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Opposing Discourses of Terror: The Use of the Terrorist Label by the Turkish and Russian Governments in the Northern Syrian Conflict

The primary goal of the paper is to examine how the Turkish and Russian Governments are using the term terrorist in their diplomatic communication towards the Syrian conflict. Following the introduction, the study outlines the theoretical framework – namely the securitisation theory –, then presents a concept of terrorism, which is focusing on the instrumentalisation of the terrorist label in discursive processes. Henceforward, the paper attempts to accomplish the aforementioned goal by examining the Turkish and Russian security discourses on two interrelated issues of the Syrian war: Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring in October 2019, and the Russian–Syrian offensive codenamed Operation Dawn of Idlib between April 2019 and March 2020. Based on the detailed analysis of relevant speeches and articles given or written by high-ranking Russian and Turkish diplomats, the paper displays how the two states justified their military interventions, defined their own roles, and framed the non-governmental actors involved in the conflicts. According to the conclusion of the author, despite the numerous similarities in their discourses, Turkey and Russia define oppositely, who is, and who is not a terrorist in Syria, which constitutes a major collision point between their geostrategic perspectives.

Keywords: Turkey, Russia, Syria, terrorism, security, diplomacy

1. Introduction

In October 2019, shortly after the Turkish Armed Forces conducted a military incursion in northern Syria, Turkey’s United Nations envoy Feridan Sinirlioğlu described the intervention as a ‘limited cross-border counter-terrorism operation’, and condemned

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‘any representation of our counter-terrorism operations as an offensive or aggression’.² His Russian counterpart, Vassily Nebenzia, on the other hand, refused to designate the groups targeted by the intervention as terrorists and described the Turkish campaign as an ‘illegal occupation and [...] dangerous experiment in demographic engineering’.³ Based on the exchange of words between the diplomats, we can presume that the two states define the meaning of terrorism differently, and are using the word “terrorist” arbitrarily, which constitutes a major collision point between their narratives. The primary aim of the paper is to test this hypothesis through the detailed analysis of Turkish and Russian security discourses on the northern Syrian conflict. The central question of the research is how the terrorist label is being used by the two governments, and how the two discourses relate to each other.

Geographically, the research is narrowed down to two subregions within Syria: Turkey’s “peace corridor” in northern Syria, and Idlib governorate. Chronologically, the research is focusing on the time period from April 2019 to March 2020 but takes the antecedents of the examined events also into consideration. Thematically, the study focuses on two specific and interrelated issues. On the one hand, it analyses how the Turkish diplomatic communication justified Operation Peace Spring, and how the Turkish and Russian perspectives differ on the Syrian Kurdish political/paramilitary groups. On the other hand, the research examines how the Russian diplomatic communication justified Russia’s active participation in Operation Dawn of Idlib, and how the Russian and Turkish perspectives differ on the radical Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The two issues have been chosen because of three reasons: 1. both interventions generated a fervent international reaction and criticism; 2. in both cases, the motif of terrorism played a major role in the intervention’s official justification; 3. the two interventions are important not only regarding the endgame of the Syrian war but also the Turkish–Russian bilateral relations.

The theoretical basis of the study is the securitisation theory, which explains how political leaderships frame security issues. In the second half of the theoretical framework, a securitisation-inspired concept of terrorism is presented, which focuses on the instrumentalisation of the terrorist label in discursive processes. Accordingly, the methodology used in the research is discourse analysis. As the primary aim of the study is to examine how the two governments framed the interventions in front of the international community, relevant speeches and articles given or written by high-ranking Russian and Turkish diplomats are analysed, to identify recurring elements in the two discourses. Special attention is paid to the analysis of speeches given at the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly during the aforementioned period, obtained from the United Nations Digital Library.

² United Nations General Assembly, Seventy-fourth session 3rd plenary meeting (United Nations Digital Library, 2019), 25.

³ Ibid. 11.

2. Theoretical framework: the theory of securitisation

When the Warsaw Pact and shortly after the Soviet Union collapsed, and the bipolar structure of the cold war ceased to exist, the security agenda which had dominated international affairs for over forty years has seemingly come to an end. The following uncertainty around the nature of international relations prompted a newfound debate on the very meaning of the term *security*. The rise of economic and environmental agendas, the growing role of non-governmental actors, and the concerns regarding identity issues and transnational challenges resulted in the popularity of a new approach, whose proponents argued that the narrow, state- and military-centred perspective of traditionalist theories must be exceeded by adding such issues as climate change, social injustice, water-scarcity and migration to the security agenda.⁴ According to this line of thinking, in the age of intensified globalisation the state loses its monopoly over conducting international affairs, therefore the relevance of security studies can be preserved only if the scope of national security is complemented with human and global aspects.⁵ Responding to these innovative ideas, the main counterargument of the traditionalist thinkers is that the progressive widening of the agenda endangers the intellectual merits of security studies, as it deprives the notion of security of its defined meaning. As a result of expanding its scope, the concept becomes the synonym for potentially ‘everything’, thus losing all its coherence and usefulness.⁶ Traditionalists, therefore, claim that the sole focus of the field must remain national security.

The securitisation theory, created and expanded by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies – Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan among others – offers a third interpretation, which constitutes the theoretical basis of the present study. While it takes the traditionalists’ complaint about incoherence seriously, it nevertheless problematises their clinging to the exclusively state- and military-centred perspective. Instead of seeking coherence by confining the definition to the military sector, it focuses on the inner logic of security, the process through which political leaderships decide what is, and what is not a security threat. The key argument of the theory is that an issue – which can be for instance a minority’s pursuit of greater autonomy, migration or the spreading of certain ideologies – becomes a security matter when it is identified as an existential threat to a referent object – usually the state – by a securitising actor – usually the government – which thereby gains legitimacy and endorsement for extreme measures beyond the scope of ordinary politics,⁷ for example suspending the separation of power branches, conducting large-scale secret surveillance programs, or launching otherwise controversial military campaigns.

