



## DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSFORMATION AND AUTONOMOUS STRUCTURES IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR: GEOPOLITICAL ENGINEERING AND REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS

Dr. Siddik ARSLAN

Deputy Secretary General of Erzurum Metropolitan Municipality - Türkiye.

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3169-3763>

### ABSTRACT

The Syrian civil war has fundamentally altered regional security balances as one of the most complex and multifaceted conflicts of the twenty-first century. This research examines the systematic relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures in the Syrian civil war within the framework of geopolitical engineering and regional security dynamics. The central problematic of the study focuses on whether demographic changes emerged as coincidental or as a planned strategy, the extent to which external actors played a determinant role in the formation of autonomous structures, and how this process affected regional security dynamics. The hypothesis of the research is that demographic transformation is part of a systematically implemented multi-actor engineering project aimed at achieving geopolitical objectives.

The study employs qualitative research design based on multiple document analysis and discourse analysis methods. The theoretical framework is constructed through the integration of geopolitical realism, structuralism, securitization theory, and critical geopolitics approaches. United Nations reports, human rights organization documents, academic studies, and field reports have been systematically examined, and demographic engineering processes have been analyzed. Findings reveal that the demographic transformation in the Northern Syria region during the thirteen-year process between two thousand eleven and two thousand twenty-four was implemented in planned stages. The systematic displacement of approximately seven to nine million Arab and Turkmen populations and the settlement of masses brought from different regions in their place provide concrete evidence strengthening demographic engineering claims.

The results of the research demonstrate that demographic transformation was designed to create an ethnic legitimacy basis for autonomous structures, fragment central state authority, and restructure regional power balances. International coalition support, efforts to legitimize terrorist organizations, and selective application of international law norms have been identified as determinant factors in the institutionalization process of autonomous structures. The study offers original theoretical contributions to the literature through the concretization of the geopolitical engineering concept in the Syrian case and proposes critical assessments for the development of regional peace and security policies.

### Keywords:

*Demographic Transformation, Autonomous Structures, Geopolitical Engineering, Regional Security, Syrian Civil War, Demographic Engineering, Securitization.*

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17811820

ID # IJARSSH/378

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, the geography of the Middle East has transformed into a seismic zone characterized by profound structural transformations. This transformative process has not remained confined merely to changes in political regimes; rather, it has engendered the redefinition of states' sovereign territories, the fragmentation of social fabrics, and a fundamental alteration of the regional security equilibrium (Hinnebusch, 2015). The Syrian civil war constitutes one of the most concrete and tragic exemplifications of this multidimensional transformation process. The popular uprising that commenced in 2011 as a constituent element of the Arab Spring processes rapidly evolved into a complex civil war involving regional and global actors. The civil war process that began in 2011 and extends to the present day has not only precipitated a humanitarian catastrophe resulting in the displacement of millions of individuals and hundreds of thousands of casualties but has also occasioned irreversible alterations in the demographic structure of Syrian society (UN OCHA, 2018). According to United Nations data, approximately five hundred thousand individuals lost their lives during the civil war, and more than thirteen million people became dependent on humanitarian assistance. It is contended that behind these changes lie not only local dynamics but also systematic interventions and strategic calculations of regional and global actors (Cordesman et al., 2014–2019).

Throughout the period since the inception of the Syrian civil war, the autonomous structures that have emerged in the country's north have profoundly destabilized regional security balances. Particularly, the autonomous structures established under the leadership of the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (PYD) and its armed wing, the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG), have constituted critical threats to Turkey's national security priorities. The process of formation of these autonomous structures is evaluated as part of a geopolitical engineering project far too complex to be reduced merely to local dynamics. NATO Parliamentary Assembly reports and various Western documents explicitly indicate that the PYD/YPG is the Syrian branch of the PKK (NATO PA, 2016). The organic links between the YPG and the PKK have also been clearly established in testimonies submitted to the British Parliament (UK House of Commons, 2014–2015). The demographic transformation occurring particularly in the Northern Syria region is directly associated with efforts to establish a legitimacy basis for autonomous structures. When field research and Syria's official pre-civil war population records are examined, it is observed that the proportion of the Kurdish population within Syria's total population ranged between three and five percent (Allsopp & van Wilgenburg, 2019). However, during the civil war, the migration of approximately seven to nine million Arab and Turkmen populations from Northern Syria to Turkey, Jordan, and other Arab countries, coupled with the transfer of masses numbering in the millions under the designation "Kurd" to the same region, emerges as concrete developments strengthening claims of demographic engineering (Yeşiltaş & Özçelik, 2017). The demographic change process in Northern Syria has been documented in detail in Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2017–2020). The alteration of population composition in strategic cities such as Tel Abyad, Ras al-Ayn, and Manbij (Amnesty International, 2015) constitutes concrete examples demonstrating that this process has been conducted in a planned and systematic manner.

