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THE IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS ON LEBANON: GEOPOLITICAL ASPECT (THE BEGINNING OF THE CONFLICT)[∗∗]

Abstract: The paper analyses the geopolitical impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon. This impact is observed in two forms: one within the Syria-Lebanon relations (a sub-regional) and the other one within the wider Middle East (a regional). The first refers to the direct repercussions that the increasing instability in Syria has on the Lebanese part. More specifically, the impact that have some factors of the Syrian crisis –increasing confessionalism and Islamic radicalism- on the internal political and religious power relations of Lebanon. The second form of impact refers to the indirect yet critical repercussions that the regional instability of the Middle East has on Lebanon. As a state of proxy actors through which the regional powers project power and as an integral part of the Syria-Lebanon sub-region, Lebanon is the primary point on which the regional systemic pressure is applied. As a result of this regional impact, the internal political and religious power relations of Lebanon become a micro-level representation of the regional power relations of the wider Middle Eastern system.

Keywords: Lebanon, Syrian crisis, Hizballah, geopolitics, regional power, confessionalism

Introduction

The Syria-Lebanon sub-region plays an important geopolitical role within the wider Middle East region. Syria constitutes a state that lies at the center of the intertwined interests of the power relations that define the Middle Eastern region. Lebanon, the other part of the sub-region, has been a state where the major regional

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powers have been projecting power through their proxy Lebanese actors for decades.

At the sub-regional level, the relations between Syria and Lebanon have been rather complicated. For three decades, from 1975 to 2005, Lebanon was transformed into an imperative geopolitical asset for Syria. This was due to the geopolitical objectives that Damascus had set regarding the Syria-Israel sub-region as well as within the wider Middle East. Among them is the sustainment of any advantage vis-à-vis Israel and the checking of any geostrategic aspirations of other competitive Arab states in Lebanon, primarily Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

After the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri and the Syrian military withdrawal in 2005, Lebanon entered a new phase of power antagonism between the pro-Syrian March 8 Alliance (brought together the Shia movements Hizballah and Amal and the predominantly Christian Maronite supporters of Michel Aoun (who had opposed Syrian influence in Lebanon during the 1990s) and the anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance (the 14 March coalition, named after the rally staged on that day in 2005, gathered around the al-Mustaqbal (the Future) party, which included the Sunni forces but also those of the Christian Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party of Walid Jumbla□, who left the coalition in 2011). Subsequently, a series of key events have played a prominent role in formulating the current political power balance. The Lebanon War in 2006 enhanced Hizballah's internal and regional status. The 2008-armed confrontation between Hizballah and the Sunni militia ended in an absolute victory for Hizballah. It was a statement of intent by the Shia organization, which asserted its military superiority in Lebanon. In 2010, Hizballah withdrew its ministers from the unity government, and in January 2011, it supported, along with other March 8 allies, the formation of a new government under the premiership of Sunni politician Najib Mikati.

At the beginning of 2011, Syria experienced the first popular protests that swept, since 2010, the Arab world. The violent reaction of the Assad regime against the first peaceful protests in the south of the country (in the city of Deraa) set the motion for the spiral descent of Syria towards a long crisis. From Deraa, the protests moved swiftly to other parts of the country, notably Hama, Deir az-Zor, and Homs. Within weeks, and primarily in reaction to the initial violent suppression of the Syrian security forces, the protests and demonstrations were transformed into a full-armed insurgency against the Assad regime. The Syrian crisis escalated and was soon characterized by sectarian violence between the Sunni opposition and the Alawite[1] regular and irregular forces (shabiha) that

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[1] This is an offshoot of Shia Islam.

supported the Assad regime. Within 2012, the Syrian crisis was spread to the main cities of the country, Aleppo and Damascus (Hinnebusch, 95-113). As the hard-liners of the regime led the escalation of violence, many reports were providing evidence that segments of the opposition were increasingly composed of Islamic radical groups (with some of them connected with Al-Qaeda elements) (Rosen, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2012).

By the end of the first half of 2012, the Syrian crisis had also been first regionalized and then internationalized, with the formation of a loose anti-Assad 'coalition' consisting of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, France, and the US, and an equally loose pro-Assad supporting bloc composed by Iran, Russia, China, and partly Iraq (Seal, 2011). It was only a matter of time before Lebanon, so closely intertwined with Syria, and began to feel the multiple impacts of the escalation of the Syrian crisis.

The geopolitical impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon (the beginning of the crisis)

The length and cruelty of the Syrian crisis has multiple impacts on Lebanon. The Syria-Lebanon sub-region constitutes a particularly integrated one, where any major political and military action, development, or change in one part of the sub-region has a direct effect on the other one.

At the regional level, that of the wider Middle East, Syria possesses a most central role. It lies at the heart of the Middle Eastern region. It has a long common border with Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan. It constitutes a "bridge" through which its ally Iran projects its influence in the Levant. It has an ongoing dispute with Israel regarding the Golan Heights and for sure, it almost engulfs geographically the much smaller state of Lebanon. In a way, Syria, by providing strategic depth to Iran and Hizballah, (Hokayem, 7-14) is the 'heart' of the Middle East.

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, it is possible to identify and analyze two different forms of the geopolitical impact the Syrian crisis has on Lebanon: a sub-regional one (Syria-Lebanon) and a regional one (the wider Middle East): 1. The sub-regional impact refers to the direct repercussions that the increasing instability of the Syrian part has on the Lebanese part of the subsystem; specifically, the impact that particular factors of the Syrian crisis, which belong to the cultural pillar of power[2], such as sectarianism and radicalism, have on the internal political-religious power relations of Lebanon. 2. The regional impact refers to the indirect repercussions that the instability at the center of the Middle East (in Syria) has on Lebanon. As a state of proxy actors through which the

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[2] By the methodology of the Contemporary Regional Geopolitical Analysis.

regional powers project power and as an integral part of the Syria-Lebanon sub-region, Lebanon is the primary point on which the regional pressure is applied.

As a result of this regional impact, the internal political-religious power relations of Lebanon become a micro-level representation of the regional power relations of the wider Middle Eastern system.

Sub-regional impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon

The first manifestation of the sub-regional impact is the reactivation of the confessional confrontation in Lebanon, between the Sunnis and the Shiites. On the Israel first level, it is a direct, almost automatic, influence of the increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian crisis on the Lebanese political-religious space. The main geographical locations where this confessional confrontation has been mostly reactivated are the city of Tripoli in north Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, two areas that are in proximity to Syria and consist of a mixed religious mosaic.

Tripoli, the second largest Lebanese city, is in close geographical proximity not only to Syria but especially to major spots of armed confrontation between the Syrian regime forces and the Free Syrian Army forces, particularly Homs and Hama. The Sunni-dominated Tripoli and its surrounding area have been logistics support centers for the Syrian opposition. Tripoli is also the residence of the small community of Alawites in Lebanon and the part of the city where the Sunni and the Alawite neighborhoods are adjoined has been in a state of low-intensity conflict since May 2012. The Alawite party in Tripoli, the Arab Democratic Party, is also believed to have been receiving funds and arms from the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad (Muir, 2012).

The arrest of anti-Assad Sunni activist Shadi al-Moulawi by the pro-Hizballah General Security Directorate (GSD) in May, and a few weeks later, the killing of a prominent anti-Assad Sunni cleric, Sheikh Ahmad Abdul Wahed, in the northern region of Akkar by the Lebanese Armed Forces led to the start of the confessional clashes in Tripoli. This low-intensity conflict has been mostly contained between the Sunni neighborhood of Bab al-Tannaneh and the Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen, which are separated by a single main street –the appropriately named Syria Street- that has been turned into an actual frontline. This is where the Syrian civil war is re-enacted on a micro-scale between the anti-Assad Sunnis of Tripoli and the pro-Assad Alawites of Tripoli (Cave, 2012). Tens of people have been killed on both sides in a confrontation that has at times involved heavier weaponry as well. The Lebanese army has been deployed in Tripoli and has often been engaged against militiamen of both sides.

The Bekaa Valley has also seen early sparks of confessional violence, though not to the extent that Tripoli has. The Bekaa, traditionally the main transit

route for legal and illegal activity to Syria, has become a transit point and logistical base for the Free Syrian Army. This has created friction between the adjoining Sunni and Shiite towns and villages, which has resulted in sporadic violence and several abductions. Also, there are reports from journalists that refer to training camps within the Sunni-controlled areas of the Bekaa that have been organized to train Sunni fighters destined for the Syrian war (Blanford, 2012). Abductions and violent incidents have also spread to the region of Wadi Khaled, north of Bekaa, in the Akkar district of north Lebanon (Cave, 2012).

Amid August 2012, sectarian violence spread also to the capital Beirut, when members of the powerful Shiite Meqdad clan of the Bekaa Valley abducted more than 40 Syrian nationals (as well as a Turkish citizen) and held them in Dahiye, the Hizballah-controlled southern suburb of Beirut. The mass abduction was retaliation for the abduction of Shiites in Syria by the opposition forces of the Free Syrian Army (Sulome, 2012). The second sub-regional impact is the radicalization of certain Sunni segments within Lebanon. One of the reasons for this is the increasing religious radicalization of parts of the Syrian opposition. Reports from the field indicate that as the Syrian crisis becomes longer and even more violent, the number of Salafi and Sunni-Wahhabi jihadi groups that are drawn into combat operations increases. In consequence, the increase of radical Islamic elements in Syria has also increased the radical Sunni-Islamic elements in Lebanon. This is particularly evident in Tripoli, which has a long history of Islamic radicalism as well as close historical connections with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Khasan, 85-90, 2011). In fact, the Islamic organization Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami (Islamic Unity Movement) had transformed Tripoli into an Islamic Emirate from 1983 to 1985. The more recent major incident of Sunni Islamic radicalism in Tripoli was the takeover of part of the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Bared, by the organization Fatah al-Islam in 2007 and its confrontation with the Lebanese army. But this was an isolated event, instigated by an obscure jihadi organization with opaque roots and funding. Since the eruption of the Syrian crisis, Tripoli has been experiencing a renewed wave of Sunni Islamic radicalism, which is closely associated with the increased radicalism across the border in Syria (Wood, 2012).

Another reason for the radicalization of Sunni elements in Lebanon is the political void that has been created during the last two years at the high echelons of Sunni political power in the country. In the most high-profile case, Saad Hariri has been living in Geneva due to a series of assassination threats against him. This void is enhanced by the fragmentation of the Sunni leadership, particularly expressed in the political and economic competition between the Hariri family and the Mikati one (Vloeberghs, 241-248).

This void has allowed more activist and radical elements to emerge at the forefront. They utilized the rising sectarianism of the Syrian crisis to achieve a higher mobilization of followers and supporters in Lebanon. The most characteristic cases are those of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir in Sidon and Imam Selim al-Rafei in Tripoli (Abdo G., 2012).

The regional geopolitical impact of the Syrian crisis

The most evident manifestation of the regional impact of the Syrian crisis in Lebanon is the overall pressure that it applies to a confessional political system and its existing power structure. Lebanon's political power balance has been, during the last four decades, a micro-level representation of the balance of power in the wider Middle East region, and particularly of the regional power play between the Iran/ Syria alliance against the different security and regional aspirations of Saudi Arabia, Israel, lately of Qatar and until a few years ago of Iraq. In other words, after 1975 and the start of the Lebanese second civil war, Lebanon's confessional "mosaic" composition has transformed the country into a proxy war battleground for the projection of political and military power by Damascus, Teheran, Riyad, Baghdad, and Tel Aviv (since 2011 the ground presence of Iran in Syria is a serious security threat of Israel). This nexus of regional interests has acquired further importance, after the eruption of the Syrian crisis, within the power dynamics of the wider Middle East. Old actors have receded (Iraq) and new actors (Qatar) have entered the frame along with the "traditional" regional actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia) who compete for influence in the Levant and the sub-region of Syria-Lebanon (Ablaka, 2015).

Hizballah, the powerful Shiite organization (that controls the southern suburbs of Beirut, parts of the Bekaa Valley, and the south of Lebanon), is the clearest example of this pressure that the system applies to the proxy actors on the Lebanese ground. By heavily relying on Iranian funding and weapons, as well as on Syrian logistical and weapons support, Hizballah has been feeling more than any other Lebanese political/military actor the pressure exerted by the ongoing Syrian crisis. Since its founding (in 1982 in Bekaa), Hizballah has been the main proxy actor for Iranian and Syrian power projections in Lebanon and a checking force of Saudi Arabia's aspirations. Under that prism, the current Syrian crisis that threatens the viability of the Syrian Assad regime also constitutes a threat to the sustainment of the Syria-Iran-Hizballah anti-Israeli, strategic, sub-regional axis. This regional threat has led the leader of Hizballah, Hassan Nasrallah, to express on numerous occasions his vocal support for the Assad regime. Furthermore, reports from both Syria and Lebanon have claimed that Hizballah has sent highly

trained units to fight alongside the Syrian regime, especially in urban warfare environments where Hizballah fighters have extensive experience (Loveday, 2012).

It is also evident that within Lebanon, Hizballah has attempted to maintain a relatively low profile in order not to aggravate further the sub-regional confessional and Sunni Islamist factors that have been reactivated by the ongoing Syrian crisis. This may also be explained by the fact that Hizballah controls the Mikati government, which in turn translates as a positive if only temporary, political advantage for the pressurized Syrian and Iranian regimes.

The centrality of Hizballah within the Lebanese power balance is of such political and military importance that any major shift in its course of action that its leadership may decide to take, whether to support more actively and openly the Assad regime or be forced to disengage from it, has serious repercussions within the Lebanese power space but also for the Shiite organization itself.

The way that Hizballah reacted to this pressure within the Lebanese political-religious context is part of the second systemic impact on Lebanon, namely the gradual regionalization of the Syrian crisis by proxy means in the Lebanese space. The assassination of the head of the Information Branch of the Lebanese *Internal Security Forces*, Wissam Hassan, on the 19th of October 2012, by a remotely detonated bomb in the Christian neighborhood of Achrafiye in central Beirut, is the first trace of this regional war by proxies on the Lebanese ground. Hassan was head of the investigation for the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri and he was also responsible for the arrest, in August 2012, of former minister and pro-Syrian Christian Lebanese politician Michel Samaha. He was arrested and accused of preparing a series of bomb attacks in Lebanon directed by the Syrian regime (Black, 2012). Whether all these cases relate to Hassan's assassination is still open.

The Internal Security Forces are the only Lebanese security institution that is not controlled by Hizballah, and since 2005, the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon has been receiving substantial funding from the US. Furthermore, Wissam Hassan was in close contact with US, French, and Saudi officials and was considered a key person in monitoring and checking the activities of Hizballah and other Syrian and Iranian agents in Lebanon (Ignatius, 2012).

Conclusion

Lebanon is the first country to be affected by any major shift at the sub-regional (Syra-Lebanon) level. The sub-regional impact of the Syrian crisis has already started to destabilize the internal politico-religious balance of Lebanon since the beginning of 2011. The growing sectarian character of the Syrian conflict, along with the increasing Islamic radicalization of parts of the Syrian opposition,

has reactivated the already existing confessional and Islamic politics in Lebanon, which were, until the eruption of the Syrian crisis, in a state of fragile containment (such as the Fatah al-Islam activities in North Lebanon and the Shiite-Sunni armed confrontation in 2008 in West Beirut). This destabilization is further enhanced by the influx in Lebanon of more than 1.5 million registered Syrian refugees (Harutyunyan, 5, 2022), a fact which can also transform the critical demographic balance of Lebanon, always a factor of great importance within the Lebanese confessional political antagonisms.

Yet, this sub-regional impact does not possess the adequate dynamic to destabilize decisively the Lebanese politico-religious balance of power. In effect, it creates the conditions for full-scale consequences of the Syrian conflict within the Lebanese territory. It is only the increasing interaction of the sub-regional impact with the regional impact that appears to be able to create such a dynamic that could set in motion the conditions for a possible power reshuffling within Lebanon. The initial existence of such a dynamic would then be sufficient to fully energize the opposing forces within Lebanon.

This is due to the fact that the activities of the regional actors involved in the Syrian crisis have also begun to increase. Specifically, the activities of the regional actor of Iran have the following target: the support of the Assad regime. The possible covert operations by Hizballah within the Syrian territory, along with its increasing re-armament within the Lebanese territory, are without doubt in accordance with the preparations that the Iranian leadership is crafting for a possible post-Assad Syria.

Other regional actors - Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are also appeared to have recently increased their activities in Lebanon with the double target of undermining the Assad regime and counter-checking Hizballah, the main proxy actor of Iranian influence in the Levant. The assassination of Wissam Hassan[3] was part of this new regionalized dimension of the Syrian crisis that has started to be conducted within the Lebanese territory.

Conclusively, Lebanon appears to be on a threshold. However, the increasing regionalization of the Syrian conflict has resulted in increasing pressure on Lebanon of the regional/systemic impact originating from the main actors of the Middle East. As a consequence, the first critical traces of this impact have started to appear in the Lebanese geopolitical space.

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[3] A key ally of Saudi Arabia and the US and an equally key opponent of Hizballah, Syria, and Iran.

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THE EVOLUTION, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND PROSPECTS OF THE CHINESE SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY[**]

Abstract: Over the past fifty years, the discipline of International Relations in China has undergone continuous evolution. Chinese scholars have transitioned their focus from translating, introducing, and disseminating Western theories to delving into the creation of an international relations theory uniquely shaped by Chinese characteristics. While progress has been made in formulating a distinct Chinese international relations theory, there are still areas of inadequacy that require attention. This article aims to critically examine the theoretical development and accomplishments of the "Chinese School" in International Relations theories while also presenting its perspectives on the future direction of International Relations theories in China.

Keywords: International Relations Theory; Chinese School; Relational Theory; Moral Realism; World System.

Introduction

Since the University of Wales appointed its inaugural faculty member in this field in 1919, International Relations has been acknowledged as a separate and independent discipline for more than a century. However, the development of international relations theories in China has notably lagged that of other countries globally.

The study of International Relations only began to emerge in China during the 1980s. Despite this late start and the challenges posed by language barriers, Chinese scholars have made substantial progress in this field through their dedicated efforts and steadfast pursuit of knowledge.

As China's role in global affairs has grown, Chinese scholars have started to provide their distinctive interpretations and analyses of international events, incorporating unique "Chinese Characteristics". This article seeks to provide a

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critical examination of the theoretical development and achievements of the "Chinese School" in International Relations theories, while also presenting its perspectives on the future trajectory of International Relations theories in China.

The Development of International Relations Theory in China

Scholars have divergent views on the categorization of China's indigenous international relations theories in terms of specific phases. According to Liang Shoude, the Chinese school of thought emerged in the 1960s (Liang, 2020). However, Yu Zhengliang, Jin Yingzhong, Li Shisheng, and others assert that the development of China's International Relations theory had its genesis with the Shanghai International Relations Theory Symposium in 1987, particularly after the initiation of reforms and opening (Guo and Zhang, 2022). Other scholars represented by Ren Xiao suggest that the issue of the Chinese school of thought was brought to attention around 2000 (Ren, 1997). Chinese scholars generally concur that the field of International Relations began to coalesce during the 1980s. Before this, Professor Ni Shixiong from Fudan University astutely noted that "China's study of International Relations was virtually non-existent prior to the 1980s." (Ni and Xu, 1997) Subsequently, the evolution of international relations theory in China can be broadly divided into three distinct phases: translation of foundational texts, scholarly debate and exploration, and theoretical innovation.

