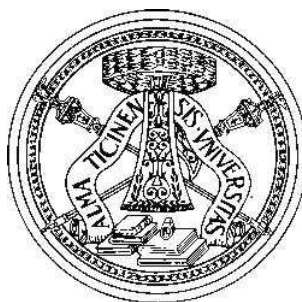


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The Kurdish Question in Türkiye's Foreign Policy: Regional Security and Diplomatic Challenges

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Abstract: This thesis examines the role of the Kurdish question in shaping Türkiye's foreign policy, with particular attention to its bilateral and multilateral relationships in the Middle East and beyond. The study explores how the Kurdish question, traditionally framed by the Turkish state as a matter of national security and territorial integrity, has evolved into a transnational concern that deeply affects Türkiye's interactions with key actors including Iraq, Syria, Iran, the United States, and the European Union. Through a historical and analytical lens, the thesis investigates how domestic insurgency, identity politics, and regional autonomy movements among Kurds have influenced Türkiye's diplomatic, military, and strategic priorities. The research incorporates a wide range of academic sources and policy documents to assess the transformation of Türkiye's approach to the Kurdish question from a strictly internal matter to a pivotal factor in foreign policy formulation. Case studies such as Türkiye's military interventions in Syria, its economic engagement with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, and its diplomatic tensions with Western allies over Kurdish armed groups are analyzed to illustrate the multifaceted nature of the problem. The study also addresses recent shifts, including potential constitutional reforms and international realignments, which suggest that Türkiye may be entering a new phase in managing its Kurdish policy. Ultimately, the thesis argues that the Kurdish question is no longer a peripheral issue but a central determinant of Türkiye's geopolitical strategy. The conclusion outlines potential pathways Türkiye might consider, ranging from continued militarization to regional cooperation and domestic political reform. In doing so, the thesis contributes to a broader understanding of how internal ethnic conflicts can become defining elements in a nation's foreign policy agenda.

Abstract: Questa tesi esamina il ruolo della questione curda nel plasmare la politica estera della Turchia, con particolare attenzione alle sue relazioni bilaterali e multilaterali in Medio Oriente e oltre. Lo studio esplora come la questione curda, tradizionalmente inquadrata dallo Stato turco come una questione di sicurezza nazionale e integrità territoriale, si sia evoluta in una preoccupazione transnazionale che influenza profondamente le interazioni della Turchia con attori chiave tra cui Iraq, Siria, Iran, Stati Uniti e Unione Europea. Attraverso una lente storica e analitica, la tesi indaga come l'insurrezione interna, le politiche identitarie e i movimenti di autonomia regionale tra i curdi abbiano influenzato le priorità diplomatiche, militari e strategiche della Turchia. La ricerca incorpora un'ampia gamma di fonti accademiche e documenti politici per valutare la trasformazione dell'approccio della Turchia alla questione curda da una questione strettamente interna a un fattore cruciale nella formulazione della politica estera. Casi di studio come gli interventi militari della Turchia in Siria, il suo impegno economico con il Governo Regionale del Kurdistan in Iraq e le tensioni diplomatiche con gli alleati occidentali riguardo ai gruppi armati curdi vengono analizzati per illustrare la natura multiforme del problema. Lo studio affronta anche i recenti cambiamenti, tra cui potenziali riforme costituzionali e riallineamenti internazionali, che suggeriscono che la Turchia potrebbe entrare in una nuova fase nella gestione della sua politica curda. In definitiva, la tesi sostiene che la questione curda non è più una questione periferica, ma un fattore determinante centrale della strategia geopolitica della Turchia. La conclusione delinea i potenziali percorsi che la Turchia potrebbe prendere in considerazione, che vanno dalla continua militarizzazione alla cooperazione regionale e alla riforma politica interna. In tal modo, la tesi contribuisce a una più ampia comprensione di come i conflitti etnici interni possano diventare elementi determinanti nell'agenda di politica estera di una nazione.

Table of Contents

List of Acronyms	1
1. Introduction	2
1.1. Methodology.....	4
1.2. Literature Review	6
2. Historical Background of the Kurdish Question in Türkiye.....	10
2.1. Theoretical Perspectives.....	14
2.2. Türkiye’s Foreign Policy Approaches	16
3. Regional and International Perceptions of the Kurdish Question in Türkiye’s Foreign Policy	20
3.1. Iraq.....	20
3.2. Syria	25
3.3. Iran.....	30
3.4. European Union.....	35
3.5. The United States	41
4. Potential Policy Shifts and Future Directions	47
5. Conclusion	52
Bibliography.....	57

List of Acronyms

- **AKP** – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)
- **EU** – European Union
- **ECHR** – European Court of Human Rights
- **EEC** – European Economic Community
- **HDP** – Halkların Demokratik Partisi (Peoples' Democratic Party)
- **HTS** – Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
- **ISIS** – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
- **KDP** – Kurdistan Democratic Party
- **KRG** – Kurdistan Regional Government
- **NATO** – North Atlantic Treaty Organization
- **PJAK** – Kurdistan Free Life Party
- **PKK** – Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
- **PUK** – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
- **PYD** – Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)
- **SDF** – Syrian Democratic Forces
- **SIPRI** – Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
- **TURKSTAT** – Turkish Statistical Institute
- **UAV** – Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
- **UN** – United Nations
- **US** – United States
- **YPG** – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Defense Units)

1. Introduction

The Kurdish question has been a central and persistent problem in Türkiye's political and social environment, arising from historical, ethnic and political tensions. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, efforts to create a unified national identity often marginalized the Kurdish population, which constitutes one of the largest stateless ethnic groups worldwide (Akyeşilmen 90). Assimilation policies, suppression of uprisings, and restrictions on Kurdish cultural expression have led to cycles of unrest and resistance that have deeply affected Kurdish communities. For instance, the ban on Kurdish education and media severely limited cultural expression and reinforced the sense of disenfranchisement (Robins 661). These policies contributed to widespread displacement, economic marginalization, and the rise of underground movements advocating Kurdish rights. The banning of the Kurdish language in education and public life not only eroded cultural identity but also increased complaints against the state. Rebellions such as the Sheikh Said uprising of 1925 arose partly in response to these policies and symbolized the struggle for broader recognition and autonomy. These events set a precedent for tensions that continued throughout the 20th century as Kurdish communities resisted policies perceived as oppressive, leading to a protracted cycle of conflict and state retaliation (660).

The militarization of the Kurdish question, especially after the emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the 1980s, escalated the conflict; this has led to significant human rights concerns, including forced displacement, extrajudicial killings, and widespread detention of Kurdish activists. Economically, the conflict has led to the diversion of significant

state resources to military spending, undermining regional development and increasing poverty in predominantly Kurdish regions (Park 49).

Internationally, the Kurdish question has further complicated Türkiye's foreign relations, especially its relations with neighboring states hosting Kurdish populations and with global powers such as the United States and the European Union. The Syrian Civil War and the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) have increased the interest of Kurdish actors in the region and brought international attention to groups such as the People's Defense Units (YPG). The YPG emerged as a critical force in the fight against ISIS and received support from Western powers, especially the USA, for its effective operations. This alliance has significantly strained Türkiye's relations with the United States, as Türkiye sees the YPG as an extension of the PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organization both in the US and Türkiye. The US support for the YPG has not only deepened mistrust between the two NATO allies, but has also led to diplomatic conflicts; Türkiye has frequently called on Washington to reconsider its stance. This dynamic highlights tensions between U.S. counterterrorism strategies and Türkiye's internal security concerns, complicating bilateral relations and broader cooperation within NATO. The YPG's role as an important ally in the Global Coalition against ISIS also positions it as a strategic actor in the region and complicates Türkiye's relations with its NATO allies. Perceiving the YPG as an extension of the PKK, Türkiye considered the YPG's growing influence as a significant security threat, further intensifying regional tensions and shaping Ankara's foreign policy priorities. In reaction to these events, Türkiye has established buffer zones in northern Syria and conducted cross-border military campaigns, including Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring (Kasapoğlu 3)

These dynamics, which mix internal politics with regional and international diplomacy, highlight the Kurdish question's complexity. This thesis suggests that the Kurdish question is a pivotal factor shaping Türkiye's foreign policy especially when it comes to other Kurdish population hosting countries. The study focuses on how Türkiye's foreign policy goals and its domestic Kurdish policies interact, especially when it comes to regional security and diplomacy. With particular case studies such as Türkiye's cross-border operations in Syria and Iraq, its strategy toward the YPG during the Syrian Civil War, and its diplomatic interactions with the US and EU over the Kurdish question, it explores the era from the late 20th century to the present. By highlighting the crucial role that ethnic and nationalist groups play in influencing state policies and international relations, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions about the Middle Eastern stability.

1.1. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the impact of the Kurdish question on Türkiye's foreign policy, particularly on its relations with other Kurdish population hosting countries namely Syria, Iraq and Iran. Due to the multidimensionality of the issue, important international actors such as the USA and the EU are also touched upon. Given the complexity of the topic, a combination of historical analysis, political discourse analysis, and case study methodology is used to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Kurdish question has shaped Türkiye's diplomatic, military, and economic engagements in the region.

The research is based primarily on secondary sources, including academic journal articles, books, government policy documents, and reports from international organizations. Primary sources include peer-reviewed publications from journals such as Middle East Studies,

International Relations, and Ethnopolitics. Additionally, reports from institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union, and think tanks like the Human Rights Watch provide critical insights into the international dimensions of Türkiye's Kurdish policy.

The historical analysis traces the evolution of Türkiye's approach to the Kurdish question by examining key events such as the Treaty of Lausanne, the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, and Türkiye's military interventions in Syria. By contextualizing these developments, the study aims to identify patterns in Türkiye's policy shifts and assess their implications for regional stability.

A discourse analysis of official Turkish statements, policy documents and speeches of key political figures is conducted to assess how the Kurdish question is framed in Türkiye's foreign policy narrative. This includes analysing how different administrations, particularly those led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), have approached the issue in diplomatic and security contexts.

The case study methodology focuses on Türkiye's interactions with Kurdish entities in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi case part examines Türkiye's economic and military engagements with the KRG and Baghdad, highlighting tensions and areas of cooperation. The Syrian case part examines Türkiye's military operations against Kurdish groups, particularly the YPG, and their impact on Türkiye-Syria relations.

Given the geopolitical sensitivity of the Kurdish question, this study follows strict ethical guidelines. Sources are critically evaluated for reliability and a variety of perspectives are included to avoid bias. The research is not based on classified government data or restricted materials, ensuring an ethical and transparent approach.

Through this methodology, the study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how the Kurdish question affects Türkiye's foreign policy decisions and regional interactions. The findings will provide valuable insights into the intersection of nationalism, security, and diplomacy in Türkiye's interactions with its neighbors.

1.2. Literature Review

The scholarly literature on the Kurdish question in Türkiye and its impact on foreign policy is vast and multifaceted, covering historical grievances, identity politics, state-building, regional geopolitics, and international diplomacy. This body of research provides essential insights into how the Kurdish question has evolved from a domestic matter into a key factor shaping Türkiye's relations with global and regional actors.

