A significant quantity of US military equipment, including aircraft, vehicles, small arms, and ammunition, has also been captured by the Taliban (Congressional Research Service, 2021, p. 67). The Taliban is now better equipped to threaten the US and its allies thanks to these military instruments and trained ANSF personnel who joined the ranks of the organization after the US withdrawal.

Furthermore, the US-led coalition has been unsuccessful in rooting out Islamic militancy in Afghanistan, and elsewhere, Islamic extremists strengthened instead of weakened (Greentree, 2021, p. 8). The global jihadist terror organizations, conversely, have resurrected and expanded their influence to establish a global caliphate (Vasiliev & Zherlitsyna, 2022, p. 1243). As indicated by US President Biden, "*the terrorist threat has metastasized well beyond Afghanistan: al Shabaab in Somalia, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Nusra in Syria, and DEASH attempting to create a caliphate in Syria and Iraq and establishing affiliates in multiple countries in Africa and Asia. These threats warrant (the US) attention and our resources*" (US President Biden's Remark, 2021).

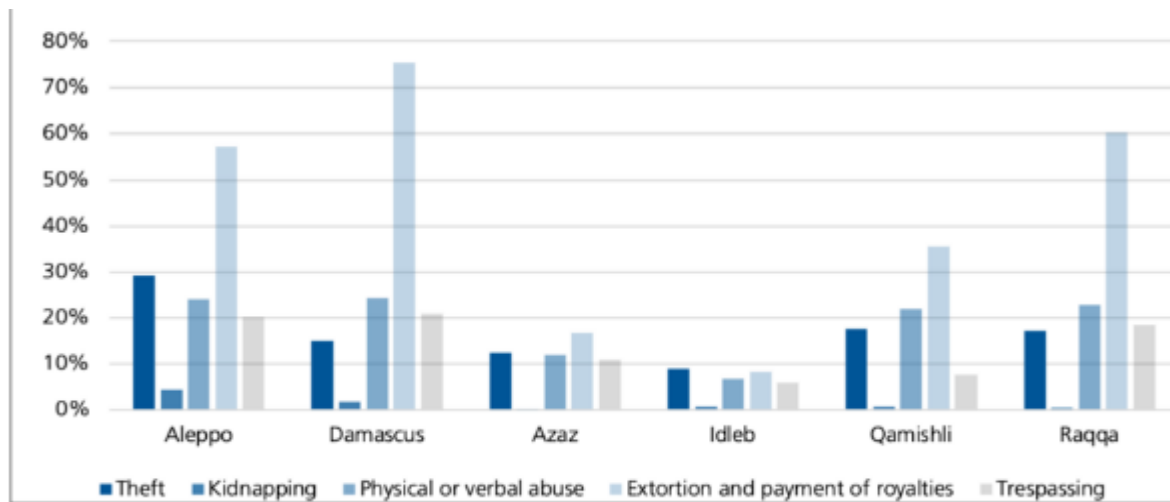
Like other leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin is also worried about the recently increasing activities of international terrorist organizations in Afghanistan (TRT Haber, 2023). Growing Islamic militancy in Afghanistan may have detrimental effects on regional and international security. Because of security concerns, the vacuum that emerged after the US withdrawal was filled by adversarial parties such as China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia (Greentree, 2021, p. 8). Terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and its regional affiliate, IS-KP, are regarded as the primary security concerns by them (Congressional Research Service, 2021, p. 47). One of the reasons why China has approached the Taliban is

to make them break with the ETIM, a small group that seeks to establish an independent Islamic state for the Uyghurs.

As previously said, the Syrian Crisis is among the most heavily intervened intrastate wars in human history. Unlike other countries, the Syrian conflict became international quickly and turned into an utter proxy war with the intervention of third-party actors such as the US, Russia, Iran, Türkiye, etc. (Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 246). Each side tried to maximize their own vested interests at the expense of the well-being and lives of Syrians. After decimating Syria and forcing millions of people to leave their homes, the civil war finally reached a new stage after the fall of the Assad regime. Nevertheless, the country is still exposed to many uncertainties with no sign of a political solution.

According to Walter (2013, p. 656 as cited in Lundgren, 2014, p. 13), civil conflicts are “*the most destructive form of violence in the world today*” as they traumatize populations, sever social bonds, and, by destroying human and material capital, reduce the prospects of durable socioeconomic progress. In addition, they produce adverse spillover effects for neighboring countries like refugee flows, arms trafficking, etc. Indeed, just like the Afghan case, the Syrian conflict has also had detrimental socioeconomic and humanitarian consequences resulting from conflicts between the regime and opposition, among various rebel groups, and external interventions.

However, it should be acknowledged at this point that Türkiye is not to blame for the extensive destruction that has occurred. In contrast, Türkiye not only saved millions of Syrians from the regime’s brutality, but it also brought some stability and security to the regions under its control (*Figure 5-3*) in comparison with others. That’s why the population has boomed in these regions after Turkish control (Atıcı & Aslan, 2018, p. 7). What is more, HTS and other opposition groups could resist the regime’s attack thanks to Ankara’s support and protection and finally managed to remove the Assad dictatorship from power.



Source: Syrian Household Living Conditions Survey 2022

Figure 5- 3 : Crime Records in Different Regions of Syria

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) data, the number of documented civilian deaths, mostly resulting from the regime's excessive use of power against its opponents (Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 246), was around 230.000 between 2011 and 2021. In addition to this, another 250.000 combatants from all sides are estimated to have lost their lives (Reuters, 2021). In 2014, the death rate peaked at 10.8 per thousand (Mozayek et al., 2022, p. 9). Approximately 7 million Syrians have been registered as refugees or asylum seekers; roughly 85% of them reside in neighboring nations. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (ibid., pp. 10-1) estimates that over 13 million Syrians in 2021, which equals 52% of the Syrian pre-war population, have been forced to leave their homeland due to the most severe crisis of our time.

A decade-long conflict caused the Syrian GDP⁹⁷ to decline by 54% (Figure 5-4). The total cost of the conflict is estimated by the UN ESCWA at about 442.5 billion USD, 117.7 billion USD for physical capital destruction, and 324.5 billion USD for GDP lost (Reuters, 2021). The war would have additional costs of 1.4 trillion USD through 2035 even if all conflicts stopped today (Barhameyeh & Jourdi, 2022, p. 2). Reconstructing Syria is expected to be around 400 billion USD or more (Ibold, 2019, pp. 16-7).

⁹⁷ The World Bank estimated Syria's gross national product in 2021 at 8.9 billion USD, a decline from 60.04 billion USD in 2010 (Alghannam, 2024, p. 3).

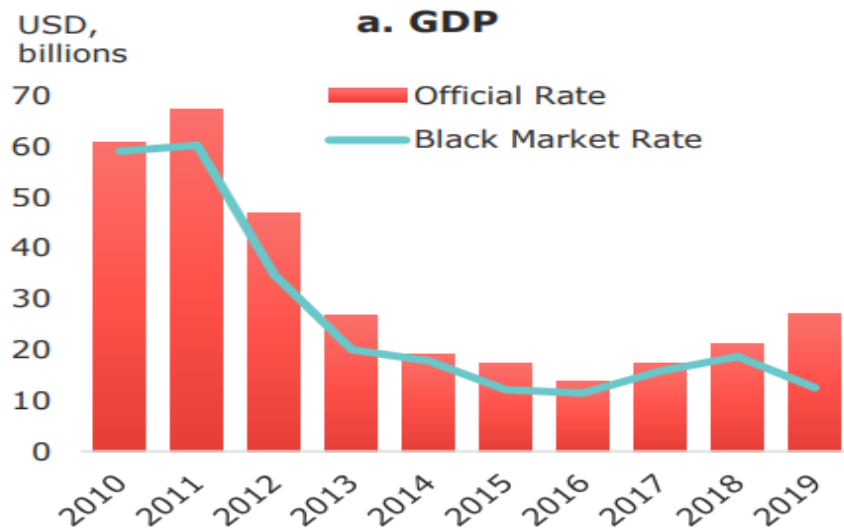


Figure 5- 4 : Shrank in Syrian GDP

Some other indicators are meaningful in terms of demonstrating the level of devastation. According to a UN Development Program report dated March 2015, 80% of Syrians inside the country were living in poverty, and life expectancy has plunged by 20 years. It is estimated that 3 million Syrians lost their jobs as a result of the conflict, while the unemployment rate rose from 14.9% in 2011 to 57.7% by the end of 2014. Half of Syria's health facilities have been destroyed or severely damaged (Ibold, 2019, p. 14), and primary school enrollment in Syria has fallen from close to 100% to an average of 50%. Indeed, the lack of opportunities for children to continue their education seems to be a driving force of displacement (Ferris & Kirişci, 2016, p. 26).

The civil war has made detrimental impacts on every segment of the national economy, from finance to industry (Mozayek et al., 2022, pp. 5-9). Agricultural production has reduced dramatically (*Figure 5-5*), and most people are deprived of nutrition due to rampant inflation and skyrocketing food prices (Barhameyeh & Jourdi, 2022, p. 4). 90% of Syrians living in the country have difficulty meeting their very basic needs (Reuters, 2021). Presently, 15.3 million Syrians have become needy for immediate humanitarian assistance (Tatli, 2023, p. 3).

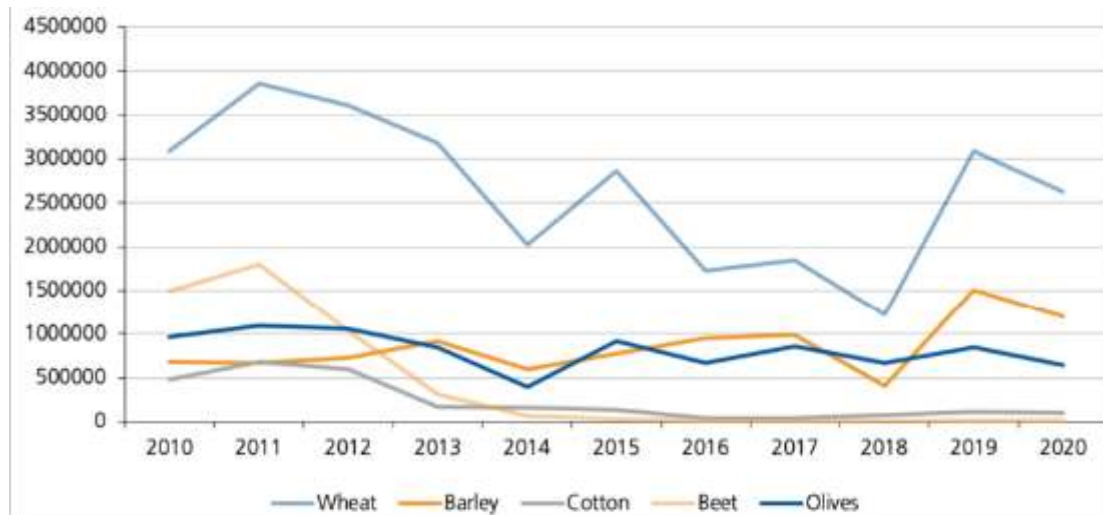


Figure 5- 5 : Dramatic Drop in Syrian Agricultural Production between 2010 and 2020

Source: Mozayek et al., 2022, p. 27

The major problem of security is another factor for the Syrians fleeing their hometowns. Terrorist organizations threatened regional and global security by taking advantage of Syria's chaotic circumstances (Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 246). The state failure in Syria has created a power vacuum, similar to previous situations in Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. This vacuum has led to significant security challenges, including armed conflict, terrorism, and an influx of refugees, affecting not only neighboring countries but also Europe (Kutlay & Öniş, 2020, p. 1087). As a consequence of the destabilization, vulnerable individuals are often coerced into various forms of exploitation, including recruitment and labor trafficking (Makdisi et al., 2017, pp. 12-5), and there is no authority to deter all this from happening.

The lack of law enforcement authorities and armed conflicts led to a serious decline in security, which made Syria an ideal place for illegal trafficking. The presence of networks with heavy weaponry and insufficient border control instruments enabled not only the trafficking of individuals but also the trafficking of weapons and drugs. Some (Alghannam, 2024, p. 2) claim that one of the underlying factors in triggering Syria's readmission to the Arab League was the ever-recorded Captagon trade⁹⁸, as 80% of this addictive drug was distributed to the Middle East by powerful interest groups in Syria.