In 1980, at the inaugural meeting of the Association for the History of China's International Relations, Professor Jin Yingzhong put forth an article entitled *The Research Tasks, Objects and Scopes of International Relations*, which signified a growing awareness of International Relations theory development in China. At the same time, several prestigious universities in China began establishing departments and majors in International Relations, International Politics, and Diplomacy. In the early 1980s, China's reform and opening-up policy prompted numerous Chinese students to study abroad. Among them, some chose International Relations as their major. Upon returning to China after studying abroad in International Relations programs overseas, these students began translating and introducing a vast array of Western works on International Relations. Representative monographs from this era included *Selected Works of Contemporary American Schools of International Relations Theories* by Professors Ni Shixiong and Jin Yingzhong, which systematically and comprehensively introduced international relations theories. During this period, such works primarily focused on introducing mainstream theories while also including interpretations of the theories by Chinese scholars. With the in-depth study of Western theories, Chinese scholars began advocating for the creation of an International Relations Theory with distinct Chinese features. Professor Wang

Jianwei's article, *Strive to Create Our Own Theoretical System of International Relations,* garnered significant attention within the academic community. Meanwhile, representative foreign language institutions such as Shanghai International Studies University, military academies led by the National Defense University of the People's Liberation Army, and other key universities represented by the School of International Relations have played a pioneering role in the research of international relations theory. Shanghai International Studies University hosted the first China International Relations Theory Seminar in 1987. Scholars like Hu Menghao and Li Shisheng explicitly proposed establishing a theory of international relations with "Chinese characteristics." (Li, 1999) However, at this stage, it was merely a proposal without further elaboration on what constitutes an International Relations theory with "Chinese Characteristics". In 1989, Zhang Jiliang from the University of International Relations wrote and published *An Introduction to International Relations*. This book, based on the fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism, adopted an analytical approach combining economic analysis, class analysis, and systemic analysis. It stood as the first textbook on international relations theory in Chinese history to be written in the discourse system of the Chinese people (Guo and Zhang, 2022). During the first phase, which lasted until approximately the mid-1990s, Chinese scholars primarily focused on translating and introducing Western International Relations theories into China. This laid the foundation for further research and scholarship in this field.

After the Cold War, as more Chinese scholars began studying in Western institutions, China increasingly focused on International Relations theory. Numerous Western works were translated into Chinese, introducing diverse theoretical paradigms, including constructivism, feminism, the British School, critical theory, and others. The representative works include *Fundamental Theories of International Relations* edited by Cheng Yi and Yang Hongyu, and *Comparative Study of International Relations Theories,* written by Jin Yingzhong and Ni Shixiong. Different theoretical paradigms significantly broaden the horizons of domestic scholars in China. Rather than blindly adopting these theories without scrutiny, Chinese scholars began analyzing and even criticizing them from their perspectives. At the 1991 Beijing China International Relations Theory Seminar, scholars pointed out that international relations research should be internationalized, rather than monopolized by a few countries (Yuan, 2007). With well-trained academic backgrounds in International Relations research, some Chinese scholars proposed building a distinctive International Relations Theory. Initially, there was debate amongst China's international relations scholars regarding whether it was necessary to create an international relations theory with

specific features that reflect China's unique characteristics. Two major groups emerged: one group strongly advocated for constructing a theory of international relations with distinctively Chinese features, due to Western theories' limitations in explaining Chinese history and political behaviors, while also being permeated with ideological bias. Liang Shoude believed that without individuality and distinctiveness, a theory lacks universality and commonality. The intrinsic requirements of social science theories include Chinese theories, Chinese schools of thought, and Chinese characteristics (Liang, 1997). The second group represented by Yan Xuetong, argued that theories contain universal truth and can be revised or disposed of as necessary, making it unnecessary to create a theory with specific features. While the discussion centered on the potential for theoretical innovation rather than specific content, it undoubtedly marked a substantial stride in the development of China's International Relations theory. The subsequent phase witnessed heightened deliberation and inquiry among Chinese scholars regarding the application of these imported theories within a Chinese framework. During this period, numerous researchers endeavored to craft distinct approaches or frameworks for comprehending global politics and international relations, incorporating China's specific historical and cultural context.

From 2000 to the present day, the third phase has been marked by substantial theoretical innovation. Since the beginning of this century, Chinese scholars have actively explored and deliberated on the development of China's International Relations theory. Wang Yizhou and other scholars believed that the "Chinese characteristics" was too prominent in ideology and suggested adopting a Chinese perspective to establish their observation angle and style (Wang, 2003). Mei Ran proposed the establishment of a Chinese school of international political science in his paper, marking the first time that the term "Chinese school" was used in the Chinese academic community in the field (Mei, 2005). During this period, many researchers sought to develop their own unique approaches or frameworks for understanding global politics and international relations, considering China's specific historical and cultural context. Innovative scholars in China sought to draw theoretical resources from ancient ethics and political thought while incorporating traditional cultural elements, history, and classical works into international relations theory. In particular, at the third China International Relations Theory Seminar in 2004, scholars conducted in-depth discussions on fundamental categories such as objects, systems, and paradigms as well as characteristics related to constructing Chinese International Relations theory from an ontological perspective. This marked a significant milestone for China's International Relations research entering the stage of theoretical innovation (Liang, 2000). By 2005, scholars like Qin Yaqing, Wang Yizhou, and Wang Zhengyi had raised issues

about building a "Chinese School" in International Relations theory with each proposing a different angle. Scholars such as Qin Yaqing and Yu Zhengliang strongly believed that the emergence of a "Chinese School" was not only possible but also inevitable. They argued that China's uniqueness in history, culture, political system, economic system, and other aspects would inevitably lead to Chinese national characteristics in international relations theory (Qin, 2005). These distinctive attributes may ultimately contribute to the formulation of a distinct theory diverging from that of Western scholars. Concurrently, Professor Zi Zhongyun proposed that rather than formulating a theory with "Chinese characteristics," it would be more beneficial for Chinese researchers to engage in the global theoretical discourse and offer their contributions (Zi, 1998). During this period, a significant cohort of Chinese scholars began devising an international relations theory with both theoretical characteristics and distinctively Chinese features (Su, 2009). It took nearly ten years from sporadic thinking at the beginning of the theoretical preparation stage to proposing a complete theory.

While an objective standard for theory creation exists in terms of developing a truly indigenous international relations theory with distinct "Chinese characteristics", these three phases represent important milestones in the evolution of this field within China. The academic focus has gradually shifted towards the question of "what is the connotation of the international relations theory of the Chinese School." From the initial translation of original works and the constant introduction of new paradigms and theories to ongoing efforts to develop localized theories, scholars have tirelessly searched for ways to contribute to the emergence of an International Relations theory with distinctively Chinese characteristics. Scholars have proposed various approaches to building a "Chinese School" in international relations theory, including incorporating Confucianism and other traditional Chinese philosophical thoughts into theoretical frameworks. Some scholars have also emphasized China's unique historical experiences and political systems as crucial elements for developing a distinctive approach to international relations theory. For instance, Ye Zicheng utilized the history of ancient Chinese political thought to study (Ye, 2005). By continuing to engage with diverse perspectives both within China and internationally, emphasizing practical applications of theory, and developing more comprehensive analytical frameworks that account for complex global phenomena, Chinese scholars can continue to make important contributions to the field of International Relations.

Achievements of the "Chinese School" in International Relations Theory

In the new century, China has made significant strides in economic development, achieved major breakthroughs in comprehensive reform, and continuously improved the standard of living for its citizens. China's economic growth has elevated its position as a major player in the global economy, leading to greater influence in international affairs. Additionally, China's active participation in global governance, such as its involvement in international organizations and initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, has extended its influence on a global scale. Furthermore, China's diplomatic efforts, cultural exchanges, and contributions to peacekeeping operations have also contributed to its enhanced international influence. As a result, China's international influence has been comprehensively enhanced.

Moreover, as China continues to play an increasingly influential role in global affairs, its unique perspective on international relations will become even more important. The world's political circumstances are undergoing transformational changes. While China is on the rise, the West appears to be declining. With the continuous and rapid enhancement of China's comprehensive national strength, its self-perception has shifted towards being a major power. This signifies that China will bear greater international responsibilities and is expected to propose Chinese solutions for global governance (Guo and Zhang, 2022). The Western theory of international relations politics is gradually becoming inadequate when applied to interpreting China's political practices and current world politics. Therefore, there is an urgent need for revolutionary paradigm shifts and theoretical breakthroughs in political research, not only within China but also globally. Against this backdrop, Chinese scholars have recognized the necessity of developing an international relations theory that reflects distinctive Chinese characteristics. Pang Zhongying believes that the Chinese School emphasizes international relations or a diplomatic knowledge system specific to China's unique national conditions, focusing on explaining China's worldview or diplomatic style (Pang, 2003). Yu Zhengliang points out that the sources of the Chinese School are Marxist international relations theory, the international relations theory and practice of New China, Chinese culture, and foreign international relations theory (Yu, 2005). Qin Yaqing places more emphasis on China's thoughts and practices, including the world view of Confucian culture and the practice of the tribute system, China's modern sovereignty thought and revolutionary practice, as well as the ideas of China's reform and opening and its integration into international society (Qin, 2006).

In particular, Chinese scholars of international relations have drawn inspiration from traditional Chinese culture, values, history, and philosophy. For instance, some Chinese scholars have proposed the concept of "China's peaceful diplomacy" as a way to understand China's role in the global order. China's 20th National Congress report emphasizes the commitment to dialogue and negotiation, promoting the construction of a world of enduring peace (Xi, 2022). This idea emphasizes that China seeks to pursue its interests through peaceful means and cooperation with other nations, rather than through coercion or aggression. Additionally, some notable scholars, including Yan Xuetong, Wang Gungwu, and Zhao Tingyang, have argued that Confucianism can be used as a lens for understanding Chinese foreign policy. These scholars have delved into the historical and philosophical aspects of Confucianism and its potential influence on China's approach to international relations. Yan Xuetong, in particular, has been prominent in advocating for the integration of Confucian principles into China's foreign policy framework. They argue that Confucian values such as harmony, hierarchy, and benevolence are deeply embedded in China's political culture and play an important role in shaping its approach to international relations. By integrating these elements with modern international relations theory, they have achieved remarkable progress. Notable examples include Professor Qin Yaqing's theory on the relationship between world politics, Professor Yan Xuetong's moral realism theory, Zhao Tingyang's world system theory, and Su Changhe's Symbiotic theory. These representative achievements of China's International Relations Theory are introduced below and analyzed in detail.

As early as 2009, Professor Qin Yaqing began exploring China's International Relations theory and put forward the Relationship Standard and Process Construction Theory. He incorporated Chinese concepts into International Relations theory. The core idea of his Relationship theory is that there are behavioral differences between Chinese people and Westerners. The Western mode of thinking emphasizes instrumental rationalism, while the Chinese mode of thinking follows a different logical system, namely, relationalism. The differences between these two modes of thinking inevitably lead to different understandings of the fundamental logic of international relations. The underlying logic of relationalism is to maintain a harmonious global atmosphere where economic interests give way to friendly relationships, and interactions do not emphasize competition and contention but rather are centered on mutual benefit. The fundamental concept in this theory is "Relationality", which he identifies as a key component of Chinese social culture (Qin, 2012). In 2015, he published an article titled *The Theory of Relations in International Politics* to develop a purely Chinese theory of International Relations. The Relationship theory conceptualizes two core

cultural thought—process and relationship — to form a relatively systematic theoretical framework. According to this approach, process refers to flowing relationships, while the relationship itself becomes the metaphysical element at the heart of the theoretical framework, constructed through nucleation processes. Moreover, this perspective holds that all relationships take on a basic form characterized by *yin-yang* meta-relationships; these represent dialectical opposites that are understood in a harmonious relationship through the dialectics of the mean. The process perspective links things in a continuous flow and resolves oppositions and conflicts toward harmony. The relationship theory stands in contrast to Realism theories, but it also recognizes the importance of rationality. From this perspective, Professor Qin Yaqing puts forward "relational rationality" as an alternative approach to understanding international relations (Qin, 2015). In 2018, Cambridge University Press published Professor Qin Yaqing's English monograph, *the Theory of Relations in World Politics*. In this book, he systematically presents his theory of International Relations that takes the ontology of relations as its basic assumption and employs dialectics of the mean as its epistemological basis. Qin Yaqing's relationism draws inspiration from Chinese traditional philosophy, particularly the concept of "relationality" found in Confucianism. This perspective emphasizes harmony, moral obligations, and the interconnectedness of individuals and society, which Qin Yaqing applies to the international realm. According to Qin Yaqing, traditional Western international relations theories have focused primarily on the state as the central actor and on power politics, often neglecting the significance of relationships between states and other actors. In contrast, relationism places relationships at the center of analysis. It emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of actors in the international system, including states, international organizations, and non-state actors. This approach seeks to understand international relations through the dynamics of various relationships, such as alliances, trade partnerships, cultural exchanges, and diplomatic interactions. While both Weber's philosophy of "explanatory understanding" and Chinese relational perspectives seek to understand human action within a broader context, the Chinese standpoint tends to emphasize harmony, collective identity, interconnectedness, and moral context in a way that distinguishes it from Weber's individualistic and subjective approach. Chinese philosophical traditions often prioritize harmony and balance in relationships, where individual actions are seen in the context of their impact on broader social and relational harmony. This differs from Weber's focus on individual motivations and subjective meanings. Chinese relational perspectives often place greater emphasis on collective identity and group dynamics. Actions are frequently understood in relation to one's roles and responsibilities within family, society, and

the state, rather than solely through individual motivations, as emphasized by Weber. This unique Chinese perspective offers a new way to examine world order and the logic of action from a relational viewpoint.

Another group of Chinese international relations scholars, led by Professor Yan Xuetong and known as the Tsinghua School, emphasizes the use of scientific methods in their research. Professor Yan Xuetong has integrated China's pre-Qin period ideology with American realism theory to develop a novel approach called Moral Realism. This theory aims to explain why power shifts occur from dominant powers to rising powers. According to this perspective, power is divided into moral power and material power. Moral power refers to the ability to establish legitimacy through soft-power means, while material power includes military and economic hard-power capabilities. The theory introduces two key variables — political leadership and strategic reputation — which are essential for understanding a nation's rise or fall. Political leadership can be categorized into four types: inaction, conservatism, activism, and combativeness. Moral Realism also highlights that morality can enhance a country's strategic reputation; it helps gain legitimacy for building new international norms. The order of the international system can be classified into three categories: the order of kingship, the order of hegemony, and the order of power. Professor Yan Xuetong argues that kingship is the best international system order, and a combination of moral power and material power represents the optimal form of power. Furthermore, if China upholds values such as equality, justice, and civilization in its rise to great-power status, it can surpass those proposed by other countries like the United States (Yan, 2014). Professor Yan Xuetong further refined his theory on leadership and rising powers, which he published as a book entitled, *Leadership and The Rise of Great Powers,* by Princeton University Press in 2019. It sparked widespread attention in the academic community in China.

Zhao Tingyang's international system theory, known as Tianxia Theory, presents a philosophical starting point that differs from Western political theories. Rather than viewing national states as the basic political units, he proposes that the world should be considered under heaven (Zhao, 2015). The ontology of international relations is coexistence and relational rationality is emphasized over individual rationality. The theory draws on the world system concept of the ancient Zhou Dynasty in China to inspire today's global order construction. In this model, the Chinese government manages the world order and arbitrates disputes between vassal states, while each state independently manages its internal affairs with the free movement of people within them. The principle of order in this world is based on family values characterized by minimizing self-interest and maximizing love and harmony. For Zhao Tingyang, the best choice for an international system is

one where the political unit is not a sovereign country but rather views itself as part of a harmonious big family - transcending Westphalia's sovereign state system. A global perspective can solve all the difficulties and problems facing the world today, given the current lack of a global order and system (Zhao, 2015). Zhao Tingyang's theory is not constructed using traditional elements of international relations theory but rather elucidates Chinese thought in the field of international politics. As such, it has presented some challenges for Western researchers attempting to understand it outside of the Chinese context.

Another branch of Chinese international relations scholars is focused on Symbiotic theory, with Su Changhe and Ren Xiao being representative scholars. They aim to use the international political system in East Asia as a model for addressing current global challenges. The nature of the political system in East Asia is characterized by pluralism, amiability, and peacefulness. These scholars believe that humans must adopt co-existing attitudes to survive in the world. Furthermore, they have clarified some misconceptions about the Tribute system practiced in ancient China (Ren, 2013). Ren Xiao's article "On the Principles of the System of Symbiosis in East Asia" provides an explicit explanation of this concept within a regional context. Meanwhile, Su Changhe has used the Symbiotic theory to further explain Chinese President Xi Jinping's proposal of a community with a shared future (Su, 2016). It emphasizes the importance of building trust and mutual understanding among nations, which can foster a more stable and sustainable global order. The Symbiotic theory challenges traditional realist theories that prioritize power politics and security concerns as the primary drivers of international relations. Instead, it argues for a more holistic view that takes into account economic interdependence, cultural exchange, environmental protection, and other non-traditional security issues. They believe that promoting symbiosis in international relations can help to build a community with shared interests and values while reducing conflicts between states. Overall, the Symbiotic theory offers valuable insights on how to construct a new world order based on cooperation rather than confrontation or coercion.

In summary, these representative achievements in China's International Relations theory all reflect distinctively Chinese perspectives on how to interpret and construct theories about international relations.

Prospects
The paradigm of International Relations theory is firmly rooted in the historical and political practices of the West. Its logical foundation and philosophical views are heavily influenced by Western culture. During the initial stages of this development, American scholars' theoretical paradigms were

predominant. Gradually, the "British School" emerged as a significant force in Europe. However, it can be challenging to separate European cultural homogeneity from the International Relations theory proposed by the "British School", making it difficult to justify the theory universally. It must be acknowledged that China's International Relations studies have primarily relied on the adoption of frameworks and core concepts from Western international relations theories. As a result, these studies have generally lacked original Chinese theoretical perspectives and insights, which has significantly diminished Chinese scholars' influence in the broader International Relations academic community as well as the global political arena.

With a unique blend of traditional Chinese philosophy, modern international relations practices, and a deep understanding of China's historical and cultural context, the Chinese School offers valuable insights and perspectives on the development of international relations theory.

Chinese scholars have crafted their viewpoints on international relations based on China's historical practices and cultural values. The above-mentioned theories show the distinctive wisdom and charm of Chinese cultural characteristics. They challenged conventional Western approaches to understanding this complex world. Of note are the monographs authored by Professor Qin Yaqing and Professor Yan Xuetong, which were written in English and published by Western publishing houses. Moreover, these two experts have produced a significant number of academic papers in English, which have played an important role in facilitating dialogue between Chinese international relations scholars and their Western counterparts within the global academic community. Their tireless efforts have been instrumental in promoting the voice of Chinese International Relations scholars on the world stage.

