

# **THE ROLE OF DOMESTIC LEADERSHIP IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: A CASE STUDY OF ERDOGAN'S RESPONSE TO THE SYRIAN CONFLICT**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Political Science at the Faculty  
of Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts (M.A.)**



by:

**Firda Nur Jannah**

**02212310004**

UNIVERSITAS ISLAM INTERNASIONAL INDONESIA

DEPOK

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## ABSTRACT

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This research elucidates the transformation of Turkiye's foreign policy under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, focusing on how Erdogan's leadership style in humanitarian diplomacy has influenced Turkiye's foreign policy transformation towards Syria. This study explores humanitarian diplomacy, leadership style, and factors that have driven Turkiye's shift from a secular, Western-oriented policy to a more regional and proactive approach. By analyzing Erdogan's speeches and Turkiye's diplomatic action in Syria, this research incorporates perspectives from interviews with representatives of the AK Party, as well as Syrian refugees who have lived in Turkey for over a decade. The methodology utilizes Turkiye's involvement in the Syrian crisis as a case study, examining how Erdogan frames his foreign policy and how this approach has reshaped the country's relations within the region. Despite domestic opposition, resistance, and criticism, Erdogan's foreign policy has strengthened Turkiye's position in Syria. This research demonstrates that Erdogan's leadership has been effective in providing humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees through his policies, despite internal and external challenges. Furthermore, the study offers a comprehensive analysis of the strategic motivations behind Turkey's rising influence in Syria and its broader implications for regional stability.

**Keywords:** *Turkish Foreign Policy, Erdogan's Leadership, Syria conflict, Syrian Refugees.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have contributed to the completion of this thesis. First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisors, Ms. Nia Deliana, Ph.D., and Mr. Ridwan, Ph.D., whose insightful guidance, critical feedback, and continuous encouragement have been invaluable throughout this research process. Their mentorship has greatly contributed to the academic quality of this thesis as well as to my intellectual and personal development.

I am also indebted to **Mr. Samuel David Blanch, Ph.D**, my examiner, for his thorough evaluation and constructive comments, which have significantly improved the clarity and rigor of this work.

Special thanks are due to the **representative of the AK Party** and the **Syrian refugee respondents** for their willingness to share valuable perspectives and experiences. Their contributions provided essential empirical insights that enriched the depth and relevance of this study.

I extend my deepest gratitude to my parents, **Mrs. Hotmaida Siagian and Mr. Suhairi**, whose unwavering support, prayers, and encouragement have been the foundation of my perseverance and commitment to this academic journey. I am equally grateful to my family and close friends for their continuous support and understanding.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all individuals and institutions who, directly or indirectly, contributed to the successful completion of this thesis.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|      |                                             |
|------|---------------------------------------------|
| AKP  | : <i>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</i>         |
| ISIS | : <i>Islamic State of Iraq and Syria</i>    |
| NATO | : <i>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</i> |
| PKK  | : <i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê</i>        |
| YPG  | : <i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i>            |

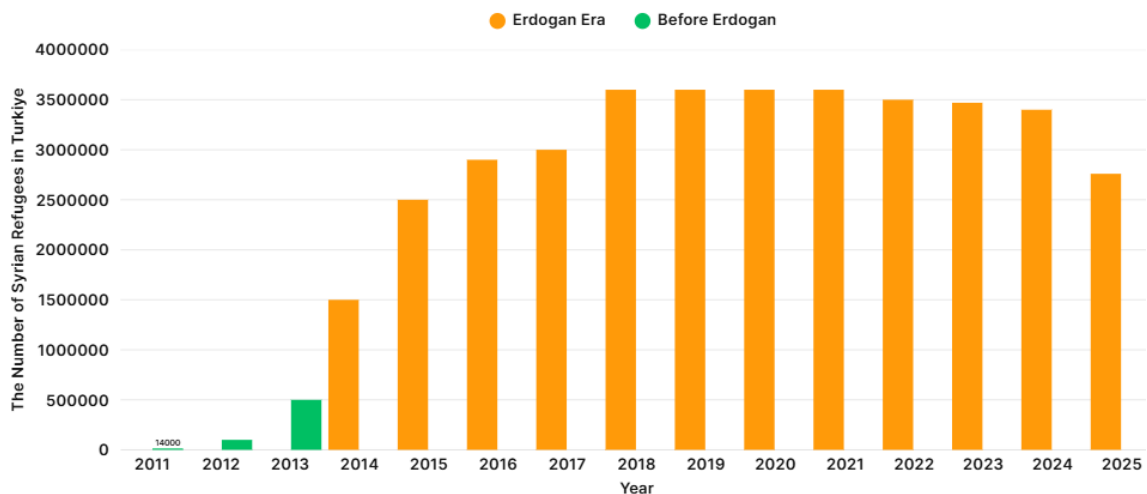
## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Problem Statement

The Syrian conflict in 2011 has caused one of the largest refugee crises, with millions of Syrians forced to flee their homes. This crisis has had a significant impact on neighbouring countries, particularly Türkiye, which had received more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees by 2018 (UNHCR, 2025). Although external factors, such as the direct threat to Türkiye's national security posed by the emergence of ISIS, the involvement of global and regional powers, and the geopolitical context in the Middle East, have been the main focus of discussions on Türkiye's role in the Syrian crisis, it is also important to examine the role of internal factors, particularly Erdogan's leadership style that has contributed to Türkiye's foreign policy in its interaction with the Syrian crisis, both in terms of military action and humanitarian policy.

**Figure 1.1 The Number of Syrian Refugees in Türkiye**

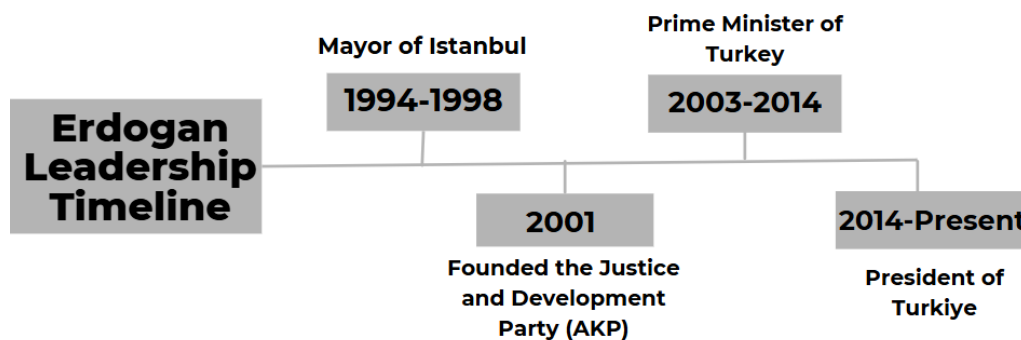


Source: UNHCR, latest updated 01 May 2025

From the table above, we can see that there has been a drastic increase in the acceptance of Syrian refugees during Erdogan's presidency, which began in 2014. The study interestingly examines how Erdogan's leadership style has led to changes in his foreign policy. The factor that has caused a shift in Türkiye's foreign policy, leadership

style, is among the important ones (Terkulova, 2023). Some key scholars, such as Kösebalaban (2020), argue that Türkiye has become an active supporter of groups opposing the Assad regime rather than remaining neutral. In this study, the leadership orientation adopted by Recep Tayyip Erdogan has played a critical role in defining Türkiye's response to the Syrian refugee crisis and the new developments in its foreign policy in the region.

**Figure 1.2 Erdogan Leadership Timeline**



President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's political career pathway is crucial in understanding the transformation of Türkiye's foreign relations during his rule. Gorner & Ucal, (2011) also emphasized the notion that Erdogan, as an individual, rose from mayor of Istanbul to prime minister and now president, and how this has changed Türkiye's political and diplomatic orientation, has charted a new course for the country. The formation of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in the year 2001 and its prompt dominance in Türkiye's relations with the world particularly in the region, has reformed the country's ideological stance, which is no longer secular and aligned with the West, but rather leaning towards neo-Ottomanism and emphasising aggressive regional aggression and strategic independence (Hazır, 2022; Taspinar, 2012). Under Erdogan's leadership as Prime Minister (2003–2014), Türkiye proactively expanded its foreign policy by distancing itself from its conventional Western allies and becoming more actively involved in the Middle East, particularly after the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War. During this period, Türkiye became a values-based actor and initiated active policies as a regional leader, emphasising strategic independence (Haugom, 2019; D'Alema, 2017). Since Erdogan became President in 2014 and gained executive power in 2017, the dynamics of Türkiye's foreign policy have become more aggressive with

changes including the integration of humanitarian diplomacy related to Syrian refugees, as well as involvement in peace processes such as the Astana Process and the Sochi Process in conflicts (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016; Cengiz, 2020).

**Table 1.1 Transformation of Turkiye’s Foreign Policy**

| Aspect                    | Before Erdogan                        | After Erdogan                                                                             | Source                                      |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Ideological Orientation   | Secular, Western-oriented             | Neo-Ottomanism, regionally focused                                                        | (Albayrak & Turan, 2016; Alekseevich, 2018) |
| Western Alignment         | Strong alignment with NATO and the US | More independent, distant from the West                                                   | (Hazir, 2022; Kutlay & Onis, 2021).         |
| Regional Influence        | Limited regional focus                | Increased role in the Middle East and North Africa, especially after the Arab Spring.     | (D’Alema, 2017; Kiouisi, 2020)              |
| Middle Eastern Engagement | Relations mainly with the West        | Closer ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.                                           | (Pope, 2010)                                |
| Strategic Autonomy        | Dependent on Western policies         | Pursuit of strategic autonomy                                                             | (Esen & Gumuscu, 2018)                      |
| Humanitarian Diplomacy    | Minimal focus on humanitarian aid     | Prominent role in humanitarian concern, especially with Syrian refugees                   | (Altunisik, 2019; UNHCR, 2023).             |
| Peace Negotiations        | Minimal involvement in peace efforts  | Active role in negotiations (Astana, Sochi processes), key mediator in regional conflicts | (Cengiz, 2020)                              |

As illustrated in the table above, there are seven aspects that influence the transformation of Erdogan’s policy, but this research only focuses on the aspect of humanitarian diplomacy. This aspect of humanitarian aid is the most significant factor in Erdogan’s policy transformation, which includes humanitarian aid. As Erdogan’s role as a leader shifted, humanitarian policy became a source of argument supporting more interventionist military measures. According to scholars, this shift is explained by the fact that Erdogan has successfully integrated humanitarian diplomacy not only as a moral or humanitarian phenomenon, but as a method of consolidating political power and expanding Turkiye’s influence in the region (Kosebalaban, 2020). Accordingly, humanitarian (aid) diplomacy combined with Erdogan’s leadership style is significant to

research in redefining Türkiye's foreign policy, both in diplomatic relations and military intervention under the title of humanitarian goals.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership style and Türkiye's humanitarian diplomacy are key to understanding the history of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria. According to scholars like Cengiz (2020), this shift is part of Erdoğan's broader ambition to transform Türkiye into a major player, particularly in the post-Ottoman Middle East to make its influence bigger according to the particular Türkiye foreign policy. Initially, humanitarian aid and public policy were used as tools to support the Syrian opposition and accommodate refugees, aiming to promote Türkiye's image as a sympathetic global leader that paved the way for broader influence. But, the President of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, gradually applied this policy to justify military intervention and Turkish ideology, particularly in the fight against the Assad regime (D'Alema, 2017).

Shift in Türkiye's foreign policy during Erdoğan's administration can be interpreted as a transition from a diplomatic approach to active involvement in military interventions in the region, aimed at expanding its power and influence in the region through this particular political approach, in Syria. The role played by the idea of humanitarianism in the shift towards humanitarian diplomacy by world powers, as explained by Kösebalaban (2020) and Cengiz (2020), is notable in understanding this phenomenon to some extent.

The fact that Türkiye President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan can personalise foreign policy and link humanitarian intervention with military plans indicates a key shift in Türkiye's foreign relations as a country that considers deep political and ideological considerations alongside internal and external influences in this regard. The very core objective of this research is to understand and to examine Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership's direct shift in Türkiye's foreign policy and relations with the world, particularly with regional countries. This study also illustrates how leadership, ideology, and political interests can interact, demonstrating that domestic political interests play a primary role in shaping foreign policy conclusions.

## **1.2 Research Question**

This study posed an important research question: How has Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership influenced the transformation of Turkish foreign policy towards Syria?

## **1.3 Objective of the Study**

This study examined how Erdogan's leadership has influenced the transformation of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria, focusing on the transformation in military action and humanitarian diplomacy about the Syrian Conflict 2011-2024, and how these aspects reflect the influence of Erdogan's leadership style in Türkiye foreign policy direction.

