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## Turkey's syrian policy under justice and development party rule after 2009

### 2009 YILI SONRASI ADALET VE KALKINMA PARTİSİ İKTİDARINDA TÜRKİYE'NİN SURIYE POLİTİKASI

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#### Abstract

The Justice and Development Party's Syria policy has followed a volatile and pragmatic line. Prior to 2011, when the Arab Spring began in Syria, strategic cooperation was established within the framework of liberal and zero-problem policies with neighbors. When Turkey's democratic reform proposals against the opposition movements that emerged in 2011 did not realize, Turkey changed its position against the Assad regime and started to support the opposition. During this period, weapons aid was also given to the dissidents. Later, with the involvement of Russia and the USA, the balances in Syria changed and Turkey turned to defensive policies that would protect its internal and border security. In this context, military operations were carried out against Syria. However, these operations were carried out with the consensus of Russia and the USA. Although the JDP declared the Assad regime to be an enemy after 2011, it has come to the point where it is possible to negotiate with the Assad regime in the later period. This study makes a process analysis of Turkey's changing Syria policy.

**Key words:** Turkey's Syria Policy, Justice and Development Party, Neo-Ottomanism, Islamism, Security.

#### Özet

Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin Suriye politikası değişken ve pragmatik bir çizgi izlemiştir. Suriye'de Arap Baharı'nın başladığı 2011'den önce komşularla liberal ve sıfır sorun politikaları çerçevesinde stratejik iş birliği kuruldu. Türkiye'nin 2011 yılında ortaya çıkan muhalefet hareketlerine karşı yaptığı demokratik reform önerilerinin gerçekleştirilmesine üzerine Türkiye, Esad rejimine karşı tutumunu değiştirerek muhalefeti desteklemeye başladı. Bu dönemde muhaliflere silah yardımı da yapıldı. Daha sonra Rusya ve ABD'nin devreye girmesiyle Suriye'deki dengeler değişti ve Türkiye iç ve sınır güvenliğini koruyacak savunma politikalarına yöneldi. Bu kapsamda Suriye'ye yönelik askeri operasyonlar düzenlendi. Ancak bu operasyonlar Rusya ve ABD'nin mutabakatı ile gerçekleştirildi. AKP 2011 yılından sonra Esad rejimini düşman ilan etse de ilerleyen dönemde Esad rejimi ile pazarlık yapmanın mümkün olduğu noktaya gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin değişen Suriye politikasının süreci analizini yapmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Türkiye'nin Suriye Politikası, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Yeni Osmanlılık, İslamcılık, Güvenlik.

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## Introduction

The foreign policy of Turkey in the first period of the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) rule developed as a reflection of the democratic liberal understanding in domestic politics. In this context, a zero-problem policy was developed, and close relations were established with neighboring countries. During this period, the JDP was concerned about providing legitimacy with liberal policies against the secular elite that maintained the tutelage of the political system. However, in the following period, the loss of power of the circles that would make effective opposition in the country brought the JDP back to its old Islamist codes. The JDP's post-Arab spring policy, which started in Syria in 2011, shows the reflections of this Islamist line.

This study firstly reveals the story of the Islamic thought that formed the origin of the JDP in the Republic of Turkey, because this story is a reflection of how they opposed the Kemalist state and how they were oppressed. Therefore, the JDP, which came to power under military pressure, first embraced people from all over the political spectrum and had a very democratic period. However, they later gathered all the power in their hands and adopted an authoritarian approach after 2010. Having followed a very liberal and democratic foreign policy before, the JDP completely changed its practices after this date. It was during this period that the Arab Spring started and the JDP returned to its Islamist codes and supported opposition religious organizations in the civil war in Syria. In fact, with Ahmet Davutoğlu's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2009, the idea of neo-Ottomanism led the government to proactive foreign policy. In this context, they wanted to help the establishment of regimes compatible with them by supporting the opposition both in Egypt and Syria. The change in the axis of the JDP's Syria policy is remarkable in terms of showing the Islamic expansionist policies in the period when it was strong, while emphasizing the democratic values when it was weak. As a matter of fact, this study aims to explain these changes in the foreign policy of the JDP through Syria.

## Theoretical framework

### Historical Background of Justice and Development Party

The Justice and Development Party (JDP) (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-in Turkish), whose founders have an Islamic background, is a continuation of the "Nationalist View" that has

survived within Turkey's distinctive Islamist traditions (Sambur, 2009). However, due to the conjuncture that emerged at the time of its establishment, this party as a conservative and liberal democratic party with members from almost all parts of the political spectrum (Axiallis, 2014).

The historical past of political Islam in Turkey continued with a peculiar story in the Ottoman period, and in the Republican Period, it contained important signs pointing to the break from the previous period. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 is shown as the period when Islamism first emerged (Cesari, 2017). Later, Islamist thought that spread from Egypt to the Islamic world, the non-religious superstitions that Islamic societies fell into and the false perception of religion, the despotic governments that prevailed in the Islamic world, and the Western colonialism, which was perceived as an external threat in the Islamic world, determined the three targets to be overcome by Islamist intellectuals (Mohammadi, 2015).