Accordingly, the term *securitisation* refers to a discursive instrument utilised by political actors, which enables them to “move” a particular problem into a specific area, thereby claiming special rights to use any means necessary to solve it. This is

⁴ Viktor Glied, ‘Migrációs diskurzus a poszt-multikulturális Európában’, *Pólusok* 1, no 1 (2020).

⁵ Barry Buzan, ‘Rethinking Security after the Cold War’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 32, no 1 (1997).

⁶ Ole Wæver, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’, in *On Security*, ed. by Ronnie D Lipschutz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

⁷ Ole Wæver, ‘Politics, security, theory’, *Security Dialogue* 42, no 4–5 (2011).

realised through the power of language: by framing an issue in a certain way, one can shape public perceptions according to their political interests.⁸ The utterance is therefore an act in itself, which constitutes social and political reality: labelling something as an imminent threat can generate an intersubjective sense of danger, which changes the accepted rules of politics. What is decisive in this regard is not whether the expressed statements about the issue are factually true, but whether the securitising actor has the resources, channels and skills to convince the target audience. Thus, the process of securitisation has two key components: the designation of an existential threat requiring emergency measures and the acceptance of that designation by the audience.⁹

2.1. *Understanding the effect of the terrorist label through securitisation theory*

Especially since the September 11 attacks, terrorism has been one of the most important subjects of security studies. Although the need for a common understanding of the problem is widely acknowledged, there is a seemingly endless debate among experts over the precise meaning of the term. As Alex Schmid, one of the leading scholars in the field points out, the word *terrorism* refers to a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, and is used in so many different contexts that it is questionable whether a unitary and all-inclusive definition can be reached. The fundamental reason for the difficulty to determine the objective meaning of terrorism is ontological: there is no intrinsic essence of the concept, as it is a man-made construct, not an object in the material sense.¹⁰

The lack of consensus constitutes not only an analytical problem but also a practical one. Boaz Ganor, the director of the Israel-based International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism convincingly argues, that it is necessary to find an exhaustive and objective definition of terrorism, as it is indispensable to any attempt to make sufficient countermeasures. Only based on such a definition, he claims, can the global struggle against terror be organised and implemented. The concept he offers is simple yet compact: ‘...terrorism is the intentional use of, or threat to use, violence against civilians or against civilian targets, in order to attain political aims.’¹¹ Although creating a precise definition certainly has some scientific value, what Ganor refuses to acknowledge is that in practice, identifying the terrorist always takes place in a political context, as the ability to do so constitutes power. Therefore, solving the problem created by the aforementioned lack of agreement does not depend on

⁸ Ole Wæver, ‘Security, the Speech Act: Analysing the Politics of a Word’, *Working Paper* no 19 (Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, 1989).

⁹ Buzan, ‘Rethinking Security’.

¹⁰ Alex Schmid, ‘Terrorism – The Definitional Problem’, *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 36, no 2 (2004).

¹¹ Boaz Ganor, ‘Defining Terrorism: Is One Man’s Terrorist another Man’s Freedom Fighter?’ *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal* 3, no 4 (2002), 294.

whether we can find the perfect definition of terrorism, but whether the involved actors – in most cases governments of states – can make a political compromise.

It is precisely the political nature of the matter, why it makes sense to approach it using securitisation theory: instead of making an effort to determine who is and who is not a terrorist based on objective factors, the research should focus on describing which actors are involved in defining terrorism, how they frame the threat, why they do so, and how the utterance of the term changes the boundaries between self and other.¹² What the *political* in this case refers to is that publicly identifying a group as a terrorist organisation or using expressions like “Axis of Evil” to describe certain countries are not neutral acts, but powerful discursive instruments which convey disapproval, appeal to emotions, and serve as mobilisation tools.¹³

In social sciences, discourse is defined as a structure of knowledge, conveyed through language, designed to exclude or invalidate alternative forms of knowledge and practice, justify a particular political and social order, and sustain a hegemonic interpretation of reality.¹⁴ Accordingly, a terror discourse applies labels, images, narratives, arguments and analogies related to the notions of terrorism and counterterrorism, and appeals to a target audience – which, depending on the circumstances, can vary from a domestic voting bloc to the international community – with the aims of de-legitimising particular actors, and legitimising the use of particular actions. Labelling the opponents as terrorists prevents the recognition of their political legitimacy, as it suggests that they are enemies of the civilised world, with whom negotiation is not acceptable.¹⁵ This implies that the challenge they pose to the security of the domestic and/or international community requires the adoption of uncompromising methods. The acceptance of the message by the target audience thus means that the political leadership receives moral and legal justification for using practices otherwise deemed inhumane or illegal.¹⁶ Acknowledging that the identified threat may be real and indeed requires special solutions should therefore not make us overlook the possibility that suspending human rights and the rule of law in the name of countering terrorist activities will result in the abuse of power and have the effect of increasing the citizens’ insecurity.¹⁷

Consequently, the understanding of terrorism based on securitisation theory is more pessimistic than the traditional one, as it questions the practical value of a precisely formulated definition. The process of identifying the terrorists takes place in a discursive context, and the definitions used by governments are adjusted to their domestic or geopolitical interests. The adequate methodological approach

¹² Jørgen Staun, ‘When, how and why elites frame terrorists: a Wittgensteinian analysis of terror and radicalisation’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 3, no 3 (2010).

¹³ Schmid, ‘Terrorism – The Definitional Problem’.

¹⁴ Richard Jackson, ‘Knowledge, Power and Politics in the Study of Political Terrorism’, in *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*, ed. by Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth and Jeroen Gunning (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 66–83.

¹⁵ Fred Vultee, ‘Securitization: A new approach to the framing of the “war on terror”’, *Journalism Practice* 4, no 1 (2010).

¹⁶ André Barrinha, ‘The political importance of labelling: terrorism and Turkey’s discourse on the PKK’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4, no 2 (2011).

