

Center for Security Studies

STRATEGIC TRENDS 2021

Key Developments in Global Affairs

Editors: Brian G. Carlson, Oliver Thränert

Series Editor: Andreas Wenger

Authors: Brian G. Carlson, Julian Kamasa, Linda Maduz,
Niklas Masuhr, Lisa Watanabe

STRATEGIC TRENDS 2021 is also electronically available at:
www.css.ethz.ch/publications/strategic-trends

Editors STRATEGIC TRENDS 2021: Brian G. Carlson, Oliver Thränert
Series Editor STRATEGIC TRENDS: Andreas Wenger

Contact:
Center for Security Studies
ETH Zurich
Haldeneggsteig 4, IFW
CH-8092 Zurich
Switzerland

This publication covers events up to 1 April 2021.

© 2021, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich

Images © by Reuters

ISSN 1664-0667
ISBN 978-3-905696-76-9

CHAPTER 3

Turkey's New Outlook: Power Projection in the Middle East and Beyond

Niklas Masuhr

Turkey's military operations in 2020 and beyond lie at the intersection of a more activist and autonomous foreign policy, the continuous mutation of the country's guiding ideologies, increased autocracy at home, and an expeditionary military machine 25 years in the making. Trends and shifts in both the short and long terms, from changing government coalitions in Turkey to the Syrian civil war, help to explain the erstwhile Kemalist Republic's accelerated transformation, both internationally and domestically, as well as its likely strategic implications.



A Turkish soldier walks next to a Turkish military vehicle during a joint US-Turkey patrol, near Tel Abyad, Syria, September 8, 2019. *Rodi Said / Reuters*



Turkish military operations throughout 2020 came as a shock to many Western policymakers and commentators, both in terms of their political audacity and their aggressive nature. In particular, its armed forces' use of Unmanned Aerial (Combat) Vehicles (UAV/UCAV) made headlines far beyond the usual bubble of military technology watchers. Beyond the battlefields of Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's increasing assertiveness in foreign policy and heavy-handedness at home have long invited diplomatic frustration and pensive analyses in NATO countries. Indeed, the very trustworthiness and reliability of Ankara as a NATO member has been questioned.

Many facets of Turkey's recent behavior have simmered for years, even decades, and have only now reached full maturation. In domestic politics, the ruling AK Party's soft Islamism has merged with ethno-nationalist currents. In the military sphere, meanwhile, important force design decisions made decades ago ensure that Erdogan has the capacity to project power as he sees fit. These developments intersect with a destabilized international environment that permits, and perhaps even advantages, the overt use of military force that Turkey undertook in 2020.

While interventions in Libya, Syria, and in the Nagorno-Karabakh war rely on similar tools and operational preferences, the politico-strategic drivers behind them are anything but uniform. Turkey's military interventions in all three theaters notably featured the use of UCAVs, but its objectives in Syria, Libya, and the Southern Caucasus were quite different in each case. The Syrian civil war naturally has a direct impact on Turkey's own national security and determines its relations with regional and extra-regional powers, most notably the US and Russia. Importantly, the Syrian war also prompted renewed concerns in Turkey over the Kurdish conflict. Operations in Libya reflect both the ideological makeup of Turkey's current governing coalition and the country's policies to ensure energy security. Support for Azerbaijan against Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, meanwhile, was similarly driven by ideological support and energy security as well as Turkey's ambiguous relationship with Russia. While Moscow has acquiesced to direct Turkish and Turkish-supported military action in all three theaters, the results in each case likely would have played out much differently if Russia had not done so. This lenience appears to be driven mostly by Moscow's desire to further weaken the already strained bonds between Ankara and its NATO



allies in the West. Taken together, all three areas of operation showcase not only Turkey's current assertiveness, but also the multi-vectored drivers of this trend and how the country seeks to position itself in an increasingly uncertain security environment.

Kemalist Past and Recent Shifts

There is no straight line between the rise of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power and Turkey's current approach to international engagement. The developments that have led here can be viewed through the prism of civil-military relations and changes in the state-endorsed doctrine in three phases: pre-2002 military dominance, the AKP's struggle to roll back that dominance culminating in the failed coup attempt in July 2016, and, lastly, the reintegration of military elites by way of ideological realignments inside Turkey.

During the first phase, until the election of the conservative AKP in 2002, the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) served as the guardrails of Atatürk's Kemalist vision. Turkey joined NATO in 1952; inter-military links with the US were especially pronounced until and beyond the end of the Cold War. The corollary of anchoring Turkey to the West was that it withdrew from the wider Middle East.¹

The fall of the Soviet Union, however, fundamentally changed Turkey's strategic environment. Within Turkish security policy circles, the two main internal opponents to Kemalism, separatism (meaning Kurdish resistance) and Islamism, replaced the Red Army at the top of the threat list. Against Islamist forces, the military set up monitoring mechanisms in order to collect intelligence, ban non-secular parties if necessary, and prevent the circumvention of the Kemalist canon – even in the face of Islamist movements gathering steam among the electorate. By the mid-1990s, an Islamist-influenced coalition government, headed by the Welfare Party, was in power. In 1997, the military intervened and overturned the government, eventually banning the Welfare Party. This, however, merely delayed the rise of some of its members, among them Erdogan himself, who successfully regrouped as the Justice and Development (AK) Party.

In 2002, the AKP swept national politics in a landslide victory at the general election. From the beginning, the Islamist party was hindered by the military, setting the tone for a conflictual relationship that culminated in the attempted coup on 15 July 2016. These two events serve as bookends for the second period under observation. During this period, the AKP and its allies wrested control of the state and



societal institutions from the TSK, even as instability rose throughout Turkey's neighborhood after the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. In terms of the country's broader foreign policy and strategic outlook, the new government sought to capitalize on the pivotal position afforded to it by straddling Europe and Asia. Under the so-called Strategic Depth doctrine, Ahmet Davutoglu, a political scientist-turned-diplomat-turned-politician, formalized the idea that Turkey possessed a natural sphere of influence not only in terms of geography but also by virtue of historic linkages throughout the region as the heir to the Ottoman Empire. These ideas formed the basis for 'neo-Ottomanism', which would replace Kemalism as the state ideology. Part and parcel of this construct was the dictum of "zero problems" with Turkey's neighbors, as Davutoglu in his capacity as Turkey's foreign minister sought to position the country as a pivotal power drawing its political capital from diplomatic relations.

