



## TURKEY'S BORDER SECURITY POLICY AGAINST NON-STATE ACTORS (2016-2019)

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### *Abstrak*

*Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan kebijakan keamanan perbatasan Turki dalam menghadapi aktor non-negara di Suriah Utara. Kebijakan Turki tersebut dilakukan setelah lima tahun keterlibatannya dalam krisis Suriah dan satu bulan setelah upaya kudeta yang gagal. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori sekuritisasi oleh Buzan yang menjelaskan tentang adanya faktor ancaman dan kerawanan yang dihadapi negara dalam struktur internasional yang anarki. Metode penelitian yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah metode kualitatif dengan jenis analisis kausalitas. Tulisan ini menemukan bahwa ancaman dan kerawanan mendorong Turki melancarkan serangkaian operasi militer sebagai kebijakan keamanan perbatasan untuk membersihkan Suriah Utara dari milisi-milisi ISIS dan PKK/PYD/YPG untuk mengontrol dampak buruk yang disebabkan oleh keberadaan aktor non-negara seperti korban sipil dan militer, kerusakan properti, serta instabilitas dan disintegrasi. Kebijakan keamanan perbatasan tersebut mengkonfirmasi tentang semakin pentingnya peran Turki di kawasan sekaligus menunjukkan konsistensi Turki dalam mengejar kepentingan keamanan nasional walaupun di luar wilayahnya.*

**Kata Kunci:** aktor non-negara, ancaman dan kerentanan, kebijakan keamanan perbatasan, Suriah Utara, Turki

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to explain Turkey's border security policy in dealing with non-state actors in Northern Syria. Turkey's policy was carried out after five years of involvement in the Syrian crisis and one month after a failed coup attempt. This study uses the theory of securitization by Buzan that explains the existence of threat and vulnerability factors faced by the state in anarchic international structures. The research method used in this study is a qualitative method with the type of causality analysis. This paper found that threats and vulnerabilities pushed Turkey to launch a series of military operations as border security policies to rid North Syria of ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG militias to control the adverse effects caused by the presence of non-state actors such as civilian and military casualties, property damage, as well as instability and disintegration. The border security policy confirms the increasingly important role of Turkey in the region while demonstrating Turkey's consistency in pursuing national security interests even outside its territory.

**Keywords:** border security policy, non-state actors, Northern Syria, threats and vulnerability, Turkey

## Introduction

Turkey has been a security actor not only in the region where it geographically lies but also in other regions like Europe, Asia, and Africa. The state's increasing capability is equipped with resources and desire to use military power beyond its borders (Lesser, 2000: 183). It can draw many researchers' attention due to its economic and military growth and implications to its active foreign policy. Besides, it survives despite hostile environments and relatively succeeds to engage in cooperation with many states in the regions.

Turkey had been firmly involving in the Syrian crisis since the very beginning. Sharing the border with Syria, the state seriously considered domino effects of the conflict towards its domestic stability. Its early involvement was to persuade the Syrian regime to provide domestic political change and form a transitional government as demanded by the people. Realizing that good relationship with Syria did not contribute to the achievement of its foreign policy goals, it took the conflicting stand against the regime by supporting the opposition groups under the umbrella organization called the Free Syria Army (FSA).

States were not the only actors in the Syrian conflict but the armed groups taking side with either the Assad's ruling regime or the opposition groups. Such a situation facilitated the conflict to persist and harm Turkey's security as it penetrated through the border. Among the armed groups that Turkey considered threats towards its security especially near the border were the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and PKK/PYD/YPG<sup>1</sup>. Both are labeled terror groups and terrorist organizations by the Turkish government.

The ISIS declared the caliphate overseeing some areas in Iraq and Syria's territory in line with its territorial gain from rival groups. Not only did its militias threaten all enemies in the claimed territory but also they forwarded threats into the Turkish soils. In the border of Turkey-Syria particularly, the armed group provoked instability and fear among people. Furthermore, its militias were able to cross the border and carry out

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<sup>1</sup> The Kurdish Worker Party (PKK). The Democratic Union Party (PYD). The People Protection Unit (YPG) is a PYD's military wing. The Turkish government perceived the groups as one organization in spite of their various names.

bombings targeting the Turkish citizens, including foreign nationals and public properties (Yeşiltaş, Öncel & Öztürk, 2016: 9).

The PKK/PYD/YPG had become the most powerful armed group in northern Syria since the Syrian regime's armed forces left the area. Turkey called the PYD/YPG a Syria's offshoot of the PKK repeatedly trying to destabilize its sovereignty in line with their demand for either independence or autonomy. Not only did the Kurdish armed group conquer the areas in the borderline and dominate military and political influence alike amongst the Kurdish groups in the region, but it also challenged Turkey's border security.