## **1.4 Significance of the Study**

- 1. Theoretically**, this study aimed to contribute to the existing literature on the relationship between political leadership and foreign policy, which is crucial for international relations understanding, with a particular focus on Recep Tayyip Erdogan as the case of the study. By examining President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's influence on Turkish foreign policy and its relations to the region, particularly its influence in Syria, this study explored a change in Türkiye's domestic foreign policy strategy, where more interventionist, neo-Ottoman, and regionally focused policies have supplanted pro-Western ones, particularly in the ongoing Syrian conflict. More importantly, the study investigated how a leader's approach and policy decisions might potentially change a particular country's political foreign relations, underlining the impact of personal political power on government actions. Meanwhile, this piece of work sheds light on Recep Tayyip Erdogan's influence on Türkiye's political and diplomatic course at all, specifically through his changing position and Middle East Twitter diplomacy, as well as his handling of humanitarian situations like the Syrian refugee crisis.
- 2. Practically**, how Erdogan's leadership has influenced Türkiye's foreign policy in practice, specifically about its military and diplomatic efforts in Syria to expand its political goals, is another key aspect of this research for understanding the practical side of the aforementioned phenomena. The study examined President

Erdogan's leadership style and his approach, which has changed Türkiye's stance towards regional and global powers as well as its attitude to the Syrian refugee crisis. Policymakers and the international community could benefit from more of this research since it provides significant understanding into the effects of leadership-driven changes in foreign policy, which can have an ongoing impact on the position of a country in regional and global affairs. Its findings and conclusions also reflect Türkiye's changing position as a key factor in the Middle East and its impact on the overall geopolitical situation for gaining and expanding political influence and power.

### **1.5 Structure of Thesis**

Chapter 1 explains the background and issues arising from the Syrian conflict that began in 2011, which has caused one of the largest refugee crises in modern history with more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees settling in Türkiye as of 2018. While numerous studies have been published on external factors related to geopolitical dynamics and security threats, this research aims to focus on internal factors, namely the role of Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a leader who has transformed Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria. This research analyses Erdogan's role as president between 2014 and 2025 to understand how his humanitarian diplomacy has transformed Türkiye into an active participant in the Syrian crisis, shifting Turkish public opinion from neutrality to full engagement.

Chapter 2 discusses the research gap, theoretical framework, and hypotheses. The study gap lies in the lack of research on how domestic leadership contributes to foreign policy change, with a primary focus on the influence of external factors. This study adopted the Neoclassical Realism Theoretical Framework, which combines the distinction between systemic pressures and domestic variables, with Erdogan as the primary influence intervening. This research hypothesised that Erdogan's leadership, characterised by a personalistic and ideological style through humanitarian diplomacy, has justified Türkiye's behavioural shift from diplomatic activities to military actions in Syria. Evidence supporting this hypothesis can be found in speeches, policy actions, and Türkiye's participation in peace processes such as the Astana Process and the Sochi Process.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology. This research uses a qualitative case study design with Türkiye's intervention in the Syrian conflict as the first case analysed. Data be collected through a review of Erdogan's speeches, semi-structured interviews with representatives of the AK Party and Syrian refugees, and a questionnaire to estimate the level of refugees' perceptions. Thematic analysis is applied in this work to identify patterns in leadership rhetoric and ideological frameworks, as well as policy changes.

Chapter 4 examines the shift in Türkiye's foreign policy under Erdogan's administration, which occurred in three stages: initial diplomatic activities, military actions, and humanitarian diplomacy. The focus is on how decision-making power in Türkiye is concentrated in Erdogan's hands and how humanitarian aid has become a tool to block political legitimacy and neo-Ottoman ideology. Another important influence aspect discussed in this chapter is the style and application of President Erdogan's leadership and humanitarian framework working together to justify Türkiye's targeted role in the region, which is now marked by military actions such as Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch in this particular regard.

The core findings and concluding statements of this piece of work are summarised in Chapter 5. It asserts that President Erdogan's approach to leadership and the strategic use of humanitarian diplomacy have been instrumental in transforming Türkiye's foreign policy in Syria and in the region at all. The shift from a passive to an interventionist policy has been made easier by these power dynamics, illustrating the degree to which domestic leadership can influence a nation's geopolitical direction. The wider significance of leadership changes in foreign policy across regional and global politics is addressed as well in this chapter of the research and analysis.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

#### 2.1 Literature Review

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made significant changes to Türkiye's foreign policy, particularly to the Syrian conflict, for its political reasons, like broadening its influence in the region. Recent studies have shown and elaborated more on the refugee crisis and other external variables, including global power dynamics and geopolitical tensions, as the primary drivers of this change (Kosebalaban, 2020). However, internal factors, primarily leadership style in this regard to see its political dynamics, are frequently overlooked despite having a significant and catalytic impact in guiding and initiating these changes for particular political reasons. This main and very imperative gap in the literature suggests that more investigation and examination are required to comprehend how Erdogan's style of leadership influences Türkiye's behaviour to outside demands, especially when humanitarian diplomacy is involved, and how this idea is applied to back up policy.

The very strategic Depth Doctrine, initially presented by Ahmet Davutoğlu, has served as the foundation for Türkiye's foreign policy. As a bridge linking the East and the West, Türkiye should adopt a non-interventionist political position in regional disputes, which reflects its viewpoint (Davutoğlu, 2001). By employing regionalism and soft power, Türkiye hopes to improve its standing in the Middle East under this framework. However, perspectives are considerably altered under the leadership of Erdogan about how this idea is being implemented. According to some key scholars such as Keyman (2017) and Kosebalaban (2020), the foreign policy of Türkiye under President Tayyip Erdogan has changed compared to the more interventionist and security-based policy pursued by the country, particularly after the Syrian civil war. Interpretation of such Strategic Depth Doctrine by Erdogan includes the use of military forces in order to spread his power in the region, rather than based on relations and peaceful coexistence, in line with the creation of the doctrine as proposed by Davutoğlu. This change reflects Erdogan's growing personal leadership influence on determining Türkiye's strategy, as internal security issues—specifically, the Kurdish crisis and the emergence of ISIS

(Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) have emerged as pivotal moments in the formation of foreign policy.

Even though the Strategic Depth Doctrine and external geopolitical pressures have been extensively studied and examined in most of the literature that currently exists, tradition indicates that Erdogan's leadership style has not received enough attention as a critical element in determining Türkiye's foreign policy transformation. Erdogan's leadership has played a significant role in transforming Türkiye's foreign policy, which was originally focused on diplomatic relations into open military intervention, particularly in Syria. According to Esen and Gumuscu (2016), Erdogan has established a personalistic leadership that develops a centralised and ideologically oriented foreign policy, in which Türkiye's national interests are increasingly defined in accordance with Erdogan's personal understanding of regional power and security concerns.

The study by Terkulova (2023) can be seen as an informative view of Vladimir Putin's leadership approach by discussing the decision-making process in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This study provides a critical and contrasting view of Erdogan's leadership, particularly with the impact of personal characteristics, including the conceptual framework, on foreign policy choices. By comparing and contrasting the psychological characteristics of the two leaders, this work expands my literature, not only to focus on positive aspects but also to provide a critical analysis of the role of individual personal characteristics in international diplomacy.

Humanitarian diplomacy is an important aspect of the transformation that Erdogan has implemented as a moral and strategic tool in Türkiye's dealings with Syria. The first was an open-door policy for Syrian refugees in Türkiye, which was initially framed in humanitarian terms to include those who migrated during the war. However, Kösebalaban (2020) adds that Erdogan's use of humanitarian diplomacy has gradually been adopted as a method to legitimise military action, particularly in northern Syria. This phenomenon signifies Erdogan's ability to manipulate humanitarian issues not only to enhance Türkiye's international image but also to seek justification for the use of military force, particularly in the case of Kurdish autonomy and security in the region.

Although Türkiye's foreign policy history has often emphasised geopolitical aspects and security concerns, the patronage system managed by Erdogan has been

influential enough to determine the formation of Türkiye's foreign policy. Esen and Gumuscu (2018) observe that competitive authoritarianism is a key feature of Erdogan's regime, where control over economic resources and state-business relations are used to strengthen political influence. Erdogan has used this system to build a loyal business elite that support government policies, such as Türkiye's involvement in military intervention in Syria. Kosebalaban (2020) also suggests that this economic patronage has provided support for Erdogan domestically and enabled him to pursue a more aggressive and militaristic foreign policy.

This mode of economic patronage is crucial in explaining the implications of Erdogan's leadership for Türkiye's policy towards Syria. Through the effective use of economic incentives, Erdogan has not only succeeded in strengthening his electoral grip on his country but has also been able to position his country as a regional power. This combination of economic and military policies has enabled Erdogan to position Türkiye in the Middle East and centralise power within the country.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

#### **Internal Factors: Erdogan's Leadership Style and Humanitarian Diplomacy**

Most of the literature focusing on the transformation of Türkiye's foreign policy under Erdogan tends to emphasise external influences (geopolitical threats and interventions around the world). However, there is a relative absence in the literature regarding the influence of internal factors, particularly Erdogan's leadership style, on Türkiye's foreign policy responses. The transition to military intervention in Syria occurred due to Erdogan's role as an active leader in diplomatic efforts in Syria. Additionally, the role of humanitarian diplomacy as a driver of military action and the expansion of Türkiye's influence in the region is often overlooked.

This research fills this gap by analysing the role of Erdogan's leadership in mediating Türkiye's response to the Syrian crisis. This research provides additional insight into the role of domestic political influence on Türkiye's foreign policy, particularly through leadership, especially in relation to operations and interventions, or military operations specifically in the international arena, including areas of civil conflict and power struggles.

In conclusion, although the current literature can be useful in finding external factors that influence changes in Türkiye's foreign policy under Erdogan, to date, there have been no adequate findings on internal factors, especially Erdogan's leadership style, which contributes to the changes adopted. The personalistic approach of Turkish leaders and their policies in humanitarian diplomacy, which have evolved into invitations for military intervention, have become part of Türkiye's foreign policy, particularly in Syria. Given this gap in the literature, this research promises to provide a clear analysis of how internal politics, in terms of leadership and economic patronage, influence Türkiye's foreign policy and mediate its presence in the Middle East.

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework**

This research adopted neoclassical realism as the main theoretical tool to describe the influence of internal factors, particularly leadership, in determining Türkiye's response to the Syrian crisis. Although structural pressures within the international system (geopolitical threats and global power involvement) provide the context for foreign policy decisions, domestic factors (leadership style, elite perceptions, and political ideology) significantly mediate a country's response to these pressures (Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2004).

### **2.2.1 Neoclassical Realism**

Neoclassical realism is an extension of classical realism and neorealism that incorporates the observation that states are not only influenced by systemic pressures, but also significantly influenced by domestic pressures, including leadership, political institutions, and internal ideology (Rose, 1998; Zakaria, 1998). Neoclassical realism differs from neorealism because, unlike the latter, which views states as rational actors reacting to external threats in an anarchic international system, the behaviors of states in responding to external threats not only reflects the demands of systemic conditions but is also influenced by internal factors such as elite perceptions and leadership priorities (Schweller, 2004).

Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria in the context of Erdogan's leadership cannot be entirely attributed to external geopolitical issues arising from the Syrian conflict. Instead, Erdogan's leadership style, ideological orientation, and ability to

consolidate power through economic patronage and humanitarian diplomacy have had a profound impact on Türkiye's intervention and policy modifications.

International System such as international changes in the balance of power, particularly with the emergence of regional powers such as Russia and Iran (Kösebalaban, 2020). Security threats like ISIS (Islamic of Iraq and Syria), the Kurdish issue, and terrorism by non-state actors (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). And geopolitical pressure which is ongoing insecurity in the Middle East, particularly following the Syrian civil war, has placed pressure on Türkiye's borders and security (Kösebalaban, 2020; D'Alema, 2017).

A firm stance against threats to Turkish sovereignty, as reflected in elite perceptions, the position of Kurdish autonomy in Syria, and the significance of regional power in Turkish politics Erdogan's vision as a neo-Ottomanist and supporter of Islamic identity has shifted the direction of Turkish foreign policy, particularly in its relations with the Middle East (Kösebalaban, 2020).

### **Foreign Policy Behaviour**

Türkiye's foreign policy in practice including military intervention in Syria, humanitarian diplomacy, and even the promotion of interests in the region through strategic partnerships and military cooperation. Neoclassical Realist Approach to Turkish Foreign Policy In the context of the Syrian conflict, neoclassical realism offers a framework for evaluating Erdogan's leadership in responding to external pressures on Türkiye. Although the Syrian conflict and the security threats posed by ISIS and the YPG/PKK (Yekineyen Parastina Gel/ Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan) are systemic issues, Erdogan's leadership and domestic factors such as his ideological vision, strategic autonomy, and humanitarian diplomacy played a critical role in shaping policy in Türkiye. Systemic pressures such as the war in Syria necessitate action in response to the geopolitical instability it has created, particularly on Türkiye's southern border. Türkiye is deeply concerned about the possibility of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria and ISIS, which pose specific security threats (Kosebalaban, 2020).

Domestic factors, including Erdogan's personalistic leadership, have been a dominant factor in determining Türkiye's policy towards Syria. The power he has consolidated, both domestically through financial support and political ideology, and

internationally, has enabled Türkiye to take an advantageous position in its foreign policy (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). Likewise, President Erdogan has used humanitarian diplomacy as a moral tool and as a pretext for military intervention, thereby providing a security foundation and power dynamics for humanitarian objectives in the region and more in Syria. During President Erdogan's administration, aid to refugees has also prioritized humanitarian diplomacy, allowing Türkiye to modify its foreign policy in Syria to military goals and plans. To strategically legitimize Türkiye's military campaign, especially against Kurdish forces, and expand Türkiye's influence in the area, Erdogan has used military intervention in Syria by framing the nation as a refugee camp and advocating for humanitarian assistance which is a notion of military goals by Türkiye in Syria and the broader sense in the region (Esen & Gumuscu, 2018).