Early works on the Kurdish question primarily focused on the historical foundations of ethnic identity and the Turkish state's nation-building policies. Scholars such as Michael M. Gunter (2004) and Robert Olson (2000) trace the roots of Kurdish discontent to the centralization and homogenization strategies pursued by the Turkish Republic after 1923. These studies underline how the abolishment of the "millet" system and the rise of a unitary Turkish identity systematically marginalized the Kurdish population, banned the Kurdish language, and suppressed uprisings such as Sheikh Said (1925), Ararat (1930), and Dersim (1937–38). Olson, in particular, connects these uprisings to broader efforts to institutionalize state control through militarization, including the formation of the Turkish air force as a tool of suppression.

Later scholarship turned to the role of the PKK and the insurgency it launched in the 1980s. Works by Gunter (2000) and Jongerden (2019) emphasize the PKK's transformation from a secessionist movement into a broader political and cultural force, representing both resistance

and a challenge to the state's monopoly on identity formation. These studies argue that the Turkish state's securitized response entrenched a cycle of violence, and they trace how successive Turkish governments oscillated between repression and cautious negotiation. Gunter (2000) also highlights the human cost of this conflict, including widespread displacement, village evacuations, and international condemnation for human rights violations.

More recent analyses expand the scope of the Kurdish question into Türkiye's foreign policy. Scholars such as Bill Park (2013) and Özlem Kayhan Pusane (2023) investigate how Türkiye's military operations in Iraq and Syria are not merely defensive acts but part of a strategic doctrine aimed at preempting Kurdish autonomy in neighboring states. Park illustrates how Türkiye's economic engagement with the KRG in Iraq exists in tension with its opposition to Kurdish independence, revealing Ankara's pragmatic approach that balances containment with cooperation. Pusane further explores how Türkiye's desecuritization rhetoric—particularly during the peace process era (2009–2015)—was used to manage domestic opposition while pursuing broader geopolitical objectives in northern Iraq.

Theoretical frameworks have also been widely employed to analyze the Kurdish question. Constructivist approaches, such as those advanced by Bahar Rumelili and Ayşe Betül Çelik (2017), argue that Türkiye's framing of Kurdish identity as a security threat reflects deeply embedded narratives of national unity and state sovereignty. Social Identity Theory, as applied by Stempel (2014), explains how exclusionary identity construction leads to entrenched ethnic divisions, which in turn shape policy decisions. Meanwhile, Realist interpretations, such as those found in van Veen et al. (2020), interpret Türkiye's growing military assertiveness—particularly in Syria—as part of a regional militarism aimed at reestablishing Turkish influence through hard power, regardless of ideological alignment.

Comparative works also illuminate how Türkiye's Kurdish policy diverges from or converges with those of other states. For instance, the work of Suren Jamal Mohammed and David Romano (2023) positions the Kurdish question within a broader Middle Eastern context, comparing Türkiye's experience with Kurdish activism to developments in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. These studies often emphasize the transnational nature of the Kurdish question and the challenges posed by non-state actors operating across borders. Additionally, works by Can Kasapoğlu (2020) and Arda Mevlütoğlu et al. (2024) explore how Türkiye's military-industrial advancements have increased its autonomy in targeting Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria, shifting the balance of power away from traditional reliance on NATO allies.

Several studies have also investigated the Kurdish question within the context of Türkiye's relations with the European Union and the United States. Nathalie Tocci (2007) and Gülistan Gürbey (2020) highlight how the EU's emphasis on minority rights and human rights norms has placed the Kurdish question at the center of Türkiye's stalled accession process. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rulings, especially concerning the detention of Kurdish politicians such as Selahattin Demirtaş, are cited as examples of the EU's legal influence on Turkish domestic politics. In contrast, U.S.-focused studies by Hale (2019) and Lawrence (2016) draw attention to the strategic tensions created by Washington's support for the YPG in Syria, despite officially designating the PKK as a terrorist organization. This contradiction has led to strained relations between Türkiye and the U.S., as explored by Setiawati and Naranta (2022), who detail how the U.S.'s tactical alliance with the SDF complicates NATO unity.

Additionally, emerging literature examines new geopolitical actors and scenarios. Liga (2017) explores Israel's support for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq as part of its broader regional strategy to counterbalance Iranian influence, while Ziryan Rojhelati (2024) discusses how

Erdoğan's regional diplomacy incorporates both security imperatives and economic interests in shaping Türkiye's engagements with Kurdish political entities. These studies suggest that future alignments—particularly with China, Russia, and Gulf states—may further shift Türkiye's approach to the Kurdish question in directions less constrained by Western liberal norms.

Finally, scholars such as Cengiz Güneş (2012) and Dara Yıldız (2023) emphasize that a sustainable resolution of the Kurdish question requires democratic reform, inclusive governance, and recognition of cultural rights. Their works argue that without addressing the structural roots of marginalization, Türkiye's foreign policy will remain reactive rather than strategic. They highlight the role of civil society, independent media, and local governments in shaping more inclusive narratives and resisting the securitization of identity politics.

Taken together, this body of literature provides a rich foundation for understanding how the Kurdish question has become a defining issue in Türkiye's foreign policy. The academic consensus indicates that while military operations and diplomatic maneuvering may yield short-term gains, long-term stability will require a multidimensional strategy that addresses the historical, social, and geopolitical layers of the problem. This thesis builds upon and contributes to these scholarly discussions by tracing the impact of the Kurdish question on Türkiye's relations with key regional and global actors, using a case-based and historically contextualized approach that incorporates both structural analysis and political discourse.

2. Historical Background of the Kurdish Question in Türkiye

The Kurdish problem in Türkiye is a deep-rooted and multifaceted problem that covers historical, political, social and cultural dimensions. Its origins can be traced back to the late Ottoman period, but it has developed significantly throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, leading to ongoing debates and conflicts within the Turkish state. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Ottoman Empire faced numerous internal and external challenges that led to various administrative reforms (Gunter 198). During this period, the diverse ethnic structure of the empire became a focal point, and the Kurds became one of the prominent groups. The Ottoman authorities implemented a system that granted certain degrees of autonomy to various ethnic groups, including Kurds, under the millet system from the 16th century onwards (Arakon 140). This system recognized religious communities and gave them a degree of self-government. However, nationalist movements among some ethnic groups, including the Kurds started to emerge as the empire weakened.

The establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 marked a significant change in state policies towards ethnic identities. The new republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk followed a nation-building policy centered on Turkish identity and secularism. This approach often marginalized the Kurds with other non-Turkish identities. The 1924 Constitution abolished the caliphate and introduced policies aimed at centralization and homogenization, which many Kurds perceived as an insult to their cultural and religious identity. This period witnessed many Kurdish uprisings, the most important of which is the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925. The rebellion was a reaction against the secular and centralizing reforms of the Turkish

state, and its suppression had significant repercussions on the Kurdish population. The state's response included mass arrests, executions, and the implementation of policies aimed at assimilating the Kurds (Olson).

The Turkish government intensified its attempts to assimilate the Kurdish community after the Sheikh Said Rebellion was suppressed. The Kurdish language was outlawed in both public and private settings Kurdish names were changed to Turkish ones, and it was severely forbidden to express the Kurdish identity in any way (Mohammed and Romano 6). The Kurds were claimed to be Mountain Turks who forgot their real roots (Özçelik 136). These policies led to further unrest, including the Ararat Rebellion (1927–1930) and the Dersim Rebellion (1937–1938). The latter resulted in a brutal military campaign that led to the deaths of thousands of Kurds and the displacement of many more. The mid-20th century witnessed Kurdish identity continue to be suppressed. The Turkish state continued its policy of denying the existence of a distinct Kurdish ethnicity, calling Kurds "Mountain Turks" and banning any expression of Kurdish culture or language.

The second half of the 20th century was an important turning point in the Kurdish question in Türkiye. The rise of Kurdish political activism and the emergence of the PKK under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan in 1978 made the Kurdish question a primary issue of Turkish politics. The PKK initially aimed to establish an independent Kurdish state but later changed its demands towards greater autonomy and cultural rights within Türkiye (Akyeşilmen). The ongoing conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state has been protracted and violent, causing many losses of life and widespread displacement. The estimations suggest that from 1984 (the first violent action of the PKK) to 2000; 31 000 people died, 3 000 villages were completely or

partially destroyed, and approximately 3 000 000 people were displaced within the country (Gunter 849).

In the 1990s, the Turkish government imposed a state of emergency in the Kurdish-majority southeastern cities, which led to serious human rights violations. Villages were evacuated and destroyed; there were widespread reports of extrajudicial killings and disappearances. These actions increased the grievances of the Kurdish people and led to international condemnation. The European Court of Human Rights issued many judgments against Türkiye due to human rights violations during this period (Yıldız).

The early 21st century saw attempts to resolve the Kurdish question through political reforms. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, launched the "Kurdish Opening" in 2009, which aimed to expand cultural rights and resolve some of the long-standing grievances of the Kurdish people. This initiative included the launch of Kurdish publications and the establishment of Kurdish departments in universities. However, the process faced significant challenges and criticism, which eventually led to stagnation (Pusane 166). Expectably, it was nationalist circles that created a backlash effect for the government. Short before the 2011 elections, the process was suspended because of a number of violent acts committed by the PKK (167). Violence returned when the peace process collapsed in 2015. Urban warfare broke out as conflicts between Turkish security forces and the PKK grew more intense in a number of primarily Kurdish cities in southeast Türkiye, including Diyarbakır and Şırnak (van Veen et al. 9). These conflicts have led to widespread destruction of urban areas, the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians, and a serious humanitarian crisis. The military's counterinsurgency operations included extensive use of methods such as curfews, demolitions, and bombardments, which drew criticism from international human rights organizations for alleged human rights violations (Ünver 69).

The Turkish government's narrative during this period largely framed the conflict as a fight against terrorism and rejected a broader discussion of the political dimensions of the Kurdish question. According to Pusane, both domestic political calculations and the broader geopolitical context, including developments in Syria and Iraq, played a role in the disruption of peace efforts (168). The Syrian Civil War has added a new layer of complexity to the Kurdish question in Türkiye. The rise of the Syrian Kurdish militia known as the YPG, which Türkiye sees as an extension of the PKK, has become a focal point of Turkish foreign policy. Türkiye has launched cross-border military operations in Syria to prevent the establishment of a contiguous region under Kurdish control along its southern border. The support given by the international community, especially the United States, to the YPG in its fight against ISIS has further strained Türkiye's relations with its NATO allies (179).

Domestically, in the post-2015 period, it was observed that authoritarianism increased during the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The state intensified its pressure on Kurdish political representation by targeting members of the pro-Kurdish HDP (People's Democratic Party). Many HDP politicians, including co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, were arrested for their alleged links to the PKK. In addition, the government replaced the elected mayors of majority-Kurdish municipalities with state-appointed trustees; this was a move widely criticized as an act of undermining local democracy. These measures further deepened the mistrust between the Kurdish people and the Turkish state.

In the meantime, the cultural and linguistic rights of Kurds continue to be a controversial issue. Although some restrictions were lifted in the early 2000s, Kurdish education remains limited and Kurdish media organizations and cultural institutions face the danger of being closed

by decrees. Many families have reported that their children were denied access to Kurdish language classes, reflecting a broader trend of cultural oppression (Karakaş).