The AKP and its then-allies in the religious Gülen movement proved quite successful in rolling back military influence, mainly through a series of trials from 2007 onward that exhibited questionable adherence to the rule of law. Prosecutors alleged the existence of an ultra-nationalist network ("Ergenekon") and the existence of military

contingency plans leading to a coup, referred to as "Sledgehammer."² While ultra-nationalist officers and civilian allies were certainly opposed to the AKP government and had proven their propensity for intervening in politics, the vast judicial proceedings also caught left-of-center journalists in its nets.³

Externally, a string of events after 2010 put the Erdogan government into "survival mode." The first external event and the ignition for much of what followed was the eruption of the Arab Spring. Erdogan at first sought to ride its wave by presenting himself as patron and partner to moderate Islamist forces, many of which were national organizations of the Muslim Brotherhood. This approach, however, meant that Turkey was overtly at loggerheads with more secular regimes. In Egypt, a military coup aborted the attempt to create an Islamic republic.⁴ The shockwaves of the Arab Spring also reached Istanbul itself, and in 2013 the city was rocked by a series of liberal protests at Gezi Park directed against the ever increasing autocracy of the AKP. The response was a major crackdown on left-of-center opposition and a stifling of critical media and the judiciary. Across the border, the destabilization of Syria and Iraq and the expansion of the Islamic State (IS) resulted in a long-term zone of instability.



Perhaps the most significant catalyst for Erdogan's transformation of the country, however, was the 15 July 2016 coup attempt, undertaken by a coalition of disgruntled TSK officers. After the attempt was suppressed, loyalists carried out further purges of the military, judiciary, media, and opposition. In total, 130,000 public servants were dismissed, including teachers and academics, and almost 80,000 suspects were formally arrested on grounds of supposed links with Kurdish elements and the Gülen network, which had turned from ally to domestic enemy.⁵ As one might expect, the purges within the military targeted those individuals encultured in NATO and US military contexts. Leaked US State Department cables revealed that even by the early 2000s, these "Atlanticists" were on the backfoot against "Eurasianists" who preferred the AKP's neo-Ottoman vision of Turkey as a pivotal, autonomous power.⁶

The failed coup also serves as the starting point for the third and current phase of civil-military relations. While the military was institutionally defanged, elements of the old guard's nationalism have been re-introduced and play an important role in foreign policy formulation. This shift meant that Davutoglu's neo-Ottomanism has been superseded by what some have called "Turkish Gaullism."⁷ In

essence, ethno-nationalist paradigms were imported into the state canon even before the coup attempt occurred. In 2018, the AKP entered into a coalition with the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which holds even more hostile views towards the Kurds, Armenia, and the Western world. Since then, the vision of Turkey as a major power in the Ottoman Empire's former borders has remained but has been complemented by the willingness to use military force in this perceived sphere of influence.⁸ Two decades of TSK force development dovetail with these aspirations.

In 2016, Erdogan listed a number of regional defense precepts that benign media would dub the "Erdogan doctrine." Its main tenets, notably a policy of proactive incursions into neighboring countries to pre-empt attacks against Turkey, have roots that extend as far back as the 1990s. In fact, contemporary operations under this guise closely mirror those undertaken in the 1990s, though of course now enhanced by additional military capabilities.

During the military modernization campaign of the 1990s, Turkey's forces were not simply symmetrically modernized across the board. Rather, specific elements geared towards a particular way of war were upgraded. Namely, investments and acquisitions



were made to develop a robust reconnaissance-strike complex enabled by systems such as rocket artillery, UAVs, and airborne tankers. In essence, the ability to conduct strikes into enemy territory was emphasized, as were mobile and flexible mechanized formations. However, the Cold War highlighted the vulnerability to Western arms embargoes and convinced Turkish planners to build an autonomous arms industry capable of producing the necessary platforms, systems, and spare parts. These domestic developments intersected with external events, especially the dynamics of the Syrian civil war and its Kurdish dimension. Operations in Syria, Libya, and the Southern Caucasus illustrate how the third phase of civil-military relations shapes Turkey's power projection in the region.

Syria quite naturally presents the most important theater for Turkey's security policy. Operations in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh are results of the domestic political shift in 2016, but Ankara involved itself in its neighbor's civil war from the very beginning in 2011. One month after the coup, Turkish tanks entering Syria marked the Syrian dimension of Turkey's "new look" as a more aggressive actor. Turkish involvement in Syria was also a crucial driver of Ankara's alienation from Washington and its increasing, if ambiguous, alignment with Moscow.

Syria: Overthrowing Assad

Ankara's policies during the first five years of the conflict were publicly justified along moral lines based on Turkey as a champion of democratization, with Russia and Iran playing the roles of counter-revolutionary enforcers. In this narrative, the US and NATO were viewed as fickle at best and treacherous at worst.⁹ The Assad regime's crackdown in the summer of 2011 forced Turkey to choose between support for the dictator and the credibility of the Turkish/AKP model of soft, bottom-up Islamism in the wider Arab world, a key tenet in Davutoglu's neo-Ottoman program.

In this period of enforcing regime change, Turkey permitted and supported the formation of organized Syrian opposition and the founding of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) on its territory in November 2011. Simultaneously to Qatar and Saudi Arabia (but without coordinating with either), Ankara also supported radical Islamist groups of credible combat effectiveness in the region such as al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and precursor elements of IS.¹⁰ Turkish action effectively strengthened the Islamic State group, mostly due to its preference for toppling Assad and preventing the emergence of a Kurdish-controlled quasi-state.



By 2015, it was clear this low-cost approach had failed: Assad was still in power, and stabilized thanks to a massive joint Iranian/Hezbollah proxy campaign and Moscow's intervention. However, Turkey's attempts at regime change from a presumably safe distance also failed because of the miscalculations inherent in the approach. Two events that would have precipitated regime collapse, namely en masse defections from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) or a NATO air campaign, did not materialize, contrary to Turkey's expectations. In the latter case, the White House's infamous "Red Line" declarations surely contributed to Turkey's assumptions.¹¹ After threatening military action if Assad were to use chemical weapons, President Obama failed to follow through, thereby undercutting the US position on Syria and failing to deter subsequent use of chemical weapons by Assad.