However, with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the western thought, determined by the state, rejected everything that had a religious reference and tried to establish a secular identity and lifestyle. In this context, Islamic thought also entered a very long period of slumber (White, 2013). With the military intervention in 1960, Adnan Menderes government was overthrown, and a new constitution was made in 1961 during this period. The most important feature of this new constitution was that it was a very liberal constitution (Isiksel, 2013). The reason why this constitution, which was made by the soldiers, who were the founders of the new regime, was so libertarian was thought to be because the previous 1924 Constitution was very restrictive, laying the groundwork for authoritarian understandings and preparing a despotic leader like Adnan Menderes (Dodd, 1992).

Towards the end of the 1960s, it is seen that especially socialist student movements started in the whole world as well as in Turkey (Bal & Laciner, 2001). Necmettin Erbakan, who was the leader of the national view movement of that period, who entered politics with his own identity at this time, had brought political Islam out of the slumber period it had been in for a long time (Gulalp, 1999).

By 1971, the State, which had western and secular codes, confronted with very different

ideas, which were hostile to the Western world and were heavily nationalistic. It should be stated that the socialist youth movements represent an extreme point in Turkey, while the national view movement represents another extreme point. However, the similarity between these two movements was that they both had a nationalist idea and were anti-Western. Although the Republic of Turkey had a codification that brought nationalism to the fore, its secular western aspect was equally dominant, and at this point it disagreed with the two extreme views mentioned above. With the memorandum given by the soldiers to the Süleyman Demirel government on March 12, 1971, the government resigned and Nihat Erim, who had a military background, became the Prime Minister instead. In the next period, an uncompromising struggle of the soldiers, who were the owner of the state and the most important political power at that time, triggered a long-lasting struggle against both the socialist thought and the Islamic national view tradition represented by Erbakan. This struggle continued in different ways with another military coup in 1980 (Esen, 2021).

After the mid-1980s, there emerged a period in which Islamist movements were on the rise in Turkey. During this period, different political murders were committed, and political Islam was shown to be responsible for this. However, despite all the propaganda activities, the rise of political Islam continued. In 1994, the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul passed into the hands of the Welfare Party, the party of the national view of that day. In the mayoral elections held that year, Recep Tayyip Erdogan won the Istanbul Municipality and made an important breakthrough in his political life. In the general elections held in December 1995, the Welfare Party emerged as the first party with 21.4% of the votes but could not form a coalition government. An important reason for this was that the soldiers, who were still the dominant figures of politics in that day's Turkey, did not want other parties to form a government with the Welfare Party. However, the events that developed later required Necmettin Erbakan to form a coalition government with Tansu Çiller, the leader of the True Path Party, in June 1996. After this point, the February 28 process, in which important ruptures would begin in Turkey, was entered (Onis, 1997).

At the National Security Council meeting held on February 28, 1997, crucially important decisions were taken regarding the future of all groups with Islamic tendencies and political Islam in Turkey. These decisions included extending primary

education to 8 years and making it compulsory. This resolution meant the closure of the middle sections of Imam Hatip high schools, which are institutions that political Islam attaches great importance to in Turkey. At that time, Necmettin Erbakan used the phrase "our backyard" for Imam Hatip High Schools. In addition, attention was drawn to the connections of political Islam with the Iranian regime, and it was requested to prevent such tendencies. These decisions, which included many other measures like these, were not initially approved by the then prime minister, Necmettin Erbakan. However, later on, these decisions were approved due to the pressure he felt on himself. Subsequent developments required Necmettin Erbakan to resign from being the prime minister in June 1997, and the governments established afterwards implemented the decisions of the National Security Council (Narli, 2000).

During this period, both the people with an Islamic tendency and the people with this identity in politics faced great pressure and forced change. These oppressive attitudes of the soldiers led to the establishment of very different coalitions within the political spectrum in the later period. So much so that Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who founded the Justice and Development Party in 2001, had friends from political Islam as well as people from different parts of the political spectrum. An important reason why people of this different view united under the roof of this party was that Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his friends, who were called innovators from the Islamic nationalistic view, had left the Nationalistic View. Abdullah Gül, who was the representative of the innovators in the congress held in the Fazilet Party, which was the Party of National View of that time, made an attempt to establish the Justice and Development Party because he lost against Recai Kutan by a very small margin (Eligür, 2010).

One of the biggest effects of February 28 on Islamists is that it forced them to transform their identity. In this respect, Tayyip Erdoğan and his friends separated from the Islamist national view and adopted the liberal conservative democrat understanding. In fact, they received a great support from the Western world with these identities in the future. However, until that time, the soldiers, who were constantly western and advocating westernization, were perceived as a natural ally by the westerners. Nevertheless, in the ongoing process, especially anti-democratic practices of the soldiers caused the westerners to move away from them and the thought they represented in Turkey. In the new conjuncture,

Tayyip Erdogan and his friends, who came to the fore with their conservative liberal democrat identity, were supported by the westerners represented by USA and EU (Yilmaz, 2013).

