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EVALUATION OF TÜRKİYE-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR (2011-2024)

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Abstract

This study examines Turkey-Russia relations within the context of the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011. What makes Russia particularly noteworthy is not only its political, economic, and military power, but also its efforts to shape its foreign policy from the perspective of a global power. Turkey and Russia have approached the Syrian crisis from differing positions; while Turkey supported opposition groups, Russia stood firmly by the Assad regime. This divergence has led to serious crises and tensions between the two countries at various times. The study first explores the emergence of the Syrian crisis, followed by an analysis of the Syrian policies of both Turkey and Russia, as well as the underlying motivations behind their respective actions in the region. Lastly, the challenges faced by both actors and potential areas of cooperation are evaluated. The findings suggest that as mutual interdependence between Turkey and Russia increases, the likelihood of resolving Syria-related crises through diplomatic means also rises.

Keywords : Türkiye, Syria, Russia, Civil War, International Relations.

Jel Classification : Y90.

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SURİYE İÇ SAVAŞI BAĞLAMINDA 2011-2024 YILLARI ARASINDA TÜRKİYE-RUSYA İLİŞKİLERİNİN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

Öz

Bu çalışma, 2011 yılında başlayan Suriye iç savaşı bağlamında Türkiye-Rusya ilişkilerini incelemektedir. Rusya'nın dikkat çeken yönü, sadece siyasi, ekonomik ve askeri kapasitesi değil, aynı zamanda dış politikasını küresel bir güç perspektifiyle şekillendirme çabasıdır. Türkiye ve Rusya, Suriye krizine farklı pozisyonlardan yaklaşmış; Türkiye muhalif grupları desteklerken, Rusya Esad rejiminin yanında yer almıştır. Bu farklılık, iki ülke arasında zaman zaman ciddi krizlere ve gerilimlere yol açmıştır. Çalışmada öncelikle Suriye krizinin ortaya çıkışı ele alınmakta, ardından Türkiye ve Rusya'nın Suriye politikaları ve bu politikaların arkasındaki temel motivasyonlar analiz edilmektedir. Son olarak, iki ülkenin karşı karşıya kaldığı zorluklar ve potansiyel iş birliği alanları değerlendirilmektedir. Elde edilen bulgular, Türkiye ile Rusya arasındaki karşılıklı bağımlılığın arttığı ölçüde, Suriye kaynaklı krizlerin diplomatik yollarla çözümünün daha olası hale geldiğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Türkiye, Suriye, Rusya, İç Savaş, Uluslararası İlişkiler.

Jel Sınıflandırılması : Y90.

INTRODUCTION

The Russian Federation (RF) was established in 1991 as the legal heir and successor of the Soviet Union (SU) after its collapse and took over the legacy of the USSR. As of today, the Russian Federation is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the largest landlocked country in the world. It is one of Turkey's most important neighbors with its nuclear technology, military power, important geopolitical position between Asia and Europe, natural resources, economic potential and trained human resources. What makes Russia remarkable for Turkey and the world is that, in addition to its political, economic and military power, it tries to shape its foreign policy on the basis of a global power.

Throughout history, Turkish-Russian relations have developed on a competitive basis due to the abundance of conflict areas, and the periods of cooperation have been quite limited. The Russians used the justification of defending the rights of the Orthodox as a means of intervening in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire. A large part of the expansion policy of Tsarist Russia was carried out towards the Central Asia, Caucasus and Balkan regions where the Ottoman Empire and Turkish lands were located. After World War I, the Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia collapsed and the Republic of Turkey and the Soviet Union were established in their place. During the interwar period, both countries tried to stay out of international struggles. Germany's invasion of Russia in World War II led to the Russians joining the war on the side of the Allies. Russia, which won World War II, made territorial demands from the Republic of Turkey (Kars and Ardahan) and brought up changes in the status of the straits in its favor, which forced Turkey to act together with the Western Bloc, and this process resulted in Turkey's NATO membership. During the new period called the Cold War Period, relations between the two countries, which were in different blocs, remained very limited. With the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, the opportunities for cooperation between the two countries have improved, and the relations that started on an economic basis have been able to move into the political arena. Although the relations between the two countries have a fragile

structure in the new process due to the abundance of conflict areas, they have been able to develop in a multidimensional manner over time, including the search for cooperation in solving regional problems. However, this situation has not eliminated the conflict areas between the two countries, and there are still controversial issues in Central Asia, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Syria and the Black Sea awaiting resolution.

The Arab Spring process, which was the name given to the people's demands for freedom that started in Tunisia, turned into a civil war in Syria, and with the involvement of major powers, the problem became the beginning of a difficult crisis to solve. Turkey initially implemented an open-door policy for those fleeing the war in Syria, and as a result, nearly four million Syrians came to Turkey. In terms of solving the Syrian problem, Turkey initially agreed with the US and EU countries to provide assistance in ensuring the security of the southern borders, to provide cash aid to be spent on refugees, and to a solution without Assad. However, over time, Western countries not only did not keep their promises, but also began to support the terrorist organization PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK, which is located on Turkey's southern border. In the face of its interests in the region not being taken into consideration by its partners, Turkey turned to a joint solution search with Russia to end the Syrian crisis. The fact that Turkey and Russia have made certain progress by seeking a solution together in solving the Syrian problem and other regional issues has taken the relations between the two countries to a new level.

After waiting for a short while at the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the Russian Federation began to use the crisis as a means of establishing itself in the region for its interests in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. The fundamental policy disagreement between Russia and Turkey in Syria has focused on Assad. While Russia directly supports the regime forces, Turkey has focused on a solution without Assad and supported the opposition forces. Despite all this, the fact that the US's Syria policy has directly threatened Turkey's national security and Russia's isolation in the international arena has brought the two countries closer, and relations between the two countries have gained new momentum in the context of the Syrian crisis. Based on this, this study aims to address Turkey-Russia relations in the context of the Syrian crisis.