In addition, events on the ground in Syria meant that Turkish attention shifted from Assad back to Kurdish influence as the major perceived threat even before the coup attempt occurred. As recently as 2013, Erdogan had attempted to negotiate directly with the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, to peacefully end or mitigate the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Both sides had, in fact, agreed to

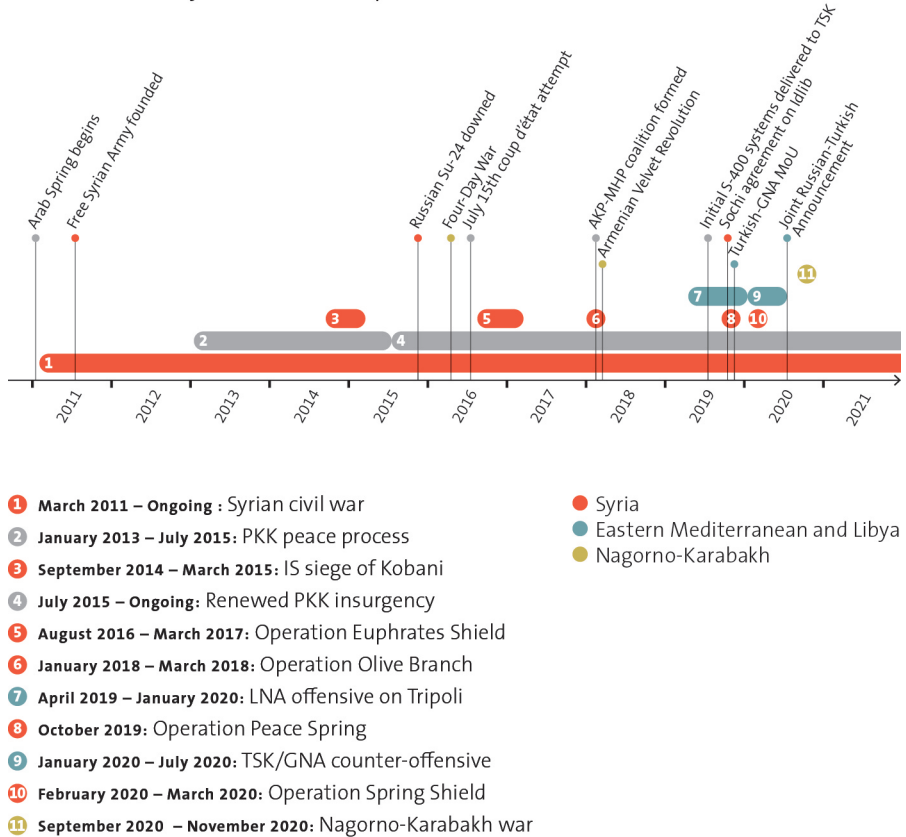
a ceasefire. The Syrian civil war and its dynamics, however, reignited tensions. With the exception of certain Iraqi special operations forces, Syrian Kurdish (YPG/YPJ¹²) units and the PKK had been virtually the only military units able to stem the tide of the IS onslaught into Syria and Iraq – significantly boosting their international reputation as a result. In 2014 and 2015, Kurdish-led forces had held out in the besieged city of Kobane, supported from the air by the counter-IS coalition, while Ankara refused to support the Kurdish holdout on its border. Turkey's refusal to assist the fighters, and a series of Islamic State bomb attacks that targeted members of the Kurdish opposition, reignited the PKK's insurgency inside Turkey after the flagging peace process broke down in 2015. Erdogan was quick to pivot from peacemaking efforts to warnings that the Kurds were the major threat facing Turkey – somewhat foreshadowing the return of the ethno-nationalist over the neo-Ottoman paradigm that would later be formalized.

In the chaos of the civil war, YPG and its allies carved out zones of effective control in northwestern Syria around Afrin City and controlled most of the country's rural northeast and east. The decision by the United States and its NATO allies to work with the YPG



Turkey's Security Environment since 2011

Political and military events and developments



and its local allies as their preferred ground component in counter-IS operations was a source of consternation for Ankara. The prospect of a contiguous Syrian Kurdish quasi-state, straddling borders and receiving external support, constituted the worst possible result of the Syrian civil war in Turkey's eyes. Operation *Euphrates Shield* in August 2016 was Turkey's

response, and would be followed up by three more major offensive campaigns by the spring of 2020, two of which were aimed at Kurds.

Syria: Adjustment of Ends and Means

Euphrates Shield is principally the operational result of an adjustment of aims and investment: Whereas



previously Ankara had pursued a low-cost, maximalist approach, now both sides of the equation were adjusted. The operation was, furthermore, tightly linked with the unsuccessful coup attempt that had occurred only one month earlier. For one, TSK leadership had opposed deploying ground forces into Syria for over a year¹³ and, secondly, the offensive proved the Turkish military's continued readiness and operational ability in the wake of post-coup purges. It also serves as the inciting incident for the current expeditionary political and military configuration observed in Syria and later theaters.¹⁴

The operation's objective was to create a secure zone on Syrian soil and to prevent the SDF from connecting their northeastern territories to Syria's northwestern Afrin province and create a "corridor of terror," in Ankara's parlance. In order to launch the operation, the Turkish government established the parameters of engagement with Washington and Moscow – but proceeded to exceed the limits agreed with the US.¹⁵ By ensuring Russian acquiescence, Turkey established itself as an additional state actor in the civil war, securing a stake in Syria's future and establishing a precedent for what has been called "cooperative competition" with Russia.¹⁶ In addition, Turkey quietly withdrew support from

groups defending the besieged city of Aleppo that would fall to the SAA in December – a tacit acceptance of spheres of influence.¹⁷

Russia's established military dominance in Syria and growing disenchantment with the Obama administration compelled Erdogan to seek rapprochement with Russia. Turkey increasingly viewed the US as an intrusive rival due to its support for the YPG/YPJ, whereas Turkey could work with Moscow once it had dropped the priority of toppling Assad. The tepid reaction of Turkey's Western allies to the coup attempt was in clear contrast to its swift condemnation by Russia. Even during the previous, "idealistic" period of Turkey's Syrian policies, the Obama administration's refusal to turn its airstrikes against Assad and its support for Kurdish elements on the ground had soured relations considerably. In 2015, various Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, and other armed groups had organized under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – even if YPG units formed the operational core and leadership.

Ankara's priority of containing the YPG's influence became even clearer in subsequent operations after 2016. While the TSK's armed occupation of the SDF-controlled majority Kurdish Afrin enclave in early 2018 was more



or less accepted by the US, its broad-front incursion into Kurdish territory in October 2019 showcased the degree to which Washington and Ankara had been on a collision course. These events also underlined Turkey's swing towards Russia in a variety of ways. When SDF forces retreated in front of the Turkish army and its proxies in 2019, they agreed on a compromise with Assad and his Russian backers. In effect, this meant that SAA troops entered SDF-held territories to deter further TSK advances. The US position in Syria, meanwhile, was concomitantly weakened due to its apparent inability to manage its relations with the SDF and Turkey. It also propelled Putin and Erdogan to sign an agreement in Sochi during the same month, agreeing to joint patrols along Syria's northern border and deconfliction measures to be undertaken in the western province of Idlib. This settlement with Russia to some degree neutralized or at least mitigated the perceived threat emanating from SDF's control of border crossings. In many ways, this turnaround is remarkable, as Russo-Turkish relations had been at a low as recently as 2015.