### Establishment and Ideology of JDP

JDP was established on 14 August 2001 under the chairmanship of Tayyip Erdogan. These people, who represented the innovative understanding of the national view, did not win the congress in the Fazilet Party on 14 May, 2000, and they started new searches and established this party with their new identities. The striking aspect of this party is that it was founded at a time when the oppressive environment of the February 28 process was fading away. Likewise, the economic crisis that broke out in Turkey in February 2001 facilitated the performance of this party. As it can be understood from the words "justice" and "development", which are the words in the name of the party, they used these two concepts effectively, which were the two most basic needs of the society at that time. This party, which came to power about one year after its establishment, achieved a great development momentum during its first-period rule, approximately 2 years after the economic crisis in 2001 and after the devastating effects of the crisis began to improve. In this period, the most important source of the legitimacy of this party in the eyes of the society was the continuous development of the economy. It was an important step for Turkey's democratization that they included people from different spectrums in the same period (Özbudun, 2006).

In fact, the role that US President Bill Clinton had assigned to Turkey during his 1999 visit to Turkey was being implemented by this party (Wing & Varol, 2006). Accordingly, Turkey, with its secular democratic structure, had achieved a position that would set an example for all Muslim societies in the Middle East. In this respect, the JDP, which applied liberal democratic practices to both domestic and foreign policy, gathered a significant number of supporters both at home and abroad (Kesgin, 2020).

In this period, the soldiers who continued their existence with their secular, nationalist and western identity and the social layers they represented entered into a great identity conflict. On the one hand, these people, who represented the westernization moves inherited from the nineteenth century to the republic, on the other hand, lost the support from the west due to their

anti-democratic practices. The secular society and its representative soldiers, who could not produce the necessary arguments against the liberal-democratic and pro-Western domestic and foreign policy that JDP constantly emphasized, resorted to different propaganda activities (Esposito et al., 2017). For example, in the gatherings that started in 2007 and called the Republic rallies, the slogan of "Are you aware of the danger?" was set. In fact, at that time, it bore the signs that the secular segments were breaking away from the western understanding and evolving towards a pro-Russian and pro-Chinese Eurasian understanding. However, the western identity, which had been defended for a long time, hindered active opposition to the JDP. For this reason, the political Islamist past of these people was emphasized (Işik, 2012).

However, one of the most striking features of that period was frequently expressed by Tayyip Erdogan in the statement "I took off the national view shirt." The expression is a phrase that was used very effectively and turned into a slogan, both to escape from that past of Tayyip Erdogan, to emphasize his new identity and to block the propaganda activities directed at him and his party. He constantly felt the need to reject his past with this sentence (Yılmaz, 2016) so that he could move towards his political goals.

The peak point of all these struggles was the Presidential elections held in 2007. According to the 1982 constitution of the Republic of Turkey, the president was elected by the Turkish Grand National Assembly with a 2/3 majority vote. However, as a result of the implementation of this rule in the 1961 Constitution, the inability to elect the president in very long sessions became an important problem. Therefore, in the 1982 Constitution, the candidate who received the absolute majority votes (at least one more than the half) in the third round of the elections would be elected President. The 2/3 majority requirement was valid for the first two rounds only. The candidate who received the absolute majority in the third round would be elected President. There were 550 deputies in the total parliament of that day. A two-thirds majority of these MPs amounted to 367. However, the allegation of Sabih Kanadoğlu, who had previously served as the Chief Public Prosecutor, made Turkey very busy at that time. According to this claim, at least 367 deputies had to be present in the parliament for the election of the president (Turhan, 2007). However, until that day, the number of 367 was known as the number of deputies to elect the president in the first round. In this case, no one except the JDP



deputies participated in the voting and the number of participants remained at 361. In this case, the Republican People's Party, which applied to the Constitutional Court, canceled this vote, and as a result, the JDP had to hold new elections (Kahraman, 2007). In the general elections held on July 22, 2007, JDP received 46.58% of the total votes in Turkey. Having received only 34.4% of the total votes in the 2002 elections, the JDP increased its public support by more than 10% in this election. Abdullah Gül became President with the participation of the Nationalist Movement Party, which entered the parliament in subsequent Presidential elections. These developments also represented the starting point of major breaks in Turkey's political life (Yılmaz, 2021).

The turning point in which the JDP gained strength in such a way that no effective opposition could be made within the system was the referendum held in 2010. In this referendum, the structure of the Constitutional Court, which actively opposed the JDP, was changed, the structure of the high council of judges and prosecutors was changed, and military courts were abolished. Thus, as a result of the elections held in 2011 with the great success of the JDP, Tayyip Erdogan declared that he entered a period of mastery in politics.