¹⁷ Priya Dixit, ‘Securitization and Terroristization: Analyzing States’ Usage of the Rhetoric of Terrorism’, in *State Terror, State Violence: Global Perspectives*, ed. by Bettina Koch (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016).

is therefore discourse analysis, a form of critical theorising aiming to examine the relationship between textual and (geo)political processes. Accordingly, the critical analysis of a terror discourse analyses relevant sources – speeches, articles or media contents – in a broader context, to identify linguistic elements directly or indirectly related to terrorism, examining what is and what is not addressed, and attempting to understand the political motivations behind the rhetoric.

3. Operation Peace Spring and the Turkish discourse of terror

In a phone conversation on the 6th of October 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump informed Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan about his decision to withdraw the American troops from Northeast Syria, thus providing the opportunity for Turkey to initiate a cross-border military intervention. Three days later, the Turkish Armed Forces and its Syrian allies launched Operation Peace Spring, a limited incursion into the 100 km stretch between the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn, in order to clean the territory from “terrorist elements” and to create a “safe zone” which enables the repatriation of the Syrian refugees residing in Turkey.¹⁸ Within four years, this was the third major campaign conducted by the Turkish state in the Kurdish-controlled region commonly called Rojava.

The military containment of the Syrian–Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG) became a priority for Ankara in 2015, as a result of three interrelated developments: 1. In June 2015, Turkey’s governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its parliamentary majority for the first time, partially because of the unexpected success of the Peoples’ Democratic Party, a progressive-socialist party, which was able to obtain the support of a large part of Turkey’s Kurdish community. Following the elections, President Erdoğan and the AKP started informally cooperating with a far-right opposition party, while embracing an exclusivist, nationalist rhetoric. 2. This coincided with the final collapse of the peace process – initiated in 2008 then restarted in 2013 – between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK),¹⁹ after a PKK-related group murdered two Turkish police officers in the town of Ceylanpınar in July 2015.²⁰ 3. In parallel with the domestic processes in Turkey, the YPG – with the military support provided by the U.S. Army – achieved successes in the fight against the so-called “Islamic State” (Daesh), and started continuously expanding the territory under its control in northern Syria, thereby awakening the greatest fear of many Turks, an uninterrupted Kurdish belt along Turkey’s southern border, controlled by PKK-related militias.²¹ In order to

¹⁸ Krisztián Manzinger and Péter Wagner, ‘Syrian Kurds, Rojava and Alternative Society Building in Middle East’, *Honvédségi Szemle: A Magyar Honvédség Központi Folyóirata* 148, no 1 (2020).

¹⁹ A Kurdish militant political organisation and armed separatist movement, established in 1978 in Southeast Turkey. In 1984, the PKK launched a full-scale insurgency against the Turkish state. Since then, approximately 40,000 people have died in the conflict.

²⁰ Arin Savran, ‘The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, 2009–2015’, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 22, no 6 (2020).

²¹ H Akin Ünver, ‘Schrödinger’s Kurds: Transnational Kurdish Geopolitics in the Age of Shifting Borders’, *Columbia Journal of International Affairs* 69, no 2 (2016).

prevent that scenario, Turkey launched its first major military intervention in Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016. Although the official aim of the campaign was to push back Daesh, by capturing several towns including Jarablus and Al-Bab, Turkey has also prevented the YPG from gaining more ground and merging the two Kurdish cantons of Afrin and Kobane.²² Turkey's second military intervention, Operation Olive Branch launched in January 2018, has resulted in the occupation of Afrin and led to the displacement of approximately 150,000 people.²³

Turkey's 2019 intervention generated a wide and fervent international outburst. It triggered extensive criticism in Washington, followed by a bipartisan rebuke to the President for his decision in the House of Representatives.²⁴ In a declaration by the High Representative, the European Union called upon Turkey to cease the unilateral military action and expressed its concern that the operation is endangering the progress achieved by the International Community to defeat Daesh.²⁵ Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit has also condemned the operation, calling it an invasion of Arab land and aggression on the territorial sovereignty of the Syrian state.²⁶ The Turkish troops and their rebel allies were accused of committing war crimes including summary killings and unlawful attacks on non-combatants. According to the Kurdish-led administration's health authority in Northeast Syria, in the period between 9 and 17 October at least 218 civilians – among them, 18 children – have been killed.²⁷

Having no other options to stop the incursion, the PYD/YPG has made a Moscow-brokered deal with Syrian President Assad on the 15th of October, which resulted in the movement of Russian and Syrian troops into Kurdish-controlled areas not yet reached by Turkish forces. The major military clashes between the Turkish army and the Kurdish militias lasted until the 17th of October when U.S. Vice President Pence and President Erdoğan agreed on a ceasefire over Turkey's operation. The agreement gave 120 hours for the YPG to withdraw its forces from an approximately 100 km long strip along the Turkey–Syria border, the aforementioned safe zone area between the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain.²⁸ It was a clear sign of growing Russian influence that five days later President Erdoğan met President Putin in Sochi to discuss the post-operation state of affairs in northern Syria. The memorandum of understanding signed by the two leaders *inter alia* gave an additional 150 hours to the YPG to complete the withdrawal from the safe zone; reiterated the parties'

²² Zoltán Egeresi, 'Törökország konfliktusa az észak-szíriai kurdokkal', *KKI-Elemzések* E-2020/11.

²³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Syria Factsheet (January–November 2018) Situation Report, 2018.

²⁴ Catie Edmondson, 'In Bipartisan Rebuke, House Majority Condemns Trump for Syria Withdrawal', *The New York Times*, 16 October 2019.

²⁵ Council of the European Union, Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on recent developments in north-east Syria, 2019.

²⁶ Reuters, 'Turkey's Syria offensive an 'invasion': Arab League secretary general', 12 October 2019.

²⁷ Amnesty International, 'Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies', 18 October 2019.