Turkey's threat perception was growing following the US' support from over the PKK/PYD/YPG's role in fighting the ISIS to inception of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) whose members were dominated by the PKK/PYD/YPG's militias (Stein, 2017: 2-4). The US assisted the SDF's formation and operation to reduce the world's perception of the US' support to the PKK and claimed such new armed organization had no other purpose but to fight the ISIS (Kabalan, 2019). The Turkish government, however, perceived the US' strategy would harm the state's security interest. Consequently, the US' role behind the PKK/PYD/YPG affected its more aggressive security policy in the border.

Realizing the threats coming from ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG especially in the border, Turkey sought to maintain the areas stable and secure of their presence and terror activities. Moreover, both showed their resistance to Turkey's foreign policy in Syria. The state was encouraged to issue its border security policy in 2016 as it claimed the right of self-defense after a five-year involvement in the Syrian conflict.

There exists some literature revealing the Turkish foreign policy towards Syria, security policy against armed groups, and relevant issues giving a contribution to the current research. Hameed and Mustofa (2018) found that Turkey re-orientated its foreign policy towards Syria mainly due to change in the Turkish ruling elites. Besides, the study revealed that the state could not engage in Syria away from the calculations of both regional and international powers. D'Alema (2017) argued that Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP towards Syria evolved. The first phase began with a harmonious relationship under the 'zero-problem with neighbors' policy, the second phase was indicated by the state's demand for the Syrian regime change and the last was pragmatic policy due to existing predicaments.

Okyay (2017) found that the dynamics in Syria encouraged Turkey to influence the post-conflict power reconfiguration as well as safeguard its territorial integrity and centralized nation-state structure against Kurdish nationalist mobilization leading to changing border management modalities. The study also revealed that the major implication for domestic politics was a hardening of sectarian, ethnic, boundaries not only for the Turkish Alevi Kurds but also for the opposing political parties.

Zahra (2017) found that Turkey's policies towards Syria were critical within the Middle East region in which the conflicts and wars against the ISIS and PKK weakened its bilateral relations. The study suggested that the Syrian refugees and the PKK pose challenges to the state's economy and domestic security. Eren (2013) argued that the PKK shifted its financing activities to the border area since Turkey could not control its extensive and geographically tough land border. Besides, such uncontrolled areas facilitated the PKK to conquer and simplify smuggling. Karakoç and Doğruel (2015) suggested that problematic relations between Turkey and Syria following the uprising cause an impact on human security in the border area. The study argued that the state's policy towards Syria shaped the perception of insecurity among Syrian refugees and the people of Hatay, a southeastern regional province sharing the border with Syria.

While the literature reviewed proves Turkey's active foreign policy towards Syria especially after the Arab Spring, so does the literature show that the state's perception of the existing conflict in Syria brought challenges to its main domestic security interest. In spite of its contribution in confirming the security issue, the literature leaves the questions regarding the state's border security policy forms against non-state actors like not only the PKK/PYD/YPG but also the ISIS as well as the driving factors. The study is intended to narrow the gap which gives a better understanding of Turkey's border security policy in the securitization theory taking into account the role of given international structure and the Turkish leaders' language capability.

This paper provides the answer to the research-conducted question "Why did Turkey carry out a security policy against such non-state actors as the ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG in the border sharing with Syria. To be precise, the paper aims to explain the driving factors of such a border security policy in the securitization theory and describe the policy forms. The study was limited to the impact of Syria's conflict with Turkey's border security and the phenomenon studied was between 2016 and 2019. The

state began to issue the policy exactly in 2016 and lasted a few years when the research was being conducted.

The issue belongs to security studies emphasizing the states' struggle in maintaining its security against possible threats. The paper is advantageous for the international relations scholarship since it presents another perspective on Turkey's response towards the excess of the Syrian conflict and helps understand the dynamics of regional politics comprehensively by melding the neorealist and constructivist approach. The paper comprises an introduction, theoretical framework, methods, results and discussion, and conclusion.

### **Theoretical Framework: Securitization Theory**

The research applied the securitization theory proposed by Buzan. Buzan's securitization theory is one of the theories belonging to the Copenhagen school providing an innovative, sophisticated and productive research strategy within contemporary security studies as well as criticisms (Williams, 2003: 511). However, the securitization theory can explain how threats have a strong correlation to the dynamics of a state's security. Stone (2009: 3) argues that Buzan's theory is the combination of neo-realist and constructivist approaches in which he primes his belief in an international structure called anarchy and addresses the social aspects of security and how people or societies construct or securitize threats.

In security studies, the bottom line of security relates to states' survival. Though states are still the main units in international politics due to their powers and military capabilities as well as a source of threats and the main referent objects of threats, the units of non-states also matter. For instance, there have been non-state actors engaging in a military game against states. For this Buzan (1983: 37) states:

“Not only is the state by far the most powerful type of unit in terms of political allegiance and authority, but also it is normally dominant everywhere in terms of its command over instruments of force, particularly the major military machines required for modern warfare. Most of the non-state units that also command political and military power see themselves as aspirant states or state-makers such as the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the Irish Republican Army, Kurdish nationalist organisations, and many others.”