The Kurdish question remains one of the most pressing and unresolved problems of modern Türkiye. Many scholars today argue that a lasting solution requires not only addressing the material needs and political rights of the Kurds, but also promoting a new understanding of Turkish citizenship that embraces the Türkiye's ethnic diversity (Güneş). The dominant view emphasizes the importance of democratization and dialogue as a prerequisite for meaningful reconciliation.

Today, the Kurdish question continues to affect Türkiye's domestic politics, regional relations and international stance. The issue is not just a matter of ethnic identity, but is also a reflection of broader debates about democracy, governance and human rights in Türkiye. Recent events in 2025 have rekindled debates about peace proposals and constitutional revisions, but given the previous cycles of violence and negotiation, suspicion is still high. A transformative strategy that recognizes the Kurdish people's historical grievances and ambitions while promoting a more inclusive vision of the Turkish state will likely be required to resolve the Kurdish crisis. Given the complexity of the issue, a comprehensive and versatile research is required to understand the importance of the Kurdish question in Turkish foreign policy.

2.1. Theoretical Perspectives

The Kurdish question in Turkish foreign policy can be analyzed through various theoretical lenses that shed light on the complex interaction between identity, security and geopolitics. One relevant framework is Social Identity Theory, which examines how group identities influence intergroup relations and conflicts. In the context of Türkiye and its Kurdish

population, this theory helps explain the persistent tensions resulting from conflicting national identities. The Turkish state's emphasis on a homogeneous national identity has often marginalized the Kurdish identity and this led to social and political friction. This marginalization is reinforced through state discourse, official narratives, and legal restrictions on Kurdish cultural expressions. Social Identity Theory suggests that when a dominant group implements assimilationist policies, the minority group may reinforce its own distinct identity, leading to increased demands for cultural and political recognition (Stempel 1). This phenomenon has been documented in various case studies that analyze ethnic conflicts around the world and draw parallels between the Turkish-Kurdish dynamic and other ethno-nationalist struggles (Stempel; Stewart et al.; Laitin and Fearon). Such studies of minority grievances and conflicts show that state-induced exclusion often fuels separatist tendencies; this is a pattern that can also be observed in Türkiye's approach to Kurdish nationalism. They also highlight how stereotypes and social identity contribute to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, underlining the role of identity in perpetuating the conflict.

Another perspective on the subject is the Security Dilemma in international relations, where actions taken by a state to increase its own security may unintentionally threaten other groups and lead to a cycle of tension and conflict. Türkiye's policies towards Kurdish groups both domestically and in neighboring countries such as Syria and Iraq can be viewed through this perspective. Efforts to suppress Kurdish autonomy movements are often justified by Ankara as necessary for national security, but these actions could worsen insecurities between the Türkiye and Kurdish population along with neighboring states and potentially lead to greater instability. This is especially evident in Türkiye's military interventions in Syria against the Kurdish YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which it perceives as an extension of the PKK. Despite

Ankara's security concerns, these interventions triggered international criticism and strained Türkiye's relations with Western allies (Demir and Yılmaz 15). The security dilemma is even more observable in Türkiye's reliance on military solutions rather than diplomatic engagement, a pattern also observed in other regions with protracted ethnic conflicts. Yegen argues that the Turkish state's approach to the Kurdish question since 2015 stems mainly from geopolitical concerns and reflects a security-oriented mentality (947). Constructivist approaches in international relations emphasize the importance of ideational factors such as identities, beliefs and discourses in shaping state behavior. From this perspective, Türkiye's foreign policy regarding the Kurdish question is determined not only by material factors, but also by constructed identities and historical narratives embedded in Turkish political culture. The Turkish state's identity construction processes have affected its foreign policy responses to the Kurdish question, and it has been argued that the securitization of Kurdish identity strengthens a state-centered approach that limits diplomatic flexibility (Rumelili and Çelik 2). Framing Kurdish movements as existential threats or integral parts of a diverse society influences policy decisions. Constructivism emphasizes how political elites and the media shape public perception of the Kurdish question through discourse, creating a securitized or desecuritized approach towards Kurdish actors.

2.2. Türkiye's Foreign Policy Approaches

Türkiye's foreign policy on the Kurdish question has historically been shaped by a dual focus on security and territorial integrity, a continuation of past policies that prioritized national unity and stability over political concessions. Rooted in the early Republican era, this approach has evolved in response to changing regional dynamics, particularly with regard to the perceived threat of separatism, and the emergence of Kurdish autonomy movements within and beyond

Türkiye's borders. The Turkish state has always viewed the Kurdish question not only as an internal issue but also as a critical element of its regional strategy, affecting its relations with neighboring states, international organizations, and global powers. The emergence of autonomous Kurdish entities in Iraq and Syria has further complicated Türkiye's foreign policy, leading to a shift toward more proactive military and diplomatic measures.

A central pillar of Türkiye's approach has been the securitization of the Kurdish question in its foreign policy discourse. The Turkish government has consistently framed Kurdish political aspirations as threats to national unity and regional stability—whether in Türkiye, Iraq, or Syria (Sadri Alibabalu 149). This perspective is also clearly evident in Türkiye's military interventions in Northern Syria, the main aim of which is to eliminate the influence of the Kurdish-led SDF. While Türkiye claims that these operations have strengthened its national security and prevented the formation of a contiguous Kurdish-controlled region, they have also had unintended consequences, including diplomatic tensions with Western allies, allegations of human rights abuses, and regional instability. The primary goal is to eliminate the influence of the SDF, which Ankara views as an extension of the PKK. The strategic motivations behind these operations align with Türkiye's broader goal of preventing the establishment of a contiguous Kurdish-controlled region on its southern border (Yegen 947).

Türkiye's foreign policy has also been deeply influenced by its relations with Iraq, particularly the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Türkiye has maintained strong economic ties with the KRG, particularly in the energy sector, while at the same time opposing any move towards full Kurdish independence in Iraq (Park 45). This dual approach reflects Ankara's pragmatic engagement that balances economic cooperation with geopolitical

containment. Since the establishment of the KRG, Türkiye's foreign policy towards Iraqi Kurds has been shaped by economic interests and security concerns.

Additionally, Türkiye's NATO membership and strategic alliances have played a role in shaping its Kurdish policy. While NATO provides Türkiye with strategic military support and intelligence-sharing opportunities, its membership also places restrictions on its unilateral actions (Lawrence 9). The alliance's collective security framework limits the extent to which Türkiye can engage in aggressive military campaigns without facing diplomatic consequences. Tensions have also arisen over NATO members' support for Kurdish forces in Syria, leading to diplomatic friction between Türkiye and its Western allies (54). The balance between utilizing NATO support and defending national security interests has been a defining feature of Türkiye's Kurdish policy in foreign relations. While Türkiye has sought military and intelligence cooperation from its Western allies in the fight against Kurdish rebel groups, differences of opinion have emerged over the West's support for Kurdish forces in Syria (Samur and Ekinçi 220). Especially US support for the YPG in the fight against ISIS has been a major bone of contention, leading to a diplomatic crisis between Türkiye and its NATO partners.

In addition to military and diplomatic strategies, Türkiye has also strengthened its defense industrialization efforts to assert greater autonomy in managing the Kurdish question. By developing indigenous defense capabilities such as UAVs (such as the Anka and Bayraktar TB2) and surveillance technology, Türkiye has significantly increased its ability to conduct precision strikes, monitor border areas, and counter perceived threats with minimal reliance on foreign military assistance (Mevlütöğlü et al. 18). These advances have increased Türkiye's operational efficiency in cross-border interventions against Kurdish rebel groups, while also strengthening its strategic autonomy in security matters. However, the increased use of drone warfare has drawn

criticism from human rights groups, raising concerns about civilian casualties and the broader impact of Türkiye's military strategies in Kurdish-populated areas. Türkiye has been trying to reduce its dependence on foreign military suppliers while increasing its cross-border operational capacity against Kurdish groups (Kaliber 65).

In conclusion, when Türkiye's foreign policy on the Kurdish question is examined, it can be easily seen that its foreign policy approach is a complex and constantly evolving one shaped in line with changing regional dynamics and international pressures. Moving forward, Türkiye may continue to strike a balance between military deterrence and diplomatic engagement, particularly in its relations with Kurdish actors in Iraq and Syria. The growing role of global powers in the region and NATO's changing stance toward Kurdish groups may continue to affect Türkiye's strategies. Additionally, domestic political shifts and economic concerns may push Ankara to explore alternative approaches, such as limited concessions or revised security frameworks, to manage the Kurdish question in a way that aligns with its broader geopolitical ambitions which are formed by domestic security concerns, regional alliances, and global diplomatic engagements. The Kurdish question remains a determining factor in Türkiye's strategic calculations, affecting its military interventions, economic partnerships, and diplomatic position within the international community. By employing security measures, diplomatic negotiations, and economic strategies, Türkiye aims to protect its territorial integrity and national security interests while overcoming the geopolitical challenges posed by the Kurdish question.

3. Regional and International Perceptions of the Kurdish Question in Türkiye's Foreign Policy

The Kurdish question in Türkiye's foreign policy has drawn a wide range of responses from regional and international actors, with each perspective shaped by geopolitical interests, security concerns, and historical relations. While some states perceive Türkiye's policies as necessary counterterrorism measures, others see them as destabilizing efforts that further exacerbate regional conflicts and humanitarian crises.

3.1. Iraq

The Kurdish question has had a massive impact on Türkiye's ties with Iraq, which has served as both a point of contention and a tool for political maneuvering for both nations. With a Kurdish population of approximately 6 million, Iraq has the second largest Kurdish population in the country after Türkiye with a Kurdish population of approximately 6 million (Osman 11). Historically, the Kurdish question has oscillated between cooperation and conflict, deeply embedded in the political strategies of Ankara and Baghdad. The fragmentation of the Kurdish population into multiple states following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century has created a persistent source of instability (Duman and Erendor). The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne failed to provide any form of autonomy for the Kurds, leading to periodic uprisings in both Türkiye and Iraq (Korkusuz and Kutluk 248; Mohammed and Romano 10; Olson). These tensions ran deep as the Kurdish population in Iraq sought greater political and territorial recognition, leading to a series of conflicts and negotiations that shaped Turkish-Iraqi relations for decades.

In the mid-20th century, Iraq experienced several Kurdish rebellions, particularly under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani. Türkiye, fearful of the influence of Iraqi Kurdish nationalism

on its own Kurdish population, aligned itself with Baghdad against these rebellions. In the 1960s and 1970s, Türkiye supported Iraq's efforts to contain the Kurdish movements, reflecting Ankara's broader strategy of preventing the spread of Kurdish separatism (O'Leary 22). However, following the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War, the Kurdish issue became increasingly international, forcing Türkiye to reevaluate its approach. In the Iran-Iraq War, both regional powers manipulated Kurdish groups for their own strategic goals, turning the Kurdish issue from a merely local concern into an international one.

