

Determinants and dimensions of the shift in Turkish behavior towards northern Syria since 2016

Turkish
behavior
toward
northern Syria

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Abstract

Purpose – The escalation of Turkish intervention in Arab internal affairs before and after the revolutions of the Arab Spring, particularly the military intervention. Sometimes Ankara threatens with military intervention and sometimes establishes large military bases in Arab countries: Qatar, Somalia and Iraq. Moreover, it carries out extensive military operations within the borders of some Arab countries such as Iraq and Syria. This type of behavior requires a study that takes into consideration the reasons of such behavior and future implications on the relations between the Arab and Turkish parties.

Design/methodology/approach – The theoretical framework of the study will follow neorealism, as the basis for understanding Turkish pragmatic foreign policy adopted in managing its international relations and interests with various countries.

Findings – The situation in Afrin after a year of Turkish occupation confirms this. Erdogan may not go ahead with a new military operation in east Euphrates and northern Syria. He may prefer instead he may deem it better to control the safe area in the north through the revival of the agreement of Adana of 1998. However, Turkey's desire to control northern Syria, which represents a quarter of the country, faces tough resistance of Turkish groups, Russian-Syrian rejection and European-American resentment. Control of the Syrian north may be subject to concessions and consensus among these powers without excluding any of them.

Research limitations/implications – States in the international system, such as companies in the local economy, have the same main interest: that's survival. It is worth noting that Waltz's neorealist theory cannot be applied to domestic national politics. It cannot contribute to the development of state policies relating to its international and internal affairs. His theory only helps to explain the reason behind the similar behavior of countries despite having different forms of governments and diversity of political ideologies. It also explains why the comprehensive international relations have not changed despite the growing decentralization of these countries.

Originality/value – How does neorealism explain Turkish military intervention in Syria since 2016?

Keywords Syria, Turkish, Foreign policy, Afrin, Neorealism,
Turkish-Syria-foreign policy -Afrin-neorealism

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

During the past six years, the Turkish state has been subjected to many internal, regional and international changes that have affected the objectives and orientations of its foreign policy to varying degrees. On the internal level, former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was nominated for the presidency and took office after winning the position in August 2014, following amendments to the constitution to shift the government system from a parliamentarian to a presidential one, in a referendum in April 2017. On the external level, these shifts were the persistent regional repercussions of the Arab Spring revolutions, which posed a challenge to Turkish national security, as well as an increase in the number of terrorist attacks in Turkey and the threat of establishing an independent Kurdish state. These changes prompted Ankara to engage in the Arab issues, especially the Syrian and Iraqi crises and the recent Qatari crisis. This resulted in changes in the tools used by Turkey's foreign policy, which we would call "the militarization of Turkish foreign policy." Ankara resorted to the military tool to confront its external challenges. It launched the Euphrates Shield Operation, a large-scale Turkish ground military intervention in northern Syria, the first phase of which took seven months from August 2016 to March 2017. The operation target was to secure the Turkish border against terrorist organizations in Syria, the second phase of the operation is supposed to be implemented in Iraq. Ankara began to cleanse Adlib and Afrin in Syria in October 2017. Moreover, it opened military bases in Qatar and Somalia.

This is considered a major shift in Turkish foreign policy toward the Arab countries. Before 2011 Ankara used to adopt diplomatic and economic tools to strengthen ties and relations with the Arab countries through the policy of "openness" on the Arab countries and then resorted to the military tool to implement its objectives renouncing diplomatic methods which represents a shift in Turkish foreign policy in general and toward the Arab countries in particular.

Hence comes the subject of the study, which will focus on the dimensions and drivers of Turkish military intervention in northern Syria

To study on the school of offensive realism, which is the basis for understanding foreign policy, the Turkish theoretical framework that relies on pragmatism will be adopted in managing its international relations and interests with various countries.

Classical realism remained the governing theory of international relations from the end of World War II (1945) until the early 1970s, with signs of *rapprochement* between the two Western camps (it included the USA and Western European countries and their allies and embraced liberal thought) and the eastern camp (it included the Soviet Union and his allies and it was adopting socialist ideology) it faced criticism, leading to the emergence of new realism. The schooler "Kenneth Waltz", who is the pioneer of new realism and reformulated classic realism in his book (Theory of International Politics) which was published for the first time in 1979 he responded to the new global changes and tried to correct the errors of classic realism at Morganto by his most scientific method which became known as New Realism.

Among the theories of classical realism is that it sees the state as a fundamental, unitary and rational actor. The state is the primary actor in international politics because of its possession of armed force, especially as states tend to understand their international environment, not the interior. The world has witnessed with the beginning of 1980s of the past century a great increase in new actors in the international system (from multinational companies, international governmental and non-governmental organizations), and therefore we find that the new realism stream has combined non-state actors as main actors in the

regional and international environment. Then considered their role as part of the analysis without being effective or independent from the policies and goals of countries.

All trends of classic and new realist theory agree that international relations are based on the struggle for power because there is no superpower that rules the whole world. Where the international pattern and the structure of the international system depend on “conflict” and impose it on the states within the system, the states are the pattern of behavior used in the environment of self-help and insecurity and the states in this situation are programmed to play a specific role dictated by the dictates of their arrangement in the ladder of international powers. The new realism seeks to work within the confines of an anarchic international system, in which states remain powerless to trust in other countries and their main goal remains not to increase strength but to work to maintain survival and this leads to search for interest, strength and calm (Donnelly, 2005).

The new realism sees that the main interest of every country is *security*, and therefore they will focus on the distribution of power. The distribution of capabilities between countries can change, but decentralization is the principle governing international relations. This has a lasting effect on the behavior of states which becomes social in the logic of self-help (Griffiths, 1999).