In addition to several scholars who systematically advanced their theories, Renmin University of China established its Research Center for Historical Politics in 2019 with a focus on "Historical Politics" as a new research path within political studies.[1] The center aims to construct a framework for political interpretation featuring distinctively Chinese historical characteristics. With its profound background in historical research and political thought study, the Department of Political Science at Renmin University of China is well-positioned to support further development in China's International Relations theory. By developing a theoretical framework that takes into account China's historical experiences,

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[1] "The Research Center for History and Political Science at Renmin University of China was established, hosting a roundtable forum on the intersection of historical political science and Chinese political studies", https://www.rujiazg.com/article/16421 (accessed November 12, 2022)

cultural values, and political context, Chinese scholars can contribute to shaping debates about key issues such as governance structures in international organizations or regional security arrangements. By drawing on traditional Chinese philosophy and culture as well as incorporating new perspectives from different regions and cultures around the world, Chinese scholars can continue to enrich the global discourse on international relations with diverse perspectives that better reflect the complex realities of our interconnected world.

Additionally, an undeniable feature of the Chinese academic community is the high degree of alignment between academia and current politics. Wang Jisi pointed out that Chinese theoreticians tend to focus more on how theory can guide practice or serve current policies, rather than on its capacity to explain reality. In China, what is referred to as international relations theory differs significantly in substance from Western theory, with the former being oriented towards serving diplomatic practice and the latter towards explaining the realities of international relations (Wang, 1998). The official Chinese documents also point out that Xi Jinping's diplomatic thoughts have opened a new realm of innovation in today's international relations theory in the world.[2] Xi Jinping's diplomatic thoughts emphasize the concept of preserving world peace and pursuing common development with the purpose of promoting the building of a community with a shared future for humanity, advocating for win-win cooperation, mutual respect, and peaceful development. He emphasizes the idea of leading the reform of the global governance system with the concept of fairness and justice and building a new type of international relations featuring mutual respect and win-win cooperation. Additionally, Xi Jinping has stressed the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a means to achieve shared growth through discussion and collaboration. Furthermore, he has emphasized China's commitment to advance major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics to fulfill the mission of realizing national rejuvenation.[3] Overall, Xi Jinping's diplomatic thoughts focus on promoting a vision of global governance that is inclusive, cooperative, and mutually beneficial.

Therefore, it is not difficult to see the guiding direction of Xi Jinping's diplomatic thoughts in the development of the Chinese School's theoretical framework. As China continues to play an increasingly influential role in the international arena, the Chinese School has the potential to enrich and diversify the

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[2] The Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Study Outline on Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, Xuexi Publishing House, 2021), 9.

[3] "Guidelines of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy", http://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/node_8013949.shtml (accessed November 8, 2023)

discourse within international relations, contributing to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of global politics. Furthermore, the emphasis on harmony, mutual benefit, and non-confrontational approaches inherent in the Chinese School's perspective can contribute to the development of new paradigms for managing international relations in an interconnected world.

Conclusion

The development of China's international relations theory has undergone a lengthy process, beginning with a pre-theoretical phase before eventually culminating in theoretical presentations. Various Chinese International Relations theories reflect different aspects of "Chinese characteristics." Some integrate Chinese elements into existing Western theoretical frameworks; others remove these frameworks' Western elements entirely and use purely Chinese approaches to explain their viewpoints. Still, others employ Western methods to build their theories but avoid using Western phrases deliberately and emphasize traditional Chinese thoughts and ideas instead. The variety of approaches mirrors the distinctive and multifaceted essence of Chinese culture, which defies easy reduction into a singular theoretical paradigm.

Moreover, the "Chinese School" has made significant contributions to International Relations theory by introducing novel perspectives and concepts that challenge traditional Western viewpoints. For example, the concept of "Tianxia World System" emphasizes cooperation and mutual benefit as key principles in international relations, while also highlighting China's commitment to peaceful development. This approach stands in contrast with the traditional Western emphasis on power politics and zero-sum games.

At its core, a theory is an abstraction and sublimation of reality. Theories of international relations are derived from the history of interactions between nations, encapsulating a condensation and generalization of human progress overall. As a concept, "theory" originated in the West. Classical international relations theories are based on Western historical experience and international practices. However, human joys and sorrows are interconnected across cultures, and theory itself is derived from practice while also guiding it. International relations theories describe and predict nations' practices worldwide. The international relations theory with Chinese characteristics originates from Chinese culture but must break through its context to communicate effectively with the world. China's international relations scholars need to continue exploring their works deeply to achieve this goal. This process of exploration and deepening is crucial for the development of international relations theory with Chinese characteristics. It involves not only

incorporating traditional Chinese cultural elements but also engaging in dialogue with existing Western theoretical frameworks to find common ground.

Moreover, effective communication requires clear and concise language that can be easily understood by the global audience. China's international relations scholars must strive to express their ideas using accessible language that transcends linguistic and cultural barriers. The development of international relations theory with Chinese characteristics represents an exciting opportunity for cross-cultural exchange and collaboration. In the creation of Chinese international relations theory, it is important to focus on addressing and discussing the common challenges faced by humanity, without being overly confined to Western theoretical standards. Whether one seeks to adhere exclusively to Western models or deliberately avoids Western theoretical influences in search of "Chinese characteristics", both approaches seem somewhat constrained. By contemplating the destiny of all humanity and engaging in philosophical introspection with a distinctively Chinese perspective, scholars can ultimately forge an international relations theory that belongs not only to China but also to the world.

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RESUMPTION OF THE KURDISH CARD IN IRANIAN-IRAQI RELATIONS: COMPLEX INTERPLAY, PRE-REFERENDUM REALITIES[**]

Abstract: The Kurds have been pivotal in Iran's domestic and foreign politics throughout history. In post-Saddam Iraq, helming the delicate balance between Iraq's ethno-confessional groups according to its national security interests posed one of the focuses of Iran's regional policy. The article aims to analyze the peculiarities of Iran's Kurdish policy, the essence of the regional transitions of the Kurdish issue, and their impact on Iran's regional policy. The article argues that the Islamic State's threat and the Syrian crisis strengthened Iran's Kurdish policy to control the Kurdish region of Iraq, including the issue of distribution and transition of energy resources. Tehran vigorously defended the principle of the territorial integrity of Iraq and preserved the Shia force's dominance in the 2017 pre-referendum period. This strategy sought to prevent the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) from evolving into potential foothold operations targeting Iranian assets in the region.
Keywords: Iran, Iraq, KRG, Kurdish card, Shia groups, IS

Introduction

The Kurdish factor has been one of Iran's most essential regional policy components. While containing Kurdish separatism within the country with extreme intolerance, Iran has used the Kurdish card in neighboring countries to its advantage. The core approach of Iran's regional policy is to prevent the formation of Kurdish autonomies in neighboring countries, which could lead to

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manifestations of autonomy in the Kurdish regions of Iran (Gunter 1998; Koohi-Kamali 2003). Until the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Tehran permanently provided political, economic, and military assistance to Kurdish political groups that opposed the regime, with a particular emphasis on supporting the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Jalal Talabani, especially during the Iran-Iraq war. In the early 1990s, Iran supported the PUK fighting against another influential Turkish-backed Kurdish party headed by Massoud Barzani, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (Sinkaya 2017). Nevertheless, Turkey and Iran have, time after time, synchronized their initiatives concerning the Kurdish factor, adjusting their policies concerning the Kurds based on their respective security interests. Historically, the Kurds have functioned as a tactical instrument for both Tehran and Ankara, serving to further their regional objectives. Neither Iran nor Turkey has ever demonstrated a genuine commitment to endorsing political autonomy for the Kurdish populace, even in neighboring nations. As mentioned by Sinkaya "the Iraqi Kurdish parties partially turned into proxies of Turkey and Iran" (2017, 12).

Following the KDP and PUK reconciliation and the progress in establishing autonomy in Kurdistan (Richards 2013)[1] Tehran also endeavored to foster relations with Massoud Barzani. This shift in Iran's approach suggests a pragmatic adaptation to the region's landscape, wherein political dynamics and alliances have transformed. The US invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime were both a challenge and an opportunity for Iran. If, in the past, Iran tried to undermine the power of Hussein via Shiite groups and Kurds, then in post-Saddam Iraq, Iran forged to shape an ideological and security environment according to its regional interests. Along with the Iranian active involvement in Iraq, it became apparent that the dynamics of development surrounding Iraqi Kurdistan would not only impact the potential establishment of a Kurdish state but would also determine the extent of influence of various states in Iraq and over the Kurdish issue in the region.

From the outset of the Syrian conflict, Iran staunchly upheld the principle of territorial integrity for neighboring states, reacting vehemently to the restructuring of borders in the region, including opposing the notion of dividing Iraq and Syria along sectarian lines, such as delineating Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish segments.

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[1] The Kurdish peshmerga collaborated with US forces. Post-invasion, the PUK and KDP held the balance of power in Kurdistan, jointly governing the region through a coalition. This arrangement extended to pivotal roles within Iraqi Kurdistan governance, with the PUK's Talabani as Iraq's president and the KDP's Barzani as the president of Iraqi Kurdistan. (Curses, Romano and Gunter 2020)

Tehran's regional strategy emphasizes the importance of maintaining current borders (Barzegar, 2008).

The analysis is predicated upon examining various sources, encompassing reports, official statements, expert analyses, and media data. The first part of the paper delves into the framework of Iran's interactions with political factions among Iraqi Kurds after the US intervention in Iraq and the differences in Iranian and Turkish approaches to the Kurdish factor.

In the subsequent section, the analysis pivots to a detailed exploration of Iran's involvement in exacerbating sectarian tensions within Iraq, enlightening the nuanced shifts in Iranian policy vis-à-vis the Kurdish factor before the 2017 independence referendum. Additionally, it investigates the complexities of Iran's policy evolution against the backdrop of the Syrian crisis and the emergence of the Islamic State (IS).

Iran's Engagements with Iraqi Kurdish Elites: Balancing Act, Security Concerns

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the Shiites and the Kurds established a dominant position within the Iraqi central government system. Between them emerged new mechanisms of interaction. Iraq's new political system marked a significant departure from the model under Saddam Hussein's rule (Wery, 13). Iran was opposed to a pro-American Iraqi government, which would likely align with U.S. interests and go against the objectives of the Islamic Republic. Iran opposed the Bush administration's regional policy, which largely focused on defining Iraq as a counterweight to Iran, building regional alliances against Iran, and establishing enduring military bases near Iran's borders. One key objective for Tehran was to preserve a strong Shia influence in the Iraqi political realm. While Shia factions vary in their views on relations with Iran, all Islamic Shia groups (ISCI, Dawa, the Sadrists) seek collaboration with Iran (Barzegar, 2008).

Since the mid-1990s, Tehran has heightened political and logistical support for the PUK to counter increased Turkish involvement in Iraqi Kurdistan via the KDP and curb the activities of Iranian Kurdish opposition settled in the region (Sinkaya 2017, 13). To manage Kurdish developments and safeguard the territorial integrity of Iraq, Tehran, following the adoption of the new constitution in Iraq in 2005 and the clarification of the status of the regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan, initiated the activation of its political and economic relations with the KRG. In 2007, Iran took significant steps, signaling a commitment to strengthening its presence and engagement in Iraqi Kurdish regions. Tehran established two consulates, one in Erbil and another in Sulaymaniyah. The KRG representative office was opened in Tehran (Sinkaya 2015), indicating a mutual interest in

fostering relations. Similarly, the deepening of Iran's relations with Iraqi Kurds was facilitated by the opening of a road for automobile communication between Iran and the KRG and the initiation of direct flights from Urmia to Erbil. Iran established economic dominance in the Suleimani region, under the control of the PUK, thereby emerging as the second-most significant economic partner of the KRG after Turkey. Iran's relationship with the KRG improved. This influence manifested itself through various economic collaborations, trade agreements, and investment initiatives (Berman 2016)[2]. Tehran has also cooperated with the Gorran (Change) party that separated from the PUK (Katzman and Humud 2016, 20). Kurdish entities control some parts of the Iran-Iraq border (1600 km), which for years enabled Iran to navigate and mitigate the impact of international sanctions, ensuring a steady supply route under its influence. Through fostering dialogue between the Shia-Arab and Kurdish political factions within the Iraqi government, Tehran sought to exert influence over separatist sentiments among the Kurds. This strategic approach by Tehran underscores its efforts to promote a balance of power and control the Iraqi political landscape.

In Iraq, Tehran has consistently endeavored to leverage the Kurdish factor to exert influence over Baghdad and simultaneously impede the unification of Kurds (Ingram 2015). From 2003 to 2008, Iraqi Kurds cooperated closely with the central government, particularly under the leadership of the Iranian-backed Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. During this period, Kurdish support was instrumental in al-Maliki's efforts to contradict the influence of the prominent Shiite opposition cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Significant opposition occurred in 2010 following parliamentary elections between the Kurdish leadership and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The critical points of this shift were the disagreements over the expansion of executive powers by al-Maliki, the concentration of military forces under his control, and the issue of the distribution of energy resources. These disputes marked a notable transformation that reflected divergent interests and objectives between the two sides. During the Syrian crisis, Turkey's policy has gone in the opposite direction of Iran's. It distanced itself from Baghdad and openly supported Barzani's efforts to oust Maliki (International Crisis Group, 2015, 14). The Syrian civil war introduced its clarifications into the paradigm of the Kurdish problem in the region. The Syrian crisis and the rise of IS allowed Turkey to target the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Syrian Kurdish forces (Hovsepyan, Manukyan, 2022) and prepare the ground for military incursions into Iraq and Syria, partly countering Tehran's Shiite-centric regional policy.

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[2] In 2000, 100 million, the dollar-denominated trade turnover in Iraq before the IS military operations (2014) was 4 billion dollars per year. 2014 In August, the parties agreed to increase trade turnover and strengthen cooperation in the energy sector.

Cooperation between Iran and the KRG was not mainly hampered by the fact that Iran's three main Kurdish parties—the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), and Komala (Kurdistan Communist Party of Iran) had relatively distant relations with the leadership of the Iraqi Kurds and political entities associated with them (Hummel 2017).

The Syrian civil war and the rise of IS brought significant shifts in the paradigm of the Kurdish issue, involving various regional actors pursuing their strategic interests. It provided Turkey with an opportunity to target the PKK and create conditions for military invasions into Iraq and Syria, which were aimed at countering and undermining Iran's Shiite axis in the broader regional context.

For Tehran, fostering collaboration with the Kurds was crucial to safeguarding its interests and minimizing external influence on the dynamics between Baghdad and Erbil. Tehran seeks to mitigate and counterbalance the influence of the United States and Israel toward Kurds. Both the U.S. and Israel tried to align the Kurds with the Syrian opposition, supported Kurdish separatist movements in Iran, and fostered anti-Iranian sentiments in the region (Wong 2012). The geopolitical circumstances surrounding the Syrian conflict and the rise of IS heightened the significance of Iraq for Iran in facilitating communication coordination and potentially serving as a bridge between various involved stakeholders.

In June 2014, following the capture of Mosul in northern Iraq by IS, and with the Iraqi army retreating, Kurdish Peshmerga forces found themselves on the frontlines against the jihadist insurgency. Hardy Mède To halt the advance of IS militants toward Iraqi Kurdistan, the KRG required military support. Ankara was initially hesitant to provide immediate assistance, prompting the KRG to turn to Iran for support in countering the IS threat. Ankara demanded that the KRG stop interacting with the PKK and YPG against IS (Gurbuz 2023). In August 2014, during the Iranian Foreign Minister M. J. Zarif's visit to Iraq, KRG President Masoud Barzani highlighted that Iran was the first country to provide the Kurds with weapons and ammunition to fight IS faster than the US (Collard 2014). In response to the escalating threat posed by the IS in 2014, Iran extended not only military support to Shia forces but also facilitated aid to the Kurds (International Crisis Group, 2015, 14). In the struggle against extremist groups, Iranian authorities-initiated considerations for collaboration with various Kurdish parties, including the PUK, the KDP, the PKK and the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD). This deliberation was framed within the broader context of enhancing Iran's overall regional security claims to address common threats posed by Sunni jihadist elements. As per Crisis Group analyses, the KDP had to pay for Iranian support later. Iranian diplomats indirectly criticized Barzani's push for independence,

advising him to cooperate with the legitimate government in Baghdad to caution against potential losses (International Crisis Group, 2015, 15). Many Iranian Kurds, including members of the KDPI and PJAK, participated alongside Iraqi and Syrian Kurds in countering the IS threat, putting aside their differences. Notably, amid the growing danger posed by IS to Kurdish regions, Tehran's partner, PUK, assumed a mediating role between the military and political forces of Syrian Kurds. Despite the PUK peshmergas' uneasy relationship with Shiite militias, they have been deployed side by side, especially in areas with a mixed population of Kurds and Shiite Turkmen. In PUK strongholds, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)[3] military advisers unified diverse proxies: PUK peshmergas, Shiite militias, PKK, and YPG, under a single command, providing intelligence, assistance, and equipment (International Crisis Group, 2015, 13-14).

In early August 2015, an Iranian delegation visited the KRG. It emphasized that, given the region's instability, the Barzani party needed to remain in power despite the expiration of the term stipulated by the constitution (his current term expired on August 19. This position was reiterated on August 4 by Qasem Soleimani, the head of the particular unit of the IRGC known as Qods[4] (Ingram 2015). It is noteworthy that almost simultaneously, Iraqi Kurdistan destabilized. After President Barzani's term ended, PUK and Gorran, influenced significantly by Iranian authorities, incited protests and violence against the headquarters of the ruling KDP in Sulaymaniyah. Despite arguments from the KDP and KRG to focus on countering IS militants and extending the president's powers through parliamentary decisions, the opposition in Sulaymaniyah remained unsupportive.

By employing economic and soft power policies with the KRG, Iran sought to curtail Turkey's ambitions in Iraq. It also viewed the KRG as an alternative partner in diversifying energy exports.

The escalation of sectarian tensions: Iran's interference

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the US government's attempted to achieve intra-Iraqi community solidarity and Sunni-Shia interaction and to resolve disputes between the central government and the KRG have repeatedly failed. It was mainly due to the strengthening of Iran's positions in Iraq as well.

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[3] It should be noted that the responsibility of combating Kurdish separatism, both domestically and internationally, has traditionally been assigned primarily to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

[4] Soleimani is acknowledged as a principal architect of Iranian Middle East policy, including the closest negotiator with the Kurdish elite. He has been killed by a US air strike in Iraq in 2020 January 3. (Azizi 2021)

In Iraq, the Kurdish media referred to him as the "Shadow General" who had significant influence over Kurdish leaders, especially Talabani. (Qureshi 2014)

Internal conflicts started in Iraq in 2014 as the representatives of the Sunni-Arab community appealed the results of the parliamentary elections, as a result of which the country's three ethno-religious groups could not reach an agreement for a long time on the issue of dividing the levers of power among themselves[5]. Only in July was the parliament convened, and Sunni Salim al-Jubburi was elected its speaker. Haidar al-Abbadi, a Shia politician, became prime minister. Nevertheless, he had serious conflicts with the commanders of the Shia military-political groups, which had close ties to the Iranian authorities, operated independently of the official military command chain, and opposed al-Abadi's cooperation with the United States (Katzman and Humud 2016, 25). The PUK president (2005-2014) Talabani, was succeeded as president by Mohammed Fouad Maasum, a politician with moderate views who had a compromise position between Kurdish parties and the Shia and Sunni camps (Katzman and Humud 2016, 20).