This study, which was prepared based on the assumption that Turkey and Russia would not be able to reach a full consensus on the solution of the Syrian crisis, yet could act jointly in response to initiatives led by Western countries—particularly the United States—even if not fully aligned with each other, presents an analysis of the areas of conflict and consensus between Turkey and Russia from the outbreak of the Syrian crisis until recent years. It evaluates the evolution of Turkey-Russia relations in the context of the Syrian conflict. The study addresses the questions of whether the joint initiatives of Turkey and Russia contributed to the resolution of regional issues, and to what extent the initial rivalry in their Syrian policies transformed into strategic cooperation. Historical and descriptive research methods were employed, and various written sources such as books, academic articles, internet materials, and journals were used as the basis for qualitative and quantitative data analysis tools commonly applied in social sciences.

I. THE EMERGENCE OF THE SYRIA CRISIS

The Syrian Arab Republic is a Middle Eastern country that gained its independence in 1946 with the withdrawal of France from its territory. The 1950s and 1960s are considered to be an unstable period for Syria due to the military coups that took place one after another after gaining its independence. Hafez al-Assad became president as a result of the military coup that took place in 1970. The order and stability that Hafez al-Assad brought to the country was accepted despite the regime's authoritarian structure. So much so that the stability that the authoritarian Assad provided was not disrupted even after the bloody struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime in Hama and Homs in the late 1970s and early 1980s. On the contrary, this bloody struggle was evaluated as part of the process of strengthening the regime.

The idea, which aimed to bring Arabs together in the Middle East with a sense of nationalism, merged with the Baath ideology after 1940. As a result of this merger, the Baath quickly organized in countries where Arab communities lived and gained supporters with slogans such as unity, freedom and socialism. In 1963, the Baath, which took power in Syria, experienced a structural change and began to advocate Syrian Nationalism instead of Arab Nationalism. The Baath Party, which had not been felt in Syria until the 1970s, began to govern the country with a single-party government from that date on, starting with Hafez al-Assad and continuing with his son Assad. It can easily be stated that the Baath ideology had a significant impact in many areas during this process, from determining economic, social, political and cultural policies in Syria to its relations with other states (İnce, 2017).

The Baath Party, founded in 1947, has undergone changes and developments in parallel with the army. Although the Baath Party was initially founded by Sunnis and Alevis together with other groups in the country, it later became a party in which the Alevis were relatively concentrated. With the rise of Hafez al-Assad, a soldier of Alevi origin, to power in 1970, the ongoing tensions between Sunnis and Alevis were further fueled. Such tensions led to the establishment of Sunni opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. As tensions grew and spread among the people, the Alevi regime also became uncomfortable, and in order to prevent tensions, it was constitutionally guaranteed that the head of state would be a Muslim in order to show that there was no difference between them and the Sunni people. However, since this situation was temporary, the tradition of autocratic rule that began with the French Mandate between 1920 and 1946 in Syria and continued with coups came to light again. Opposition groups were suppressed using violence, an indefinite state of emergency was declared throughout the country, and arrests and torture intensified (Özdemir, 2016).

During his 30-year rule, Hafez al-Assad established a strong security and intelligence network in Syria and suppressed the opposition. After Hafez al-Assad, his son Bashar al-Assad took over power in 2000. Assad, who came to power by promising liberal reforms in Syria, did not implement the changes expected of him. With the increase in economic difficulties and corruption in the country, opposition groups emerged in Syria, and as a result, Assad began to implement a policy of repression to suppress the opposition. These policies became even harsher when the Arab Spring spread to Syria.

In 2011, a group of students in the city of Daraa, Syria, protested by writing anti-government graffiti on walls as part of the Arab Spring. The protesters criticized corruption and the government's oppressive rule, and demanded Assad's resignation. However, Assad intervened harshly in the protests. Encouraged by the social movements in the Arab Spring, Syrians took the protests to other cities, and the largest protests of recent times began in many important cities immediately after. Assad tried to suppress the protests harshly, and as a result, thousands of Syrians lost their lives and millions of Syrians migrated to other countries.

By implementing minority policies, father and son Assad combined the fate of the Arab Alevi sect with their own fate and brought the minorities closer to power at the expense of the majority. The minority policies pursued shook the structure of Syrian society and the foundations of national unity. In addition, by linking Syria to a regional Shiite sect axis led by Iran, it triggered historical sensitivities. The elimination of all opposition in Syria had serious consequences. This situation increased corruption and led to the marginalization of a large Syrian mass who could not express their views and defend their interests due to the absence of opposition mechanisms such as political parties, civil society organizations and independent unions. All these were the main reasons for the outbreak of the 2011 Syrian crisis (Al-Samar, 2023).

From 2011 to the present, chaos, activities of terrorist organizations, poverty, fundamental human rights violations, humanitarian threats, economic crisis, and the prevention of decent living conditions (Şahin and Terlemez, 2020) continue in Syria. In this respect, it can be said that both internal and external factors are effective in the basis of internal conflicts in Syria. Political, economic and social problems that have been going on in the country for years, the government's oppressive rule, sectarian differences and economic inequalities have caused deep dissatisfaction among the

Syrian people. In addition, regional states, global powers and terrorist organizations in particular have caused the conflicts in Syria to deepen even more. These actors have intervened in the events in line with their own interests by using internal factors in Syria. The struggles for influence between regional powers, their desire to gain a strong position in the country, ideological differences and the efforts of terrorist organizations to use Syria for their own purposes have caused the conflicts in the country to become even more complicated. Particularly regional states such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and global powers such as the US, Russia, England and France have intervened in the events in Syria at different times. This situation has caused the internal conflict in Syria to turn into a kind of proxy war. In this context, it can be easily stated that external factors as well as internal factors should be taken into consideration in order to resolve the internal conflicts in Syria.

As the conflict in Syria progressed, numerous non-state actors emerged. The Syrian army withdrew from the north of the country and some rural areas to central and strategic points. Kurdish groups, led by the PYD, took advantage of the authority gap in Northern Syria to form cantons and tried to hold these regions against other opposition groups. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was established by commanders who left the army and volunteer fighters to form a comprehensive opposition. However, the number of local armed groups continued to increase rapidly with each passing day. Taking advantage of the chaotic environment and instability, Al-Qaeda entered into conflicts around Damascus, in Aleppo and Idlib under the name of the Nusra Front. Security and civil war in Syria have been shaped mostly by such non-state actors. Changes in the political and strategic structure of the region have caused terrorist organizations such as ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG, paramilitary structures and other supporting actors to become or be made key players in the war (Ağır and Tatlı, 2020). This process took place in a context where conflicts of interest over Syria's geopolitical importance intensified and regional balances of power changed.