Buzan also defines security as a pursuit of freedom from threats (Šulovic, 2010: 1). In terms of security discourse, Buzan differentiates the security of individuals from that of the state known as a security problem. While the aspect of individual security relates to social threats because people are embedded in a human environment with inevitable social, economic and political consequences, the state security relates to the performance of maintaining internal social order and external defense (Buzan, 1983: 19-21). In order to perform both functions, a state's action could unavoidably cost individual security meaning that the state can be either a source of security for or threat against individual interest. Therefore, the pursuit of an individual security is both stimulus and constraint on national security (Buzan, 1983: 34).

Regarding the relationship between a state's behavior and the international system, the theory proposes a proposition that a state would perceive self-insecurity (national insecurity) due to the melding of threats and vulnerabilities which then leads it to consider a securitization policy as Buzan (1983: 73) argues: "Only when we have established a reasonable idea of both the nature of threats and the vulnerabilities of the objects towards which they are directed, can we begin to make sense of national security as a policy problem. Insecurity reflects a combination of threats and vulnerabilities and the two cannot meaningfully be separated."

Most threats involve many complicated factors and cause uncertainties that states have to allocate the threats to their national security and anticipate the effects brought by both threats and vulnerabilities. Like other Copenhagen school theorists, Buzan's securitization theory embraces five sectors of threats, namely political, military, economic, societal and environmental sector (Buzan, 1983: 75-83; Buzan, Waever & de Wilde, 1998: 22-23). Despite that those sectors have distinctive referent objects, security units, and survival characteristics, among which to traditionalists the military is the states mostly a concern, they are less independent or inter-connected for national security.

In addition to breaking down threats by sectors, Buzan (1983: 83-88) introduces other threat variables such as source, intensity, and historical change. In terms of source, threats can come from internal (like secessionist activities) and external of the state (other states and non-state actors). Intensity variable is determined by several factors for instances, geography or spatial sense (if the threats are close at hand, middle-distanced or faraway), temporal sense (if the threats are immediate or take some time to develop),



probability (if the threats have a chance) and measure of seriousness (if the threats are seriously carried out). The last, historical change means that if the states are able to adapt to the development of technology, military, economy, and others as so do threats evolve.

Meanwhile, vulnerabilities can vary such as limited population, poor resources, indefensible boundaries, and others in term of the weak state or weak power's comparison to the global power (Buzan, 1983: 73-74). In order to respond to the insecurity and provide national security, the state has two strategies; concentrating on cutting off threats at the source outward called the international security strategy and reducing its vulnerabilities inward called the national security strategy where leaders are responsible for combining these strategies with the logical, perceptual and political element to come up with a security policy (Stone, 2009: 7).

In Buzan's theory, security policy-making is part of a national security problem made up of those three problems. Within logical problems, leaders consider objectives (ends) and techniques, resources, instruments and actions (means) where ends justify means and due to the fact that absolute security is never going to be attained, the sacrifices of state and its citizens would be necessary to make attain it (Buzan, 1983: 215; Stone, 2009: 8). On the other hand, perceptual problems rest on the fundamental information during the policymaking (Buzan, 1983: 215) and political problems rest on the political process in which domestic actors' views addressing international structure are contested (Buzan, 1983: 231).

Leaning on Waever's speech act model (theory) to arrive at the policy, the theory suggests that the units (securitization actors) construct a threat to any referent object's existence or securitize an issue as an urgent matter requiring an immediate measure to which audience resonates (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998: 5). As the Copenhagen School has developed, securitization is merely politicizing an issue and only if the issue can leave the normal politics to emergency politics sphere is it called a successful securitizing move. During this process, Waever (2011: 466) argues that the role of expression is important.

In the research, Turkey was facing insecurity due to threats and vulnerabilities. The threats which Turkey perceived stemmed from the ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG as well as uncertainty in Syria. The armed groups destabilized the state, especially its border areas through some terror activities. ISIS took advantage of long Turkey-Syria borderline to

head inward and outward and targeted the Turkish civilians and armies. The armed group's success in gaining more lands incited instability around the border; meanwhile, its southeastern region was still under the PKK's threat.

The PKK/PYD/YPG also advanced its territorial gains in the border in addition to warning Turkey through several terror activities not only in the areas near the border but also in further areas within the state. The state believed that the armed group ruled most of northern Syria inhabited by Kurdish people would harm Syria's integrity which also meant to harm its integrity. Both ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG's presence along with external powers intervention and support had complicated the conflict and caused a great number of refugees to cross its border.