⁹⁸ The Syrian regime and its allies have been using Captagon trafficking to finance the ongoing conflict against opposition forces. This illicit trade has been used by the regime as leverage to exert pressure on the Gulf countries to be admitted back to the Arab world (Alghannam, 2024, p. 1), as Syria has emerged as the epicenter of the captagon trade, which has become a social problem in the Middle East due to widespread addiction.

By getting involved in the Syrian civil war, Türkiye has helped saving millions of lives, but it has also had to deal with a number of economic, security, and humanitarian consequences as a result of the ongoing catastrophe. Having the longest common border with this country, Ankara has been experiencing the negative results of the crisis firsthand. Because of the proximity of the conflict zone, Türkiye has paid the highest prices compared with other countries.

Whereas some 17.000 PKK and DEASH terrorists have been neutralized through a series of military operations (Özer S. , 2022); according to various sources (Kowalczevska & Łubiński, 2022, pp. 58-64; Yalçın, 2020, pp. 187, 263, 317), more than 200 Turkish soldiers have lost their lives⁹⁹ since 2016, together with 1.600 Turkish-backed FSA (SNA) fighters. In addition, hundreds of Turkish citizens died because of YPG/PKK and DEASH's cross-border attacks from Syria or in suicide bomber attacks in Türkiye (İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2017).

In addition to high humanitarian costs, Türkiye has experienced a variety of direct and indirect economic costs of the Syrian civil war, which deepened the currency and inflation crisis in the country, affecting consumers' cost of living to some extent. Since no official data has been released, it is difficult to estimate the full economic costs of military operations and humanitarian relief in the region; however, given the current state of circumstances, it is safe to say that the Syrian War and related issues have had a significant negative impact on the Turkish economy.

The decreasing volume of trade and high costs associated with humanitarian assistance, refugee support, border security maintenance, and military expenditures represent direct costs. In contrast, the shifting labor force, declining FDI, diminishing growth potential, reduced foreign tourist numbers, declining trade volume with Iraq and Iran due to conflicting interests, and inflation are byproducts of Türkiye's policies regarding the Syrian conflict and the broader Arab Spring (Ozan, 2017, p. 27; Akmehmed, 2015). As a matter of fact, for Cagaptay (2020, p. 2), these factors contributed to the stagnation of the Turkish economy.

Before the Syrian Crisis broke out, Türkiye's trade volume with Syria hit the historical record (*Table 5-2*) in 2010 (Bilgiç Alpaslan, 2012, p. 3). However, the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011 drastically changed this landscape. In 2012, this volume diminished to 497 million USD (Akmehmed, 2015). Ankara's trade with other Middle Eastern countries was

⁹⁹ The majority of military personnel interviewed claimed that the casualty rate was higher during the first military operation, namely the Euphrates Shield, since it was not planned carefully under the pressure of politicians due to the 15 July failed coup attempt. The following period, though, has seen a significant decrease in casualties due to evolving strategies and cooperation between the military and other agencies.

negatively impacted as well (Yavuz, 2015). As a direct result of the Syrian conflict, Türkiye's trade with Russia came on the verge of total collapse after shooting down a Russian jet violating Turkish airspace in 2015. In retaliating in kind, Moscow imposed wide-ranging sanctions on Ankara. The total economic losses are estimated at around 3 billion USD in trade (Koçak, 2017) and 4.5 billion USD annually due to the cancellation of construction projects (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 16) because of this incident.

Table 5- 2 : Türkiye's Declining Trade Volume with Syria

Years	Export (\$)	Import (\$)
2009	1.421.636.808	221.453.649
2010	1.844.604.582	452.493.426
2011	1.609.861.216	336.646.450
2012	497.960.228	67.448.462
2013	1.024.473.298	84.909.318
2014	1.800.962.479	115.498.978
2015	1.522.031.769	51.506.053
2016	1.321.981.350	65.388.846
2017	1.363.178.300	70.560.814
2018	1.345.071.688	69.388.867
2019	1.225.872.220	51.506.053

Source: TÜİK, 2022

Thanks to successive military incursions, Türkiye is currently controlling sizable chunks of territory in northern Syria effectively (US Congress, 2024, p. 17). These areas are home to approximately 2 million Syrians now (England & Pitel, 2022). In order to prevent further refugee influx and encourage Syrian refugees to go back, Ankara engaged in a variety of state-building attempts¹⁰⁰ in these regions, providing education and healthcare along with security (Çevik, 2022, p. 3). So far, 9 million Syrians (*Figure 5-6, almost half of the pre-war Syrian population*), including 4 million in Idlib (UNHRC, 2022), and the ones in Türkiye have become dependent on Türkiye's financial support in effect (England & Pitel, 2022). Ankara has been meeting their basic needs as much as security.

¹⁰⁰ In the three areas under Ankara's watch, Syrian schoolchildren learn Turkish as a second language. The sick are treated in Turkish-built hospitals, and the lights are kept on by Turkish-generated electricity. The Turkish lira is the dominant currency, and Türkiye's state-owned postal service, PTT, is used to transfer salaries to Syrian workers and host the bank accounts of local councils. The governors' offices of Turkish border provinces oversee hiring and firing in adjacent Syrian regions (England & Pitel, 2022).

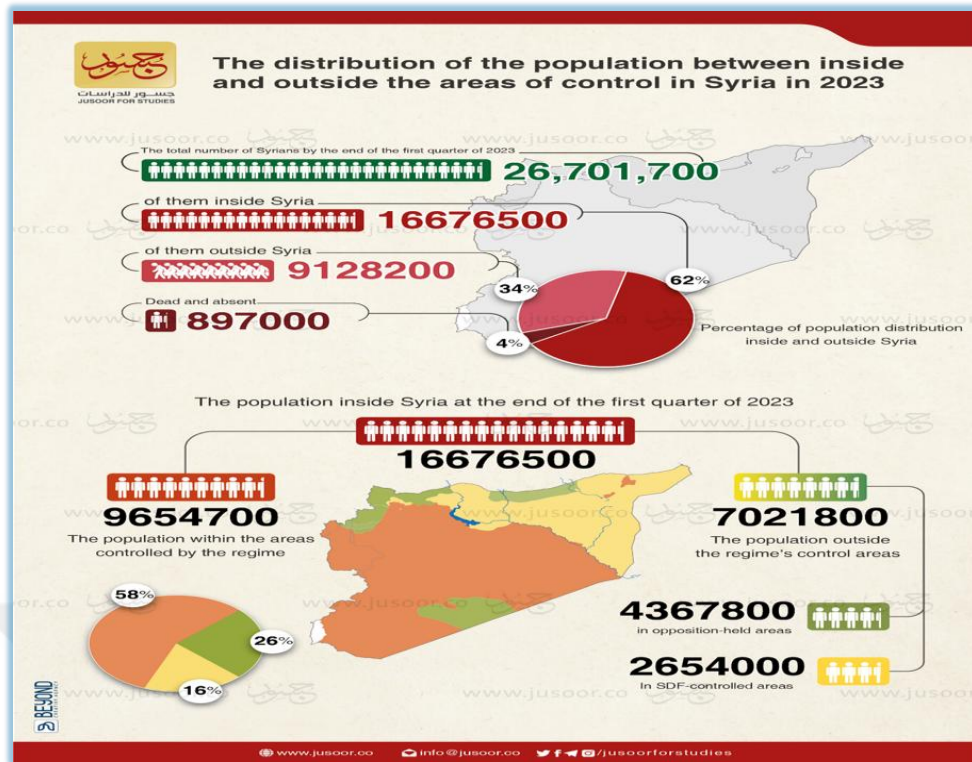
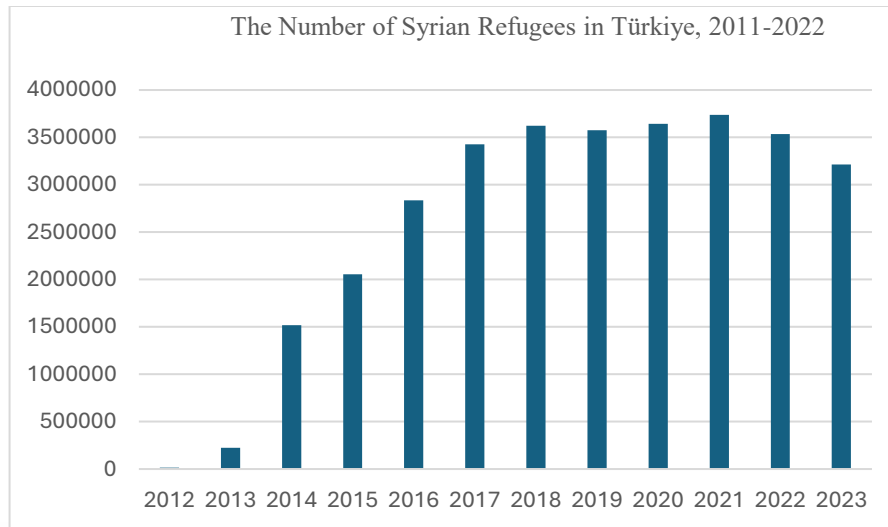


Figure 5- 6 : The Distribution of Syrian Population as of 2023

Source: Al-Terkawi, 2023

As argued by Fearon and Laitin (2003, p. 75), the intrastate wars caused more deaths and refugee flows compared with interstate wars. The Syrian conflict perfectly conforms to this premise, as the pre-war population has already fled from the country. After the Syrian crisis broke out, Türkiye opened its border for fleeing refugees from the regime's brutality or other armed groups' demographic shifting deeds (Polat, 2020, p. 55), as it projected that the toppling of the Assad regime was just a matter of time and that the Syrian conflict would cease soon (Ozan, 2017, p. 26). Since then, the number of Syrian refugees in Türkiye has reached 3.7 million (*Table 5-3*), and Ankara, having the largest refugee population in the world, is struggling with the heavy economic burdens of refugees by using its national resources rather than foreign aid (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1403).

Table 5- 3 : Syrian Refugees in Türkiye



Source: (goc.gov.tr)

Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006) point out that a huge number of refugees fleeing the interstate war in a neighboring country would cause social tensions in the hosting country by worsening resource competition, changing the ethnic balance, and joining the ranks of terrorist organizations or other armed groups in the receiving country. Indeed, the Syrian refugees have been undermining the Turkish economy in multiple channels.

They create problems for the labor market at the local and national scale by increasing the unemployment rate among Turkish citizens and promoting informal employment. They have also played a role, partly, in a dramatic rise in food and rents, particularly in big cities and border provinces, which is detrimental, especially for low-income Turkish citizens. The annual cost of Syrian refugees for Türkiye is about 2 billion USD¹⁰¹ (Hopoglu, Künü, & Irak, 2017), and the total cost paid for Syrian refugees is estimated to be around 50 billion USD¹⁰² between 2011 and 2022 (Tümen, 2023, p. 6).

Even though it was seen as a foreign policy issue at the beginning, the Syrian refugees have presented a multi-faceted and complex problem for Ankara in the following years (Tuncel & Ekici, 2019, p. 56). Throughout the Syrian conflict, the demographic makeup of border cities, including Kilis, Gaziantep, and Mardin, shifted (*Figure 5-7*) in favor of Arabic-speaking

¹⁰¹ Before the Syrian war, Türkiye's Disaster & Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) spent around 395 million USD annually. With the start of the Syrian civil war, this spending has increased over 75% to 1.5 billion USD in 2011 and 1.7 billion USD in 2012 as a direct result of the Syrian civil war (Akmehmed, 2015).

¹⁰² The exact figure varies from one source to another. According to Yükselen (2024, p. 67), for instance, the total sum spent on Syrian refugees is around 85 billion USD.

residents (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 14). As indicated by Ozan (2017, p. 27), this situation gave rise to discontent among Turkish citizens because of job competition, skyrocketing rental rates, etc.