### **JDP's Foreign Policy until 2009**

One of the clearest reflections of JDP's liberal-democratic understanding emerged in its foreign policy practices. Evaluating Turkey's chronic problems up to that time with different foreign policy approaches, JDP also gained the support of some secular liberal sections in the country. For example, the Cyprus issue, which has been on Turkey's agenda since the 1950s, was handled with a very different approach and a very liberal and democratic line was followed. Accordingly, the unification of the two communities in Cyprus and their entry into the European Union with a common constitution had previously been revealed by the Annan Plan made by the United Nations. Fully supporting this plan, JDP showed that they were supporters of a liberal and democratic solution, and they also received the support of the Western world with these moves. Likewise, JDP improved its relations with the European Union at an advanced level and carried out the harmonization packages and democratization moves required for membership. In fact, Turkey had very close relations with Greece, which had previously been determined as an enemy in the public opinion (Oran & Ünsal, 2013).

One of the points where liberal policies are most clearly reflected in foreign policy is the "zero-problems-with-neighbors policy" formulated by the JDP itself. The slogans frequently voiced by the soldiers and the institutions supporting them, especially the secular elites in previous periods, were losing their validity in this period. A slogan inherited from the previous eras to the Turkey of that day clearly revealed Turkey's relationship with its neighbors: "A country surrounded by seas on three sides and enemies on four sides." According to this, Turkey was surrounded by enemies and Turkey's neighbors were Turkey's enemies. However, this concept changed to a large extent and, as a requirement of liberal policies, it reached the point of "zero problems with neighbors" (Askerov, 2017).

In addition, Turkey's constant facing to the West due to its secular identity had a significant impact on its relations with the Middle East countries. For this reason, there were very limited relations with the Middle East countries in the previous periods.

One of Turkey's most important foreign policy problems from previous periods was its relations with Syria. The Euphrates River, which originates from Turkey and passes through Syria, created important problems in foreign policy. The construction of dams on this river caused the problem of transboundary waters with Syria and this problem remained on the agenda for a long time. On the other hand, Syria's support of PKK terror, which is a Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey, exacerbated the problems (Sever, 2001). However, JDP had very close relations with Syria as a requirement of its "zero problems with neighbors" policy and changed the direction of the old policies of the state.

### **Methodology**

This study was a qualitative survey and was a comparison of two different periods. The data required for the study were obtained by literature review and these data were evaluated comparatively. The conditions under which the JDP's Syrian policy, which is the subject of this article, changed and where it evolved as a result are discussed in the study. In addition, case studies were conducted to shed light on the emerging transformations.

The article was formed with the analysis of the policies of JDP in two different periods by comparing and contrasting them. Moreover, the reasons for the change in policies were analyzed, and how these changes were put into effect in

Syrian policy was demonstrated through practices. While the paper reveals the historical development of Islamist idea in Turkey, it gives an account of the reasons for the change resulting in the implementation of the ideology on Syria. In order to give a clear picture, the paper used a comparative method and indicated the policy changes of JDP in different periods.

## Results and discussion

### Ahmet davutoglu and neo ottomanism

The last point the JDP was on the defensive in Turkey's political structure was the closure case, which was opened in Constitutional Court, brought against it in March 2008. The positive outcome of this case for JDP, amid pressure from the environment towards secular elites, created a great opportunity. The unchanging public support to the JDP in all the developing processes and the attitudes developed by the EU and the USA towards the dissidents, who were believed to hamper the democratization processes, heralded positive developments for the JDP. Both the high level of public support and the support of the USA and the EU against the secular elites strengthened the JDP's position both at home and abroad. In fact, all these developments were clearly shown in the referendum in 2010, and 11 articles of the constitution, which can be considered as important steps towards democratization, were amended.

The fact that the JDP did not have a competitor to effectively oppose was an important reflection of that Ahmet Davutoglu was made Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009, and JDP started to produce new policies. At this point, the appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu as Minister of Foreign Affairs and the adoption of the idea of neo-Ottomanism as a policy coincided with the same time (Akca, 2019).

In Ahmet Davutoglu's previous book, "Strategic Depth", we see that he evaluates the power of the state by taking into account different data. Accordingly, the history, geography, culture and population of a state are its fixed data. Likewise, its economic, technological and military capacity are also potential data. While these come together to show the power of the state, there are other factors that affect these data exponentially. First of all, the strategic mentality of that state and the existence of historical accumulation that includes cultural, psychological, religious and social values within this mentality can be used effectively in policy making. All this will take

place within a strategic planning. This strategic planning will be made by the political initiative who is willing in this regard (Davutoğlu, 2001).

In this study, Davutoğlu also mentions some elites who does not have a certain identity. He stated that these people, who think that they do not take initiative and take risks in making decisions on important issues, withdraw in occasions that require responsibility. Therefore, these elites stand back at the point where they need to take a step. They follow a passive policy. However, he implied that people with the understanding of strategic depth should take risks and be active in important decisions (Davutoğlu, 2001).

In fact, we can say that Davutoglu brought such a notion to power with the idea of neo-Ottomanism together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which started in 2009. Although it is perceived in a very different way in the society, Davutoglu's understanding of neo-Ottomanism is to have very close relations with the modern states that became a part of the Ottoman Empire and to be a pioneer in many issues.