The end of the war in Syria and the establishment of peace depend on internal and external factors. Internal factors stem from Syria's own internal dynamics, such as ethnic and sectarian structures. The fact that these structures are not separated from each other by sharp lines makes the problem even more complex at many points, especially in Damascus and Aleppo. For example, while 70% of Aleppo is Sunni, 30% is Alevi and non-Muslim. Moreover, Sunnis, Alevis and Christians do not even show a homogeneous distribution among themselves. Ethnic structures are generally not taken into consideration within this religious and sectarian distinction. Kurds are also among Aleppo's 70% Sunni population. When considered alone, they constitute 10% of Aleppo.

Contrary to earlier expectations, the Syrian regime was able to maintain a significant degree of political and territorial integrity throughout the conflict, despite facing prolonged political and military opposition. Several key internal and external factors contributed to this outcome. Among the internal dynamics were the regime's sectarian-based security structure, the alignment of political and economic interests within the ruling elite, and the increasing radicalization of a segment of the armed opposition. Although this radicalized segment remained relatively small, its presence generated concern both among segments of the Syrian population and within the international community. Externally, the emergence of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the comprehensive political, military, and economic support provided to the Assad regime by states like Russia, Iran, and China played a decisive role in sustaining the regime's cohesion and resilience (Orhan & Haşıl, 2023). These factors, when considered collectively, help explain how the regime was able to consolidate its control during the most critical phases of the Syrian civil war.

I.I. Reasons for the Intervention of the Russian Federation and The Republic of Türkiye in the Syrian Crisis

The process that led to the start of the Syrian Civil War and is called the "Arab Spring" is the name given to the general public movements that began with the Tunisian and Arab peoples voicing their demands for democracy after a young man burned himself in Tunisia in 2010. As a result of the protests, governments were overthrown in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and there was no regime change

in Yemen and Syria due to various internal and external reasons; however, peace could not be achieved.

The reasons for the developments in the Arab world can be summarized under two main headings: "internal reasons and external reasons." Internal reasons can be summarized as the people's demands for freedom, corruption seen in almost all Arab countries, economic problems, the existence of a growing middle class, oppressive governments, the fact that the majority of regimes are pro-Israel and pro-Western; and external reasons can be summarized as the change in the international system, the ease of access to and sharing of information with globalization, and the shift in the axis of the world balance of power (Baharççek, 2017, 357-361). Russia, on the other hand, considers the main reason for the Arab Spring as an active policy carried out by the USA to reshape the Middle East and destroy Russia's strategic interests (Yılmaz, 2019).

The reasons for the civil war in Syria that broke out after the Arab Spring spread to Syria can be listed as sectarian differences, economic difficulties, the political oppression of the autocratic regime, the growth of the anti-regime opposition (Samaylov, 2018), the regime's lack of power to suppress the uprisings, the regime's reliance on the Alevi minority not wanting to lose power, the regime's weak social support, and the competition of the great powers in the Middle East.

Turkey and Russia's involvement in the situation in Syria is based on many different reasons. If we make an assessment from the perspective of the Russian Federation, it can be seen that its relations with Syria are essentially inherited from the Soviet Union. Syria, which was the Soviet Union's satellite position in the Middle East during the Cold War years, has become the last stronghold in the region and the Mediterranean for the Russian Federation when evaluated together with recent developments.

Although Russia attaches great importance to the Arab region, which has an important place in the world energy market (Sapranova, 2017), the region is not of vital importance to Russia because it is not dependent on the Middle East in terms of energy. Russia acts with the basic aim of limiting the US's spheres of influence in the region, preventing the strengthening of regional actors (Turkey, Egypt, Iran) that may compete with it in the future, and proving that it is an effective power in international politics. When evaluated from this perspective, it is possible to explain Russia's policies with "offensive realism" from the theory of international relations.

Syria is important for Russia not so much for economic reasons but for strategic reasons. Russia is trying to prevent the US from completely changing the balance of power in the Middle East in its favor through Syria and to maintain its status as a powerful state in the region (Samaylov, 2019). The Tartus Naval Base is the gateway of Syria to the Middle East for Russia, to prevent the USA and Sunni Muslim countries from dominating the Middle East and to gain influence in the region, to make people forget the Ukraine crisis and to lift economic embargoes, to show the failure of the USA's policies towards the region, to render Turkey ineffective and to end its efforts to be effective in the region unsuccessfully, North Caucasian fighters fighting in the ranks of ISIS in Syria, to create distrust among allies by neutralizing NATO, to gain power in domestic politics and to conceal corruption rumors, to keep national consciousness alive with patriotic policies in Russia, to create regional alliances, to prevent the establishment of a Turkmen state in Syria, to promote the arms industry and increase arms trade, to establish a Alevi state can be listed as the reasons for Russia's presence in Syria (Yılmaz, 2016). It can also be said that Russia sees the Syrian crisis as an opportunity to prove that it is a global actor again.

Turkey's involvement in the Syrian crisis can be considered more comprehensible and immediate compared to that of Russia, primarily due to geographical, security, and humanitarian factors. Syria shares a land border of approximately 911 kilometers with Turkey, and the conflict has historically posed serious security challenges. Throughout the course of the war, Turkey experienced a substantial influx of refugees, with the number of Syrians hosted within its borders reaching nearly four million by the end of 2019. Additionally, there were numerous cross-border incidents in which long-range weapons were fired from Syrian territory into Turkey, resulting in the loss of civilian lives. During this period, reports also indicated that Syrian Turkmen populations were subjected to

ethnic cleansing under the pretext of civil war, leading to further migration into Turkey. Border security emerged as a major concern, particularly as large segments of the border region fell under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian offshoot of the PKK terrorist organization. This development significantly elevated Turkey's perception of threat to its national security. Taken together, these factors illustrate the rationale behind Turkey's active engagement in Syria and help contextualize its policy responses during the most critical phases of the conflict.

II. TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS

Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria has changed many times, but has always aimed to protect Syria's territorial integrity, political unity and social diversity. In line with this policy, Turkey strives to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians, work for a peaceful political solution in Syria and create a safe zone in Syrian territory. In addition, Turkey conducts operations against terrorist organizations operating in northern Syria and fights against these organizations that also threaten its own security. In this context, it is possible to examine Turkey's post-2011 Syria policy under four periods (Kalaycı, 2021):

- The first is the persuasion period between March 2011 and September 2011, when it was thought that the Assad regime could be persuaded within the scope of the good relations established in the 2000s.
- The second is the support period for the opposition between September 2011 and August 2013, when attempts were made to organize the opposition groups and to find support at local, regional and international levels after the relations with the regime were severed.
- The third is the fight against terrorism period, which was put into practice due to terrorist organizations such as ISIS and PYD/YPG/PKK expanding their spheres of influence in Syria and launching attacks on Turkey and opposition groups supported by Turkey.
- The last period is the period of preventing the terror corridor that was tried to be established in northern Syria and the emergence of the border security problem, and ensuring the security of the borders, where only military methods and hard power elements were applied in foreign policy towards Syria.

Before the Syrian civil war, Turkey established good relations with the Assad regime, and especially between 2007 and 2011, it made efforts to establish a secure trade belt in a wide area extending from Turkey's borders to North Africa. Syria is one of the critical routes of this belt. During this period, "zero problems with neighbors" was accepted as a political goal, and it can be stated that a certain distance was covered (Turaman and Çelik, 2018). Trying to take the initiative with the beginning of the crisis in 2011, Turkey sent the then Foreign Minister and the Undersecretary of the National Intelligence Organization to Syria as a first move to inform them that violence should be avoided, a transition period was needed, and that Turkey was ready to help. During this period, in which intensive diplomatic work was spent, Turkey made efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis and tried to establish dialogue with the Assad regime. Davutoğlu and Fidan's visit in 2011 should also be considered as a part of these efforts. However, the Assad regime's increasing violence against the opposition and its failure to heed these recommendations, the incompatibility of Turkey's and Syria's expectations, and the developments that followed, have changed Turkey's stance, and it has adopted an attitude that criticizes the Assad regime's practices and supports opposition groups (Kiraz, 2020).

The development that led to the burning of bridges in terms of Turkish-Syrian relations was the meeting between Erdoğan and Obama in the US on September 21, 2011. The two leaders agreed to increase the pressure on the Assad regime. Considering the previous decisions of Western powers to impose economic sanctions on the Assad regime, Ankara's entry into the sanctions process was a turning point for Syria. Following his meeting with Obama, Erdoğan said, "We have cut off our talks

with the Syrian administration. We did not want to come to this point, but the Syrian administration has brought us to the point of making such a decision. We no longer have confidence in the Syrian administration,” indicating that a new period had begun in Turkey’s foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis. During this period, Turkey clarified its anti-Assad regime stance and began to directly intervene in the Syrian crisis. In this context, after cutting off relations with the Assad regime, Turkey announced a 9-article sanctions decision against Syria on November 30, 2011. In response, the Assad regime has taken economic sanctions such as increasing taxes on imports and imposing additional coercive measures on Turkish trucks (Demir and Gürson, 2017).

After the severance of relations with Assad, a period of support for the opposition began in Turkey’s Syria policy. During this period, Turkey began to support the opposition and also made attempts to convince the international community in this direction. Thus, Turkey developed a policy based on the idea that there was no room for Assad. This policy included elements such as providing more support to the opposition, a buffer zone, and closing certain regions to flight when necessary. During this period, Turkey also considered the option of a military intervention with the support of the international community and with the condition of acting together. In short, during the second period, Turkey followed a policy that adopted the view that Assad should not be included in the future of Syria (Ozan, 2017). Starting from this point, Turkey made efforts to gain the support of the international community by cooperating with regional powers such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council for the solution of the Syrian crisis. However, Turkey was forced to seek clear and strong support from its allies such as the US and the EU due to the Security Council’s failure to provide the necessary guarantees due to the opposition of Russia and China. During this period, Türkiye withdrew its ambassador from Syria, cut off diplomatic relations, and expelled Syrian diplomats on May 30, 2012.

During this period, the Syrian regime escalated its policy of violence by opening fire on its own people who were holding peaceful demonstrations. Indiscriminate bombardments of residential areas, ballistic missile attacks and the use of chemical weapons caused the deaths of thousands of people and the displacement of millions. Many states such as the USA, Canada, Turkey, EU member states and international organizations such as the UN have accepted the regime’s human rights violations and crimes against humanity, and have viewed the Syrian regime as a significant threat to regional and international security. For this reason, at the fourth meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People Group established under the leadership of Turkey in December 2012, the Syrian National Coalition was accepted as the legitimate representative of the Syrians by 114 states and 13 international organizations. In line with the legitimate demands of the people, efforts were made to form an effective and inclusive opposition for the reconstruction of Syria (Serdar, 2015).

During this period, when Turkey started to support the opposition in Syria and took the initiative for regime change, there were important developments, especially since the summer of 2012: Military support was sought from NATO and the UN to establish a buffer zone, a response was given after artillery shells coming from Syria caused the deaths of citizens in Turkey, an attempt was made to prevent arms shipments by forcing planes destined for Damascus to land, thus trying to put pressure on Syria, attempts were made to prevent Russia’s support for Syria, efforts were made to balance Russia, military units were deployed to the Syrian border, and a memorandum was issued for cross-border military operations.

Another important step taken against attacks and threats originating from Syria during this period was the change of the rules of engagement on October 4, 2012, based on the downing of a Turkish Rf-4E reconnaissance aircraft in June 2012. Within the framework of the new rules of engagement, armed elements approaching the border will be considered a threat and will be responded to immediately. In fact, in accordance with the new rules of engagement, a Russian plane was brought down in Ankara on October 10, 2022, a Syrian war helicopter was shot down on September 16, 2013, a Syrian war plane was shot down on March 23, 2014, another Syrian war helicopter was shot down on May 16, 2015, and a Russian-made UAV was shot down on October 16, 2015 (Kalaycı, 2021). The change in the rules of engagement and the developments that followed have resolutely shown the international community that Turkey does not want to directly intervene

in the ongoing civil war in Syria, but will not refrain from taking the necessary steps to protect its own border security. All these developments constitute only a few of the initiatives that Turkey has taken to realize change in Syria. Although Turkey has tried to deter Syria with these and similar initiatives, it has not been very successful. As a result, the fourth period of its Syria policy, the war on terror, has begun, as terrorist organizations have begun to gain regional dominance in Syria and pose a serious threat to Turkey. The period of struggle has begun. In fact, the attacks on Reyhanlı and Cilvegözü in early 2013 can be considered as a beginning in this regard.