Ratio of refugees to nationals by province

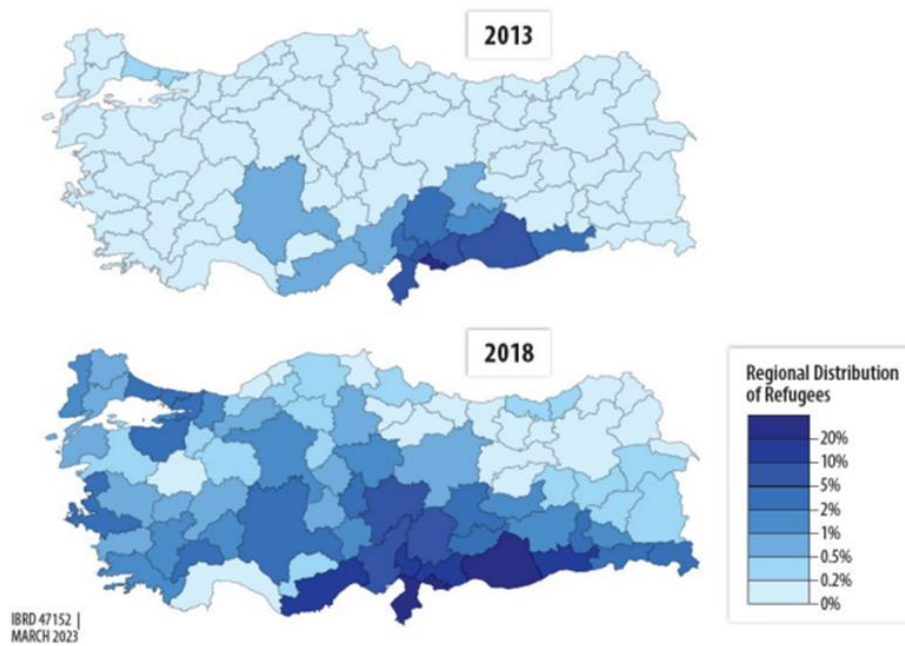


Figure 5- 7 : Regional Distribution of Syrian Refugees

Source: Tümen, 2023, p. 4

No other country in the region has been more generous than Türkiye in dealing with the Syrian refugees; nevertheless, the degrading economic conditions have increased the risk of conflict in the past years (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024). In an effort to reduce social tension¹⁰³ between the Syrian community and Turkish nationals, Türkiye has also attempted to establish safe zones in Syria for the relocation of Syrian refugees (Siccardi, 2021, p. 6). However, relatively few Syrians have relocated from Türkiye to these places so far (Gök, 2022). Contrary to immediate expectations, not many refugees have gone back to their homelands after the recent power change in Syria.

¹⁰³ The research carried out in 2014 revealed that 62% of Turks believed that Syrians damaged social order and moral standards (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 12).

According to earlier studies¹⁰⁴, the majority of Syrian refugees wish to return home as long as safety and stability are guaranteed (Sosyo Politik Saha Araştırmaları Merkezi, 2019). Nevertheless, *Mr. Mahmud's* thoughts and observations contradict these findings:

“Here, Syrians created a new life by beginning at zero. They won't decide to go back, of course. Assume for the moment that a Turk moves to Germany and settles there. Will they return after completing all this work? Most likely not. In the same vein, people acquired languages and over time developed homes, careers, and even marriages. Having completed all of these, they won't return. I know some people whose children cannot speak Arabic but only Turkish because their children were born here. These people find it difficult, if not impossible, to return.”

Regardless of the Syrian refugees' desire to return, Turkish authorities will have a difficult time resolving the matter. The author especially questioned two interviewees, both of whom are citizens of Syria, regarding the sentiments that are currently held toward Syrian refugees. They stated that:

“When we first came to Türkiye in 2013 and 2014, respectively, we were treated generously. Nonetheless, a complete shift in public opinion has occurred toward us concurrent with Türkiye's deteriorating economic circumstances. We are aware that we must leave, but the question is, where? We see that hardly even basic security remains in our cities, let alone any houses. We want the Turkish people to respond to this question of how we are able to go back under these circumstances. Besides, it should be borne in mind that the Syrian community has been contributing substantially to the Turkish economy in the recent years”.

Direct military spending and border security are other costly fiscal items. Although it is not debated openly before the public, Türkiye's military operations in Syria (*and Iraq*) put a heavy burden on the national economy. Peynirci (2019, p. 39) demonstrates that the Ministry of Defense expenditures increased¹⁰⁵ by 83.9% between 2013 and 2017, from 17 billion USD in 2010 to 22.6 billion USD in 2014, mainly because of the Syrian conflict. The material losses

¹⁰⁴ One of the most recent surveys conducted by UNHCR has revealed that while 56% of Syrian refugees wish to return to their country one day, only 1% of them planned on doing so in the next 12 months (UNCHR, 2023, p. 5).

¹⁰⁵ According to another study (Bayır, 2021, pp. 40-2), despite the security operations in Türkiye and beyond its border carried out during this period, there was no significant change in Turkey's defense expenses after the Arab Spring. However, it should be noted that Bayır's studies only cover military expenditures and do not include reconstruction expenditures after trench operations in Türkiye and indirect expenditures on social development projects in Syria.

of four cross-border operations are estimated to be between 30 and 40 million USD (Neset et al., 2021, p. 43).

Aydıntaşbaş (2020, p. 20) states that it is also estimated that Ankara spends annually between 2 and 3 billion USD to control the region through its proxies. Additionally, Türkiye has invested almost 110 million USD in installing concrete walls and a comprehensive border security system to strengthen its border with Syria (Akmehmed, 2015). These factors contributed to Türkiye's decline in growth rate, which fell sharply from 9.2% in 2010 to 2.2% in 2012.

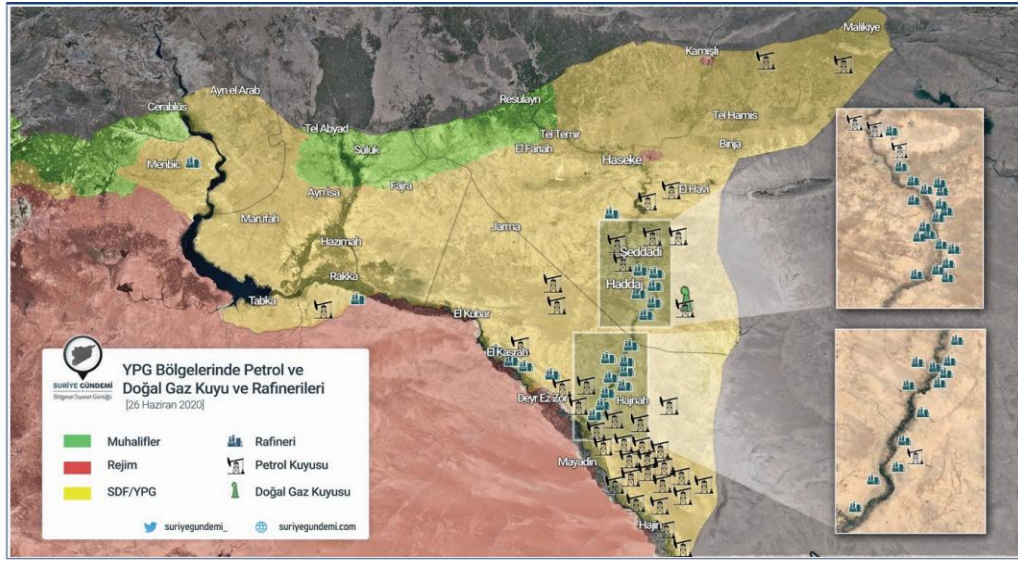
In spite of this great humanitarian and economic suffering, Türkiye has not fully achieved its national objectives in Syria. The PKK, under the banner of the SDF, is still controlling the eastern part of the Euphrates River¹⁰⁶, one-third of Syrian territory in effect. They even declared their constitution under the name of social contract (Radpey, 2015, p. 835), which is a solid step forward to their ultimate objective. Acun and Görücü (2023, pp. 45-7) argue that these terror groups have never been so close to building an autonomous or independent Kurdish entity in Syria with the US's military and financial aid.

In other words, the PKK has been able to establish a practically self-sufficient ruling system. *Mr. Mahmud* shares his observations:

“Kurdish people played a big part in stopping DEASH in Kobane because Assad was not there. And they already have their independence. I was in Kobane last year, and I saw that there was a totally different government in those areas; they had their own soldiers and policemen. Maybe they would accept a semi-autonomous rule in exchange for oil, but Kurdish groups will not accept full Assad control again, for sure”. He also added this is the general perception among Syrians.

The YPG/PKK has established its own civil administrations in these regions rich in much of Syria's natural resources, including oil, gas (*Figure 5-8*), and agricultural land (England & Pitel, 2022). By tapping and exporting Syria's oil, the YPG/PKK generates over 2.5 billion USD annually, making it the richest terror organization globally. According to certain sources, even the Assad regime was procuring its oil from the YPG/PKK (Musa & Koparan, 2024). US companies are also cooperating with the YPG/PKK and making huge profits through this never-declared trade (Rosen, 2021).

¹⁰⁶ In 2023, many Arab tribes living in SDF-controlled territories staged protests against US-backed Kurdish authority as a result of the discrimination they faced, particularly the SDF's obligatory recruitment practices (Hawach, 2024).



Kaynak: Suriye Gündemi

Figure 5- 8 : Syrian Energy Resources under PKK's Control

In fact, after diminishing DEASH's influence, the US troops are stationed in Syria only to protect oil fields (*as stated by former US President Trump*) under the YPG's control (Kajjo, 2020). The Syrian regime described the “illegal” presence of US forces at Syrian oilfields and called for Washington to withdraw their troops immediately (Humud & Blanchard, 2020, p. 8).

According to England and Pitel (2022), the SDF has around an army of 100 thousand,¹⁰⁷ which is trained and armed by the US with tanks and other armed combat vehicles (Acun & Görücü, 2023, pp. 48-9). The YPG/PKK's ties with the US cannot be defined as temporary and tactical anymore, considering the rift between Ankara and Washington. All of these are tangible steps towards a *de facto* Kurdish statelet in northern Syria, which will pose a serious secessionist threat to Türkiye sooner or later.

What is more, the PKK has demonstrated its adaptability by attempting to replicate the success of the YPG in Kobane in 2014: *take the town, declare autonomy, and seek international recognition*. Fortunately, though, the Turkish army crushed those attempts in a number of urban areas, including Diyarbakır, Cizre, and Nusaybin, as elaborated in Chapter 4. In addition, the PKK is funneling the US-made arm systems (including anti-tank and MANPAD missiles) to Iraq and Türkiye to inflict more casualties among Turkish troops.

¹⁰⁷ The number of YPG militants varies in different sources: 70.000 (Polat, 2020, p. 57), 30.000 (Acun & Görücü, 2023, p. 60).

When the Assad regime played the Kurdish card again by withdrawing its troops from the northeastern part of Syria and releasing PYD leaders in response to Turkish support for the opposition (Acun & Görücü, 2023, p. 20), Türkiye failed to reassess the situation and develop an effective counter-policy. Similarly, Cagaptay (2020) states that Ankara's shortsightedness allowed the deepening ties between the YPG and Washington. Ozan (2017, p. 28) reports that foreign aid to the YPG, which subsequently headed toward the PKK, has increased these terrorist organizations' operational capabilities and self-confidence in Türkiye, too.

Çevik (2022, p. 3) predicts that in case Türkiye launches another operation to eliminate these risks, it will most probably be faced with strong international condemnation since the YPG is extremely careful about not involving the PKK's attacks on Turkish soil. Furthermore, the US has continued to station 900 troops in Eastern Syria in order to safeguard oil wells, as indicated above, and deter new Turkish incursions (Hawach, 2024), which makes Ankara think twice before further action.

Now that the regime was ousted and the HTS-led group has taken over control of the country, how Syria will continue its way is crucial to Türkiye. The preservation of territorial integrity and the establishment of an all-inclusive government are key to a peaceful and stable Syria in the future. In this context, how armed groups will be disarmed and reintegrated into society is not yet obvious. Because some of these groups not only continued a fight against the regime or each other, they also involved a range of illegal activity due to weak state authority, which risks both security and stability in the country and the region. Therefore, Türkiye has been subject to different types of criminal activities, such as migrant smuggling and drug trafficking. According to the 2021 Global Criminality Index, Türkiye has one of the highest crime scores in the world, ranking 12th out of 193 countries (OCINDEX, 2021, p. 2).

5.5. Implications on Domestic and Foreign Politics

The US invasion of Afghanistan in the style of "the Global War on Terror" and Türkiye's military actions have had a significant impact on the foreign and domestic policies of the two countries. During the military activism era, decisions were made that considered both domestic issues and geostrategic factors. A small group of individuals made some critical decisions, bypassing state institutions. Since power was consolidated in executive branches, the respective legislative institutions, like judicial bodies, could not use their oversight

responsibilities appropriately. The leaders have made an effort to convince as many people as possible by focusing on short-term advantages at the expense of long-term losses.