Looking to the aforementioned literature and notions, this study carefully examined how Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the President of Türkiye, his leadership style or political behavior, and humanitarian diplomacy have influenced Türkiye's approach to the Syrian crisis and conflict. The idea of Neoclassical realism theory states that states (countries) respond to systemic pressures through the role played by domestic political forces in that response, such as leadership and elite perceptions. In the case of Türkiye, Erdogan's ideological and centralized leadership in seeking to expand power has played a central role in determining the country's foreign policy actions in Syria. This situation has led Türkiye to abandon diplomacy and adopt an aggressive military role, reflected in a shift in foreign policy behavior triggered by external security threats and domestic politics.

Neoclassical realism in this case is a complex approach to understanding the formation of Erdogan's leadership, and domestic factors, including ideology and economic patronage, can explain Türkiye's reaction to the war in Syria for its political goals, particularly under President Erdogan's administration. By integrating external constraints and internal politics, this framework provides deeper insights into the challenging nature of Türkiye's foreign policy behavior. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a leader who is discussed in this research as a critical independent variable to explain the shift towards military intervention in Türkiye's foreign policy in Syria for its political goals and the reasons that Erdogan is seeking.

### **2.3 Argument and Assumption**

According to neoclassical realism theory, this research hypothesized that Erdogan's personalistic leadership has dominated foreign policy toward Syria because it combines humanitarian diplomacy with intervention. This blend of ideology-based leadership and ideas about humanitarian diplomacy has resulted in a policy shift involving direct country engagement in the Syrian war. Erdogan's role as a central ruler has provided the domestic and ethical justification needed for military intervention and regional influence in the Syrian crisis.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Methodology**

A qualitative approach is adopted in this study to investigate how Türkiye's foreign policy has transformed under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, particularly how Türkiye has been involved in the Syrian conflict. This research focuses on three terms of Erdoğan's presidency and analyzes in detail the factors that caused these changes. Studies on Erdoğan's politics are complex and multidimensional, including an analysis of his speeches, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaire-based data collection to obtain as many answers as possible about the politics, ideology, and leadership that have determined Turkish foreign policy during Erdoğan's administration.

#### **3.2 Research Design**

This research employs a case study design, where Türkiye's intervention in the Syrian conflict serves as the primary case and is used to analyze the overall development of Turkish foreign policy. This case study mode is suitable for this research because it allows me to investigate the topic comprehensively by exploring the relevance of Türkiye's military intervention and how it represents political and strategic adjustments under Erdoğan's leadership (Baskarada, 2014). The concept of competitive authoritarianism by Esen & Gumuscu (2016) is also involved in this research and is crucial in understanding Türkiye's leadership style and political structure. Based on this framework, we can understand why democratic institutions can still survive in a system where the majority party has disproportionate control over political decisions that typically benefit them (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). By deconstructing Turkish foreign policy within this framework, the research can determine how Erdoğan's leadership has altered the domestic and foreign policy agenda, particularly in the context of the Syrian crisis.

### 3.3 Data Collection

#### Primary Data Sources

1. Speeches and Public Statements: President Erdogan has delivered five significant speeches, which were analyzed in terms of rhetoric, ideological foundations, and strategic objectives, particularly Turkiye's role in Syria and regional geopolitics.
2. Semi-Structured Interviews: Key individuals interviewed in depth through semi-structured interviews, including: A representative from the AK Party to provide insights into the party's political discourse and policies regarding Syria, and three Syrian refugees who have been residing in Turkiye. These interviews provide an exclusive perspective on the impact of Turkish foreign policy toward Syria over the years, compared to those directly affected by it.

**Table 3.1 List of Interviewees**

| No | Category       | Number of informants | Position/ Status                                                 | Interview Location                        | Date                |
|----|----------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1  | AK Party       | 1                    | Head of the international relations unit of AK Party<br>Istanbul | Phone                                     | 20 June 2025        |
| 2  | Syrian Refugee | 3                    | 1 Labour                                                         | Offline interview<br>(Sakarya University) | 17-18 March<br>2025 |
|    |                |                      | 2 Student                                                        |                                           |                     |

3. Questionnaire: online questionnaire conducted via Google Forms, completed by 20 Syrian refugees residing in Turkiye with the status of student and labour. The criteria for respondents were refugees from Syria who had settled in Turkiye during the conflict against Assad's opposition from 2011 to 2024 (13 years). The questionnaire asks questions about morality, political identity, and the Erdogan administration in the form of closed-ended multiple-choice questions (Reja, et al., 2003) regarding their perceptions of Turkiye's role in the Syrian conflict, which adds another dimension to the impact of Turkiye's foreign policy on refugees.

**Table 3.2 List of Correspondents**

| 20<br>Syrian<br>Refugees | Residence | Number of<br>Respondents | Date           |
|--------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|----------------|
|                          | Sakarya   | 12                       | 9-25 June 2025 |
|                          | Izmir     | 1                        |                |
|                          | Istanbul  | 5                        |                |
|                          | Bartın    | 2                        |                |

The combination of interviews and questionnaires offered a comprehensive view of how Turkish foreign policy and the ideological strategies of the Erdogan administration are shaped by foreign policy in Syria. Interviews help uncover internal mental shifts, strategic considerations, and political rhetoric behind the foreign policy actions of the authorities, while questionnaires provide additional insights into the effects of foreign policy on its direct constituents.

### **Secondary Data Collection**

However, in this research, it has its primary data and sources, secondary data for its richness of data, and accurate results are also carefully collected and used to provide the detailed context and depth to the literature on Turkish foreign policy and the geopolitical realities in the Middle East. The secondary data includes reputable academic articles and research, books, and very important media reports related to the matter and topic. In this regard, secondary data helped this research's results and also provided a comparative perspective on Türkiye's evolving role in the Middle East (Heaton, 2008).

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

As this research implemented thematic analysis, it is based on speeches, interviews, and surveys (Lochmiller, 2021). This approach reveals patterns of consistency in information, including Erdogan's focus on Türkiye's historical legacy, the nature of Islam, regional influence, and national security. Analyzing the mentioned data helps the research to uncover how these themes influence each other and shape Türkiye's foreign policy options, providing a multifaceted picture of political, ideological, and leadership processes.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Academic ethical standards are firmly followed in this research in terms of data collection and in the entire process in order to avoid controversy because of the sensitivity and respect of academics. The interviews were done in a language most comfortable to the participants. All the informants were made aware of the intention of the study and advised to request any confidentiality as they so wished. Subjects have also authorized the researcher to use their names in the research. The participants were also informed of the right to withdraw their consent to take part in the research at any time they wish and will not suffering any adverse outcome. The set of such ethical considerations makes this research respectful of and rights of each of the subjects involved.

### **3.6 Possible Limitations**

Several limitations are also observed in this research. Limited access to high-level government officials or members of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is one of the main limitations of this study. This could limit the depth and richness of information in interviews with political elites in this research. Furthermore, as this research focused on interpretations related to foreign policy, it was not easy to find objective statistics relevant to the field of research under a competitive authoritarian regime.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### **Turkiye's Foreign Policy Transformation towards Syria: Leadership Strategy and Humanitarian Diplomacy**

This chapter presents core findings according to the data, which are organised thematically to answer the main question, “**How has Erdogan's leadership influenced the transformation of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria?**” Based on an analysis of speeches and semi-structured interviews, three interrelated dimensions were identified. These dimensions highlight the various ways in which Erdogan's leadership has influenced Türkiye's foreign policy and its regional influence in the context of the Syrian conflict. The transformation referred to significant and multidimensional changes in Türkiye's foreign policy and its role in the region under Erdogan's leadership in this research. These changes include not only shifts in the country's foreign policy but also shifts in decision-making processes, political ideology, and strategic priorities. The three main discussions outlined are: (1) Türkiye's Foreign Policy Transformation towards Syria under Erdogan's Leadership; (2) Erdogan's Foreign Policy Leadership Orientation; (3) Humanitarian Diplomacy as A Tool for Legitimacy Policy; and (4) Synergy in Leadership and Humanitarian Diplomacy.

#### **4.1 Türkiye's Foreign Policy Transformation towards Syria under Erdogan's Leadership**

The process of change in Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan can be analysed in three basic stages: opposition to Assad, military actions, and a shift in diplomatic relations. Both domestic and global factors appear to have played a role in changing the priorities and tactics evident in each phase.

**Table 4.1 Turkish Foreign Policy Timeline towards Syria (2011-2024)**

| Phase                      | Year             | Key Event                                     | Policy Change                           | Result                                            | Source              |
|----------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Opposition to Assad</b> | <b>2011-2013</b> | Called for Assad to resign                    | Dropped "zero problems with neighbors." | Relations with Syria collapsed                    | (D'Alema, 2017)     |
|                            | <b>2014</b>      | Supported FSA and welcomed refugees           | Backed Sunni opposition                 | Over 3 million Syrian refugees entered Türkiye    | (Kirişci, 2014)     |
|                            | <b>2015</b>      | Shot down a Russian jet                       | First open conflict with Russia         | Russian sanctions; tourism and trade losses       | (Taşpınar, 2016)    |
| <b>Military Action</b>     | <b>2016</b>      | Launched Euphrates Shield operation (vs ISIS) | Created "safe zones" in Syria           | Captured Jarabulus and Al-Bab                     | (Kioussis, 2020)    |
|                            | <b>2018</b>      | Started Operation Olive Branch (Afrin)        | Targeted Kurdish YPG                    | Gained control of the Afrin area                  | (Kösebalaban, 2021) |
|                            | <b>2019</b>      | Operation Peace Spring                        | Attacked YPG after U.S. troops withdrew | Faced EU sanctions; captured Tel Abyad            | (Cengiz, 2020)      |
| <b>Diplomatic Shift</b>    | <b>2020</b>      | Joined Astana talks with Russia & Iran        | Accepted their influence in Syria       | Fragile ceasefire in Idlib                        | (Ibold, 2019)       |
|                            | <b>2021–2024</b> | Invested in rebuilding in N. Syria            | Used aid projects as a bargaining tool  | Built schools and hospitals in rebel areas        | (Altunisik, 2023)   |
|                            | <b>2022–2024</b> | Held talks with Assad's regime                | Tried normalizing relations             | Trade restarted, but full diplomacy still lacking | (TRT Haber, 2025)   |

- Before Erdogan
- Erdogan's Era

#### 4.1.1 Phase I: Opposition to Assad (2011-2013)

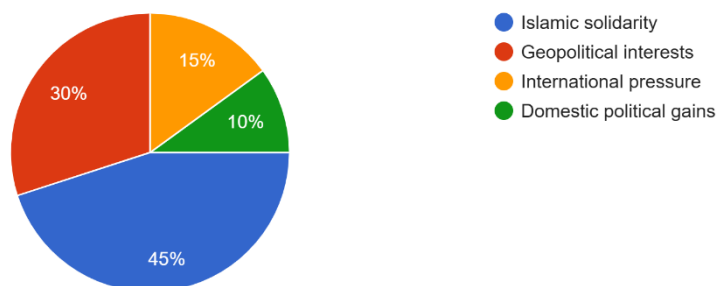
In the early stages of the Syrian war, Türkiye, a country that had long enjoyed close ties with Syria, found itself at odds with the Assad government. This was in stark contrast to Türkiye's recently adopted policy of 'no problems with neighbours,' which had been a pillar of Turkish foreign policy in the early 2000s under Erdogan's leadership. During this period, intervention in Syria began, and Türkiye issued strong calls for regime change in the country, particularly after the escalation of repression against demonstrators. At the time, Erdogan was serving as prime minister, and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu was among the most vocal figures urging Assad to step down and openly supporting the Syrian opposition (D Alema, 2017).

As the Syrian government responded to popular protests through repression, Türkiye began accepting Syrian refugees in 2011 and implemented an open-border policy, marking the start of its humanitarian involvement in the crisis (Kirişci, 2014). This was accompanied by the expansion of legal provisions known as temporary protection for refugees, providing shelter for hundreds of thousands of Syrians. By 2014, the number of refugees entering Türkiye peaked at over 3 million, reflecting a desire to provide humanitarian assistance and play an active role in internal events in Syria. The motivation at this stage was a combination of morally driven cases, particularly Islamic solidarity used to support Türkiye, and geopolitical pragmatism regarding regional stability.

**Figure 4.1 Türkiye's Primary Motivation for Accepting Syrian Refugees**

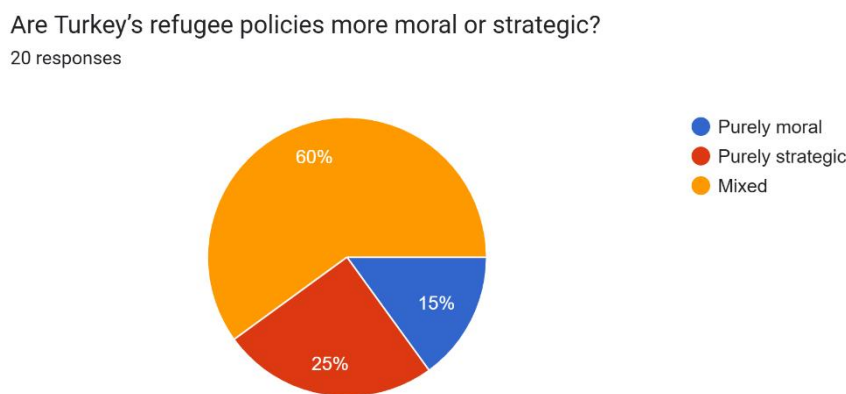
In your opinion, what is Turkey's PRIMARY motivation for accepting Syrian refugees?