The concept of demographic engineering denotes the systematic alteration of societies' ethnic, sectarian, or linguistic composition in accordance with political objectives (Şeker, 2013). This concept is defined in geopolitical literature as a strategy employed particularly in processes of fragmenting or reshaping states' territorial integrity (Şeker, 2013). When historical examples are examined, it is observed that demographic engineering practices have served as instruments employed by states to achieve their political objectives across a broad geography extending from the Balkans to the Caucasus, from the Middle East to Africa. In the specific context of Syria, demographic engineering is not limited merely to the management of population movements; it

also encompasses the objective of creating ethnic homogeneity in specific geographic regions and presenting this homogeneity as justification for claims of political autonomy (Ghosh-Siminoff, 2020). In this process, various methods such as forced displacement, voluntary or involuntary migrations, establishment of new settlement units, and alteration of existing settlement structures are employed (PAX, 2014). International human rights organizations' reports contain comprehensive evidence regarding systematic displacement practices in various regions of Syria (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Cases documented by organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reveal that civilian populations have been targeted according to their ethnic identities and subjected to forced migration (Amnesty International, 2015).

The concept of geopolitical engineering signifies a broader framework than demographic engineering. This concept defines strategic practices encompassing the planned reorganization of states' borders, sovereign territories, and regional power balances (Şeker, 2013). Geopolitical engineering is not limited merely to the alteration of physical borders; it also encompasses the transformation of political regimes, the reconfiguration of alliance structures, and the repositioning of regional actors (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This process also incorporates strategic instruments such as the routing of energy lines, the establishment of economic dependency relationships, and the deployment of military bases. In the Syrian context, geopolitical engineering is interpreted as the elimination of the centralized nation-state structure to create autonomous structures that could be divided into five parts and the alignment of this process with Israel's regional expansion objectives (Mazari, 2006). The map prepared by Ralph Peters, known as "Blood Borders," proposes the redivision of the Middle East along ethnic and sectarian lines (Peters, 2006). Although this map is not accepted as an official American policy, it is evaluated as a significant indicator reflecting the mode of thinking of certain strategic circles regarding the region.

The transformation initiative also known as the Greater Middle East Project was discussed as one of the fundamental axes of American foreign policy at the beginning of the two thousands. In United States Department of State documents, the Greater Middle East Initiative is addressed under the headings of democratization, economic liberalization, and social transformation (U.S. Department of State, 2004–2005). While this project proposes objectives of democratization, economic liberalization, and social transformation in the region, it is claimed that in reality it signifies a process meaning the weakening and fragmentation of regional states (Mazari, 2006). While proponents of the project argue that the dissemination of liberal democratic values in the Middle East would bring long-term stability, critics contend that this constitutes part of a strategy to establish regional hegemony (Gerges, 2014). Whether the Syrian civil war is part of this grand transformation project remains at the center of ongoing debates in academic and political circles. In analyses by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and other think tanks, it is emphasized that internal dynamics such as authoritarian regimes, corruption, and sectarian politics lie at the root of collapses in the region (Cordesman et al., 2014–2019). While some authors argue that developments in Syria originate entirely from local dynamics and misguided interventions and that there is no systematic plan (Hinnebusch, 2015), other authors contend that the patterns behind events are not coincidental and are the product of strategic planning (Mazari, 2006). The fundamental point of divergence between these two perspectives derives from differing interpretations regarding the degree of intentionality and level of coordination of observed events.

The promises and commitments made to Turkey at the initial stage of the Syrian civil war were abandoned as the process progressed, and policies evolved in a direction contrary to Turkey's national security interests (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2017–2020). Initially, while Turkey pursued policies aligned with the objective of establishing democratic transformation and stability in Syria, over time the priorities of international actors shifted toward strengthening autonomous structures in Northern Syria. In 2011 and 2012, Turkey's Syria policy was based on the

expectation that the Assad regime would implement democratic reforms and create space for the opposition; policy changes were made when these expectations were not met and the regime resorted to violence. While initially the objective of establishing democratic transformation and stability in Syria was put forward, over time the priority shifted to strengthening and perpetuating autonomous structures in Northern Syria (Yeşiltaş & Özçelik, 2017). This shift signified a strategic disappointment and security threat for Turkey. The emergence of a structure on Turkey's southern border housing more than one hundred thousand fighters trained to NATO standards and equipped with advanced weapons altered the regional security balance to Turkey's disadvantage. The emergence of a structure on Turkey's southern border possessing military capacity that could be used against it, equipped with high-technology weapons, and housing more than one hundred thousand trained fighters altered the regional security balance to Turkey's disadvantage (Cordesman et al., 2014–2019). The military academies, training camps, and defense lines established in regions under the control of this structure are evaluated as indicators of long-term strategic positioning.