Hard power outlooks have both direct and indirect effects on domestic politics. In both contexts, leaders leveraged security narratives to consolidate power, despite differing domestic circumstances. President Erdoğan used a security-based narrative to consolidate his nationalist base after peace negotiations failed with Kurdish groups at home. Similarly, because of US domestic polarization (Yaqin, 2022), the Democratic administration has resorted to military means to demonstrate that they are just as competent as Republicans in defending American security. Under the influence of security-oriented policies, supposed foreign policy achievements were used to win elections and weaken opposition. Consequently, both nations experienced militarization and securitization processes at various degrees, which resulted in a reversal of democratic principles and diplomatic isolation.

Just before the 9/11 attacks, US President Bush won the presidency by a slim margin. While his legitimacy was questioned, the attacks provided him an opportunity to consolidate his power. Therefore, from the onset, domestic political considerations dominated the US decision-making processes concerning the Afghan war. By stimulating the basic security worries of the Americans, the Bush administration induced them to approve their costly war on terror decision. The flaws in the “check and balance” system have become more apparent, and Congress and other respective parties failed to carry out their control over war budgets (Cordesman, 2017, p. 5) and illegal practices.

Under the influence of the government propaganda machine, the US public has become so preoccupied with Islamist terrorism threats that no successive administration dared to reconsider the counterproductive “Holy War” rhetoric (Waldman, 2013, p. 832). Even though they noticed the Afghan war was unwinnable and continued involvement in combating the Taliban was futile (Greentree, 2021, p. 8), they could not reveal this to the public, considering the political backlash (The Economist, 2009).

The US responded to the 9/11 attacks on its soil within the framework of a “war on terror”. These decisions led to the US engaging with Afghanistan through traditional security instruments (Hassan, 2023, p. 10). Afterwards, no clear direction was given by the White House, and “the default was always the military solution”. The overly securitized conditions undermined the legitimacy of the intervention.

In a conversation with them to learn their standpoints, the US nationals also agreed that the security-based policies dominated foreign policies after the 9/11 attacks. Americans gave credit to their presidents for putting these policies into effect, too. In the same period, they observed Muslims being persecuted in the US, but they did not feel guilty because of fresh memories of attacks. It was interesting to note that one participant claimed that widespread propaganda portraying all Muslims as "barbaric" and "evil" was the reason why he felt uneasy when he first arrived in Afghanistan and began working with the Afghan contractor employees.

While conducting military operations, the civilian casualties and collateral damage were disregarded (Seren M., 2021, p. 31), so US airstrikes and night raids heightened a sense of oppression among Afghans and triggered in many an obligation to resist (Rahim, 2023, p. 86). According to Thimm (2018, p. 37), the widespread human rights violations were documented, which gave rise to declining domestic and global support for the US intervention. Hassan (2023, pp. 40-1) also infers that Washington turned a blind eye to the fraud in the Afghan elections just because of keeping the puppet leaders in power, which significantly undermined the legitimacy of those governments.

The rhetoric surrounding the Global War on Terrorism, often termed a 'crusade,' frames it as an existential battle between good and evil (Greentree, 2021, p. 12). This perspective paints the entire Muslim world as a participant in this conflict. As a result of this rhetoric, American Muslim communities and allied Muslim nations felt offended and alienated from the US. This alienation had broader implications, undermining cooperation with US-NATO partners and traditional allies. Most decisions, including the withdrawal from Kabul, were made unilaterally, without consulting allies (Hassan, 2023). This lack of consultation raised questions about the US's commitment to its security assurances. Furthermore, this decision has harmed not just the US but also NATO's nascent relations with the states in Central Asia (Bağbaşıoğlu A., 2024).

In the context of great-power competition, the US has been reluctant to acknowledge its defeat in the Afghan War. However, the geostrategic repercussions make this denial a bitter pill for American decision-makers to swallow (Greentree, 2021, p. 8). The geopolitical consequences of the US defeat in Afghanistan, such as the resurgence of the Taliban and shifting alliances in the region, would be much more significant globally than the defeat in Vietnam (Chellaney, 2021). For some, the Pax Americana period came to an end with the US's swift and chaotic departure from Afghanistan (Tisdall, 2021).

Several Indian analysts have harshly criticized the “precipitous” US withdrawal and its implications for India; others have raised new questions about American credibility as a strategic partner for India as it seeks to balance against China (Congressional Research Service, 2021, p. 55). By exploiting this situation, Beijing exercised its influence in the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement. Now, China has made its entry into Afghanistan to satisfy its raw material needs (D’Souza, 2023). Analysts assess that recent events in Afghanistan may lead to an intensified Russian security presence in Central Asia, too.

Similarly, upon facing the various spillover effects of the Arab Spring and ensuing Syrian conflicts (Parlar Dal, 2016), Türkiye has also gone through a militarization process in tandem with an intensified securitization process in domestic and foreign policies (Foreign Policy, 2021; Kutlay & Öniş, 2020, p. 1088). Although the Syrian conflict was regarded as an opportunity to advance Türkiye’s influence in the region, it gave rise to negative results, which posed grave security threats to its national security and territorial integrity. Accordingly, Türkiye shifted to a more assertive foreign policy to address emerging risks in the immediate neighborhood and employ its military power beyond its border (Dost, 2023).

Türkiye’s coercive policies have enabled it to mitigate the security threats resulting from the Syrian crisis (US Congress, 2024, p. 17) by creating a 220-kilometer safe zone on its southern border (Polat, 2020, p. 87). However, these policies obviously led to a securitization process with serious diplomatic, political, and financial consequences (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 26).

The majority of respondents acknowledged that:

“Türkiye’s foreign and domestic policies were securitized, much like the US, because of the military actions in Syria. Nonetheless, given that the country’s territorial integrity and national security were in jeopardy, several retired soldiers claimed that this was a cross for Turkish people to bear. They contend that until security concerns are fully resolved, even if it involves employing force, citizens must put up with anti-democratic conduct and rising military spending”.

However, according to Mr. Çiçek”:

“Not necessarily every state must go through the securitization process because of employing military intervention in another country. For example, the United Kingdom never

approved of discrimination against Muslims, even as the country grieved the loss of its men in Afghanistan”.

According to Mehmetçik and Çelik (2022, pp. 27-31), there have been three main drivers for this securitization process: seeking strategic autonomy as a mid-size power, domestic political consideration, and developing homegrown military-industrial capacity. The Arab Spring and Syrian conflict coincided with Turkish foreign policy shifting. However, this shift did not happen just overnight. Like other “midsize powers,” Türkiye had already been sending signals to pursue a more assertive policy in the international system heading towards multipolarity (US Congress, 2024, p. 1). In essence, Ankara has been seeking to achieve its national interests depending on its increasing economic power and military capacity (Ataman & Yeşiltaş, 2024, p. 7).

In fact, there were some fundamental reasons why Türkiye pursued a more assertive policy after the Arab Spring and therefore encountered diplomatic problems. The changes in the international system forced Türkiye to adapt its foreign policy. As a result of this adaptation, Türkiye embraced its multiple identities and included a focus on other regions alongside the West (Neset et al., 2021, p. 2). Similarly, Türkiye’s geostrategic significance for the US has decreased while China and South Asia have become the primary focus (Ülgen, 2021, p. 8).

As one of the frontrunner middle power countries (Dost, 2023), Türkiye aims to increase its sphere of influence regionally and globally. To this end, it demands a more inclusive, effective, fair, and secure international system (Fidan, 2024, p. 18) or the ending of the global tutelage system, in other words (Ataman, 2024, p. 34). Although Western capitals are worried that “Türkiye is increasingly turning towards the east” (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 22), Türkiye’s interest in joining anti-Western BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) should be regarded in this context.

As the prospect for EU membership is not high, and the US behaviors are deemed harmful, Türkiye tries to diversify its relations considering its economic and political interests (US Congress, 2024, pp. 9, 10). In the Turkish eyes, the West systematically criticizes Türkiye by refusing to acknowledge the emerging realities of the international system while neglecting Ankara’s genuine concerns and interests (Yükselen, 2024, p. 64). In brief, Türkiye is tending to adapt itself to changing conditions by deepening its ties with the Islamic world and some non-Western powers, and this is perceived by the West as damaging to their interests.

However, this tendency gained momentum in the face of emerging risks and diverging policies with its national allies following the Syrian conflict. The securitization of Turkish foreign policy manifested itself in military incursions in Syria and the increasing use of military power in some other areas to address deteriorating circumstances (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 27). This move led to diplomatic rifts between Ankara and its Western allies as well as regional countries. Although it was legitimate, Türkiye's increasing military activism faced international condemnation, and Ankara found itself in isolation in the Middle East.

From the Turkish perspective, however, Ankara was forced to act unilaterally due to its ally's indifference to its genuine security concerns. When the Assad regime intensified the brutality towards its people and a huge refugee influx started to Türkiye, the international community remained reluctant to Ankara's multinational intervention calls (Okyay, 2017, p. 836). Its allies also turned a blind eye to Ankara's legitimate request for the establishment of a safe zone to prevent refugee flow (Cfr, 2023). What is worse, Türkiye's NATO allies, the US and EU, came to support the YPG/PKK in the fight against DEASH, which was incompatible with the spirit of allied solidarity (Fidan, 2024, p. 24) and highly inflammatory to Türkiye as well. Because PKK was also recognized as a terrorist organization by themselves (Ülgen, 2021, p. 6).

On the other hand, Western powers perceived Türkiye's unilateral moves in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean as overly ambiguous and revisionist (Cagaptay, 2020, p. 3). Consequently, mutual relationships with the US and EU were strained. Türkiye was also treated as a regional destabilizing actor by these countries as it was following "neo-Ottomanist" (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 11) and "Sunnification" (Okyay, 2017, p. 841) agendas. For them, Türkiye's actions arguably harmed their interests in some cases (i.e., the fight against DEASH), undermined NATO's strength and unity (US Congress, 2024, p. 9).

Mutual suspicions and conflicting interests between Türkiye and the US became even more evident after the failed coup attempt of July 15. Because the US not only failed to publicly condemn the coup (Neset et al., 2021, p. 12) but also ignored Türkiye's repeated demands for the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, who was behind the plot. This sparked a widespread belief in Türkiye that the US and West might have supported or (ignored) the coup attempt, which exacerbated anti-Western sentiment immensely (Ülgen, 2021, pp. 6,16). Ankara responded to these developments in kind: by taking a value-based isolationist policy known as "precious loneliness" afterwards (Noi, 2024, p. 117), stretching its military presence to protect its national interests (Outzen, 2022), and restoring its soured relations with Russia.

Upon its calls for solidarity against Russia and Damascus being in vain, Türkiye had to make an unappealing choice: either to support the Western anti-DEASH coalition, including PKK-affiliated elements, or to side with Russia to protect Türkiye's interest in Syria. Suspicious of Western countries' attitude against the 15 July failed coup, Türkiye pursued more cooperation with Russia (Strategic Comments, 2019). The purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile system, costing 2.5 billion USD (Güler, 2024, p. 131), occurred in this context. Nevertheless, the side effects of this choice have already manifested in a variety of ways. With this turn, Yalçın (2020, p. 212) argues that Putin drove a wedge into the alliance, and Türkiye's relationships with the US and European countries became much more troublesome.

As a result, the US took some punitive actions. Ankara was expelled from the F-35 jet program (Mehta, 2019) and exposed to CAATSA sanctions in response to its S-400 missile system purchase decision (Zanoti & Thomas, 2020, p. 2). In parallel with increasing anti-Turkish sentiments, even the future of Türkiye inside NATO has been a matter of debate in some Western capitals (Strategic Comments, 2019); from time to time, high-level officials call an end to Ankara's membership even though there is no stipulation in the NATO Charter to do so (Neset et al., 2021, p. 26). Nevertheless, these actions turned out to be counterproductive, proving that the security alliance between Türkiye and the West has never been seen as on equal footing by the EU and the US (İnat & Cicioğlu, 2024, p. 76).