20 responses



This is also supported by questionnaire results, where 45% of respondents stated that the primary motivation for Türkiye accepting Syrian refugees was Islamic solidarity, while 30% cited geopolitical interests as the driving force behind the decision. These statistics show how Turkish government activities are influenced by humanitarian desires (Islamic values) and business interests in terms of regional stability.

**Figure 4.2 Türkiye's Refugee Policy Decision**



In addition, the majority of respondents (60%) believed that Türkiye's refugee policy is a combination of moral and strategic interests. This demonstrates the holistic strategy Türkiye has adopted in dealing with the refugee crisis, which is based on humanitarian diplomacy and national interests.

#### **4.1.2 Phase 2: Military Action (2016-2019)**

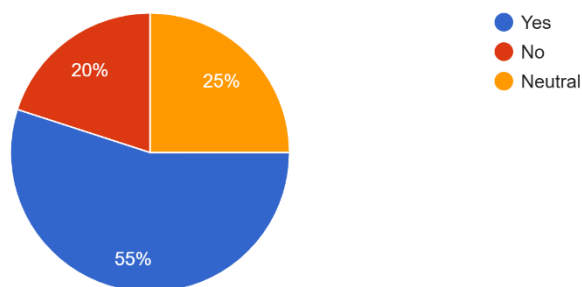
The next phase of Türkiye's policy in Syria was marked by a shift towards military intervention. This began in 2016 and took the form of Operation Euphrates Shield, a process launched to eliminate ISIS terrorists in zones along the Turkish-Syrian border and establish safe zones in Syria. This operation marked a change in Türkiye's approach from a diplomatic approach to a litigious approach involving direct military involvement, in response to the growing security threat from Kurdish groups such as the YPG, which Türkiye considers to be an offshoot of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) (Kosebalaban, 2021).

This intervention continued when Turkiye sent troops to Operation Olive Branch in 2018 to fight Kurdish forces in Afrin, and then, when US troops were withdrawn, Turkiye launched Operation Peace Spring in 2019. This latest military operation was carried out to take control of YPG-held areas, strengthen Turkiye's position against Kurdish forces, and secure its southern border against the possibility of Kurdish autonomy in the future. This is in line with Erdogan's statement that *"Our cross-border operations have one and only one aim to protect our homeland and our citizens from terrorist attacks. Neither the PKK nor the groups linked to ISIS in Syria are legitimate counterparts for our country; on the contrary, they are our enemies"* (Haber Global, 2024) However, these activities have caused significant friction with the European Union and the United States, which have condemned Turkiye's military actions and the humanitarian consequences of its measures against civilians.

The mixed reactions of refugees to the shift towards military intervention are shown in the table above. One refugee argued that Turkiye's policy in Syria was based at least in part on domestic political considerations to win votes and rally nationalism (Raca Hasanatu, 2025).

**Figure 4.3 Turkiye's Military Operations Were Meant to Divert Attention from Economic Crises**

Are Turkey's Syria military operations meant to divert attention from economic crises?  
20 responses



Not only that, according to questionnaire results, 55% of respondents believe that one of the motives behind Turkiye's military operations was actually to divert attention from domestic economic crises. This finding provides further

evidence that domestic political considerations were a driving factor in determining foreign policy in the region during that era.

#### **4.1.3 Phase 3: Diplomatic Shift (2020–2024)**

Since 2020, Türkiye has begun to adjust its policy towards Syria by shifting its efforts from military to diplomatic. This change of direction became clear as Türkiye, which had joined the three-party Astana peace process alongside Russia and Iran, sought to enforce a ceasefire and stabilise the situation in Syria (Cengiz, 2020). This phase represents a gradual shift from military engagement to diplomacy, as Türkiye began to acknowledge the failure of its military policy in Syria and sought a more realistic way to protect its national interests. In the following years, Türkiye sought to normalise its relations with the Assad regime, starting in 2022 with negotiations. The goal is to ease tensions and restore diplomatic and trade relations, although full normalisation is unlikely due to ongoing disputes over Syria's future and the role of Kurdish forces there (Ibold, 2019).

As shown in **Figure 4.2**, 60% of respondents believe that Türkiye's policy towards Syria is not entirely humanitarian in certain cases or purely strategic, meaning that the shift towards a diplomatic approach was caused by domestic and external pressures. This finding suggests that Türkiye's diplomatic outcomes, particularly in relation to its participation in peace negotiations, are more strategic in nature and not entirely based on moral or even humanitarian considerations.

In the big picture, the transformation of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria over the years has been subject to complex humanitarian issues, national security interests, and changes in the domestic political nature of the country. Initially, humanitarian desires to help the Syrian opposition and accept millions of Syrian refugees turned into security and nationalist interests, especially regarding the Kurdish issue. However, there are now signs of a return to diplomacy, and Türkiye is seeking to reconcile its ambitions in the region with international political realities and national issues.

These arguments and analyses are supported by data provided by the questionnaire, which gives a complex picture of how Türkiye approaches its foreign

policy and international relations, particularly in the region. It is stated that Türkiye's actions are a mix of strategic interests and humanitarian diplomacy influenced by internal political and geopolitical factors. This transformation highlights Türkiye's shifting political position in the Middle East and its efforts to navigate the regional conflict labyrinth while protecting its security and influence.

The findings indicate that Türkiye's independent foreign policy towards Syria is certainly influenced by Erdogan's leadership style and ideological tactics in the country's foreign policy. Significantly, the findings of this research validate previous research on the importance of leadership characteristics in determining foreign policy, particularly in non-democratic or authoritarian contexts, as well as the instrumentalisation of humanitarian diplomacy. The theory known as Neoclassical Realism, which demonstrates the power of interaction between external systemic pressures on the domestic aspects of leadership perception, can be seen in Türkiye's response to the crisis in Syria. As postulated by Rose (1998), the internal organisational structure of leadership plays a major role in how states respond to external threats. The theoretical framework used in this research proved to be valid in relation to Türkiye as one of the countries involved in the intervention in Syria due to Erdogan's personal vision, which includes neo-Ottoman ideology along with his national security interests.

#### **4.2 Erdogan's Foreign Policy Leadership Orientation**

This section discusses Erdogan's leadership style as a key determining factor. The transformation of Türkiye's foreign policy, especially towards Syria, cannot be understood without considering Erdogan's personal characteristics and leadership style. Erdogan's orientation or leadership style, which includes 'centralized decision-making, assertiveness, pragmatism, and a deep-rooted neo-Ottoman ideology,' has become one of the main variables influencing Turkish foreign policy, particularly towards Syria. Neoclassical realism is used as a useful concept to explain this phenomenon in the sense that systemic pressures affecting the system are combined with domestic characteristics of the system, especially leadership strength, to influence foreign policy decisions. This theory helped understand why, despite external pressures such as the Syrian conflict or the emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), which is also known as the Daesh

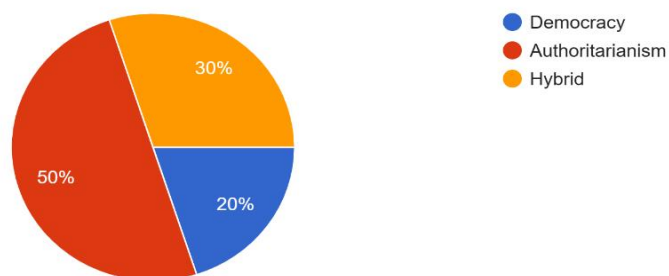
group, Türkiye's foreign policy is heavily influenced by Erdogan's leadership characteristics and Turkish political approaches.

#### 4.2.1 Centralisation of Decision-Making

One of the most significant shifts in Turkish foreign policy has been the **centre of decision-making** in the presidency. Erdogan strengthened his dominance over foreign policy with the transition to a presidential system in 2017, following a constitutional referendum that strengthened the president's powers and centralised foreign policy decision-making in Erdogan's hands (OSCE, 2017). Through this new structure, Erdogan gained almost absolute authority over foreign and military policy, while traditional institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Parliament have been sidelined (Esen & Gumuscu, 2018). This has reduced the influence of traditional diplomatic institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and decision-making is now largely centred on Erdogan himself and his inner circle.

**Figure 4.4 Does Türkiye's Syria policy *democracy or authoritarianism*?**

Does Turkey's Syria policy reflect democracy or authoritarianism?  
20 responses

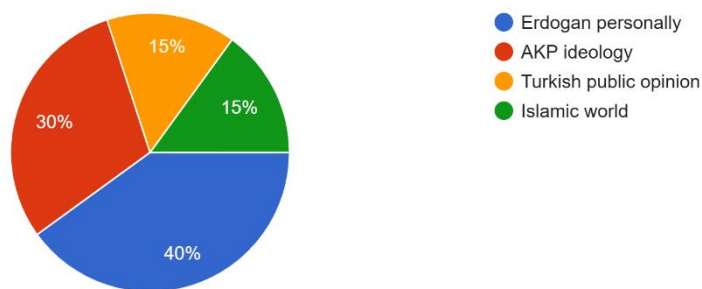


According to responses, half of the respondents believe Erdogan is the main decision-maker in handling Syria, demonstrating how personal foreign policy has become. Interviews with AK Party officials further confirmed this, as expressed by one representative who said that *“foreign policy is now increasingly influenced by Erdogan's views, with other actors in the institution playing a marginal role in influencing this policy area”* (Merve Ege Aktaş, 2025). This

trend can be linked to a global trend towards the formation of authoritarian regimes, in which foreign policy is a tool for gaining power. The main result in this regard is that the centralisation of foreign policy decision-making has allowed Erdogan to pursue a more personal and sometimes impulsive foreign policy, particularly concerning Syria.

**Figure 4.5 Turkiye's Moral Narrative on Syria**

Who most influences Turkey's moral narrative on Syria?  
20 responses



This centralisation of decision-making is also felt by Syrian refugees in Turkiye. According to a questionnaire, 40% of respondents believe that Erdogan himself influences Turkiye's moral stance in Syria, demonstrating a direct link between personal influence and Turkish policy. This centralisation means that Turkiye's foreign policy is more individualistic, with Erdogan's vision determining the country's direction even above the bureaucratic sources involved in diplomatic negotiations with other countries.

According to Neoclassical Realism theory, internal processes and dynamics can resolve foreign policy determinants with affirmative results, with variables including centralisation of leadership. Rose (1998) suggests that foreign policy decisions are not only influenced by external pressures but also depend on the characteristics of the state in question, including leadership style and available decision-making mechanisms. In the Turkish context, Erdogan's exclusive role in foreign policy has significantly influenced Turkiye's foreign policy toward Syria and other issues related to the region. By undermining the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and making foreign policy the domain of the executive branch,

Erdogan ensures that his interests and views are directly projected into Turkiye's foreign activities.

#### **4.2.2 Erdogan's leadership style: assertive, pragmatic, and ideological**

Erdogan's leadership has radically changed Turkish foreign policy, as Turkiye has moved beyond its passive character in the region towards becoming an active regional power in the Middle East. This transformation is supported by Erdogan's leadership style, which adapts to broader geopolitical dynamics, such as internal politics, the security situation in the region, and new political decisions in the economic and humanitarian spheres. Gorener and Ucal (2011) argue that Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan has shifted its main priority from a Western orientation to the formation of an independent foreign policy based on Islamic solidarity.

Erdogan's unique leadership style, described as aggressive, pragmatic, and ideological due to his Neo-Ottoman ideology, has changed the way Turkiye deals with Syria. All these characteristics have enabled Erdogan to shift Turkish foreign policy from being an ally of the West to becoming a regional power and a unifying force for Islam. This is because, as mentioned by Hazir (2022), Erdogan's political and ideological agenda is now more centred on Turkiye in terms of independence and regional leadership. This process can be seen through interviews with AK Party officials, in which a representative said that Erdogan's approach to the situation in Syria is related to protecting Turkiye's sovereignty and showing that Turkiye is the saviour of Muslims in the region. The quality of Erdogan's leadership not only redefines Turkish foreign policy but also enables Turkiye to take a more aggressive stance in Syria, with domestic ideology influencing foreign policy decision-making.

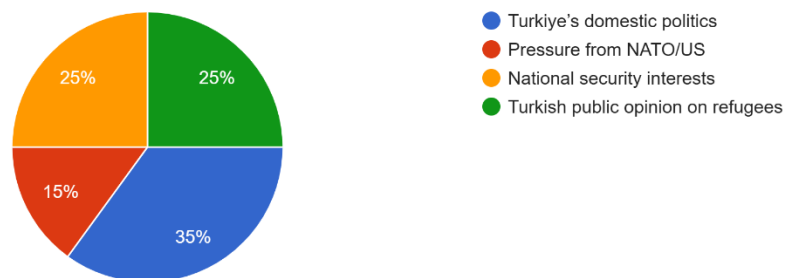
Erdogan's leadership style is widely seen as **assertive, pragmatic, and ideologically driven**. Erdogan's assertiveness is evident in his speeches and activities, in which the Turkish president tends to describe his country's role in Syria as a moral and strategic necessity. Erdogan has chosen the context of the Syrian conflict as the front line in the war against injustice, while emphasising Turkiye's historical ties with Syria and its moral responsibility towards its

brothers in Syria. *“We’ve always stood for protecting the territorial integrity and unity of the country. Of course, we’ve never hesitated to raise our voice and show our reaction against injustice, lawlessness, oppression, and cruelty. But we’ve never let it turn into blind hostility or open enmity. Anyone who knows the 13-year history of the events in Syria is a witness to Türkiye’s sincere struggle for a fair peace.”* (Haber Global, 2024).