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The central international system adheres to two principles: insecurity and varying gains. In the context of decentralization, each country is not sure about the intentions of other countries and is afraid that the possible gains that result from cooperation may be in the interest of other countries more than their own interest and this result leads them to rely on other countries. The new realism has become very influential in the field of international relations as the end of the 1970s of the past century.

The trends of neo-classical realism have *been divided* into two currents: defensive realism and offensive realism. They are interested in recognizing the influence of the internal structure and the decision-makers’ perceptions on foreign policy orientations and objectives. However, this does not preclude differences between them.

Defensive realism, whose most important proponents were Stephen Van Evera, Robert Jervis, Joseph Grieco, assumes that international chaos is less dangerous and that security is more available than missing. In so doing, it makes a theoretical concession by curtailing international incentives. It does not make them control the behavior of all states. It has begun to recognize the existence of distinct foreign policies and thereby recognize the meager effects of internal structures on external behavior. When defensive capabilities are more readily available than offensive capabilities, security prevails and incentives for expansionism disappear. When defensiveness prevails, states will be able to distinguish between defensive weapons and other weapons.

The offensive realism whose most important champions were John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, Farid Zakaria emerged as a reaction to defensive realism, criticizing it for its fundamental premise that the state, in the context of international chaos, was only concerned with its own security. It posits that on the contrary, chaos always force countries to maximize and increase power, so they believe in the increasing probability of war between states whenever some of them have the ability to easily invade another state and consequently, the case of absolute chaos persists. However, what distinguishes this proposition from Waltz’s realism is that it does not recognize that the interpretation of foreign policy and international outputs of different countries are based on the idea of chaos. This is rejected by offensive realism as one factor and emphasizes that the focus on the

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foreign policy of the states must include internal and systemic variables and other effects of *ad hoc* and specific aspects of international policy, which can be explained by these variables (Walt, 1998).

However, there are many criticisms of defensive realism that led to the emergence of the offensive realism movement (which will be relied upon to interpret Turkish foreign policy toward northern Syria) and his assumptions are focused on the following (Wendt, 1995):

- The main driver of state behavior is survival. The chaotic nature of the international system makes the goal of survival lead to aggression and expansion as an inevitable behavior of the state.
- Wars occur because of the states pursuit of security, and therefore war and expansion is the means to maintain security and remain in the chaotic environment, where “Mirchammer” believes that the ideal state of the security of a major country is its conquest of the whole world.
- *International relations* are a zero-sum game, so conflict is inevitable between different countries.
- *The chaotic* nature of the system pushes countries to continually maximize their capabilities and maximize their relative influence to maintain their advanced position among nations.
- *It is the relative capabilities* of the state that shape its external behavior and not its awareness of the opponent’s intentions. Therefore, the countries behave aggressively, not motivated by their sense of threat, but rather as a result of the awareness of their leaders with their increasing strength.
- *There is* a relationship between the internal influences and the external policy of states. Material capabilities determine the behavior of the state. The more the state grows, the more it seeks to expand, which places it in a state of constant hostility with the rest of the countries. Therefore, there is a direct relationship between the material state’s strength and external orientation (Donnelly, 2005, pp. 41-42).

It can be said that realism of different trends (traditional realism, neorealism, neoclassical) has provided acceptable interpretations of what is happening in international relations. The common point between these multiple trends is the impact of international environmental data on the behavior of international actors. What can be observed with regard to their positions on the nature of the separation between domestic and foreign policy is a sharp distinction. Such distinction is absolute with the supporters of traditional realism and neorealism, while proponents of neo-classical realism alleviate such distinction. They tend to consider the impact of the internal determinants of the state and its importance in understanding external behavior along with external determinants.

Accordingly, the main research question of the study will be as follows can the assaults of the offensive realism explain the Turkish military intervention toward Syria since 2016?

First: stages of Turkish military intervention in northern Syria since 2016

Operation Euphrates Shield. The Euphrates Shield is the name given to the Turkish military intervention that was launched in northern Syria and is intended to have the Turkish land and air forces cross from the west of the Euphrates River, where they are stationed on the Turkish side to the east of the Euphrates River and start military action in the provinces of northern Syria. The operation began on August 24, 2016 and came after the announcement of the failure of the alleged coup d’état on the night of July 15. No timing or timetable or

specific targets were declared for the operation. On the morning of March 29, 2017, the Turkish National Security Council issued a statement during its meeting held at the presidential complex in Ankara announcing “The end of the operation and it was successful. Its targets were to secure borders and disrupt the threats and attacks of ISIS and provide an opportunity for our Syrian brothers to return to their country and to provide the opportunity to live in safety and peace in the operation area.” Ankara has defined the objectives of Operation Euphrates Shield as follows [1]:

- Secure the Turkish border and halt the threats and attacks of ISIS.
- Provide the opportunity for Syrian refugees to return to their country.
- To enforce security in the areas of northern Syria.

International and Syrian reactions to the Euphrates Shield Operation were different. The Syrian position was characterized by outright rejection and described it as an illegal intervention and direct occupation of Syrian territory. As for the Russian position Konstantin Kosachev head of the Federation Council Foreign Affairs Committee announced that “The declaration of the end of Operation Euphrates Shield was a positive development because it was illegal and denied any Russian cooperation with Turkey as part of this operation. He explained that the cooperation with Turkey was confined to purging Syria of terrorist elements [2].

However, the Turkish Government did not take into account these positions. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that the first phase of the Operation Euphrates Shield initiated by the Turkish armed forces in cooperation with elements of the Syrian Free Army in Syria has been completed successfully. He announced the start of preparations for new operations against terrorist organizations in other regions.