From its main airbase in Khmeimim, Latakia province, the Russian Air Force started to conduct bombing campaigns against the opposition in September 2015. However, in November a Turkish F-16 fighter shot down

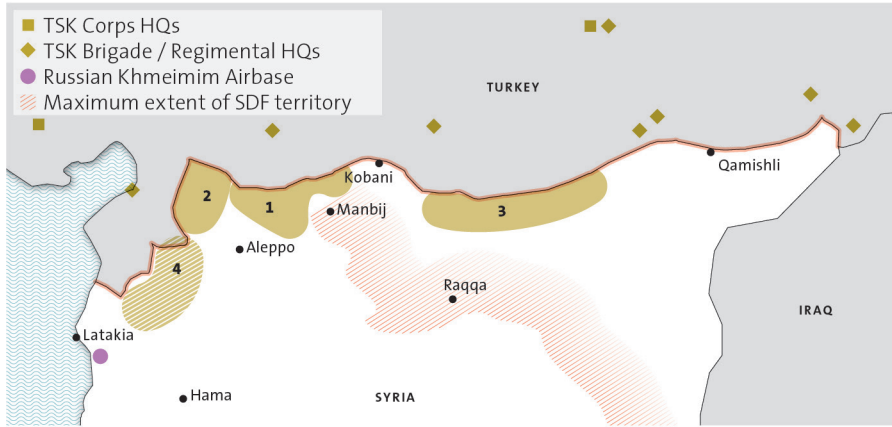
a Russian Su-24 attack aircraft, causing a major diplomatic crisis. Russia in response imposed a series of economic sanctions, targeted at Turkey's export, construction, and tourism sectors. However, the sanctions were not designed to be extensive, as Moscow sought to minimize negative repercussions for Russia, and consequently they did not inflict massive damage on the Turkish economy. For this reason, Moscow also did not threaten to reduce or cease deliveries of natural gas to Turkey, its second-largest foreign consumer, despite Ankara depending on Moscow for 56 per cent of its supply.¹⁸ Ankara formally apologized for the downing of the Russian aircraft and endorsed the Russian-driven Astana process to discuss Syria's political future. As mentioned above, *Euphrates Shield* operationalized the new reality of Turkey's acceptance of the status quo – Assad remaining in power – and the new consultative if still competitive relationship with Russia regarding Syria. Two military developments showcased this shift particularly clearly: Turkey's acquisition of Russian S-400 air defense systems, ignoring significant US resistance to this action, and its 2020 aerial offensive against Assad's SAA in Idlib province.

By February 2020, Ankara had long abandoned the idea of toppling Assad, but the TSK conducted a series of



Turkish Military Operations in the Syrian Theater

Since 2016



- 1 **Euphrates Shield:** August 2016 – March 2017, mechanized incursion into northern Syria in reaction to IS cross-border attacks and to contain the SDF's sphere of influence.
- 2 **Olive Branch:** January – March 2018, armed occupation of Afrin province in northwestern Syria against SDF units.
- 3 **Peace Spring:** October – November 2019, mechanized incursion into SDF-held area along Turkish-Syrian border.
- 4 **Spring Shield:** February – March 2020, retaliatory UCAV and artillery strikes against SAA across Idlib province in western Syria.

Source: GlobalSecurity.org (Locations of Turkish HQs)

drone and artillery strikes against the SAA that month that crippled its forces in Idlib province on Syria's north-western border with Turkey. Civilian refugees, along with Turkish-backed rebel groups and jihadist elements (organized within the Nusra-successor HTS) had been pressed into a shrinking perimeter slightly larger than Luxembourg and only three-quarters the size of Rhode Island. While the Turkish strikes (referred to as Operation *Spring Shield*) were intended to relieve

pressure on this perimeter, they were also conducted in retaliation for a Russian air strike that killed 33 TSK soldiers. The fact that it was the SAA that was punished through UCAVs and precision artillery, and not Russian forces, reflects the nature of cooperative competition between Ankara and Moscow. With Assad being iced out of the Sochi format, the diplomatic vehicle that manages deconfliction in Idlib, Russia and Turkey have been able to send military signals to



each other over his head. Spring Shield was a manifestation of the current *modus operandi* between the two powers. These dynamics would be replicated later in Libya and to some extent in Nagorno-Karabakh.

While *Spring Shield* proved the potency of the TSK's modern reconnaissance-strike complex, it did not prove strategically decisive, as it failed to push the line of contact back significantly from the Turkish border.¹⁹ Yet, as suggested above, the operation proved useful in demonstrating that Russia and Turkey were able to wage proxy warfare across a very limited space without coming to blows directly. To some extent, this is surely the result of Russia's militarily and politically entrenched position inside the country. *Euphrates Shield* in 2016 did buy Turkey a seat at the table regarding the future of Syria and provided Turkey with some degree of leverage over Russia. However, this influence appears to be confined to Syrian territory itself and, even more narrowly, the zone of contact between Turkish and Russian-backed forces. Russia sits much more comfortably and has the ability to increase pressure on Turkey at will through the expendable instrument of Assad's SAA. While rapprochement with Putin was a logical consequence of US support for the YPG and its opaque policies on intervention,

Erdogan's relationship with Moscow appears similarly asymmetrical.

Securing the Libyan Bridgehead

While the application of military force inside Syria is not too surprising given the state's role in Turkey's security, the military campaign in Libya arose largely due to Turkish nationalists' vision of the country's regional posture and their resurgent influence within the security apparatus. While Ankara has sought to influence the political and military balance in Libya ever since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, it only overtly intervened in the civil war in late 2019. In November of that year, the Turkish government signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) codifying the Turkish interpretation of maritime claims with Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), based in the capital Tripoli. In exchange for recognition of Turkish maritime claims, Ankara promised to stabilize the GNA's precarious military situation in a separate MoU – and duly delivered. In doing so, the TSK joined a long list of external actors that are pursuing various degrees of overlapping and competing goals in the North African country.