Aggression can also be observed in Türkiye’s military actions in Syrian territory under the names of Operations Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch (2018), and Peace Spring (2019). These military actions were carried out despite strong opposition from NATO partners and even the European Union, and were largely aimed at limiting Kurdish autonomy, which Erdogan considers a threat due to its links with the PKK (Kosebalaban, 2021). This is supported by questionnaire results showing that 25% of Syrian refugees feel that Türkiye’s military operations in Syria are caused by national security issues, particularly related to Kurdish separatism.

**Figure 4.6 Factors that Most Drive Türkiye’s Policy Shifts Toward Syria**

Which factors most drive Türkiye’s policy shifts toward Syria?  
20 responses



Erdogan has clear ambitions that Türkiye should become a regional hegemon, as can be seen from his rhetoric, he states that *“Türkiye is bigger than just Türkiye”* (Middle East Eye, 2024). This involvement shows a reaction to security threats and an attempt to demonstrate influence in the region. This leads to the conclusion that Erdogan’s assertiveness in Syria is supported by security

needs on the one hand and, on the other, by a larger ideological vision of making Türkiye a strong and independent regional leader.

This demonstrates a pragmatic strategy and how Erdogan has successfully aligned ideology with national security interests. For example, Erdogan's initial support for Syrian opposition groups shifted to a more security-oriented approach after the emergence of Kurdish militias (YPG), which Türkiye considers a serious security threat on its southern border. This pragmatism is further confirmed by an interview with a member of the AK party who believes that Türkiye's military activities in Syria are not only driven by ideological or humanitarian reasons, but also by security considerations (Merve Ege Aktaş, 2025).

These interrelated characteristics can be considered the cause of Erdogan's aggressive, pragmatic, and ideological leadership in Syria. Türkiye's interventionist policy is influenced by its involvement in neo-Ottomanism and the need to protect Muslim communities in the region. At the same time, pragmatism allows for strategic shifts, especially in the face of Kurdish and ISIS threats, so that national security remains the primary goal of Turkish foreign policy regardless of ideological commitments.

#### **4.2.3 Neo-Ottomanism and Erdogan's Regional Leadership Ambitions**

One of the most distinctive aspects of Erdogan's leadership style is his neo-Ottomanism, particularly in relation to Syria. Neo-Ottomanism emphasises Türkiye's history in the Middle East, the Balkans, and North Africa, and argues that Türkiye should dominate these regions by becoming a dominant power. Erdogan's foreign policy rhetoric often refers to Türkiye's Ottoman legacy, in which his country was considered a great power in the region with an obligation to protect the oppressed, especially Muslims in the Middle East.

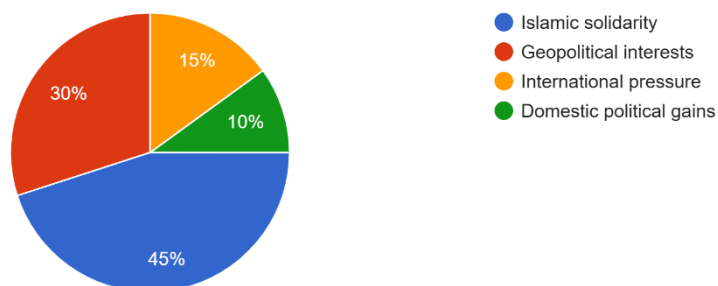
Erdogan's practical approach to decision-making has helped Türkiye shift its focus from supporting regime change to upholding territorial integrity and security along Türkiye's southern border. At the same time, the ideological aspect of Erdogan's leadership is also evident in his support for neo-Ottomanism, a postulate that emphasises Türkiye's central role in the Middle East. According to

Hazir (2022), Erdogan's neo-Ottoman vision is not only about restoring historical glory but also about creating a new regional order to take the initiative in countering Western powers and local rivals. This aligns with Neoclassical Realism, which states that leaders with ideological beliefs can influence a country's foreign policy decisions, especially when those beliefs align with national security issues.

Neo-Ottomanism is one of the key factors influencing Türkiye's view of Syria. Its leadership is built on the struggle to restore Türkiye as the guardian of Sunni Muslims around the world and the protector of the Muslim world. This is usually based on a moral obligation resulting from the oppression of Muslims in Syria.

**Figure 4.7 Türkiye's Primary Motivation for Accepting Syrian Refugees**

In your opinion, what is Turkey's PRIMARY motivation for accepting Syrian refugees?  
20 responses



This is evidenced by questionnaire data showing that 45% respondents of Syrian refugees believe that Turkish foreign policy towards Syria is guided by Islamic Solidarity, which is one of the visions of what Türkiye's role as a regional leader should be, as proposed by Erdogan. This balancing act is reflected in Erdogan's decisions that focus on projecting Turkish power in the Middle East, particularly in Syria. However, in **Figure 4.6**, critics argue that this policy also has a domestic political impact 35% of Syrian refugees say that Erdogan is using the Syria policy to divert attention from domestic economic problems in Türkiye. This shows that Erdogan's ideological foreign policy can be directed towards his political interests in strengthening his power among conservatives. In conclusion,

Erdogan's Neo-Ottoman rhetoric in Syria has ideological and domestic political objectives, continuing Türkiye's regional interests as support from the conservative constituency depends on these beliefs.

Erdogan's rule is also motivated by the Neo-Ottoman policy of rebuilding Türkiye as the center state of the Muslim world on the basis of its Ottoman legacy (Davutoğlu, 2001). This policy is reflected in Erdogan's discourses, in which he frequently invokes the Ottoman legacy and frames Türkiye's interventions in Syria as a moral obligation to rescue Sunni Muslims and preserve Islamic solidarity (Hazır, 2022). He regularly addresses Syrians as "*brothers and sisters*" in the shared history of the Ottoman Empire, recalling the cultural and historical ties that bind Türkiye to the region (Haber Global, 2024).

Critics of Erdogan's Neo-Ottoman policy have argued that the policy is primarily motivated by domestic political factors in the form of appealing to Islamist, conservative voters. According to the Syrian refugee interviewee, he believes that Erdogan uses his Syria policy to distract from Türkiye's worsening economic crisis (*Abdul Malik El Avad, 2025*). Erdogan's anti-West, pro-Islamist rhetoric resonates with his voter base, consolidating his support among conservative voters while furthering his agenda of Türkiye as a regional power (Hazır, 2022).

Erdogan's foreign policy is guided by the Strategic Depth Doctrine by Ahmet Davutoglu, which argues that Türkiye's geopolitical weight lies in its Ottoman history (Davutoğlu, 2001). From this perspective, Erdogan has attempted to increase Türkiye's influence in the Middle East and beyond by using historical, cultural, and religious affinities to enhance Türkiye's role in the region.

His military actions, such as Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch, are seen not only as security measures but also as Türkiye's moral obligation to protect Sunni Muslims from the Assad regime and Kurdish militias. This is also evident in Erdogan's speeches, in which he emphasises that Türkiye must protect the territorial integrity and, in particular, the unity of the Syrian people because of its historical responsibility:

*"We have always been a window to see new things with a caring attitude and wise thinking. We remain firm in the same position today. Once again I say: our brothers, the Syrian people, all from every group and belief. They are our close friends. As far as the eye can see, the holy tombs, bridges, fountains, inns, and mosques that adorn every corner of Syria are silent witnesses to our brotherhood that has existed since ancient times"* (Haber Global, 2024).

Neoclassical Realism helps to understand this in an internal context such as leadership ideology and national identity. Thanks to the above, domestic factors create a domino effect in determining a country's response to foreign influence (Rose 1998). This occurs through the variables of national identity, leadership ideology, and national security beliefs. Erdogan's neo-Ottoman vision has directly influenced Türkiye's policy towards Syria, where his leadership and role are dominated by a focus on regional hegemony and the protection of Türkiye's interests relative to other international actors through the context of diplomacy.

#### **4.2.4 Erdogan's Perspective on Threats and Türkiye's Role in Syria**

The threats perceived by Erdogan have had a significant critical influence in shaping Türkiye's foreign policy, particularly in encouraging its participation in Syria. Erdogan's worldview, which tends to view security issues as existential threats, has played a major role in driving Türkiye's military operations and diplomatic changes in the region. The two main threats that Erdogan has consistently raised are Kurdish separatism and the emergence of ISIS. Both are considered not only regional problems, but direct existential threats to Türkiye's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national security (Kösebalaban, 2021; Taşpınar, 2016).

##### **A. Kurdish separatism and its impact on Türkiye's security**

Erdogan is deeply concerned about Kurdish separatism, and this has played a key role in his policy towards Syria. The presence of Kurdish militias in Syria, particularly the YPG (People's Protection Units), is seen by Erdogan as a direct extension of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a Kurdish separatist party that has been in conflict with Türkiye for decades. Erdogan has always

insisted that Kurdish autonomy on Türkiye's southern border would threaten national security. In his speeches, he often emphasises that Türkiye's borders and territorial integrity must be defended at all costs. According to one of Erdogan's public speeches, *'Our cross-border activities are focused on and aimed at protecting our homeland and our citizens from terrorists. The PKK and ISIS-affiliated organisations in Syria cannot be considered our partners; on the contrary, they are enemies of our state'* (Haber Global, 2024).

This statement reflects Erdogan's view that the presence of the YPG in Syria could be used as a haven for Kurdish separatists and could trigger similar actions in Türkiye. To prevent this, Erdogan has implemented a military policy in Syria, which has led to the Euphrates Shield Operation (2016), the Olive Branch Operation (2018), and the Peace Spring Operation (2019). These operations aim to establish a zone of control and remove Kurdish forces along the Turkish border, confirming that Erdogan bases his foreign policy on security (Kösebalaban, 2021).

Erdogan's policy objective in Syria is to protect Turkish territory from international and local aggression, particularly by Kurdish separatist movements. This aligns with the Neoclassical Realism theory, which emphasizes that leaders' perceptions of security threats significantly influence a country's foreign policy decisions (Rose, 1998). Erdogan's security considerations have been a dominant theme in deciding that military action takes priority over diplomacy with Kurdish groups in Syria.

Not only is the nature of this threat perceived as a regional issue, but it is also considered an attack on Türkiye's sovereignty. This is evident in the rhetoric of Turkish intervention, where on various occasions, Erdogan has described Türkiye's military intervention as a just retaliation against those who seek to undermine Türkiye's territorial supremacy.

## B. The Threat of Terrorism

The emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and its potential to disrupt stability in southern Türkiye is the second existential threat emphasised by Erdogan. ISIS's conquest of territory in Iraq and Syria has pushed the group

closer to the Turkish border, posing a major threat to Erdogan. According to Erdogan, the presence of ISIS in Syria is a direct threat to Turkiye's security and the stability of the wider region.

In one of his speeches, Erdogan clearly explained why Turkiye must intervene militarily against ISIS: *"No one can expect us to tolerate the separatist traitors who have been emboldened by different excuses. Insha'Allah, in the coming months, we will take new steps without considering whose words or threats"* (24 TV, 2024).

This rhetoric demonstrates that security is Erdogan's top priority in the Syrian conflict, where the increased presence of ISIS in Syria is seen as a direct threat to Turkiye's internal stability. As a result, Turkiye has also conducted several operations against ISIS, which has an established presence in northern Syria. These activities are part of the anti-ISIS campaign, but also serve to demonstrate that Turkiye has a military role to play in an area it considers strategically important (Cengiz, 2020). This shows that when Erdogan made his decision, the threat of ISIS terrorism was considered very high, as it aimed to disrupt Turkiye's stability and threaten national security issues.

Although in the early stages of the Syrian conflict, Turkiye demonstrated a response driven by humanitarian issues, such as hosting millions of Syrian refugees in Turkiye and allowing opposition groups to organise against the Syrian regime, the humanitarian approach was not appropriate when the security threat posed by Kurdish groups and ISIS to Turkiye forced a shift towards a more security-oriented policy. Central to this policy shift is Erdogan's understanding of the threat, which has been present in his vision since active military intervention was considered a means of addressing external and internal challenges.

Erdogan is powerful enough to position Turkiye as a guarantor of stability in the region and as a defender of its territorial integrity. In his speech, he stated: *"The new operations we will carry out not only seek revenge for the bloodshed by our martyrs and the lives we will have lost, but also secure our future. When it comes to the fight against terrorism, the survival of our country, the peace and security of our nation, everyone, regardless of their identity, either stand with us*

*or against us. There is no middle ground. There is no room for compromise, ignoring the grey area, or turning a blind eye"* (24 TV, 2024).

The interaction between threats and leadership patterns is explained by Neoclassical Realists, who rightly point out that foreign policy measures are influenced by a leader's personal beliefs and perceptions of national security. Erdogan's handling of the Syrian conflict is not only based on external influences but also reflects his prioritisation of security principles, which has led him to prioritise Türkiye's territorial integrity and national sovereignty over other factors. Based on the questionnaire findings, 55% of respondents agreed that Türkiye's military intervention in Syria was motivated by the need to defend Türkiye's borders from foreign aggression and attacks by Kurdish groups and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's perspective on the threats posed by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and Kurdish separatism has influenced Türkiye's foreign policy behaviour towards Syria, as perceived by Erdogan. Security-oriented foreign policy reflects his belief that maintaining territorial integrity and the security of Turkish citizens is of utmost importance. These perceived threats have been the direct response to military intervention in Syria, particularly Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, and Operation Peace Spring.

