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## **The Construction of Containment Anxiety: A Critical Geopolitical Analysis of Turkey's Military Intervention into Syria**

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# The Construction of Containment Anxiety: A Critical Geopolitical Analysis of Turkey's Military Intervention into Syria

Mustafa Onur Tetik\*

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## Abstract

The Turkish Armed Forces successfully executed two consecutive cross-border operations (Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch) in Syria following the failed coup d'état in 2016. Turkey's supposedly traditional "Kurdophobic" reflexes were widely deemed as the motivation behind these operations. However, these assertions are weak when it comes to Turkey's relatively harmonious relations with Iraqi Kurdistan and the significant portion of Turkish Kurds' endorsement of the incumbent Turkish government. Moreover, the fact that the Turkish government was not a hardliner against the Kurdish-led outlawed Democratic Union Party and its military wing People's Protection Units in the early days of the Syrian Civil War undermines these essentialist and reductionist contentions. This article proposes a geopolitics-driven and more holistic explanation to the Turkish military campaign into Northern Syria. Its objective is to provide a more comprehensive insight into Turkish geopolitical manoeuvres in Syria, to set the contextual and ideational background of the military operations and to present Turkey's cognitive horizon for its actions within its vicinity. The article anchors its theoretical basis in the "critical geopolitics" approach in order to place the Turkish intervention into a broader geopolitical context.

**Keywords:** Euphrates Shield; Olive Branch; Critical Geopolitics; Turkey; Syria

## Introduction

The swift purge of numerous allegedly Gulenist military officials following the failed coup d'état in 2016 immediately made people question the technical capabilities and fighting might of the supposedly "fractured" Turkish Armed Forces (TSK). However, the TSK's successfully executed consecutive cross-border operations of Euphrates Shield (2016-2017) and Olive Branch (2018) within Syria overturned this popular belief. Turkey's supposedly traditional "Kurdophobic"<sup>1</sup> reflexes were widely deemed as the motivation behind these operations because, according to this argument, Turkey opposes any sort of an autonomous Kurdish enclave next to its borders due to a possible spill-over effect of separatist national consciousness on its Kurdish-origin citizens that might exacerbate the country's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) problem. However, these Kurdo-centric assertions are weak when it comes to Turkey's relatively harmonious relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) and the significant portion of Turkish Kurds' endorsement of the incumbent

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Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. Moreover, the fact that the Turkish government was not a hardliner against the Kurdish-led outlawed Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing People's Protection Units (YPG) in the early days of the Syrian civil war undermines these essentialist and reductionist contentions. Therefore, it is necessary to address the question of ideational motivations behind Turkish political and military manoeuvres in Northern Syria with a more holistic perspective.

Following the launch of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch in Syria on the 20th of January 2018, the Turkish Prime Ministry's Coordinatorship of Public Diplomacy made a declaration revealing the reasons behind the operation. This official document contained clear geopolitical objectives and security threat definitions (*Hürriyet* 2018). According to the PM's Coordinatorship, besides the usual PKK threat, Turkey militarily intervened into Syria in order to prevent a potential "PKK belt" from reaching the Eastern Mediterranean that would link the terrorist organisation with the world geographically and to assure that Turkey's territorial connection with the Arab world endures. These concerns went beyond traditionally non-territorial and asymmetric threat of PKK terrorism and included serious geopolitical/territorial perils. Therefore, this article proposes a geopolitics-driven explanation to the Turkish military campaign into Northern Syria.

The article employs insights from the "critical geopolitics" approach as its theoretical basis in order to put the Turkish intervention into a geopolitical context. Critical geopolitics enables us to comprehend and demonstrate the geopolitical reasoning of relevant actors and the discursive medium that they construct in order to justify their policies. In the beginning, the article briefly reviews the premises of critical geopolitics. Subsequently, it explains the three types of geopolitical reasoning (practical, formal and popular) proposed by O Tuathail and Dalby (2002) which is adopted by the article as its methodical guideline. The Turkish National Security Council (MGK) press releases, the reports of the notable pro-government think tank SETA and İbrahim Karagül's (a pro-government journalist writing regularly on geopolitics) op-eds are introduced as the primary sources in order to analyse the change in Turkey's geopolitical perception towards Syria between 2014 and 2017 that resulted in the intervention. These three sources from separate social fields are complementary to each other to provide an elaborate understanding of Turkish geopolitical mind and hegemonic discourses in the Turkish public sphere. The article takes the capture of three towns in Northern Syria (Ayn al-Arab, Tal Abyad and Manbij) by the YPG as the main chronological pillars that gradually transformed Turkish geopolitical reasoning. The analysis of geopolitical developments in a chronological way enables the reader to track the gradual shift in the Turkish actors' discourses. This analysis's objective is to provide a more comprehensive insight on Turkish geopolitical manoeuvres in Syria, to set the contextual and ideational background of the military operations and to present Turkey's cognitive horizon for its actions within its vicinity.

### **The Premises of Critical Geopolitics**

In the classical study of geopolitics, geographical factors are regarded as the most fundamental variables in foreign policy making due to their assumed permanence and fixity (Spykman 1942); thus, "in its most common usage geopolitics refers to a fixed and objective

geography constraining and directing the activities of states" (Agnew and Corbridge 2003: 3). According to this conventional perspective, geography is a self-evident realm that is independent of our beliefs (O Tuathail 2005: 40). States and other global actors operate on a given "territorial space" that presumably divides the world geography into mutually exclusive blocks (Agnew and Corbridge 2003: 14) under the nation-state system that surmises an ultimate state/nation-territory cohesion. The traditional International Relations (IR) theory takes this mutually exclusive, clearly demarcated and fixed state/nation-territory consistency as an ontological axiom. This supposed exclusive "national territory" determines "inside-outside" and "us-them" dichotomies within international politics that are generally immanent to mainstream foreign policy analyses. Critical approaches to geopolitics challenge and deconstruct this "naturalised" perception of geography and international politics.

Critical geopolitics simply argues that the "spaces" in world politics are actively constructed by elites and publics as a medium for political actions of states and other global actors and it exposes the techniques of intellectual naturalisation of geopolitical perceptions (Agnew 2010: 569-570). In this regard, geopolitics is relevant to the discursive field as much as it is about institutional/extra-discursive practices. Even though geopolitics is mainly pertinent to international actors' coercive and diplomatic practices such as coalition formation, containment, invasions, battles or troop deployment, those practices are made meaningful and conceivable through the justificatory medium of geopolitical discourses (O Tuathail and Agnew 1992: 191). Geopolitics is not only about the physical/geographical environment's relationship with the conduct of foreign policy (Sprout and Sprout 1960 cited in O Tuathail and Agnew 1992: 191) but also the "commonsensical" construction of domestic-foreign, inside-outside and enemy-foe dichotomies via discourses (Agnew and Corbridge 2003: 95). Geopolitical discourses divide space into "our" and "their" place, regulate "us" and "them" and distinguish the "self" from the "other"; thus, critical geopolitics does not limit its attention with pre-given, taken-for-granted and common-sense spaces (Dalby 1991: 274).