Türkiye's assertive policies caused problems with the EU as well. For many European countries, Türkiye was not perceived as a potential member of the EU anymore because of its pan-Islamic tendency and assertive naval activities (Kutlay & Öniş, 2020, p. 1102). In addition, like the US, EU officials repeatedly expressed their concerns about the deterioration of civil liberties and rule of law, and arguably increasing authoritarianism in Türkiye (US Congress, 2024, p. 3). For this reason, the EU Commission froze the membership talks in effect. On the other hand, Türkiye had already lost its faith and questioned the sincerity of the negotiations (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 29) after the acceptance of the Greek Cypriots in the union in 2004. Besides, the EU's significance for Turkish foreign policy has been decreasing (İnat & Cicioğlu, 2024, p. 74) for a while. Thus, the EU does not have much leverage on Turkish policies.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, ideological aspirations, alongside national interests and pragmatism, also guided Turkish foreign policy. Turkish decision-makers evaluated the Syrian conflict from a sectarian and an identity framework and devised policies accordingly (Okuy, 2017, p. 840). To increase its influence, Ankara began to support

revolutionary movements in the region for advancing reform and democratization; however, this resulted in problems in relations with anti-revolutionary camps, particularly the Gulf monarchies. Moreover, Ankara's assertive policies were perceived as expansionist and irredentist, and this stoked the anticolonial fears among the Arab communities (Maziad & Sotiriadis, 2020).

While aiming at being the leading country in the Muslim world, Türkiye found itself alienated from Arab nations. Türkiye's involvement in the power struggle in Iraq, Syria, and Libya caused an intense competition not only with the Saudis and the UAE but also with the Iran-led Shia axis (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 34). Some Arab states not only condemned Türkiye's military operations in Syria (İdiz S., 2020) but also positioned themselves against Ankara in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, even providing support to PYD/YPG in response to its military activism (Başkan, 2019, p. 86). In addition, its economic relationship with some Gulf countries deteriorated (Kabalan, 2019).

Gözen (2021, p. 524-5) argues that the securitization process of Türkiye's foreign policy manifested itself through military operations in different regions. In this sense, Ankara's overstretched military presence in the Syrian and Libyan conflicts, as well as its naval activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, in line with the Blue Homeland strategy, could also be evaluated as another significant militarization consequence of Turkish foreign policy (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 36).

Indeed, Türkiye has established military bases in different countries, from Qatar to Somalia, and protected its interests determinately. Nevertheless, Ankara has put itself at odds with other regional powers like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, and Russia, particularly due to its stretched military beyond Syria to the Gulf and Libya. These countries, together with Greece and France, increased their cooperation to sideline Türkiye from the exploitation of gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean (ibid. p. 36).

As another driver of securitization, these active foreign policy initiatives were supported by Türkiye's developing indigenous defense industry (Kutlay & Öniş, 2020, p. 1092). Türkiye's defense industry has achieved tremendous improvement in recent years, and even NATO countries are importing highly sophisticated military assets such as drones nowadays (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 31). Increasing military capacity serves two different objectives in foreign policy. First, Türkiye's dependency on the West, particularly the US, diminishes so that Ankara can drive a more independent policy based on its national interests

(Ülgen, 2021, p. 6). Second, these modern capabilities enable Türkiye to conduct successful military operations in Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh in line with its national objectives (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 25).

In short, Türkiye has achieved a degree of success by pursuing a more assertive foreign policy during the Syrian civil war; nevertheless, this caused diplomatic repercussions. This gap between Ankara and its allies even more widened after the Syrian conflict erupted because of diverging interests and priorities. Assuming that the Syrian crisis is conducive to increasing its influence, Türkiye attempted to shape regional developments. However, this endeavor failed because its means (hard and soft power) were insufficient to support its assertive foreign policy objectives (Bakır, 2024, p. 147). According to Cagaptay (2020, p. 7), by putting all his money on a single horse, brotherhood, the JDP miscalculated the Middle Eastern facts. Hence, Ankara found itself with soured relations with MENA countries, which turned out to be costly and as such forced Türkiye to make a pragmatic turn afterwards (Noi, 2024, p. 117).

When Türkiye lost control of the Syrian crisis at some stage, President Erdoğan decided to make deals with Putin to alleviate some of the geopolitical troubles Türkiye faced, which made Ankara even more reliant on Moscow for its Syrian policy. While Ankara and Moscow have come much closer after the failed coup attempt in 2016, Türkiye's relations with its Western allies and the US soured (Kutlay & Öniş, 2020, p. 1095). Although it has been one of the distinctive principles of Turkish foreign policy (Gönlübol & Kürkçüoğlu, 1995, p. 370), Turkish officials were unable to play a great power off against another for the first time in modern Turkish history.

The coercive policies also led to the deterioration of Türkiye's relations not only with the US but also with the EU (Kutlay & Öniş, 2020, p. 1102). Soured relations with the US and its support for the SDF (YPG) remain the main security threats for Türkiye, even after the recent power change in Syria. The EU membership process has been stalled effectively, but it should not be forgotten that Ankara's trade is mostly with the West, not Russia and China. Şen and Şahin (2020, p. 244) rightly assert that the military capacity should be supported by accurate calculations to obtain the best response. In light of the results above, it is hard to say the JDP has done so by pursuing an assertive stance in Syria for quite a while, at least.

In this regard, the Syrian case provides a striking example of how miscalculations and counter maneuvers of other actors resulted in a shift in the balance of power in the civil war

(Şen & Şahin, 2020, p. 244). Unfortunately, Türkiye failed to predict the other third parties' counter maneuvers in Syria and faced problems. Indeed, Ankara has a number of pressing issues that are largely caused by or are getting worse as a result of the Syrian conflict. Türkiye has employed its hard power to address these issues at the expense of many negative implications on its foreign and domestic policies.

The developments in the aftermath of the Arab Spring explicitly proved that the domestic and foreign relations issues are becoming increasingly interconnected (Okuy, 2017, p. 829). Indeed, although the increasing threat perceptions and rapidly changing regional dynamics have essentially shaped Türkiye's Syrian policy, domestic political considerations also played an undeniable role in the decision-making processes (Çevik, 2022, p. 7). To cope with these multiple risks, Türkiye had to resort to its military power, which was necessary for national unity. Therefore, Türkiye's domestic politics have also undergone a securitization process similar to its foreign policy.

According to results of interviews, nearly all of the respondents agreed that Türkiye's Syrian policy during the past 10 years has been greatly influenced by domestic issues. Retired military officers said that “political meddling caused some decisions that were supposed to be made based on military principles to be delayed or turned ineffective.”

In any case, the 15 July coup d'état marked a watershed moment in the securitization process with its long-term effects. Because it did not only bring forward a shift in the ruling system but also spark a massive feeling of insecurity. Then, the narrative “fight against terrorism” and “siege” was frequently used when Türkiye's allies began to act in a way to undermine its national security (Neset et al., 2021, p. 12). For instance, contrary to the previous decade, the border security was extensively highlighted when Türkiye encountered multiple security risks, such as increasing refugees, DAESH-YPG/PKK attacks, illegal passage of foreign jihadist fighters, etc. (Parlar Dal, 2016). In addition, the Blue Homeland doctrine was devised to draw attention to Türkiye's vital interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, which was not the case in the past.

When it first broke out, the vast majority of Turkish citizens rejected any involvement in the Syrian Civil War, in line with established norms. However, the sentiment has changed over time (Hlavsova et al., 2018, p. 48), partly because of this rhetoric and partly because of increasing terror attacks. Indeed, as indicated by Adar (2020b), the security-oriented foreign

policy is supported by a large constituency across the country, sharing a strong commitment to Türkiye's national security and territorial integrity.

Thanks to this popular support, Türkiye managed to fend off some serious risks emanating from the Syrian conflict, and it is now more willing to protect its national interests in other places like the Eastern Mediterranean. However, this policy has also been used by ruling elites to consolidate their power at home, which paved the way for a decline in democratic standards, a lower level of rule of law, and weakening state institutions at varying degrees. It should be noted that while Türkiye was dealing with the Syrian crises, its domestic politics faced a series of turbulences: the Gezi protests, the 6-8 November incidents, and the 15 July failed coup in succession. In order to address the domestic and external risks simultaneously, the government implemented the security-oriented policies, which unavoidably limited the civil liberties and rules of law.

According to Neset et al. (2021, p. 14), President Erdoğan and the JDP used the securitized policies to keep the support up for achieving various objectives. First, the newly formed conservative nationalist coalition utilized a securitized foreign policy narrative to enhance their domestic legitimacy and standing (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 25). As such, the opposition could not form a united front against the ruling JDP party. Second, the state institution was designed in comfort with the ideological tendency of ruling elites. Thanks to the constitutional amendments in 2017, all powers in the Turkish ruling system accumulated to the executive branch, President Erdoğan, practically (Cagaptay, 2020), while the gravity of other institutions was on the wane. In addition, the government used the July 15 coup attempt to redesign military-civilian relations, which had always been problematic. Third, the government utilized foreign policy crises to consolidate power domestically for winning elections as well as to cover domestic issues, particularly economic ones (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 27).

By securitizing Syrian policy, President Erdoğan aimed to narrow the opposition's room for maneuvering in domestic politics. For Kutlay and Öniş (2020, p. 1101), the opposition, whenever it makes a critique of foreign policy, is blamed for being "not domestic and national." Nevertheless, this could not prevent mounting domestic discontent and anti-refugee sentiments (IMMAP, 2022, p. 16). For this reason, the government prioritized sending Syrian refugees back after suffering defeat in the 2019 local elections (Tuncel & Ekici, 2019, p. 55) to maintain power prior to the 2023 presidential election.

In order to facilitate this process, local councils were set up (Zanotti & Thomas, 2023, p. 13), and a number of socio-economic development projects were initiated. However, all of these are arguably stigmatized as Erdoğan's Turkification strategy (Leeuwen & Van Veen, 2019, pp. 4-7) and Türkiye's attempt to create a buffer "Sunni-Arab" state between its Kurdish population and the Kurds living in the northern regions of Syria (Adar, 2020b). Nevertheless, these are a bit reductionist, because, as Tuncel and Ekici (2019, p. 63) suggest, Türkiye only sought to create "safe zones" between itself and terrorist organizations, upon the international community's denial to do so.

As explained above, after the Assad regime denied Ankara's call for democratic reforms, Türkiye adopted a regime change policy in Syria. Accordingly, a pro-Muslim Brotherhood policy was followed, as they were the only organized group in Syria. However, Kutlay and Öniş (2020, p. 1099) claim that in order to gain the support of Turkish voters as well as legitimize this turn, Türkiye was portrayed as the guardian (or spokesperson at least) of the Muslim world by politicians. In the end, this policy produced some negative implications for Türkiye's already polarized society by increasing the political polarization in the country, which is a potent example of the spillover effect of the Syrian war (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1400).

The main opposition party, CHP, blamed the government for pursuing a sectarian foreign policy by supporting jihadists and aggravating the civil war in Syria. By doing so, as they claimed, the JDP put national security at risk because of its "Sunnification" policy (Okyay, 2017, p. 840), by referring to the basic ideological affinity between the JDP and Brotherhood-affiliated parties throughout the region (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 13). In exchange, President Erdoğan accused CHP of being pro-Ba'athists and exploiting sectarian tension in Türkiye (Okyay, 2017, p. 842).

In fact, as Mehmetçik and Çelik (2022, p. 25) point out, domestic identities had a greater influence on foreign policy formulations, with subsequent implications for domestic politics. To illustrate, in domestic politics, President Erdoğan frequently utilized the symbol of Rabia to condemn the coup in Egypt and defend Türkiye's value-based isolationist foreign policy. However, these gestures did not produce any positive results for Turkish foreign policy but only diplomatic isolations and backlashes, as detailed above.

The contagious nature of the Syrian conflict also negatively affected Türkiye's ethnic fault lines and left long-term consequences on Turkish domestic politics, particularly after the Kobane siege (Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 1403). Following the 6-8 October street protests, the

government and HDP accused each other of inciting violence, which culminated in the end of the peace process (Okay, 2017, pp. 843-4). From then onwards, the PKK increased its attacks in an attempt to reclaim its pivotal role among Kurdish factions after the stalemate in the June 7, 2015 election (Tuna, 2024, p. 21).

In response, President Erdoğan skillfully resecuritized the Kurdish question and criminalized the HDP, the soft belly of the united opposition, to drive the wedge further into the opposition (Siccardi, 2021, p. 9). Due to securitized policies, Türkiye was forced to abandon its democratic opening policy and returned to its former security-prioritized practices (Kaya & Whiting, 2017, p. 82-3). News about martyrs and civilian casualties resulting from the PKK's attacks are especially significant in this process, as *Mrs. Yinanç* emphasized. It is important to note, nevertheless, that the government continued in the peace process until the PKK broke the ceasefire, even while HDP-affiliated groups declared so-called self-rule in ten separate towns (İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2019, p. 10).