Erdogan's leadership has clearly demonstrated that foreign policy is not merely a response to external pressures, but is heavily influenced by internal factors and leadership ideas in general. Erdogan's responses to questionnaires and speeches prove that he prioritises national security threats (Kurdish separatism and ISIS activities) when deciding to intervene militarily in Syria. Neoclassical Realism theory offers a powerful tool for analysing how Erdogan's views on the development of these threats influence the formulation of his security-oriented foreign policy, which in turn demonstrates the impact of leadership perceptions in shaping a country's foreign policy direction.

### 4.3 Humanitarian Diplomacy as A Tool for Legitimacy Policy

Humanitarian diplomacy is an important aspect of Türkiye's foreign policy, especially with regard to the status of Syria. Türkiye has used a humanitarian approach as a means of strengthening and supporting its foreign policy during the provision of humanitarian aid, the implementation of an open-door policy towards refugees, and the process of encouraging other countries to accept a predetermined moral concept. In this section, this research discusses how humanitarian diplomacy as an instrument of soft power is used as a tool for global image and influence in legitimising Türkiye's foreign policy.

#### 4.3.1 Türkiye is the Largest Host Country for Syrian Refugees

**Table 4.2 The number of Syrian Refugees in Türkiye (2011-2025)**

| Year | Registered Syrian Refugees | Explanation                                                                    |
|------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2011 | 14.000                     | At the start of the crisis, the initial wave of Syrian refugees arrived.       |
| 2012 | >100.000                   | Rapid increase as violence escalated in Syria.                                 |
| 2013 | 500.000                    | Türkiye became one of the main host countries.                                 |
| 2014 | 1.5 Million                | Türkiye became the world's largest refugee-hosting country.                    |
| 2015 | 2.5 Million                | Continued escalation led to a dramatic rise in arrivals.                       |
| 2016 | 2.9 Million                | A temporary protection system was established for Syrians.                     |
| 2017 | 3.0 Million                | Continued growth, pressure on local infrastructure.                            |
| 2018 | 3.6 Million                | Peak population; integration and aid challenges intensified.                   |
| 2019 | 3.6 Million                | Over 200,000 granted Turkish citizenship                                       |
| 2020 | 3.6 Million                | The COVID-19 pandemic complicated humanitarian operations.                     |
| 2021 | 3.6 Million                | Situation remained largely unchanged; efforts focused on education and health. |

|      |              |                                                                              |
|------|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2022 | 3.5 Million  | Start of voluntary return programs; 100,000+ returnees estimated.            |
| 2023 | 3.47 Million | Gradual decrease due to resettlement and voluntary returns.                  |
| 2024 | 3.4 Million  | The trend continues with a small decrease, largely due to voluntary returns. |
| 2025 | 2.76 Million | Estimated further decrease, with many naturalized and some returning home.   |

Source: UNHCR, latest updated 01 May 2025

Since the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Türkiye's open-door policy has made it the largest host country for Syrian refugees in the world, with the number reaching 3.6 million Syrian refugees in 2018 (UNHCR, 2025). This policy was formulated as part of Türkiye's legacy of providing protection to the oppressed, based on Islamic solidarity and humanitarian principles (Karahana, 2020). Erdogan's speech supported this framework, saying: *"Our brothers and sisters, who fled the attacks, first came to our doorstep to save their lives. It is no small number, their number reached 3.7 million, but it has now dropped to 2.9 million. For 13 years, we have acted as hosts to these Syrian refugees. I say this openly not to complain, but because of our convictions and the bonds of neighbourliness we have, we welcomed them with open arms"* (Haber Global, 2024).

Over the past 13 years, Türkiye has been hosting Syrian refugees under the leadership of Erdogan, who, at the beginning of his presidency in 2014, successfully made Türkiye the country with the largest number of refugees in the world (Karahana, 2020). This policy is not merely a humanitarian gesture, but also a strategic soft power tool, positioning Türkiye as a leader in Muslim humanitarian initiatives (Hazır, 2022).

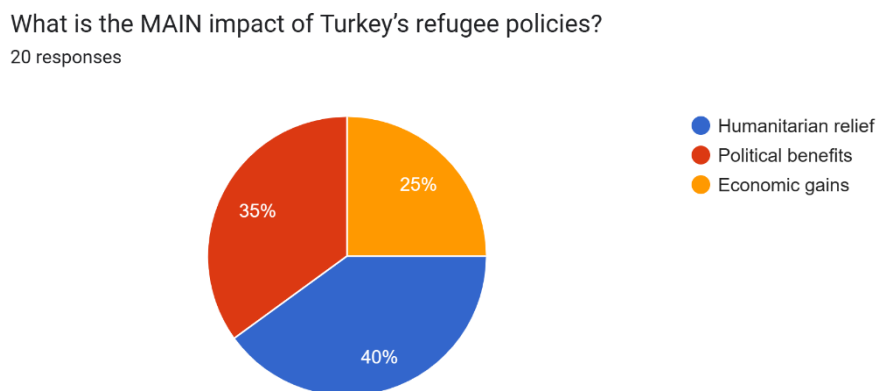
#### 4.3.2 The Open-Door Policy

Türkiye's actions in inviting refugees into its country through an open-door policy remain one of the most prominent manifestations of its foreign policy to date. Since the Syrian conflict erupted in 2011, Türkiye has become a host

country for millions of Syrian refugees, with over 3.6 million refugees sheltered in the country (Kirişci, 2014). This policy demonstrates Türkiye's commitment to humanitarian principles and, in addition, serves as a diplomatic tool to strengthen Türkiye's image as a country committed to the protection of refugees.

With this policy, Türkiye has allowed Syrian refugees to enter the country without serious restrictions and provided them with access to medical services, educational facilities and housing. Despite reviews of this policy in Türkiye due to the economic and social problems it has caused, it is considered to be the right policy, with Türkiye seen as a saviour for other Muslims exploited by the conflict in Syria. This policy is a soft power tool that strengthens Türkiye's image as a leader in humanitarian affairs and emphasises only Islamic ideological solidarity. Despite facing difficulties at the domestic level, it has succeeded in positioning Türkiye internationally as a country with moral leadership in the region.

**Figure 4.8 The Main Impact of Türkiye's Refugee Policy**



The existence of this framework is supported by questionnaire data showing that 40% of respondents consider humanitarian issues as one of the most significant factors behind Türkiye's open-door policy. Additionally, in **Figure 4.1**, 45% of respondents view Islamic solidarity as the primary driving factor.

#### **A. Political Utility**

The open-door policy is the main principle of Türkiye's response to the Syrian refugee crisis and assumes the unconditional acceptance of refugees, as

well as the provision of shelter and basic services for them. This policy has enabled Türkiye to take a moral stance in the region as a supporter of people who have been forced to flee, especially Syrians escaping violence. Türkiye has emphasised this behaviour as part of the Muslim Brotherhood and the humanitarian responsibility of the Erdogan government (Karahana, 2020). However, the open-door policy is not merely a humanitarian project but a tool of Türkiye's foreign policy aimed at proving Türkiye's leadership on the international stage and leveraging its soft power. Cihangir-Tetik & Mufitler-Bac (2021) argue that this policy is in line with the main principle of neo-Ottomanism, which states that Türkiye must be the leader of the Islamic world, so that the decisions taken by the president are in line with this vision.

This policy has also been used politically domestically as part of their exploitation. Interviews with Syrian refugees suggest that *“Erdogan’s refugee rhetoric is an attempt by politicians to win the support of conservative and Islamist voters in elections”* (Raca Hasanatu, 2025). Erdogan himself often presents the refugee issue as a moral obligation, but also attacks political opponents who oppose this strategy by accusing them of being racist or nationalist (Haber Global, 2024). This rhetoric not only portrays Türkiye as a moral leader in the region but also helps strengthen Erdogan’s support among key voter groups, especially conservatives.

Although the open-door policy theory is placed in the moral realm, it has attracted critical attention in various forms. According to Esen & Gmumuscu (2016), social dissatisfaction has increased alongside rising social tensions and economic issues stemming from hosting over 3.6 million refugees. Interviews with Syrian refugees describe the policy as unfair, citing increased *“competition between Turkish citizens and refugees”* (Abdul Malik El Avad, 2025). The economic costs of hosting such a large number of refugees have also caused public discontent, particularly due to pressure on housing, social services, and employment, which has affected local communities and urban areas in particular (UNHCR, 2023).

In addition, opposition parties have used this policy to criticise the Erdogan government, particularly during periods of economic recession. Political entities have also exploited anti-refugee rhetoric to gain public sympathy, portraying refugees in Turkiye as a burden on the state treasury (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). This division is an inherent part of Turkish society, as evidenced by the fact that the politically motivated implementation of the open-door policy has been used to achieve specific political goals, using humanitarian issues as a pretext.

The open-door policy is an example of how humanitarian diplomacy can be used not only as a tool for domestic political gain but also as a method of regional power projection. While strengthening Turkiye's image as a moral leader, this policy also creates political instability as refugee hosting has burdened the economy and social infrastructure. This policy framework by Erdogan is a political tactic that gives him a voice among conservative segments of society, but it causes discomfort among other segments. The multi-centric objectives of this refugee policy illustrate the complexity of Erdogan's political objectives in both foreign policy and domestic politics.

#### **4.3.3 Humanitarian Reality: Refugees' Views on Erdogan's Leadership**

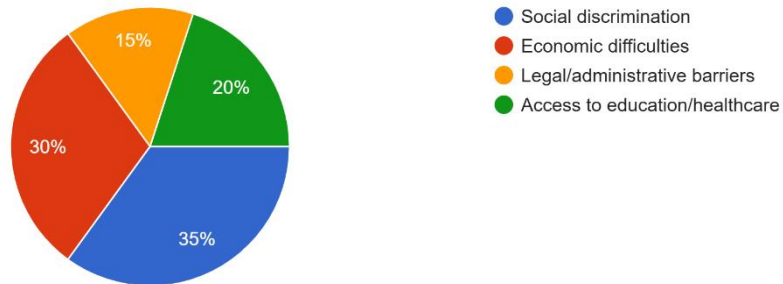
Syrian refugees' views on Turkish government policy under Erdogan's leadership leave an ambiguous impression, a mixture of gratitude, criticism and political awareness. Interviews and questionnaires reveal three key perceptions:

1. Discrepancy between rhetoric and reality: There is a discrepancy between reality and the way Turkiye is often portrayed by Erdogan as a moral leader for refugees.

**Figure 4.9 The Major Challenges Faced by Syrian Refugees in Turkiye**

What are the biggest challenges faced by Syrian refugees in Turkiye?

20 responses



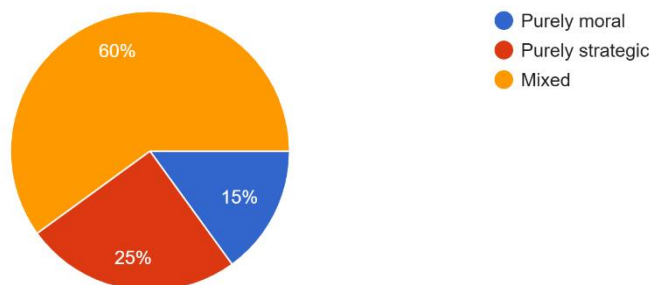
The chart shows that they were dissatisfied with the treatment they received in Turkiye, 35% refugees felt social discrimination, and another challenge in economic issues, and access to services such as education and healthcare. This highlights the disparity between Erdogan's rhetoric regarding refugees in terms of asylum provision and the experiences refugees face on the ground. This situation includes inequality and social exclusion.

2. Instrumentalization of Refugees: Refugees also see the open-door policy as a political tactic by Erdogan to strengthen his political base, particularly conservative voters.

**Figure 4.10 Turkiye's Refugee Policy**

Are Turkey's refugee policies more moral or strategic?

20 responses

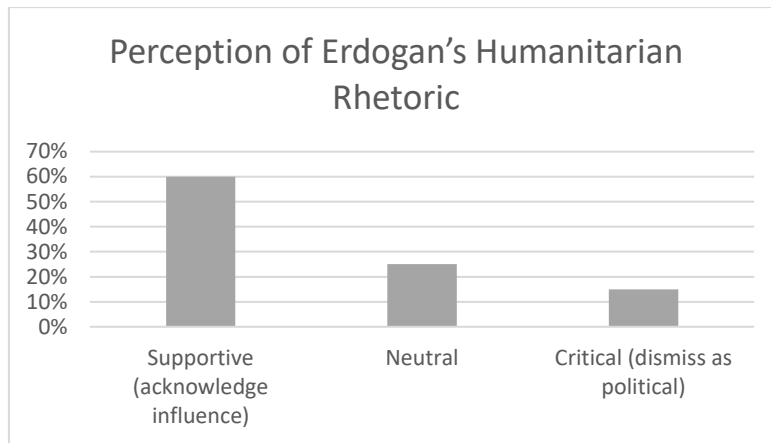


This chart shows that 60% of respondents believe that Türkiye's policy towards the refugee population is influenced by moral considerations and political strategy. According to a Syrian refugee, the protection provided by Türkiye is not entirely free from political motives, although they are grateful, they are aware of this (Büşra Cuma, 2025). This shows that despite strong humanitarian rhetoric, refugees also understand how they are being used by Erdogan to strengthen his leadership among his Islamic constituents.

3. Unrealized Expectations: Syrian refugees claim that their needs are often unmet despite the government's claims of providing housing and assistance. Nine out of every 20 respondents stated that they did not receive adequate assistance in terms of housing, medical care, and job opportunities. A refugee explained, *"They are very generous in Türkiye, but the reality on the ground is different, and we have not been able to meet our basic needs"* (Abdul Malik El Avad, 2025). The mismatch between the narrative and the reality of how difficult it is to be a refugee in Türkiye suggests that refugees' full access to Turkish society may be an issue.

