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Turkish-U.S. Strategic Relations and the Syrian Civil War

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POLAT URUNDUL, MAY 6 2018

On April 12th, Michael Goodyear's response to my blog piece, Turkey's Operation Olive Branch (in Turkish: *Zeytin Dalı Harekati*), was published in this section. Mr. Goodyear argued that the operation serves as the catalyst for the expansion of Turkish power in Syria, targets Syrian Kurds, and the United States should preserve its own objectives by negotiating with Turkey. I will try to demonstrate why Turkey is changing its foreign and defence policy in the Middle East. Once the transformation in Turkish foreign policy is understood, it may be easier to understand Turkey's military operations in region. In this piece, I will argue that Turkey's military operation is also related to maximising influence and protecting its political interests in Syria as well as security concerns. However, this blog piece suggests that the U.S. and Turkey actually share similar interests in the Syrian Civil War.

During the Cold War, Turkish foreign policy was mostly Western oriented. Its foreign policy-making was conducted against a clear and simplified backdrop: Turkey's survival as a sovereign state of the Soviet threat. But when the Cold War ended, and the Soviet threat dissolved, a new structural situation emerged. Therefore, the new agenda for Ankara has been multilevel since the 90's. For example, Ankara's economic interests are now more important than surviving as a sovereign state in the Cold War. Ankara also has to respond to sub-state security issues in neighbouring states, particularly the Kurdish question, by considering security and human rights issues.

As the peace talks with the Kurds have collapsed and the Turkish Army cleared Syrian cities such as Al Bab from DAESH (also called Isis or Isil), the influence of the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) in Syria has become a more important consideration for Turkey. In the meantime, the PKK had tried to imitate Syrian Kurds' military tactics in Northern Syria. As a result, an urban conflict began in which the PKK sought to establish self-governments in Turkey's east. This effort failed. As a result of the mobilisation of guerillas and military equipment among the PKK and the YPG during the Kobane resistance, Turkish policy-makers apparently began to be increasingly concerned about the YPG's danger for Turkey's national security. However, Turkey initially and for some time preferred not to intervene in Syria even though both the PKK/YPG and DAESH were accused of executing terror attacks in Turkish cities. Thus, even PKK partisans protested the Turkish government for not intervening in Syria, and for helping Kurds. Although Turkey supported Syrian opposition forces, including the Free Syrian Army, which tried to topple the Assad government, Turkish policy makers hesitated to intervene in Syria. Turkey preferred not to use its own military power due to security risks. However, after a DAESH suicide bomber attacked the wedding of a Kurdish family in Turkey, Ankara decided to intervene and fight DAESH militants in Syria's north. The result was Operation Euphrates Shield (in Turkish: *Fırat Kalkanı Harekati*). Indeed, neither Euphrates Shield nor Olive Branch operations were pre-emptive attacks, as Turks faced repetitive attacks from across the Syrian border prior to those operations.

It may be argued that Operation Olive Branch is not only related to security issues; it may also be linked to Turkish political and economic interests in the area. Turkey also wants to maximise its influence in Syria's North, because it wants to secure a seat at the Syrian peace talks, which will have direct effects on its security. However, Turkey's possible participation in the talks may help the U.S. achieve its goals in Syria. That is, Turkey prefers not to return to the *status quo ante* once the political transition is achieved, and it is eager to help the establishment of political order to prevent a power vacuum. Despite the recent rapprochement with Russia, the regional powers' (such as Iran) interests may be too challenging for Turkey's ambitions. Because Turkey's population mostly consists of Sunnis, the

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Syrian regime had been hostile to Turkey since at least early 2000. Persian ambitions are too expansive to be ignored. And Turks are part of NATO. For the Turks, American influence in Syria may be more appealing than the Ba'ath regime backed by Russia and Iran as long as it does not threaten Turkey's national security. If the recent diplomatic meetings between Ankara and Washington continue, Turkey and the U.S. may have a great chance to meet their demands and work together on a common plan for Syria's future. It should be remembered that this is not the first issue between Americans and Turks, as the two countries have experienced and surmounted larger disagreements than this in the past: notably problems with opium production, the Cyprus dispute, a mistaken attack on a Turkish ship, the hood event, and issues related to the Iraq War. Turkey continues to view the U.S. as an important ally; continues to contribute to NATO missions, and otherwise supports international diplomatic missions relevant for both countries.

Operation Olive Branch does not only ensure Turkey's security and political interests, it also creates opportunities for the Turkish economy in the long run, as new Turkish companies and institutions have already begun to operate in Northern Syria. Any further opportunity to send some of the Syrian refugees back to their homelands would also be promising for Turkey since it spent billions of dollars on the refugee crisis. In the final analysis, what Turkey and the U.S. need to do is maintain the dialogue. However, the U.S. should not neglect Turkey's security concerns, as these are key for Turkey's intervention in Syria. In return, Turkey must be ready to see Kurds playing a role in Syria's political transition. The extent to which such a concession would be difficult for Turkey should not be understated – but such concession may be necessary.

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