The relationship between autonomous structures and terrorist organizations constitutes one of the most controversial dimensions of the subject. Various international actors, including United States officials, have at times acknowledged that the YPG has organic ties to the PKK. There is strong evidence that the organizational formation that is the primary actor of the autonomous structure established in northern Syria has organic ties to the structure accepted as a terrorist organization by Turkey and numerous countries. In United States intelligence reports and Republic of Turkey National Intelligence Organization analyses, cadre transfers and command relationships between the PKK and YPG/PYD have been documented in detail. Various international actors, including official authorities of the United States, have at times acknowledged the identity of these two structures. The Ambassador sent by President Donald Trump to Turkey also admitted that the YPG is the PKK itself. United States Department of Defense officials have also made statements confirming the connections between the YPG and PKK in various open sessions. Nevertheless, autonomous structures have been positioned as counter-terrorism partners and efforts have been made to grant them international legitimacy (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2017–2020). This situation has brought with it criticisms that terrorism definitions have been made flexible according to political interests and that legal norms have been instrumentalized (Peters, 2016).

The promises and commitments made to Turkey at the initial stage of the Syrian civil war were abandoned as the process progressed, and policies evolved in a direction contrary to Turkey's national security interests (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2017–2020). Initially, while Turkey pursued policies aligned with the objective of establishing democratic transformation and stability in Syria, over time the priorities of international actors shifted toward strengthening autonomous structures in Northern Syria. In 2011 and 2012, Turkey's Syria policy was based on the expectation that the Assad regime would implement democratic reforms and create space for the opposition; policy changes were made when these expectations were not met and the regime resorted to violence. While initially the objective of establishing democratic transformation and stability in Syria was put forward, over time the priority shifted to strengthening and perpetuating autonomous structures in Northern Syria (Yeşiltaş & Özçelik, 2017). This shift signified a strategic disappointment and security threat for Turkey. The emergence of a structure on Turkey's southern border housing more than one hundred thousand fighters trained to NATO standards and equipped with advanced weapons altered the regional security balance to Turkey's disadvantage. The emergence of a structure on Turkey's southern border possessing military capacity that could be used against it, equipped with high-technology weapons, and housing more than one hundred thousand trained fighters altered the regional security balance to Turkey's disadvantage (Cordesman et al., 2014–2019). The military academies, training camps, and defense lines established in regions under the control of this structure are evaluated as indicators of long-term strategic positioning.

The Syrian civil war holds special significance in the context of Israel's regional expansion strategies. The existence of a strong centralized Syrian state historically constituted a formidable obstacle to Israel's northward expansion plans (Gerges, 2014). The fragmentation of Syria and the weakening of central authority signify the elimination of this obstacle. The depiction of Syria in diminished form and Israel with expanded borders in Ralph Peters's "Blood Borders" map is interpreted as a reflection of this strategy (Peters, 2006). Indeed, throughout the civil war process, Israel has intensified its military operations against Syrian territory, positioned itself in strategic regions, and de facto expanded its areas of control (Cordesman et al., 2014–2019). The perpetuation of the occupation of the Golan Heights, regular air strikes conducted against Syrian territory, and operations against Iran-backed forces constitute concrete examples of Israel's efforts to derive strategic advantage from the Syrian crisis. These developments demonstrate that the Syrian civil war is not merely a local conflict but also constitutes part of a process of restructuring regional power balances (Gerges, 2014).

The concept of regional security dynamics denotes the complex interaction of all actors, processes, and structural factors affecting security in a geographic region (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Regional security dynamics specific to Syria are not limited merely to interstate relations; they also encompass numerous factors such as the role of non-state armed actors, the politicization of sectarian and ethnic identities, refugee movements, and competition over economic resources (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, more than six million people were displaced due to the Syrian civil war, and approximately five million Syrian refugees took refuge in neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2018–2023). This refugee crisis has not remained merely a humanitarian problem; it has also profoundly affected the demographic structures, economic balances, and political priorities of neighboring countries. These dynamics are in continuous interaction with one another, and change in one area creates chain effects in other areas (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