These findings can be argued to support the ideology of humanitarian realism, where values are applied to achieve foreign policy solutions, even though those values operate under strategic political interests. For instance, while the policies implemented by Erdogan seem to portray Türkiye as a moral actor in the Syrian crisis, the reality of refugees reveals policies that are complex and driven by as many strategic objectives as the humanitarian reasons claimed.

**Figure 4.11 Humanitarian Rhetoric Perception**



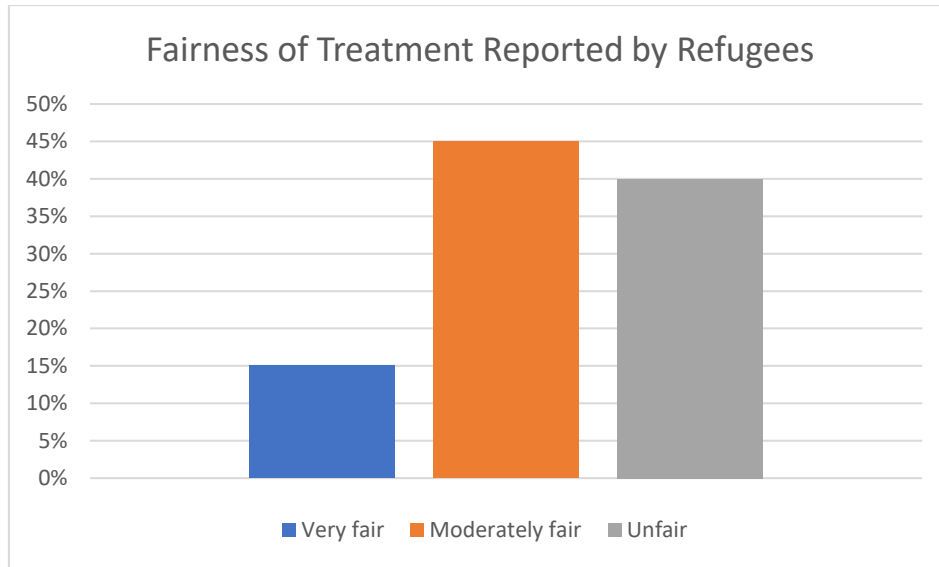
Source: Syrian Refugees Questionnaire, 2025

Empirical findings show that most interviewees (12 of the 20) recognized the strong impact of President Erdogan's moral rhetoric, specifically his invocations of Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwwah islamiyah*) and Türkiye's legacy as a haven for the persecuted. Such prevalence can be explained by the strategic framing of the refugee crisis by the government, both as a religious obligation and as a national virtue (Karahan & Karahan, 2020).

And yet, qualitative feedback reveals a more ambivalent sentiment. A refugee, for instance, had the following to say: *"We are thankful for Türkiye's protection, but we also know that it is political"* (Raca Hasanatu, 2025). This remark pinpoints the dual nature that exists within the discourse: however much the humanitarian discourse resonates with recipients, its politicization is ever more felt.

These findings reveal that, on the one hand, humanitarian rhetoric employed by the government is effectively appealing to both refugees and the public, securing Türkiye's image as a benevolent actor in the region. On the other hand, the political dimension of the refugee policy is also clear to the recipients, who recognize the instrumentalization of this rhetoric in the pursuit of political interests. This duality reveals the complexity of Türkiye's refugee policy, where humanitarianism is both an ethical justification and a tool for both domestic and international political calculation.

**Figure 4.12 Equity and Ambivalence in Refugee Assistance Programs**



Source: Syrian Refugees Questionnaire, 2025

The research shows significant concerns with the implementation of refugee aid programs, and more particularly with political fairness. Five of the interviewees made explicit connections between political allegiance to the AK Party and the delivery of assistance, indicating a patronage aspect in humanitarian aid provision. These findings position fundamental concerns regarding the distributional equity of aid and the politicization of refugee aid in Türkiye. In addition, only a minority (15%) of the participants described their treatment as "extremely fair," while the largest number (45%) provided a more qualified evaluation of their treatment being "fairly fair" (Interview Responses). The conditionality of responses contradicts the official narrative of unqualified hospitality and illustrates structural tensions between policy rhetoric and realities on the ground.

**The Long-Term Integration Ambivalence.** In spite of Erdogan's public assurance to provide long-term protection to refugees, summarized in pronouncements such as his commitment to stand by the refugees "until the end" (Yurttaş TV, 2022), the evidence speaks to significant doubt about the permanent status of refugees in Türkiye. Seven participants notably declined to comment on their residential security or prospects for obtaining citizenship, underscoring the structural ambiguities of Türkiye's refugee integration regime. This ambivalence

prevails even despite Türkiye's strategic naturalization processes, which extended citizenship to more than 200,000 Syrians through 2019 (UNHCR, 2025). Although this policy move was meant to afford some degree of permanent security to refugees, it has also caused domestic backlash, illustrating the challenges of reconciling humanitarian protection with the political and societal difficulties of integrating a sizable refugee population.

#### **4.3.4 Framing the narrative of the ummah (Türkiye as protector of Muslims)**

The moral discourse created by the government, especially in national and international media, is one of the key components of Türkiye's humanitarian diplomacy policy. Türkiye has repeatedly positioned itself as a defender of Muslims, especially in its handling of Syrian refugees and other humanitarian crises in Muslim-majority countries under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. These events have been disseminated through state-controlled media and social media, portraying Türkiye as a symbol of Islamic solidarity for oppressed Muslims.

This narrative serves several functions. The first is to legitimise Türkiye's foreign policy, positioning Türkiye as an ethical leader in the Middle East and more broadly. This framing helps Erdogan respond to criticism that Türkiye's actions in Syria are strategic, not humanitarian. In response, Erdogan justifies Türkiye's actions in Syria in fighting ISIS on the basis of Islamic solidarity. By portraying Türkiye as the protector of Muslims, Erdogan portrays Türkiye as the saviour of Islamic unity and a major power in the region, supporting oppressed Muslims around the world.

Erdogan's rhetoric often refers to Türkiye's humanitarian role, as seen in his speech: *"I also want to speak to the dear Syrian people: my beloved Syrian brothers and sisters, ..."* (Haber Global, 2024). This statement can be seen as a reflection of Türkiye's commitment to humanitarian aid, particularly in Syria, as well as a moral justification for its intervention. By defining Türkiye's actions within the framework of Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwwah Islamiyah*), Erdogan further strengthens the country's reputation as a leader in the Muslim world. Thus, Türkiye emerges as the protector of the rights of weak Muslims. Not only does

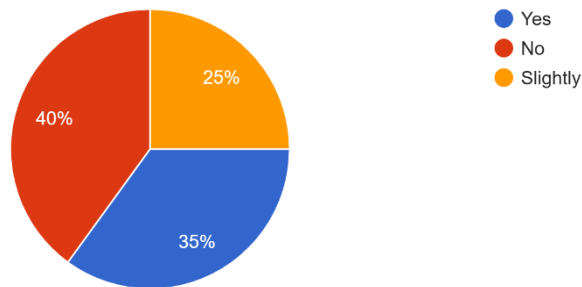
rhetoric about Islamic solidarity make Türkiye's foreign policy more legitimate, but it also strengthens Türkiye's position in the region.

By assuming the role of protector of Muslims, Türkiye can justify its intervention in Syria and the humanitarian aid it allocates with high moral motives. This narrative also contributes to the support Türkiye receives from other Muslim-majority countries, strengthening its position as a regional power and as a pioneer of Islamic unity. Additionally, this ethical construction plays a role in enhancing Türkiye's international image.

Given its humanitarian credentials and Islamic orientation, Türkiye seeks to protect its interests on the international stage to gain diplomatic advantages and enhance its standing, particularly among Muslim-majority countries. The role of protector of Muslims also positions Türkiye as a regional power, but as a moral authority and a good leader in the Middle East.

**Figure 4.13 Acceptance of Ummah's Narrative for Syrian Refugees**

Has the AKP's "Ummah" narrative increased acceptance of Syrians in Turkey  
20 responses



The AK Party's success in implementing the 'Ummah' narrative to influence public opinion towards Syrian refugees in Türkiye has received mixed responses, as revealed in questionnaire data. 35% of respondents agree that this approach has played a significant role in making the public accept Syrian refugees in Türkiye, in line with the argument that Türkiye's stance in helping Syrian refugees is driven by Islamic unity and moral obligation. However, 40% of respondents do not believe that the narrative has had a significant impact on how

society accepts refugees, indicating that moral considerations alone are insufficient to change deeply rooted attitudes. The remaining 25% of respondents stated that the narrative has not truly made a meaningful impact on increasing acceptance of Syrian refugees in Türkiye.

These findings suggest that while some residents may be influenced by the “Ummah” narrative, it is not sufficient to influence levels of acceptance of refugees. Ethical appeals to Islamic solidarity, while powerful, face difficulties in overcoming domestic political and economic realities such as concerns about resource distribution, social integration, and rising tensions due to the arrival of refugees.

The political rhetoric used by Erdogan also combines religious imagery and historical consciousness because the precedent set by the Ottoman Empire can be used as a model for Türkiye’s presence in the Muslim world. Erdogan often speaks of the Ottoman Empire’s mission as the saviour of the Ummah (the global Muslim community) and uses this historical precedent to explain Türkiye’s interventionist policies in Syria and other regions. The call to the Ottoman Empire is evident in Erdogan’s role in creating connections between Türkiye’s current role and its past role as a country in the region on a broader scale, where Türkiye is a modern country but can also be defined as the successor to Ottoman idealism.

As an illustration of how culture contributes to a region, an example is Erdogan’s repeated rhetoric that *‘Türkiye is bigger than just Türkiye. As a nation, we cannot limit our horizons to 782,000 square kilometres’*, which describes the cultural idea of Türkiye’s national status and the expansion of Türkiye’s territory as a regional power and ideological leader. This concept is linked to the ideology of neo-Ottomanism, which implies that Türkiye can become a guiding force in the Islamic world and a regional stabilising power (Middle East Eye, 2024).

Academics such as Alekseevich (2018) and Yavuz (2020) claim that the revival of Ottoman identity traditions is not merely an ideological endeavour, but a tactical step to establish Turkish hegemony in the region. This neo-Ottoman ideology is one of the references of the Strategic Depth Doctrine, which combines ideological discourse with state actions.

Under Erdogan's current leadership, Türkiye primarily relies on historical visualisation and humanitarian rhetoric to strengthen its regional influence and demonstrate its power to Syria and neighbouring countries. An example is the Strategic Depth Doctrine, which encourages Türkiye to combine moral posturing and geopolitical actions so that the country can be seen as a military and moral power in the Middle East (Yavuz 2020).

In conclusion, the portrayal of Türkiye as the protector of Muslims is a tactical tool that not only enhances Türkiye's moral authority but also legitimises its foreign interventions. This narrative not only portrays Türkiye as an altruistic power but also creates political support for Erdogan by framing Türkiye's foreign policy under Islamic solidarity and historical discourse. Although the AK PARTY's strategic agenda on the Ummah has conflicting popularity among the masses, it remains a key aspect of Türkiye's foreign policy and diplomacy, as Türkiye aspires to play a leading role in the Middle East and become the moral leader of the global Islamic community. However, this narrative only succeeds in increasing the acceptance of Syrian refugees in Türkiye when balanced with domestic economic interests and socialisation issues that continue to shape the public's experience with refugees. Data from interviews and questionnaires also reveal a dialectic between humanitarian rhetoric and political tactics, as Türkiye's moral narrative proves highly appealing to international audiences but remains influenced by political realities and domestic issues in practice.

#### **4.3.5 Humanitarian Diplomacy as Soft Power and Global Image Building**

Türkiye's humanitarian diplomacy strategy serves as an effective form of soft power, not only to strengthen its position in the region but also to build its global image. Through its open-door policy for refugees, cross-border humanitarian aid, and its narrative as a protector of Muslims, Türkiye has emerged as a key Actor in the Middle East that not only values humanity but also seeks to shape the regional order.

Manipulating soft power through humanitarian diplomacy enable Türkiye to promote its ideological values, gain international legitimacy, and enhance its image globally as a responsible member of the international community. In his

speech, Erdogan stated that: "*We not allow anyone to tarnish these humanitarian efforts. The main policy regarding the Syrian crisis has officially collapsed since yesterday.*" (Haber Global, 2024).

Humanitarian diplomacy can be used both as a political measure to improve Türkiye's image and to justify its overall foreign policy, especially its military and diplomatic operations in Syria and the Middle East. This underscores that Türkiye's moral position and authority can help the country project moral leadership and its need for leadership in international affairs, particularly regarding the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries (Büşra Cuma, 2025).

In conclusion, Türkiye's strategy in humanitarian diplomacy theory is broad, combining moral actions and practical goals to strengthen its foreign policy. Its open-door policy towards refugees, cross-border humanitarian services, and portrayal of Türkiye as a defender of Muslims are tools that help legitimise Türkiye's foreign policy and shape its international image. Thus, Türkiye has successfully positioned itself as an ethical leader in the Middle East and a responsible actor in international efforts to support humanity. At the same time, this strategy serves as a powerful soft power tool to achieve not only regional authority but also international authority.