Operation olive branch. Turkey announced on January 19, 2018, the start of its military intervention in the city of *Afrin in northwest Syria*, to eliminate the terrorist organizations there, the people’s protection units (YPG) (classified by Turkey as such) and ISIS, as well as the establishment of 30 km deep buffer zone within the Syrian border to secure its borders and repatriate Syrian refugees from Turkey.

The attack started with the movement of members of the Free Syrian Army and a number of Syrian armed factions that receive military and logistical support from Turkey. These factions include 25,000 fighters, for example, the Sultan Murad Brigade, the Sultan Mohammed Al Fateh Brigade, the Martyr Zaki Turkmani Brigade, the Asbal Al Aqedah brigade and a Turkman group called the Samarkand Brigade. They included also the Noordin Zanki movement, the most important group backed by Turkey in rural Aleppo. The attack was first carried out by elements of the armed factions on the borderline between Azaz and Gul Baba toward Afrin, followed by the entry of 6,400 Turkish soldiers in a large ground offensive. Several days after the Turkish military escalation toward Afrin, the air raids on the city were intensified and military formations were sent to invade the city ([Turkey in Syria, 2018](#)).

These factions and the Turkish army face a strong opponent, which President Erdogan vowed to eliminate. YPG is an armed Syrian Kurdish faction that works under the leadership of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Both helped to liberate the Syrian cities of ISIS. SDF controls almost 25% of Syria lands. It is known that SDF receives military and logistical support from the USA and serves as a small US army inside Syrian territory. Washington recently granted it anti-aircraft missiles which they used against Turkish aircraft in Afrin and dropped a number of them. This embarrassed the Turkish army at home ([Yilmaz and Sazak, 2018](#)).

Afrin is a mountainous area of about 3,850 square kilometers or 2% of Syria and geographically separated from other Kurdish-controlled areas along the border with Turkey. The Afrin-Turkish relationship is distinguished by the passage of a railway from Turkey through the Afrin region that reaches the city of Aleppo, which was built by Turkey prior to the First World War. The area of Afrin is located on the banks of the Afrin River in the far north-west of Syria. It is adjacent to the city of Izaz to the east and to the city of Aleppo to the south and to the southwest of the town is the province of Idlib. It straddles the Turkish border from the west and north. Its population is 523,258, according to the statistics of the Syrian Government in 2012. It includes about 350 villages and small towns and large cities, most notably Afrin city, Jandriassa, Bilbla and Rajo. For the Kurds, Afrin is one of the three Kurdish provinces in Syria, preserving and defending it is an existential issue for them and will not easily abandon it. They aspire to connect it with other Kurdish areas, according to the statements of Kurdish leaders in Syria. The commander of YPG, Siban Hamo, pledged to “cleanse the region of Turkey’s calamities” and stressed that his forces would defend Afrin. On the other hand, Ankara insists on imposing its control on Afrin to achieve territorial contiguity on all border areas between the Turkish city of Jarablus, west of the Euphrates and the Mediterranean Sea. This eliminates any possibility of achieving territorial contiguity between the Kurdish areas and prevents Syrian Kurds from connecting their main areas, Qamishli, Ain Al Arab and Afrin to each other or to establish self-rule in the future (Parlar Dal, 2020). The Olive Branch officially ended in mid-March 2018, when Ankara declared its full control of the city of Afrin following the withdrawal of Kurdish forces.

Spring of peace. At exactly 4 o’clock on the afternoon of October 9, 2019, Ankara announced the start of the “Spring of Peace” military operation inside the Syrian depth in the region east of the Euphrates River in northern Syria.

Ankara confirmed that its goal is [...] to “cleanse” the area of terrorist organizations, namely, the PKK, Kurdish YPG and “ISIS” and the creation of a safe area for the return of Syrian refugees from inside Turkey to their country. This Turkish operation is the third in the Syrian territories [3].

The military operation has won Syrian, Arab and international condemnation, as it violates international law and represents an occupation of a sovereign state. During the first days of the operation, the forces (Democratic Syria – Qasd) made up of (14 armed organizations that contributed to the defeat of ISIS, including the Kurdish YPG), faced the Turkish attack against them, but their commander, “Mazloun Kobani” announced the withdrawal of his adult forces. (60,000 Kurdish and Arab fighters) due to the difference in capabilities between them and the Turkish army, with its air and ground forces and the Syrian Free Army (the opposition supported by Ankara) and armed Syrian opposition units, such as the Turkmen factions backed by Turkey and the hostility of the Kurds, have contributed to the operation, Nationalism in the Syrian north [4].

Then, on the evening of October 17, 2019, a ceasefire announced in northeastern Syria and a five-day ceasefire between the parties involved in the Turkish “Spring of Peace” operation. This was after a session of talks held by Turkish President “Recep Tayyip Erdogan” with an American delegation that included (Foreign Minister “Mike Pompeo” and Vice President “Mike Pence”). The latter announced a Turkish-American ceasefire agreement between the Turkish army and the Syrian Democratic Forces “SDF” that includes 12 items [5].

“Pence” stressed that the US-Turkish agreement includes [...] the withdrawal of the Kurdish forces from the safe area, which is 32 km deep along the Turkish-Syrian border and stressed that the USA will facilitate this process and that the American forces will not return

to this area. “Pence,” said that the “safe area” would be mainly controlled by the Turkish army. While the Turkish forces penetrated for about 30 km in the central sector of the northeast of the country between the cities of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, that is, with an extension of 120 km. In exchange for the withdrawal of the YPG elements present in this area, they will withdraw from it. This sector also includes the two highways (M4 and M10). In return, Ankara pledged not to enter the Kurdish-majority city of Ain al-Arab (Kobani) and to agree to the entry of Syrian Government forces into “Manbij.” Simultaneously, “Trump” announced the withdrawal of the American forces from Syria, which would lead to a security vacuum in the northeast of the country and launch a military race to occupy it between the Turkish army and the loyal factions on the one hand, and the Syrian Government forces and “Kurdish units” on the other hand, as each side would seek to control the areas of Al-Malikiyah. Al-Hasakah is in the northeastern corner of Syria, near the Iraq border.