A direct causal relationship exists between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures in the Syrian civil war. The alteration of demographic structure aims to establish an ethnic legitimacy basis for autonomous structures (Ghosh-Siminoff, 2020). This process is not limited merely to changing population numbers; it also encompasses the concentration of specific ethnic groups in specific geographic areas and the political organization of these areas (PAX, 2014). The canton system established in Northern Syria has been organized within the framework of the Democratic Confederalism ideology, and administrative mechanisms independent of central state authority have been created. The Democratic Confederalism model developed by Abdullah Öcalan in messages sent from İmralı constitutes the ideological foundation of the autonomous governance structures established in Northern Syria. The demographic transformation occurring in Northern Syria is evaluated in this sense as part of a strategy to create the necessary social base for the institutionalization of autonomous structures (Ghosh-Siminoff, 2020).

The concepts of state sovereignty and territorial integrity are among the fundamental principles of international law and the Westphalian state system (UNSC, 2015). However, in the Syrian case, it is observed that these principles have been systematically violated and a new understanding of sovereignty has been imposed (Peters, 2016). The creation of autonomous structures, the fragmentation of central state authority, and the establishment of de facto sovereign territories in specific regions contradict the classical understanding of state sovereignty (UNSC, 2015). While United Nations Security Council resolutions emphasize the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty, in actual practice different regions of the country have come under the control of different external actors (UNSC, 2015). The military presence of the United States in eastern Syria, Russia in the western and northwestern regions, Iran in the south and around Damascus, and Turkey along the northern line demonstrates Syria's de facto fragmented state. This situation brings with it the debate as to whether what is at issue is an effort to establish a new norm in the international system or the flexibilization of the normative

framework to achieve specific political objectives (Peters, 2016).

The process of legitimizing terrorist organizations constitutes one of the most striking dimensions of the Syrian civil war. Despite the PKK being designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union, and Turkey, its Syrian branch YPG/PYD has been elevated to the status of coalition forces partner. Structures that have historically been recognized as terrorist organizations and banned by numerous countries have been elevated to ally status under specific geopolitical conditions, and efforts have been made to grant them international legitimacy (Hinnebusch, 2015). This legitimization process has not remained merely at the discursive level but has also been implemented at the institutional level. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), established in 2015, was formed around the YPG core to give a multi-ethnic appearance, and this structure was designated by the United States as the "primary local partner." While the SDF structure includes units composed of Arab, Syriac, Turkmen, and other ethnic groups, various reports indicate that the command echelon and critical positions remain under YPG control. The permission granted to terrorist organizations to open political representations, their invitation to international meetings, and the provision of military support constitute concrete indicators of this legitimization process (Yeşiltaş & Özçelik, 2017).

Ethnic identity politics has played a central role in the Syrian civil war. The political organization of ethnic identities and their association with territorial claims pose serious threats to the territorial integrity of regional states (Romano, 2006). Particularly, the politicization of Kurdish identity across a broad geography encompassing Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey and its association with autonomy or independence demands in each country has become one of the fundamental sources of regional instability (Romano, 2006). The corridor created along the Kandil, Sinjar, and Rojava line is evaluated as a strategic connection providing the regional integration of the PKK/KCK schema. Control of this corridor holds vital importance for the PKK/KCK structure both in terms of providing logistical support and maintaining ideological cohesion. This politicization process does not originate solely from the internal dynamics of the relevant communities; it is also shaped by the strategic interventions of external actors (Gerges, 2014).

The selective application of international law norms is clearly observable in the Syrian crisis. Fundamental international law principles such as state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in internal affairs are strictly defended in some situations while being ignored in others (UNSC, 2015). This selective application raises serious questions regarding the universality and binding nature of international law (Peters, 2016). While the provisions of the United Nations Charter protecting territorial integrity continue to be defended at the discursive level, the lack of reaction by the international community to different regions of Syria coming under the de facto control of different external actors constitutes a concrete example of this selective approach. While the principle of preserving Syria's territorial integrity continues to be defended at the discursive level, the tolerance shown to different regions of the country coming under the control of different external actors in actual practice constitutes a concrete example of this selective approach (UNSC, 2015). Similarly, the fact that references to international law norms regarding issues such as chemical weapons use or civilian massacres receive responses of varying intensity depending on the identity of the perpetrators constitutes another dimension of this selectivity.