The need to unite in the fight against the Islamist forces temporarily hid the Intra-Iraqi ethno-religious contradictions. A conditional partnership that had emerged among Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish forces initially proved efficacious in countering the common threat posed by Islamist forces. Nevertheless, the military successes over the Islamists rekindled pre-existing contradictions among the collaborating factions. The territories recaptured from the IS became arenas not only for an intense power struggle but also for a resurgence of unremitted animosity among the factions, sparking a renewed and ruthless power struggle within the ruling elite of Baghdad. The Kurds of Iraq and Syria primarily concentrated on maintaining neutrality in the internal conflict and are involved in military confrontation mainly to protect Kurdish territories. Hence, the Peshmerga forces led by the Kurdish leadership maintained as much neutrality as possible in the liberation of other Iraqi territories occupied by IS.

A rather complicated relationship developed between the Kurds and the Shiite militia, which were included in the People's Mobilization Forces (Quwwāt al-ashd ash-Shaʿbī), also known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). Even though the Shia-dominant PMU reports to the Iraqi National Security Service, Tehran had much more direct influence and control over them than Baghdad did. Iran was the primary supplier of ammunition and military equipment to the PMU. As a result, commanders affiliated with the IRGC Quds Force and several Shiite militia groups aligned with Iran emerged within the PMU hierarchy, assuming leadership roles (Abbas 2017, 4-6). With each military success over IS, the Militia,

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[5]According to the agreement between Iraq's main ethnoreligious groups, the top three seats of the state are divided: the speaker of the parliament is a Sunni Arab, the prime minister is a Shiite Arab, and the president is a Kurdish. (Nazir 2006)

and especially its chiefs, gained more and more influence in Iraq. It makes sense that the PMU mainly served Iranian interests and that Iran's policy towards the Kurds was also basically expressed through the PMU.

Armed clashes between the Kurdish Peshmerga and the PMU became periodic, especially when Kurds recaptured important strategic areas from IS, particularly in Tuz Khurmatu near Kirkuk, which was strategically important for gaining control over Kirkuk and Mosul (Qassim 2018)[6]. Erbil attempted to maintain control over as many regions as possible during that time by demanding from Baghdad its own share of oil revenues, increasing the representation of Kurdish ministers in the central government, and implementing Article 140 of the Constitution, which calls for a referendum to unite Kirkuk with Kurdistan (Katzman and B. Prados 2007, CRS-6)[7]. The prominent crisis revolved around Kirkuk, an oil field governed by the Barzanian Clan and strategically located between Baghdad and the KRG. The incorporation of Kirkuk is expected to contribute to Kurdistan's economic self-sufficiency significantly. During this period, KRG leadership looked at an effective alternative to reducing dependence on Baghdad and Ankara to fuel exports to Persian Gulf ports. Discussions on the construction of an oil pipeline between KRG and Iran gained a more objective nature, expecting the consensus of Iraq's central authority. Kurdish sources testify that Tehran was promoting official Baghdad's policy of blocking the construction of the pipeline in order to include Kirkuk oil exported by the Kurds to Jayhan (Hêvîdar 2016).

The disagreements between the PMU and the KRG were further exacerbated when Turkey, without Baghdad's consent and with the permission of Barzani, dispatched military forces into the parts of Iraq that border Syria (Lucente 2016). The confrontation between Iran's and Turkey's proxies over Kirkuk and Mosul became increasingly militarized. Each of the parties tried to establish its own supremacy in these regions through the instrumentalisation of military groups. It intensified the disputes among Iraq's ethnic groups.

Ankara positioned Zilkan as its deepest base in Iraq following the Islamic State's 2014 seizure of Mosul and the capture of local Turkish consulate personnel. Placed on a high point with an overview of Mosul, the base is located fifty miles

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[6] American intelligence reported about the presence of Qasem Soleimani in Kirkuk. There was a piece of information that Soleimani played a crucial role in orchestrating an agreement between a faction of the Talabani family and Hadi al-Amri, a prominent figure in the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and the head of the Badr Organization. The agreement outlined the transfer of control over Kirkuk, including its crucial facilities, to the PMU.

[7] Kirkuk sits on 10% of Iraq's overall oil reserves of about 112 billion barrels.

inside the Kurdistan Region and provocatively within the visual range of the Iraqi militia that is supported by Iran on the Nineveh Plains (al-Nashmi 2022).

Although Tehran faced a challenge from Turkey's potential expansion into northern Iraq, it was also not in its best interest to leave Kirkuk under Erbil's jurisdiction, as Kurdistan would present Erbil with a new energy rival. For this reason, the Shia PMU organized military groups with Turkmens and Sunni Arabs urging them to stop the growing consolidation of Turks and Kurds in Mosul. In the peshmerga conflict with the PMU, the PKK cooperates with the Shiite Militia to limit Turkey's involvement in Northern Iraq (Knights 2022).

In response to a formalized alliance between the PKK and PMU in November 2015[8], Ankara dispatched an armed contingent to Dohuk to enhance the military preparedness of the Peshmerga forces (Lees Weiss 2021). Thus, Turkey's military involvement in Iraq can be considered in the context of the growing influence of Iran over the Kurds and the concurrent erosion of the KDP standing. (International Crisis Group 2014). The Iran-PKK cooperation was also conditioned by the cooperation between the Kurdish PYD and Iran in the Syrian crisis. Turkey's invasion of Syria under the name of fighting against the PKK was assessed by Tehran as a threat to its position and that of Bashar al-Assad. With Tehran's silent agreement in 2012, Assad granted some territorial and military sovereignty to the Kurdish structures in Syria in exchange for his support. The Kurds were able to successfully fight against the IS and other extremist groups, as well as the Syrian opposition forces (International Crisis Group 2014, 4-5).

Notably, during the period spanning from 2014 to 2016, under the auspices of Iran's leadership, a relatively stable regional axis was formed along the Turkish borders, comprising the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the Shiite administration in Baghdad, and distinct Kurdish military and political entities (Dalay 2015). Turkey's aspiration to establish the Kurdish Azaz-Jarablus region in Syria as a buffer or "security zone" was partially due to Tehran's strategic calculus. Tehran supported Kurdish interests temporarily, aimed at constraining Turkey and exploiting the controlled territory for the transportation of energy resources. Consequently, discussions between Erbil and Tehran regarding constructing a new pipeline from the KRG to Iran were intended to weaken Turkey's transit significance (Ekurd.net 2016).

The reinforcement of Russia's military-political engagement and the Turkish military incursion into Syria has introduced a novel emphasis on the power dynamics among regional stakeholders. The converging regional foreign policy

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[8] The agreement did not provide a cessation of hostilities between the IRGC and the Iranian faction of the PKK, the PEJAK (International Crisis Group 2014, 4-5).

objectives of Iran and Russia, particularly in combating radical Islamic organizations and endorsing the incumbent Syrian government, have prompted an activation of military-political collaboration between Tehran and Moscow, as well as concerning Kurdish affairs. Since late September 2015, Russian airstrikes in Syria against IS have facilitated the Kurdish forces (PYD/YPD) strengthening and cutting off the Syrian opposition's supply routes from Turkey via the Azaz Corridor. This corridor extends north of Aleppo, reaching westward to the Turkish border in the Kurdish-populated Kobane region. Analogous to the KDP and the PUK scenario in Iraq during the 1990s, the de facto extension of the PKK and PYD during the governance crisis was used to advance the establishment of Kurdish self-governance entities and their independent military forces, thereby laying the groundwork for a more comprehensive institutional process towards autonomy. However, Tehran acknowledged the challenges to its interests of continued support for the Kurds, as this could impinge upon the territorial integrity of Syria.

In 2016, the accord delineating a ceasefire framework in Syria, brokered between Russia and the United States in February, accompanied by the Kurdish federalization (federalism) process in Syria and introduced specific changes in Iran's Kurdish policy. Alterations in Iran's Kurdish policy were directed at impeding the institutionalization and legitimation of the emergent Kurdish autonomy in Syria by isolating the Kurdish forces from the negotiation process regarding Syrian peacebuilding and Kurdish self-governance efforts.

The possible establishment of Kurdish autonomy in Syria has highlighted the need for the Iranian authorities to cultivate trust among the Kurdish population within the domestic political landscape. The timing of President Hassan Rouhani's inaugural visit to Senaj, the focal point of Iranian Kurdistan, in 2015, immediately following the signing of the nuclear deal in July, is not coincidental. In Tehran, concerted endeavors are underway to preempt the spillover of the Turkish-Kurdish conflicts in the southeastern regions of Turkey into Iran, particularly amidst the unpredictable escalation of the crisis along the Syrian and Iraqi borders. Such a foray, if left unchecked, could incite separatist sentiments among the Kurdish populace in the northern regions of Iran. Once again, making promises about the rights of millions of Kurds in Iran and pledging enhancements to their social conditions and infrastructure development, the president's messages were mainly aimed at emphasizing Tehran's critical engagement with the Kurdish issue beyond Iran's borders. Rouhani emphasized that "it protects Erbil and Baghdad just as it protects Iranian Kurdistan. Without Iran's help, Erbil and Baghdad would be in the hands of terrorist groups right now. Just as we protect Sanandaj, we also protect Sulaimani and Duhok" (Dalay 2015).

The Kurdish Peshmerga took de facto control of Kirkuk in June 2014 during the advance of the IS in northern Iraq and the withdrawal of Iraqi government forces. The seizure of Kirkuk significantly enhanced the Kurds' control over economic resources, contributing to their economic autonomy. Given this increased control, there was a notable assertion by Kurdish President Barzani in early 2016 that the KRG might consider conducting a non-binding referendum on independence by the end of that year. This proposal reflected the Kurds' growing confidence in their ability to exercise self-determination, political aspirations, and regional dynamics in pursuing Kurdish autonomy.The Kurdish Peshmerga took de facto control of Kirkuk in June 2014 during the advance of the IS in northern Iraq and the withdrawal of Iraqi government forces. The seizure of Kirkuk significantly enhanced the Kurds' control over economic resources, contributing to their economic autonomy. Given this increased control, there was a notable assertion by Kurdish President Masoud Barzani in early 2016 that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) might consider conducting a non-binding referendum on independence by the end of that year. This proposal reflected the Kurds' growing confidence in their ability to exercise self-determination, political aspirations, and regional dynamics in pursuing Kurdish autonomy.

While the Kurdish movement in Iran lacks cohesion as a unified social-political force, the Iranian authorities remain concerned about the potential for the country's Kurds to exhibit the level of activity seen in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey amid regional transformations. This concern is particularly pronounced given that Iran's Kurdish regions face heightened social insecurity and underdevelopment. Moreover, the Iranian government persists in implementing discriminatory policies against the Kurdish minority.

Tensions escalated between the KRG's two main political parties, the KDP and PUK, due to disputes over the referendum and Kirkuk. The KDP accused the PUK of betraying the Kurdish cause by allegedly capitulating to Iran and making a deal to withdraw. Kirkuk fell to Iraqi government forces following a contentious referendum in which the Kurdistan region sought independence against Baghdad's objections. This dispute intensified divisions between the KDP and PUK. The PUK, aligned with Iran, accused the KDP of jeopardizing Kurdish interests through the referendum. Qassem Soleimani, Commander of Quds Forces, warned Kurdish leaders before the referendum about the risks and urged withdrawal from Kirkuk after the vote. Soleimani reiterated this message after the funeral of PUK leader Jalal Talabani, advising withdrawal from Kirkuk in exchange for Iranian protection of Kurdish interests. Soleimani's visit to Kirkuk before the Iraqi offensive indicated Iran's decisive role in influencing the PUK's alignment with Baghdad. (Georgy and Rasheed 2017). Before the referendum, the confrontation between Iran and the

KRG had been growing. Iran's officials have many times threatened that the separation of the Kurdistan Region from the territory of Iraq would lead to the termination of all bilateral military and security agreements and the blocking of all border crossings between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan. Soleimani addressed the leaders of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: "I have asked the popular forces of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi not to attack Iraqi Kurdistan, but I will not do so again." In response, Barzani said, "We extend the hand of brotherhood to everyone, and those who want to fight with us can try their will." (Rajanews 2016)Following these warnings, the Iraqi army and PMU forces swiftly captured Kirkuk, taking control of government buildings, the airport, military bases, and oil facilities. The Kurdish Peshmerga affiliated with the PUK retreated without resistance. Before the attack, the security authorities of the KRG reported the presence of IRGC forces alongside the Iraqi army and the PUK (Zeitoons.com 2021).The Kurdish referendum of September 2017, marked by an overwhelming mandate for independence, strained relations between the KRG and Baghdad. The united opposition of Tehran and Baghdad to the referendum underscored a shared commitment to preserving the territorial integrity of Iraq.

Conclusion

In the Middle East's shifting geopolitical landscape, Iran is faced with an opportunity to expand its influence within the region and substantiate its status as a dominant force in the Kurdish issue. The possibility of the KRG achieving outright independence from Baghdad, combined with the danger of the formation of Kurdish federal autonomy in Syria, poses significant challenges to Iran. Such a scenario threatens to diminish Iran's influence in the region while posing problems for Iran's domestic Kurdish dynamics. Iran seeks to prevent the ultimate consolidation of Kurdish entities and the establishment of Kurdish autonomy within its territory. Iran had temporarily strengthened its collaboration with Kurdish forces in order to counter extremist Islamist groups. It was a short-term policy aimed at sustaining Baghdad, defeating IS, and preventing Turkish expansion in the region. Strategic issues regarding the distribution and transition of energy resources also highlight Iran's hunger to assert control over the KRG. The Kurds remain a tactical tool for Tehran to tackle both regional and extra-regional competitors effectively and to uphold its security environment.

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THE MUSAVAT AZERBAIJAN POLICY TOWARDS KURDS: PARALLELS WITH POST-SOVIET AZERBAIJAN'S ETHNIC POLICY[**]

Abstract: The three censuses conducted in Azerbaijan during the post-Soviet period (1999, 2009, and 2019) reveal a significant decline (more than 300 percent) in the number of Kurds in the country over 20 years (1999-2019). This trend is consistent with Azerbaijan's policies towards indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. In this context, the situation parallels the experiences of other ethnic groups residing in Azerbaijan, including the Talysh people, Lezgins, Avars, and others. The primary objective of the present article is to examine the underpinnings of Azerbaijan's policy towards indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, with a specific focus on the Kurdish case. In terms of timeframe, the authors specifically chose the period of the first republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1920). This decision is based on the recognition that, when investigating the ethnic policy of Azerbaijan within this timeframe, the researcher is not necessarily obligated to address whether Azerbaijan could pursue an independent policy separate from the center (Moscow). This specific question gains relevance in the subsequent 70 years, covering the Soviet period, but does not apply to the years 1918-1920. When examining the issue, priority was given to the historical-comparative method by the authors. Accordingly, in selecting the temporal starting point for the examination, the period when Turkism was in action as a viable ideology in Azerbaijan was deemed pivotal.

Keywords: Musavat, Kurds, post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Talysh people, ethnic policy, ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, Khosrov bey Sultanov, Koturly

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Introduction

The existing studies on the Kurds of the Eastern Transcaucasus (the main area of the present Republic of Azerbaijan) are predominantly focused on the Soviet period (Čursin 1925; Bukšpan 1932; Pčelina 1932; Vil'čevskij 1938; Miller 1956; Bakaev 1965; Aristova 1966; Müller 2000; Cavadov 2000: 135-166; Yilmaz 2014; Tonoyan & Misakyan 2022; etc.), with a lesser emphasis on the post-Soviet period (Evoyan 2014; Hamid 2020; etc.). From a purely field-oriented perspective, the conducted studies can be categorized into several groups, namely ethnographic (e.g., Chursin 1925; Aristova 1966; etc.), historical-political (Bukšpan 1932, Müller 2000; Yilmaz 2014), demographic (Müller 2000; Cavadov 2000), and linguistic (Vil'čevskij 1938; Miller 1956; Bakaev 1965).

This study aims to examine the policy of the first republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1920) towards the Kurds, elucidating its principal directions and features, and identifying the key factors that shaped this policy. This endeavor seeks to fill a gap in existing scholarly works and broaden the temporal scope within which, as previously noted, the exploration of this topic has been confined.

The reference to this topic appears relevant for filling the gap in scientific literature and addressing content propagated by certain directions of present-day Azerbaijani propaganda. Specifically, it challenges notions of purported historical and contemporary tolerance in Azerbaijan. This study aims to counter the false assertions that the rights of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples are invariably respected and protected in both past and current Azerbaijan, fostering a more objective discussion of the issue.

The examination of the mentioned problem and the study of its historical depth have perhaps become more relevant after the last Artsakh war in 2020 and the new military aggression, along with total ethnic cleansing, carried out by Azerbaijan against Artsakh in September 2023. In light of these new realities, where Armenians no longer inhabit Artsakh, the political elite of Azerbaijan persists in cultivating anti-Armenian sentiments within the country on the one hand while simultaneously engaging in diametrically opposite propaganda on the international stage. There are ongoing efforts to persuade the international community that Armenians can safely return to Artsakh and live there as an ethnic minority within Azerbaijan. In this context, it is crucial to comprehend Azerbaijan's ethnic policy through the case of the Kurds because historical experience can best illustrate Azerbaijan's approach to the non-Turcophones of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) and adjacent territories.

Turkism as a key element in the national policy of Musavat Azerbaijan

Representatives of the military-political elite of the first republic of Azerbaijan, proclaimed at the end of May 1918 as bearers of the ideology of Turkism or Turkic nationalism, endeavored to establish the dominance of Turkic narratives in the public and political domain of Azerbaijan from the very first days of the newly created republic. At the same time, the mentioned ideology was extensively employed in the nation-building process, which took place with active military-political support from the Ottoman Empire in that area characterized by a mixed ethnic composition. The military presence and supremacy of the Ottoman Empire in Musavat Azerbaijan manifested through the Islamic Army of the Caucasus (Hovhannisian 1982, 167), aimed not only to extend the borders of Ottoman Turkey's military and political influence, reaching the western and southern shores of the Caspian Sea and, subsequently, Central Asia, but also to conduct ideological engineering. The ultimate goal was to create a homogeneous society with a pan-Turkic identity in Musavat Azerbaijan. It should not be considered a coincidence that, when marching to Gandzak (Ganja) and then to Baku, the commander of the Islamic army of the Caucasus, Nuri Pasha, and the rest were accompanied by Ahmed Aghaoglu, a well-known ideologue of pan-Turkism, serving as an adviser (Shissler 2002, 163-164).

In general, the policy of Musavat Azerbaijan towards non-Turkic peoples was based on the following two components specific to the Ottoman Empire at the end of its history:

− In the case of non-Turkic Muslims, their assimilation and integration into the dominant "Turkic element"

− In the case of non-Muslims, particularly Christian Armenians, ethnic cleansing and displacement[1].

Consequently, to understand the policy of Musavat Azerbaijan towards the Kurds, as a starting point, we must accept the realities listed above. It is also an important circumstance that, although certain Kurdish figures held particularly influential positions in the military-political elite of Musavat Azerbaijan, such as Prime Minister Fatali Khan Khoyski, Minister of Defense Khosrov bey Sultanov, Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Nurmammad bey Shahsuvarov, and others (Hamid 2020), and occupied high positions, it was due to their ideological orientation as carriers of the pan-Turkic ideology[2]. The facts supporting this

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[1] As an example, see the Armenian massacres in Baku in September 1918 (Kazemzadeh 1951, 143-144).