Additionally, the degree of Kurdish participation in the parliament diminished because of suspected support for terrorism, and trustees were appointed to Kurdish municipalities (Adar, 2020b). However, it should be noted that during the trench incidents, the municipalities and their mayors attempted to undermine state unity by directly or indirectly supporting the terrorist groups (İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2019, p. 54). Of course, it is unreasonable to expect someone who commits these crimes to stay in the public service.

The increasingly militarized and then-securitized approach also undermined the roles of traditionally powerful state apparatus in the system. The botched 15 July coup attempt accelerated the transition to a hypercentralized presidential system (Ülgen, 2021, p. 14), which was put into effect in 2018. For some, this transition was a death warrant for Turkish democracy (Dost, 2023). With the abolishment of the parliamentary system in place since 1960, the power was centralized in the hands of the presidency (Kirişçi & Sloat, 2019, p. 1), further undermining checks and balances (Ülgen, 2021, p. 14). Indeed, the Turkish Parliament (Turkish Grand Assembly-TBMM) played very little role in decision-making processes regarding the Syrian War and Türkiye's involvement (Çavuşoğlu, 2022, p. 58).

The conscripts of the Turkish army have not served in the cross-border military operations, like other counterterrorism operations (Durmuş, 2019). Therefore, the engagement of their families and the general public in debate over military operations was lower than in the 1990s. This also negatively impacted the legislative body's role in policymaking. In this

respect, the legislative branch did not exercise its oversight role, as illustrated by covert appropriation expenditures (Seren, 2020, p. 190), and the motions to authorize Turkish military engagement passed with a great majority in the parliament.

Furthermore, as argued by some researchers (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 25; Kirişçi & Sloat, 2019, p. 1), in addition to nationalist concerns, the ideologies and identities of ruling elites have been among the key factors for securitization. The formation of the alliance between the JDP and nationalists (MHP) made a spillover effect on Turkish foreign policy, which led to a militaristic and assertive turn (Jabbour, 2022, p. 11). Accordingly, the traditional influential position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) in Turkish policy formulation has been reduced owing to populist rhetoric (Özdamar & Yanik, 2024, pp. 1850-1).

Whereas President Erdoğan and his close circle¹⁰⁸ primarily shaped Türkiye's foreign policy, MoFA's officials were blamed for being elitist and not acting in line with "*national will*". As a result, Ankara's policies have become less predictable. When these hastily formulated policies were put into action, they created new obstacles rather than solving existing ones, in some cases at least. The decision to acquire a Russian-made air defense system was an obvious example of this cycle. Although it cost substantially and soured bilateral ties severely, Ankara has reportedly placed the S-400 system in a storage facility rather than activating it, worrying about additional US retaliatory actions (US Congress, 2024, p. 11).

The failed 15 July coup d'état attempt has also made quite an impact on the army's role in domestic politics. After the failed coup, public confidence in the Turkish Armed Forces was at an all-time low; President Erdoğan, therefore, has also used military operations in Syria to inspire Turkish people's faith in their army. Siccardi (2021, p. 15) determines that by launching Operation Euphrates Shield just weeks after the coup attempt, the Turkish government adeptly managed to rebuild the credibility of the Turkish Armed Forces. Furthermore, traditionally flawed civilian-military relations¹⁰⁹ in Turkish politics was redesigned (Yalçın, 2020, p. 219).

¹⁰⁸ President Erdoğan, for example, picked several individuals who were not career diplomats and were aware of their pro-JDP inclination to serve as ambassadors to important cities like Washington.

¹⁰⁹ During this research study, it was noticed that western experts have a tendency to evaluate the prosecutions made after the July 15 coup attempt solely within the framework of the rule of law and highlight human rights violations. However, this view ignores the fact that Türkiye's history is also the history of a series of coups; it also disregards the public sensitivity that emerged after the failed coup and thus fails to provide a holistic assessment.

For the first time in the history of the country, civilians have achieved full control over the military, and the ultimate responsibility for a country's strategic decision-making lies in the hands of elected political leadership. Following the implementation of the presidential system, President Erdoğan personally started picking the former generals to serve as ministers of defense. In doing so, the army's position in politics was further tightly controlled. Kirişçi and Sloat (2019, p. 8) assert that while the army lost its traditional influence, the top brass has become subservient to President Erdoğan. The long-standing tutelage system came to an end (Ataman, 2024), in other words.

Yalçın (2020, p.219, 275) claims that unlike the Gulf Crises in 1991, generals could not oppose the political decisions regarding the Syrian opposition due to this absolute control. The conditions that emerged after the July 15 coup attempt made it impossible for soldiers to object to the decisions made by politicians regarding military operations. Accordingly, Zeyrek (2019) claims that if a member of the armed forces had not demonstrated unconditional loyalty to the government or not agreed with Syrian policy¹¹⁰, he would have been compelled to retire. While interviewing them, A.Ç.E., B.S., and D.A. particularly emphasized that:

“Following the coup attempt on July 15, the Turkish Army was completely in disarray. They observed firsthand how the Army's morale was raised within the ranks by the Euphrates Shield Operation. They also agreed that right after the failed coup, the balance of power between generals and civilians irreversibly shifted in favor of the civilian side. Many high-ranking generals and officers, who had previously been considered ardent Kemalists, pledged absolute obedience to the government out of concern that they would be purged, too.”

In spite of acute political polarization, the military operations in Syria and other regions garner broad cross-party support in Türkiye (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 30). Thus, as Çevik (2022, p. 3) argues, militarized Syrian policy has served to rally the Turkish citizens around the flag before key elections. According to some analyses (OCINDEX, 2021, p. 4), President Erdoğan utilized Turkish military operations to consolidate his power in both the referendum in April 2017 and the June 2018 presidential election, respectively. In this sense, Kutlay and Öniş (2020, p. 1099) assert that the Turkish offensives in Syria have served to deflect voters' attention from economic issues.

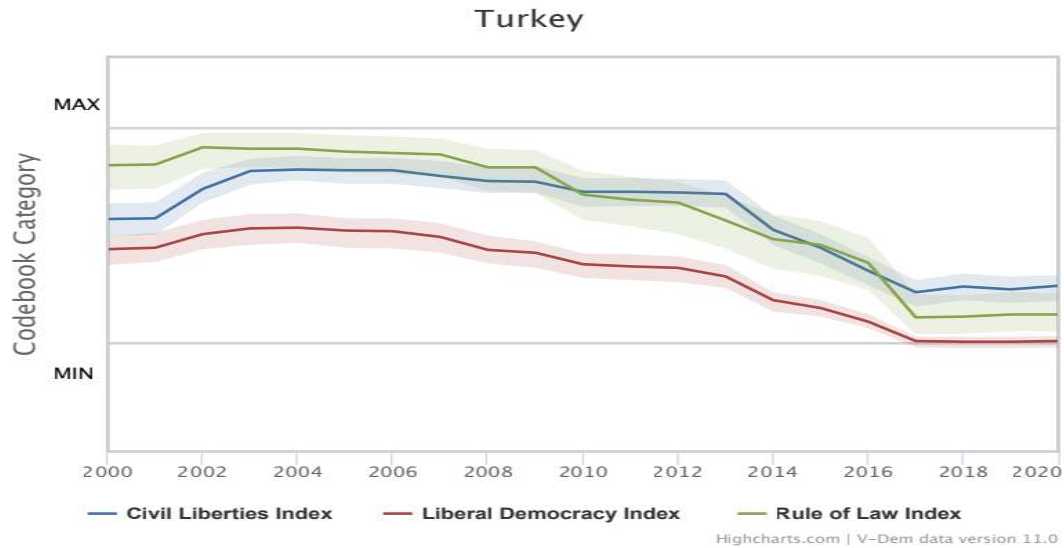
¹¹⁰ There have been speculations that the commander of the 2nd Army, *General İsmail Metin Temel*, was relieved of his duties because of disagreements with the Turkish Chief of Staff and the government over the operations in Syria (Sputnik, 2019).

The increasing militarization of foreign policy caused a variety of repercussions on democratic life in Türkiye. The skilful usage of the speech act blended with ultra-nationalistic rhetoric and evident security threats led to backsliding in the rule of law, civil liberties, and media freedom. It is crucial to acknowledge that the attempted 15 July coup in 2016 has played a pivotal role in the securitization process in Türkiye. After the failed coup, Türkiye declared a state of emergency to deal with plotters, which inevitably narrowed the democratic rights to some extent.

Siccardi (2021, p. 10) claims that the alliance with nationalists pushed the JDP into a broader shift towards a stricter path. This turn has negative implications for the freedom of speech and freedom of assembly principles in Türkiye. The media did not give much coverage to individuals who opposed the military operations (Freedom House, 2020, p. 28), under the shadow of nationalist rhetoric and increasing news of martyrs. Due to their linkage with terrorist organizations, the government has eliminated dozens of media outlets (OCINDEX, 2021, p. 5). According to Freedom House, press freedom was under threat (The Economist, 2018), and Türkiye's ranking in the 2022 World Press Freedom Index fell to 149¹¹¹ out of 180 nations.

In addition, the Kurdish question has been out of the political dimension, and once again it is seen through merely a security paradigm. In a similar vein, according to the internationally recognized Rule of Law Index (WJP, 2022, p. 27), the principle of the rule of law has also declined in Türkiye throughout this period. Türkiye dropped from its 2015 ranking of 80th out of 180 countries to 101st in 2018 and 116th in 2022 as a result. International indexes like *Freedom House* and *V-Dem* (Freedom House, 2020, p. 14; V-Dem, 2020, pp. 10-12) downgraded Türkiye to the “not free” category of democracies, which demonstrated the regressive trend of Turkish democracy (*Figure 5-9*) during that period (Ülgen, 2021, p. 14).

¹¹¹Türkiye's ranking was 122/180 in 2009 in this index.



Source: Graph generated from V-Dem Institute's interactive website, based on data from Michael Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Turkey 2000-2020 Dataset v11.1," Varieties of Democracy Project, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds21>.

Figure 5- 9 : The Regressive Trend of Türkiye's Democracy as of 2020

The democracy deficit has been one of the thorniest issues in Türkiye's relations with the West, particularly with the EU. This democratic deficit not only strains international relations but also hampers Türkiye's ability to attract crucial foreign investments. Considering the economic interdependence with these countries, bad democratic performance would be long-term vulnerabilities. As a midsize power country, Türkiye has limited resources (Mehmetçik & Çelik, 2022, p. 26); therefore, it needs FDI to boost its economy because of lacking natural resources and low domestic savings. For this reason, Ankara should improve its rule of law index to attract more foreign investment (Ülgen, 2021, pp. 14, 15).

CHAPTER 6

6. CONCLUSION

This research investigates foreign military interventions, focusing on their motives and negative consequences. In this framework, the US's Afghanistan intervention in 2001 and Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria after 2016 are compared and contrasted to identify common features of foreign military activism in another country. These cases were selected deliberately because they show some resemblances, such as the multi-ethnic and religious makeup of targeted countries, the goal of eradicating terrorism, and the strategic missteps made during the military operations.

However, the two cases also differ significantly: the US forcibly overthrew the central government in Afghanistan and installed a friendly regime, while Türkiye aimed to mitigate security risks arising from the Syrian civil war. In addition, Washington received remarkable support from its allies for its overseas operations. In contrast, Ankara had to conduct its cross-border military operations independently, relying solely on its own forces and excluding its proxies in Syria. Therefore, another purpose of this research study is to highlight the negative consequences emanating from two fundamentally different cases.

The concepts of "military intervention" and "the civil war" are critically analyzed in this study, as they are closely linked to each other. As a long-established foreign policy tool, states tend to conduct external intervention in the ongoing civil wars to advance their national objectives by supporting one of the warring parties. While these interventions may sometimes stem from humanitarian concerns, such as alleviating starvation or protecting civilians, underlying motives often align with the national interests of the intervening countries. States may opt for other means to intervene depending on the conditions and risks, but the most direct one is military intervention.