The PKK's demand for either independence or autonomy, domestic instability potential, and geographical position in the middle of heated conflicts within the international system could be vulnerabilities for Turkey. The state was struggling to create stability from the PKK/PYD/YPG's military and political influence from within and since the Syrian crisis started, it had been deploying more resources to dam the conflict from entering its territory as well.

The border security was highly important to Turkey as the region was mostly inhabited by the Kurdish people. The insecurity of border areas would be harmful to the state's sovereignty now that it could fuel the demand for its southeastern region's independence and raise the PKK/PYD/YPG's power growth. To the state, maintaining sovereignty was considered a condition to maintain its power and vice versa. In response to the threats, as argued in the securitization theory, the state took an exceptional measure or the use of force as its border security policy since the issue became urgent to solve through repeatedly expressed rhetoric of its elites.

The Turkish President (and Prime Minister before the state transformed into a presidential system in 2017) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was considered the important actors securitizing the border issue as an emergency. Meanwhile, the securitized issue resonated well with the Turkish parliament and the public. Consequently, the state's concern about border security was admitted and supported by the parliament, and the executive body was given the mandate to deal with the threats in any measure. The policy was designed to clear the border areas from the ISIS and prevent



the PKK/PYD/YPG from expanding its territorial gains. The state raised military operations and targeted the armed groups in both its territory and Syria's territory.

The securitization policy in the form of military operations was also encouraged by the anarchic structure of international politics with which Turkish leaders considered that the state's security determined its security, without counting on other powers, against the existing threats. The security policy was aimed to protect its civilians, military personnel, and properties, create border stability, and defense national integrity. Furthermore, to reach such a security policy, the leaders needed to assure other units within the state through the language (speech act) to support their concern to turn an urgent issue for the state to handle. Here the neorealist and constructivist perspective mutually complement the analysis of the study.

## Methods

The research applied the qualitative method with causal analysis. It was library research whose data ranged from variously recorded sources such as books, book chapters, journal articles, research reports or papers, working papers, policy briefs, videos, and other useful documents. The study applied the analytic induction model developed by Znaniecki to analyze data. Bryman defines the analytic induction as an approach to analyze data which within the process the researcher looks up a universal explanation on the social phenomenon studied beginning from collecting data until finding out deviant cases off the hypothesis (Bakry, 2017: 192).

The analysis model suggests several steps; (1) designing rough definition of the research question; (2) determining hypothetical explanation of the research question; (3) collecting data and examining the cases; (4) Should deviant cases not be found, the hypothesis is confirmed, and (5) should any deviant case be found, the analyst has to either reformulate the hypothesis and collect data further to examine the case or redefine the hypothetical explanation to exclude such deviant case (Bryman, as cited in Bakry, 2017: 193).

After collecting some relevant pieces of information on the case, the research question was designed, "Why did Turkey raise a border security policy against non-state actors regarding the Syrian conflict?" Thanks to the data collected, the hypothesis was created. Afterward, it was traced and examined through more data. During the research,

the hypothesis was reformulated and redefined until it was convincingly confirmed. The research confirmed that Turkey committed a series of military operations as its national border security policy was driven by threats and vulnerabilities. The cross-border operations were purposively issued to remove the ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG, therefore, it would be able to protect its citizens and properties, create border stability, and maintain territorial integrity.

**Turkey's Insecurity: Threats and Vulnerabilities**

Before the paper explains Turkey's insecurity factor, it is necessary to understand the geopolitics in northern Syria. The region was predominantly inhabited by Syrian Kurdish people sharing the borderline with Turkey's southeastern region which was also predominantly inhabited by the Kurdish people (Turkish Kurds). Like the rest of Syria, the region was a persistent battleground among the armed groups. At the beginning of the Syrian uprising, the Assad's regime granted autonomous status to the Kurdish region to prevent the Kurdish groups from joining the opposition forces against the regime and defend the region with its governance. However, the situation in the region turned complicated due to the emerging of new armed groups as new players, the Kurdish groups' independent maneuvers from the Syrian regime, and the US' strategic interest in the region. The main conflicting actors in the region can be seen in Table 1 below:

**Table 1 – The Conflicting Actors in Northern Syria**

<i>No</i>	<i>State and Non-state Actors</i>	<i>Aligned with</i>	<i>Objectives</i>
1	Syria's Armed Forces (Assad)	Russia, Iran	Defend Syria's national integrity and the Assad's regime.
2	ISIS	-	Establish a caliphate within Syria and Iraq.
3	PKK*/YPG/PYD**	The US	Maintain northern Syria's autonomy and governance.  *Demand an independent state or an autonomous region of Turkey's southeastern region.

			**When backed by the US, it maneuvered far more independently from the Assad's regime.
4	FSA	Turkey	Defend Syria's national integrity and demand regime change in Syria.