²⁸ Umut Uras, 'Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in northern Syria: One month on', *Aljazeera*, 08 November 2019.

commitment to preserving the territorial integrity of Syria; and emphasised their determination to fight terrorism in all forms.²⁹

3.1. *The Turkish discourse of terror*

If we examine the Operation Peace Spring-related speeches and articles given or written by high-ranking Turkish diplomats, we can identify five recurring arguments, which constitute the backbone of the official justification for the intervention. The first element of the discourse is designating the presence of PYD/YPG as an existential threat to the national security of Turkey, which implies that the intervention was an act of self-defence. This is evident for instance in the letter addressed to the President of the Security Council by Turkey's envoy to the UN: 'Turkey's national security has been under the direct and imminent threat of terrorist organizations operating in the east of the Euphrates in Syria.'³⁰ The securitisation of the "Kurdish issue" resonates well with the collective threat perceptions of the Turkish public, as the majority of Turks believes that the efforts of the Kurdish minority to gain more autonomy and the support provided by outside (Western) powers for these efforts endanger the unity of the state. This intersubjective fear is not confined to the Turkish borders: as the population along both sides of the Turkish–Syrian border is mostly Kurdish, many Turks are concerned about the possibility that the level of autonomy achieved by northern Syrian Kurds will revive separatist tendencies in Southeast Turkey. From a legal perspective, however, the argument has yet another meaning: in case the operation is recognised as an act of self-defence by the International Community, it is in line with international law. Accordingly, Sinirlioğlu cites Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations as legal justification, which declares that individual or collective self-defence is legitimate if an armed attack occurs against a member state.

The second discursive element is the designation of the PYD/YPG as a force occupying Northeast Syria and oppressing the various communities living under its rule.³¹ In a speech given at the UN Security Council in October 2019, Sinirlioğlu said that the area controlled by the Kurdish militias is a 'testing ground for a new totalitarian terrorist State'.³² Similarly, in an article published by *The New York Times*, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu characterised the rule of PYD/YPG as 'tyranny of terrorist organisations'.³³ The implication, in this case, is twofold. On the one hand, by emphasising the dictatorial nature of the PYD/YPG authorities, the Turkish Government frames the operation as a humanitarian intervention aiming

²⁹ President of Russia, 'Memorandum of Understanding Between Turkey and the Russian Federation', 22 October 2019.

³⁰ Feridun H Sinirlioğlu, *Letter dated 9 October 2019 from the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council* (United Nations Digital Library, 2019), 1.

³¹ The Turkish accusations against the PYD are not baseless. According to a report conducted by the Human Rights Watch in 2014, the PYD has committed a range of human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, abuse in detention, unsolved disappearances and killings, and the use of children in PYD security forces (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

³² United Nations Security Council, 8645th meeting (United Nations Digital Library, 2019), 26.

³³ Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, 'Why Turkey Took the Fight to Syria', *The New York Times*, 11 October 2019.

to liberate oppressed and terrorised civilians. On the other hand, the argument can be interpreted as a response to the criticism that Turkey has violated the territorial integrity of the Syrian state: by emphasising the separatist agenda of the PYD/YPG, Ankara frames Operation Peace Spring as an intervention aiming not to violate, but to preserve Syria's integrity. This narrative appeared for instance in a speech given by Çavuşoğlu at the TRT World Forum 2019, in which the minister said that one of the goals of the operation was to 'enforce Syrian territorial integrity, which we are very much committed to. And the aim of this terrorist organization and the countries who were supporting this terrorist organization was to divide Syria and to create a terror state along our border'.³⁴

The third and arguably most important discursive element is the almost constant use of the term "PKK/PYD" or "PKK/PYD/YPG" in speeches and articles alike, which clearly indicates that according to Ankara's narrative, the PKK and the PYD are in fact one organisation. This claim has its basis, as the history of the two groups is tied together, and the ideological connections between them are undeniable. After the 1980 military coup in Turkey, the PKK moved its headquarter to northern Syria, and organised the armed struggle against the Turkish state mainly from there until 1998, when Ankara and Damascus normalised their relations and signed the Adana Security Agreement, which obligated the Syrian regime to recognise the PKK as a terrorist organisation, and prohibit all activities of the group on its territory. Following the millennium, the PKK has established regional "sister parties" in the countries with significant Kurdish minority;³⁵ one among them being the PYD, inheriting the organisational resources left behind by the "mother party". These branches remained under the PKK's indirect control; some scholars, however, argue that the exceptional circumstances in Syria since 2011 have given the PYD a more distinctive purpose and identity, which may have resulted in the loosening of its ties with the PKK.

According to Kaya and Lowe, the priorities of the two groups started to diverge in 2015, when the PKK returned to the low-level guerrilla warfare against Turkey, while the PYD remained focused on the efforts to implement an autonomous administration in northern Syria and gain more international legitimacy.³⁶ This narrative however is debatable, as, during the second half of the decade, the PKK reportedly carried out attacks on the Turkish state with American weapons provided to the YPG, which suggests that the ties between the groups are still strong.³⁷ The Turkish discourse which consistently refers to them as one serves two main purposes. On the one hand, by emphasising that the PYD/YPG is inseparable from the PKK, Ankara points out the contradiction in the U.S. discourse, which approves the former while condemning the latter as a terrorist organisation. On the other hand, according to Ankara the inseparability of the two groups means that the Adana Agreement can be applied to the PYD/YPG as well. This is especially relevant because of the 4th annex of the document, which declares that the Syrian Government's 'failure to take the necessary

³⁴ Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, 'Demystifying Turkey's Operation Peace Spring', *TRT World Forum*, 12 November 2019.

³⁵ International Crisis Group, 'The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria', 04 May 2017.

³⁶ Zeynep Kaya and Robert Lowe, 'The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship', in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, ed. by Mohammed Shareef and Gareth R V Stansfield (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).

³⁷ Daily Sabah, 'US weapons given to PYD used by PKK in attacks in Turkey', 28 April 2017.

measures and security duties, stated in this agreement, gives Turkey the right to take all necessary security measures within 5 km deep into Syrian territory'.³⁸ Therefore, it is not surprising that Turkish diplomats refer to the agreement as legal justification.