On October 22, 2019, after the end of the US-Turkish truce, Erdogan visited Russian President Vladimir Putin and at the end of their meeting in Sochi, southern Russia, he announced a Russian-Turkish agreement between the two sides on northern Syria. The agreement includes the deployment of the Syrian border guard and police. The Russian military is on the border with Turkey for the first time as its withdrawal in 2012, and the Kurdish militants have withdrawn 30 km from the border and US President Donald Trump has welcomed the agreement that will lead to the continued cessation of hostilities [6].

Then, on October 23, 2019, the day after the Turkish-Russian agreement, the Turkish Ministry of Defense announced that there was no longer a need to launch a new military operation other than the “Spring of Peace” inside the Syrian depth (Glass, 2019).

However, these security arrangements and their political repercussions have not ended yet and there will be new agreements looming, especially in light of Ankara’s continuous breach of the ceasefire and the continued air and ground shelling of Kurdish cities in northern Syria, which raised international concerns about the return of the terrorist organizations (ISIS) activity in a favorable environment in which political and security instability existed.

Second: the interpretation of the new realism that characterizes the Turkish external behavior toward Syria since 2016

After reviewing the stages of Turkish external behavior toward Syria since 2016, we find that it can be explained by many theoretical approaches, but the theory of new realism and the trend of offensive realism is the most appropriate to do this interpretation, as it will enable us to anticipate the future of that behavior during the foreseeable and short term. By applying the current and offensive realism’s current categories to Turkish behavior toward Syria since 2016, *we will notice the following:*

**Ankara has begun to rely on Hard power as an effective tool in Turkish foreign policy, especially toward the Syrian crisis since August 2016, when it launched Operation Euphrates Shield to intervene in Syria and took control of Al-Bab city north of the country in its initial phase. Then it launched Operation Olive Branch and took control of Afrin. Then, launched the “Olive Branch” and “Spring of Peace” operations had been launched. In this context, the Turkish military intervention in northern Syria was mainly motivated by the need to establish security and Ankara’s control over Kurdish cities in northern Syria to prevent the establishment of a separatist Kurdish state that could threaten the Turkish state and to prevent the infiltration of terrorists from the Syrian border into the Turkish interior (Davutoğlu, 2008).*

By imposing an intensified military presence that included land forces intrusion to control the cities vital for the national security of Turkey, including Kurdish cities in northern Syria such as Al-Bab, Afrin and Manbij, Ankara has aimed to maximize its gains from military intervention in northern Syria, *including the following gains*.

Prevent the formation of a Kurdish border army, particularly after Washington hints in this regard in January 14, 2018 just six days before the start of Operation Olive Branch. The US-led anti-ISIS International Coalition issued a statement on establishing a Syrian border security force in Northern and Eastern Syria to protect borders with Turkey and Iraq. The force would be in the range of 30,000 soldiers, half the number would come from SDF group, to deploy immediately after its formation on the northern and southern borders and east of the Euphrates River. This prompted Erdogan to crush this force in the cradle and accused Washington of establishing a “terrorist army” on the border of Turkey. The announcement of the formation of that force confirms that Washington sought to impose new security arrangements in Syria in favor of SDF and against Turkish interests. The main US goal is to prevent Iran from completing the “Shiite crescent,” which begins in Tehran and runs through Iraq and Lebanon and then Syria to the east of the Mediterranean because control of the northern border of Syria will cut the land road between the west of Syria and the Mediterranean.

As well as strengthening the *Turkish National Security* by dislodging the Kurds from the east of the Euphrates, where Ankara adopts a decade-long strategy focused on preventing any separatist or autonomous Kurdish entity, Ankara’s entry into Afrin will frustrate the establishment of a self-governing Syrian Kurdish entity. It would remove the Kurds to the west of the Euphrates River and deprive them of any outlet that extends to the Mediterranean Sea controlled by YPG or The Democratic Union Party (PYD), considered by Ankara as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Syria ([ALL ISIS Roads Lead To Turkey, 2019](#)).

Ankara has also sought to strengthen its national security by eliminating external support for the PKK as it has waged a fierce war against the party and imposed a suffocating siege as the failed coup attempt in June 15, 2016 on some southeastern cities of Diyarbakir, Mardin and Gaziantep. Erdogan has accused the Kurdish Democratic Peoples Party, represented in parliament and its chairman, Salah Eddin Dimirtash, (in custody now) of supporting the coup against him. The Kurdish factions in Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran are linked by “blood and tribal customs and exchange support to establish a Kurdish state. Ankara believes weakening Syrian Kurds would weaken the power of Turkey’s Kurds, The Turkish army has used the military operations in northern Syria to test the new Turkish weapons. Erdogan and his cabinet members boasted that the Afrin operation is carried out entirely using Turkish national weapons, including heavy guns, armored personnel carriers, military equipment and ammunition, all manufactured in Turkey. Erdogan seeks to test these weapons and their effectiveness, before marketing them, especially among African countries to enhance his relations with them ([Abadi, 2019](#)).

**Turkey’s foreign policy toward Syria*, relied on cooperation with non-state armed actors such as the Free Syrian Army, a group of the officers from the national Syrian army that broke away in 2011 after the outbreak of protests against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in March 2011 in the city of Daraa south of Syria. The Turkish Government provided the Free Syrian Army with all aspects of logistical and intelligence support. Their leaders are stationed in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, across the border from Syria.