Source: Collected and Extracted from Various Sources by Authors

Next to the Assad's regime armed forces mainly backed by Russia and Iran, there were several important armed groups (non-state actors) in the region whose roles were significant in the conflict as they affected tensions and complicated regional powers' foreign policy (see table 1). The ISIS aggressively conquered many areas in the region to realize its caliphate policy and fought against all of the armed groups. ISIS's rise operating not only in Syria but also in the neighborhood could be a common threat to the Syrian regime, the Kurdish armed groups, opposition forces, and foreign powers. The PYD/YPG was the most dominant and influential among the Kurdish groups in the region. Turkey saw it as the same organization as the PKK which was orchestrating instability for many years within its territory. Despite its linkage to the PKK, the US provided support to such an armed group and established SDF to fight the ISIS. When backed by the US, it tended to maneuver much more independently from Syria's regime and even demanded the region free from the regime's interference.

As the theory suggests, Turkey perceived the insecurity caused by threats and vulnerabilities which can be drawn in Table 2 below:

**Table 2 – Turkey's Threats and Vulnerabilities**

<i>Threats</i>	<i>Objects Threatened</i>
ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG  (sources of threats) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Close at hand</li> <li>- Immediate</li> <li>- Probable</li> <li>- Serious</li> <li>- Foreign powers' intervention/support</li> </ul>	Civilians, military personnel and properties <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Threats targeted the Turkish civilians, military personnel and facilities</li> </ul> Border Stability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Threats destabilized borders and Turkey's territory</li> <li>- Threats caused a massive influx of refugees into Turkey</li> </ul> Territorial Integrity

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Threats conquered and governed most of northern Syria causing Syria's disintegration</li> <li>- Syria's disintegration threatened Turkey's integrity</li> </ul>
<i>Vulnerabilities</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Domestic problem</li> <li>- Geographical proximity</li> <li>- Turkey's relative power to global powers in international anarchical structure</li> </ul>	

Source: Collected and Extracted from Various Sources by Authors

The FSA was the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF)'s strategically on the battleground against the ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG. Demanding the regime change in Syria and maintaining Syria's integrity against the previous two armed groups' ambition alike were its main purposes. The Turkey-backed opposition forces finally incorporated into another umbrella group called the Syrian National Army (SNA), together with other northern Syrian groups after capturing some areas from the ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG's militias.

The Dynamics in northern Syria impacted Turkey's security interest not only to citizens but also to stability and integrity since its involvement in the conflict and among the non-state actors, the ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG's existence was the Turkish government concerned a lot as sources of threats. Just like ISIS, the PKK/PYD/YPG which controlled 65 percent of northern Syria had been committing several attacks causing casualties among Turkish civilians, military personnel, and properties. The statistics of the terror attacks blamed on both armed groups between January 2015 and January 2017 reached up to 28 cases, occurring in various places in Turkey (Luerdi & Alfajri, 2017: 20-23).

The ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG's activities threatened Turkish border stability. Their confrontations against each other and other rebel factions especially the FSA caused instability along the border. Not only did they target the FSA's strongholds within Syria but they also launched several attacks to the Turkish towns near the border. In addition to such suffering, the state was a home for most Syrian refugees escaping the conflict which in return became its domestic burden. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2019) recorded that there had been 3,691,333 Syrian refugees living in the state since the Syrian conflict started. The Syrian refugees especially originating northern Syria would multiply in numbers providing that it did not control the region.

While the ISIS strove to create its caliphate taking some of Syria's areas, the PKK/PYD/YPG's ruled significant areas in northern Syria and created its governance. Both armed groups' aggressiveness in governing the areas was a threat to Syria's integrity and complicated the FSA's strategy to defend Syria's national integrity. The PKK/PYD/YPG's effort to maintain northern Syria's autonomy was potential to Syria's territorial disintegration and Turkey believed the group had a long term agenda, establishing an independent Kurdish state which also targeted its Southeastern region. Leaving the armed group with its governance in northern Syria would cost the state's future national integrity.

The threats were followed by Turkey's vulnerabilities such as domestic problems, geographical proximity, and power comparison within the international system. The state was still facing the PKK rebel group in its southeastern region. While the armed group was still fighting the Turkish government and threatening its integrity at home, its involvement played important roles in defending the PYD/PYG's position in northern Syria. Turkey's southeastern region shared borders directly with northern Syria which enabled threats to travel swiftly into its territory. The state realized its power compared to other global powers intervening in the conflict like the US and Russia. Thanks to their involvement, the conflict constellation remained dynamic while the armed groups could gain more power and put their security interest at stake.