Another development that closely concerns Turkey is the increasing visibility of the PKK terrorist organization in the region. The Baath Party and the Assad regime, which have ruled the country for over 40 years, made an alliance with the PKK during this period and handed over the north of the country to them, thus gaining significant areas of dominance through the PYD terrorist organization, the PKK's branch in Syria (Sarı, 2019). The Syrian Kurds, who first organized under the name PYD in 2003, began to act together with the PKK terrorist organization because they could not find a leader among themselves. In this context, they began to defend both the thoughts of PKK terrorist organization leader Abdullah Öcalan and that the Kurds would determine their own future. The PYD took advantage of the PKK's presence in Syria during the regime period to obtain logistical support and form its cadres. Turkey, revealing the connection of both the PYD and its armed branch, the YPG, with the PKK, expresses these organizations at every opportunity as the extension of the PKK in Syria. In addition, these organizations are officially declared to the international community by Türkiye as terrorist organizations (Tok, 2018).

The terrorist attacks in Cilvegözü on February 11, 2013 and in Reyhanlı on May 11, 2013 showed how the war in Syria would affect Turkey and increased concerns about border security. The attacks that brought the two countries to the brink of war resulted in the deaths and injuries of dozens of people (Dündar, 2016). In addition, after the power vacuum that emerged after the US invasion of Iraq, the ISIS terrorist organization, which introduced itself as the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant", quickly intervened in the conflicts in Syria in 2013 and quickly centralized its place on the Syrian agenda with its profile and actions (Aksoy, 2016). This organization, which changed the balances, has created new threats to Turkey's security. Thus, Turkey has had to combat the threats of the PYD/YPG and ISIS operating in Syria, as well as the PKK. Indeed, the many attacks carried out by ISIS in Turkey and the PKK and HDP's attempts to declare so-called "liberated regions" by initiating the October 6-7 incidents are the most concrete examples of these threats (Kalaycı, 2021). Turkey has lost many citizens in the bomb attacks carried out by the PYD and ISIS terrorist organizations many times. In 2015 and 2016 alone, dozens of people lost their lives and hundreds were injured in the bomb attacks carried out by ISIS (Akbaş, Babahanoğlu, and Yelman, 2016).

The PYD is gaining a stronger position among other Kurdish groups by acting together with another terrorist organization, the YPG, operating in the region. The PYD/YPG terrorist organizations, which are active in the Afrin, Kobani and Hasakah regions, are not entering into conflict with the Assad regime by implementing the third way strategy. However, they aim to develop and consolidate their own area of dominance in the points where they are active. In these regions, the PYD cooperates with another terrorist organization, the PKK, and forms autonomous cantons in line with the so-called "democratic autonomy" understanding advocated by the PKK. In other words, the PYD/YPG terrorist organizations have systematically established legislative, executive and judicial bodies within the framework of regional autonomy in the cities of Afrin, Kobani and Jazira (Kerman and Efegil, 2017).

As a result of the terrorist threats that Turkey was exposed to during the Syrian conflict, three main objectives came to the forefront in its counterterrorism-oriented Syria policy during that period. First, the possibility of the PYD gaining regional control in northern Syria by uniting the Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira cantons it established in 2014, when considered alongside the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), was perceived by Turkey as a potential step toward the formation of a Kurdish state stretching from the Iranian border to the Mediterranean—an outcome regarded as highly disadvantageous. Therefore, preventing the PYD from creating a so-called "terror corridor" became a strategic priority. Second, ISIS, which had perpetrated numerous terrorist attacks within

Turkey, needed to be pushed back from the border, and the fight against terrorism had to be carried out at its source. Third, a large number of Syrian refugees who had entered Turkey as a result of the civil war and through the open-door policy necessitated the establishment of safe zones in northern Syria to facilitate voluntary and secure returns. These three goals constituted the foundational dynamics of Turkey's foreign policy toward Syria during this phase (Kalaycı, 2021). Subsequently, Turkey entered a new phase of its Syria policy—referred to as the border security period—during which it launched several cross-border military operations deemed necessary to protect national security and to address the evolving dynamics of the conflict.

III. RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In the last ten years, particularly following the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, there have been significant shifts in Russia's foreign policy. President Vladimir Putin is actively striving to strengthen Russia's position as a superpower and a pivotal participant in international affairs. By unsettling the existing balance of power, he is establishing a new and challenging equilibrium with the United States and Western nations. Driven by an imperialistic vision, intricate strategic factors, and the utilization of global resources, the Kremlin is engaging in a foreign policy that is assertive, proactive, and confrontational (Marom, 2023).

In this framework, particularly since 2012, Putin has been endeavoring to enhance Russia's presence and influence across the Middle East, as well as in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Africa, while the United States has been impeding these efforts. Conversely, Russia has been working to hinder the expansion of NATO and the European Union. Nevertheless, the intensification of the conflict in Ukraine has reached a pivotal moment for Moscow's interests and relationships in the Middle East. It is difficult to imagine that both Iran and Russia will not emerge as significant beneficiaries from this situation. Currently, a military withdrawal from Syria is not under consideration. This decision not only heightens tensions with Israel but also bolsters Tehran's power and status, while simultaneously prolonging Russia's involvement. Such dynamics disturb the already precarious balance of power in a region recognized as one of the most extensive and volatile in the world (Marom, 2023). Russia "is gradually increasing its influence over Iran and Syria thanks to the close relations it has established with these countries," and it also provides substantial quantities of armaments to both nations.

The geopolitical motivations primarily drive Russia's policy in the Middle East. While the region is not a top priority for the Russian Federation, it has evolved into a platform for Russia to showcase its newly acquired military strength and its capacity to influence crises while seeking avenues toward stability. Moreover, despite ongoing tensions, the agenda concerning the Middle East represents the sole opportunity for potential interaction between Russia and the West, particularly the United States, across various issues. Owing to the non-ideological and pragmatic nature of its policies, Russia has successfully fortified and broadened its relationships with both regional states and non-state actors. Nonetheless, certain contradictions persist due to fundamental differences in interests (Zvyagelskaya, 2021). Syria has been selected by Russia as the venue for its resurgence as a superpower. The geopolitical interests of Russia in the Middle East do not align with those of the West, although there are points of overlap. The Arab Spring produced varied impacts on both the region and the global landscape. In this context, both Russia and the West are endeavoring to tackle the issue of global terrorism. Economic prospects for Russia are presented by this region. The key to a new world order is held by the Middle East (Lukyanov, 2020).