The 1980s saw the emergence of a new dimension to the Kurdish question with the rise of the PKK, which launched an armed insurgency against Türkiye. The PKK took advantage of Baghdad's weakness in control of the mountainous regions of northern Iraq and used these areas as a base of operations (Sadri Alibabalu 155). In return, Türkiye and Iraq signed the 1983 Border Security and Cooperation Agreement, which allowed Turkish forces to conduct cross-border military operations against PKK targets (156). This marked a critical phase in which Türkiye legitimized its military interventions into Iraqi territory under the pretext of counter-terrorism operations. During this period, the Iraqi government also used chemical weapons against the Kurdish population, particularly in the infamous Halabja massacre of 1988, further complicating regional dynamics (O'Leary 18). Later Iraq's stance on the PKK has fluctuated, at times allowing Turkish attacks to target the group and at other times using the PKK as a bargaining chip in diplomatic negotiations with Ankara. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Türkiye increased its military presence in northern Iraq, leading to periodic diplomatic disputes with Baghdad, which viewed such operations as a violation of its sovereignty. Despite these tensions, Iraq's internal conflicts, including the Iran-Iraq War and the Kurdish insurgencies, limited Türkiye's ability to

effectively address security concerns, resulting in a complex and often contradictory approach to the PKK problem.

Following the 1991 Gulf War, the establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq led to the emergence of the Kurdistan Regional Government, which granted de facto autonomy to Iraqi Kurds. This development worried Ankara, which feared the precedent it could set for its own Kurdish population. Türkiye continued its policy of not recognizing Kurdish independence while also engaging in economic cooperation with the KRG to counterbalance the PKK's influence (Akkaya 153). The KRG became a vital economic partner for Türkiye by the early 2000s, with trade and energy deals giving Ankara leverage over the Kurds' desire for full independence. The expansion of Turkish businesses in Iraqi Kurdistan, from construction firms to energy deals, has deepened economic ties between Türkiye and the KRG, even as political tensions with Baghdad persist.

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime further reshaped Turkish-Iraqi relations. The KRG consolidated its autonomy, and Ankara had to strike a delicate balance between engaging with the Kurdish leadership and preventing any moves toward Kurdish statehood. Türkiye leveraged its economic influence, particularly in the energy sector, to oppose any formal move towards independence while keeping the KRG dependent on trade routes. This strategy included direct control over key oil export routes, such as the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, which serves as a vital link for the KRG's oil exports (152). Türkiye has also signed preferential trade agreements with the KRG, facilitating exports of Turkish construction materials, consumer goods, and technological infrastructure to Iraqi Kurdistan (Ergocun). Economic interdependence was even more solidified by Turkish investments in KRG-based energy companies and oil and gas revenue-sharing agreements, which

Ankara used as leverage to deter Kurdish separatism. Despite Ankara's political opposition to Kurdish independence, economic ties continued to grow, making Türkiye the KRG's primary trading partner. This was evident in the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum, which Türkiye strongly opposed and cooperated with Baghdad to pressure the KRG to abandon its separatist ambitions. Türkiye's economic clout, including control of vital oil export routes, has played a decisive role in thwarting Kurdish independence efforts (Akkaya 154).

Despite Türkiye's economic interaction with the KRG, its military operations against the PKK in northern Iraq have remained a constant point of friction with Baghdad. The Iraqi central government has repeatedly condemned Turkish military interventions as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty, while Türkiye has criticized Baghdad for failing to eliminate PKK bases (Park 46). This dynamic has led to diplomatic tensions, with Iraq seeking international support to block Turkish military actions and Türkiye justifying its interventions as necessary for its national security. The Turkish military maintains a presence in northern Iraq, including from bases established in the 1990s, underlining Ankara's long-term strategic interest in controlling PKK activities beyond its borders. However, Iraq has several times condemned these attacks as violations of its sovereignty, and Baghdad has repeatedly demanded the withdrawal of Turkish forces from the Iraqi territory. Diplomatic tensions have increased greatly from time to time over the years, with Iraq seeking international support to block Turkish military operations while Ankara insists on its right to defend itself. In some cases, the Iraqi government has attempted to assert control over the region by deploying its own forces or entering into negotiations with Kurdish authorities to limit Turkish influence, but these efforts have produced limited results (Mohammed and Alrebh 10).

Perceptions of Türkiye's actions by different groups in Iraq vary significantly. While the KRG has often cooperated with Türkiye, valuing economic ties and political support against Baghdad, the Iraqi government has viewed Turkish interventions as violations of its territorial integrity. This dichotomy gives an idea of the complexity of Kurdish-Arab relations in Iraq, where Turkish involvement is seen as both an opportunity and a challenge. The KRG's reliance on Türkiye for economic development has sometimes pitted it against Baghdad, which has sought to assert greater control over Kurdish affairs. For example, when the KRG signed a long term oil deal with Türkiye in 2013, the Iraqi government resorted to cut the Kurdish share of the federal budget in 2014 (6). At the same time, Türkiye's military operations and efforts to influence Kurdish politics in Iraq have fueled nationalist sentiment in Baghdad, and strengthened demands for greater sovereignty over Iraqi territory.

As the region's geopolitical setting continues to change, the Kurdish question remains a defining factor in Türkiye-Iraq relations. The continued presence of Turkish forces in Iraq, economic dependencies between Ankara and the KRG, and Baghdad's fluctuating stance on Kurdish autonomy contribute to a complex and evolving dynamic. Both nations have used the Kurdish question as a political tool to advance their own interests, resulting in a multifaceted relationship marked by both conflict and cooperation (Rojhelati 2). Understanding this historical and evolving dynamic is crucial to grasping the broader geopolitical scene of the Middle East. Future developments, such as changing U.S. policies, regional alliances, and domestic political shifts in both Türkiye and Iraq, will continue to shape how the Kurdish issue impacts Turkish-Iraqi relations. Based on past policy shifts, one possible scenario is an increased Turkish military presence in northern Iraq if Baghdad is unable to rein in PKK activities. Alternatively, a rapprochement between Türkiye and Iraq could lead to joint security operations or economic

cooperation aimed at stabilizing the Kurdish regions. The potential withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq could further shift the balance, creating new security dilemmas and forcing regional actors to reassess their positions. In addition, changes in Iraqi leadership or the strengthening of nationalist groups could lead to increased resistance to Turkish interventions and further complicate diplomatic relations.

3.2. Syria

With a Kurdish population of nearly 2.5 million, Syria is one of the countries of critical importance, just like Iraq, when it comes to the Kurdish question (McGee 174). Syria's perception of the Kurdish question is deep-seated in historical tensions in Türkiye's foreign policy, the complexities of the Syrian civil war and broader regional power struggles. Recently, there was a regime change in Syria and following the collapse of a long-lasting Baath regime, a new government was established under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa (Blanchard). The rapid strikes by Syrian armed groups against the government of Bashar al-Assad led to his resignation and exile to Russia. Although the new government's stance regarding the Kurds is unknown, insurgent groups and the SDF seemed reluctant to confront each other, leading the SDF maintain its control over Northern Syria, where the majority of Kurdish population in the country reside (Triche). The former Syrian government, led by President Bashar al-Assad, had consistently opposed Turkish interventions against Kurdish groups, viewing them as violations of Syrian sovereignty and actions that destabilize the region. This stance is embedded in a history of volatile relations between the two countries, marked by conflict, cooperation and strategic restructuring.

In the late 20th century, Syria provided support to the PKK, granting asylum to its leader Abdullah Öcalan and allowing the group to operate on Syrian soil. This support was motivated by

Syria's long-standing tensions with Türkiye, particularly over territorial disputes and water resources such as the Euphrates River (D'Alema 3). However, as Turkish-Syrian relations improved in the late 1990s, this policy changed significantly. The 1998 Adana Agreement marked a turning point, with Syria expelling Öcalan and agreeing to suppress PKK activity within its borders. Türkiye's foreign policy was shaped by then Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's thought, popularly formulated in the concept of "Strategic Depth" (Kasapoğlu 1). During this period, there was a significant rapprochement in Turkish-Syrian relations. Visas were cancelled, free trade was promoted, and joint cabinet meetings were held between the two countries (1). This rapprochement led to increased economic and political cooperation between the two states, with Syria aligning itself more closely with its stance on Kurdish separatism. However, this cooperation was largely strategic rather than ideological, as both nations continued to harbor deep-rooted mistrust.

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 fundamentally changed the dynamics of the Kurdish question in the region. As the conflict escalated, Kurdish groups in northern Syria, particularly the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Defence Units (YPG), took advantage of the power vacuum to establish de facto autonomous governments (D'Alema 12). Perceiving these groups as extensions of the PKK, Türkiye responded with increasing concern. The possibility of a contiguous Kurdish-controlled area on its southern border was seen as an existential threat to Türkiye's territorial integrity, leading to a series of military interventions, including Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016, Operation Olive Branch in 2018, and Operation Peace Spring in 2019 (Kasapoğlu 3). The Syrian government has repeatedly condemned these operations, viewing them as clear violations of its sovereignty. Then president

Bashar al-Assad condemned Türkiye's actions as support for terrorism and suggested that Ankara's real aim is to expand its regional influence at Syria's expense (*Syria Offensive*).

Türkiye's military interventions in northern Syria have had significant consequences for Syria's internal security and territorial integrity. Damascus perceived Ankara's actions as an attempt to establish an unofficial Turkish sphere of influence in northern Syria, undermining the possibility of a unified Syrian state. The displacement of Kurdish communities and the resettlement of Arab populations in formerly Kurdish-majority areas have further fueled Syria's suspicions of demographic engineering by Türkiye. Reports by international organizations, including Human Rights Watch have documented forced displacement and property confiscation in areas occupied by Turkish-backed forces (Human Rights Watch). These actions reinforced the Syrian government's belief that Türkiye's Kurdish policy is not just about security, but also involves changing Syria's demographics in a way that serves Ankara's long-term strategic goals.

While the Assad administration strongly opposed Türkiye's military actions against Kurdish forces, its own stance on the Kurdish question remains unclear. The Assad government had historically suppressed Kurdish political and cultural rights in Syria, but also shown a willingness to engage with Kurdish groups when politically expedient (O'Leary 7). Throughout the civil war, the Syrian regime had at times tolerated the PYD's control over Kurdish-majority areas, using it as a buffer zone against Turkish-backed rebel forces. This pragmatic approach highlights the extent to which the Kurdish question serves as a bargaining chip in Syria's broader strategic calculations. Reports suggest that Damascus had facilitated limited cooperation between Kurdish militias and pro-government forces at various points in the conflict, particularly when faced with common threats from Turkish-backed Syrian opposition groups. Syrian forces and

Kurdish fighters have at times coordinated in their fight against jihadist elements, particularly ISIS, despite their fundamentally different political aspirations (Hale 29).

The broader geopolitical implications of Türkiye's Kurdish policy have also influenced Syria's approach, which perceived Türkiye's military presence in northern Syria as an extension of its broader neo-Ottoman ambitions and suspects Ankara of seeking long-term territorial control rather than merely addressing its security concerns. This perception is reinforced by Türkiye's continued support for some opposition groups inside Syria, which the Assad regime saw as a direct attempt to undermine its rule. Syria also accused Türkiye on several occasions of collaborating with Western powers to undermine the central government in Damascus. These accusations were further complicated by Russia's role in the conflict, with Moscow serving as a key ally of Assad while maintaining a complex and sometimes cooperative relationship with Türkiye. The interaction between Russian, Turkish, and Syrian interests further complicates the resolution of the Kurdish question in Syria.