The geopolitical discourses of "intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialize' international politics in such a way as to represent it as a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas" (O Tuathail 2005: 40). Not every international unit is capable of influencing universal geopolitical order deeply but they would all pursue to construct a niche for their national-self through geopolitical discourses and praxis. The robust concepts of geopolitics shared with mainstream realist assumptions of IR like "survival", "security", "interest" and "threat", which are "floating signifiers", needs to be defined through a particular national-self and its "exclusive" space. It is because we need to know "whose" (the national-self) survival, security or interest we are talking about in order to reach the means of realisation. "National security" is one of the most fundamental "interests" of states that is sought by using geopolitical lenses vis-à-vis the outside world. In territorial terms, "security is only possible for a tightly defined spatial unit endowed with sovereignty" and "is then, by definition, the defence of particular spatial sovereignty and the politics within it" (Agnew and Corbridge 2003: 86). This particular space to be defended from security threats is the legal territory of the state ("homeland, fatherland, motherland") which exclusively, "indivisibly" and "unconditionally belongs to the nation". "The homeland" does not only represent the sovereign jurisdiction of a state but it is also framed as something sacred for the nation to be

protected from dangers of outer forces. The geopolitical discourses of danger can construct a certain territory as a threat to “national security” or “border security” in order to justify coercive actions taken against this blacklisted space.

### Three Types of Geopolitical Reasoning and Methods

O Tuathail and Dalby (2002: 4) propose a three-fold typology of geopolitical reasoning in critical geopolitics: *Practical*, *formal* and *popular geopolitics*. While practical geopolitics denotes the “reasoning of practitioners of statecraft, of statespersons, politicians and military commanders” (O Tuathail and Agnew 1992: 194), formal geopolitics is about “strategic thinkers and public intellectuals who work in civil society and produce a highly codified system of ideas and principles to guide the conduct of statecraft” (O Tuathail and Agnew 1992: 194). Popular geopolitics refers to “the production and circulation of geopolitical discourse in popular culture and the mass media” (O Tuathail 2002: 603-604). Geopolitical representation of the world and particular spaces surrounding the “homeland” by all of these actors are fed by and feeds the threat and danger perceptions of a state in relation to its national-self. These geopolitical discourses and reasoning flowing from the national-self definitions inform the spatialisation of boundaries and dangers (O Tuathail and Dalby 2002: 5).

Geopolitical/geographical reasoning and the imagination of the practitioners of statecraft (practical geopolitics) might be more complex, elaborate and colourful than their ritualistic and discreet utterances since there are politically limiting factors driving the officials to be more cautious, diplomatic and humble about their geopolitical ambitions. Likewise, formal geopolitics’ (organic intellectuals<sup>2</sup>) discursive tone is most likely to be technically structured. Nevertheless, popular geopolitics is not for the elite circles but for the public consumption that interpellates ordinary citizens into the geopolitical discursive regime of the truth. There are no diplomatic constraints for the actors in mass media since their words are not official speech-acts binding statecraft. Therefore, the historiographical narration of geopolitical reasoning is likely to be more prevalent in popular geopolitics.

This article triangulates content and discourse analysis of three types of Turkish geopolitical reasoning in order to set out ideational motivations, geographical imagination and the discursive medium through which Turkey’s military engagement in Syria was realised and justified. The geopolitical discursive data used for triangulation: (1) *Practical geopolitics*: Turkey’s National Security Council’s (*Milli Güvenlik Kurulu* - MGK) press releases. The MGK is the highest security deliberation and coordination council of the Turkish state composing of the president, vice-president, the ministers of justice, foreign affairs and national defence, the chief of the general staff and the commanders of land, air and naval forces. The council hold regular meetings every two months to discuss recent security-related developments and determine outlines of general security policies. Therefore, even though the council’s declarations are not binding for the executive branch but advisory, the press releases of the council are the primary sources to locate practical geopolitical reasoning of the Turkish government.

(2) *Formal geopolitics*: The Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research’s (*Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı*, SETA) policy briefs, reports and op-eds.

The SETA is an Ankara-based (with branches in İstanbul, Washington D.C. and Cairo) think-tank institution with substantial ties with the current Turkish government. The SETA experts claim that they produce reports and briefs in order to contribute to the new foreign policy vision of Turkey which is thought to be an “aspiring regional power” under the AKP rule, to inform the public about foreign policy issues with researches and publications and to provide human resources to the Turkish government (Ustun and Kanat 2018: 409-417). They also assert that they had a salient influence on the government in some policy areas such as the so-called Arab Spring and the so-called Kurdish question. Even though the question of whether they propose original roadmaps and perspectives to the government beforehand or they legitimise the already implemented policies afterwards is controversial, the SETA can be considered as the “organic” unofficial strategic community of the AKP government. Therefore, their publications related to the Syria case are used as a primary source for formal geopolitics of Turkey towards Northern Syria.

(3) *Popular geopolitics*: İbrahim Karagül’s, the chief editor of a leading pro-government, the *Yeni Şafak* daily newspaper, op-eds on Northern Syria, Syria and the Middle East in general. Karagül’s op-eds can be tracked as a primary data for popular geopolitics since he consistently and historiographically narrativises Turkey’s policies towards Syria. His op-eds are an illustrative sample of popular geopolitical reasoning, which situates Turkish interventions into an identity-driven geopolitical storyline. *Yeni Şafak* and İbrahim Karagül are relevant for Turkey’s popular geopolitics because *Yeni Şafak* is a well-known pro-AKP government media outlet that follows an Islamic agenda and İbrahim Karagül is one of the few journalists in Turkey, who are occasionally invited to Erdoğan’s foreign visits and flew with the presidential and prime ministerial aeroplanes. He is a staunch and frank supporter of the AKP government and his popular geopolitical writings are in consistence with his political posture. There are alternative pro-government media outlets like the *Sabah* or the *Yeni Akit* and op-ed contributors which disseminated similar discourses to Karagül’s. They could have also been subjects of analysis in this article. However, in order to avoid cherry-picking reinforcing the article’s argument and to be methodically precise and consistent, this study limited its interest in popular geopolitics with Karagül’s op-eds. Therefore, his writings are employed as an illustrative case of popular geopolitics in Turkey towards Northern Syria.