It was thought that adopting this idea and acting in this direction would bring Turkey to a central position as in the Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, Turkey would conduct active diplomacy in its environment and use its soft power effectively. In this way, it would strengthen the positive perception towards itself in other societies. In addition, in order for a country to internalize its strategic depth, it had to accept its historical past and plan accordingly. In this way, there was the thought that the past inherited from the Ottoman Empire would strengthen Turkey even more (Tüysüzoğlu, 2013).

In fact, we can say that with this thought, Ahmet Davutoğlu is trying to change the direction of Turkey's traditional foreign policy. The western and secular identity that Turkey had previously adopted had weakened its relations, especially with its southern and eastern neighbors. He remained far from active politics in his relations with the West. It was believed that Turkey's effectiveness would increase with the new concept determined (Tüysüzoğlu, 2013).

Turkey's traditional foreign policy was heavily oriented towards the West and was shaped to bring its western identity to the fore. Especially the abandonment of the idea of irredentism with the establishment of the republic caused Turkey to take a passive stance towards the former

Ottoman geographies, the Balkans and the Middle East. After 2009, the JDP's lack of rivals in domestic politics and elimination of secular elites signaled its transition to a new and proactive foreign policy. Although Davutoğlu stated that he did not use terms such as neo-Ottomanism, he criticized Turkey's passive foreign policy on many issues in various ways and signaled new directions (Cavlan, 2010). In this context, Davutoğlu criticized Turkey's failure to pursue active politics towards the states that were historically and geopolitically within the Ottoman Empire (Davutoğlu, 2001).

During this period, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan explained Turkey's new foreign policy as follows: He stated that Turkey is not a country in the periphery of international actors in any way, and that it is in a strategic position that will affect three continents. He also stated that Turkey's experience and historical mission compelled Turkey to assume a role in line with this rich background. Therefore, he stated that Turkey should move towards becoming a global power instead of being a regional power. Likewise, he stated that this situation is not a radical change from traditional politics, but a revision in line with world realities (Tüysüzoğlu, 2013).

In fact, although Ahmet Davutoğlu does not openly use the term Ottomanism, it is possible to understand from his discourses that a new Islamist identity is being formed and that Muslim states from the old Ottoman legacy are being called upon for cooperation under the leadership of Turkey. He included the Muslims in the Balkans, as well as the Middle East countries, which were former Ottoman lands, in the Muslim communities. The proactive foreign policy that started with Davutoglu was not limited to the modern states that were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Foreign policy towards the Muslim communities in Africa also started to work actively. After becoming the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu announced in his Sarajevo speech on 16 October 2009 that they would strengthen their ties with these Muslim countries and establish very close relations with them. He also expressed the need of Muslim communities for Turkey in different ways. He even stated that a significant part of Turkey's own population consisted of people whose origins belonged to these countries. All these were expressions that drew the profile of an idealist Islamist (Oran & Ünsal, 2013).

## Reflections of paradigm shift on syrian policy

In fact, the zero-problems-with-neighbors policy that JDP had previously set had begun to bear fruit since 2007. The rapprochement between the two countries became more evident with the free trade agreement on 1 January 2007. In the following period, until 2010, the trade volume between the two countries increased from 796 million dollars to 2.5 billion dollars (Collinsworth, 2013).

Later, on September 16, 2009, with the visit of Bashar Assad to Turkey, a strategic cooperation council was established between the two countries. There would be ministers of the two countries in this council and it would consist of 16 people in total. In addition, other ministers who were not members of this council would also attend the meetings when necessary. It was envisaged that this council would meet at least twice a year. An important advantage of this council was that it would enable the bureaucratic problems to be overcome more quickly (Sinkaya, 2012). In addition, with the visa exemption agreement signed in 2009, the citizens of the two countries started to enter the other country without obtaining a visa (Imai, 2016).

This agreement was followed by the ministerial meetings of the two countries for high-level strategic cooperation. The meetings held in Aleppo and Gaziantep on 13 October 2009 with the participation of council member ministers were realized as a concrete step of cooperation (Kıbaroğlu, 2016). In addition, on 22 December 2009, the council attended by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan on behalf of the Republic of Turkey convened in Damascus and a total of 50 agreements, memorandums of understanding and cooperation protocols were signed in various fields (Scheumann et al., 2011).

Likewise, this council was held in Latakia, Syria on October 3, 2010. The meeting with the participation of the Prime Ministers was held on 21 December 2010 in Ankara. At this meeting, the status of the previous agreement was evaluated. In addition, 11 more agreements were made. In these agreements, it was decided to fight terrorism, to combine natural gas pipelines, to facilitate customs procedures and to clear mined lands and make them suitable for agriculture.

### – Arab Spring and Turkey's Positioning

The Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia in 2010, spread to the countries in that region and

reached Syria. At first, Turkey was in favor of democratic solutions. For example, in the uprisings against the Gaddafi regime in Libya, Turkey sought a democratic solution that would continue the regime and prevent international intervention. However, these searches were unsuccessful. Then, when the events broke out in Syria, Turkey first thought of solving the problems with democratic initiatives that the Syrian regime would also consent to (Oran & Ünsal, 2013).