[2] In general, the reports and opinions of the British military, diplomats and politicians are extremely interesting regarding the moods and orientations of the military-political elite,

assertion include the rise of Khosrov bey Sultanov, a figure of Kurdish origin, to the position of Minister of Defence, and subsequently, his harsh policies towards the Kurdish population residing in the southern parts of the former Elizavetpol' guberniya (province). Musavat Azerbaijan's military sphere fell under the Ottoman Empire's control from its inception. In essence, the Islamic Army of the Caucasus, led by Nuri Pasha, a relative of Enver Pasha, played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Azerbaijani army. Consequently, the individual occupying the position of the military minister in Musavat Azerbaijan was expected to align with the standards required for the Caucasian policy of Ottoman Turkey, including in the ideological plan.

In this regard, interesting parallels can also be found in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, particularly during the administrations of Heydar and Ilham Aliyev, when several Kurdish figures, including Beylar Ayyubov, Kammaladdin Heydarov, Vasif Talibov, Ramiz Mehdiyev, Rovnag Abdullayev, and others, held high government positions (Evoyan 2014, 99-100; 103-104). However, this did not in any way prevent the discriminatory policy towards the Kurdish population or the reduction of their numbers.

The geographic distribution and demographics of Kurds during the Musavat rule

During the period of Musavat rule, Kurds primarily inhabited two main areas: Nakhijevan and the Ałahēčk district of the historical Armenian province Siwnik (Syunik), along with the adjacent areas extending up to the Araks valley. In other words, this pertains to the region stretching from Berdzor (formerly Soviet Lachin) to (V)orotan (formerly Soviet Kubatlu), where Kurds primarily settled after the Russo-Persian wars of 1804-1813 and 1826-1828 (Aver'janov 1900, 24; Aristova 1966, 36-37; etc.). From 1918 through 1920, Musavat Azerbaijan, with active support from Britain, sought to establish control over this area and rely wholly on Artsakh. After the wars mentioned above, the Kurdish tribes, whose main occupation was nomadic cattle breeding, moved to Ałahēčk and

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formed mainly from the large landowners of Azerbaijan, in the region under investigation. The following words of Earl Curzon, which he said while discussing the Caucasus during the meeting of the Eastern Committee on December 2, 1918, are noteworthy: "*The difficulty about the Government of Azerbaijan at the moment is this, that it is violently pro-Turk, violently anti-Armenian, violently anti-Persian, - in fact, it is everything we do not want it to be. The Government is in the hands of the Tatar land-owners who hate Armenians with a deadly hatred, hate the Bolsheviks equally well, and, for racial and selfish reasons, are inclined towards the Turks. The aspirations of this small State of Azerbaijan are for recognition, which we have never yet given, and for the expansion to the South*" (Hovhannisian 1982, 175-176, cit. no. 16).

predominantly settled in the villages of Zerti, Minkend, Bozlu, Kamally, Kalacha, Cherakhly, Agjakend [I], Karakeshish, Ag-Bulakh, Sheilanly, Katos bina, Chai bina, Shurtan, Soiukh-Bulakh, Zailik, Agjakend [II], Orujlu, Khalanly, located in the Berdzor (former Lachin) and Karvachar (former Kelbajar) districts (Bukšpan 1932, 62-63; Müller 2000, 55-56). According to data published by Aristova in the later years of the USSR, particularly in the 1960s, Kurds established in the historical Ałahēčk□ were Shia Muslims. They resided in 20 villages, some of which had heterogeneous populations by the 1960s, as Azerbaijanis lived alongside Kurds (Aristova 1966, see Table 1).

Table 1. Settlements of Kurds established in historical Ałahēčk□ and neighboring areas as of 1950-1960 (Aristova 1966, 64)

Region	Village
K□arvačar□ (former Kelbajar)	Lower Shurtan
	Middle Shurtan
	Upper Shurtan
	Zailik
	Agjakend
	Orujlu
Berjor (former Lačin)	Minkend
	Karakeshish
	Kamally
	Bozlu
	Kalacha
	Cherakhly
	Upper Zerti
	Lower Zerti
Orotan (former Kubatly)	Zilanly
	Selali
	Mirzakverdli
	Kürdmahruzlu
	Lower Mollu
	Upper Mollu

While there is no clear information about the number of Kurds during the years of the first republic of Azerbaijan, the Soviet agricultural census of 1921, the closest available data in terms of time, recorded 29,741 Kurds across the entire country (Müller 2000, 47; Harutyunyan 2023a, 72). Their primary area of residence was mostly the territory of the later so-called "Red Kurdistan" (1923-1929). According to the census data, the number of Kurds in the Jevanshir uezd was 14,682 (17.3%), in Kubatli uezd 13,994 (35.4%), in Karyagin (Jabrayil) uezd 571 (≈ 0.8%), in Aghdash uezd 413 (≈ 0.8%), and in Shushi uezd 81, which accounted for about 0.1 percent of the entire population of this county (Müller 2000, 46-47).

In addition to the agricultural census data of 1921, the number of Kurds in the territory known as "Red Kurdistan" exceeded 35,000 by 1924, constituting 80.7% of the population of that area (Čursin 1925, 2; Müller 2000, 50). Furthermore, according to Čursin, who conducted on-site field research, only half of the 35,000 Shia Kurds were proficient in their mother tongue, Kurdish (Čursin 1925, 2).

Thus, based on statistical data recorded during the years 1921-1924, it can be inferred that in the preceding years of 1918-1920, Kurds were primarily concentrated in the historical Armenian Aghahechq and its adjacent areas, which were temporarily under the control of Musavat Azerbaijan with British support. During the period under examination, the number of Kurds should not have differed significantly from the figures of 1921-1924 and is estimated to have ranged from approximately 25,000 to 30,000.

The problem of primary sources
In general, understanding and describing Musavat Azerbaijan's policy towards indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, specifically the Kurds, is challenging due to the lack of necessary sources. In this context, the works of researchers who conducted fieldwork in the areas where these peoples, particularly the Kurds, resided in the early years after the establishment of the Soviet order in the Caucasus are crucial sources. These works (Čursin 1925; Sysoev 1927; Bukšpan 1932; Pčelina 1932; etc.) are important for two reasons. Firstly, they are temporally close to the Musavat period, and secondly, they offer insights into various issues (especially Bukšpan 1932), reflecting the memories of the local Kurdish population regarding the realities of the Musavat period.

D. Müller acknowledges the fact that Musavat's policy towards the Kurds is known to us mainly through Bukshpan's work published in 1932; however, he deems this work a "problematic source" (Müller 2000, 46). Notably, Müller does not provide any explanation as to why Bukshpan's book should be considered problematic. It could be related to Bukshpan being a Soviet author, coupled with

the fact that, in the early 1930s, the so-called "counter-revolutionary" discourse still held sway in the political life of the Soviet Union. This circumstance could influence the subjective nature of Bukshpan's information regarding Musavat's discriminatory and assimilatory policy towards the Kurds. Nevertheless, whether through the analysis of statistical data from 1921-1924 or comparison with the information provided by others (such as Steklov), there is reason to believe that Bukshpan was relatively objective in the information he presented. While the author may have adopted a somewhat harsh tone in describing the events, this does not cast doubt on the reliability of this valuable source.

Accordingly, an attempt has been made below to present the policies of Musavat functionaries toward the Kurds in three directions (tax-economic and legal policy, military conscription policy, and language policy).

Tax-economic and legal policy

In his 1932 work, Bukshpan reported remarkably significant information about Musavat Azerbaijan's tax policy, alongside systematic looting and captures, and gross violations of property rights towards the Kurds, citing as a source the stories he had heard from the local Kurdish population who had survived the Musavat period. In particular, according to the mentioned author, the tax and legal policies of Musavat towards the Kurds became severe and particularly cruel, especially when Khosrov bey Sultanov, the first military minister of the first republic of Azerbaijan (May-June 1918), was appointed the temporary governor-general of Artsakh and Zangezur in January 1919 with the consent of the command of the British South Caucasus Army, particularly Lieutenant General Sir William Montgomerie Thomson.

Although Khosrov bey Sultanov was born into a Kurdish family in the Qurddağı village of the Berdzor (former Lachin) district, ideologically he aligned with the group of Turkish nationalists. In 1917, he became a member of the Musavat party and later joined the Ittihad party with an Islamic ideological base.

Bukshpan's reports on the tax policy implemented by Khosrov bey Sultanov towards the Kurds make it evident that he and the beks of Koturly, who enjoyed his patronage, not only imposed heavy taxes but also engaged in brutal looting in the Kurdish villages. In this regard, Bukshpan particularly notes: "The [Kurdish] population of Lachin and Kubatli was in economic slavery imposed by the Sultanovs and subjected to unprecedented pressures. These were manifested not only by heavy taxes and various obligations but also by the inhuman cruelties of wild parties and violence, including the right of the first night" (Bukšpan 1932, 27).

According to Steklov, the tax policy of the Sultanovs led to extreme dissatisfaction among the Kurds. The already heavy tax burden they bore during

the years of the first republic of Azerbaijan was further compounded by new types of taxes with the direct participation of the Sultanov clan (Steklov 1928, 40).

Based on stories heard from the Kurdish population, Bukshpan provides valuable information about the violence and murders committed by the Sultanovs against the Kurds: "The peasantry of Kelbajar and Lachin still cannot calmly pronounce the names of their former oppressors. We were given endless examples of illegal confiscations, robberies, violence, mass mutilations, and murders carried out by the Sultanovs during their rule in Kurdistan" (Bukšpan 1932, 27).

In continuation, the same author notes: "The taxes paid to Sultanov are soaked with the sweat and blood of Kurdish villagers. Even now, one can still meet people who were beaten almost to death [by the Sultanovs]" (Bukšpan 1932, 27-28).

Bukshpan reported that during the brief period of Musavat's rule, the Kurds faced economic and political pressures unprecedented even in the darkest times of their history (Bukšpan 1932, 68).

As mentioned above, Kurdish villages were also affected by the attacks of the Koturly beks, who were affiliated with the Sultanovs and encouraged by them. These attacks were much more destructive and cruel compared to the gangs operating directly under the authority of the Sultanovs. According to information published by Bukshpan, when the Koturly begs detachments entered Kurdish villages, residents were compelled to flee. Only a few villages attempted armed resistance, though often unsuccessfully (Bukšpan 1932, 71). Furthermore, men who were captured faced forced labor supervised by escort guards. This labor was unpaid and was accompanied by whipping. The captive Kurds were required to provide their own food (Bukšpan 1932, 71).

During the attacks orchestrated by the gangs sent by Musavat authorities, members of the Kurdish tribes endured indescribable terror and witnessed the shootings and murders of their fellow villagers. Villagers reported that after the shootings, the Koturly bandits demanded payment from the villagers for the spent bullets. Refusal by the villagers led to the confiscation of property and completes looting. Those who resisted, and especially those who managed to organize mass resistance, were brutally killed by Musavat gangs. Simultaneously, such incidents served as convenient pretexts for organizing new bloodshed against the Kurds (Bukšpan 1932, 71-72).

Bukshpan reported that for every bey killed due to Kurdish resistance, entire Kurdish tribes faced extermination, and people related to them by blood were forced to leave their native settlements and flee (Bukšpan 1932, 72).

Bukshpan, rightly attributing the atrocities against the Kurds during the years 1918-1920 to the direct patronage of Musavat authorities, notes in this regard: "The

conquest, accompanied by bloodshed, looting, and subjugation of the Kurdish population in Lachin and Kubatlu districts by the Sultanov Beks, also served as inspiration for the Musavat gangs of Koturly, propelling them toward new atrocities. These acts were carried out with the direct patronage and permission of the central Musavat authorities" (Bukšpan 1932, 72).

Military conscription and "Cossackization" policy

According to Bukshpan, on the way to solving the problems of its adopted "national policy", Azerbaijan decided to use the Kurds as "cannon fodder" in the fight against its neighbors and at the same time solve the so-called "Kurdish issue" (Bukšpan 68-69). In this context, Steklov's information is particularly interesting regarding the "Cossackization" of the Kurds, coupled with attacks and looting of Kurdish villages by Musavat groups. Steklov elucidates the policy's objectives: "As a barrier against potential encroachments by Armenian allies on Karabakh through Armenia, the Ministry of Defense is developing a project to create "Azerbaijani Cossack regiments" from the Kurdish population of Karabakh. According to this plan, following the established military conscription law for the Kurds, they are to serve in Kurdish units situated in the Zangezur region" (Steklov 1928, 43).

It should be mentioned that according to the project developed by the Musavat regime, a Kurdish infantry battalion of 400 people was established as part of the Azerbaijani army's infantry division, along with a mounted battalion of 200 people as part of the cavalry division (Steklov 1928, 43). Compulsory military service was set at 2 years, and the regulations stipulated for the Kurds stated that, during times of war, Kurdish battalions could be deployed to the borders of Karabakh (Steklov 1928, 43-44).

In addition, at the military academy in Baku, a "Kurdish" department was established to train 20 cadets. The organization of these "Kurdish" troops began in late October 1919 but was not completed by the time Sovietization occurred the following April (Müller 2000, 46).

The hostile stance of Musavat Azerbaijan's military elite towards the Kurds is further evident in the approved order, which stipulated that a Kurd conscripted into the army must present himself with a suitable outfit, weapons, and necessary soldier accessories. Additionally, a Kurd assigned to the cavalry division should, beyond the mentioned requirements, possess a suitable horse and the necessary accessories for the horse. Furthermore, the responsibility for the suitability of all military equipment and accessories rests with the Kurdish community, tribe, or family to which the infantryman or rider belongs. The tribe or family of the Kurdish soldier should bear the cost of replacing any accessories deemed unsuitable by the receiving committee (Steklov 1928, 43-45).

In general, the policy of the leaders of Musavat Azerbaijan to create armed detachments from Kurds and use them against Armenians is typologically very similar to the policy of Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II towards Armenians and Kurds. This similarity is particularly evident in the creation of Kurdish armed squads called "Hamidieh" in 1890 and their use against Armenians. The goal behind this strategy was threefold: to undermine the rapprochement of Armenian-Kurdish relations, to assimilate the Kurds into the state by weakening their strong tribal system, and ultimately, to deploy the Kurds against the Armenian liberation movement (Baibourtian 2013, 139-148; Astourian 2021, 28). Regarding the last point, V. Minorsky also expressed the same opinion, stating: "*The Turks chose the Kurds as a crude instrument to counteract the Armenian national movement*" (Minorsky 1915, 11, apud. (Baibourtian 2013, 142).

Language Policy

Thanks to Bukshpan's valuable work, the information we have about Musavat Azerbaijan's language policy towards the Kurds further confirms that within the framework of its "national policy", this state initially employed all possible means to oppress the Kurds and eventually sought to assimilate them. The language policy of Musavat rule towards the Kurds did not differ in content and nature from the political line discussed in the preceding sections related to tax-economic and legal policy, as well as the military conscription and "Cossackization" policy. Thus, Bukshpan described in detail the situation in which the Kurdish language began to be gradually pushed out of use during the rule of the Musavats, becoming a marginal and so-called "closed" language, the scope of which was narrowed and limited only within the walls of the house: "Alongside the atrocities and persecutions against the Kurdish language, and Kurds, in general, became objects of ridicule. Musavat functionaries regarded Kurds with mockery and scorn, gradually influencing sentiments among the particularly backward population of the area. During this period, vows to renounce the Kurdish language became common, as Kurdish was a subject of irony, jokes, and mocking names (for example, kır-vır, kıra-vıra, etc.). We documented numerous instances where Kurds collectively vowed to abandon their mother tongue throughout entire villages, such as the village of Kamally in the Lachin region" (Bukšpan 1932, 72).

The persistent targeting of the Kurdish language, the cornerstone of the ethnic identity of the Kurdish people, by the Musavatists hastened the process of assimilation and "turcization" of the Kurds (Bukšpan 1932, 72-73). However, the Musavat government of Azerbaijan was not satisfied with this alone. By force of the law, a "legal provision" was established, declaring "Turkish" as a "dominant language" and categorizing it as an "open language" (Turk. açık dil). This implied

that the Kurdish language itself became a "closed language", intended only for usage and contact within the walls of one's own home, and communication in public places was to be carried out only in the "open language", i.e., "Turkish" (Bukšpan 1932, 72).

In this context, the fact that the first statistical bulletins concerning Azerbaijan during the Soviet period shows a continuous decrease in the number of those who know the Kurdish language and consider it their mother tongue is not at all accidental. Thus, if according to the data of 1924, only half of the 35,000 Kurds of the Kurdistan region knew Kurdish (Čursin 1925, 2), that is, about 17,500 people, then according to the data of the first Soviet census of 1926, only 16.5% (6808 people) of Kurds registered in Azerbaijan stated Kurdish as their mother tongue. The remaining Kurds indicated "Turkish" as their native language (Müller 2000, 51). Judging by the picture reflected in the statistical data, the process of language decline, which started as a result of the language policy carried out by the Musavat, particularly the "de-prestigeization" of the Kurdish language, did not stop after the establishment of the Soviet order and, as a result, greatly affected the change in the ethnic identity of the local Kurds.

On the Turkish influence on Musavat policy towards the Kurds

The Turkish approach to the Kurdish question, under whose ideological and military influence the first republic of Azerbaijan operated from its inception, significantly impacted Musavat Azerbaijan's policies towards the Kurds. In this context, it is crucial to note that, despite the Ottoman Empire actively utilizing Kurds in the conflict against Armenians within its territory since 1890, it also grappled with the challenge of addressing the Kurdish question itself. Kurdish nationalism, which intensified in the late 19th century, emerged as a significant threat to the Turks, particularly towards the end of the First World War and thereafter. The arming of the Kurds and their use against the Armenians was motivated by specific promises, which stipulated the granting of autonomy to the Kurds in the concentrated areas of Armenians once the Armenian question was resolved with the involvement of the Kurds. Therefore, at the moment when the first republic of Azerbaijan was being established, it became almost evident to the Kurds that the Turks had no intention of granting autonomy or status to them. It is not coincidental that the timeframe spanning from the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 3, 1918) to the Armistice of Mudros (October 30, 1918), and subsequently to the opening of the Paris Peace Conference (on January 18, 1919), aligned with the emergence of Kurdish nationalist movements and marked a new phase in the struggle for autonomy and independence (Baibourtian 2013, 207-270).

After the conclusion of the First World War, Turkish authorities grew more sensitive to the Kurdish question, and these sentiments were also conveyed to their ideological followers who held sway in Azerbaijan, within the Musavat political elite.

Therefore, the policy of the Musavat authorities towards the Kurds has typologically repeated the Kurdish policy of the pan-Turkic authorities of Turkey. This involved, firstly, arming the Kurds and using them against the Armenians. In the second phase, it entailed oppressing and persecuting the Kurds to solve the Kurdish question.

Parallel with the post-Soviet Azerbaijan's ethnic policy

The ethnic policy of post-Soviet Azerbaijan has many similarities with the policy of Musavat Azerbaijan towards the Kurds. It is noteworthy that, according to the first post-Soviet census conducted in Azerbaijan in 1999, the number of Kurds was reported as 13,100 (Junusov 2001). However, in the second census in 2009, this figure dropped to 6065 (PSEE 2009), and in the third census in 2019, it further decreased to 4,000 (Azadlıq 2023). In other words, based on the official census data of Azerbaijan, the number of Kurds in the country declined by more than 300% between 1999 and 2019.