A combination of discourse and content analysis applies here because geography is a discursive phenomenon interlinked with ideology and a form of power-knowledge nexus (O Tuathail and Agnew 1992: 192). In the article, discourse and content analyses are embedded into historical and contextual analysis of Turkish foreign policy towards Syria between Summer 2014 (the Siege of Ayn al-Arab) and the end of 2016. The timeframe of the article does not cover the Olive Branch operation (2018) but the analysis of data provides prior Turkish geopolitical reasoning and discourses that eventually culminated in the intervention into the Afrin region held by the PYD/YPG. Geopolitical articulations are open to being subjected to a causal analysis as speech-acts, especially when they are uttered by government officials since their utterances are binding in the international system as an institutional/non-discursive realm. Likewise, the proposals and perspectives of the security community might have a direct advisory influence on the decision making processes. Therefore, especially practical and formal geopolitical language used in the MGK press releases and the SETA reports were subjected to content analysis as well. Nevertheless, geopolitics as discourses in a

post-structural sense are constructive utterances that make policies cognitively “conceivable”, but not necessarily “inevitable”. Therefore, the analysed discourses here are not “causes” but intentionally formed “mediums” that cognitively made Turkey’s active political and military engagement in Syria possible or “thinkable” in the Turkish public sphere. The article pursues Turkey’s geopolitical reasoning and discursive medium and storyline for political and military interventions in Syria through O Tuathail’s five questions to approach the “grammar” of geopolitical reasoning: Where (location specification), what (situation description), who (actor typifications), why (attributions and imputations of causality), so what (strategic calculation) (O Tuathail 2002: 609-617). These questions reveal us the key points in the Turkish geopolitical narrative constructed on the security of the national-self.

### **The Waking Up Moment: Ayn al-Arab**

*Context.* An authority vacuum throughout the Syria-Turkish border grew out of the Syrian Civil War which erupted with the unrest in 2011 against the Baathist Regime. According to a report of The International Crisis Group (2013: 2), the Kurdistan Workers’ Party’s (PKK), an armed organisation listed as terrorist by the US, the EU, the UK, Turkey and others, its Syrian branch, outlawed the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing People’s Protection Units (YPG) exploited this power vacuum and started to dominate the area with a tacit *modus operandi* with the Assad Regime. Even though Assad and the PYD/YPG were not politically bedfellows, they had common enemies: Turkey and Islamist rebels (Gunes and Lowe 2015: 5). This development aggravated Turkey’s national security concerns. The AKP elites shared their concerns about the YPG/PKK in Northern Syria with the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) officials and urged them to stand against the PKK’s ambitions in Syria. However, the KRG-funded Kurdish National Council (ENKS) in Syria preferred not to militarily antagonise the dominant PYD/YPG. They signed the Erbil Agreement with them that prevented Kurdish infighting at the margins of the protracted Syrian uprising (Tanir, Wilgenburg and Hossino 2012: 9) and established the Supreme Kurdish Committee (DBK) to govern the region by power-sharing. This move towards a united Kurdish front surprised and disappointed Ankara since the AKP elites wanted the Kurdish movements in Syria to be incorporated into the “Free Syrian Army” (FSA), the main loose armed opposition body which was also fostered by Turkey’s efforts.

Even though the AKP elites strongly supported the territorial integrity of Syria and opposed the PYD/YPG, they invited Salih Muslim, the co-president of the PYD, to Turkey several times and maintained a dialogue with the organisation. This dialogue had happened in the context of the “political solution process” whereby the Turkish government had an indirect contact with the PKK. However, this initiative did not provide a rapprochement between Turkey and the PYD (Gunes and Lowe 2015: 9) which was still accepted as a terrorist organisation because Turkey’s pressures to convince the PYD/YPG to join the national opposition instead of acting unilaterally and not cooperating with the Assad regime failed. TEV-DEM (Movement for a Democratic Society), the governing coalition in Northern Syria led by the PYD, unilaterally declared regional self-rule and autonomous cantons as territorial units of governance in January 2014 following the footsteps of the KRG (Abdulla 2014) despite Turkey’s objections. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the territoriality

of this autonomy declaration was archipelagic since the self-declared cantons were not geographically connected. Therefore, Turkey glossed over the YPG and still mainly focused on the regime change in Syria as its fundamental geopolitical interest instead of a nascent security threat that might emerge from a PKK-controlled territory in Northern Syria.

The siege of Ayn al-Arab (Arappınar/Kobani), a Kurdish majority town in the North of Syria, by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (DAESH/ISIS/IS), designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey and others, in September 2014 was a waking up moment for Turkey's geopolitical reasoning towards Northern Syria and Syria in general. However, during the siege, Turkish policymakers' practical reasoning still had not geopolitically bracketed or detached the particular problems in Northern Syria from Turkey's general Syria policy that was blindfolded by the overreaching mission of toppling the Assad regime. Therefore, the Turkish PM Davutoğlu declared during the siege that Turkey would be fully part of the international anti-DAESH coalition if the coalition agreed "on a plan for the removal of the Syrian regime" and if Western allies "put in place a no-fly zone over Syria's northern borders and a safe zone on the ground" (Parlar Dal 2017: 16). However, Turkey's overarching strategy targeting both the DAESH and the Regime failed to gain support from the allies.

President Erdoğan openly declared that the PYD is a terrorist organisation in the eyes of Turkey and that Turkey could not, therefore, be expected to help a terrorist group (Guardian 2014) as part of the international anti-DAESH coalition. Turkish statespersons' position was, more or less, "helping the PYD would simply strengthen the PKK and its tacit ally Assad" (Gunter 2015). Even though Turkish statespersons and politicians conceived and constructed the fight between the DAESH and the YPG as "two terrorist groups are fighting" during the blockade of Ayn al-Arab (Öğür and Baykal 2018: 64), Turkey reinforced the efforts that prevented Ayn al-Arab's fall to the DAESH. Turkey provided humanitarian relief and immediately accepted and sheltered almost all Kurdish civilian refugees, estimated at over two hundred thousand, who fled from Ayn al-Arab and the vicinity of the town (Demiroz and Unlu 2018: 3-4). Numan Kurtulmuş, the then Turkish deputy prime minister, stated that Turkey's unconditional open door policy showed the world that Anatolian territory (Turkey) is "the last island of humanity" (BBC 2014). Turkey also provided medical treatment to YPG militants, officially considered as terrorists, in Turkish hospitals (Hürriyet 2014a). Moreover, Turkey suggested the FSA defend Ayn al-Arab militarily and also allowed the KRGI's Peshmerga forces to cross through Turkish soil to help the YPG against the DAESH in Syria (Kaya and Whiting 2017, 83). At the discursive level, for instance, the Prime Minister Davutoğlu saluted "the Kurdish brothers in Kobani" (Hürriyet 2015ad) or the Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan stated that "the Syrian Kurds are historical friends and natural allies of Turkey, not the Assad regime" (Hürriyet 2014b) when the town was besieged by the DAESH.