Civil wars often invite external interventions due to their spillover effects that threaten regional and global security. In this case, states intervene to deter these negative outcomes or exploit them in the context of the security dilemma. In this sense, military interventions can be carried out directly by the employment of the intervening power's armed forces or indirectly by supporting any side in the ongoing civil wars. From the ruling elite's perspective, they would be supportive, hostile, and neutral.

However, in any case, the intention of military interventions is to shift the existing balance of power in favor of one side. It could therefore have an impact on the intervening states, either positively or negatively. Supporting ruling elites may stabilize a regime, leading to short-term peace, while backing rebels could result in prolonged conflict and humanitarian crises. Accordingly, many adverse consequences emerge, like refugee influx, power vacuum, hunger, etc.

Third-party interventions are prone to being unsuccessful because they undermine the law-and-order enforcement capacity of the central government. Once the interventions are employed, they open Pandora's box. Then, civil conflicts among different ethnic or religious groups emerge in the absence of an overarching ruling authority. Furthermore, terrorist or illegal organizations also take advantage of this power vacuum for their criminal or illicit activities. By doing so, they not only pose security threats to the intervened country but also to the whole region. The US contributed to the Afghan civil war by overthrowing a relatively stable Taliban (albeit oppressive) regime in 2001. Türkiye's encouragement of the Syrian opposition groups between 2011 and 2014 has also played a partial role in intensifying the Syrian crisis, according to interviewees' observations.

In addition to these facts, and based on findings and interviews, this research study presents several key arguments. First, the US and Türkiye carried out their military operations in Afghanistan and in northern Syria to achieve their national goals, but they have failed to reach their strategic objectives. Although they achieved their immediate objectives in the course of military operations, they had to endure various economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian consequences.

As the US was being attacked at home for the first time, the September 11 attacks significantly heightened Americans' security concerns. As a result, there was tremendous public pressure on the US government to act quickly to take countermeasures. Therefore, it can be argued that the US launched the Afghanistan operation within weeks of the attacks. This decision was somewhat hasty and driven by the need to address public security concerns. Indeed, the goals of the US intervention were declared to destroy the Al Qaeda terrorist network established in Afghanistan and to overthrow the Taliban administration that provided sanctuary to this network. So, the short-term target of intervention was to punish the perpetrators, which would act as a deterrent to other prospective attackers.

While official discourses emphasized the goal of creating a stable and self-sufficient Afghanistan by ending the Taliban's oppressive control, developments in the following period suggest these were secondary objectives. Because when the attacks occurred, the Taliban had

been in power since 1996, and nothing had been done against the regime by then except for economic sanctions. In addition, it can be claimed that the US's deployment of more than 100.000 soldiers in Afghanistan was not solely aimed at bringing peace to the country but also aimed at keeping China and Russia in check in the context of a great power competition as long-term objectives.

As for Türkiye, having seen the consequences of the Libyan civil war, Ankara tried to take an active role in the Syrian crisis from the beginning. Since Turkish officials regarded a rapid power change as the quickest and most beneficial scenario, significant support was provided to the Syrian opposition. However, since the internal and external support of the Assad regime and the rise of extremist groups in the power void could not be estimated accurately, Ankara faced complex security risks ranging from terrorism to refugee inflow. To address these multiple security threats, Türkiye was forced to carry out transborder military operations in Syria.

During its initial military operations in 2016, Türkiye apparently aimed to drive DEASH away from its border and stop the YPG/PKK from gaining further territory in northern Syria. Because of their strikes from Syria and at home, DEASH and YPG/PKK posed a serious and immediate threat to Türkiye and its people. Thus, eliminating terrorist networks in Syria was the short-term objective. Through the establishment of safe zones, the subsequent operations sought to weaken the YPG/PKK presence in northeastern Syria and the Afrin region. Thus, the ultimate goal appears to be thwarting any attempt to create a self-governing quasi-Kurdish state in northern Syria, as this would eventually pose an enormous threat to Türkiye's national security and territorial integrity. Due to socioeconomic issues, Ankara also attempted to send 4 million Syrian refugees to these safe zones.

In brief, the US and Türkiye have put effort into Afghanistan and Syria to realize their national objectives, namely alleviating security risks, first and foremost. Nevertheless, the US failed to reach both its short-term and ultimate objectives. Even though the US managed to oust the Taliban regime easily at the beginning, its intervention ended up a strategic defeat against the Taliban in 2021. For sure, Afghanistan is neither a safe nor a self-dependent country today. Even the new Taliban rule is being challenged by other radical organizations. Moreover, radical Islamism resurfaced all around the world under different names but with the same ideology, DEASH in Iraq and Syria, for instance. In addition, the global balance of power tilted towards China, Russia, and other rising powers after the US defeat in Afghanistan. Some scholars argue that these are concrete signs of an approaching multipolar system. Because of its persistent

unilateralism, even the US's NATO allies have been questioning the credibility of US leadership.

In fact, Türkiye's military involvement has not yet resulted in a strategic defeat similar to that of the US. As the Assad rule came to an end, Syria's changing conditions offer both risks and opportunities for Ankara. Nevertheless, Türkiye has not achieved its declared strategic objectives in the Syrian conflict yet. Although it has been able to drive out DEASH and YPG/PKK components through its cross-border operations, it has not yet been able to completely eradicate the threat of terrorism by undoing the Kurdish independence endeavor in northern Syria.

With the support of the US and other Western powers, the YPG/PYD has expanded its territorial control and political influence in Syria. As a result, the PKK or its affiliated units now hold far more influential positions in Syria than they did in 2011. They are controlling a great chunk of Syrian territory rich in natural resources and arable lands. Türkiye could also prevent more refugee influx towards its border by establishing safe zones in Idlib and elsewhere; however, not many Syrian refugees have gone back to these areas from Türkiye so far. Furthermore, Ankara had diplomatic tension, from time to time, with its neighbors and NATO allies because of its military operations in Syria. What is more, it became dependent on Russia to further its Syrian policy for a while. Based on these findings, H1, "*States employ military interventions to achieve their national interests, but they face undesired results in the end even if they reach their immediate objectives*" is confirmed.

The second argument is that any successful military intervention necessitates deep understanding of the cultures and histories of the countries intervened. The US decision-makers and practitioners excluded the Taliban (and Pashtuns in general) from state building, which proved to be counterproductive because they did not know sufficiently about Afghan culture and history prior to the invasion. The Pashtun's moral and material support facilitated the ensuing Taliban insurgency. Besides, the US attempted to impose its governing system and norms by ignoring well-established Afghan traditions, particularly *Pashtunwali*, and unique characteristics of rural Afghan society.

As inferred above, Türkiye also made similar mistakes by underestimating the regime's resilience and anticipating a swift power change. Turkish policymakers simply blame minority rule for the widespread public unrest; in reality, the Syrian crisis was sparked by long-standing socioeconomic issues. For this reason, when their financial interests are at stake, even the Sunni middle class issues their support for the Assad regime alongside other minority groups. In addition, Türkiye's backing of the Muslim Brotherhood turned out to be

counterproductive because of the radicalization and fragmentation of opposition groups. These also instigated the secular Syrians' fears of fundamentalism. In addition, Turkish officials have paid very little attention to the anti-colonial sentiment in the region, especially among Syrians who endured a horrific French mandate¹¹² between two World Wars.

Furthermore, Ankara has failed to predict that PKK-affiliated elements would get unwavering support from Türkiye's friends and turn into an influential group in Syria. Aydemir (2018, p. 512) argues that the ultimate success in the fight against terrorism can be achieved by establishing communication with the target society rather than using hard-power-based policies. However, it seems that Ankara has not put sufficient effort into establishing ties with Syrian Kurds. Despite their close relationship with the PKK, Türkiye could have encouraged them to join the anti-Assad coalition by finding an effective *modus vivendi*. It should have envisaged that PKK/YPG would exploit the power vacuum to drive its ultimate objective further at the expense of Türkiye's territorial integrity and national security.

The lack of a grand strategy also gave rise to failure for both countries in their military efforts. The superficial planning and execution of the US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's inconsistent policies throughout the years led to predictable failures in achieving strategic objectives. At times, short-term tactical gains overshadowed long-term strategic objectives. The ruling elites sometimes prioritized public expectations and translated military achievements into political gains.

Nevertheless, by sacrificing long-term strategies for transactional gains, the implementation of plans and policies was hindered. This approach ultimately affected the effectiveness of military interventions. In this respect, the high-level decisions were made under the influence of domestic political considerations, as such reelection was preferred rather than strategic aims at certain times. So, H2, "*Lacking a grand strategy and insufficient knowledge about the targeted country potentially leads to failure in military intervention,*" is also confirmed.

The third argument is that foreign interventions cannot garner popular support in the intervened countries unless they offer a certain level of security and socioeconomic stability. To put it another way, the intervening countries must mobilize their agencies to strengthen the ability of local governments or other administrative organizations, as the military means are insufficient to address the requirements of the local population. If these basic needs are not

¹¹² The French mandate administration appointed Alawites to critical positions in the army, which was not welcomed by the public. This policy led to the following coups and societal discontent (Lesch, 2012, p. 3).

sufficiently provided for, the local population becomes disenfranchised from the government or looks for means of fleeing, which leads to an influx of refugees or internally displaced individuals.

In this regard, the Afghan government's inability to provide the fundamental services to the Afghan people is due to an ineffective state infrastructure. Pervasive corruption is one of the reasons why the US-led Afghan intervention ended in a strategic disaster. Similarly, Türkiye has achieved some improvement in the areas it controls through development projects, though their impact remains inadequate. Because Ankara's financial means fell short of realizing its development and infrastructure projects in war-torn northern Syria, Idlib, and elsewhere.

As a result, Türkiye has managed to convince very few Syrian refugees to relocate to their countries. However, thanks to these efforts, Türkiye deterred more refugee flow to its soil and transferred capacity to the Syrian opposition, which would be crucial for the new Syrian governments. Thus, H3, "*Unless intervener countries provide security and improvement in life standards to local populations, their efforts are doomed to fail,*" is partially confirmed as Türkiye achieved some success.

The fourth argument is that other powers' actions are crucial in determining the ultimate success of military interventions. Generally speaking, military interventions also drag other actors into the targeted countries either because of increasing threat perception or maximizing their interests vis-à-vis the intervener countries. For this reason, countries conducting military operations in another country are to anticipate the countermoves of other third parties and develop contingency plans accordingly. Indeed, Pakistan's covert support of the Taliban played an important role in America's defeat in Afghanistan. This support undermined US efforts by providing the Taliban with resources and legitimacy, complicating the military landscape for American forces. Also, the US struggled to persuade certain Afghan factions to cooperate or alienated some deliberately. Their counterbalancing significantly contributed to the US defeat.

When it was on the verge of being overthrown in 2015, the Assad regime was able to survive with Russian and Iranian military and diplomatic support. In return, Russia, Türkiye's historical competitor, established an undeniable footprint on its southern flank for a while. In addition to these two states, Iranian-backed Shiite groups in Syria have been the most important supporters of the regime. Apart from this, the emergence of DEASH, by taking advantage of the power vacuum in Syria and the US's support of YPG/PKK under the pretext of fighting DEASH, left Türkiye facing multifaceted security threats.

In addition, within the framework of regional power struggle, some regional countries formed anti-Turkish alliances in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean in response to Türkiye's increasing military activism to protect its vital interests. Accordingly, Türkiye had to readjust its Middle East policy to compensate for its financial losses as a direct result of the Syrian war. Furthermore, Türkiye could not reach out to some minority groups in Syria, which limited its room for maneuver. So, H4 "*Other third-parties' support or countermoves are decisive variables for intervener countries achieving their ultimate objectives in military interventions*" is confirmed.

The fifth argument is that once they apply military power, states go through a seemingly inevitable securitization process in their domestic and foreign policies. Indeed, irrespective of their aims, the US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria have also negatively affected their domestic and foreign policies. Both countries have experienced securitization processes after deciding to employ hard-power apparatus. As a result, every issue, from economy to education, was evaluated from the security vantage point. While the power is consolidated in the hands of executive bodies, the influence of other state institutions, particularly those of legislative bodies, diminished, and they did not conduct their oversight responsibilities as they were supposed to.

In the US, the traditional check-and-balance system was compromised, and many critical decisions were made without seeking the approval of parliaments. US President Bush and his successors used the securitized policies to justify their external interventionism. Following the 9/11 attacks, Washington tried to reinforce its global hegemony by portraying nearly all Muslims as "enemies" in the context of the war on terror. The media also reinforced this narrative under the influence of public outrage. When Afghan detainees were treated unfairly and bypassing international justice courts, no objection was raised from the press or legal authorities; in fact, it was a potent symbol of democratic backsliding.