Based on the constructivist principle as the theory embraces that reality is constructed, Turkey's insecurity and threats were constructed by the leaders (securitization units) during the policymaking process. The research emphasized the role of the Turkish president (and also Prime Minister) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the policymaking, they were responsible for constructing threats which targeted the referent objects (see Table 2) and insecurity by considering whole fundamental information such as the threats were close at hand, immediate, probable and serious in addition to attracting foreign powers' intervention or support (see Table 2). So did they have to consider the policy's objectives to the resources the state had? In term of the policy, they would prefer to have military operations by exploiting own resources in order to remove the threats swiftly.

The leaders had to engage in the political process within which their ideas could be contested with other Turkish domestic actors' stance. The latter also called an audience,

referred to the Turkish parliament and publics which had an important role in supporting the policy. While the parliament passed motions to Turkish authorities to carry out several cross-border operations (Xinhua, 2019), the positive image on the operations among the Turkish publics rose following media coverage (Aljazeera, 2019). To the audience, the leaders overstated the ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG as serious threats threatening the referent objects and securitized border as an emergency to the state. Their language capabilities contributed to allowing a military option as the state's border security policy. It aligned with what the Turkish President Erdogan (2016) stated at the conference speech on the day of the first military operation launch: "The attacks that targeted our country from Syria have come to such a level that leaves us no choice but to solve this problem immediately and the process for this started today."

The state's efforts to maintain its security regarding what was happening in Syria could also be heard from other officials' repeated statements for instance, the Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu (2019) stated on side of his overseas visit:

"Our only target is terrorists, in this way we will contribute to Syria's territorial integrity. Unfortunately, there is a terrorist organization in northeastern Syria. This is a grave threat to our country. The US gave them weapons and we arrest them in Turkey because the terrorist organizations in both northern Syria and Turkey are the same. This will be an important operation for the stability and security of the region."

Using the securitization theory as a tool analysis, Turkey's insecurity was raised by threats perception following its vulnerabilities. However, such threats and insecurity were constructed by the leaders during policymaking. In other words, they politicized that the Turkish citizens and properties, border stability, and integrity were the objects harmed by the threats. In responding to such threats and supported by parliament and public opinion, several military operations were deemed necessary and urgent. Only by the military incursions could the state clear the border of the threats and pursue its security interests.

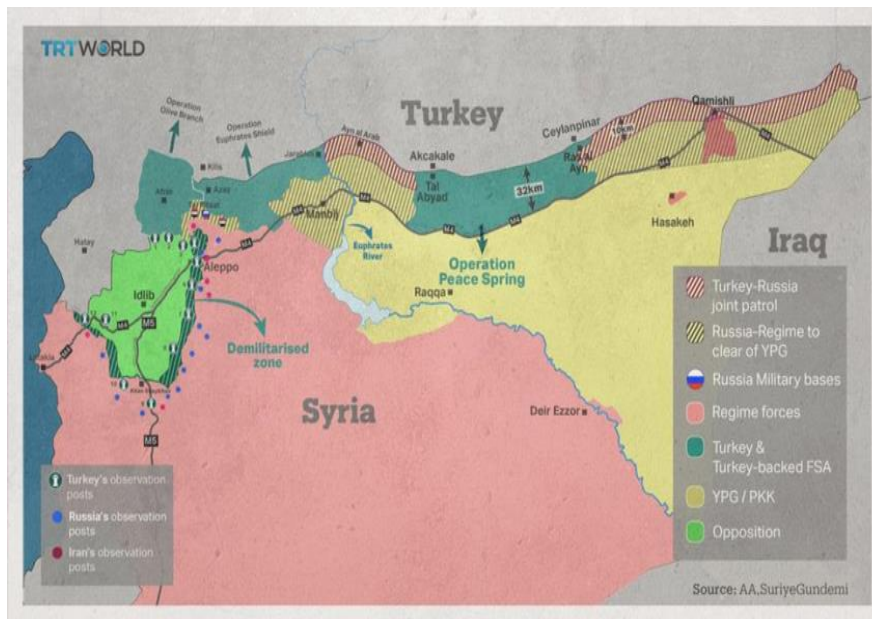
### **Turkey's Border Security Policy: Military Operations**

To respond to the threats especially towards its border, Turkey committed military operations as its national border security policy. As mentioned, the operations' main objective was to remove the ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG and stem their influence and



movements in northern Syria. The state already launched three cross-border military operations namely Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, and Operation Peace Spring. The areas covered by the three distinctive operations can be seen in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1 – Turkey’s Three Operations’ Areas



Source: <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/operation-peace-spring-in-a-nutshell-30779>

### Operation Euphrates Shield (OES)

OES commenced from August 2016 to March 2017 to clear the ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG in western Euphrates areas. Aktürk (2017: 94) suggested that OES indicate Turkey’s strength despite a one-month-after failed coup experience and dismissal of 43 percent of generals and admirals in its armed forces. OES mainly targeted to remove the ISIS from the border and prevent the PKK/PYD/YPG from forming the corridor stretching over the west of Euphrates River to the town of Afrin (Yeşiltaş, Seren & Özçelik, 2017: 12). Turkey launched OES following the agreement with Russia and the withdrawal of Russian troops from the areas. The state found a middle ground with Russia on Syria’s territorial integrity and it, therefore, focused on the two terror groups instead of arm confrontations with Syrian regime forces during the incursion.