Despite these tensions, there were intermittent talks about possible reconciliation between Türkiye and Syria. Both countries share overlapping security concerns, particularly over the presence of jihadist groups in northern Syria, and there have been reports of Russian-brokered talks aimed at normalizing relations (30). However, significant obstacles remained, including Syria's demand for a full Turkish withdrawal from occupied Syrian territory and Türkiye's insistence on maintaining a military presence to counter Kurdish militias. These negotiations have been further complicated by shifting regional alliances as Türkiye recalibrates its foreign policy amid changing global dynamics as Syria strengthened its ties with Iran and Russia (O'Leary 6). Additionally, Türkiye's domestic political landscape also plays a role in shaping its

approach to Syria, with nationalist elements within the Turkish government advocating continued military pressure in northern Syria.

Syria's perception of Türkiye's Kurdish policy is ultimately shaped by its broader strategic imperatives. While Damascus opposed Kurdish separatism within its own borders, it also saw Turkish military actions as a direct challenge to its sovereignty and long-term stability. This dichotomy shows the complexity of the Kurdish question in the context of Turkish-Syrian relations, where both nations search a balance between conflict and reluctant pragmatism. The Assad regime always remained deeply suspicious of Türkiye's regional ambitions and continued to use the Kurdish question in its diplomatic interactions with both regional and international actors.

As the conflict in Syria evolves, the Kurdish question remains a key factor affecting Turkish-Syrian relations and regional stability. The recent overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime has created new dynamics as various groups compete for control and influence. In this context, Türkiye's approach to the Kurdish question continues to be shaped by security concerns, territorial integrity and the broader geopolitical view.

As discussed earlier, Türkiye has viewed Kurdish militias, particularly the YPG in Syria, as extensions of the PKK, which it labels a terrorist organization. This perception has led to numerous military interventions aimed at preventing the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region on its southern border. For example, the 2019 Turkish offensive into northeastern Syria was launched with the aim of creating a "safe zone" free from YPG influence, but the operation faced international criticism, with reports suggesting it led to significant civilian displacement and allegations of demographic engineering (*Syria Offensive*).

The situation got even more complicated with the fall of the Assad regime. In the resulting power vacuum, Kurdish groups have sought to preserve cultural and political gains made during the years of conflict. In regions such as Rojava, Kurds have established autonomous governments and promoted the Kurdish language and cultural practices (*Kurds in the New Syria*). While these developments have empowered the Kurdish population, they are perceived by Türkiye as potential catalysts for growing separatist sentiment within its borders.

The international community's stance on the Kurdish question adds another layer of complexity. While the US has cooperated with Kurdish forces in the fight against ISIS, Türkiye views the alliance with suspicion, fearing it is strengthening Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. This divergence of perspectives have at times created tensions in Türkiye's relations with its NATO allies as Ankara tries to balance security concerns with international diplomatic pressure (*"Conflict Between Türkiye"*).

In the post-Assad era, Türkiye's policy toward the Kurdish question is likely to continue to focus on preventing the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous region on its own territory that could inspire similar movements. This goal could include a continued military presence in northern Syria, strategic alliances with local groups opposed to Kurdish autonomy, and diplomatic efforts to gain international support for its stance. However, in Syria's changing look, finding a balance between addressing security concerns and navigating the complicated web of regional and international relations is likely to remain a significant challenge for Türkiye.

3.3. Iran

Iran, another country with a significant Kurdish population among the states in the region, is an actor that cannot be overlooked when it comes to the Kurdish question and Türkiye's

foreign policy. The historical context of Turkish-Iranian relations is rooted in the centuries-long rivalry between the Ottoman and Persian empires in particular. However, in the modern era, their interactions have been shaped by mutual security concerns, economic interests, and regional ambitions, with the Kurdish question playing a major role in defining their engagement.

Iran, like Türkiye, has historically struggled with Kurdish nationalist movements within its borders, leading them to perceive the Kurdish issue primarily through a security lens. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of modern nation-states, Kurdish aspirations for independence were systematically suppressed by Tehran, as was the case by Ankara (Sinkaya 842). Throughout the 20th century, Kurdish uprisings periodically occurred in both Türkiye and Iran. In Iran, the Republic of Mahabad, a short-lived Kurdish state established with Soviet support in 1946, was quickly dismantled by Tehran (842). The suppression of this experiment strengthened Iran's opposition to Kurdish independence movements and aligned its stance with Türkiye, which was simultaneously dealing with its own Kurdish unrest. This alignment laid the foundation for intermittent security cooperation between the two states against Kurdish separatist groups, including the PKK in Türkiye and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran.

The 1980s marked a turning point in Turkish-Iranian relations over the Kurdish issue. With the rise of the PKK and its uprising against Türkiye, Ankara sought regional support to counter Kurdish militancy. Iran initially provided limited covert aid to the PKK as a means of pressuring Ankara, particularly during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) (van Bruinessen 23). Over time, Iran's position on the PKK has changed as it has sought to balance its regional strategy with its own concerns about the Kurdish insurgency. In the late 1990s, Tehran shifted toward a more cooperative stance with Türkiye, entering into intelligence-sharing agreements and joint security

measures to counter both the PKK and PJAK (Bayat). Turkish-Iranian military coordination has increased, particularly in border regions where both countries have conducted operations to eliminate Kurdish militant strongholds. While tactical cooperation continued, Iran has periodically used its interactions with Kurdish groups to exert pressure on Türkiye, particularly during times of regional geopolitical shifts or diplomatic disputes (van Bruinessen 26). However, Tehran's mentality changed when Kurdish rebels, particularly PJAK, began operating from northern Iraq against the Iranian government. This led to increased Turkish-Iranian intelligence sharing and joint military operations targeting Kurdish militant bases along their shared border. Both countries viewed Kurdish separatism as an existential threat to their territorial integrity, but they also used Kurdish groups strategically to counterbalance each other's regional influence.

The post-Cold War era and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 further changed the Kurdish dynamics between Türkiye and Iran. The collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime facilitated the rise of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, a development that both Türkiye and Iran viewed with suspicion (O'Leary 24). While Türkiye engaged with the KRG economically, as discussed in detail earlier, Iran was more cautious, fearing that a strengthened Kurdish presence in Iraq could embolden its own Kurdish population. Despite these differences, both countries were determined to prevent full Kurdish independence, as such an outcome could have destabilizing effects on their national security interests. While Iran has maintained close ties with various Kurdish groups in Iraq, it has also worked with the central government in Baghdad to contain the KRG's ambitions. Tehran has used its influence over the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a major Kurdish political party, to counterbalance the dominance of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which has closer ties to Türkiye (26). Iran has also provided economic and military support to Baghdad in its disputes with the KRG, particularly during the 2017 Kurdish

independence referendum, when it supported Iraq's military intervention to retake disputed areas such as Kirkuk. By maintaining relations with both the Kurdish and central Iraqi authorities, Iran has secured its strategic foothold in Iraq while trying to prevent any unilateral Kurdish independence movement that might inspire similar aspirations among its own Kurdish population. In the meantime, Türkiye, on the one hand, was trying to neutralize the PKK's presence in northern Iraq, while on the other hand, it was trying to foster economic dependencies in order to include the KRG in its sphere of influence (Mohammed and Alrebh 6).

The Kurdish question in Syria has added another layer of complexity to Turkish-Iranian relations. The Syrian civil war has created an environment in which Kurdish groups, particularly the YPG, have been able to establish de facto autonomous regions. Since Türkiye perceives the YPG as an extension of the PKK and a direct security threat, Iran's position is even more critical. Throughout the conflict, Tehran used its alliance with the Assad regime to balance relations with Kurdish groups in Syria, sometimes allowing tactical cooperation between Syrian Kurdish forces and Iranian-backed militias to counter Türkiye's influence in northern Syria (*An Uneasy Stalemate?*). This dynamic has placed Türkiye and Iran in both cooperative and competitive positions, with Iran trying to balance Türkiye's growing influence in Syria while also ensuring that Kurdish forces do not disrupt its broader regional strategy. Economically, the Kurdish question has affected trade and energy cooperation between Türkiye and Iran. Both countries have significant economic ties, particularly in the energy sector, and have at times used the Kurdish issue as leverage in their broader diplomatic engagements. Türkiye's dependence on Iranian oil and gas imports, especially in the face of Western sanctions on Tehran, has made economic cooperation a necessary aspect of their relationship (Sadri Alibabalu 155). However, differences over Kurdish policy have occasionally soured trade agreements, and Iran has viewed

Türkiye's economic interactions with the KRG as a potential challenge to Iraqi sovereignty. Turkish energy companies have invested in the KRG's oil sector, creating a strategic divergence between Ankara and Tehran as Türkiye strengthens its foothold in the Kurdish region while Iran seeks to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity.

Despite periodic cooperation, Turkish-Iranian rivalry over Kurdish politics remains prominent. While both states share a common interest in suppressing Kurdish separatism, their broader regional ambitions often pit them against each other. Türkiye's military operations in northern Iraq and Syria, although justified as counterterrorism efforts, have sometimes clashed with Iran's strategic objectives in the region. For example, Türkiye's repeated incursions into northern Iraq, particularly its operations against PKK strongholds in the Qandil Mountains, have at times weakened Iran's influence in the region as Tehran has sought to maintain close ties with both the Iraqi central government and certain Kurdish groups, primarily the PUK (van Bruinessen 22). Similarly, in Syria, Turkish military interventions aimed at displacing Kurdish groups, such as Operation Olive Branch (2018) and Operation Peace Spring (2019), clashed with Iran's strategic goal of preserving Assad's control over all of Syria's territory. Iran has opposed Türkiye's military expansion, at times fearing that its support for Shiite militias and the Syrian government could disrupt the corridor of influence stretching from Tehran to the Mediterranean. These competing agendas have led to diplomatic tensions, with both countries at times using Kurdish groups to balance each other's influence in Iraq and Syria. Iran has sought to limit Turkish influence, including in Kurdish-populated areas, through its support for Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria (Ozcelik). In addition, Iran's willingness to provide limited support to Kurdish groups at times has been a tactical move to pressure Türkiye on broader regional issues. The two countries differ in their approaches to US involvement in the region, with Türkiye at times

aligning with Washington in its anti-Iran stance, while Iran remains committed to opposing Western influence.

For the future, it can be claimed that Türkiye and Iran are likely to continue their pragmatic cooperation on Kurdish security issues as they compete for regional influence. Just like in Iraq and Syria the changing geopolitical positions, including shifting U.S. policies in the Middle East and the potential realignment of Kurdish political actors, can further shape their engagement. Especially, the decline of the US presence and engagement in the region could play a critical role in shaping these countries' approach to the Kurdish issue. One possible scenario is that Turkish military operations in Iraq and Syria will increase if Kurdish groups gain greater autonomy, leading to further friction with Iran. The growing influence of some other international actors such as China and Russia in the Middle East affairs could also change the dynamics of Turkish-Iranian interactions on the Kurdish question, as both countries seek external support to strengthen their positions. While Ankara and Tehran are likely to continue cooperating against Kurdish separatist groups, underlying distrust and diverging regional strategies suggest that the Kurdish question will remain a major factor in the complex and often uneasy relationship between Türkiye and Iran. As Kurdish political and military groups in Iraq and Syria evolve, both Türkiye and Iran will be forced to reevaluate their strategies, balancing security concerns with economic and diplomatic imperatives.