Turkey's mixed messages and ambivalent policies towards Northern Syria and the siege of Ayn al-Arab was consistent with Turkey's holistic approach towards Syria envisioning a regime change as a permanent solution; thus it was still pressuring the PYD/YPG for integration with the anti-Assad opposition instead of entirely alienating the organisation from the nation-wide resistance. Besides, Turkey was still on "the solution process" track and in an indirect dialogue with the PKK de-securitising the domestic terrorism issue. The US and its allies began to actively target the DAESH positions around Ayn al-Arab and airdrop weapons

and ammunition to the YPG militants in order drive the DAESH out of Ayn al-Arab in spite of Turkey's concerns that drove it to dither. Turkey's this equivocal stance can be described as "passive toleration" of the PYD/YPG during the siege of Ayn al-Arab.

*Practical Geopolitics.* Syria and the civil war have been appearing in the Turkish National Security Council (MGK) press releases since April 2011. The recurrent themes related to Syria, defined as "brother/sister country", have been the emphasis on "democratic transition" (TR National Security Council 2011c, d, e, 2012b, c, d), "addressing people's legitimate demands" (2011a, b, c, d, e, 2012b, c, d, 2013c, f, 2014a), "humanitarian crisis" (2012a, c, e, f, 2013d, f), "refugee question" (2012d, e, f, 2013a, b, c, d, e, 2014a, b). The MGK urged the Syrian regime to compromise with the opposition via democratic reforms from the first day in accordance with the AKP government's anti-status quo stance throughout the so-called Arab Spring years. The diplomatic discourse used by the MGK employed a normative language rather than a geopolitical one. The Syrian crisis has been narrated as a humanitarian crisis and democracy problem. This was a morally justificatory linguistic tool for active involvement in the developments in Syria. However, as the quagmire in Syria started to turn into a form of civil war next door to Turkey, security-driven geopolitical discourses were surfaced. After 2013, the MGK started to emphasise threats against "regional security and stability" (2013a, b, d, e, 2014c, d). Even though Turkey has been an ardent "democratically" revisionist power in the region since the narrational beginning of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, it needed to protect its "homeland" from imminent danger coming from the adjacent territory. Therefore, the practitioners of the Turkish statecraft slowly began to conceive and construct the Syrian geography as a nest of "national security" threat (2012d, e, 2013a, e, 2014a, b, c) through the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013.

A "territorial" terrorism threat had started to find a place rarely in the press releases of the MGK after the second half of 2012. In parallel with the PYD's gradual consolidation of its power in Northern Syria following the withdrawal of the regime forces, the MGK started to mention its concerns about "terrorist structures abusing the territorial power vacuum" and "border security" (2012d, e). However, the MGK had never directly and literally targeted the PYD/YPG until 2016 in coherence with the "spirit" of the so-called "solution process" and the AKP government's priority on overthrowing the regime. Therefore, the discursive emphasis still stayed on the nation-wide normative transformation rather than sub-regional geopolitics in Syria. Even though the fight against the DAESH mentioned as a goal in the press briefs of the MGK during the siege of Ayn al-Arab, the same declarations did not clearly express concerns about the PYD/YPG and emphasised the importance of the dialogue process with the PKK (2014e, f). National security and regional stability were also raised as a matter of threat against the country.

*Formal Geopolitics.* The think tank SETA, as part of the Turkish government's unofficial strategic community, released brief analysis pieces during the DAESH advancement towards Ayn al-Arab. The SETA experts, Can Acun and Hüseyin Öner, as part of formal geopolitical reasoning, coded the Kurdish-majority areas controlled by the YPG as a geopolitically significant space since the Kurdish population live next to the Turkey-Syria and Syria-Iraq frontiers. These lands are also presented as important for the geopolitics of energy since the Kurds are inhabitants of oil-rich parts of Syria (Acun and Öner 2014: 1).

They assessed the PYD/YPG as an ally of the regime that was suppressing the anti-Assad and anti-PYD Kurdish opposition. They did not evaluate the siege of Ayn al-Arab specifically through a prism of geopolitical-territorial threat to Turkey but as an organic extension of Turkey's problem with the Assad's Syria. The PYD/YPG had not been constructed as a territorial threat to Turkey yet (Acun 2014, Acun and Öner 2014) but as an "errand-boy" of the "evil" regime. At this point of time, the formal geopolitical reasoning imputed the agency behind the YPG's rise to the Syrian regime.

*Popular Geopolitics.* İbrahim Karagül also depicted the PYD/YPG in Kobani as an unreliable side in the siege of Ayn al-Arab because of its ties with the Assad regime (Yeni Şafak 2014a). Even though he repeated that "Turkey's fate is with the Kurds" (2014b, c), he advocated a non-alliance policy between the YPG and the DAESH and suggested a security zone established by Turkey because taking clear side with the YPG might have meant supporting the Kurds against the Arabs (2014d, e). The perception of the PYD/YPG as the "Kurds" was a position that disappeared from Turkey's geopolitical imagination in the following years. After the US military support to the YPG had become crystallised, Karagül began to write about a geopolitical/territorial threat to Turkey particularly related to developments in Northern Syria that spatially bracketed this sub-region from Turkey's overall policy towards Syria. He asserted that the US aimed at establishing a corridor, a buffer zone, next to Turkey's southern borders from Northern Iraq to the Mediterranean. According to him, this supposed Northern Iraq-Mediterranean corridor's function was to cut Turkey's geographical connection with the Arabs, controlling Turkey's relations with the Muslim world and sabotaging Turkey's geopolitical ambitions in the region (2014 f, g, h).

Karagül also situated the siege of Ayn al-Arab into a broader historiographical narrative that mainly distinguished his popular geopolitical discourse from practical and formal geopolitical reasoning. According to him, the YPG and the DAESH are Trojan horses which are instrumentalised by the West for their new geopolitical designs in "the geography" which ambiguously denotes the post-Ottoman Middle East or the Muslim world in his writings. To him, the siege of Ayn al-Arab is a cover for the Western geopolitical ambitions in the region and the West is seeking a new Sykes-Picot order that will render new cartographical practices aiming at the containment of Turkey because if Turkey rises again, the geography will rise and, thus, cannot be manipulated and governed by the Western powers anymore (2014i, j, 2015a). Therefore, to him, Turkey has to establish a security-zone in Northern Syria unilaterally and face these geopolitical threats within Syria (2014 f, g, h). Turkey/Anatolia has been described as the "heartland" of "the geography"; thus a possible isolation from the Middle East through a Western-controlled statelet/buffer zone at Turkey's southern frontiers was discursively represented as a fatal threat to both Turkey and Arab-majority countries. Karagül was hasty about targeting the West and asserting geopolitical containment arguments compared to practical and formal geopolitical imaginations but they would come to a similar line with him after the subsequent developments in Northern Syria.