When demonstrations began in Syria in March 2011, regimes in other Arab countries had already been overthrown. However, there was the potential for a much longer war in Syria. The policy that Turkey had wanted to implement in Libya previously did not work. In this case, the need to follow different policies regarding Syria stood in front of Turkish policy makers. In Syria, the demonstrations first turned into a civil war, then into proxy wars and became a cause for conflict between sects. In addition, in the same period, organizations with religious references started to become more active in Syria, and minorities of different nationalities such as the Kurds began to seek new solutions of being independent.

The rapprochement with Syria until that day had caused Turkey to remain silent in response to the regime's reaction to the events taking place in Syria. After the protests started on March 18, 2011, Turkey was in favor of solving problems through dialogue. At first, Turkey saw this issue as Syria's own internal issue and was worried that the problems that would arise would affect it negatively (Altunışık, 2016). Later, Turkey wanted the Syrian regime to make some reforms. Among these demands of Turkey were general amnesty, change in the electoral system and the abolition of the state of emergency that had been going on since 1963. The Assad regime in Syria lifted the state of emergency on April 21. However, when other reforms and democratic initiatives were not realized, Turkey changed its policy towards Syria. At that time, Ahmet Davutoğlu's intense efforts were inconclusive (Mohammed, 2011). Later, Prime Minister Erdogan decided to impose economic sanctions against the Syrian regime after his visit to the USA.

#### – Pressure on Syria by the JDP

The JDP government's policy towards Syria, starting from March 2011, turned into forcing this country into democratic reforms. However, at the same time, these calls for reform did not

yield results and the refugee migration to Turkey started. While rumors were spreading that they would create a buffer zone in Syria to stop the refugees from crossing into Turkey, the Syrian army was sending soldiers to the Turkish border. During this process, allowing the Syrian opposition to gather in Turkey in May and July indicated that the crisis between Turkey and Syria would deepen. On July 9, 2011, Davutoğlu went for the last time and demanded that the war be stopped. When these demands were not accepted, Turkey started to follow a similar policy against Syria together with the western states. In September, Turkey allowed the dissidents to form the Syrian National Council in Istanbul. In this way, Turkish government thought that they could have more control over the political equilibrium that might emerge after Assad in Syria. Likewise, the Assad regime accused Turkey of inciting, arming and training the rebels (Oran & Ünsal, 2013).

#### – Support to Opposition

After September 2011, Turkey changed its policy towards Syria once again and started to support the opposition. In this new period, Davutoğlu first announced a package of sanctions against Syria on October 30, 2011. Accordingly, high-level strategic cooperation was suspended until the establishment of the legitimate government in Syria, senior officials who used violence against civilians within the country were banned from traveling to Turkey, and their assets in Turkey were frozen. Similarly, arms sales to Syria were stopped, and all arms shipments to this country were blocked. In addition, financial relations with the Central Bank of Syria were suspended (Ağır & Atılgan, 2017).

#### – JDP's Similar Policies Towards Other Arab Countries

In fact, during the period when Turkey changed its policy towards Syria, there were also power changes in countries that had previously experienced the Arab Spring and gained new administrations. For example, in the elections held on October 23, 2011, in Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began, the Ennahda party, which was described as a moderate Islamist, received 41% of the votes and won 89 seats in the 218-member constituent assembly. Likewise, it became the largest political party in the parliament (Saleh, 2015).

Likewise, in the election process that started on November 28, 2011, and ended on January 11, 2012, in Egypt, as an Islamist organization, the



Muslim brothers' party "Freedom and Justice Party", won 127 out of 332 seats and achieved great success in the election together with the other parties it formed a coalition with. Mohammed Morsi, the representative of the Muslim brothers, won the presidential elections held in May-June 2012 (Kazamias, 2015). Morsi pursued policies aimed at weakening the military tutelage, as the JDP had done in Turkey. During this period, Morsi dismissed some military commanders. However, he was removed from power with the military coup on 3 July 2013 (Kurun, 2015).

It should be stated that Morsi's domestic policy moves in this period were similar to the JDP's policies in Turkey. However, what the JDP did in Turkey, Morsi could not do in Egypt. Along with the military coup, the government and pro-government press in Turkey reacted very harshly to the military coup (Türkeş, 2016).

#### – Islamist Ideals as Driving Force

All these show that the changes made in the Syrian policy in this period and the policy towards other Arab countries show similarities. Although JDP's discourses focused on democracy at that time, it is possible to say that Islamist ideals came to the fore. Already in this period, we see that with the change made in Syrian policy, they started to support the opposition in this country. The opposition supported by the JDP emerged as belonging to the Islamist background (Başkan & Taşpınar, 2021).

Islamic organizations similar to the Muslim brothers in Egypt were also present in Syria. Behind the JDP's support to these Islamic groups was its enthusiasm to bring organizations that would have close relations with it to power. While doing this, the western states, especially the USA, reacted strongly to Bashar Assad's use of chemical weapons against his own people at that time (Scheller, 2014). In this case, the JDP calculated that the groups it supported would be accepted by the westerners and move to power. However, the fact that the US wanted Assad, who had secular tendencies, to stay in power rather than an Islamic government, had failed Turkey's calculations. Likewise, Turkey could not calculate the existence of forces such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates that would give serious reactions to any formation of the Muslim brothers (Erhan et al., 2015).