Ostensibly, the asymmetric warfare choice of Washington has not produced good governance and stability but only significant losses of lives, violations of basic human rights, and weakening US influence both regionally and globally. Shortly, the US's 20-year-long Afghanistan occupation ended with a strategic defeat in August 2021. When the US withdrew, the Afghan government collapsed swiftly, and the Taliban retook the country without facing any significant resistance. Contrary to the pre-war objectives, neither the central government nor ANSF obtained sufficient capacity to rule the country and to withstand the Taliban when necessary. Today, the Taliban is stronger than ever, with no viable alternative in place.

The US and its allies allocated significant resources for seizing overall control of the country by quelling the insurgency. Nevertheless, they failed to win the minds and hearts of the Afghan people. This was largely because they prioritized military solutions over improving the living standards of Afghans. Apart from the first three years of occupation, between 2001 and 2004, the US and the Afghan government were unable to ensure security and peace. The Afghans were forced to choose between local landlords and the brutal air assaults of coalition forces. Accordingly, many of them fled their hometowns or were abused in various ways.

The securitization policies proved to be ineffective, and anti-American sentiment has never been so high in the world. It has become evident that the war on terror narrative had a detrimental effect on US soft power. In direct contrast to what was intended, domestic and global support for the Afghan invasion naturally declined as their morality and legitimacy started to erode. Many believe that the US's defeat in Afghanistan and its inertia in the Syrian crisis marked the end of the Pax Americana era, and the US is effectively a declining power. These determinants have contributed to the inevitable failures of 20-year-long occupations.

Türkiye has also undergone a securitization process at home and abroad after its military has become integral to its foreign policy. Despite some claims that the Turkish government has taken a more security-focused stance after the Gezi protests, it is hard to demonstrate that a securitization process is occurring concurrently with the Syrian civil war. Because, despite many criticisms and incidents, the government continued the previously initiated peace process. Only after the PKK posed a direct threat to Türkiye's national security and territorial integrity with its urban warfare strategy did the government resort to military means to eliminate these risks.

However, after the 15 July failed coup attempt, a significant and inevitable securitization process dominated domestic politics. The government responded harshly to this coup attempt, and an effective fight was carried out against the sympathizers of the FETÖ terrorist organization in public service at a time when it was experiencing significant problems in foreign policy. During this period, media outlets affiliated with terrorist organizations were also closed. These measures, which were taken during the state of emergency, might give the impression of a democratic regression when viewed from the outside.

In this period, like the US, the presidential office has become the dominant power in the administrative system thanks to constitutional amendments, while other branches, like the parliament and army, have seen their traditional roles significantly diminished in policymaking. Although these changes are interpreted as a democracy deficit, the root causes of the securitization process should be sought in Türkiye's history of coups. It can be argued that there

would be much less of a decline in the rule of law and civil liberties if the state did not have to deal with the Syrian crisis. In this case, it demonstrated that the Syrian crisis made an indirect impact on the domestic securitization process.

In terms of foreign policy, however, the Syrian war acted as a catalyst for shifting Turkish foreign policies towards a more assertive direction. By this turn, Türkiye has achieved a degree of success and gave a firm signal that military power would be an option if its vital interests are deemed under threat. Nevertheless, Türkiye's increasing use of military means in the Middle East and other areas was not welcomed by other actors, which culminated in regional isolation and severed relations with Western partners and some regional powers.

Owing to these securitized policies, many servicemen from both countries have lost their lives in Afghanistan and Syria. In addition, the huge expenses of their troops surged their respective defense budgets. Furthermore, they also had to allocate substantial resources to their proxies to ensure their loyalty. In addition to these common expenditures, Türkiye also had to cover the steadily increasing cost of Syrian refugees. Half of the Syrian pre-conflict population has become reliant on Turkish protection, investment projects, and financial resources. Türkiye's efforts to create safe zones to relocate Syrian refugees have proved futile so far. Apart from these direct costs, Türkiye's trade volume declined in parallel with the strained relations with its regional partners.

This study also questions whether the US and Türkiye adequately explored diplomatic options before resorting to military force. Although Mrs. Yeşiltaş and a few other respondents argued that *"there were no legitimate and dependable partners, namely the Taliban and the Assad regime, to negotiate,"* memoirs and other assessments claim otherwise. In reality, the Taliban adamantly desired to work with the West in an effort to gain international recognition. In the same vein, neither the Kurdish factions nor the Assad regime desired to stand against Türkiye. Assad was sending weak signals for reforms at the beginning of the crisis; with sustained diplomatic pressure and multinational encouragement, the civil war would have been averted. So, H5, *"Military interventions bring about an inevitable securitization approach in foreign and domestic politics of intervener countries,"* is confirmed, with some reservations, though. Because the Syrian conflict did not play a direct role in the securitization of Turkish domestic politics.

In conclusion, foreign (military) interventions are conducted to advance national interests, but they are doomed to fall short of reaching their ultimate objectives. Conversely, they have negative effects on both the intervener and the intervened countries. It appears that

in addition to constantly shifting dynamics, their own mistakes also prevented both countries from achieving their ultimate objectives.

Afghanistan and Syria have complex, layered religious and ethnic societies, a fact that was ignored by the US and Türkiye. Both sides also made the error of alienating some political and ethnic factions in the targeted countries rather than adopting an all-inclusive approach. Relying solely on military power rather than using other state apparatus in the decision-making and execution processes was another costly error for them. Some of the decisions were taken considering domestic politics rather than strategic interests. Finally, with an increased focus on security in both domestic and foreign policy, alternative approaches were disregarded. As a result, both countries must endure great economic and humanitarian costs as well as diplomatic difficulties.

Additionally, both cases demonstrated that the intervened and intervening countries collectively suffered negative consequences from external military operations. Afghanistan has faced the most tragic consequences of recent times after the departure of US forces. Afghan people are subject to pervasive hunger and instability. Because of multi-party intervention in the Syrian crises, peaceful demonstrations spilled into a bloody civil strife. Over half a million people died in the conflicts for various reasons, and the financial losses of the Syrians are also incalculable for many. Even if the conflicts end today, it will take another 30 years to complete the restoration of the country, according to the most optimistic estimates.

In the light of all these factors, this research study concludes that foreign military interventions potentially bring about more harm than good to both intervened and intervener countries. Even though the immediate objectives are achieved, a wide range of repercussions surfaces in the long run. The US occupation in Afghanistan ended up with a strategic defeat, undermining its global hegemony. Türkiye, even if it conducted legitimate military operations under the UN Charter self-defense provisions, has encountered various security risks and unfavorable consequences. Therefore, it should not be forgotten that the fundamental principles of international relations, such as non-interference, territorial integrity, and equal sovereignty, are the results of lessons learned from centuries of human suffering. These rules were written in blood over time and became common norms. For these reasons, they must not be violated unless truly necessary.

INTERVIEWS

A.H. Retired Turkish Officer (Interviewed on January 16, 2024)

Akan, Fatih. Retired Turkish Officer (Interviewed on August 11, 2023)

A.D. Retired Turkish Colonel, Former Commander Turkish Battalion based in Syria (Interviewed on August 14, 2023)

Aslan, Murat. Associated Professor of Department of Political Science and International Relations in Hasan Kalyoncu University (Interviewed on June 06, 2023)

Çiçek, Oğuz (Ph.d). Former Brigade Commander, served in both Afghanistan and Syria as Unit commander and Intelligence Officer (Interviewed on September 02, 2023)

Doğutaş, Osman. Former Intelligence Officer (Interviewed on January 22, 2024)

E.F. Afghanistan Citizen who studied in Türkiye and denied going back after Taliban's takeover (Interviewed on October 10, 2023)

Kasap, Mehmet. Former Turkish Logistic Officer served both in Afghanistan and Syria (Interviewed on January 21, 2024)

K.S. Afghanistan Citizen who studied in Türkiye and who is opponent of Taliban and lives in Norther part of the Afghanistan (Interviewed, by email, on October 6, 2023)

Mahmud, Nidal. Syrian Citizen and Computer Engineer who worked for both Syrian opposition and Regimes in the cyber activities, then he fled Türkiye in 2017 (Interviewed on May 10, 2024)

Rahim, Natasha. Pakistani Citizen and Academician (Interviewed, on February 23, 2024)

S.B. Turkish Colonel, Former Battalion Commander and Planning Officer in Syria (Interviewed on August 31, 2023)

S.A. Afghanistan Citizen who works in Türkiye and defends Taliban's policies (Interviewed on October 16, 2023)

S.M.A. Syrian Citizen who fled Türkiye in 2014 and lived until 2021 (Interviewed on September 15, 2023)

S.H. Syrian Citizen who fled Türkiye in 2014 and still living in Gaziantep (Interviewed on August 09, 2023)

Tokgöz, Bülent. TV Programmer and author of “Cihadın Mahrem Hikayesi” (Interviewed on October 10, 2023)

Türk, İsmail. Former Turkish soldier and Interpreter, served both in Afghanistan and Türkiye (Interviewed on August 04, 2023)

U.U. Turkish Officer who served both in Afghanistan and Syria (Interviewed on August 08, 2023)

Yeşiltaş, Merve Seren. Associated Professor of Department of Political Science and International Relations in Yıldırım Beyazıt University (Interviewed, by email, on August 14, 2023)

Yinanç, Barçın. Senior Journalist and Commentator (Interviewed on September 23, 2023)



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A. MÜLAKAT ONAM FORMU/ CONSENT FORM

Comparative Analysis of the US Intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's Military Operations in Syria in terms of Unpredictable Results of Foreign Military Interventions

Contrary to expectations, the world has not achieved peace and tranquility in the post-Cold War period; on the contrary, intra-state conflicts stemming from ethnic and religious reasons have become more threatening to global security than ever. Since the current international security system, namely the UN Security Council, was primarily designed to prevent interstate conflicts, it has failed to prevent such conflicts, and serious humanitarian consequences such as genocide have emerged. In order to prevent these situations, new concepts such as "humanitarian intervention" and "Responsibility to Protect (R2P)" have come to the fore. In this context, while pluralists who defend order in the long-standing order/justice debate oppose external interventions on the grounds that they bring more harm than good, solidarists who stand on the side of justice advocate humanitarian intervention to protect individuals by emphasizing fundamental human rights.

In the 1990s, third-party (external) interventions became a common practice in foreign policy in response to the serious human rights violations witnessed in countries such as Bosnia and Rwanda. However, it was soon understood that humanitarian intervention could be used as a useful excuse by the intervening countries to realize their national interests, such as regime change. It was observed that the weakening of the central government in countries subject to external interventions created an authority gap, which led to unforeseen harmful consequences such as deprivation of basic services and becoming a safe haven for terrorist organizations. External intervention can have negative repercussions such as economic losses and security policy practices not only in the countries subject to intervention but also in the intervening countries. In this context, this study aims to examine the negative consequences of external intervention by focusing on the US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's recent military operations in Syria.

These two cases were chosen due to similar characteristics in terms of planning, implementation, and problems encountered. Both the US and Türkiye tried to realize their national interests by relying on military power and achieved their short-term military goals but faced more complex problems in the medium and long term. While the US faced a humiliating defeat against the Taliban without achieving the ultimate goal of "self-sufficient and secure Afghanistan," Türkiye, although it was able to prevent the terror corridor on its southern border, faced multidimensional consequences such as refugees, severe economic difficulties, and diplomatic loneliness.

With respect to the aforementioned opinions, I think your insightful analyses, comments, and observations will greatly benefit this research. I would like to meet with you in this regard and conduct an interview based on the questions below at a time and manner that you find suitable.

- What are the main reasons why countries intervene? Humanitarian concerns or national interests?
- What role do concerns about domestic politics play in the decision-making process for intervention?
- What do the US intervention in Afghanistan and Türkiye's military operation against the Syrian Crisis have in common in terms of their initial goals and final results?
- Did both the US and Türkiye have to resort to military methods in Afghanistan and Syria, or could results have been achieved with alternative policies such as "coercive diplomacy" instead of a military solution?
- What are your views on the proposition that "*applying hard power policies in foreign policy inevitably reflects on domestic politics as a security-oriented approach, eroding democratic standards?*"

Thank you for your support and contribution in advance.