### **The Sobering Up Moment: Tal Abyad**

*Context.* The YPG completely repelled the DAESH from Ayn al-Arab in January 2015 with the assistance of US airstrikes and weapon airdrops. The US government had pursued a "lead

from behind” strategy and refused to militarily engage in the Syrian rebels’ fight against the Baathist regime. Nevertheless, the US government was eager to wage a war against the DAESH by deliberately “splitting of the anti-ISIS effort from Syria’s broader war” (Itani and Rosenblatt 2018: 7-8). The rise of the DAESH “had shifted US attention from aiding the insurgency against Assad—which had always been a limited effort—to degrading and destroying ISIS” (Itani and Stein 2016: 6). Turkey and the US shared the outlook that “Assad must go” but had divergent means to accomplish that. However, even though both are against the DAESH, the emergence of it widened the political gap between Turkey and the US. After the defeat of the DAESH in Ayn al-Arab, the US decided to heavily rely on the Kurdish YPG as its proxy in the anti-DAESH campaign of the international coalition. In the meantime, the image of PYD/YPG/YPJ (women only militant branch of the PYD) militants fighting against the “Islamist” DAESH that was a major threat to Western values and security was intensively polished in the Western media and public opinion as “secular” and “feminist” Kurdish heroes and heroines in parallel with the policies of the US government (Öğür and Baykal 2018: 67-69).

“After its victory in Kobane in January 2015, thanks to U.S. support, the PYD has begun to spread to non-Kurdish areas” (Balache 2016: 29). The growing alliance between the PYD and the US enabled the YPG to control more population and land beyond its pre-US capability which started to divert Turkey’s attention from the nation-wide regime change policy to sub-regional (Northern Syria) national security issues. Although Turkey’s discontent with the US policy in Northern Syria was gradually developed in parallel with the deepening the US-YPG relations, the YPG’s capture of the Arab-majority town Tal Abyad in June 2015 was a sobering up moment for the Turkish elites of statecraft. It increased the Turkish elites’ stress and sense of geopolitical containment since “long-term control of Tal Abyad would further the YPG’s goal of connecting the non-contiguous zones of territory it holds across northern Syria” (Dalay 2018: 79). The occupation of Tal Abyad by the YPG geopolitically linked the so-called Jazira and Kobane cantons of the PYD. A contiguous territory dominated by the Syrian offshoot of the PKK alongside Turkey’s southern frontier inaugurated and exacerbated geopolitical containment anxiety of the Turkish officials and civilian strategic community. In the domestic side, the so-called “solution process” enabled an indirect dialogue between the Turkish government and the PKK collapsed during summer 2015, which also cemented Turkey’s sub-regional threat perception towards Syria.

*Practical Geopolitics.* Turkish National Security Council did not hasten to particularly problematise the PYD/YPG presence as a fatal security threat. The first following council meetings after the YPG’s repulse of the DAESH from Ayn al-Arab, the MGK kept employing a vague discourse that portrayed Syria as a space of threat and danger for Turkey and the region, which did not decisively specify the PYD/YPG but the DAESH (TR National Security Council 2015a, b). Starting from summer 2015, which also coincides with the failure of the indirect AKP-PKK talks and the YPG’s expansionism with the US support and the capture of Tal Abyad, the MGK began to indicate particularly the PYD/YPG as a specific problem in Syria. In June 2015, the MGK drew attention to the brewing demographic engineering in the Syrian region next to the Turkish border which heralded an imminent territorial threat (2015c). The MGK had still not named the YPG, but it was an indication of supposed “Kurdification” efforts in the region. This concern was beyond the decades of the

PKK terrorism threat. The MGK offered “a zone cleared from terrorist organisations” inside Syria which obviously demonstrated Turkey’s changing priorities in Syria because the primary target was not the Assad’s regime (2015d). This zone proposal aimed at the YPG as well as the DAESH without naming it. In October 2015, the MGK called international organisations to put the Syrian branch of “the separatist terrorist organisation”, namely the PKK, into terror lists (2015e). The YPG/PYD started to become a manifest target for the MGK. The most emphasised themes within the MGK press releases throughout 2015 were the “border security” and “security threats emerging from Syria” (2015a, b, c, d, e, f). The practical geopolitical reasoning towards Syria almost completely changed from a normative and humanitarian discourse towards Syria, in general to geopolitically securitisation theme related to Northern Syria following the capture of Tal Abyad, the advancement of the YPG/PKK and the failure of the “solution process”.

*Formal Geopolitics.* The SETA experts kept focusing on the regime in their report following the repulse of the DAESH from Ayn al-Arab by the YPG during early 2015 (Ulutaş, Kanat and Acun 2015). Veysel Kurt, another SETA expert, depicted the absence of military conflict between Turkey and the PYD/YPG as a positive situation and expected that reasonable interrelations between sides, especially in the context of the solution process in a SETA brief released in March (Kurt 2015: 2). However, as the YPG’s expansion and consolidation of power alongside the Turkish-Syrian border came to a non-negligible level, the formal geopolitical reasoning also began to heed these developments. In his SETA brief in June 2015, Can Acun, a SETA expert, brought the supposed demographic engineering and ethnic cleansing against the Turkmens and Arabs by the YPG to the fore and emphasised that the occupation of Tal Abyad by the YPG established the geographical unity of the self-proclaimed Jazira and Kobani cantons (Acun 2015). To him, the control of Tal Abyad is the first link of a possible PKK-state next to the Turkish border and the YPG will attempt the same for the Afrin canton, which is an isolated enclave in the Northwest of Syria. There is a serious geopolitical threat against Turkey to be contained by a Kurdish enclave governed by the PKK. This would have meant a “geographically united belt” hostile to Turkey. Therefore, Turkey had to take this “corridor project” in Northern Syria into account (Acun 2015: 8).

Likewise, Murat Yeşiltaş, in his SETA report on Syria in August 2015, asserted that the YPG-PKK built a territoriality contiguous with the Turkish border and constructed Northern Syria as a part of the imagined “Kurdistan” geography that was a cartographical practice (Yeşiltaş 2015: 13). He also defined the geo-cultural dynamics developed thanks to the growing Kurdish nationalism under the banner of the YPG/PKK in the region as a geopolitical security threat to Turkey (Yeşiltaş 2015: 21). The formal geopolitical reasoning in Turkey had increasingly become concerned about the geographical containment threat following the capture of Tal Abyad by the YPG. This change in the perception of unofficial security community of the AKP government towards Syria reinforced the reformation of Turkey’s geopolitical imagination of the Syrian civil war and began to narrow down Turkey’s geographical interest from Syria as a whole to Northern Syria as a sub-regional security threat which aggravated the sense of containment by a hostile structure. However, despite the awareness and depiction of this geopolitical pitfall, the SETA experts were hesitant to call for a unilateral military intervention into Syria which demonstrated that the level of threat was still manageable in their perceptions.