The fourth recurring argument is placing the PYD/YPG in the same definitional category as Daesh; thereby criticising the U.S. efforts to counter Daesh through Kurdish proxies. The implication is that as both are terrorist organisations, supporting one to defeat the other is unacceptable. As Sinirlioğlu put it: '...some Member States have provided heavy weapons, ammunition and training to PKK/YPG under the assumption that it was acceptable to use a terrorist organization against another terrorist organization [...]. Unsurprisingly, those weapons have been used to target Turkey and civilians in Syria.'³⁹ Although the Turkish Government's official standpoint is that the conflict in Syria can only be resolved by finding a political solution, it nevertheless vehemently opposes the inclusion of the PYD in any political negotiation. By labelling the PYD as terrorists, Ankara not only attempts to prevent the military support provided for the group but simultaneously legitimises its own decision to veto the Kurdish participation in both the Geneva and the Astana processes. Turkish politicians and diplomats have criticised the efforts made by the U.S. to "rebrand" the YPG, thus making it more acceptable for Turkey. The term "rebrand" mainly concerns the name "Syrian Democratic Forces", under which the YPG is acting since late 2015. In this regard, Ankara's recurring point of reference is a segment from a speech given by General Raymond Thomas in 2017: "We literally played back to them: 'You have got to change your brand. What do you want to call yourselves besides the YPG?' With about a day's notice, they declared that they were the Syrian Democratic Forces. I thought it was a stroke of brilliance to put democracy in there somewhere. But it gave them a little bit of credibility."⁴⁰

The last element is framing the intervention as a precondition for solving the refugee crisis in Turkey. With 3.6 million people, the country indeed hosts the largest refugee community in the world, which creates a wide range of social, administrative, educational and economic challenges for the Turkish state.⁴¹ As the rapidly increasing number of refugees in the second half of the decade has evoked growing displeasure in the Turkish population, the government is interested in solving the problem also from a political perspective. Two weeks before the start of the operation, President Erdoğan gave a speech at the UN's General Assembly, in which he announced that Turkey intends 'to establish a peace corridor in Syria, 30 kilometres wide by 480 kilometres long, where we hope, with the support of the international community, to facilitate the settlement of 2 million Syrians'.⁴² The Turkish discourse thus depicts the result of the intervention with a pair of antonyms: it designates the area prior to the intervention as a "terror corridor", while describing the post-intervention

³⁸ Voltaire Network, 'The Adana Security Agreement', 20 October 1998.

³⁹ United Nations Security Council, 8645th meeting, 25.

⁴⁰ The Aspen Institute, 'SOCOM: Policing the World', 2017.

⁴¹ Sára Gibárti, 'Assisting Syrian refugees in Turkey: International approaches and domestic policies', *Security and Defence Quarterly* 33, no 1 (2021).

⁴² United Nations General Assembly, 'Seventy-fourth session 3rd plenary meeting'.

situation as a “peace corridor”. It is undeniable that since the intervention, the Turkish state has been making great efforts to provide infrastructure, education and health services for the people settled in the “safe zone”.⁴³ Critics, however, claim that through the relocation of the mostly Arab population into the stretch of territory along the Turkish border, Erdoğan also intends to change the ethnic composition of the area, thereby creating an “Arab corridor” between Southeast Turkey and the region controlled by the PYD/YPG.⁴⁴

4. Operation Dawn of Idlib and the Russian discourse of terror

On the 30th of April 2019, the Syrian regime, backed by Russian airpower, has launched a military campaign to recapture the last remaining province in Syria under the control of rebel forces.⁴⁵ The antecedent of the campaign was an agreement between Russia and Turkey, signed in September 2018 in Sochi, which can be considered a diplomatic attempt to uphold the ceasefire in the Idlib de-escalation zone.⁴⁶ The deal prescribed the establishment of a demilitarised zone 15–20 km deep in the de-escalation area from where all radical terrorist groups must be removed within a month, and the restoration of transit traffic on the routes M4 and M5 by the end of 2018. Furthermore, the signatories reiterated their commitment ‘to combat terrorism in Syria in all forms and manifestations’.⁴⁷ As Şaban Kardaş points out, the Sochi Agreement has created a very unstable equilibrium, which constituted a “mission impossible” for Ankara; and justification for the launch of the 2019 offensive for Damascus and Moscow.⁴⁸

The deal has indeed posed a serious dilemma for Turkey: although it had to prevent a Syrian–Russian attack, causing a humanitarian disaster and generating a new wave of refugees towards the Turkish border, it was unwilling to start a military conflict with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which by then has side-lined or subdued other rebel groups, and successfully consolidated itself as a hegemon in Idlib governorate.⁴⁹ HTS is the successor organisation of Jabhat al-Nusra, a group openly aligned with Al-Qaida. In July 2016, it changed its name to Jabhat Fatha al-Sham, thereby signalling that its ties with Al-Qaida have been broken. In January 2017, when Jabhat Fatha al-Sham merged with several smaller groups, HTS was established, whose leaders officially

⁴³ Carlotta Gall, ‘In Turkey’s Safe Zone in Syria, Security and Misery Go Hand in Hand’, *The New York Times*, 16 February 2021.

⁴⁴ Fehim Tastekin, ‘Turkey’s occupation of northern Syria includes population transfers’, *Al-Monitor*, 07 May 2020.

⁴⁵ Vivian Yee and Hwaida Saad, ‘Syrian Government Starts Campaign to Retake Last Opposition Stronghold of Idlib’, *The New York Times*, 20 May 2019.

⁴⁶ In the framework of the Astana process, launched by Russia, Iran and Turkey in January 2017, four de-escalation zones have been established in Syria. By 2018, Idlib was the last remaining zone, as the other three had been captured by the Assad regime.

⁴⁷ Feridun H Sinirlioğlu and Vassily Nebenzia, *Letter dated 18 September 2018 from the Permanent Representatives of the Russian Federation and Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council* (United Nations Digital Library, 2018), 2.