Many US and European intelligence reports confirmed that Turkey has also cooperated with leaders of armed terrorist groups such as the former Al-Nusra Front, currently the Liberation Army of Al-Sham, an armed organization based in the Syrian city of Idlib, that

controls the city and runs it under the auspices of Turkey. Ankara also cooperated with leaders and elements of the terrorist organization ISIS according to international intelligence reports.

Therefore, Ankara sought to strengthen the Turkish role in Syria through cooperation with these actors. Despite the Turkish logistical and material support of the Syrian opposition factions and some armed militias, most notably the Syrian Free Army, these forces are no longer a parallel to the Iranian and Russian military presence in Syria. These two countries helped the Syrian National Army to regain control of a large number of cities controlled by the Ankara-backed armed factions. As the beginning of the Russian military intervention in Syria in August 2015, Damascus regained control of 60% of the country by the end of 2018 and Turkish military intervention will allow Ankara to intensify its support of the Syrian armed opposition factions including the Free Army after the defeats it suffered at the hands of the Syrian National Army.

**Regarding the effects of the international system on the Syrian case, we will find that it witnessed an embodiment of the conflict between the various regional and international powers. The most prominent of these powers at the regional level are Turkey and Iran. At the international level, they are the USA, Russia and EU countries. The Turkish position has aimed to prove that Ankara is an influential country in its regional and international environment and to balance the Russian and Iranian military presence in the region. This is especially important in the light of the US retreat from the Middle East in favor of other international roles and strengthening the Russian and Chinese influence in the region (Max Boot, 2019).*

These regional and international forces had a certain attitude toward the Turkish military operations in northern Syria. These operations did not enjoy regional and international support neither were they directly opposed nor were they confronted with military resistance by local forces: Kurdish armed factions such as YPG, SDF, the Syrian National Army. It has also been subjected to competitive deals and sharing of influence between the regional and international powers concerned with the Syrian file ([All ISIS roads lead to Turkey, 2019](#)).

The intensity of regional and international positions on the three Turkish military operations varied slightly, as regional and international powers contented themselves with oral criticism of the 2016 Operation “Euphrates Shield,” given that Ankara declared fighting ISIS terrorist organization in northern Syria, and this was a regional and international demand. This is in contrast to the “olive branch” and “Peace Spring” operations, as some countries have threatened to impose sanctions on Ankara if the Turkish military offensive continues in both cases ([Cagaptay, 2019](#)).

With regard to the position of the *Syrian Government*, Damascus has announced that the Turkish attack on the north of the country is a military aggression that has traveled against it and will take all necessary measures to repel it. It denied the presence of any elements of the terrorist organization “ISIS” in northern Syria. The Kurdish “YPG” (which is an armed Syrian Kurdish faction in the “Syrian Democratic Forces” known as “SDF,” which are Arab Kurdish forces that participated in liberating the Syrian cities from ISIS control) also pledged to repel the Turkish aggression.

Regarding *Arab* positions, the League of Arab States has declared its condemnation of all Turkish military operations in northern Syria. The United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have also issued statements condemning Turkish military operations in northern Syria. The Arab League called for the participation of all spectra of the Syrian people in serious negotiations within the framework of a comprehensive and objective political process without excluding any party, with the necessity of preserving the sovereignty and

unity of the Syrian lands. Regarding the Iranian position, Tehran called on Turkey to end the Afrin operation immediately and demanded that it respect "Syrian sovereignty." Tehran also criticized the "Spring of Peace" process and called for its immediate end.

On the international level, the Russian position was the most important internationally, as coordination between *Moscow and Ankara* is continuing militarily and Erdogan has been keen to obtain Moscow's approval before carrying out any military operation in northern Syria. Before Operation Olive Branch, a Turkish military delegation visited Moscow to obtain Russia's agreement and a phone call was made between "Erdogan" and Russian President "Vladimir Putin" before the start of the "Spring of Peace" process. Then, in both cases, Moscow announced the withdrawal of its forces from the area to be invaded by the Turkish army in northern Syria and "SDF" forces were also withdrawn from those cities (Jarablus, Al-Bab, Afrin, Tal Abyad, Ras Al-Ain), which paved the way for the control of the Turkish army and the factions. The armed Syrian opposition on those cities where it entered without little resistance, which confirms that there is a Turkish-Russian agreement to share influence in northern Syria (Lynch, 2019).

By analyzing *the Russian position* we find that Moscow will be a winner in all cases. There were political sources that revealed Moscow had proposed to the Kurds to hand over the city of Afrin to the regime. However, they refused and consequently, Moscow accepted the Turkish military intervention in the city, to eliminate the strength of the Kurds' power rising in the city. After all, Kurds are allied with Washington and receive logistical and military support, which threatens the Russian influence in Syria in the future, especially as Moscow seeks to crystallize a final settlement of the crisis. Moscow is aware that such a settlement is not possible without ending all the outstanding field files, including the reduction of the strength of the rising Kurds. If the operation continues and a rupture in Turkish-US relations is caused by the US rejection of the military action, this would strengthen relations between Moscow and Ankara. If Washington supports the Turkish operation against the Kurds, it would lead to an end to the American Kurdish coalition and the Kurds will begin to strengthen relations with Russia. Moscow will thus succeed by allowing Ankara to intervene in Afrin in that it puts Washington on the way to confrontation with its Turkish and Kurdish allies.

The same applies to the "Spring of Peace" process, Moscow agreed to Turkish military intervention in the "Spring of Peace" area and its control of the cities of Ras Al-Ain and Tal Abyad in exchange for the deployment of the Syrian border guards backed by Russian military patrols on the joint Turkish-Syrian border for the first time since 2012, which is what it represents a military victory for Moscow and its ally Damascus, as well as for exploiting the Turkish attack to pressure the Kurdish factions politically and militarily to open a direct dialogue with the Syrian Government leading to the integration of "SDF" forces into the Syrian army again and to cancel the idea of autonomy or secession in northern Syria, which represents a military and political victory for Damascus and Moscow. We see Russian influence in the Syrian file, especially in light of the final settlement of the crisis.