*Popular Geopolitics.* İbrahim Karagül warned the government against the geopolitical containment threat to Turkey relatively earlier than the AKP government's recognition by historiographically narrativising the supposed imminent dangers emerging from Northern Syria. However, in the wake of the defeat of the DAESH in Ayn al-Arab, Karagül had not focused heavily on the YPG in particular but he mostly concentrated on broader geopolitical designs in the "geography" aiming to isolate Turkey and to incarcerate Turkey into the borders of Anatolia (Karagül 2015b, c, e). He defined being locked up in the "homeland" as a doomsday scenario because, in popular geopolitical reasoning, Turkey means something more than where its sovereign jurisdiction is owing to its assumed historical leadership role in its "geography". According to him, these geopolitical designs are produced by the same Western coalition, which attacked Turkey and attempted to drive Turks out of Anatolia during and after World War I, in order to sabotage Turkey's leadership because they still perceive Turkey as the Ottomans. If Turkey does not defend itself beyond its borders, deep into the Middle East, it will have to confront the enemy in Istanbul's frontiers (2015b, c, d, e). He presented Turkey as the common identity, space, state and "the homeland" of the "geography" whose destiny was attached to Turkey's success or failure (2015f, g, h). These popular/populist geopolitical reasoning and discourses did not often particularly target Syria and the YPG/PKK or offered sophisticated policy alternatives but they had a rhetorical representation and "rally around the flag" function for the public audience. It is necessary to bear in mind that, during this period, Turkey was still on the solution process track. The ironical issue was that even though the PKK/YPG was expanding alongside the border, Karagül did not often particularly target the Kurdish-led forces in parallel with the official government policy.

However, after Tal Abyad fell into the hands of the YPG and the AKP government's dialogue with the PKK collapsed, Karagül also shifted his narrative by adding the specific PKK-led geopolitical containment motifs within his discourse. In June 2015, he turned back to focus on the containment argument and began to contend that the US and the West were orchestrating the establishment of a "Northern Iraq-Mediterranean belt", "buffer zone", a "Kurdish belt" (2015j), "YPG/PKK corridor" (2015n) in order to contain Turkey spatially, cut its geographical connection with the Arab countries and tame Turkey's geopolitical ambitions. To him, they hired the PKK for this objective and let the YPG conduct ethnic cleansing to the Syrian Turkmens and Arabs to purify the non-Kurdish residential areas that would provide a demographical habitat for a Kurdish enclave. Therefore, a military incursion into Northern Syria is a must for the Turkish government in order to eliminate this nascent geopolitical containment threat before the war spread to Turkey (2015i, j, k, l).

If, as he always discursively frames, the Kurds are a natural part of the regional broader "we" that he calls "the geography", then, why a Kurdish enclave from Iran border to the Mediterranean is a geopolitical pitfall for Turkey and the Arabs? Karagül attributes agency to the Western states which will constitute the Kurds as an enemy actor to both Turkey, "the last bastion of the geography", and the Arabs and cut their geographical connection via this "hostile" entity situated between them (2015m, n). Therefore, the Kurds are still within the construction of supranational/civilisational "self" in opposition to the "other", namely the West. Nevertheless, this specific Kurdish militia was otherised as a Western puppet and its possible exclusive territory was deemed as the "garrison" of the "other". In this geopolitical

imagination, it was not the Kurds containing Turkey but the West through the medium of the PKK/YPG which was refused to be recognised as the representative of the Kurds. The PKK/YPG was perceived as a threat for both its own “separatist” agenda and its collaboration with Turkey’s supposed civilisational “other”. These and similar discursive themes recurred in Karagül’s writings during the rest of 2015. This popular geopolitical reasoning that defined the “West” as the perpetrator of the new imperial cartographical practices and the ontological foe, presented the YPG/PKK as the evil powers’ contractor. The YPG was instrumentalised for containing Turkey geopolitically from its southern border that would cut its physical land connection with its “Muslim-Arab” hinterland. Therefore, a Turkish military intervention in Northern Syria is an inevitable action in order to hinder this negative geopolitical projection.

### **The Starting Up Moment: Manbij**

*Context.* The YPG forces backed by the US and the international coalition kept enlarging the Syrian territories under their control at the expense of the DAESH. Turkish elites and public opinion were significantly concerned about this expansion since the PKK, Turkey’s public enemy No. 1, was gaining more grounds in terms of territory in Syria and was aestheticising its image which was earning sympathy in the Western public sphere. The YPG and its minor Syrian partners, with the advice of the US officials, rebranded themselves as “the Syrian Democratic Forces” (SDF) in order to circumvent Turkey’s objections in October 2015. The AKP government repeatedly warned the YPG and the US officials not to cross to the west of Euphrates River which would move the PYD one step closer to encircling Turkey’s Syrian border by connecting Afrin town to the rest of the YPG-held areas. On the Afrin side, the SDF, with its Arab elements, captured Tel Rifaat town in February 2016 that narrowed the geographical gap between self-proclaimed cantons. Even though Turkey’s discontent was growing in parallel with the SDF’s expansion, the US’s unwavering support for the SDF and Turkey’s deteriorated relations with Russia as an aftermath of Turkey’s shooting down a Russian warplane in November 2015 for violating Turkish airspace did not give diplomatically permissible environment to Turkey in order to conduct military manoeuvres in Northern Syria.

The US-backed SDF launched an offensive to the Manbij town on the West of Euphrates River in May 2016 despite Turkey’s declaration of a potential movement towards Manbij and Jarabulus as a red line. The SDF was advancing alongside the Turkish border instead of deep into Syria in order to defeat the DAESH. The US provided assurances to Turkish officials that the YPG would leave the town after the operation became successful (van Wilgenburg 2016) which had not happened yet. The Manbij offensive and the capture of the town by the SDF in early August 2016 and the YPG’s advancement towards the border town of Jarabulus were the final straws for Turkey to militarily engage in Northern Syria unilaterally by its own forces and its Syrian proxies. Even though the botched military coup attempt had taken place a month before the operation which led experts to question the supposedly “fractured” TSK’s military capability, the Turkish army initiated the Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) together with the FSA forces against the DAESH starting from Jarabulus in the 24th of August. The operation was finalised with the full control of Al-Bab town in February 2017 that totally cut the DAESH’s land connection with the Turkish border

and set a geopolitical barrier between the YPG-controlled Afrin town and the rest of Northern Syria.