3.4. European Union

The European Union is also an important actor when it comes to the Kurdish question, even though it is not a nation-state neighboring Türkiye, unlike the other actors examined in this study. This issue has always been significant in shaping Türkiye's relations with the EU by affecting diplomatic relations, causing human rights concerns and raising negotiations for

accession. The Kurdish question, framed by Türkiye as a security concern and by the EU as a human rights and minority rights issue, has created recurring tensions between the two sides. The EU's perception of Türkiye's policies towards its Kurdish population has often been critical, particularly at key moments such as Türkiye's military operations against Kurdish groups in Syria, the imprisonment of pro-Kurdish political figures, and restrictions on Kurdish education (Stanicek 2). These concerns have led to diplomatic friction, and the EU has frequently issued resolutions condemning Türkiye's handling of the Kurdish issue. For example, the European Parliament has called for the release of Kurdish politicians such as Selahattin Demirtaş, and the European Commission's progress reports have consistently cited Türkiye's policies on Kurdish rights as a major obstacle to EU membership (*2021 Resolution on Human Rights Situation*). These criticisms have shaped Türkiye's foreign policy calculations, with Ankara oscillating between defensive rhetoric, limited policy adjustments, and, at times, outright rejection of EU demands, which have been seen as interference in its domestic affairs. While Türkiye emphasizes the fight against terrorism and national unity, the EU continues to advocate for expanded political and cultural rights for the Kurdish population. This difference in approach has contributed to repeated political stagnation in Türkiye's accession process, with the EU consistently linking improvements in Kurdish rights to broader democratic reforms required for Türkiye's membership bid.

Historically, Türkiye's interaction with the EU has been marked by volatile dynamics, ranging from aspirations for full membership to periods of political deadlock. Türkiye first applied for associate membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959 and later signed the Ankara Agreement in 1963, which paved the way for eventual accession (Kirisçi 48). However, the Kurdish issue became a more important factor in EU-Türkiye relations after the

1980s, particularly following the escalation of conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK. During the 1990s, when Türkiye was experiencing intense internal unrest, the EU expressed increasing concern about human rights violations in Türkiye's predominantly Kurdish regions (48). The European Parliament and the European Commission have issued many reports highlighting allegations of extrajudicial killings, forced village evictions and systematic discrimination against Kurdish citizens. The EU has also expressed concern over Türkiye's state of emergency in the southeast, which limited freedoms of expression, assembly and the press. In response, several EU member states have imposed restrictions on arms sales to Türkiye, expressing concerns that European-made weapons are being used in counter-insurgency operations against their Kurdish populations ("*Weapons Transfers and Violations*"). In addition, human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented abuses that have increased international pressure on the EU to hold Türkiye accountable. These concerns have contributed to Türkiye's delayed accession talks, with the EU making human rights improvements a key condition for progress in membership negotiations. Reports of extrajudicial killings, forced displacements, and restrictions on Kurdish cultural expression have been met with harsh criticism from European institutions and have led to delays in Türkiye's EU accession process. The European Commission's progress reports, in particular, have consistently highlighted Türkiye's handling of the Kurdish issue as an obstacle to meeting the Copenhagen Criteria for membership. The Kurdish issue has increasingly been framed as a test of Türkiye's commitment to European democratic norms, and this complicated the accession negotiations even further.

One of the critical turning points in Türkiye-EU relations regarding the Kurdish question came when Türkiye was officially recognized as an EU candidate in 1999. This recognition was

partly based on Türkiye's commitment to improve human rights conditions, including the treatment of its Kurdish population. In the following years, some reforms were implemented under the Justice and Development Party, including the easing of restrictions on Kurdish broadcasting and education. However, these reforms were viewed as inadequate by the EU, and concerns persisted about Türkiye's heavy-handed security measures against the PKK and broader Kurdish political activism (Derince 148). The EU has called on Türkiye to shift from a military-focused approach in addressing Kurdish grievances to a more political and inclusive strategy. As part of this effort, the EU has repeatedly emphasized the importance of democratic reforms, legal protections for Kurdish political participation, and cultural rights. The European Commission's progress reports have consistently called for legal changes to increase the political representation of Kurdish parties, while EU-funded programs have aimed to support civil society organizations defending Kurdish rights (Toygür and Tekin 3). In addition, the EU has encouraged attempts of dialogue between the Turkish government and Kurdish political actors, but these efforts have been largely sidelined by Ankara's security-centric approach. The European Parliament has also passed multiple resolutions condemning Türkiye's restrictive policies toward Kurdish political movements and calling for a shift toward reconciliation and inclusive governance. While some progress has been made, such as the establishment of Kurdish language courses in the early 2000s and limited legal protections for Kurdish cultural rights, these reforms have remained superficial and frequently undermined by ongoing security pressures (Derince 147). As a result, despite early optimism, EU-Türkiye relations have remained strained over the Kurdish question.

The collapse of the Kurdish peace (or resolution) process in 2015 further increased tensions between Türkiye and the EU. The Turkish government's renewed military operations against Kurdish militant groups, both at home and in neighboring Syria and Iraq, have drawn

increasing criticism from Europe. The EU has repeatedly condemned Türkiye's military operations against Kurdish forces in northern Syria, particularly following Operation Peace Spring in 2019, which targeted the Kurdish-led SDF (Stanicek 3). While acknowledging Türkiye's security concerns, European leaders have criticized these interventions as a violation of international law and an increase in regional instability. The EU also imposed restrictions on arms exports to Türkiye again, in response to its military intervention in Syria, reflecting the extent of European disapproval of Ankara's Kurdish policy. These developments have deepened the gap between Türkiye and EU member states and led to increasing calls in the European Parliament to formally suspend accession negotiations with Türkiye.

The EU's stance on Kurdish political rights has also been an important factor in EU-Türkiye relations. The European Parliament has consistently advocated for greater political representation for Kurds in Türkiye, and the EU has condemned Türkiye's detention of pro-Kurdish politicians, particularly those affiliated with the HDP. The imprisonment of high-profile Kurdish politicians such as Selahattin Demirtaş has been cited by EU institutions as evidence of Türkiye's democratic backsliding, leading to further diplomatic tensions. EU reports have highlighted concerns about the erosion of judicial independence in Türkiye and have argued that legal measures taken against Kurdish politicians are politically motivated rather than impartial measures against terrorism. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled against Türkiye in cases involving Kurdish political figures, further straining relations between Ankara and Brussels (Buyuk). Türkiye has accused the EU of applying double standards and interfering in its internal affairs, and has argued that its policies towards Kurdish political figures are necessary for national security.

Despite these tensions, Türkiye remains an important partner for the EU, particularly in areas such as trade, migration and counter-terrorism. Economically, the EU is Türkiye's largest trading partner, and both sides continue to trade despite political disagreements (*"Foreign Trade Statistics"*). The EU-Türkiye Customs Union, in force since 1995, facilitates economic integration, and discussions on its modernization continue, albeit stalled by political tensions (Toygür and Tekin 4). In terms of security cooperation, Türkiye remains an important NATO member, and intelligence sharing continues between Türkiye and European countries on counter-terrorism efforts, particularly in relation to threats posed by foreign fighters and extremist groups operating in Syria and Iraq (Deni 55). Moreover, the 2016 EU-Türkiye migration agreement has remained largely intact, demonstrating pragmatic cooperation between the two sides despite disagreements on human rights and Kurdish policies (Stanicek 3). While diplomatic tensions persist, mutual strategic interests necessitate continued engagement in these critical areas. The 2016 EU-Türkiye refugee agreement, which aimed to stop the flow of refugees into Europe, has demonstrated Türkiye's strategic importance to the EU. However, Türkiye has occasionally used its role in migration management as leverage in negotiations with the EU, and has occasionally threatened to open its borders if European leaders continue to criticize its policies on the Kurds and other human rights concerns. Despite the fact that sometimes political relations have deteriorated; economic ties have generally persisted, reflecting the complexity of Türkiye-EU relations beyond the Kurdish question. The EU's economic influence over Türkiye has at times been viewed as a potential bargaining chip, but Ankara has shown a willingness to pursue alternative economic partnerships, particularly with Russia and China, in response to EU criticism (*"Foreign Trade Statistics"*).

Regarding the future, the Kurdish question is likely to remain a central theme in EU-Türkiye relations. While the EU continues to push for human rights improvements and political reforms, Türkiye sees European criticism as interference in its internal affairs. As Türkiye's geopolitical ambitions evolve and the EU reassesses its enlargement strategy, the relationship between the two actors is likely to continue to oscillate between pragmatic cooperation and diplomatic confrontation. Future developments, including shifts in EU foreign policy, Türkiye's evolving domestic political landscape, and potential changes in regional security dynamics, will shape the course of their engagement. Without meaningful dialogue and mutual concessions, the Kurdish question will remain a persistent source of tension between Türkiye and the EU, affecting not only the accession talks but also broader diplomatic and security cooperation. One possible scenario is that Türkiye, under economic and political pressure, could implement limited reforms on Kurdish rights in order to secure trade advantages or closer diplomatic ties with the EU. Conversely, if EU-Türkiye relations remain tense, Türkiye could continue its turn toward alternative alliances, such as Russia and China, which could reduce Brussels' influence on the Kurdish question. The EU's role as a mediator between Türkiye and Kurdish political actors could be a way to reduce tensions in the future, especially if Türkiye sees strategic benefits in cooperation rather than confrontation. Furthermore, if the EU reconsiders its broader enlargement strategy, it could intensify its demands against Türkiye on Kurdish rights or deprioritize the issue in favor of geopolitical stability and security cooperation.

3.5. The United States

The United States has been playing an active role in the Middle East for decades, so it is closely implicated with Turkish foreign policy and the Kurdish question, despite being miles away in geographic terms. Some key moments that demonstrate the centrality of this issue to their

relations include the US's establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War, which facilitated the establishment of the KRG (Gunter 202). This move deepened Türkiye's concerns about Kurdish autonomy and set the stage for future diplomatic tensions. Another critical turning point was the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, which further strengthened Kurdish political actors and led to greater US engagement with Kurdish forces, cementing the strategic partnership between the US and the KRG. In Syria, US support for the Kurdish-led SDF in the fight against ISIS was another turning point, leading to increasing friction with Türkiye (Blanchard 1). These events have consistently shaped how the Kurdish question has affected Turkish-American relations, frequently causing tensions between Ankara and Washington. Türkiye and the United States have maintained a strategic partnership since the beginning of the Cold War, and Türkiye joined NATO in 1952 to counter Soviet influence (Lawrence 24). This alliance has facilitated military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and arms trade, but their relations have often been strained by divergent regional policies (Togan 1342). The Kurdish question has emerged as a central issue, particularly as Kurdish aspirations for autonomy in Iraq and Syria increasingly intersect with U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East.