Although the JDP did not openly expressed its Islamic ideals on Syria and other Arab countries,

different reflections of this have emerged. In particular, a phrase that Tayyip Erdogan used in his speech on September 5, 2012, has been constantly reminded as a slogan that most clearly shows the Islamic ideals in Turkey after that day. His sentence is as follows: "God willing, we will recite Fatiha [First Quranic verse that is cited in prayers in Islam] at the tomb of Saladin, and we will also perform our prayers in the Umayyad Mosque... We will freely pray for our brotherhood (Hurriyet Newspaper, 2012)."

#### – Developments at Home

In the following period, Turkey's interest in the opposition in Syria continued to increase. In January 2014, 2 trucks claimed by government officials to belong to the National Intelligence Organization were stopped by the Gendarmerie on the order of the prosecutor (Armstrong, 2014). It was claimed that these trucks initially contained weapons that went to the Syrian opposition. When these allegations were repeated in the press for a long time, government officials began to repeat that there was humanitarian aid going to Syria in the trucks (Stanley-Adamson, 2016).

In the news published in May 2015, signed by journalist Can Dündar, the weapons hidden under the drugs in these trucks were shown. Thereupon, Turkey's agenda focused on this issue again (Dündar, 2015), and at this point Ahmet Davutoglu emphasized that state institutions should work in coordination and stated that it was wrong to reflect a decision of the political will as if it were a crime by another state institution. In addition, he said, unlike his previous statements, what happens inside the trucks is nobody's business (Cumhuriyet Newspaper, 2015).

#### – Russian Intervention and Defensive Period

During this period, clashes continued between the Syrian army and the opposition, and the progress of the opposition could not be stopped. At the beginning of 2014, the opposition in Syria lost foreign support to a large extent, and during this period, ISIS began to be effective in the north and east of Syria. By 2015, Russia was also included in the equation in Syria on September 30, 2015. Russia, which stated that it entered the region in order to stop the advance of the terrorist organization ISIS, organized an aerial bombardment against ISIS, thus weakening the strength of the organization. In addition, during this period, the Syrian government gained the support of Iran (Karnazov, 2015).

The downing of the Russian plane, which violated Turkish airspace on November 24, 2015, started a new era for Turkey. Turkey, which had been actively involved in the crisis in Syria until that day, then changed its priority and returned to its national security policies. In this period, the protection of the borders and the organization of the Kurdish minority in northern Syria were highlighted as the main problems. This period also led to a temporary Cold War between Turkey and Russia, and the Syrian airspace was closed to Turkish planes in the same period. After this, the Assad regime in Syria entered the recovery process (Kökçam, 2018).

#### – **Turkish Military Operations to Maintain its Security**

It is possible to say that Russia's intervention in the region changed the conditions dramatically. In fact, as a result of the influence of Russia, Astana talks were held, and a ceasefire was declared between the Assad regime and the opposition on 30 December 2016. Turkey and Iran were also included in these talks. In fact, these three countries became the guarantor states. As a result of the Astana agreement signed on May 4, 2017, it was decided to establish de-escalation zones. Later, with the 2 agreements dated 15 September 2017, the framework determining the duties and responsibilities of the soldiers of the guarantor countries was drawn. 12 observation points were established around Idlib, and the observation points where Turkish soldiers were placed were located in the areas under the control of the opposition. Russia and Iran had observation points in the areas under the control of the Assad regime. However, the advance of the regime soldiers towards Idlib continued and this situation led to an increase in the wave of migration towards Turkey. In this case, Turkey placed more soldiers at the observation posts, but could not prevent the attacks (Demir, 2021).

After the start of the period of Turkey's withdrawal to the defense in Syria, its policy focused on border security and internal security issues. In this context, there were different cross-border movements of the Turkish Armed Forces towards Syria. The first of these is the operation launched against the ISIS on August 24, 2016. As a result of this operation, ISIS withdrew inside Syria. The reason that compelled Turkey in this operation was the killing of soldiers and civilians on its own borders and within the country by this organization (Yeltin, 2018).

On January 30, 2018, there was a second operation launched by Turkey against the Kurds' attempts to establish a new state in Syria. There were important reasons for this operation from Turkey's point of view. First of all, this operation was launched with the aim of creating safe zones for the Syrian refugees, whose numbers are increasing day by day in Turkey. In addition, the activity of the separatist Kurdish movement PKK in Turkey, its attack on Turkey's military posts and attempts to establish a new state have made the operation necessary for Turkey. As a result of this operation, Afrin city center was taken under control on 18 March 2018. Thus, the Kurdish canton that was planned to be established in the region was prevented (Köylü, 2018).