The GNA has been locked in civil war with Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), a consortium of



militias and mercenaries that has coalesced around a core of former regime troops, since 2014.²⁰ The LNA has been supported materially and militarily by the UAE, as well as politically by Egypt and France, and is increasingly reliant on Russian private military companies, such as the now-infamous Wagner Group that has entrenched itself in the Libyan conflict. In terms of interests, the UAE are driven by their version of domino theory, fearing Muslim Brotherhood-style bottom-up Islamism creeping closer to the Gulf, whereas its local ally Russia has broader and more diffuse aims, including to accommodate Turkey somewhat in order to weaken NATO cohesion.²¹

Turkey's interest in Libya is not new, but the domestic political shift in Turkey has also manifested itself in the Libyan theater. In the years immediately after the overthrow of Gaddafi, Turkey had mostly been involved through its support for Islamist forces inside the country, in line with its priority of proselytizing the AKP's model throughout the region. This extended to support for ideologically aligned groups, reportedly including those responsible for the 2012 attacks on US diplomatic and intelligence facilities in Benghazi.²² Secondary motivations for the intervention may have included countering and imposing costs upon regional rivals, in this

case specifically the UAE and Egypt, as well as safeguarding economic interests inside the country, mostly bound up in the construction sector. The AKP's coalition with the nationalists in the MHP, however, has folded personnel and ideas from the formerly dominant Kemalist military brain trust into official government policy, and Libya happens to play a key role in the current government's aspirations. The ideological set of beliefs most responsible for the move into Libya is a 2006 pronouncement by then-Rear Admiral Cem Gürdeniz of Turkey's "Blue Homeland" (*Mavi Vatan*), which claims a wide exclusive zone of influence around Turkey's shores.²³ Erdogan's ideological pivot is exemplified by how Gürdeniz, purged and arrested in the Sledgehammer trials, has now become a major author of Turkey's regional posture. *Mavi Vatan* has become the maritime element of the ruling coalition's drive for global relevance through regional dominance and underpins the expansion of Turkey's naval power projection capabilities. Ankara's attachment to the GNA, and its internationally recognized status in particular, stems from its conflict with Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt over competing interpretations of exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean and the gas drilling rights that come with them. While its



rivals have locked shields through the EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF), coordinating their efforts, the GNA is the only state actor recognizing Ankara's interpretation.

At first glance, the reasons for Turkey's confrontational stance, as well as its willingness to engage in a proxy war abroad, appear to be tied to interests over carbohydrate exploitation. After all, Turkey imported 72 per cent of its energy in 2018. It has also sought to substitute deliveries from its occasional cooperative regional rivals Russia and Iran with gas from its ally Azerbaijan. However, these priorities only go so far in explaining Ankara's willingness to engage in a militarized tug-of-war with Greece and France, which deployed naval forces in support of Athens in early 2020, in the Eastern Mediterranean. There have – as of early 2021 – not been significant finds of natural gas in the exclusive economic zones claimed by Turkey and agreed to by the Tripoli government. Ankara instead appears to be motivated by its new desire to establish itself as a major regional power and global actor, as well as its disenchantment with Europe and the US. With the latter's disengagement from the wider region, Turkey seeks to assert itself into pivotal positions and make itself indispensable. In other words, Turkey's principal problem with the EMGF lies not in claims over gas

supplies, but rather in the idea that Turkey cannot accept exclusion from any spheres of influence, especially as the long-simmering conflict with Greece lies at the heart of the issue, both geographically and metaphorically.²⁴ Confronting Greece in particular over competing interpretations of national sovereignty of course also acts as a *cause célèbre*, especially among Erdogan's nationalist-Eurasianist allies in the military and MHP.

Libya thus presents both a political and military bridgehead for Turkish exploitation efforts necessary to break out of the perceived containment imposed by its neighbors. In broader regional strategic terms, this aim has been viewed as an element of the pivot that has been observed since 2016 regarding Syria, where Ankara moved away from attempting to export Turkey's soft Islamist model by toppling Assad. In geographic terms, this shift constitutes a reframing of Turkey's strategic areas of concern – a narrowing of priorities onto the Kurdish issue regarding Syria and the wider Middle East and an elevation of the Eastern Mediterranean. This also carries with it an emphasis on Turkey's growing navy, which has not only been used to support combat operations in Libya but has also escorted Turkish exploration vessels and intimidated European and Israeli ones.²⁵ It also has



been used to escort arms shipments into Libya in contravention of the UN arms embargo – which the EU's IRINI mission seeks to enforce. Most incendiary in this regard was a spring 2020 incident in which TSK frigates radar-locked a French naval vessel.²⁶

While Ankara insists on the legitimacy of its intervention, Tripoli only acceded to the twin memoranda when the LNA was about to break into the capital, after Turkish diplomats had agitated for a maritime demarcation deal for over a year. As such, the GNA reluctantly put itself at Ankara's mercy and likely should be considered fully reliant militarily on Turkey's support. The Tripoli government had been under significant pressure from the LNA. Turkey's January 2020 deployment, based around UCAVs and Syrian National Army (SNA, formerly FSA) fighters used as a mercenary expeditionary force, was able to reverse the momentum – despite Haftar being supported operationally by UAE manned and unmanned aviation and Russian mercenaries.

While Turkey managed to stabilize the GNA's military position, its intervention can hardly be viewed as an unqualified success. Ankara and its allies' forces managed to counter-attack and drive the LNA back to Sirte, in the center of Libya's Mediterranean

coast, where the front lines appear to have settled into a stalemate following a Russo-Turkish announcement in May 2020. From here, the assessment becomes less clear-cut. Turkey has raised the stakes by significantly contributing to a theater-wide arms race between the warring Libyan factions. In 2014, most external supplies consisted of infantry weapons, including shoulder-launched air defense systems (MANPADs) at the upper end, but since then the conflict has been fought by UCAVs, attack helicopters, modern anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), and mobile air defense systems such as Pantsir-S1.²⁷ In addition, around 10,000 foreign mercenaries have flocked to the country's battlefields, including the SNA and nominally private Russian forces. Most notable in this regard is surely Russia's Wagner Group, which has not only supplied advisors and specialist frontline forces, but also maintains and operates MiG-29 and Su-24 fighter and attack aircraft, in addition to having established a fixed command and control infrastructure. On the eastern side, Wagner contractors have reportedly built major fortifications and trenches along a 280-kilometer line between Sirte and al-Jufrah airbase in the desert – quite literally entrenching the current political and military status quo. On top of these military developments, the GNA dissolved in early 2021 to be



replaced by a Government of National Unity (GNU) that seeks to re-unify the country – even if, as of April 2021, it is unclear how the military and political divide of the country can be overcome if external actors have invested so heavily militarily.