Questionnaire results indicate that the impact of these actions has been well received by the international community and further strengthens Türkiye's role as a key player in the humanitarian field in the region and as a source of moral authority for world powers. An interview with one of the AK Party officials, Merve Ege Aktaş (2025), also highlights that the strategy outlined is part of a broader diplomatic strategy aimed at enhancing Türkiye's international profile while promoting its ideological values and humanitarian obligations.

The findings of this research prove the opinion that humanitarian diplomacy, which can be considered one of the instruments of soft power, is a strategic tool to strengthen influence and legitimise foreign intervention. The rhetoric created by Erdogan around the idea of Türkiye as a protector of Muslims is also reflected in Hazir's (2022) research, which highlights how countries, especially authoritarian ones, often package their foreign policies with moral rhetoric to consolidate domestic political power. This

research also contributes to the literature by revealing that while humanitarian rhetoric has enabled Türkiye to maintain a positive image in the international community, it is closely linked to the country's domestic political ambitions, such as gaining popularity among conservatives and distorting the reality of domestic crises.

#### **4.4 Synergy in Leadership and Humanitarian Diplomacy**

Humanitarian diplomacy and Erdogan's leadership style are at the core of Türkiye's approach to its foreign policy towards Syria. As a strong authoritarian leader, Erdogan has utilised elements of humanitarian diplomacy to justify his military intervention as a moral act, combining his political goals with Türkiye's ambitions in the region. In this section, the author discusses how the results/impacts of these two factors have resulted in a more interventionist foreign policy.

##### **Erdogan's leadership and humanitarian diplomacy**

Erdogan's authoritarian, charismatic, and pragmatic leadership style has enabled him to influence Türkiye's foreign policy, particularly with regard to Syria. He has employed the concept of humanitarian diplomacy to legitimise Türkiye's decision to use its military in its intervention in Syria. Erdogan has been able to further advance his strategic interests in the region by portraying these actions as a moral obligation to protect Muslims and refugees, while maintaining a strong and dominant position (Kirişci, 2014).

Erdogan often describes Türkiye's involvement in Syria not only as a military necessity, but also as a broader Islamic moral mission. Through this framework, he sought to justify Türkiye's military actions in Syria, such as Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), Operation Olive Branch (2018), and Operation Peace Spring (2019), in relation to crimes committed against oppressed Muslims (Ibold, 2019).

##### **The Politicisation of the Refugee Issue**

The handling of the Syrian refugee crisis is one of the most important aspects of Erdogan's humanitarian diplomacy. Türkiye has implemented a policy of accepting more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees since 2011, and Erdogan describes this policy as a moral obligation, part of Türkiye's role as an Islamic country to stand with the oppressed (Hazir, 2022).

The history of Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwwah Islamiyah*) has dominated Türkiye's ideas in its stance as protector of Muslims. However, this refugee policy has also been politicised, both internally and externally. According to questionnaire data, 35% of respondents believe that the 'Ummah' narrative has significantly increased acceptance of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, while 40% say the impact is minor, and 25% state the impact is partial (**Figure 4.13** Syrian refugees questionnaire, 2025). This indicates that while the moral narrative has resonated with some, it has not been effective in changing public attitudes toward refugees.

Interview results also highlight this complexity. Most Syrian refugees appreciate the security guarantees provided, but they also recognise that Türkiye's open-door policy is a political tactic by Erdogan to gain domestic political support. According to one refugee: *'I am thankful for Türkiye's help, but some feel like pawns in a political game. It's not just about humanitarian aid, but also political.'* (Busra Cuma, 2025). These results illustrate how ethical narratives can be seen politically when the refugee issue is combined with Erdogan's agenda to attract Islamist and more conservative voters.

### Military Intervention

Under Erdogan's leadership, Türkiye has also been involved in several military actions in Syria, presented not only as a military necessity but also as a moral imperative. Operation Euphrates Shield (2016) aimed to stabilise Türkiye's southern border by targeting ISIS and Kurdish groups. According to Erdogan, this was a moral step to defend against ISIS and Kurdish rebels targeting Syrian civilians (Cengiz, 2020). Similarly, the Olive Branch operation (2018) and Peace Spring (2019) can be described as Turkish efforts to protect Syrian civilians from Kurdish forces and the emergence of Kurdish autonomy near the Turkish border.

The questionnaire results show that only 40% of respondents believe in Türkiye's military intervention in Syria and believe that the intervention supports Türkiye's humanitarian narrative that it is protecting oppressed groups. However, 60% of respondents identified the strategic nature of the intervention, indicating that the operations were never driven solely by humanitarian considerations, but also by national security concerns, political gains, and economic improvement (**Figure 4.8** Syrian refugee questionnaire responses, 2025). This brings us to the duality of Türkiye's military

operations, where intervention can be justified on the one hand because it takes moral issues into account, but also because of national security concerns.

#### Cooperation with Syrian Opposition Groups

Erdogan's strategy also includes cooperation with Syrian opposition groups to overthrow the Assad regime. Support for these opposition groups in Türkiye is packaged as a humanitarian obligation to help the Syrian people fight for freedom as part of a larger operation. However, this support is also strategic because Türkiye's goal is to shape Syria's future politics by empowering its allied groups. Erdogan has openly stated that Türkiye's participation in this military intervention is a moral and strategic step to ensure its border security (Taşpınar, 2012).

#### Media propaganda and Erdogan's speeches

One of the key elements of Erdogan's humanitarian diplomacy lies in the way he interacts with the media and the purpose of his speeches to influence public opinion on Türkiye's actions in Syria. To rally support for his intervention in Syria, especially in areas with high Muslim populations, Erdogan tends to exploit the image of Islam, nationalism, and the historical narrative of the Ottoman Empire. Erdogan's speeches on Syria tend to combine Islamic identity with nationalism and moral responsibility, and paint a picture of Türkiye as both a regional leader and a moral leader.

Not only are we defending our own borders, but we are also doing justice in protecting our brothers and sisters in Syria. *"We welcomed them into our homes by calling them immigrants, reaching the virtue of hospitality"*, as explained in Erdogan's speech (Haber Global, 2025). This kind of rhetoric is used to legitimise Türkiye's military bases in Syria and support its claim to be a moral pillar in the Islamic world. It also plays a vital role in shaping public perception because it appeals to Islamic unity, nationalism, and the right of Muslims to defend their fellow Muslims from oppression.

#### Humanitarian Diplomacy as a Public and International Legitimacy Mechanism

The use of diplomacy focused on humanitarianism forms a major part of the legitimacy used by Türkiye to enforce its foreign policy at home and abroad. Domestically, Erdogan has been able to capitalise on support from elements of Turkish society that support his government because of the importance of Türkiye's role in Syria,

which is seen as a moral obligation of the state (Hazır, 2022). Humanitarian rhetoric at the international level and the narrative followed by the media have contributed to legitimising Türkiye's intervention in Syria and its control over military operations, which in turn strengthens Erdogan's legitimacy at home.

At the international level, Türkiye has positioned itself as a responsible global actor concerned with the well-being of Muslims in war-torn countries. Through humanitarian diplomacy, Türkiye has not only gained moral legitimacy but also diplomatic support from countries with Muslim majorities (Kirişci, 2014).

Erdogan's leadership and humanitarian diplomacy have collaborated to produce a more interventionist approach in foreign policy in Syria. By equating military intervention in Syria as a moral position aimed at protecting Muslims and refugees, Erdogan has not only legitimised Türkiye's foreign policy but also accommodated the population. Humanitarian rhetoric has enabled Türkiye to project itself as a moral force in the Middle East, and subsequent military intervention aligns with Türkiye's interests in avoiding national security threats. Although leadership and humanitarian diplomacy are intertwined in the context of Türkiye, Syria, and the region more broadly, the country continues to strive to balance morality and geopolitical interests.

Questionnaires and interviews also help to show how complex the relationship between humanitarian diplomacy and political strategy is. On the one hand, moral rhetoric appeals to most people, and on the other hand, there are also political motives behind the policies pursued by the Turkish government; this is particularly relevant to Syrian refugees. The complex combination of humanitarian and national interests is evident in Türkiye's foreign policy in Syria, as the country continues to assert itself as a regional power and moral leader.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **5.1 Conclusion**

This research has examined the shift in Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria under Erdogan's leadership, as well as how his leadership style and the implementation of humanitarian diplomacy have led to changes in Türkiye's evolving foreign policy. The findings reveal that the quality of Erdogan's leadership style, such as assertiveness, pragmatism, and strong ideological commitment to neo-Ottomanism, has played a central role in transforming Türkiye's foreign policy from diplomatic engagement to direct military intervention. This shift is also marked by the intertwining of security interests, particularly related to the Kurdish separatist struggle, ISIS, and humanitarian initiatives in the context of Islamic solidarity.

The author demonstrates how Erdogan uses humanitarian diplomacy, such as Türkiye's open-door policy towards refugees, as a regional power and a weapon to consolidate his political legitimacy at home. The research also shows that although Erdogan's humanitarian rhetoric has succeeded in portraying Türkiye as a moral leader in the Middle East, the reality on the ground makes it difficult to realize the promised policies.

The moral rhetoric about refugee integration, which is heavily promoted by Erdogan, is criticised by the reality reflected in how both refugees and their hosts view the situation. The duality of linking humanitarian actions with political interests makes the situation even more complex when defining Türkiye's foreign policy issues and the use of humanitarian issues as a means to gain political advantage.

The findings of this research are relevant to the field of foreign policy analysis as a whole, particularly with regard to the interaction between ideology, leadership, and humanitarian diplomacy. As this research shows, the values espoused by leaders, and in the case of authoritarian leaders, their personalistic and ideological orientation, have a significant impact on a country's foreign policy choices.

Erdogan's leadership style, characterised by centralisation of decision-making and the conflation of moral and strategic issues, makes his management a good case research for exploring how leaders' characteristics influence national behaviour in international relations. This is consistent with the Neo-Classical Realist perspective, which highlights the role of domestic factors such as leadership and national identity in shaping foreign policy.

This research complements our understanding of humanitarian diplomacy as a strategic tool in international relations. This highlights that humanitarian actions have two objectives: (a) to gain moral influence in the international arena; and (b) to maintain political control domestically. The fact that Erdogan turned to humanitarian diplomacy, especially in the case of Syria, supports the thesis that decisions in the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes can be made due to moral imperatives, as well as strategic political objectives.

This research also challenges the conventional observation that humanitarian operations are altruistic, providing a better perspective on the ability to utilise them as part of a cohesive strategy to promote the geopolitical interests of other countries. This is because the debate over the morality of Islamic solidarity cannot be separated when discussing policy towards Syrian refugees in Türkiye, which has been so closely linked to national political dynamics and efforts to pursue regional power.

## **5.2 Limitations of Study**

This study is based on interviews with a small group of Syrian refugees, Turkish authorities, and questionnaire participants, and may therefore not be relevant to the majority of the population and individuals from other groups. While Neoclassical Realism theory is useful, it would be beneficial to include other theories to provide a more in-depth understanding of the issues influencing Türkiye's foreign policy. Finally, there is no consideration of shifts in the geopolitical environment, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which could influence Türkiye's foreign policy decisions. These weaknesses indicate that further research is needed in this area, as the existing considerations are based on limited information and theoretical insights to provide a comprehensive picture of the issue.

### 5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Although this research has helped in understanding that Türkiye's foreign policy has changed under Erdoğan's leadership, three areas of future research could expand the results and provide deeper insights into this topic.

1. **Studies on Refugee Integration in the Turkish Context:** Future research could examine the long-term integration of Syrian refugees into Turkish society within the context of Türkiye's open-door policy. This would also address the social, economic, and political consequences of accepting millions of refugees into the country, with a particular focus on public opinion and political polarisation. The role of media, both traditional and social, in shaping attitudes toward refugees and their integration also deserves attention.
2. **Comparative Analysis of Humanitarian Diplomacy:** How Türkiye, whose system is based on humanitarian diplomacy, uses humanitarian diplomacy compared to other countries, especially in the Middle East and authoritarian states, can provide a comparative analysis of how humanitarian values are distorted for political purposes. Such studies can be useful in recognising trends and variations in the use of humanitarian rhetoric by foreign policy leaders to achieve domestic and foreign policy outcomes.
3. **The influence of domestic political transformation:** This research highlights the fact that Erdoğan's role is relevant in determining Türkiye's foreign policy. There is potential for further research on how domestic political sentiment in the future, through changes in leadership or general elections, may influence Türkiye's foreign policy, causing shifts in their views on sensitive issues such as refugee integration, military action, and interactions with regional countries through diplomacy, among other issues. An explanation of the role of domestic political dynamics in shaping foreign policy choices would complement the existing literature on domestic determinants of foreign policy in authoritarian states.
4. **Further research on Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign Policy:** Although this research has touched on the topic of Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign policy, more in-depth research can be conducted on its influence on Turkish foreign policy in Syria and the Middle East in general. Researchers can analyse the political impact of Neo-

Ottomanism on Türkiye's relations with regional powers and its international status. In addition, the perception of this ideology at home and abroad and its implications for Türkiye's ability to form alliances or engage in conflicts can be examined.

5. International Relations Theory: In this research, Neoclassical Realism is used to describe the relationship between leadership and foreign policy decisions. Further studies can be developed based on this framework and applied to other regional areas or during presidential transitions in Türkiye. Comparing and contrasting the interaction between external structural factors (e.g., changes in the global balance of power, regional disputes) and internal beliefs about leadership is equally useful in considering how foreign policy choices are made in countries with strong, centralised leadership.

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