As a general principle, the Middle East occupies a lower tier in the hierarchy of Russian foreign policy when compared to America, Europe, China, and leading Asian nations. However, the Kremlin has now undertaken the initiative to portray Russia as a significant global power. Moscow can no longer overlook the proximity, hydrocarbon wealth, and socio-political volatility of the Middle East. The Soviet Union, having relinquished its military and political presence in this region at the onset

of the Gulf War, not only forfeited its standing within the Middle East but also diminished its influence on the global stage. By reestablishing Russia's presence in the Middle East, President Putin has sought to create a power dynamic that transcends the former USSR's boundaries, aiming to reclaim the stature lost during the Gorbachev period. In essence, Putin's primary objective in the Middle East is to elevate Russia's status and affirm its position as a significant external power in one of the world's most unstable regions (Vasiliev, 2018).

Russia's strategy in the Middle East encompasses several critical objectives. A primary necessity is to manage and diminish the influence of Islamic extremism and radicalism, which poses a risk of extending from the former republics of the USSR into Russian territory and its neighboring states. By extending support to allied forces and regimes in the region, Russia aims to establish long-term geopolitical partnerships (Trenin, 2016). Additionally, Russia seeks to maintain a limited military presence both in the region and along its borders, perceiving NATO forces in proximity as a significant threat. Furthermore, there is an intention to enhance Russia's involvement in regional markets for various commodities, including weapons, nuclear fuel, oil and gas, and food. Efforts are underway to attract investments to Russia, particularly from affluent nations within the Persian Gulf. The protection of energy prices necessitates coordination with key oil and gas suppliers in the Gulf nations (Trenin, 2016). Currently, Moscow's primary policies in the Middle East focus on collaborating with the United States to achieve a peaceful resolution in Syria, while also expanding and reinforcing connections with Iran, particularly as sanctions are set to be lifted. Additionally, maintaining strong relations with Egypt, Iraq, and both Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups is essential. These strategies involve forming an alliance of friendly nations stretching from Tehran to Cairo, fostering pragmatic relations with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states wherever feasible, and ensuring effective coordination with Israel (Trenin, 2016).

III. I. Russian's Role in the Syrian Crisis and Its' Foreign Policy

The first stop of the protests and popular uprisings that started against the oppressive and authoritarian regimes in North Africa and the Middle East in December 2010 was Tunisia, followed by Egypt. Russia, which was very disturbed by the domino effect of these events and their emergence in Libya and Syria, began to follow the developments closely. The protests and demonstrations that started in the Syrian city of Dera against the despotic Damascus administration began with the regime's attempt to suppress them with violence, and an armed struggle began between the parties. With the involvement of external actors in the ongoing struggle between Assad's forces and opposition elements, the civil war has evolved into a complex process that continues to this day (Canyurt, 2018; Souleimanov & Abbasov, 2020).

Russia has supported the Assad regime by using all its means to prevent the change of government in Syria that occurred in Libya in 2011 with the intervention of Western powers and the NATO operation. In this context, the draft resolution that proposed sanctions against Syria, which was submitted to the United Nations (UN) Security Council in October 2011, was vetoed by Russia and China. Stating that democracy would not come to the country with any external intervention, Russia stated that it viewed the events as an internal Syrian issue. Russia, which clearly showed that it stood behind the Assad regime by sending three warships to Tartus in November 2011, later announced that it would also send the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov to Syria. Stating at every opportunity that the future of the Assad regime should be decided by the Syrian people, it has opposed a military intervention in the region. As the clashes between the two sides intensified and the Assad regime increased its pressure and violence on the opposition forces, the draft resolutions proposed to the UN Security Council in February 2012 and July 2012 were again blocked by Russia. In this way, Moscow shelved the option of a possible military intervention against Syria with its diplomatic moves in the UN Security Council.

Western countries held the Assad regime responsible for the deaths of many people in the attack carried out in the Eastern Ghouta region near Damascus in August 2013 using chemical weapons. The allegations of chemical weapons use, which were seen as a red line by the US under

the Obama administration, brought to the agenda Western countries' talks of military operations against Syria. Russia, which found the evidence on the use of chemical weapons unconvincing, vetoed the draft resolution submitted to the UN Security Council together with China. In addition, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who met with Syrian Foreign Minister Valid Muallem in September 2013, convinced Syria to surrender the chemical weapons. Following this, Sergey Lavrov and John Kerry met in Geneva and reached an agreement on the destruction of the chemical weapons and their surrender to the international community on the Moscow-Washington line.

The first international peace talks to resolve the crisis in Syria were held in Geneva in 2012 under the leadership of Western countries. At the 2nd Geneva Conference held in January 2014², there were deadlocks in finding a solution to the Syrian civil war due to differences of opinion between the parties. While developments in Syria were progressing in this direction, the protests and uprisings that began in the capital Kiev in the last months of 2013 drew Russia's attention to the Ukrainian crisis. When Ukrainian President Yanukovych terminated the partnership agreement planned to be made with the European Union (EU), the opposition in the country began protesting. As the conflicts intensified, Yanukovych left the country, and in March 2014, Crimea first declared its independence and then decided to join Russia in a referendum. In addition to the US and EU countries imposing economic sanctions on Russia due to the developments in Ukraine, the falling oil prices at that time had a very negative impact on the Russian economy. Despite all the sanctions imposed by the West, Russia achieved what it wanted in Ukraine and showed the whole world that it could use the option of military intervention if necessary in order to maintain its influence in the former Soviet geography (Erşen, 2019; German, 2020).

Following the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea, Russia redirected its attention to Syria and demonstrated its political stance by vetoing the UN draft resolution in May 2014, which proposed referring President Assad to the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes. During the same year, the growing influence and territorial expansion of ISIS across various parts of Syria began to alter the dynamics of the civil war, increasingly to the detriment of the Assad regime. Although the international coalition led by the United States launched air operations against ISIS in August 2014, these efforts were deemed insufficient. Russia, in particular, perceived ISIS's growing presence as a serious threat to regional stability and its strategic interests (Dalar, 2017).