On the European level, French President Emmanuel Macron reiterated his criticism of Ankara and called for the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution unanimously adopted on the evening of February 24, 2018 under No. 1401 that called for an immediate cease-fire in Syria for 30 days. The decision covered all the governorates of Syria including Afrin. This criticism goes in line with the French position which rejects the operation from the beginning. On January 22, 2018, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian expressed his country's concern over the sudden deterioration in Syria. He called his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu and appealed for "restraint" in light of the

deteriorating humanitarian conditions. Paris then urged the UN Security Council to hold a meeting on January 23, 2018 to discuss the Afrin Turkish Operation in northern Syria. However, the Council ended its session without issuing a condemnation of the operation or a joint declaration thereon. As usual, Erdogan rejected this criticism of France, warning of the outbreak of a diplomatic crisis between the two countries if they both stick to their respective positions (12).

The European countries also unified to criticize the “Spring of Peace” process, six European countries stopped exporting arms to Ankara and the European Parliament threatened to impose sanctions on Turkey if the attack continued because it contradicts the principles of the United Nations and international law and represents the military occupation of a sovereign state and impedes efforts to settle the Syrian crisis (Seligman, 2019).

This is in contrast to *the American position*, which faced a dilemma in dealing with the Turkish insistence on controlling parts of northern Syria to establish a “safe area.” Ankara confirmed that it had informed Washington of military operations before they were carried out. Ankara and Washington also confirmed the continuation of coordination between them.

However, the dilemma that confronted Washington in the case of Turkish military intervention was the continued Turkish demand for Washington to stop support to the Syrian Kurds and fears were raised about a military confrontation between Ankara and “SDF” forces and the two parties are allies of Washington and the latter is keen to maintain its relations with them. Therefore, WA has affirmed Ankara’s right to defend itself against any terrorist attack or any threat to its security.

But it asked Turkey not to exceed the boundaries of Afrin and exercise restraint. It asked Ankara also to set a timeframe and geographic framework for its military operation in Afrin. Washington’s aim was to thwart any Turkish movement to Manbij, the headquarters of US forces in Syria and the outpost for more than 1,000 US troops. There were fears of an armed American-Turkish confrontation if the Turkish army could quickly control Afrin and headed to Manbij. These fears ended with a visit by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to Ankara on February 16, 2017, where he held an extensive meeting with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu and issued a joint statement confirming the formation of working groups to resolve the issues of dispute between them. Both stressed that the forces of the two countries would not confront each other in Manbij.

The USA changed its position and demanded that Ankara stop the military operation in Afrin for a month in compliance with UNSCR 1401. However, the most important objective was to give the SDF and YPG which receive logistical and military support from Washington, an opportunity to rearrange their papers. Washington does not want to lose them because they are a miniature American army inside Syria and contributed to the fierce battles and achieved impressive victories on ISIS. Moreover, the Kurds in Syria are closely linked to the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey and receive support in various forms from them. So they will work to maintain their political and military gains they have achieved over the past years. This may drive them to enter into new alliances with regional or international powers that would replace the USA in case Washington headed Ankara’s call to stop supporting the Kurds. Russia would be the main candidate (Snell, 2019).

Once that cooperation was established and strengthened between Moscow and the Kurdish factions in Syria, it will represent a change in balance of power in the future Syrian settlement. Moscow as an ally of the Syrian regime will not take decisions that would adversely affect Damascus. Then, therefore, will accept the Russian support of the Kurds and would not have the same concerns as was the case with Washington.

After the announcement by *Trump* to withdraw his forces from Syria, WA announced on February 22, 2019, that it would keep a “mini-peacekeeping” force in Syria after the completion of the American withdrawal scheduled for the end of April 2019. The force would be 400 soldiers. It was a surprise move following a telephone conversation between Trump and Erdogan on the evening of February 21, 2019. They agreed to adhere to the political solution as a way to end the Syrian crisis and continue coordination and consultation between Washington and Ankara regarding the establishment of a safe zone in northern Syria. The call took place in the context of the “telephone diplomacy” which the two presidents adopted to consult with each other on the Syrian situation as Trump announced the withdrawal of his forces from Syria on December 19, 2018. On February 22, 2019, Sean Robertson spokesman for the US Department of Defense, announced that the 2,000 US troops in Syria will be withdrawn by the end of April 2019, leaving only 400 as a mini-peacekeeping force. The 400 force would be divided between the safe zone being negotiated and the US base in the south of the Syria near Iraq and Jordan borders. Robertson said the US force would be part of the multinational monitoring force, which would consist of NATO forces stationed in Syria, to prevent the resurgence of ISIS and maintain stability in Syria. Experts believe that the force is intended to be a buffer force between Turkish forces and SDF (Max Boot, 2019).

This decision reveals that Trump, who was committed to the rapid and immediate military withdrawal from Syria, has changed course due to the views of his advisers and European allies who called for maintaining US influence in Syria and support of Washington’s allies from the Kurds and European forces. Even few hundred US troops in Syria preserve American influence in the final settlement of the Syrian file, which is controlled by Moscow in full. The move also confirms that Trump has responded to the demands and recommendations of the US Defense Department to support SDF and his Kurdish allies, especially after their crucial role in the defeat of ISIS. Moreover, it reveals Washington’s keenness to protect Kurdish allies against any possible Turkish military offensive, especially after warnings of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Turkey of risks of such attacks after the US withdrawal.