The presence of both terror groups within the areas risked Turkey’s national security which paved the TFA deployment. The ISIS-controlled a 100-kilometer borderline in the region of Azaz-Jarablus and from which its militias committed suicide

attacks in Turkish large cities (Yeşiltaş, Seren & Özçelik, 2017: 13). In addition to conquering a vast region and confronting the TAF and FSA's members, the armed group was deemed to recruit new militias in Turkey to strengthen its strongholds and create instability in the state.

While Turkey was facing ISIS' threats at the domestic level, the PKK/PYD/YPG benefitted from the international anti-ISIS coalition by securing support from the US. The Kurdish armed group significantly took over the area previously dominated by ISIS and it, therefore, sought to reinforce its political and military power to remain the most important and strongest actor as well as extend its territorial domination from the west of Euphrates River to Afrin. Nevertheless, the attempts cost Turkey's security since the Kurdish group was perceived as both a separatist and a terror organization threatening Turkish integrity and stability. In addition to the attempts, the group mobilized its militias to conduct several deadly attacks in Turkish soils.

Having seen its border security harmed by the terror groups' threats and its proximity to northern Syria, Turkey needed to take a cross-border military intervention against them into Syrian territory despite criticisms from the EU and the US. To the leaders, security was the most important interest which Turkey had to achieve. The state reiterated its importance and another possible similar move in the future as the Prime Minister Yıldırım (2017) stated during an interview program: "After this point, if we take action in the event that our security is threatened or if action is needed against the ISIS and PKK, then it will be as part of a new operation. That means the Euphrates Shield is over and any potential actions, if necessary, will be named differently."

As the Turkish National Security Council announced the end of OES, the TFA successfully liberated several important towns which were previously the terror groups' basis such as Jarablus, Azaz, Al-Rai, and Al-Bab in which the FSA's members could settle afterward. It was reported that more than 140,000 Syrian refugees were able to return home in the region after Turkey ended OES (Anadolu Agency, 2018). Besides neutralizing the terror groups' components in the areas, the TFA and FSA pushed the militias 40 kilometers southward and created a 90-kilometer-in-length-and-40-kilometer-in-dept safe zone between the border of Turkey-Syria and the formerly attempted corridor by the PKK/PYD/YPG (Yeşiltaş, Seren & Özçelik, 2017: 31).

### **Operation Olive Branch (OOB)**

Turkey launched the second operation under the name of OOB from January to March 2018. OOB's main purpose was to clear the PKK/YPD/YPG in the region of Afrin including its surrounding rural areas. OOB was launched in response to the US' increasing support to the PKK/PYD/YPG and plan to form 30 thousand strong border security forces called the SDF, within which the Kurdish armed group enjoyed its dominant role in northern Syria (TRT World Research Center, 2018: 10). Though the state already demanded the US to cease arms transfer and training since they would help the expansion of PKK/PYD/YPG's influence which then harmed its domestic and regional stability, the US ignored such demand and rather justified its assistance to combat the ISIS' militias.

Thanks to the US' support, the PKK/PYD/YPG evolved to a state-sponsored hybrid organization which was able to develop dangerous capacity with relatively advanced stand-off weapons such as ATGMS, MANPADS, and rockets, moderately trained manpower and larger sized formations of the organization (Kasapoğlu & Ülgen, 2018: 6). On a par with the US' support, between January and February 2018 the armed group launched up to 94 rockets targeting Turkish population near two border provinces; Hatay and Kilis causing socio-economic destruction (Kasapoğlu & Ülgen, 2018: 7-8).

The PKK/PYD/YPG rising power in the region of Afrin and surroundings as well as its increased attacks to Turkey were determinants to the Turkish leaders to take an emergency military action against the threats which was more intense than the previous incursion engaging both air power and land strikes campaign. OOB used heavy military hardware such as F-16 fighter jets, TB2 drones, T122-CNRA rocket launchers, ADOP2000-howitzers, and Leopard tanks; however, as the Turkish officials stated the incursion would only target the PKK/PYD/YPG's militias and their shelters, buildings, weapons, and equipment (TRT World Research Center, 2018: 25).