⁴⁸ Şaban Kardaş, ‘Turkey’s Mission Impossible in Sustaining Idlib’s Unstable Equilibrium’, *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 09 April 2020.

⁴⁹ International Crisis Group, ‘In Syria’s Idlib, Washington’s Chance to Reimagine Counter-terrorism’, 03 February 2021.

declared that they have cut all the connections with the formal ally, and gave up on the international jihadist agenda.⁵⁰ Unsurprisingly, Syria and Russia did not affirm this, and designated HTS as a terrorist organisation. According to their narrative, Turkey could have fulfilled its obligations only if it had separated HTS from moderate groups and taken military action against the former.⁵¹ For Ankara, however, it was clear that HTS was already too entrenched in Idlib to be defeated without suffering mass casualties.⁵² Having no better options, Turkey thus started to cooperate with the group on pragmatic grounds, while officially including the group on its list of terrorist organisations.⁵³

Turkey's inaction regarding HTS and the continuous attacks by various radical groups against Russian military assets at the Hmeimim airbase constituted a narrative basis for Moscow and the Assad regime to launch military campaigns – first Operation Dawn of Idlib in April 2019, then Operation Dawn of Idlib 2 in December 2019 – to retake Idlib governorate and the surrounding area in Northwest Syria. According to Human Rights Watch, the attacks carried out by the Russian–Syrian alliance during the period from April 2019 to March 2020 have killed at least 1,600 civilians, destroyed or damaged schools, markets and medical facilities, and forced approximately 1.4 million people to leave their homes.⁵⁴ This is reinforced by a report conducted by the United Nations Human Rights Council, which claims that based on the available evidence it is reasonable to believe that Russian aircraft have participated in attacks deliberately and systematically targeting civilian areas in order to depopulate the zone, and accelerate its capture.⁵⁵ During spring 2019, the Syrian–Russian forces first advanced eastward on villages and towns in northern Hama, followed by a westward push in August, resulting in the capture of the strategically important town of Khan Sheikhoun on the M5 highway.

With the support of Russian airpower, regime forces intensified the campaign in December and proceeded towards the city of Idlib. In January 2020, Turkey responded with the deployment of 9,000 additional soldiers to observation points in the area, which raised the conflict to a new level and increased the risk of direct Turkish–Russian confrontation.⁵⁶ On 27 February, a most probably Russian airstrike has killed 34 Turkish soldiers. To avoid the escalation with Moscow, Ankara chose to blame the Syrian regime and upgraded its military presence in the area into a self-standing operation targeting regime troops.⁵⁷ The unfolding violence was halted on 5 March, when an additional protocol to the 2018 Sochi Agreement was signed by President Putin and President Erdoğan, which ceased military actions along the actual

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group, 'Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib', 14 May 2020.

⁵¹ Ekaterina Stepanova, 'Russia's Foreign and Security Policy in the Middle East: Entering the 2020s', *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 2020.

⁵² International Crisis Group, 'In Syria's Idlib'.

⁵³ Ercan Çitlioğlu, 'A Turkish Perspective on Syria', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, 27 October 2020.

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch, 'Targeting Life in Idlib', 15 October 2020.

⁵⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council, 'Rampant human rights violations and war crimes as war-torn Idlib faces the pandemic UN Syria Commission of Inquiry report', 07 July 2020.

⁵⁶ Stepanova, 'Russia's Foreign'.

⁵⁷ Kardaş, 'Turkey's Mission Impossible'.

line of contact; and prescribed the establishment of a security corridor on both sides of the M4 highway, monitored by joint Turkish–Russian patrols.⁵⁸

4.1. *The Russian discourse of terror*

Given the high number of civilian casualties, it is worth examining how Russia justified its active participation in the offensive. Based on the analysis of relevant speeches and articles given or written by high-ranking diplomats, three main recurring arguments can be identified in the Russian discourse. The first one is designating the West as a single entity, deliberately blocking the peace process by supporting and “whitewashing” terrorists in Idlib. According to the discourse, Moscow is committed to the political solution of the Syrian crisis, nevertheless believes that the precondition of the successful negotiations is the eradication of the last remaining terrorist stronghold in the country. Thus, the most pressing task is to fulfil the 2018 Sochi Agreement, which prescribes the separation of moderate opposition from terrorist forces.⁵⁹ The greatest obstacle to these efforts, Russian diplomats claim, is that “Western colleagues” are still pursuing the goal of regime change; therefore, they are providing support to the enemies of the regime regardless of their extremist agenda, and taking steps to rebrand a terrorist organisation, namely HTS, as a legitimate actor. This was put forward for instance by Vassily Nebenzia, the permanent representative of Russia in the UN: “As the Syrian Government forces move closer to the strongholds of the terrorists, [...] we increasingly hear that Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham has allegedly become an emancipated responsible structure, a kind of civilian administration that is striving to allow people to live peacefully in those areas.”⁶⁰

The argument was used by Nebenzia to justify the Russian decision to veto a draft resolution submitted by Germany, Belgium and Kuwait, which called upon all parties, in particular the Syrian regime, to immediately cease hostilities and undertake confidence-building measures. Although the document emphasised the importance of combating terrorism, Nebenzia claimed that the real objective of the draft was “to save the international terrorists who are entrenched in Idlib from their final defeat”.⁶¹ The Russian portrayal of the West is unquestionably a manipulative generalisation, it is, however, not entirely baseless. Although the United States designates HTS as a terrorist organisation and an “Entity of Particular Concern”,⁶² some prominent figures in American diplomatic circles are indeed suggesting a more flexible U.S. policy towards the group. In an interview in March 2021, former ambassador and former Special Presidential Envoy James Jeffrey for instance said that HTS could be

⁵⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, ‘Additional Protocol to the Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Area’, 06 March 2020.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s answers to media questions following the 56th Munich Security Conference, Munich, February 17, 2020’, 17 February 2020.

⁶⁰ United Nations Security Council, 8623rd meeting (United Nations Digital Library, 2019), 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 2.