At present, both Ankara and Moscow appear to have achieved favorable conditions, in particular at the expense of the LNA and UAE, as well as the Tripoli government, which is at the mercy of its protectors. That being said, it is unclear how exactly these dynamics translate into the GNU's stated task of forming a unified government and how Turkey and Russia might leverage their military positions for political advances inside the new government. Erdogan's government, meanwhile, continues its confrontational course with the EU and its NATO partners, whose responses have been complicated by both France and Italy, which support different sides of the Libyan Civil War. That being said, while Turkey has again showcased its willingness to accommodate Russia at the expense of the West and its local allies, its position in Libya is perhaps fairly vulnerable due to how intimately it is tied to the Tripoli government's legitimacy and Ankara's wider Mediterranean ambitions. Some suggest that Turkey is in the process of overextending its footprint beyond its political means.²⁸

The success of the efforts that Ankara has undertaken in pursuit of securing a bridgehead in the Maghreb is very much dependent on broader processes still to be resolved. While the Libyan theater does not constitute a major drain on the TSK's resources, Turkey risks overextension in the political sphere by its bullish stance towards European NATO allies. In such a calculation, a strategic assessment of Libyan operations could only be seriously undertaken once the gas exploration feud with the EMGF has been settled one way or the other. Until then, Turkey has opened a flank that comes with vulnerabilities. For one, a permanent presence and commitment to the GNA and its successor elements on the ground permits Russia to potentially put pressure on Turkey, even for gains related to other theaters or political issues. While its local allies are dependent on Turkish support and protection, Ankara also depends on the semi-legal status conferred to its operation provided by the November 2019 MoUs. Perhaps most significantly, however, the Erdogan government's confrontational course towards Europeans, in particular France, might come back to haunt Ankara if the Eurasianists' promises fail to materialize. While Turkey has proven in Libya that it can "work with" Russia, just as it did in Syria and subsequently in Nagorno-Karabakh,



it has to be noted that Moscow's lenience is at least partially based on weakening ties between Turkey and the West. Whether this is a sustainable foundation for years to come remains to be seen.

Two States, One Military Doctrine

Turkey's energetic diplomatic and military support for Azerbaijan in the fall 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh to some extent mirrors the ideological shift of 2016. However, while the current configuration of Erdogan's leadership cadre has indeed proven decisive, the ground for Turkey's support in the war had been prepared for almost a decade. As recently as 2011, Turkey had pressured Baku not to re-open conflict over Azerbaijan's breakaway region, where tensions have simmered since 1994. In fact, Davutoglu had previously even sought to normalize relations with Armenia, only to have his efforts successfully torpedoed by Turkish nationalist circles, the Azerbaijani government's protests, and resistance amongst Armenians. As a result of this failed normalization experiment, links with Baku were strengthened and the military dimension of the Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance Treaty gradually reinforced.²⁹ Wider diplomatic efforts to defuse and ultimately resolve the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh are anchored within the OSCE's Minsk Group under

French, Russian, and US leadership. However, frustrations at the lack of progress contributed to Baku's decision to attempt a military solution.³⁰

At first glance, the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh might appear as a partial Russo-Turkish proxy war, as the former is allied with Armenia through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). At the same time, Turkey and Azerbaijan's warm relations and the slogan "two states, one nation" showcase Ankara's preferences clearly. But just as in Syria since 2016 and in Libya, the reality is more complex, and it can be argued that Moscow and Ankara are acting more in concert than against each other. Russian acquiescence to the Azerbaijani offensive likely results from its government's disdain for Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his pro-Western leanings. In effect, Turkey and Azerbaijan acted as Russia's muscle in sending a message to the region, beyond Armenia, that Russian power could also manifest itself through acquiescence to external threats.³¹ This line of thinking was indeed shown by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, oligarch and head of the conglomerate that the Wagner Group is attached to, who – speaking most likely as a proxy for Moscow – effectively described Pashinyan and his 2018 Velvet Revolution as a CIA project and



only drew a red line at Armenia's borders, purposefully excluding the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.³²

Turkey's motives for the engagement were multifaceted, though more direct than in Libya. For one, oil-rich Azerbaijan serves as a major supplier of energy resources to Turkey, and SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state-owned petroleum and gas company, is the biggest single foreign investor in the Turkish economy. Second, increasing its footprint in the Caucasus would provide useful leverage over Russia in other, more relevant, theaters. Lastly, hostility towards Armenia is of great importance to the ultra-nationalist MHP and its main constituency. Baku itself, meanwhile, was likely driven by a wave of anti-Armenian sentiment in the wake of clashes that occurred in the summer of 2020 in conjunction with an economic slump.

As such, the Azerbaijani government, headed by its autocratic president Ilham Aliyev, likely identified a window of opportunity. Previously, most Western commentators had assumed that, as in the 1990s, superior Armenian forces would be able to hold their positions in mountainous terrain, enabling a successful counter-offensive.³³ Another assumption was that Armenia's air defense and territorial advantages would make an Azerbaijani assault

prohibitively costly, both militarily and politically. The Four-Day War of 2016, in which both sides deployed heavy weapons in a limited capacity had shown, however, that an Armenian victory was not guaranteed. This experience encouraged Baku to go forward on 27 September 2020. This was a calculation that ultimately proved successful, when to the surprise of virtually all commentators, Azerbaijani forces achieved a clear battlefield victory in six weeks by threatening to move on to the regional capital of Stepanakert. Of greatest significance, however, were not only deliveries of Turkish UCAVs but also the degree to which the TSK had exported its expertise in utilizing a modern, drone-enabled reconnaissance-strike complex. The amount of operational input that Turkish officers had in Azerbaijan's campaign is not known publicly, but it was likely significant.³⁴

Still, Russia's apparent unassailable position in the Southern Caucasus puts into question how much Turkey actually gained in the conflict. While Turkish nationalists regard the Azerbaijani campaign as a success and the oil-rich country is indebted to Turkey, it is questionable how much leverage over Moscow was actually gained. The ceasefire that ended open hostilities on 9 November was a trilateral agreement between Russia and the two former



Soviet Republics. Neither Turkey nor the OSCE's Minsk Group played a diplomatic role. Moscow thus demonstrated regional superiority by ending the war on its own terms – having been happy to acquiesce to the decimation of Armenian and Karabakh forces and the resultant loss of territory. As a result of the ceasefire, Russian peacekeepers have been deployed to guard the borders of what is left of Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh, with Azerbaijan reclaiming almost two-thirds of its area.