OOB emphasized the takeover of Afrin as it was the most nested region of the PKK/PYD/YPG's militias during the Syrian war which Turkey claimed another terror corridor. By circling the town from the south, the state ensured that the armed group could not create an adjacent, autonomous region through which it could reach the Mediterranean (Ustun, 2018: 2). Before OOB began, Hatay and Kilis had been its fire ring reachable from Afrin as well as a doorstep for its militias' infiltration to Turkey. Had Turkey not

launched the operation, the armed group would have turned into a much larger threat with the US' support. According TRT World Research Center (2018: 27), The importance of such military move was in line with the Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu's statement at the beginning of OOB: "Turkey is subject to attacks every day from Afrin. It is our right to defend ourselves in line with international law and to take measure against a terror group surrounding us, violating our rights, hence we should intercede."

OOB could be aimed to gain an immediate victory within three months to prevent the PKK/PYD/YPG from either making an alliance deal with the Syrian regime or bargaining its position with the US. OOB succeeded to neutralize 3,603 militias in total, free more than 1,900 square kilometers from the PKK/PYD/YPG and liberate 273 locations including towns, villages and strategic mountains and hills (TRT World, 2018). Following the incursion, Turkey was able to return more than 150,000 Syrian refugees in the region (Anadolu Agency, 2018).

### **Operation Peace Spring (OPS)**

OPS was the third operation launched by Turkey starting on October 9, 2019, only three days after the US announced that it would withdraw its troops from the region and move to the southeastern region (Cebul, 2019). The US' lifted its support to the PKK/PYD/YPG after long, tough negotiations with the state. So did it reach a deal with Russia on October 22, 2019, that both states would conduct joint patrols in the areas targeted by the TAF during OPS (TRT World, 2019). Those two events facilitated the TAF to clear the armed group's militias in the region and capture two strategic towns; Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn which both were initial targets near Turkey's towns; Akçakale and Ceylanpınar respectively.

Turkey only focused on controlling the two strategic towns by which it could create a safe zone stretching between them. The state firmly wished to create a 32-kilometer-depth safe zone often called a peace corridor clear from the PKK/PYD/YPG that could offer shelter for up to 1 to 2 million Syrian refugees. It once halted the incursion to allow the Kurdish armed group's militias to leave the designated safe zone as a part of the deal with the US (TRT World, 2019).

Despite criticisms from such regional powers as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and including Israel, Turkey confirmed that it would take any action when its security was at risk. The state criticized the Middle Eastern states for not doing enough

to save the Syrian refugees instead. Beginning with the airstrikes followed by ground battles, OPS was deemed as important as the two previous military moves which aimed to secure Turkey's border from the terror groups as the Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu (2019) stated: "Turkey's counter-terrorism operation in northern Syria launched to establish a safe zone was very strategic, important and timely not only for Turkey but also for Syria and for the stability and security of the region. Turkey spoiled a big game with the Operation Peace Spring."

In addition to forcing the PKK/PYD/YPG's militias and their weapons out of the peace corridor, Turkey made a diplomatic success by pushing the US and Russia to negotiation tables for its security concern amid the Syrian regime effort to ally with the Kurdish armed group and the US domestic actors' conflicting stands over the incursion (Oruc, 2019). OPS could be the most successful move made by Turkey with which it could clear the militias in the much larger region than the previous two operations within a short time. Furthermore, the state's move gained people's support within its operation areas as Gallup International (Aktürk, 2019: 2) recorded that OPS was welcomed by the majority of Arab population and the surprisingly significant population of Kurdish people.

## **Conclusion**

Analyzed with Buzan's securitization theory, Turkey's insecurity caused by both threats and vulnerabilities justified its border security policy which was strengthened by the anarchic structure of international politics as well as its leaders' speech capability in domestic level. The border security policy was issued because the state was subject to regional threats growing in northern Syria especially orchestrated by the ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG. In addition to the threats exposure and geographical proximity with the region, it was facing the Kurdish group's insurgency at home. It had to take a serious action to pursue its security interest by removing such threats beyond the border. The security dimension was drawn by not only the armed groups but also the consequence of their presence like civilian, military personnel and property casualties, border instability, and territorial disintegration.

Such interest had to be championed with its power now that it could hardly rely on foreign entities amidst the anarchic structure of international politics. To gain support

at the domestic level, the Turkish key leaders securitized the border issue and demanded an extraordinary action in the form of military operations. The three military incursions called Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, and Operation Peace Spring respectively brought about success to the state through which threats coming from the non-state actors were removed. By doing so, the state could protect its people, create border stability allowing the return of thousands of refugees to northern Syria and maintain its national integrity from the secessionist movement.

That Turkey launched the military incursions or often called counter-terrorism operations in northern Syria along with the achievements leading to a regional game-changing could confirm its growing influence as well as the bargaining position as one of the major powers in both Syria's crisis and region. Despite the situation, the state will not ignore the US and Russia factor in pursuing its future interest in which national security along with Syria's integrity remains a priority. To this extent, the Turkish leaders will have to find middle ground with those powers like what it has recently done in Syria.

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