When the PKK launched an armed insurgency against the Turkish state in 1984, Türkiye's response was overwhelmingly militaristic, immediately classifying the PKK as a terrorist organization and conducting extensive military operations to neutralize its activities. The United States, in line with Türkiye's stance, designated the PKK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997 (Lawrence 10). Despite this alignment, however, U.S. interactions with Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria have caused persistent friction in bilateral relations, particularly as Washington attempts to maintain strategic partnerships with Kurdish groups while balancing its commitment to Türkiye as a NATO ally (Kasapoğlu 4).

During the 1991 Gulf War, the United States imposed a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, effectively creating a safe haven for the Kurdish population. This led to the establishment of the KRG, a semi-autonomous Kurdish entity with US support. As mentioned earlier in this study, Türkiye was skeptical of the KRG's empowerment, fearing that it would fuel Kurdish separatism within its own borders, but still it simultaneously engaged with the KRG economically, particularly in the energy sector. The paradox of Turkish policy—cooperating with the KRG while suppressing Kurdish movements at home—reflected Ankara's attempt to balance economic pragmatism with national security concerns. Meanwhile, the US deepened its ties with the KRG, seeing it as a reliable partner in stabilizing Iraq, especially after the 2003 US-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein's regime (Pusane 9).

The Syrian Civil War has made U.S.-Türkiye relations more complicated than ever over the Kurdish question. The rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq has led the United States to partner with the SDF, whose primary military component is the YPG. Türkiye openly opposes U.S. military support for the group as it views the YPG as an extension of the PKK (Lawrence 33). However, Washington has justified its alliance with the YPG on the basis of operational necessity, given the group's effectiveness in combating ISIS. This strategic divergence has led to significant diplomatic tensions, with Türkiye accusing the United States of supporting terrorist actors and the United States urging Türkiye to focus on broader regional stability rather than Kurdish militant activity (Alhas). The US has repeatedly assured Türkiye that its partnership with the YPG is tactical, but these assurances have not been enough to deter Türkiye from voicing its concerns.

When Turkish military operations in Syria, including Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, and Operation Peace Spring, were launched, these attacks were met with strong opposition from the United States, which viewed them as destabilizing actions that

undermined anti-ISIS operations and exacerbated regional conflicts (Kasapoğlu 3). NATO allies also expressed concern that Türkiye's unilateral actions threatened the alliance's broader security strategy in the Middle East. As previously discussed, the European Union also criticized these operations, and several member states imposed arms embargoes on Türkiye over concerns about human rights violations. Despite all the criticisms, Türkiye has defended its actions as necessary counterterrorism measures, arguing that Kurdish militant groups pose a direct security threat to its national sovereignty. Reflecting bipartisan concerns about Ankara's military interventions, the U.S. Congress imposed sanctions on Türkiye following the 2019 military operation (Taş Yetim and Hazar 2). In spite of these tensions, however, Türkiye and the U.S. have continued to cooperate on other security issues, including intelligence sharing on regional terrorist threats, arms trade agreements, and maintaining NATO alignment. Türkiye has also strengthened its strategic position by controlling key air bases such as Incirlik, which are vital to U.S. military operations in the Middle East (Gunter 468).

Recent developments point to the continuing difficulties in managing the Kurdish issue within Turkish-American relations. The United States has reportedly facilitated talks between Kurdish groups and the Syrian government, aiming to integrate Kurdish forces into Syrian state structures as a means of reducing conflict and addressing Türkiye's security concerns (Malsin, Kalin and Youssef). Türkiye has expressed cautious optimism about these talks but continues to insist that any solution must include the disarmament and disbandment of Kurdish militias, which it views as terrorist organizations. Recent developments also suggest that Washington is encouraging its Kurdish allies in Syria to shift their priorities from armed resistance to political integration, which could change regional security dynamics. But Ankara remains skeptical of these efforts, most probably fearing that recognizing Kurdish political autonomy in Syria could

set a dangerous precedent for its own Kurdish population. Decades later, Türkiye is experiencing the same nightmare it experienced during the establishment of the KRG, this time in Syria.

The broader geopolitical landscape continues to shape the Kurdish question in U.S.-Türkiye relations. Türkiye's increasing alignment with Russia and China, in part as a counterweight to U.S. pressure, suggests Ankara is diversifying its strategic options beyond its traditional Western alliances. This shift has important implications for Türkiye's bargaining power in negotiations with the U.S. over the Kurdish question. Türkiye has demonstrated its willingness to challenge U.S. influence and seek alternative security partnerships by strengthening its economic and military ties with Russia, including the purchase of the S-400 missile defense system (Hale 33). In addition, China's Belt and Road Initiative has provided Türkiye with new economic opportunities, reducing its dependence on Western financial institutions (Teker et al. 187). These restructurings have allowed Türkiye to use its position more effectively in negotiations with the United States, using its strategic partnerships as a way to counter American support for Kurdish groups in Syria. However, this shift in axis has also brought risks, as closer ties with Russia and China could further alienate Türkiye from its NATO allies and complicate its long-term security strategy. Moreover, domestic political changes in the United States and Türkiye could further affect their respective positions on the Kurdish question. While Washington remains committed to its Kurdish partnership in Syria, there is a growing recognition that long-term stability in the region requires balancing Kurdish autonomy with Turkish security imperatives. The U.S. administration faces the challenge of maintaining its credibility as an ally for both Türkiye and Kurdish groups, while Türkiye is increasingly willing to act unilaterally, as seen in its expanding military operations beyond its borders.

Considering the future, the Kurdish question is likely to remain a central and contentious issue in U.S.-Türkiye relations. The U.S. must strike a delicate balance between supporting Kurdish groups that have proven effective in counterterrorism operations and maintaining its strategic alliance with Türkiye. Meanwhile, Türkiye must decide whether to continue its confrontational approach or seek a more diplomatic solution to the long-running Kurdish conflict. The course of their relations will depend on regional developments, shifts in the U.S. foreign policy, and Türkiye's evolving role in NATO and the broader Middle East. Without a mutually acceptable framework, tensions over the Kurdish issue will persist and shape the future of Turkish-American diplomatic engagement. The possibility of Türkiye expanding its military footprint in Iraq and Syria, combined with the U.S. efforts to manage Kurdish relations through diplomatic mediation, will define the next phase of this ongoing geopolitical challenge.

Given the broader regional implications of the Kurdish question, Israel also emerges as a uniquely positioned actor whose strategic calculations both align with and complicate Türkiye's objectives. Historically, Israeli-Kurdish relations have evolved around mutual perceptions of marginalization and shared security interests. In Iraq in particular, Israel has been one of the few international actors to openly support Kurdish aspirations for autonomy or independence, most notably during the 2017 KRG independence referendum, which it approved despite near-universal regional opposition (Liga 2–4). Israel's motivations lie in a long-standing alliance with the Kurdish leadership that encompasses intelligence cooperation and energy trade, most notably the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, which transports Kurdish oil via Türkiye to Israeli markets. This relationship is seen by Israel as a strategic buffer against Iranian influence in the region and a rare way to project power and gain allies in a generally hostile neighborhood (Liga 4–5). But Türkiye sees Israel's support for Kurdish nationalism—especially in northern Iraq—as a threat to its own

territorial integrity and regional influence. Israel's support for Kurdish independence has contributed to periods of increasing diplomatic tension between Ankara and Tel Aviv. While Türkiye and Israel have gone through phases of economic and security cooperation, particularly on intelligence and counterterrorism, the Kurdish question remains a potential flashpoint in bilateral relations.

As a potential scenario for the future, Israel's position on the Kurdish question could further complicate Türkiye's regional policy, especially as Israel-KRG relations deepen in economic and, potentially, diplomatic dimensions. As Setiawati and Naranta (2022) argue, Türkiye under Erdoğan has increasingly adopted a security-centric and assertive foreign policy toward Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq, viewing them through the lens of PKK affiliation and territorial threats. Israeli efforts to promote Kurdish autonomy or independence—even unofficially—could be perceived by Ankara as a hostile intervention and lead to further regional polarization. Moreover, in a future scenario in which Kurdish political entities in Iraq or Syria gain greater legitimacy or institutional integration, Israel may view them as stable partners, while Türkiye may interpret such developments as a catalyst for internal unrest. Israel's quiet but strategic position on the Kurdish question therefore poses a long-term challenge for Türkiye, potentially affecting Ankara's foreign policy recalibrations in the Levant and beyond.

4. Potential Policy Shifts and Future Directions

As the geopolitical scenery of the Middle East continues to evolve, the Kurdish question will continue to be a determining factor not only in Türkiye's current foreign policy but also in its future international engagements. Given the complex interaction between domestic politics, regional security dynamics, and global alliances, the course of the Kurdish question will have

significant implications for Türkiye's relations with a wide range of actors beyond its immediate neighborhood. How Türkiye manages its relations with Kurdish actors, both within and beyond its borders, will determine the parameters of its engagement with key global and regional powers, including the United States, Russia, Iran, the European Union, and various multilateral institutions.

In the coming years, Türkiye is likely to pursue a security-oriented approach to the Kurdish issue, particularly in its relations with non-state actors such as the PKK and its affiliates in Syria and Iraq. However, this approach will be shaped by several recent global and regional trends. In particular, the restructuring of U.S. foreign policy away from large-scale ground operations in the Middle East could present both opportunities and risks for Türkiye. While a potential reduction in U.S. support for Kurdish-led forces like the SDF could ease Ankara's immediate concerns, it could also create new power vacuums that Kurdish groups seek to fill. Türkiye could respond by expanding its military presence and consolidating de facto control in northern Syria and Iraq through buffer zones, joint patrols, strategic infrastructure projects, and local political alliances aimed at achieving long-term influence. It is also possible that Türkiye could seek to indirectly influence governance in these regions by supporting cohesive local councils and leveraging humanitarian aid.

Meanwhile, the European Union's stance toward Türkiye is becoming increasingly pragmatic in light of shared security and migration concerns. Despite ongoing tensions over human rights and democratic governance, EU member states are increasingly reliant on Türkiye to contain refugee flows from the Middle East and promote regional stability in light of the Ukraine war and rising tensions with Russia (Oğurlu 46). Moreover, Türkiye's growing defensive capabilities, particularly in drone warfare and hybrid security operations, have strengthened its

position as a regional power that the EU cannot alienate (Mevlütöğlü et al. 19). As a result, the EU may be more willing to ignore Ankara's assertive stance in the Kurdish regions, especially when Turkish operations are framed as counterterrorism efforts. This shift may soften EU criticisms and provide Türkiye with more room to maneuver militarily, but it comes at the cost of deepening normative contradictions within European foreign policy and straining its credibility on human rights and minority issues.

At the regional level, Türkiye's engagement with Iraq and Syria will continue to be shaped by Kurdish dynamics. In Iraq, Türkiye could continue to engage pragmatically with the KRG while deepening its partnership with Baghdad. Despite periodic political tensions, as discussed previously, Türkiye and the KRG have developed a mutually beneficial relationship over the past two decades. The KRG relies heavily on trade with Türkiye, particularly for energy exports, construction, and consumer goods, while Türkiye benefits from regional influence and energy diversification. The KRG has also cooperated with Türkiye in its fight against the PKK, providing intelligence and limiting PKK activity in certain areas, although this has not always been consistent across all Kurdish factions (Yıldırım 13). This pragmatic alignment is likely to continue, and Türkiye is likely to increase its role in KRG infrastructure and border security, while using economic leverage to shape Erbil's stance on the PKK presence and other regional issues.