Moscow was able to quickly and decisively impose red lines and deploy airborne forces as peacekeepers. Reflecting back on Prigozhin's statements regarding Armenia, this to some extent mirrors the Idlib scenario in which Moscow sat back while its proxy suffered casualties, only to step in later. In another parallel, Turkey and Russia effectively conspired to ice out Western influences from the region, as neither the US, the EU, nor the Minsk Group played a significant role in ending the conflict. What is not known so far is to what extent Baku will have to pay for Turkish assistance in the war and how its relationship with Russia is affected by aligning so closely with Erdogan. Ultimately, it cannot be conclusively stated whether Ankara was driven more by the desire to protect its economic health and energy supplies by ingratiating itself with Aliyev or whether the

government coalition feels it has to continually stoke the flames of aggressive ethno-nationalism for domestic and ideological reasons. Regardless, and while both complexes were certainly at play, the war's perceived success might create an unrealistic benchmark for the utility of military force – especially if Ankara was motivated primarily by ideological reasons.

Implications

As has become apparent, the political cocktail that created the current iteration of Turkey's foreign policy orientation did not magically appear in 2020, but has simmered at least since the AKP's accession to power in 2002 and in many ways precedes it. While Erdogan first sought to defang the military institutionally and roll back the secular old guard, this group has re-emerged somewhat as a force favoring an assertive, anti-Western ethno-nationalism. What is new, however, is a military force designed for the type of operations that the ruling coalition requires to pursue its goals, namely fairly rapid, low-cost power projection activities in both Turkey's neighborhood and beyond.

This gives Ankara the flexibility required to insert itself militarily into theaters of critical relevance to its rivals: Turkey has impinged upon the perceived backyards of the European



A New Robotic Way of War?

Perhaps the most publicized feature of Turkey's military campaigns were glossy aerial recordings taken mostly by Turkish-made ANKA-S and TB2 UCAVs that ravaged the Syrian Arab Army and Karabakh-Armenian forces, respectively. A second element that caught the international eye was the deployment of SNA fighters to Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh as an expeditionary force outside Syria, in the latter case reportedly at brigade strength. The creation of a largely strategically autonomous arms industry providing a modern reconnaissance-strike complex is certainly not without operational and even strategic value. In Turkey's case, the autonomy of its forces means it is virtually invulnerable to sanctions. However, beyond the notion that attrition on the battlefield failed to achieve politico-strategic success in any of the three theaters, Turkish military actions have not even been unequivocally successful on the tactical level.

- In **Syria**, the TSK's Operation *Spring Shield* crippled Assad's forces and destroyed large quantities of armored fighting vehicles, artillery pieces and, most significantly, Russian-made air defense systems, especially of the Pantsir-S1 variety. Similar drone feeds emerged from Libya that seemed to suggest Turkey had found a way to overcome the dreaded Russian air defense. However, it should be noted that the SAA's overall performance has not been of particularly high quality, whether directed against Turkish drone strikes or those strikes conducted by NATO forces or the Israeli Air Force during years prior – a result of inferior export versions and lack of training and ability on the part of SAA crews. Air defense and electronic warfare systems controlled by Russia's own military are likely much more capable, even against low-flying UCAVs and loitering munitions. As a case in point, electronic warfare systems at Russia's Gyumri base in Armenia reportedly brought down numerous TB2s when they had crossed the border and approached the base's perimeter.
- Meanwhile, Turkish drones reportedly achieved much less favorable attrition rates against the LNA's forces in **Libya**. This is compounded by the fact that currently the TB2 drone (as opposed to the heavier ANKA-S) can only be operated by line-of-sight guidance and is consequently dependent on ground stations and signal repeaters. As a result, their offensive value in particular would be much lower in a more expansive and fluid battlefield.
- The **Armenian and Karabakh** forces were certainly not designed to counter an enemy equipped with modern UCAVs and loitering munitions. Even so, while the impact of these systems should not be discounted, it has to be noted that Azerbaijani special operations forces still had to fight arduously through the mountains to take the vital town of Shushi on Stepanakert's only supply route to Armenia, effectively winning the war. As with *Spring Shield*, had Russia decided to step in and come to its nominal ally's rescue, the campaign would likely have ended in a much less favorable outcome for Turkey.
- Lastly, while the use of the **SNA** is a convenient way for Ankara to avoid sending non-special forces infantry into harm's way, it has to be noted that their use comes with strings attached. For one, their performance in each Turkish incursion into Syria has been less than satisfactory militarily. Secondly, they present a rather large problem in terms of political optics: The expeditionary use of mercenary forces that have been credibly accused of looting and war crimes in the past is likely not helpful to Turkey's regional image in the long run.



Union in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean and of Russia in the South Caucasus. The TSK has been an effective tool in gaining leverage in these areas and in securing Turkey's position as pivotal and perhaps even indispensable in the international sphere. As has been argued above, none of the 2020 operations have achieved far-reaching successes, mostly due to Moscow holding superior cards in each theater. Paradoxically, however, here also lies a problem in the anti-Western course charted by the nationalists and Eurasianists: The more Turkey distances itself from the US and Europe, the less Russia needs to accommodate Ankara. If Western-Turkish relations were to break down even further, it is unclear what would stop Russia from applying pressure across secondary theaters or even in Syria. In such a scenario, bridgeheads could quickly turn into exposed flanks.

This also means that the Biden administration's cold stance towards Erdogan – neither Secretary of State Antony Blinken nor President Biden bothered to reach out to their counterparts directly for weeks – and its likely selective engagement with the region are not necessarily good news for Erdogan's government. Already in December 2020, Erdogan moderated his tone vis-à-vis the US and Israel. Particularly in view of the normalization of

relations between multiple Arab countries and Israel in the waning months of the Trump administration and the announced resumption of multilateral formats by the White House, Turkey likely cannot afford to continue on its present course of alienating neighbors.³⁵ The two most significant stumbling blocks to at least a more conciliatory relationship with the US are surely questions regarding US support for the YPG and Turkey's acquisition of S-400 systems. President Biden might also be more inclined to use economic sanctions against Turkey than his predecessor was.