*Practical Geopolitics.* The MGK targeted the PYD/YPG directly for the first time in the January 2016 press release (TR National Security Council 2016a). The MGK declared that the current Syrian regime, the DAESH and the PYD/PKK cannot be part of the construction of Syria's future. It confirmed that Turkey will keep supporting the Turkmen and the opposition groups in Syria. Regional and national security threats were also crucial elements of Turkish practical geopolitical logic at the beginning of 2016 (2016a, b). The MGK repeated that the PYD/YPG could not be a participant of negotiations on Syria's future (2016b). In the first MGK meetings in 2016, Russia's role in the Syrian civil war specifically emphasised since the regime was regained its advantage on the ground at the expense of the opposition by the assistance of Russia's military engagement on the side of Assad (2016a, b). This new development was making the opposition that Turkey supported retreat gradually. Moreover, the warplane crisis between the two countries made Russia to be an important topic in the MGK meetings. However, Russia would lose its "threat" position within Turkish practical geopolitical reasoning following the relatively quick rapprochement between the parties which diplomatically facilitated Turkey's incursion into Syria (Kortunov and Erşen 2018: 1-2; Baev and Kirişçi 2017).

The MGK condemned European Union countries for sheltering and espousing the YPG/PKK components within their territories (2016b, c, e, f). The US, the leading actor in the international coalition supporting the YPG, was not directly targeted by the MGK. Strong emphasis on the YPG in the MGK releases since the beginning of 2016 was an indicator of changing threat perception and geopolitical reasoning of Turkish statecraft's practitioners. The MGK meeting and press release on the 20th of July 2016 were entirely devoted to the failed coup attempt and the so-called Fetullahist terrorist organisation (FETÖ) (2016d). Nevertheless, the MGK meetings during the OES revealed the revised practical geopolitical thinking of the Turkish state practitioners regarding Northern Syria in general terms. The reason for the operation declared by the MGK was preventing the YPG's "terrorist corridor" alongside the borders (2016e, f). The MGK set two aims for the operation: Border security and moving the YPG and the DAESH out from the Turkish borders completely. The MGK repeated the necessity of "terrorist-free" and "no-fly" zones next to Turkey's frontiers. The MGK announced a "total (full scale) fight" against the terrorist organisations including the YPG with all possible means (2016f). This revised securitised approach towards Syria was an outcome of the geopolitical reasoning that coded the YPG's expansion as a containment threat which eclipsed and replaced the overarching foreign policy goal of regime change in Syria. This geopolitical perception was crystallized mostly during 2016 and drove Turkey to take a military action in Syria. The main difference in Turkey's security concerns stemming from Northern Syria than its general fight against the PKK was the territoriality aspect of the emerging PKK-associated structure. Nevertheless, the MGK reiterated that the territorial integrity of Syria was an important principle for Turkey (2016e, f) which unveiled the priority of Turkish practical geopolitical reasoning in Syria.

*Formal Geopolitics.* In 2016, SETA released a comprehensive report exclusively on the YPG/PYD for the first time. In this report, the political objective of the YPG was clearly defined as establishing a geopolitically uninterrupted "belt" from the Iraq border to the

Mediterranean under its domination (Acun and Keskin 2016). The SETA experts, Acun and Keskin, contended that the PYD/YPG was oppressing all other political factions under their *de facto* territory and conducting mass deportation and ethnic cleansing against Turkmens and Arabs in the regions where there were no or rare Kurdish settlements. They described the space where this territorial belt/corridor in the making was located as geopolitically significant for Turkey. In another SETA report on the PKK's detrimental strategy and venture to carry its violent activity to residential areas in order to control town centres within Turkey in 2015, the SETA experts emphasised that the PKK was emboldened by the expansionism in Northern Syria. To them, the then relatively porous borderline between Turkey and Syria provided a territorial convenience to the PKK/YPG militants within the adjacent towns of Turkey to the YPG-controlled towns in Syria where the urban warfare took place. It geostrategically stimulated the PKK cadres to achieve the same objectives in Turkey that were already realised in Syria (Yeşiltaş and Özçelik 2016). Therefore, a permanent territorial YPG-led structure contiguous to the Turkish border would always bear a potential to convey the PKK influence and violence to Turkish territory easily.

Some other reports and books published by SETA in 2016 made similar remarks reinforcing the formal geopolitical imagination that constructed Northern Syria under the control of SDF/YPG as a territorial national security threat. Duran and Yalçın (2016) asserted that the PYD aimed to form Northern Syria in a monolithic way (Kurdify) as a fait accompli installed statelet alongside Turkish borders. This development would be a grave national security threat because it was a boon to the PKK in order to perpetuate its war against Turkey. This would also avoid Turkey to have a saying on post-war Syria by geographically disconnecting it from the rest of the country. These reports emphasised that one of the main missions of the operation was to prevent a potential YPG corridor which might be a territorial springboard for the PKK's future terrorist activities within Turkey (SETA Annual Report 2016 and Yeşiltaş, Seren and Özçelik 2017). The sense of geographical containment became crystal clear in the formal geopolitical reasoning which almost completely diverted attention from the goal of regime change to preventing a potential containment.

The publications of SETA following the OES which unveiled the geopolitical rationale behind the intervention were more explicit and direct about the role of the US in establishing a hostile enclave next to the Turkish borders. SETA experts claimed in 2016 annual report that the US intentionally ignored the YPG's expansionism and ethnic cleansing (SETA Annual Report 2016: 93). According to another SETA report, the US actively supported the YPG because the US's objective was creating a geopolitical belt by using the PKK/YPG as a proxy on the southern border of Turkey (Ulutaş 2016: 4). The OES report of SETA states that the US does not conceive the YPG only a tactical partner against the DAESH but it desires to establish the YPG controlled areas as a garrison for itself (Yeşiltaş, Seren and Özçelik 2017: 53). The formal geopolitical reasoning of the AKP government's civilian security community began to code the US as the real perpetrator of the commonly defined territorial PKK threat, which puts the US, a NATO ally, in the "enemy" category. Therefore, the US presence in the region, once were not situated as a threat within Turkish geopolitical imagination, was gradually turned into a geopolitical threat to Turkey's national security and order for the Turkish formal geopolitical reasoning. This perceptual change in the geopolitical reading of the developments made Turkish-Russian rapprochement much easier despite the significant

policy differences. Besides multiple factors driving Turkish-Russian rapprochement, this formal reasoning and imagination informed and justified the practical geopolitics which decided to have a closer relationship with Russia and to take a direct and unilateral military action in Syria.