Furthermore, it should be noted that this decrease occurred despite overall population growth in Azerbaijan. According to state census data, the entire population increased by more than 2 million, representing over 25% growth, from approximately 7.9 million in 1999 to 10 million in 2019. This emphasizes the significant and disproportionate decline in the number of Kurds within the context of the overall population growth during the same period.

Although the same tax code applies to all peoples in post-Soviet Azerbaijan and the legislative and legal acts are the same for all, in the northern, i.e., Lezgian and southern, i.e., Talysh-inhabited zones, such a policy is conducted that does not allow the development of these areas and forces the residents, in particular Lezgi and Talysh peoples, either to emigrate or to enter the contract military service in the armed forces of Azerbaijan due to domestic needs. Naturally, in the case of emigration, the specific weight of these peoples in the proportion of the population of Azerbaijan weakens, and in the case of contractual military service, they become "cannon fodder" on the borders of Artsakh and Armenia, like the Kurds in Musavat Azerbaijan. In all the wars with the participation of Azerbaijan in the post-Soviet period, but especially in 2016 and after, the geography of the conscription places of the majority of those killed is proof of this reality.

According to statistical surveys among the Talysh people and interviews with national figures advocating for their rights, 7,500 Talysh were deployed to the

front during the first Artsakh war (Diyarmirza 2021; Khabarfarsi 2021). Both the first Artsakh war (1991-1994) and the second 44-day war in 2020 resulted in at least 1,000 Talysh casualties each (Diyarmirza 2021; Khabarfarsi 2021). Interestingly, based on the lists provided by the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan, the number of Azerbaijani casualties during the 44-day war was approximately 2900 (MDRA 2021). This implies that over 34 percent of the Azerbaijani casualties were Talysh. In contrast, according to the official census data in 2019, Talysh people constituted only 0.88% of Azerbaijan's population, i.e. 87,508 people (Turan 2023).

In terms of language policy, "Turkish" has been called the state language both in Musavat Azerbaijan and post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Both in Musavat Azerbaijan's Declaration on the State Language of Azerbaijan and in the Law on Language adopted in post-Soviet Azerbaijan in 1992, "Turkish" is mentioned as the name of the state language [3], which in both cases showed the desire to give priority to the ideology and principles of Turkism in the matter of national policy and the unfriendly and hostile attitude towards the identity and language of other non-Turkic-speaking peoples living in Azerbaijan.

There are many cases when the representatives of Talysh people in post-Soviet Azerbaijan were targeted not only for speaking in Talysh language but also for not hiding or not being able to hide the accent and intonation specific to Talysh language when speaking in Azerbaijani.[4]

As in the case of the Kurds in Musavat Azerbaijan, as well as in the case of the representatives of Talysh people in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, attempts have been made, and are currently being made, deliberately with the encouragement of central authorities to target the Talysh language and the Talysh people as objects of ridicule.

Finally, like the Kurds in Musavat Azerbaijan, as well as all the Iranian-speaking (Talyshes, Tats, and Kurds), Lezgi-speaking, and Avar-speaking peoples in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, they are deprived of the basic rights to receive proper

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[3] For details, see Garibova 2009, 15-16.
[4] For example, on January 9, 2015, a young man of Talysh origin from Astara participated in the program "Among the People" (Turk. "Adam içində") on the Azerbaijani channel ANS. Lacking singing talent, he received justified criticism from the jury. This seemingly ordinary event took an unexpected turn when one of the jury members, Khalida Akhmedova, asked the participant about his origin, and then with a piece of chewing gum in her mouth, she bluntly told him: "Go, son, first clean your mouth of the Talysh accent, then come" (Iskandari 2015).

general education in their mother tongue and to have radio, newspapers, and television.[5]

Conclusion

Summarizing the policy of Musavat Azerbaijan towards the Kurds and comparing it with the policy towards the Iranophone and Caucasian peoples living in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, the following commonalities can be noted:

- The policy conducted in Azerbaijan towards non-Turkic peoples has a lot to do with the dominant ideology in that area, particularly with the actions imposed by Turkism.
- Both in Musavat Azerbaijan and different parts of the history of post-Soviet Azerbaijan (1991-1994 and from 2016 to the present day), Turkism, as a dominant ideology, had supremacy in the political system, which is due to the intensification of the policy of oppression, assimilation and "Cossackization" towards the non-Turcophone Muslims.
- The struggle and wars against Artsakh and Armenia were and are of significant importance for Azerbaijan in terms of getting rid of other peoples and reducing their number in the proportional composition of the population, and this is evident from the features of the politics of both the Musavat and post-Soviet periods of Azerbaijan.

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[5] For details, and especially for the Talysh case, see the Alternative report on implementation of Council of Europe Framework Convention on Protection of National Minorities, prepared by the Public Council of the Talysh People in Azerbaijan. The mentioned alternative report accused the government of assimilatory policies, violation of educational and language rights, and the arrest, prosecution and murder of minority rights activists (*An alternative report prepared by the Public Council of the Talysh People in Azerbaijan on implementation of the CE Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in the Republic of Azerbaijan for the protection of Talysh people, covering the period of 2016 – 2021 years*, Baku, 2021, 5-15. https://www.irfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/An-alternative-report.pdf). For legal problems concerning the ethnic minorities of Azerbaijan, see also the recent study by the Baku Research Institute (Gayibov 2023)

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THE IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISM, APPLICATION, AND DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS OF TURKEY'S DRONE STRATEGY[**]

Abstract: *Drones possess precise intelligence gathering, casualty avoidance, and remote strikes as an emerging strategic technology. With the rapid development of functionality and application modes, drones have become a new focal point in international military competition. In recent years, the operational contributions of Turkish drones in multiple battles have attracted global attention. This article examines the background formation, implementation mechanisms, and further prospects of Turkey's drone strategy to understand the complex factors behind the particular development patterns. This article adopts the analytic hierarchy process and draws on current literature and case studies, analyzing multiple perspectives of Turkey's drone strategy from two hierarchical levels: domestic politics and international environments. As a latecomer, Turkey has made significant strategic achievements in the field of drones. The analysis of Turkey's strategic planning and practices in domestic and international arenas in different periods hold a certain degree of reference for drone development both in China and in the international society.*

Keywords: *Turkey, Unmanned Aircraft System, Drone Strategy, Reconnaissance and Strike Integrated Drones.*

Introduction

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, are military aircraft controlled remotely or autonomously through navigation systems. They are equipped with sensors, target detection devices, offensive ammunition, and electronic emitters used for reconnaissance, disruption, and destruction of military targets. Drones are not limited by the safety requirements imposed on manned systems and therefore have greater range and endurance, allowing them to perform

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military missions in hazardous environments. The key characteristics of drones include remote control, reusability, and deployment and takeoff in various ways, such as flight runways, catapults, or vertical takeoff and landing. Most drones are operated and monitored through ground control stations, forming a comprehensive unmanned aircraft system (UAS). In history, the British Royal Air Force conducted the first test of a small radio-controlled aircraft in 1917 and then developed the DH82 Queen Bee drone during World War II as a gunnery training target. The United States used drones as aerial decoys and for psychological warfare leaflet drops during the Vietnam War, marking the first operational deployment of drones (Sprengel, 2021). After the Vietnam War, countries such as the Soviet Union and Israel began exploring drone technology. In 1982, Israel shocked the world by using drones in conjunction with fighter jets to successfully destroy 19 Syrian anti-aircraft missile sites without any casualties during the Bekaa Valley War (Prisacariu, 2017). In 1991, the Allied forces achieved success in using drones to target attack objectives during Operation Desert Storm. In the 21st century, drones have evolved from being used for the single function of target practice, reconnaissance, or communication into Reconnaissance and Strike Integrated systems. Major technologically advanced countries consider drones a priority in military development, constantly innovating and investing in research and development.

The military strategy of Turkey has always been driven by geopolitical interests. Traditionally, it had a trust deficit in dealing with great power competition and has been influenced by its past imperial history. In such a strategic scenario, Turkey has experienced a series of regional security events since the end of the Cold War, including the Iraq War, the Syrian Crisis, the Libyan War, and the Kurdish issue, which have triggered a stronger sense of independence in Turkey's political mentality. Since the ruling Justice and Development Party, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, came to power in 2002, Turkey's ambitions in geopolitics and military modernization have converged into a more autonomous military strategy and defense industry development. Among them, the drone program, initiated in the mid-1990s, has become an indicator of strategic practice. It is mainly based on two types of developments: the transformation of military conflict patterns and the evolving perspective on weapon development. These factors are the driving force behind the drone strategy of Turkey, shaping the substantial progress of industrial manufacturing and military fields through a continuous feedback loop. This article analyzes the historical background and development mechanisms of Turkey's drone strategy, presents an overall picture of the drone strategy at the two levels of analysis, domestic and international, and also explores the development prospects of Turkey's drone strategy.

Development Background of Turkey's Drone Strategy
Domestic Level-Proxy Warfare in Military Conflicts and the Techno-nationalism of the Defense Industry

In the past 20 years, Turkey has conducted multiple military strikes against targets both inside and outside borders, establishing a model of using proxy forces for military actions (Outzen, 2021). This strategy has been implemented in two strategic fields: within Turkish territory, the focus of strikes has been on the southeastern border region, against the fighters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK). Under the authority of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (Milli Istihbarat Teskilati, MIT), a special department operates as a quasi-military unit and carries out targeted attacks against PKK militias (Stein, 2022). Outside of borders, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and MIT have successively organized and trained local pro-Turkish militias in neighboring countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Libya. These proxy forces serve the interests of Turkey as surrogate military units. The two types of proxy strategies face different challenges. First, PKK armed personnel are stationed in mountainous areas with complex terrain, posing high difficulties for reconnaissance. Second, the use of overseas proxy forces raises issues of loyalty and controversies concerning international humanitarian law. The capture or killing of proxy personnel in conflicts often affects the domestic public's perception of supporting military operations. These challenges have become the driving force behind the adoption of drone applications (Çevik, 2022). Since 2010, Turkey has extensively employed drones in military operations, leading to significant strategic achievements. For instance, between 2018 and 2020, Turkey conducted "Operation Olive Branch" and "Operation Spring Shield" in Syria. In 2018, a joint operation by the TAF and MIT saw the successful destruction of the convoy of PKK leader Ismail Ozden by the Bayraktar TB2, becoming a noteworthy example of drones executing precise "surgical strike" operations (Duz, 2020).

The profound conceptual factors influencing the drone strategy behind military operations reflect Turkey's pursuit of core technological autonomy, embodying the theory of techno-nationalism proposed by Robert Reich. According to Reich (1987), technology is a fundamental premise for national security, and a country should adopt a nationalist approach, striving for self-reliance in the field of cutting-edge technology without excessive dependence on external markets. Regarding military strategy, Turkey is fully aware of the necessity of its military-industrial complex to lead the production of key weapon systems. In response to practical needs for maintaining territorial integrity and the security landscape of surrounding areas, Turkey has gradually established one of its niche capabilities in indigenous weapons☐ the domestically produced drones. As a symbol of domestic

defense technology, drones provide Turkey with geopolitical maneuverability. Furthermore, Turkey has established techno-geopolitical ecosystems centered on drones by exporting technology to neighboring countries (Kasapoğlu, 2022). Due to the deterioration of relations with Western countries, especially the USA, the options for purchasing weapons from abroad have become limited. Consequently, Turkey has accelerated its efforts in the domestic defense industry (Hovsepyan, 2022). In the context of drone strategy, this reflects additional issues from an international perspective.

International Level-Historical Background of Technological Constraints and the Mutual Construction Dynamic of Middle Power Subjectivity

In the late 1980s, Turkey initiated foreign procurement of drones, following the global trend. The Meggitt BTT-3 Banshee, imported from the United Kingdom, was first used by the TAF in 1989. The main supplier countries during Turkey's drone procurement period were the United States and Israel. In 1995, Turkey purchased the Gnat 750 and I Gnat drones from General Atomics of the US, which remained the backbone of the TAF until 2005 (Kahvecioglu, 2014). In 1999, Turkey acquired 108 IAI Harpy drones from Israel. Starting in 2007, Turkey began leasing Israeli-made Heron, Searcher, and Dominator drones. In 2010, the Turkish Air Force purchased 10 Heron drones for $150 million. The deployment of Heron drones stimulated the development of the domestic drone industry (Kamaras, 2021). Turkish private enterprises developed supporting subsystems for the Heron platform. For example, ASELSAN developed electro-optical targeting systems, SAVRONIK built satellite ground terminals, and MİLSOFT created remote image evaluation systems (Vargemezis, 2017). However, the acquisition of the Heron drones encountered various setbacks, highlighting the deteriorating bilateral diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel since the beginning of this century. In response to Israel's military operation in the 2008 Gaza War, Turkey froze its military procurement deals with Israel in 2009. After the Gaza flotilla raid in 2010, Turkey excluded Israel from participating in the "Anatolian Eagle" Air Force exercise that year and the subsequent joint training, resulting in delays in the delivery and maintenance of the Heron drones. In 2018, Turkish Defense Minister Nurettin Canikli accused Israel of deliberately selling defective Heron drones, rendering them ineffective for Turkish use. This issue became a major vulnerability in multiple failed campaigns targeting the PKK (Middle East Monitor, 2018).

In 2008, Turkey expressed its intention to purchase high-end drones, namely General Atomics' MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper, from the US to enhance its efforts against the PKK. However, Turkey held divergent views from the US on the Iranian nuclear issue, and the US aimed to avoid retaliation from the PKK in its

military operations in Iraq (Zanotti, 2011). Consequently, the US Congress vetoed the deal in 2014. In summary, the unstable relationship between Turkey and Western drone powers became a significant obstacle to Turkey's acquisition of advanced drones. However, it also served as an external motivator for Turkey's determination to pursue independent development and aspire to become a drone power.

On the other hand, Turkey is generally regarded as a "middle power" in the context of international politics. In the military field, Turkey has a conventional armed force of 450,000 personnel (CIA, 2023), making it the second-largest force within NATO. Yalçın (2012) argues that the country's potential for military development positions it as a regional hegemon and represents a significant characteristic of Turkey as a middle-power state actor. In terms of technology, middle powers tend to concentrate limited resources on expertized industries. Although they may not lead in cutting-edge research and innovation like superpowers, they can shape niche networks through existing specialization and transnational supply chains (Kim, 2021). Furthermore, superpowers, being indisputable technological leaders with access to resources that other countries cannot obtain, are often incapable of providing effective references and paths for many developing countries seeking basic technologies. This role is often filled by middle powers that offer a balance between cost-effectiveness and practical needs. Turkey's status as a middle power, as it pertains to the realm of international politics and its material capabilities, strongly manifests itself in the trajectory of drone development, both at the national and international levels.

Implementation Path of Turkey's Drone Strategy

Driven by government policies, resource allocation, and the demands of actual combat drones, this has become a core development project in the Turkish defense industry. At the domestic level, major aerospace enterprises effectively provide new models that support military planning. At the international level, Turkish drones have emerged as a new option in the global drone market, extending beyond traditional military powers.

Domestic Level-Development Process of Drones and the National Strategy

Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) and Baykar Defense are prominent drone enterprises in Turkey. The former is responsible for producing the Anka and Aksungur drones, while the latter specializes in manufacturing the renowned Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı drones. Since 2004, TAI has been involved in the development of the Anka series of Medium-Altitude, Long-Endurance (MALE) drones. In 2010, they launched the Anka-A prototype, which has been used in

counter-PKK missions since 2015. Subsequently, these drones have demonstrated combat experience by participating in various cross-border operations. The Anka-A is equipped with smart munitions, has a payload of 250 kilograms, a flight endurance of 24 hours, and a maximum service ceiling of 30,000 feet. It is an integrated drone capable of executing Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) as well as conducting airstrikes (Duz, 2021). TAI has continued to develop advanced models following the unveiling of the prototype, including the High-Altitude Long-Endurance (HALE) Anka +A, the Anka Block A with an increased payload capacity, and the Anka-S equipped with satellite communication. In addition to the Anka series, TAI introduced the Aksungur in 2019, which is a large-scale drone. Aksungur can reach a maximum flight altitude of 40.000 feet and is equipped with sonar buoys, magnetic anomaly detectors, and synthetic aperture radar. It has a payload capacity of 750 kilograms and an endurance of 50 hours. It is positioned as the main drone for the Turkish Navy's maritime patrols and anti-submarine operations (Mevlütoğlu, 2020).

Baykar is Turkey's most prestigious drone manufacturer. It initially established its technical foundation by developing micro-drones. Baykar's unanimous achievement came in 2014 with the introduction of the TB2, the second-generation indigenous Turkish drone following the Anka series. As the tactical drone of the TAF, TB2 meets the needs of miniaturization, intelligence-gathering, and strike capabilities. It is equipped with precise positioning and long-range anti-tank missiles. The small radar cross-section makes it difficult to detect. TB2 has become a highly relied-upon anti-tank weapon. It has a payload of 650 kilograms, a flight endurance of 27 hours, and a service ceiling of 27,000 feet. Due to its relatively low cost, TB2 has been extensively used in military operations both domestically and internationally, carrying out tasks such as counter-terrorism, maritime reconnaissance, and targeted strikes abroad. Since its service entry in 2015, TB2 has accumulated over 350,000 flight hours. The excellent combat performance on the Middle Eastern battlefield has made TB2 the first Turkish drone to be exported (Sözübir, 2021). Following the TB2, Baykar introduced the Akıncı, a large-scale drone, in 2019, with a payload of up to 1350 kilograms. It is equipped with active phased array radar, an electronic warfare system, and missiles with a striking range of 250 kilometers. Its powerful attack capabilities are designed to target high-political value objects deep within enemy territory (Tapia, 2021). Additionally, Turkey's renowned drones include the Alpargu and Kargu, developed by STM for counterterrorism and asymmetric warfare. These miniaturized suicide drones, also known as "loitering munitions", are launched by operators using portable launchers. They are designed to track and engage mobile targets, either causing destruction or self-destructing upon impact (Kasapoğlu,

2021). *Table 1* shows the current models of Turkish indigenous drones in service, along with their main parameters.

Table 1: Turkey's active indigenous drones (Source: Gettinger, 2019)

Model	Maker	Type	service time	Quantity
SERÇE-1	Aselsan	micro	2018	500+
Kargu	STM	micro	2018	160+
Bayraktar TB2	Baykar	MALE/Tactical	2015	86
ANKA-S	TAI	MALE	2016	12+
Karayel	Vestel Defense	MALE/Tactical	2014	10

The Defense Industry Agency (Savunma Sanayii Başkanlığı, SSB) is the core institution responsible for managing military technology development and defense trade within the government. With Turkey's increasing influence in the global defense market, the defense industry has become a national strategic asset. Under the leadership of Erdoğan, the Defense Industry Agency has been directly supervised under the Presidential Office since December 2017, serving as a platform for coordinating relationships between state-owned and private enterprises, the TAF, and the political elites of the Justice and Development Party (Donelli, 2022). In 2011, the SSB and the TAF jointly issued the "UAV Roadmap 2011-2030", a development plan for the medium to long-term drone strategy. It was Turkey's first policy document regarding drone development and established strategic objectives to enhance capabilities and reduce dependence on foreign technology. In 2018, SSB published the "2018-2022 Sectoral Strategy Document" (2018-2022 Savunma Sanayii Sektörel Strateji Dokümanı), recognizing drones as one of the most critical technological sectors in the 21st century. Turkey aims to achieve parity with the world's most advanced countries by engaging in technology exchange and personnel training. Turkey's goal is to position itself as export-oriented, create significant added value, and strive to exert influence in the global market.