In Syria, recent developments have added new complexities to Türkiye's strategic calculations. Following the collapse of the Assad regime, a Turkish-backed group (HTS) seized power in Damascus, signaling a temporary diplomatic victory for Ankara ("Turkey's Earthquake Survivors"). However, this new Syrian leadership also signed an agreement to integrate the SDF into the regular Syrian army (Azhari et al.). This move potentially provides political recognition

and protection to Kurdish groups, particularly the YPG, by placing them under the formal protection of the new state apparatus. As a result, Kurdish groups could gain increased political influence and institutional presence inside Syria, potentially allowing them to achieve their goals through state-backed channels. For Türkiye, this new arrangement could require a recalibration of its security posture. Ankara may have to think twice before launching new military actions against Kurdish groups, as such actions could now be interpreted as direct conflict with a Syrian state it helped bring to power. At the same time, Türkiye may intensify its diplomatic efforts to ensure that the official role granted to Kurdish forces remains limited, tightly controlled, and devoid of promises of greater autonomy that could spill over into its own Kurdish regions.

Iran will remain a complex partner and rival. While Türkiye and Iran have at times taken coordinated action against Kurdish rebel groups operating along their shared border, strategic competition remains. Internal Iranian instability, particularly amid Kurdish unrest in the northwestern regions and broader anti-regime sentiment, could prompt Tehran to seek tactical cooperation with Ankara. However, Iran's alignment with pro-Shia groups, its support for selected Kurdish groups, and its divergent long-term goals, such as Türkiye's expanding military and economic footprint in Iraq, suggest persistent friction. Moreover, regional instability in regions such as the Persian Gulf or Azerbaijan could further complicate Turkish-Iranian relations and spill over into competing Kurdish policies.

Türkiye's relations with Western institutions will increasingly depend on its ability to balance domestic security imperatives with international expectations. While the EU and the US are likely to continue to criticize Ankara's domestic Kurdish policy -especially political repression, restrictions on cultural rights, and restrictions on political representation- they will simultaneously depend on Türkiye for regional counterterrorism cooperation, refugee control,

energy transit routes, and NATO alignment. This interdependence creates a transactional framework in which Türkiye can negotiate greater tolerance of its security practices in exchange for meeting the West's strategic needs. For example, Ankara could offer to mediate regional conflicts or expand its logistical contributions to NATO operations in exchange for muted criticism of its domestic policies.

In response to shifting alliances, Türkiye could try to reframe the Kurdish question as a regional diplomatic issue rather than a purely domestic or military one. Engaging Kurdish actors through controlled political channels or even engaging in regional dialogues on decentralization, conflict resolution, and minority rights could boost Türkiye's credibility and reduce external pressure. At the same time, Ankara could continue to project power through its rapidly growing defense industry. Türkiye's use of advanced drone technology and surveillance infrastructure has dramatically changed the strategic landscape, allowing for more targeted operations and deterrence with fewer international consequences. However, the reputational risks of prolonged cross-border operations-especially if civilian casualties rise or international media coverage intensifies-may prompt Türkiye to complement its hard power tools with selective political initiatives, including cross-border reconciliation programs, intelligence cooperation frameworks with neighboring states, or pilot programs for local governance reforms in Kurdish-majority areas.

The domestic political climate will continue to be a determining factor. If a more inclusive coalition emerges or economic pressures force a political realignment, Türkiye may reconsider previous attempts to offer cultural and political concessions to its Kurdish citizens. In fact, recent developments suggest that such a recalibration attempt may already be underway. The Turkish government has started discussions about the potential release of PKK founding leader

Abdullah Öcalan as part of a broader effort to reframe the Kurdish issue and seek a negotiated solution (Yackley). While the outcome of this effort remains uncertain, it points to a possible shift away from purely security-oriented policies. In parallel, Türkiye is also discussing constitutional amendments aimed at facilitating better integration of its Kurdish population. While some critics argue that these steps may be politically motivated, potentially timed to influence upcoming election cycles, the existence of such discussions reflects a shift in domestic discourse. Whether these developments translate into permanent policy changes or remain symbolic gestures will depend on both domestic political will and external pressures. Past events, such as the short-lived peace process (2013–2015), have shown that public support for negotiated solutions exists when framed within a broader democratization agenda (Rumelili and Çelik 11). However, rising nationalism, polarized media narratives, and securitization during election cycles continue to constrain reforms (Jongerden 268). Civil society actors, local governments, and independent media can help shape public discourse in ways that sustain pressure for long-term solutions. At the same time, the internal dynamics of the Kurdish political movement, including its fragmentation and electoral strategy, will affect the feasibility of renewed dialogue. Türkiye's ability to incorporate these domestic developments into its foreign policy calculations will be important in reducing international criticism and rebuilding trust with Kurdish communities in the region.

5. Conclusion

As this study demonstrates, the Kurdish question transcends national borders and deeply affects Türkiye's relations with neighboring countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Iran, as well as with global actors such as the United States, the European Union, NATO, and increasingly China

and Russia. From the early decades of the republic, marked by the suppression and denial of Kurdish identity, to current debates on military interventions, constitutional reforms and strategic alliances, the Kurdish question remains at the very core of Türkiye's strategic orientation. In the conclusion part, the main arguments and findings of this study will be synthesized and forward-looking perspectives will be offered on possible trajectories that Türkiye could take in dealing with the Kurdish question through its evolving foreign policy framework.

Historically, the Kurdish question has been dramatically affected by Türkiye's nation-building project and its fundamental emphasis on a unitary Turkish identity. The establishment of the republic in 1923 represented a decisive departure from the multi-ethnic nature of the Ottoman Empire. Kurdish rebellions such as the Sheikh Said Rebellion, the Ağrı Rebellion, and the Dersim Rebellion were met with overwhelming military force and contributed to decades of institutionalized marginalization. During the Cold War, Kurdish identity was systematically denied and expressions of cultural and political autonomy were criminalized. The emergence of the PKK in 1984 as a militant movement fighting for Kurdish rights marked a critical rupture. Over the course of nearly four decades, the PKK conflict has claimed more than 40,000 lives and has subjected Türkiye to constant international scrutiny, particularly from human rights organizations and Western governments.

The foreign policy dimension of the Kurdish question began to take center stage in the 1990s. The 1991 Gulf War and the subsequent imposition of a no-fly zone over northern Iraq gave rise to the KRG, which later became a semi-autonomous and important economic partner for Türkiye. Despite Ankara's strong opposition to any form of Kurdish political autonomy, it engaged pragmatically with the KRG, particularly in energy and trade, while simultaneously conducting cross-border military operations targeting the PKK in northern Iraq. The relationship

with the KRG developed into a mutually beneficial alliance, even as Türkiye continued its policy of rejecting Kurdish political aspirations within its own borders.

The civil war in Syria that broke out in 2011 opened a new chapter. The rapid rise of the YPG, the Syrian affiliate of the PKK, and its central role in the US-led fight against ISIS forced Türkiye to reassess its regional security priorities. A series of military operations—Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring and, more recently, Claw Sword and Claw Lock—aimed to push back Kurdish forces and secure Türkiye’s southern border. But these interventions complicated Türkiye’s relations with both the US and the European Union. Washington’s continued support for the YPG-led SDF has been a source of deep bilateral tension, despite Türkiye’s key role in NATO and other strategic platforms. At the same time, the EU has persistently criticized Türkiye’s Kurdish policy from a human rights perspective, framing it as incompatible with the democratic standards expected of candidate countries.

In Iran, Türkiye has found both a partner and a rival in managing Kurdish separatism. Joint military operations and intelligence sharing have been balanced against underlying tensions over influence in Iraq and Syria. The two countries share concerns about the politicization of their Kurdish minorities, but their geopolitical ambitions often clash, especially in the disputed areas of northern Iraq. These dynamics get even more complicated by Iran’s domestic instability and the potential for Kurdish activism to intersect with broader anti-regime movements.

A critical turning point in Türkiye’s domestic approach was the short-lived peace process between 2013–2015, in which the government entered into negotiations with the PKK and a modest expansion of Kurdish cultural rights was observed. Its collapse in 2015 led to renewed militarization and a hardening of nationalist rhetoric. The subsequent crackdown on pro-Kurdish

political actors, including the imprisonment of leaders of the Peoples' Democratic Party, further strained relations with Western actors and closed domestic political ways for addressing the Kurdish question.

Despite these challenges, recent developments suggest that Türkiye may be entering a new phase. Reports of high-level discussions on constitutional amendments on minority rights and the controversial possibility of releasing PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan have reignited discussions about the potential for renewed political dialogue. While these steps are partly politically motivated, they reflect recognition by Turkish institutions that the Kurdish question cannot be resolved by military means alone.

Regarding the future prospects, several strategic directions emerge for how Türkiye might manage the Kurdish question through its foreign policy. First, it could choose to reinforce its current securitized approach, continue military interventions in northern Iraq and Syria, expand cross-border bases, and strengthen alliances with regional actors such as the KRG. However, this approach carries the risk of long-term entrenchment and a potential backlash from regional and international actors, especially if civilian casualties increase or Kurdish groups gain legal recognition within new political frameworks in Iraq or Syria.

Second, Türkiye could intensify diplomatic efforts, both bilateral and multilateral. This could include engaging with Baghdad and Damascus to formalize security protocols regarding Kurdish militant groups and using economic pressure on the KRG to influence its political stance. The integration of the SDF into the new Syrian army under a Turkish-backed transitional government presents both a challenge and an opportunity; it could protect Kurdish groups from

direct Turkish intervention while also opening avenues for diplomatic negotiations with the new regime over the scope and limits of Kurdish political autonomy.

Third, Türkiye could reconsider the domestic dimension of the Kurdish question. Significant constitutional reforms, expanded linguistic and cultural rights, and meaningful political representation for Kurdish citizens could help ease domestic tensions while also improving Türkiye's international standing. Such a path would require significant political courage and a shift in public discourse, but it could provide long-term stability and regional legitimacy. International actors, particularly the EU, may be more inclined to support Türkiye economically and politically if such reforms are implemented with real commitment.

Finally, Türkiye's broader geopolitical orientation will significantly impact the future of its Kurdish policy. If Ankara continues to pivot eastward—if it strengthens its ties with Russia, China, and the Gulf states—it may enjoy greater autonomy in managing the Kurdish question, but at the cost of further alienation from Western institutions. Conversely, renewed engagement with NATO and the EU will likely require greater alignment with human rights norms, minority protections, and democratic governance. Türkiye's strategic calculations will have to weigh the benefits of flexibility against the costs of isolation.

As a result, the Kurdish issue will continue to be one of the defining challenges of Türkiye's foreign policy. Its complexity, which cuts across borders, identities, and ideologies, requires a delicate and adaptable approach. Türkiye must balance security needs with regional diplomacy, domestic inclusiveness with national unity, and military power with political wisdom. Türkiye's choice is not just between conflict and peace, but also between narrow-mindedness and

leadership. The direction it takes will shape not just the lives of millions of Kurds, but also Türkiye's position in the international system and its role in the future of the Middle East.

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