⁶² Sultan Al-Kanj, ‘Despite attempt at makeover, Syria’s HTS remains on US terror list’, *Al-Monitor*, 21 December 2020.

an asset for U.S. strategy, and claimed that “[t]hey are the least bad option of the various options in Idlib”.⁶³

The second key element of the discourse is portraying Russia as a benign power committed to international law, and associating those who question this narrative with terrorism. According to the Russian diplomatic communication, Moscow did everything to “prevent violence and resolve the situations peacefully”;⁶⁴ because of the terrorist activities of HTS, however, it had no other options besides launching an offensive on Idlib. On several occasions, Nebenzia emphasised that while conducting attacks, Russia always acts according to the norms of international law, and uses precision airstrikes to avoid civilian casualties.⁶⁵ This self-designation is complemented by the framing of HTS as a group of terrorists, bandits and hostage-takers; which implies that it is illegally occupying a territory of the Syrian state and causing suffering to the civilians under its rule.⁶⁶ The discourse thus depicts Operation Dawn of Idlib as a humanitarian intervention aiming to liberate the terrorists’ civilian hostages.

Russian accusations against HTS have a basis. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council, the group escalated attacks on government-controlled areas causing civilian casualties; recruited and used children to participate in hostilities; and persecuted activists and media workers critical of its activity.⁶⁷ What the Russian narrative “forgets” to add, however, is that nearly half of the population in Idlib consists of internally displaced persons, who were inclined to flee there by their fear of the regime. Given the centrality of international law in the discourse, it is not surprising that those who question or disprove the Russian narrative have become the targets of disinformation campaigns. One of the prime subjects of these campaigns is the White Helmets, a group of rescue workers attempting to save victims of military strikes while documenting the consequences of the attacks. After the group had publicised video footage and documentary evidence of war crimes committed by Russian and Syrian forces, Russian propagandists responded by associating the members of the White Helmets with terrorist organisations and accusing them of faking attacks to besmirch Russia’s reputation.⁶⁸ Although the main platform of the campaign is social media, high-ranking diplomats have also accused the group of terrorism-related activities. Nebenzia for instance claimed that the group is “working with Al-Nusra Front, and [...] preparing acts of provocation using chemicals”.⁶⁹

The third element, which places the Russian narrative in a wider context, is portraying the Syrian conflict with the antonyms of order and chaos. The argument is embedded in the Russian discourse on the post-bipolar world order, which emphasises the growing tension between liberal interventionism, and the traditional Westphalian approach to state sovereignty. In his 2019 speech at the General Assembly of the

⁶³ Priyanka Boghani, ‘Syrian Militant and Former Al Qaeda Leader Seeks Wider Acceptance in First Interview With U.S. Journalist’, *Frontline*, 02 April 2021.

⁶⁴ United Nations Security Council, 8527th meeting (United Nations Digital Library, 2019).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ United Nations Security Council, ‘8623rd meeting’.

⁶⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council, ‘Rampant human rights violations’.

⁶⁸ Matthew Levinger, ‘Master Narratives of Disinformation Campaigns’, *Columbia Journal of International Affairs* 71, no 1.5 (2018), 125–134.

⁶⁹ United Nations Security Council, 8553rd meeting (United Nations Digital Library, 2019), 15.

United Nations, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Western nations are making desperate attempts to “prevent the establishment of a polycentric world, restore their positions of privilege and impose standards of conduct on everyone else based on their own narrow interpretation of liberalism”.⁷⁰ In another speech, given at the Valdai International Discussion Club, Lavrov claimed that the geographical distance between the United States and the Middle East enables Washington to pursue its geopolitical and geo-economic interests by conducting interventions, overthrowing regimes, and creating safe havens for terrorists.⁷¹ Russia on the other hand is directly impacted by the Middle Eastern turmoil, not only because of the strategic partnerships between Moscow and Damascus, but also because of the spread of Islamic radicalism, which can potentially revive separatist and extremist tendencies in the North Caucasus, and thus poses a threat to the territorial integrity of the Russian state. Accordingly, Moscow’s discourse claims that the Western emphasis on human rights and liberal values is merely a cover-up for the real intention of the West: to destabilise the region and undermine Russia’s geopolitical position.⁷²

As both the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and NATO’s Libyan intervention in 2011 had negative impacts on regional stability and contributed to the emergence and expansion of Jihadist factions, the argument has a solid basis – by pointing at the devastating consequences of Western adventurism, Russian diplomats can effectively demonstrate, who is the real “agent of chaos” in the Middle East. According to Moscow’s dichotomy-based narrative, the only alternative to liberal interventionism is the concept of *sovereign democracy*, created by former Kremlin ideologue Vladislav Surkov as a response to the “colour revolutions” of the post-soviet periphery. As Richard Sakwa points out, the concept has a binary meaning. Internationally, it demands autonomy and independence for individual states vis à vis Western hegemony; calls for a more democratic, polycentric world order; and argues for the right of every nation to a democratic development process that is compatible with its specific traditions and political culture. Domestically, however, it prioritises political and social stability over the rights of the individual, thereby rationalising the technocratic suppression of competitive and pluralistic politics.⁷³ Consequently, the discursive application of the concept has two implications regarding Syria. On the one hand, it denies the International Community’s right to question Assad’s legitimacy, which in practice manifests in the Russian vetoes of Security Council resolutions targeting the regime. On the other hand, the discourse justifies the regime’s efforts to restore its sovereignty over the entire territory of the country regardless of the brutality of the measures it is using, which in practice manifests in the active participation of the Russian army in Operation Dawn of Idlib.

⁷⁰ United Nations General Assembly, Seventy-fourth session 9th plenary meeting (United Nations Digital Library, 2019).

⁷¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions during the Valdai International Discussion Club’s panel on Russia’s policy in the Middle East, Sochi, October 2, 2019’, 02 October 2019.

⁷² Hannah Notte, ‘Russia in Syria: Domestic Drivers and Regional Implications’, *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, January 2017.