It would also prevent the return of ISIS again and contribute to the elimination of foreign fighters. SDF announced that it is holding 800 of European ISIS leaders. The European Union refuses to regain its fighters from Syria for fear of acquittal in case they stand trial due to lack of evidence. This would allow them to engage in public life in Europe and carry out terrorist attacks as lone wolves, and therefore its better to have them besieged and eliminated inside Syria. The US military presence in Syria will also bolster Washington’s efforts to counter Iranian influence in Syria and prevent it from expanding its influence in the north-eastern part of the country on the Iraq-Syria border, which is now controlled by SDF Kurdish militants backed by Washington.

The US recantation after declaring its intention to withdraw its soldiers from Syria will affect the debate on the establishment of a safe zone in northern Syria, where US sources revealed on February 23, 2019 that Washington rejected the deployment of Turkish troops in the “security zone” to be established in northeastern Syria. Sources also revealed that Turkish forces or Syrian opposition factions backed by Ankara would not be allowed in the security zone. Washington would like to deploy NATO troops in the zone, still under discussion with its allies and 1,000 European troops are to be deployed in that region. This is an indication of the failure of the consultations conducted by the Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar with the US Acting Secretary of Defense, Patrick Shanahan during the first visit to Washington on February 21, 2019. Erdogan seeks to establish a safe zone at the depth of 32 km inside. The Syrian territory controlled by Turkey. He explained in a televised

talk on February 23, 2019 his consent to the participation of his country's allies in reference to Washington and NATO forces, but he reiterated Ankara's ability to establish it alone if the differences continued [7].

With regard to the American position on the Turkish peace spring process, we find that Erdogan launched the "Spring of Peace" process despite numerous American warnings to him since the beginning of 2019 not to take any unilateral action in the northeastern region of Syria, which is an area of American influence in Syria in which US forces and military bases are concentrated. Then the Kurdish armed factions (SDF, the Kurdish People Protection, Kurdistan Workers Party), as well as the Syrian oil wells.

Then the observer of the Syrian file finds that the Turkish-Russian agreements are more important than their Turkish-American counterparts, as the "Spring of Peace" process started with a phone call from Putin to Erdogan and ended with an agreement between them. However, the US position on Syria is volatile, as Trump announced that he withdrew his forces twice within one year, and then withdrew this announcement based on the advice of his advisers, who assured him that these forces should remain there and work to reduce their number only, to maintain American influence there in exchange for the growing Russian influence. This was recently demonstrated by the military base building race that was launched in Moscow, WA and Ankara in northern Syria. Moscow has announced the construction of a base in Qamishli in northern Syria to monitor US military bases in the north and Turkey has also built a military base in (Ras al-Ain). Therefore, it is likely that the Turkish-Russian agreements will continue to arrange the security situation in northern Syria, while the Turkish-American agreements may falter due to the fluctuating position of the "Trump administration" and the diversity of the differences between Ankara and Washington.

**Regarding the internal structure and perceptions of the Turkish decision-maker regarding military intervention in northern Syria, Erdogan aimed to achieve several objectives on the internal front through intensifying military operations abroad. The appropriate theater for that in light of the regional and international environment is the Syrian arena.*

An observer of Erdogan's foreign policy since becoming prime minister in Turkey in 2002, would find that he seeks to maximize Turkey's regional role by trying to restore the glories of the Ottoman Empire. Erdogan always expressed his desire to build bridges between Turkey and all countries that were under Ottoman rule. Since the AK Party took control of Turkey in 2002, it was referred to as the "neo-Ottomans." The man who formulated such theory was Turkish former foreign minister and Prime Minister Ahmed Daoudglu, in his book *Stratejik Derinlik/Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu (The Strategic Depth: The Turkish International Location)*, in which he stressed the need for a return Turkey to control its vital space represented in the Middle East (Altunışık and Martin, 2011).

Turkey is now in the process of implementing this scheme with political and military control over northern Syria and Iraq. Erdogan relied on the economic and cultural tools to extend Turkish influence in those countries, but he resorted to the use of the military tool in Syria through three military operations because it will achieve many of the goals, including:

- *Media coverage* of Turkish internal troubles: Turkey's internal problems have been exacerbated since mid-2016, immediately after Ankara announced that it had foiled a military coup attempt. It launched a repressive campaign against opponents and the Fathallah Gulen group and arrested more than 50,000 people without legal evidence. This led to more problems with European Union countries, the USA and

human rights organizations. It also exacerbated the economic crisis in the country against the background of the decline in Lira exchange rate against the dollar and the decline in investment rates and high unemployment.

- To bolster *Erdogan's popularity* in Turkey: Erdogan seeks to strengthen his image and raise his popularity at home through military expansion abroad and victory in the battle of Afrin. The Turkish municipal elections are scheduled for March 2019 and the legislative and presidential elections in November 1, 2019. In a comment on those elections, Erdogan said that they "will determine the future of Turkey for half a century ahead". It is the first elections to be held after the constitutional amendments that gave the President of the Turkish Republic absolute powers. Erdogan will, of course, run for office for a new term. This has already been achieved by Erdogan, with opinion polls showing a 10% increase as the Olive Branch started, to reach 55%. Also, his popularity increased by 3% after the spring of Peace. Then, the victory of the Turkish army in Afrin and its complete control will lead to further political victories for Erdogan at home. On the contrary, prolongation of the military confrontation or the rise in Turkish casualties would go down with Erdogan's popularity to the benefit of his opponents from the Kurdish parties [8].
- *Economic gains*: All geopolitical surveys confirm that the eastern Mediterranean coast contains one of the world's largest gas reserves fields, the giant Leviathan gas field with reserves of 23 trillion cubic feet. Israel, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria are the coastal countries that border the field. The Syrian gas reserves are concentrated in the governorates of Palmyra, Qara, Tartous, Banias. Once these reserves are extracted, Syria will become the third gas exporter in the world. Of course, Turkey wants to control any of the areas that contain reserves of natural gas because it is a country with economic growth and high population density and has no energy sources [9].
- *To distract* the Turkish military establishment in cross-border military operations and recommend the leaders involved in those operations to cover the arrests and liquidation led by Erdogan against the elements of the military under the pretext of their involvement in the failed coup in Turkey, which took place in mid-July 2016. He also seeks to mobilize Turkish national electoral blocs in any forthcoming election by promoting Erdogan as a fighter against separatist Kurds who prevents them to establish any separatist Kurdish entity on the Turkish-Syrian border.
- *To strengthen* the Turkish influence in the final settlement of the Syrian file, to compensate for Erdogan's lost bet on the Syrian opposition, whom he supported materially, morally and logistically. However, they lost all the cities that controlled for Damascus. It will also lead to a Turkish presence close to oil and gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean of Syria and Ankara may seek to explore them from the Syrian coast.
- *The repatriation* of Syrian refugees in Turkey, estimated at 3.5 million refugees to resettle in the safe zone. Their presence in Turkey has become an additional economic burden on the Turkish Government, which suffers from complex economic crises. It will also lead to a demographic change in the nature of the population in the north of the country. This is what Erdogan is seriously trying to achieve, through the return of refugees of Arab origin to the North to displace its Kurdish population to the inside of Syria to avoid having and Kurdish