In the first half of 2015, ISIS's territorial gains continued, and Syrian opposition forces succeeded in capturing Idlib and advancing toward Latakia, further eroding regime control. Alarmed by these developments, Russia responded by significantly enhancing its military presence in Syria, deploying new fighter jets, attack helicopters, air defense systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles (Maher & Pieper, 2020). After receiving authorization from the Federation Council on September 30, 2015, Russia formally initiated air operations in Syria. The Kremlin justified its intervention by citing an official request from the Assad regime and framed its involvement as part of the international fight against ISIS.

With Russia's direct military support, strategic regions such as Aleppo and Hama were recaptured by regime forces, marking a turning point in the conflict. This intervention effectively shifted the balance of power in favor of the Damascus administration and consolidated Russia's role as a decisive external actor in the Syrian civil war (Pieper, 2019).

III. II. Fundamental Dynamics Determining Russia's Syria Policy

The main dynamics that determine Russia's Syria policy are its global leadership struggle with the US. While Western powers led by the US increased their influence in the Middle East region in the early years of the Cold War, Russia, due to the economic and political problems it experienced, retreated into its shell and could not display a clear stance towards the region. Russia, which thought

² United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General on the 2nd Geneva Conference on Syria*, UN Document S/2014/54, January 2014, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11012.doc.htm>.

that it had lost its former power against the US, saw Syria as an important opportunity to put an end to this course of events, also considering the developments in Libya (Erşen, 2017).

Another dynamic that determines Russia's Syria policy is its military and economic interests in the Middle East. In the January-August period of 2015, the Moscow administration came to the rescue of the Assad regime, which was losing territory to ISIS and opposition groups. Russia, which directly got involved in the Syrian civil war in September 2015 to keep the Assad regime in place, managed to change the political balances in the region in favor of the regime (Blanga, 2021). Russia used the airspace of Iraq and Iran in its intervention in Syria, while also benefiting from Iran and Hezbollah as ground forces. At this point, the good relations that Moscow has developed with Middle Eastern countries also came to the fore. Thanks to the military and commercial relations it established with Libya under the Gaddafi rule, Russia has made significant gains in favor of arms and oil companies. In addition, following the agreement reached with the P5+1 countries in 2015 regarding Iran's nuclear program, the Moscow administration showed its will to send S-300 missiles to Iran. In addition, the two countries strengthened their relationship by agreeing to build a second reactor at the nuclear power plant operating in Bushehr, Iran (Erşen, 2019).

Another factor shaping Russia's Syria policy is that radical religious groups fighting against the regime in Syria pose a threat to Russia's national security. Namely, the fact that militants in religious groups originate from Central Asia and the Caucasus and that these groups may eventually expand into the former Soviet geography and affect the region poses a danger to Russia's territorial integrity. Considering the ethnic/religious struggles in the North Caucasus region and the Muslim population living in Russia, the sensitivity of the situation is obvious for the Moscow administration. Therefore, the possibility of radical religious organizations in the Middle East spreading outside the region directly affects Russia's security, and the Moscow administration cannot remain indifferent to developments in the region (Aksoy, 2019).

Another dynamic shaping Russia's Syria policy is the arms trade between the two countries. Russia, which traded arms with Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Libya, Iraq and Egypt during the Cold War, saw a decrease in arms exports to regional countries throughout the 1990s. Russia, which developed its defense sector after Putin became president in 2000, also increased its arms sales to Syria, its traditional ally in the Middle East. It turned the crisis and instability in Syria to its advantage and achieved significant economic gains thanks to the weapons it sold to the Assad regime (Samoylov, 2018). Russia, which uses its weapons in the region to keep the Assad regime standing, sold S-300 missiles to Syria despite all the objections and pressure from Israel. In addition, after the military operation it carried out against Syria, Russia, which increased its arms sales to countries such as Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, China and India, has put new arms agreements on its agenda with these countries. It tested its weapons technology on Syrian soil and introduced its newly produced weapons. While the Middle East region serves as the largest market for Russian weapons, Syria has also been one of the most important buyers of these weapons.

III. III. Evaluation of Türkiye-Russia Relations in the Context of the Syrian Civil War

With the end of the Cold War, many areas of cooperation that were not possible between the Soviet Union and Turkey have been developed between Turkey and Russia. The strengthening of many areas of cooperation with high potential, especially in energy, trade and tourism, through the initiative of the two countries has provided significant strategic and economic contributions to the parties (Koçak, 2017). Although both countries had to deal with economic and political crises after the Cold War, there was an expectation that the dimension of the relations could be taken to further levels with the development of economic relations. The "Syrian Civil War", which started at a time when the relations between the two countries were perhaps closer than ever in their history, triggered the risks of competition and conflict between the two countries.

The policies of Russia and Turkey on Syria are contradictory and create serious problems between the two countries. Turkey has faced a serious refugee influx and security problems with the

Syrian crisis (Askerov and Tchantouridze, 2018). Turkey has a 911-kilometer long border with Syria that is quite difficult to control completely. As the civil war in Syria intensified, Ankara has had to deal with many security problems arising from this situation. In addition to the fight against organizations such as ISIS and the PKK, it is also necessary to draw particular attention to the social and economic difficulties created by the nearly four million refugees who fled the civil war in Syria and took refuge in Turkey. Ankara, which holds the Assad regime directly responsible for the escalation of the civil war, therefore began to support opposition groups fighting against Assad together with Western countries since the fall of 2011. This attitude has brought Russia, which has become one of the most important supporters of the Assad regime along with Iran during the Syrian civil war, and Turkey face to face (Erşen, 2016).