⁷³ Richard Sakwa, ‘Sovereignty and Democracy: Constructions and Contradictions in Russia and Beyond’, *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia* 1, no 1 (2012), 3–27.

5. Conclusion

If we compare the Turkish and Russian discourses, we can find many similar or even identical elements. Both accuse the United States of supporting terrorism, claim that the precondition of a successful political peace process is the elimination of terrorists, stress that no differentiation can be made between good and bad terrorists, and underline the importance of preserving Syria's territorial integrity. It is also remarkable that despite the differences between their geostrategic interests, both Ankara and Moscow emphasise the potentiality of Turkish–Russian cooperation. In the period examined by this paper, diplomatic efforts have resulted in two agreements, creating a situation in northern Syria that is – at the moment – acceptable for both sides. The aforementioned similarities, the relatively friendly-toned communication towards each other, and the diplomatic achievements, however, do not resolve the sharp contradiction between the Turkish and Russian terror discourses.

In Idlib governorate, the central question concerns the status of HTS – an Islamist organisation aiming to prove that it has left its Jihadist past behind and become a moderate rebel group. For Turkey, the priority regarding Idlib is to maintain the status quo by preventing a new Syrian–Russian offensive, which would further aggravate the humanitarian crisis in the area, and launch a new wave of refugees towards the Turkish borders. This motivates Ankara's pragmatic cooperation with HTS and explains the Turkish discourse which emphasises that “the killing of civilians under the pretext of fighting against terrorism cannot be accepted”.⁷⁴ Consequently, the best-case scenario for Ankara would be the one in which Russia recognises HTS as a moderate rebel group that can be involved in the negotiations. This scenario, however, seems highly unlikely. In northern Syria, Russia is carefully balancing between two conflicting goals: on the one hand, Moscow supports the regime's efforts to retake the entire territory of Syria; on the other, it tries to maintain its fragile partnership with Turkey. The latter is important for Russia not only economically, but also strategically, as it is interested in deepening the internal fractures within the Euro-Atlantic Alliance – this explains the Russian discourse which unequivocally detaches Turkey from the West, using a friendlier tone with the former while harshly criticising the latter.

The text of the 2018 Sochi Agreement already reflected the Russian balancing, as the document contains two contradictory instructions, which were reaffirmed in the 2020 additional protocol: to take all necessary measures to maintain the existing status quo; and to combat terrorism in all forms and manifestations.⁷⁵ Because of the now fortified presence of the Turkish Armed Forces in Idlib, and not least because of Russia's interest in sustaining the partnership with Turkey, the status quo seems stable in the short- and perhaps medium-term. In the long-term, however, Moscow will probably support the regime's efforts to retake the region, and the fact that HTS is still on the UN Security Council's list of terrorist organisations may provide the narrative basis for a new offensive. In other words, the 2018 and 2020 agreements

⁷⁴ United Nations Security Council, '8645th meeting'.

⁷⁵ Sinirliođlu and Nebenzia, *Letter dated 18 September 2018*.

between Moscow and Ankara have only frozen the conflict, without tackling the deep-seated contradiction between their narratives.

The situation in north-eastern Syria is no less complicated. Regarding the PYD/YPG, the roles played by Turkey and Russia are reversed compared to the attitudes towards HTS. Ankara designates the Kurdish group as a terrorist organisation, and vehemently opposes its inclusion in the peace process. Moscow on the other hand does not identify it as a terrorist group and cooperates with it on a pragmatic basis. Accordingly, Russian diplomats have not hidden their displeasure with Operation Peace Spring. Shortly after the intervention had ended, UN envoy Nebenzia stated that the “illegal occupation and the dangerous experiment in demographic engineering” in north-eastern Syria has destabilised the region, which necessitates a dialogue between Syrian Kurds and the regime.⁷⁶ This indicates that a central element of the scenario pushed by Moscow is a deal between Assad and the PYD, which grants the regime sovereignty over the Kurdish territories while providing some form of regional autonomy for the Kurds.

For Ankara, however, it is a strategic priority, and because of the nationalist sentiments at home, it is also a domestic political goal to hinder any form of Kurdish autonomy in Syria, especially if that means that the region is de facto governed by the PYD/YPG. The October 22 Sochi Agreement, similarly to the documents on Idlib, did not tackle the obvious contradiction between Russian and Turkish discourses. It emphasised the parties’ “determination to combat terrorism in all forms and manifestations”,⁷⁷ it did not, however, specify whether the PYD/YPG should be considered a terrorist organisation. It has not cleared the air either that the memorandum reaffirmed the importance of the Adana Agreement, as the two sides interpret the relevance of the 1998 document differently. Ankara considers it a legal justification for the Turkish presence in Syria. For Russia, however, working in the framework of the agreement means that the legitimacy of the regime in Damascus must be recognised by Turkey. Although the existing status quo seems relatively stable, it reasonably concerns Ankara, that the 22 October memorandum provided the opportunity for Moscow to put pressure on Turkey by playing the “Kurdish card”.

We can conclude that the discursive practices used by the Turkish and Russian Governments regarding the northern Syrian conflicts clearly demonstrate, why the efficiency of a positivist, definition-based approach is questionable, to say the least. Both Turkey and Russia define the notion of terrorism according to their (geo) political interests and are using the terrorist label to de-legitimise the actors they perceive as threats to their strategic priorities. In practice, this inevitably results in the meaninglessness of the provisions emphasising their commitment to fighting terrorism in all forms and manifestations. The two terror discourses show several similarities, furthermore, through their diplomatic efforts Moscow and Ankara were able to create a status quo that at the moment seems stable. These factors, however, do not resolve the central collision point between Turkish and Russian narratives on northern Syria, namely, that the two governments define oppositely, who is and

⁷⁶ United Nations Security Council, ‘8645th meeting’.

⁷⁷ President of Russia, ‘Memorandum of Understanding’.

who is not a terrorist in the region. As long as this interest-driven contradiction is not tackled, the potentiality of recurring conflict remains high.

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