These dynamics will, to some extent, increasingly burden Europe, particularly in light of the Eastern Mediterranean confrontation. While Greece, backed up by France, is willing to answer military pressures in kind, a unified European position is unlikely to emerge. NATO, as a result, will have to play a key role in keeping lines of communication open and to soften (or blunt) the edges of Ankara's anti-Western rhetoric and actions. In some ways, it already does so, as the Hellenic Armed Forces and the TSK run deconfliction measures regarding the Aegean struggle through NATO.³⁶ Beyond NATO, Europe appears ill-equipped to deal with a more muscular Turkey that is willing and able to resort to military force. Here the main

areas of contention are the Eastern Mediterranean and related issues: Libya, the political dispute over Turkey's occupation of Northern Cyprus, maritime demarcation zones, and migration in the Mediterranean region. Further on the horizon, the question of Syrian reconstruction arises, including the respective roles of Europe and Turkey.

Ankara's military posture has afforded it direct levers "on the ground" that European powers lack, especially in Syria and Libya. With the exception of France, whose president has dispatched naval assets into the Aegean to back up Greece, it is questionable to what extent other European powers are willing and able to push back actively and pursue regional interests. In this way, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh must be a cautionary tale to Europeans (and the US): Due to Turkish and Azerbaijani willingness to pursue military options, the Minsk Format has effectively been rendered obsolete – and with it, France's role in its mediation.

Presently, Ankara attempts to run an increasingly complex multi-vectored balancing game in its neighborhood by seeking to apply and release pressure across multiple theaters and forums. The sheer ability and (equally important) willingness to resort to military force swiftly can be considered a great advantage in an unstable

region. However, the ideological tint in Turkey's foreign policy might become a liability down the road, despite the institutional marginalization of the TSK. At some stage, the heated rhetoric runs the risk of outrunning the TSK's military capabilities or what Erdogan and his advisors consider acceptable risk. In other words, operations such as those conducted in 2020 risk establishing precedents that military campaigns can be undertaken quickly and cheaply. However, while the resumption of hostilities with Armenia would certainly be popular with the MHP and its ideological allies, as would operations against Kurds or a further distancing from the West, the calculation would change quite dramatically once Moscow decides not to acquiesce.

- 1 Ali L. Karaosmanoglu, "The Evolution of the National Security Culture and the Military in Turkey," *Journal of International Affairs* 54:1 (2000), pp. 199–216.
- 2 Günter Seufert, *Überdehnt sich die Bewegung von Fethullah Gülen? Eine türkische Religionsgemeinschaft als nationaler und internationaler Akteur*, (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), 2013), pp. 16–17.
- 3 Dani Rodrik, "Ergenekon and Sledgehammer: Building or Undermining the Rule of Law," *Turkish Politics Quarterly* 10:1 (2011), pp. 99–110.
- 4 Lars Haugom, "Turkish Foreign Policy Under Erdogan: A Change in International Orientation?", *Comparative Strategy* 28:3 (2019), pp. 206–223.



- 5 "A Look at Turkey's Post-Coup Crackdown," *AP News*, 30.08.2018.
- 6 Leela Jacinto, "Turkey's Post-Coup Purge and Erdogan's Private Army," *Foreign Policy*, 13.07.2017.
- 7 Haugom, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, pp. 209–210.
- 8 Arne Strand / Siri Neset, *Turkish Foreign Policy: Structures and Decision-Making Processes*, (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2019).
- 9 Sener Aktürk, "Turkey's Role in the Arab Spring and the Syrian Conflict," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 15:4 (2017), pp. 87–96.
- 10 Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 129–131, 139–140.
- 11 Christopher Phillips, "Eyes Bigger than Stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Syria," *Middle East Policy* 24:1 (2017), pp. 36–47.
- 12 People's Protection Unit and Women's Protection Unit, respectively.
- 13 Ozlem Kayhan Pusane, "Turkish Public Diplomacy and Operation Peace Spring," *War on the Rocks*, 13.01.2020.
- 14 Jeff Jager, "Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield: An Exemplar of Joint Combined Arms Maneuver," *Small Wars Journal*, 17.10.2016, p. 3.
- 15 Murat Yesiltas / Merve Seren / Necdet Özcelik, *Operation Euphrates Shield: Implementation and Lessons Learned* (Ankara: Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), 2017), p. 21.
- 16 Nicholas Danforth, "What did Turkey Gain from the Armenia-Azerbaijan War?" *Eurasianet*, 11.12.2020.
- 17 Christopher Phillips, *Eyes Bigger than Stomachs*, p. 49.
- 18 Idil Bilgic-Alpaskan et al., "Economic Implications of Russia's Sanctions against Turkey," *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*, 07.12.2015.
- 19 Jennifer Cafarella et al., *Turkey Commits to Idlib* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 2020), pp. 1–6.
- 20 Jalel Harchaoui / Mohamed-Essaid Lazib, *Proxy War Dynamics in Libya* (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech Publishing, 2019), p. 4.
- 21 Jalel Harchaoui, "The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya," *War on the Rocks*, 07.01.2021.
- 22 Aaron Stein, "Turkey's Proxy War in Syria," *War on the Rocks*, 15.01.2015.
- 23 International Crisis Group, "Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters," *Crisis Group Europe Report* 257 (2020), pp. 7–8.
- 24 Galib Dalay, *Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charting a Way Out of the Current Deadlock*, (Doha: Brookings Doha Center, 2021), pp. 2–7.
- 25 Günter Seufert, *Turkey Shifts Focus of its Foreign Policy* (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), 2020), pp. 2–4.
- 26 "France Blasts 'Extremely Aggressive' Turkish Intervention against NATO Mission Targeting Libyan Arms," *France 24*, 17.06.2020.
- 27 Florence Gaub, "What if... There is no Disarmament in Libya?", in: Florence Gaub (ed.), *What if... not? The Price of Inaction* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2021), pp. 61–65.
- 28 Iain MacGillivray, "What's Turkey's Endgame in Libya?", (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2020).
- 29 Daria Isachenko, *Turkey–Russia Partnership in the War over Nagorno-Karabakh* (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), 2020), p. 2.
- 30 Cindy Wittke, "Bergkarabach," *Russland-Analysen* 394 (2020), pp. 14–17.
- 31 Daria Isachenko, "Türkei, Russland und Bergkarabach: Eine Ambivalente Konfliktkonstellation," *Russland-Analysen* 394 (2020), pp. 21–22.
- 32 Isachenko, *Turkey–Russia Partnership*, p. 3.



- 33 Michael Kofman, "A Look at the Military Lessons of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", *The Moscow Times*, 21.12.2020.
- 34 Ibid; John C.K. Daly, "Baku and Ankara Deny Turkish Military Bases Being Established in Azerbaijan," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 18:19 (2021).
- 35 Dan Arbell, "What will a Biden White House Mean for Turkey-Israel Relations?", *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 29.01.2020.
- 36 Dalay, *Turkey, Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean*, p.9.