concentrations on the borders with Turkey. The Turkish plan has already been implemented in the cities of Afrin and Jarablus, where 311,000 Syrian refugees have been repatriated from Hatay and Gaziantep in southern Turkey.

Turkish
behavior
toward
northern Syria

Therefore, the Syrian file will remain one of the most important challenges of Turkish foreign policy during the next five years (2018-2023), which represents the first term of the presidency of Erdogan after the amendment of the Turkish constitution from a parliamentary system to a presidential one. The Syrian file, in particular, has become one of the main determinants of Turkish foreign relations, as it will have a negative and positive impact on Turkish-American, Turkish-Russian and Turkish-European relations.

So, It can be said that realism of different trends traditional realism, neorealism, neo-classical realism have been divided into two currents. Defensive realism and offensive realism, has provided acceptable interpretations of what is happening in international relations. The common point between these multiple trends is the impact of international environmental data on the behavior of external actors. What can be observed with regard to their positions on the nature of the separation between domestic and foreign policy is a sharp distinction. Such distinction is absolute with the supporters of traditional realism and neorealism, while proponents of neo-classical realism alleviate such distinction. They tend to consider the impact of the internal determinants of the state and its importance in understanding external behavior along with external determinants.

If we apply these theses on the Turkish policy, we find that the internal structure and perceptions of the decision-maker had a clear impact on the orientations and objectives of Turkish foreign policy toward the Syrian crisis, especially the tendency to rely on the military tool to deal with the Syrian file. Erdogan aimed to achieve several objectives on the internal front through intensifying military operations abroad. The appropriate theater for that in light of the regional and international environment is the Syrian arena.

An observer of Erdogan's foreign policy since becoming prime minister in Turkey in 2002, would find that he seeks to maximize Turkey's regional role by trying to restore the glories of the Ottoman Empire. Erdogan always expressed his desire to build bridges between Turkey and all countries that were under Ottoman rule. Since the AK Party took control of Turkey in 2002, it was referred to as the "neo-Ottomans." The man who formulated such theory was Turkish former foreign minister and Prime Minister Ahmed Daoudglu, in his book *Stratejik Derinlik/Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (The Strategic Depth: The Turkish International Location), in which he stressed the need for a return Turkey to control its vital space represented in the Middle East. Turkey is now in the process of implementing this scheme with political and military control over northern Syria.

Conclusion

The assaults of the offensive realism can explain a major shift in Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Arab countries. Before 2011, Ankara used to adopt diplomatic and economic tools to strengthen ties and relations with the Arab countries through the policy of "openness" on the Arab countries and then resorted to the military tool to implement its objectives renouncing diplomatic methods which represents a shift in Turkish foreign policy in general and toward the Arab countries in particular.

From the above, we conclude that the new realism theory, and in particular the current of offensive realism, can be relied upon to explain Turkish foreign policy in *northern Syria*, especially with regard to the motives and goals of Turkish military intervention, as well as the effects of the internal environment on the decision-maker and his external behavior.

It can also be said that the entire north-eastern region, east and west, will be subject to the sharing of influence between three international actors: Turkey, Russia and Syria and the USA. Non-state actors will have a continued presence in this region, where Ankara, Moscow and Washington will depend on them to carry out some security tasks and elements of the armed opposition factions “Free Army” supported by Turkey will exist, as will the militias of the Syrian state, as well as the Syrian Democratic Kurdish Forces (SDF). Which warns of the continuation of the process of demarcating the borders between the smallest cities and villages in that region, so that every international and regional actor realizes its interest in it.

We see that Erdogan’s final goal is to implement the Cypriot scenario in northern Syria in the sense of controlling several cities in northern Syria after a military invasion and then managing them politically by his local allies and “leaving” all those cities and dealing with them as a “colony” affiliated with Turkey. However, the Turkish army forces present there will always be subjected to continuous reprisals by the “QFD” forces. Recently, the Turkish army announced on October 27, 2019 that one of its patrols in Syria was attacked by the “QFD” forces in the border area of the operation (Spring of Peace).

Therefore, Turkish military interventions in its various forms through direct new ground armed attacks such as (Spring of Peace – Olive Branch) or indirect, such as support for armed militias to carry out military operations with political cover, will be repeated in northern Syria under the pretext of fighting terrorist organizations, but the main objective is Control new cities and villages, to achieve more gains and to ensure the establishment of the safe area with the specifications that Ankara wants and achieve its full goals.

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