*Popular Geopolitics.* In the popular geopolitics side, İbrahim Karagül kept alerting the officials and informing the public about the imminent containment threat. To him, the geopolitical scenario drafted by the Western powers was still in play. The most fundamental reason behind the Western support to the YPG expansionism is to isolate Turkey from the Sunni Arab-Muslim world and to build insurmountable walls between them (*Yeni Şafak* 2016a, b, c) as “they” cut Turkey’s geographical connection from the Central Asian Turkic World which is another identity-driven hinterland of Turkey (2016d). He defined this supposed Western “offensive” to the Muslim World in the personality of Turkey as the new chain of the historical storyline composed of the Crusades, the Mongol invasion and World War I in which the Muslim World was under serious attack by outsiders (2016g, h). To him, “they” draw Sykes-Picot like new maps but Turkey has its own counter cartographical designs too (2016h). They implemented such “sinister” plans against Turkey and the Muslims in order to control the “geography” because the “Muslim lands” are the geopolitical “main axis” of the world and the “centre” of the human civilisation (2016e), namely the “heartland”. Therefore, Turkey’s military engagement in Syria in order to reverse these geopolitical designs was a must (2016d, f).

When the YPG penetrated into Manbij countryside and the town centre in August 2016, just before the OES, İbrahim Karagül intensified his containment forewarns and stated that if Turkey did not intervene for the time being, it would be forced to militarily defend itself within its own borders (2016i, j). After the launch of the operation, he hailed the intervention and defined it as Turkey’s most important geopolitical intervention after Cyprus in 1974 because it overturned the containment plans (2016r). He declared the “Mosul-Aleppo line” as Turkey’s geographical defence front and that north of these cities should be controlled by Turkey regardless of what it cost (2016k, l, m, r). He proposed more interventions into towns adjacent to Turkey’s southern borders such as Afrin, Tal Abyad and Tel Afar (Iraq) (2016n, o). To him, the operation should be expanded to Mosul that would secure Turkey’s borders and eliminate the containment threat for good (2016q, s). These maximalist and partially irredentist geopolitical proposals of Karagül blended with historiographical narrative as part of popular geopolitical imagination represented the YPG controlled areas as a “natural living space/*lebensraum*” of Turkey. This popular geopolitical representation justifies and encourages any military involvement in the region. Even though practical or formal geopolitical reverberations of these extravagant proposals are controversial, these popular geopolitical representations assist to set the justificatory discursive medium upon which military engagements are built. These sort of popular geopolitical discourses, which are not exclusive to Karagül but widespread among pro-government media figures, have made ongoing and further military operations beyond Turkey’s territories publicly “conceivable”.

## Conclusion

The geopolitical imagination of space in world politics is not essentially given and self-evident as traditional geopolitics roughly preaches. The discursive construction of geopolitical map surrounding the “homeland” in relation to political elites’ reasoning informs threat perceptions of a nation-state. In this work, the analysis of Turkish geopolitical discourses regarding Syria revealed the discursive medium intentionally constructed by the relevant actors in order to realise Turkey’s geopolitical objectives. This discourse analysis is significant because it provides the discursive substructure upon which Turkey’s coercive and diplomatic policies in Syria were built. The institutional/non-discursive policies of Turkey became “conceivable/thinkable/implementable” through this medium. The triangulation of three types of geopolitical discourses (practical, formal and popular) presented a broader picture of the geopolitical discursive medium in Turkey towards the Syrian civil war and Northern Syria in particular. Illustrative examples of practitioners of statecraft (the MGK), strategic public intellectuals (the SETA) and the mass media (*Yeni Şafak*’s İbrahim Karagül) were used in order to have a more holistic account of Turkish geopolitical reasoning.

Turkey and its governmental practitioners and organic intellectuals conceived and constructed the turmoil in Syria as a matter of “democratisation” and “humanitarian disaster” in the early days of the crisis. However, the YPG’s territorial expansion alongside Turkey’s southern borders gradually shifted this normative outlook to a realistically geopolitical one. As the YPG enlarged its territory, Turkish elites revised their geopolitical reasoning towards Syria and discursively constructed a geographical containment threat targeting Turkey’s national security. This new discursive geopolitical medium that constructed Northern Syria as a fatal peril enabled Turkey to militarily engage in Syria which might have not been conceivable for the sake of “regime change”. It is important to note that this discursive representation of the geopolitical situation was not detached from the non-discursive realm because the political and military developments on the ground, the capture of strategic towns of Tal Abyad and Manbij by the YPG, ringed alarm bells for the Turkish elites. Therefore, there was a clear interplay between geopolitics as discursive and institutional realms which mutually informed each other. The practical developments in the field pushed the Turkish actors to re-evaluate their reasoning and to construct a discursive setting in relation to this revised reasoning. This article intended to show this interplay through the lenses of Turkish practical, formal and popular geopolitical reasoning which drove the TSK and produced the justificatory medium for Turkey’s military incursions into Syria. As it was observed in the follow-up operation of the OES, the Olive Branch, in 2018 and Turkey’s alleviating discourse towards the Syrian regime, Turkish foreign policies towards Syria is now almost entirely guided by the sense of geopolitical containment threat by the PKK. Therefore, in the absence of a dramatic shift in domestic or international settings, the discursive medium is already established for further incursions into Syria targeting the YPG by avoiding a military clash with the regime whose threat was eclipsed by the geopolitical anxiety stemming from Turkey’s potential territorial isolation from its supposed Arab-Muslim hinterland.

## Notes

1. Turkey's alleged "Kurdophobic" reflexes refer to a number of reductionist Turkish foreign policy analyses attributing the main motivation behind Turkey's external and internal state actions simply to a supposed essentialist and coherent anti-Kurdish sentiment or explaining the Turkish state's behaviours with an ethno(Kurdo)-centric perspective. This outlook preaches that Turkey's policies are determined by the anxiety of a potential Kurdish nation/statehood even beyond its borders that drives Turkey to coercively or diplomatically prevent any positive development for the Kurds regardless of different Kurdish political factions. However, as can be observed Turkey's different approaches towards the PKK and the KRGI, Turkey pursues more nuanced and selective policies depending on the pertinent Kurdish organisation. The PKK and the KRGI have fundamental differences in terms of ideology and interests even though they have a sort of *modus vivendi* that prevents a military conflict between the sides.
2. Antonia Gramsci distinguishes "organic intellectuals" from traditional ones. To him, these intellectuals are "organically" bounded with a social group (especially a dominant group, or the state), function as the ideological "persuaders" and/or "directors" of the group (Gramsci 1971: 5-14). Gearoid O Tuathail and John Agnew (1992: 193) frame "specialized community of security intellectuals in various public think-tanks" and "public intellectuals of statecraft" perpetuating dominant geopolitical discourses as "organic intellectuals", a concept borrowed from Gramsci.

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