Russia's inclusion in the Syrian equation has been a move that has significantly changed the course of the Syrian civil war. Initially perceived as a move to make Russia forget the tensions it had experienced in Ukraine and Crimea, the Syrian exit has been transformed into an opportunity for Moscow to expand its sphere of influence due to the geopolitical vacuum left by the Obama administration in the Middle East (Köse, 2018). Russia has seized this opportunity and has sought to preserve its Tartus military base from the Cold War and therefore its presence in Syria, and as a result, to return to the geography it dominated during the USSR period. Turkey, on the other hand, has generally adopted a policy in line with NATO, has taken steps to ensure that civilians are not further victimized by this current civil war, and has also aimed to develop policies to prevent the emergence of formations that would threaten its own security on the other side of the border (Tüfekçi, 2017). Russia's initiation of military operations in Syria in September 2015 has significantly affected Turkey's plans. Above all, Russia's launch of air operations against ISIS and Turkey-backed opposition forces in Syria has increased the effectiveness of regime forces. Its increased military presence in Tartus has restricted the area of operations of the Turkish Naval Forces (Samaylov, 2018).

Russia's involvement in the war and Turkey's inability to find sufficient support from the US in combating regional problems and threats originating from Syria have created a new power center in the context of Syria. The de facto alliance formed between Turkey-Russia-Iran has paved the way for a partial reduction in conflicts in Syria. This alliance has created a strong alternative to the US's unilateral policies. The US's continued pursuit of policies that will increase tensions and create conflict in the Middle East has turned the de facto alliance into an attractive alternative for regional countries (Erol, 2017). The US's open support for the PYD, which poses a serious threat to Turkey from Syrian territory, has forced Turkey to seek new solutions (Askerov, Byrne, Matyok, 2018). Turkey and Russia have been able to demonstrate their determination to continue the process that was initiated despite the assassination of Andrey Karlov.

Turkey-Russia relations are going through a new test, especially in the context of the Syrian crisis. It is seen that relations are showing a tendency to deepen despite the crises experienced. It is seen that the good relations established between the leaders of the two countries are effective in overcoming the crises between the two countries. Putin's first visit to Turkey after his great victory in the 2018 elections has a special meaning. The two countries have declared that they will take a common stance against Western-based policies led by the US in Syria and the Middle East and seek solutions together. Both the purchase of weapons systems and the will of the two countries to find a common solution to the Syrian problem can be considered as the most important developments in the history of relations between the two countries.

Turkey-Russia relations during the Syrian crisis underwent a significant test of endurance. While the two countries did not achieve full resolution of certain disputes, some issues were set aside temporarily and others were effectively frozen. Despite these challenges, Ankara and Moscow managed to maintain relatively aligned or complementary stances on many regional and global matters in this period. This alignment reflected a conscious strategic choice by both parties (Yılmaz, 2019). The Syrian conflict generated not only new areas of competition but also opportunities for cooperation between Turkey and Russia. These developments, analyzed in detail in the study, support the research hypothesis that, although the two countries were unable to reach a complete consensus

on the resolution of the Syrian crisis, they continued to coordinate and act together on certain issues—particularly those initiatives pursued by Western countries led by the United States and not fully endorsed by either Ankara or Moscow.

CONCLUSION

Syria is located in a strategically important region for both Turkey and Russia. There are various reasons for both countries to intervene in the Syrian crisis. From Russia's perspective, the reasons include protecting the Tartus military base, which is the only naval base outside of Russia from the Cold War, and therefore its presence in Syria, forgetting the reactions in the international community after the occupation of Crimea, proving that it is an effective power in the international arena, and continuing its presence in the Middle East. From Turkey's perspective, the issue is of vital importance. With the start of the civil war, Turkey has faced a serious influx of refugees, many harassing attacks have been launched from Syria with long-range weapons, and as a result of these attacks, there have been casualties, serious problems have been experienced in terms of border security, a significant part of the 911 km long land border has come under the control of the PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organization, and significant threats have emerged against Turkey's national security. Therefore, the reasons for Russia, which has no border with Syria, and Turkey, which has the longest land border with this country, to intervene in the crisis are different from each other. While Turkey's involvement in the civil war that is happening right next door is a necessity in the face of the negative externalities of this war, it is seen that Russia's intervention is based more on maximizing its interests in its domestic and foreign policies.

Despite significant policy disagreements between Turkey and Russia—including issues related to Central Asia, Crimea, the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute, Russia's refusal to recognize the PKK as a terrorist organization, and the routing of energy transmission lines—the two countries managed to develop their economic relations independently of these challenges. Notable strategic-level steps were taken during this period, such as the construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant and the acquisition of the S-400 missile system. With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, additional areas of conflict emerged; however, new opportunities for cooperation also arose. The Astana process, a joint initiative by Russia, Turkey, and Iran aimed at resolving the Syrian conflict, provided renewed momentum for bilateral relations. From the perspective of international politics, this period also challenged the prevailing perception that global problems could not be addressed without the involvement of Western-based institutions or countries. In this context, the close personal rapport established between the leaders of Turkey and Russia was considered instrumental in facilitating problem-solving and advancing bilateral cooperation during the most critical phases of the Syrian crisis.

The analysis of Turkey-Russia relations between 2011 and 2024 in the context of the Syrian civil war demonstrates the complex and dynamic nature of bilateral interactions in a highly volatile regional environment. While fundamental differences in their approaches to the Syrian crisis ranging from Turkey's support for opposition groups to Russia's unwavering backing of the Assad regime generated tensions and occasional confrontations, both countries demonstrated a pragmatic capacity for strategic cooperation when faced with shared interests and external challenges.

Turkey's concerns regarding border security, the threat posed by ISIS and the PYD, and the management of millions of Syrian refugees shaped its foreign policy and military interventions. Russia's direct involvement in Syria, beginning with its military intervention in 2015, significantly altered the balance of power in favor of the Assad regime and reinforced Moscow's position as a key actor in the conflict. Despite these differing objectives, mechanisms such as the Astana process enabled Turkey and Russia to coordinate diplomatically, manage regional crises, and establish frameworks for limited collaboration.

Over the period under review, the bilateral relationship evolved into a cautious and pragmatic partnership. While full consensus on the resolution of the Syrian crisis remained elusive, both Ankara and Moscow sought to stabilize their relations and influence outcomes in Syria without triggering direct confrontation. The study demonstrates that the interplay of competition and cooperation—driven by security concerns, geopolitical interests, and the personal rapport between national leaders—has been central to shaping the trajectory of Turkey-Russia relations. Ultimately, the Syrian crisis has both tested and reinforced the adaptive capacity of their bilateral ties, illustrating how regional conflicts can simultaneously generate conflictual pressures and opportunities for strategic collaboration.

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