On October 30, 2019, another Turkish operation against the Kurdish region in Syria began. The activities of the separatist Kurdish movement in this region were perceived as a threat by Turkey. Although military success was achieved as a result of this operation, some results changed with the intervention of the USA and Russia later on. In the Ankara agreement dated October 17, 2019, Turkey and the United States reached an agreement, and the Kurdish militias began to withdraw to the south. In addition, the Sochi agreement was signed with Russia on October 22, 2019, and as a result, it was decided that the separatist militias would withdraw 30 kilometers to the south. In addition, it was planned to conduct patrols of Turkish and Russian soldiers at a depth of 10 kilometers in this region. Thus, actors with diplomatic activity such as Russia and the USA came before Turkey and limited Turkey's range of action (Demir, 2021).

Then, on February 20, 2020, another operation against Syria was launched. Neighboring the Turkish city of Hatay, Idlib had become a gathering place for opponents of the regime. Therefore, the attacks of both the Assad regime and the Russian forces continued. This situation, which threatens Turkey's borders, could also lead to a refugee influx of three million people living in the region towards Turkey. Due to these security problems, Turkey launched a cross-border operation. As a result of this operation, which took place with an air attack, the Sochi agreement was signed between Russia and Turkey on March 5, 2020, and the operation was terminated. Thus, Turkey's control was established around Idlib. As a result of this operation, Turkey eliminated a security problem against itself (Demir, 2021).

### – New Pursuits in Syrian Policy

At the last point, the realization by Turkey that the Bashar Assad regime could not be overthrown especially because of the support of Russia and the USA brought new pursuits. Tayyip Erdogan, who said that it was not possible to meet with Bashar Assad before (Cumhuriyet Newspaper, 2017), has recently changed his mind. Holding a press conference for the European political community while he was in Prague, Erdogan said on relations with Syria, "When the time comes, we can go to meet with the president of Syria. As of now, there are already low-level talks (Euronews, 2022)."

### Discussion

After the military memorandum in 2007, JDP's ability to overcome the closure case in 2008 without any problems caused it to become almost the only actor in political life in the following period. The JDP, which largely eliminated the opposition forces within the state with the constitutional amendment referendum in 2010, gave the signal that it would embark on new initiatives when Ahmet Davutoglu was appointed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2009. After this period, the idea of following a proactive policy under the name of neo-Ottomanism was attempted and new initiatives were tried to be realized for all nations that were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Although an Islamic understanding was not expressed openly at the level of discourse, the actions of the later period showed that the government was chasing Islamic dreams. In particular, the collapse of the regimes after the Arab Spring and the coming to power of parties with Islamist ideas in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia gave hope that the dreams of the JDP would come true.

However, the intervention of other political forces in the following process brought about radical changes. The removal of the Muslim brothers from power in Egypt and the intervention of Russia in Syria to support the Assad regime also heralded that Islamist dreams would not come true. As a matter of fact, the USA's support of the Assad regime against radical Islamist opponents had results far beyond the expectations of the JDP.

With Russia's intervention in the region, it is possible to say that Turkey's Syria policy was drawn to a defensive line. After that period, some military operations were carried out to prevent formations that would threaten Turkey's security in the authority vacuum that emerged in Syria. As

a matter of fact, these operations were carried out under the control of Russia and the USA.

Tayyip Erdogan's Syria policy has significant changes in attitude. While he was close enough to say, "my brother Esad" before the Arab Spring, it came to the point of saying enemy "Eset" after the events started in Syria (Demirtaş, 2013). He stated that it was not possible to meet with Bashar Assad during this period. He even stated that Assad was a murderer who killed his own people. However, at the last point, he stated that he could negotiate with the regime in Syria.

Finally, after the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu's statement, "We have to somehow agree with the opposition and the regime in Syria, we have to take it", anti-Turkey protests were held in many cities under the control of the Free Syrian Army supported by Turkey. Meanwhile, there were those who burned the Turkish flag among the protesters (Euronews, 2022).

### Conclusion

After coming to power in Turkey, the JDP, which was quite weak against the secular soldiers, received great support both inside and outside of Turkey with its liberal and democratic line. Thanks to this support, he was able to stand against the soldiers, who were the most effective political power in Turkey at that time. Even liberal policies showed themselves in foreign relations and a policy of zero problems with all neighboring countries was adopted. In this context, very close strategic cooperation was entered into with Syria. However, the fact that the JDP became very powerful and remained unrivaled in the political arena caused it to return to its own Islamist identity. Supporting the opposition in Syria for these purposes and providing them with weapons, JDP was eager to bring Islamist groups to power. Other developments that fed these dreams also emerged in Egypt and Tunisia, which experienced the Arab Spring. While all these brought about foreign policy initiatives that fed Islamic idealism, with the intervention of Russia, Iran and the USA in Syria, all these idealist policies were replaced by realist and defensive policies. After a while, Turkey's own security was endangered, and foreign policy moves to protect this security were realized. Turkey's Syrian foreign policy evolved from democratic liberal policies to idealist Islamist policies, and then it has been drawn to a realistic line in the face of the emerging realities. In fact, at this point, a situation has emerged that even the opponents,

who were supported before by Turkey, are not satisfied.

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