International Level-The Rising Drone Power and the Drone Diplomacy
Currently, more than 90 state and non-state actors around the world possess drones, with 16 countries developing independently and exporting their systems (Ewers et al., 2017). The low cost, military demand, and demonstrated battlefield performances are the main factors contributing to the continuous expansion of Turkish drones in the global arms market. Turkey's arms exports rose from $634 million in 2010 to $3.22 billion in 2021, ranking it as the 12th largest arms

exporting country in the world (Erdemir, 2022). Drones alone account for nearly a quarter of this total. With the remarkable performance image in Nagorno-Karabakh and Russo-Ukrainian Wars, drone exports are expected to grow strongly and continuously in the coming years. The price–performance ratio of Turkish drones makes them particularly appealing to countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. The substantial combat experience of Turkey serves as a compelling "endorsement" for countries in these regions that have political authoritarian tendencies or face internal insurgencies.

Turkey's export-oriented approach to drones is also regarded as a manifestation of its state-led "drone diplomacy" strategy. Drone diplomacy was associated with the US in the past, which utilized drones deployed in military bases worldwide as a tool of deterrence and diplomatic leverage against countries that could potentially challenge the US and its allies, especially in the Middle East. The US showcased its dedication to safeguarding Israel's security interests through exchange and collaboration in the field of drones (Simons, 2011). For Turkey, the implementation of drone diplomacy involves establishing lucrative and enduring partnerships and strategic connections with recipient countries based on the provision of drones, ammunition, and technical assistance (Borsari, 2022). Alongside trade, Turkey has entered into military-industrial cooperation agreements with neighboring countries to construct a technical network for drone collaboration. Turkey and Ukraine have signed a joint production agreement for the TB2. Baykar and Ukrainian defense company Ukrspecexport formed a joint venture called "Black Sea Shield" to produce drone engines, thereby addressing Turkey's core technical bottleneck[1]. In 2022, Turkey began joint production of the Akıncı with Azerbaijan (Lapaiev, 2020). Drones have also become a diplomatic tool for Turkey's engagement in Africa. Through drone deals, Turkey has acquired concessions for oil exports and mining rights in Nigeria (Rossiter, 2020). Meeting war demands in Ethiopia and Morocco has established a new form of patronage network between the Turkish government and the leaders of these countries (Hansen, 2022). Drone diplomacy has solidified Turkey's economic and geopolitical interests in Africa. Ahmet Kasim Han highlighted that drones are no

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[1] The issue of drone engines remains a challenge that Turkey has yet to resolve. Ukrainian engines do not represent a definitive solution; they can only serve as an option for providing engines for large drones (Erdemir, 2022). Conversely, small drone engines remain a global concern and are currently manufactured by only a select number of countries. In October 2022, Turkish engine manufacturer TEI (TUSAŞ Engine Industries Inc.) announced the delivery of PD170 turbo-diesel aviation engines for the new generation of Bayraktar TB-3 drones, representing Turkey's first indigenous aviation engines to meet the power requirements of MALE drones (Dangwal, 2022).

longer just weapons systems for Turkey but are viewed as a source of national pride and an unmistakable symbol of the country's competence in managing internal and external affairs (Fahim, 2020).

Application Cases of Turkey's Drone Strategy

The applications discussed in this article are classified based on the actors involved in weapon usage. First, Turkish drone operations are based on national interests (internal/domestic level), which encompass domestic and international actions. Second, the utilization of Turkish drones as strategic tools in conflicts between other countries (external/international level). These applications correspond to the evolution of armed conflicts, spanning from counterterrorism and power games within a country to comprehensive interstate wars, reflecting the impact and significance of Turkish drones as crucial strategic assets.

Counterterrorism against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)

Established in 1978, the PKK aims to establish an independent state and is considered a terrorist organization and a major domestic security threat by Turkish authorities, leading to decades of armed conflict between the two sides. Due to the PKK's adeptness at utilizing the terrain for guerrilla warfare, the TAF had long relied on attack helicopters to combat them. However, a turning point occurred in 2016 when the PKK shot down a Cobra helicopter, resulting in fatalities among the personnel on board. Consequently, the authority decided to construct drone bases in eastern provinces and introduced Anka and TB2 to conduct reconnaissance and launch real-time attacks on PKK hideouts in the "field cleansing" operations (Eytan, 2020). Since the introduction of drones, the armed strength of the PKK has significantly weakened. Since 2016, the TAF has eliminated a total of 3,391 PKK militants, with 1,129 of them killed directly in drone attacks. The ratio of PKK members to Turkish military personnel killed in military conflicts has increased from 1.5:1 in 2016 to 10:1 in 2020 (Crisis Group, 2023). Due to the exceptional performance of drones in intelligence gathering, the US terminated its 10-year intelligence support to Turkey in targeting the PKK in 2020 (Pranger, 2021).

Military Operations Targeting Neighboring Countries

On March 1, 2020, Turkey initiated the "Spring Shield Operation" in Idlib, Syria, marking the first direct military confrontation involving drones between Turkey and another country. Facing the Assad regime forces supported by Iran and Russia, Turkey employed a significant number of TB2 in the so-called "swarm" tactics (Urcosta, 2021). In a complex battlefield with multiple targets, the reconnaissance systems of the drones swiftly identified the targets and initiated

strikes. Through the firepower unleashed by a fleet of 20 drones, severe damage was inflicted on the heavy weapons and ammunition depots of the Assad regime forces. Throughout the five-day operation, the drone fleet destroyed two SU-24 fighter jets, eight attack helicopters, 156 tanks, and ten Russian air defense systems, resulting in over 3,000 casualties among Syrian personnel (Crino, 2020). Instead of suppressing the enemy's overall air defense capability through intense and large-scale airstrikes, Turkish drones implemented a "drone blitz" strategy - initiating preemptive strikes on Syria's air defense systems, allowing for precise and targeted attacks. Faced with the conventionally armed Assad regime forces, Turkey achieved a significant strategic victory and leveraged an asymmetrical tactical advantage at a manageable cost (Frantzman, 2020). On the other hand, the Russian Pantsir missile defense system, utilized by the Assad regime forces, was previously regarded as an air defense weapon that even the US Air Force found challenging to penetrate. However, when faced with TB2 attacks, its defensive capabilities appeared relatively weak (Frantzman, 2020). The confrontation between Turkish drones and Russian air defense systems has continued beyond the Spring Shield Operation.

Interstate Warfare
The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched a war against the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, which continued until November 9. Azerbaijan utilized drones in combat operations, including the TB2, implementing tactics such as "Suppression of Enemy Air Defense" (SEAD) and "Find, Fix, Track, and Kill" (Postma, 2021). The drones were employed to launch decoys, enticing Armenian air defense systems and ground artillery to disclose their positions. The TB2 then launched smart munitions to engage and destroy a variety of ground targets. After 44 days of fighting, Azerbaijan achieved significant tactical victories, destroying nearly 200 tanks, 146 artillery pieces, and 42 air defense systems, causing more than 4,000 casualties and equipment losses worth over $1 billion on the Armenian side (Rubin, 2020). Turkish drones neutralized the renowned Russian S-300 air defense and the Repellent-1 anti-drone electronic warfare systems, marking another triumph for Turkish drones in the confrontation with Russian air defense systems. Azerbaijan's success on the battlefield is viewed as an entry into the era of the "dronization" of war (Kasapoğlu, 2021), where drones play a crucial role, especially in the early stages of the low-intensity combat operations before the severe ground fighting (Hecht, 2022). The low cost of drone warfare has increased the risks of armed conflicts worldwide. The technical capabilities of Turkish drones have garnered widespread attention from Western countries, prompting them to

take countermeasures. Shortly after the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Canada became the first country to cite civilian casualties caused by TB2, terminating the export of Electro-Optical/Infra-Red (EO/IR) imaging and targeting sensor systems used in TB2 to Turkey (Gallagher, 2020).

Russo-Ukrainian War

After the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022, Ukraine used drones, primarily the TB2, to counter the aggression of the Russian military. Strategically, Ukraine successfully accomplished the objective of deterring Russian forces, making it one of the few bright spots for the Ukrainian military on the battlefield and marking the first direct confrontation between Turkish drones and Russian conventional forces. Within the first four months of the conflict, Ukraine reported over 75 instances of successful TB2 missile launches against Russian tanks, artillery, and logistics trains crossing the eastern plains of Ukraine (Cagaptay, 2022). The drones' built-in imaging capabilities allowed for real-time visual evidence of the strikes' effectiveness. Videos of Russian forces under drone attacks were continuously disseminated worldwide via the internet, resulting in Ukraine's successful cognitive warfare beyond the physical battlefield. The TB2 gained significant attention when it assisted in locating the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the 'Moskva', which was sunk in battle. The TB2 helped to spot the exact location of the cruiser in the Black Sea and acted as decoys to disrupt the ship's search radar during the attack, enabling two R-360 Neptune anti-ship missiles to hit the vessel accurately (Tavsan, 2022). In early May, the Ukrainian Air Force launched a raid on Russian forces occupying Snake Island, where the TB2 once again played a crucial role. They destroyed three Strela-10 air defense systems, two patrol boats, and a landing craft belonging to the Russian forces on the island (Kaya, 2022). Furthermore, a TB2 shot down a Mi-8 helicopter while it was hovering for resupply, marking the first recorded instance of a manned aircraft being downed by a drone (Ozberk, 2022).

Further Prospects of Turkey's Drone Strategy
Domestic Level - Development of Unmanned Weapon Systems and the Innovative Strategic Concepts

The TAF completed the comprehensive use of domestic drones in 2017. The achievement of this goal not only signifies the widespread utilization of domestic drones in Turkey-involved military conflicts but also reflects the emerging trend of contemporary asymmetric warfare strategic thought. In practical warfare strategies, the TAF consistently integrates drones into overall operational planning alongside other weapon systems. For example, the effective combination of drones with artillery, rocket systems, and various tactical ballistic missiles enhances their

overall effectiveness (Bekdil, 2020). Drones also provide support to the Turkish Air Force's fighter jet fleet, including F-16 aircraft and attack helicopters, by filling the reconnaissance gaps left by systems like early warning aircraft and land-based radar. Additionally, the TAF actively develops anti-drone directed-energy weapons, such as Roketsan's ALKA system, to counter enemy drones. The TAF has established the Laser Technologies Center of Excellence to advance the development of anti-drone weapons using laser technology. Meanwhile, private enterprises are pursuing cutting-edge breakthroughs. In collaboration with the Turkish Navy, Baykar has developed drone launch and recovery platforms for the newly commissioned amphibious assault ship, the TCG Anadolu, which is Turkey's largest surface attack vessel. These drone deployments aim to compensate for the firepower deficiency caused by the exclusion of the US F-35 fighter jets from the TCG Anadolu due to bilateral diplomatic factors. Baykar has developed the TB3, featuring a carrier-based folding wing design and enhanced attack capabilities, serving as the next-generation model of the TB2. TAI has also invested in the development of the Şimşek, a micro-sized, supersonic target drone. It will be installed on large-scale drones such as Anka and Aksungur for electronic warfare and aerial decoy missions (Bekdil, 2021).

Regarding the future drone strategy, the Turkish academic and think tank communities have proposed key initiatives. Firstly, there is a comprehensive expansion of unmanned armed vehicles based on existing drone applications, including Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs) and Unmanned Ground Vehicles (UGVs). These vehicles will be utilized for weapon replacement and operational preparedness in the TAF, to establish a joint operational mode for unmanned weapon systems across different military branches. Secondly, the outstanding performance of Israeli Harop suicide drones in the Nagorno-Karabakh war showcased the effectiveness of miniaturized drones with minimal identification capabilities. These drones can efficiently target small, rapidly changing, and repeatedly locatable objectives, offering an economically reliable solution for conducting surveillance and strike missions in high-risk geographical areas. Turkey is currently engaged in the field of miniaturized drones with the aforementioned Alpagu and Kargu. However, in comparison to mature models from other countries, there is still room for Turkey to catch up in terms of durability, payload capacity, and overall capabilities. Turkey's inventory is predominantly focused on MALE platforms. There is a necessity to enhance balanced development across both types of ends (large drones and loitering munition) and diversification (including jet-powered drones such as Baykar Kızılelma) (Iddon, 2022). This entails addressing complex component production

challenges for large drones and facilitating large-scale production for loitering munitions.

Ultimately, a clear outcome of technological competition advantage can only be achieved through the fusion of material capabilities as well as warfare concepts. In the field of drones, the United States not only leads in existing technological advancements but also pioneers the core concepts and discourse of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), which emphasizes robotic warfare and AI-assisted control in the context of drones (Kasapoğlu, 2018). Currently, Turkey's strategic focus primarily revolves around the design, enhancement, and production of existing weapon systems, highlighting certain shortcomings. It is essential to integrate relevant resources from the military, intelligence agencies, business sector, and academia. Active participation in global knowledge and information exchange concerning the next generation of military revolutions is crucial. By leveraging its extensive tactical experience and manufacturing foundation, Turkey can shape its frontier conceptual framework for drone strategy, considering internal needs and external factors.

International Level-The Issue of a Responsible Actor under International Norms and Humanitarian Trends

After gaining significant recognition through involvement in various military conflicts, Turkey's drone strategy has inevitably intertwined with its foreign policy. Furthermore, the role and regulations of unmanned weapon systems in modern warfare have become a major topic of debate within international society. In the face of global attention and challenges, Alper Coşkun, the former Turkish ambassador to Azerbaijan and senior researcher at the Carnegie International Peace Foundation, highlighted measures Turkey could take in its drone strategy (Coşkun, 2022): There is a need to enhance transparency in international drone transactions and technology transfers. Under normal circumstances, Turkish enterprises and the SSB should publicly disclose detailed information regarding drone transactions with recipient countries or political entities to eliminate any gray zones. It is also important to comply with international export control regimes. The multilateral frameworks for controlling arms trade, such as the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and the Wassenaar Arrangement, explicitly establish norms for drone transfer and related technologies. As a member of both frameworks, Turkey should ensure effective coordination and implementation of international standards between its diplomatic and defense departments. Finally, establishing a national code of conduct is crucial. Turkey should proactively propose standard operating procedures for the decision-making process regarding drone exports. It should also define technical specifications and limitations for recipient countries. These steps

will be instrumental in shaping Turkey's international perspective as a "reliable" and "predictable" actor in the field of drones. They will contribute to enhancing its global reputation, strengthening multilateral relationships with regional partners and NATO allies, and advancing a sustainable drone strategy.

On the other hand, due to the strategic advantages of drones, such as cost-effectiveness and low risk, they have reduced the political costs of armed conflicts and have become the preferred weapons of many international actors, including both state and non-state entities. As a major global exporter of drones, Turkey often gains attention due to the conflicts involving its trading partners. Apart from the aforementioned military conflicts, the focus is also on the dimension of international humanitarian concerns. For instance, Western countries led by the United States have expressed diplomatic concerns to the Turkish government regarding the use of drones by Ethiopian government forces in the armed conflict with Tigray separatist groups, which resulted in serious civilian casualties (Marks, 2022). Therefore, with regard to humanitarian issues related to drones, Turkey needs to conduct comprehensive assessments of recipient countries and propose specific and appropriate regulatory initiatives. This will help consolidate its international image as a responsible drone exporter. It will also lead to international recognition of Turkey's expertise in the field of drones and establish an intangible, valuable niche in the increasingly competitive global drone arena.

Conclusion

From the perspective of comparative research, Turkey's drone strategy can offer valuable insights and lessons for other nations. Taking China as an instance, the development of drones within the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has mirrored a trajectory similar to that of Turkey. As significant drone powers within the same context of the Global South, the two countries are both driven by techno-nationalism and national pride as key factors in their internal development dynamics (Soyaltin-Colella & Demiryol, 2023). Specifically, the PLA's drone evolution has undergone three progressive stages: initially focusing on importation, followed by imitation, and ultimately advancing to independent research and development. This progression underscores the significance of Turkey's strategic approach and offers valuable insights for nations aiming to enhance their drone capabilities.

With high-level attention and resource support from the authorities since the 21st century, as well as the well-rounded domestic scientific research system and component supply chains under the military-civilian integration development policy, the successful deployment of drone series such as "Rainbow" and "Wing Loong" signified that China's independently developed drones have reached an

advanced international level. Chinese drones encompass a comprehensive range of types, spanning from micro to medium-range and large-scale drones. Currently, all series of drones within the PLA are domestically manufactured. The WZ-8, introduced in 2019, has emerged as the world's most advanced supersonic drone (Joe, 2019). In comparison to Turkey, China possesses a superior and well-established level of drone technology and industrial foundation. Among these, the CH-3 Rainbow drone demonstrates similar performance to the TB2 and entered mass production earlier than the Turkish drone. As China's first exported drone, the CH-3 Rainbow has been in active service with the air forces of several countries since 2009, including Nigeria and Pakistan, participating in military operations conducted across various regions (Alden, 2020).

In the field of drone exports, China has adopted a drone diplomacy model similar to that of Turkey. Chinese drones display both cost and technological advantages, making them favored by many developing countries in the global arms market with demands for counter-terrorism, border disputes, and other low-intensity conflicts. This trend is particularly noticeable in countries along the Chinese "Belt and Road" initiative in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. In contrast to the United States and Israel, which impose stringent political conditions on drone exports, China maintains an open attitude towards technology transfer, strengthening its diplomatic relations with the purchasing countries (Schaefer, 2015). Unlike Turkey, China's drone technology has long been highly regarded and feared by Western countries. However, behind its drone diplomacy, China faces more concerns from certain countries regarding the perception of the "China Threat" narrative (Chase, 2015). Therefore, China's drone diplomacy needs to attach greater importance to shaping the international discourse. This is especially critical in the current international society, where there is a lack of consensus on international laws pertaining to drone-related issues. China should take the lead in proposing initiatives related to international norms regarding drone exports, usage, technology transfer, and humanitarian responsibilities. It should strive to become a leader in establishing mechanisms for accountability and predictability in the use of drones.

The practical performance of Turkish drones in conflicts such as the Russo-Ukrainian War highlights the increasing importance of the miniaturization and intelligentization of drones and the concept of asymmetric warfare. Consequently, countries need to prioritize the strategic layout and tactical development of anti-drone measures. For China, there is an immediate need to enhance the strategic focus on developing anti-drone technologies and constructing specialized operational systems. On a tactical level, it is crucial to strengthen the deployment of existing comprehensive anti-drone systems, such as the "SpiderWeb" and

"SkyDome", through practical exercises. Moreover, continuous improvement of the ongoing struggle and development process of the interaction between drones and anti-drone systems is of utmost importance.

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THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE KURDISH FACTOR: INTRA-KURDISH, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

On September 20th, 2023, the Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA, organized an international conference entitled "The Syrian crisis and the Kurdish factor: intra-Kurdish, regional, and international aspects." It has been organized within the research project "The geopolitical importance of the Kurdish factor in the Syrian crisis," supported by the Science Committee of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports of the Republic of Armenia. The conference aimed to be a platform for Science Diplomacy where the diplomats and academic circles through the corridors of academia discussed the Syrian crisis, the Kurdish problem, intra-Kurdish, regional, and international, etc.

Several diplomats attended the conference: Ambassador of the RA to Tunisia and Morocco, H.E. Dr. Arshak Poladian, Chargé d'affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Iraq to the Republic of Armenia, H.E. Dr. Suhailan M. Khaleel Al-Jubori, etc. We had guest speakers from the Near East South Asia Centre for Strategic Studies, Washington, DC, USA, and the Rewq Baghdad Center for Public Policy, Iraq, Egypt, etc. Leading research fellows from the Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA participated in the conference.

Dr. Lilit Harutyunyan, Head of the Department of Arab Countries of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the NAS RA, expressed special thanks that in those difficult days for Armenia and Artsakh (*the full-scale military operation against Artsakh launched by Azerbaijan*), the attendees found the strength to participate in the conference and thereby contribute to the broad discussion of regional issues. The participants honored the memory of compatriots who died in Artsakh with a minute of silence. Dr. L. Harutyunyan presented the concept of the conference and discussed issues in general terms. She noted that Syria has an important role in both the regional and sub-regional dimensions, and the ongoing developments in Syria also had a chain effect in other regional countries. The conference had two sessions. The reports presented in the first session were dedicated to intra-Syrian developments and different viewpoints on the Kurdish factor. In the second session, issues related to the impact of the Syrian crisis on regional and international reality, the involvement of regional and non-regional actors (Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the USA, China, and EU countries) in the Syrian conflict, and its consequences were discussed.

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Armenia to Syria (2007-2018), Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Armenia to the Republic

of Tunisia and the Kingdom of Morocco, Prof. Arshak Poladyan, highlighted in his speech the importance of holding an international conference on the above topic. He noted that the discussions and reports on both the Syrian crisis and the Kurdish issue have scientific and applied importance and relevance. As an expert on the Kurdish issue, Ambassador Poladyan also spoke about the approaches of the Syrian government to the Kurdish issue and noted their features. In addition, the ambassador emphasised the consequences of speculations on the Kurdish issue by foreign actors.

In the core of his report, "Syria as a geopolitical factor", Dr. Prof. Ruben Safrastyan emphasised several important issues. He singled out the following theses: the geopolitical significance of Syria and Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis. Prof. Safrastyan also referred to the role of Iran and Turkey in the Syrian crisis and spoke about several other regional states as well. The report highlighted the role of intra-Syrian processes as well as the issues of Syrian refugees. In the concluding part of the report, the future vision of Syria from a geopolitical point of view was also discussed.

Director of the Rewaq Baghdad Center of Public Policy, Dr. Abbas al-Anbori, presented in his "Kurdistan and the Central Government of Iraq: Challenges and Solutions" report the characteristics of relations between Iraqi authorities and the government of Kurdistan and the main trends of economic and political contacts. He mentioned the contradictions that exist in bilateral relations.

Dr. L. Harutyunyan and Tatevik Manukyan (research fellows of the Department of Turkish Studies) discussed in their presentation titled "Russia's narratives on the Kurdish issue in the Syrian conflict" the evolutionary features of Russia's narratives of the Kurdish factor at the core of the Syrian conflict. The dynamics of the development of contacts between Russia and Syrian Kurds in the fight against the "Islamic State" terrorist organization during the period when the possibility of Kurdish autonomy formation in Syria was outlined are also discussed. Meanwhile, some parallels are drawn with the communication between the USA and Syrian Kurds. Russia's perceptions of the Kurdish factor are also considered by combining the interests of regional and non-regional actors involved in the Syrian conflict and their perceptions of the Kurdish issue. A special reference is made to Turkey's involvement in the core of the Syrian conflict and its position on the Kurdish issue. The current processes in the Middle East, particularly since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, where international and regional players—Russia, the USA, China, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Israel—have had conflicting, often mutually exclusive interests, have again raised the importance of the Kurds and the Kurdish issue, as well as its manipulation on the international stage. In the context of the Syrian conflict, Russia's position on the Kurdish issue

was initially predetermined by its geopolitical and regional priorities and then also by its relations with Ankara, which, despite many contradictions, have recently been built based on transactional pragmatism.

"Arab Spring" and the outbreak of the conflict in Syria in 2011 have ultimately sealed the "Kurdish card" in Russia's Middle Eastern foreign policy narratives. Syria became Russia's only actual stronghold in the Middle East. That was the main reason why Moscow tried to preserve President Assad's rule at all costs. In 2014, after the formation of the terrorist organization "Islamic State" (hereafter, IS), which established its control over a significant part of Iraq and Syria, President Assad had to establish limited cooperation with the Kurds in the fight against IS terrorist groups. It is obvious that Damascus later succeeded in liberating and protecting the northeastern regions of the country from IS militants as a result of the military activity of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (hereafter PYD) and its armed unit, the People's Protection Units (hereafter YPG). Russia's direct involvement in the war against IS in Syria on September 30, 2015, made cooperation between Moscow and the Kurds inevitable. It is clear that the Kurds had become an important military and political component of the settlement of the Syrian conflict and seemed to have the opportunity to participate in the formation of a new geopolitical landscape in the Middle East. On the other hand, time didn't work in favor of the Kurds, taking into account the reshaping of the interests of external actors in the region and the changes in the balance of power. The erupted war in Ukraine in 2022 and the sharply growing contradictions between Moscow and Washington, also outside of Syria, put the Kurds in a difficult situation. Turkey's military operations proved that the status of the Kurds in Syria directly depends on Turkey's position and ambitions, as well as the Russian-Turkish military-political tandem. Russia's position has gained primary importance in this discourse. Throughout the Syrian conflict, Russia has sought to preserve the integrity and unity of Syria but has not ruled out the possibility of Kurdish autonomy within it, in support of Kurdish wills. Russia offered the Kurds to negotiate with Syrian President Assad and cooperate with the Syrian government forces, maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria, on the condition of demilitarizing all Kurdish armed groups and incorporating them into the Syrian armed forces.

Dr. Gawdat Bahgat (NESA strategic center, Washington, D.C., USA), in the core of the report "US Middle East Policy: New trends and realities," spoke about the transformations of American policy in the region, US-China competition, the withdrawal of American troops, the establishment of diplomatic relations between several Gulf states and Israel under the US umbrella, changes in the American position regarding the Syrian crisis, the return of Syria to the League of Arab

States, and the improvement of relations between Syria and "the Arab family".

Dr. Arax Pashayan (Head of the Department of International Relations, Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA), in her speech titled "The Kurdish Policy of the Syrian Government in the Beginning of the "Arab Spring": Lost possibilities, uncertain future" discussed the approaches of the Syrian authorities in the beginning of the "Arab Spring" towards anti-government uprisings and upheavals of the Kurdish population living in the northeastern regions of the country. Since the formation of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Kurdish population has not been considered an ethno-religious minority but a part of the country's Sunni-Muslim community; therefore, the possibility of the full realization of Kurdish national rights has not been taken into account, as in the case of various Christian denominations (tawaif).In addition, 15 percent of the nearly two million Kurdish population living in Syria (300,000 people) did not have citizenship; therefore, they were deprived of basic human rights. Currently, there have been accumulated socio-economic problems in the northeastern regions of the country, particularly in Hasakeh province. On the other hand, there have been crystallized hostile perceptions and approaches between the Kurdish and Arab tribes throughout different historical periods, which have complicated the possibility of finding the edges of cooperation, including in 2011 and later. Since the events of the "Arab Spring", in response to Kurdish demand, the Syrian government has made several practical proposals with a package of socioeconomic reforms. The government used its ties with Kurdish tribal leaders and representatives of various Kurdish elites in Damascus to open a dialogue. In Kurdish circles, mutually exclusive perceptions were formed regarding the Kurdish national perspective. Over time, demands for Kurdish autonomy and independence emerged in various circles of Kurdish society. That process began to be coordinated by the Democratic Union Party, affiliated with the PKK. The Kurdish issue in Syria soon became the subject of geopolitical competition and was manipulated by various international actors (Turkey, the USA, Russia, Iran, Israel, Iraq, Gulf countries, etc.). In the following years, Kurdish armed self-defense groups in Syria were involved in military clashes with a series of transnational military groups, militias, and the Turkish state.

The main conclusion is the following: The Kurds acted irresponsibly from the perspective of Syrian national security. They did not accept the government's proposals and got involved in long-term armed conflicts and clashes with Turkey and militant Islamists. As a result, the Kurdish issue in Syria became the subject of geopolitical speculation; the northeastern Kurdish and Arab regions of Syria were occupied by Turkey. The Syrian war would have gone completely different if the Kurds had adopted a more flexible and balanced position and found edges of

cooperation with Damascus. The speech discussed the following issues: 1. The Syrian authorities' proposals for socio-economic reforms in the Kurdish regions; 2. The practical steps taken by the government, their successful and incomplete aspects; 3. Questions related to the perceptions of Kurdish problems in the Syrian elite; 4. The approaches of representatives of different Kurdish elites and the existing contradictions between them regarding the perspective of the Kurdish national agendas.

Dr. Levon Hovsepyan (Head of the Department of Turkish Studies of the Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA), in his report entitled "Beyond security concerns and Kurdish threat: the broader aspects of Turkey's military involvement in the Syrian crisis" argued that Turkey launched its first military operation in the sovereign territory of Syria in 2016 named 'Euphrates Shield', which later had its continuities. Turkey became one of the powers that had significant and crucial military-political involvement in the Syrian crisis. Though Turkey's military engagements and continuous operations are being mainly discussed and analyzed within the context of the fight against the Islamic State and Kurdish forces, the determinants and many aspects of Turkish military engagement are broader and encompassing. In this topic, we aim to reveal and outline the broader aspects. Ignoring the broad aspects of Ankara's military involvement, a purely security and military-centric approach fails to highlight and reveal the domestic and external, geopolitical, and personalistic, leader-centered determinants of today's Turkey, which include ideological, identity, image, and other layers. The report covered a wide range of issues concerning the determinants and aspects of Turkish involvement in a variety of contexts, including civil-military relations, revisionist foreign policy vision, Erdogan's image-making, a new foreign political and security identity, proxy forces and hybrid warfare experience, regional power projection, a new global role vision, multilateral transactionalism, etc.

Tatevik Manukyan, in her presentation titled "The image of Kurdish female fighters in the Syrian crisis: a new manifestation of transformation and branding" mentioned that the Kurdish revolutionary fighting female guerrilla emerged in the Syrian crisis with a vision of establishing a democratic, decentralized, and pluralistic society where women's self-expression and lifestyle would be free, spiritual, cultural, and knowledge-based, unrestricted by traditional patriarchal regulations. Since the first Women's Self-Defense Force (YPJ) formed in the Kurdish regions of Syria in 2013, women have become the backbone and primary force behind the transformation of the traditional value system of Kurdish society. Currently, about 40% of Kurdish self-defense fighters are female. The women's self-defense movement in the Kurdish regions of Syria is sometimes described as a women's revolution. Syrian Kurdish partisan women became a representation of

the struggle against the Islamic State's terrorism; they made a serious contribution to the military frontline by heroically resisting that dreadful horror. Despite the atrocities of the terrorists, the Kurdish woman did not develop a victim's mentality at all; on the contrary, their principle of living became the struggle, with the slogan "resistance is life".

In addition to fighting with weapons in their hands on the frontlines, Kurdish women partisans also undertook local, educational, and diplomatic missions, becoming an original brand to reveal the courage of the Kurdish woman's spirit and the essence of the struggle.

Dr. Gor Gevorgyan (senior research fellow of the Department of Arab Countries, Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA), in his speech titled "The role of Egypt in the context of Syria's "return to the Arab family" (2013-2023)," mentioned that Egyptian-Syrian relations have traditionally played a key role not only in the Palestinian peace process and the Arab-Israeli confrontation, but also to some extent these relations determine the formation of the security environment in the Arab world, trying to help overcome various problems in inter-Arab relations. However, at different stages in the history of bilateral relations, there were also problematic periods, including the freezing of diplomatic relations, etc. At the beginning of the 21st century, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who came to power in 2013 on July 3 as a result of a coup in Egypt, breathed new life into Egyptian-Syrian relations. Egypt's efforts to establish regular relations with Syria are evidenced by Cairo's position regarding Syria's readmission into the League of Arab States. It can be noted that since 2019, Egypt, within the framework of inter-Arab meetings, has begun to consistently speak out and support the need to reconfirm Syria's membership in the League of Arab States. At the same time, by supporting the return of Syria to the "Arab family," Egypt qualitatively raised relations between official Cairo and Damascus to a new level. In 2023, on May 7, at a meeting of foreign ministers of the Arab League held in Cairo, Syria reinstated its membership. President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi made significant efforts to return Syria to the "Arab family".

Dr. Grigor Vardanyan (senior research fellow of the Department of Arab Countries, Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA), in his speech titled "Syria's readmission to the Arab League and restoring its relations with the Arab States" argued that the study is aimed at first scrutinizing the process of Syria's readmission to the Arab League in the first half of 2023 and secondly understanding the internal and external motives and objectives of Bashar Al-Assad's government and regional powers in admitting Syria to the Arab fold. There are two research questions: 1. Why did the Syrian authorities improve relations with the Arab States? 2. What were the main internal and external factors

impacting the decision-making processes within the Syrian security elite while seeking support from the Arab States? Analyzing this staggering geopolitical move in the Arab world, discussing the real objectives of the changes, and given all the perspectives and thoughts of subject matter experts, we draw our own perspective on the theme and draw our conclusions.

Anush Hovhannisyan (research fellow of the Department of Turkish Studies of the Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA) mentioned in her topic entitled "The Puzzle of Turkish Foreign Policy in Syria and Syrian Kurds' Challenges" that for years Ankara has threatened to expand its invasion of eastern Syria and ethnically cleanse more areas of Kurds and other minorities along the border. This puts millions of people's lives in constant limbo. Eastern Syria has many minorities, including a historic Christian community and Yazidis. The People's Defense Units, or YPG, formed one of the key Kurdish groups that fought ISIS. However, Turkey accused it of being a "terrorist" group. Turkey used this as an excuse to attack the YPG, first in 2016 near Manbij and later in Afrin in 2018. This created a complex puzzle in eastern Syria. The beleaguered country is still divided, and the remnants of the Syrian Civil War still dominate the landscape. For Ankara, the goal was to get the rebels to remove Kurds from areas like Afrin and along a "buffer zone" along the border, so it could expel some three million Syrians to these areas and "resettle" these Syrian refugees in formerly Kurdish areas. This was the cynical approach of Ankara—to use poor Arab Syrians who had fled to fight against poor Syrian Kurds, essentially destroying both groups. While the Kurds and other minorities in Syria get bombed, Russia, Turkey, and the US do high-level deals. For average people living in eastern Syria, the future looks bleak. They will either be ethnically cleansed by another Turkish invasion or have to live with the Russian-backed Syrian regime. How they can overcome this challenge, what is the position of the new Ankara government in the Syrian issue—these and other questions will be analyzed in this talk.

Dr. Nazeli Navasrdyan (senior research fellow of the Department of International Relations of the Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA), in her topic entitled "The Kurdish factor and Iran's regional security interests in the context of the Syrian crisis," noticed that the Syrian crisis and the rise of Islamist forces created completely new realities for states with Kurdish populations (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria), forcing them to reconsider both their internal and external political lines on the Kurdish issue. The advancement of the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist organization in Iraq and Syria required a great overstretching of forces from Tehran. Iran faced the problem of border security as well as various new religious, economic, and political threats and challenges. As a result, Tehran intensified its military-political involvement in Iraq and Syria, also in the direction of the Kurdish

factor. As the Syrian crisis deepened, Iran began supporting the Kurdish forces fighting ISIS in order to protect Iraq's Shiite regions and preserve the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. At the same time, it strongly defends the principle of the territorial integrity of Syria, negatively reacting to the models of establishing a new balance of power in the region by dividing the country into Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish autonomies.

Dr. Mushegh Ghahriyan (senior research fellow of the Department of International Relations of the Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA), in his report "Reasons and objectives of rapprochement between Gulf Arab states and Syria" argued that Syria's early-spring 2011 anti-government demonstrations rapidly turned into a full-fledged conflict. Syria is currently split into several areas where different factions are in control as a result of a war. However, if in the first phase of the war, the events unfolded to the detriment of the Syrian government, then after 2015, the Syrian government forces, with the assistance of foreign allies, were able to alter the course of events, and as a result, they regained control in various parts of the country. Consequently, the question regarding the removal of President Bashar Assad from power was effectively sidelined.

Right from the onset of the Syrian conflict, the Gulf Arab countries demanded Bashar Assad's resignation and extended substantial support to the anti-government forces. These states actively participated in isolating and boycotting the Syrian government within the Arab world, even allocating Syria's Arab League representation to the opposition. However, as the conflict's dynamics evolved, the Gulf Arab countries gradually reassessed their stance towards Syria and Bashar Assad. They cautiously embarked on restoring diplomatic relations with Syria. Notably, in 2023, Syria successfully reclaimed its position within the Arab League with the support of these very countries. The purpose of this topic was to analyze the reasons for the change in the position of the Gulf Arab countries. I employ the systemic level of the three-level foreign policy analysis as a framework. Simultaneously, I draw parallels between the diverse policies adopted by the Gulf Arab countries in their interactions with Syria, explaining differences in the trajectory of the foreign policies of these countries and the peculiarities of the decision-making process.

Dr. Aram Gasparyan (leading research fellow of the Department of Arab Countries of the Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA), in his speech titled "The changes in Tunisia's and Morocco's positions on the Syrian crisis" noticed that the beginning of the armed conflict in Syria in 2011 had a notable impact on the relationships between Syria and several Arab countries, including Morocco and Tunisia. In the wake of the Syrian crisis, both countries criticized the actions of the Syrian authorities, citing anti-popular measures that resulted in a marked

deterioration of diplomatic ties. However, more recently, the positions of both Tunisia and Morocco toward Syria have experienced significant shifts. These changes can be attributed to a combination of factors, including domestic and foreign policy considerations, along with evolving regional and geopolitical developments.

Anna Antonyan (PhD candidate), Department of Arab Countries of the Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA, in her speech titled "Israeli political and social narratives on the Syrian crisis" argued that the Syrian crisis that erupted in 2011 has also become a serious challenge to Israel's security since it is a border state, and the processes taking place in Syria might affect Israel as well. Israel also justified its concern that although Israel till now did not have diplomatic relations with Syria, in any case, ensuring the stability and predictability of realities in Syria was very important from the point of view of Israel's national security. It was with this rationale that Israel declared its neutrality from the very beginning of the conflict, but it was quite natural that Israel would indirectly try to influence the ongoing events in Syria. As a result of the expansion of the conflict, when Iran was also directly involved in the Syrian crisis, Israel became even more cautious in trying to indirectly prevent the increase of Iranian influence in neighboring Syria. Added to this was the activity of the Lebanese Shiite movement "Hizballah", which also supports the government of Bashar al-Assad. The foregoing forced Israel to conduct even more consistent control, as well as to try to counteract the ongoing events in Syria and the strengthening of Iranian Shiite influence there.

At the end of the conference, participants had a very productive and interesting discussion. Issues related to the strengthening of the Turkish factor in the South Caucasus, the effects of Russian-Turkish relations, the complex situation around (Nagorno-Karabakh) Artsakh, the tension in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, etc., were also discussed.

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