Military intervention and indirect war strategies are among the fundamental instruments employed in the Syrian civil war. Rather than direct military intervention, indirect methods such as supporting local proxy forces, providing weapons and training to these forces, and providing air support characterize the modes of external actors' intervention in the Syrian conflict (Mumford, 2013). Rather than deploying ground troops directly in Syria, the United States provided advisory and training support to the SDF through special forces; this strategy reduced the political costs that direct intervention would create. This indirect intervention strategy

enables the distribution of international legal responsibility and avoidance of the costs that a direct declaration of war would bring (Mumford, 2013). The proxy wars method allows intervening states to achieve their strategic objectives through local actors without risking their own soldiers. However, it can also lead to the prolongation of conflict, loss of control, and the emergence of unexpected outcomes (Mumford, 2013).

Energy resources and economic interests constitute a dimension of the Syrian civil war that should not be overlooked (Cordesman et al., 2014–2019). Syria's geostrategic position, its importance for oil and natural gas pipelines, and its location on regional trade routes make the country an attractive target for global and regional powers (Butter, 2015). Particularly, competition over the control and routing of energy lines is one of the important factors affecting the dynamics of the civil war (Butter, 2015). The transfer of the Rimelan oil fields in Northern Syria to SDF control and the use of revenues obtained from the sale of this oil to finance autonomous structures holds critical importance for economic sustainability. The oil fields in Northern Syria and the question of who will control this region also holds critical importance for the economic sustainability of autonomous structures (Cordesman et al., 2014–2019). The plan for the Qatar-Turkey-Europe natural gas pipeline project to pass through Syria and the competition of alternative energy projects such as the Iran-Iraq-Syria line constitute the energy geopolitics dimension of the civil war.

During the civil war, the migration of millions of people from Syria to neighboring countries and Europe has created one of the largest refugee crises in modern history. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees data, Turkey has become the country hosting the most refugees in the world by hosting approximately four million Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2018–2023). This wave of migration has not remained merely a humanitarian crisis; it has also profoundly affected regional and global politics (EU Commission & UNHCR, 2016). Turkey's hosting of approximately four million Syrian refugees has created significant pressures on the country's economic, social, and political structure (EU Commission & UNHCR, 2016). Meeting the education, health, and housing needs of refugees, their integration into the labor market, and social cohesion processes have created multidimensional challenges for Turkey. The refugee issue has also become a bargaining subject in relations between Turkey and the European Union and has emerged as a factor affecting Turkey's foreign policy preferences.

The propaganda and perception management techniques employed in the Syrian civil war have created determinant effects on the course of the conflict and the attitude of international public opinion (Al-Rawi, 2017). While in Western media the YPG/YPJ was presented with an image of a libertarian force with female fighters, especially after the Kobani defense, in Turkish media the same structures were depicted as the Syrian branch of the PKK. Hollywood-style documentaries, striking photographs, and heroic narratives were systematically used to positively shape the perception of YPG/YPJ in Western public opinion. The intensive use of social media platforms has revealed new dimensions of information warfare (Al-Rawi, 2017). Different actors have conducted complex propaganda campaigns to strengthen their own narratives and weaken their rivals' narratives (Al-Rawi, 2017). In these campaigns, techniques such as selective information sharing, distortion, misinformation, and emotional manipulation have been widely employed (Al-Rawi, 2017). Visual content disseminated through social media, hashtag campaigns, and influencer utilization have been effectively deployed in the Syrian civil war as instruments of modern perception management.

The failure to overcome the security dilemma constitutes one of the fundamental reasons for the continuation of regional instability (Jervis, 1978). Each state operates within a vicious cycle in which measures taken to enhance its own security increase the security concerns of neighboring states (Jervis, 1978). In the Syrian context, measures taken by one country for border security are perceived by the neighboring country as a threat to territorial integrity and trigger countermeasures (Jervis, 1978). Turkey's military operations conducted in northern Syria

(Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring), while defined by Ankara as border security operations, have been characterized by the Syrian regime and some international actors as violations of sovereignty. The purpose of these operations was explained as preventing the formation of a terror corridor on Turkey's southern border and establishing safe zones, but they have led to debates on regional balances and international law. This security dilemma reinforces mutual distrust rather than cooperation and dialogue and complicates the resolution of problems (Jervis, 1978).

In the existing literature, the Syrian civil war is generally addressed within frameworks of anti-regime uprising, external intervention, or sectarian conflict (Gerges, 2014). However, the number of studies examining the systematic relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures, the geopolitical engineering dimension of this process, and its multilayered effects on regional security dynamics from a holistic perspective remains limited (Ghosh-Siminoff, 2020). Particularly regarding how demographic engineering strategies have been implemented, which actors have played roles in this process, and what the long-term consequences of these strategies might be, significant gaps exist in the literature (Ghosh-Siminoff, 2020). Existing academic studies address the Syrian civil war either from the perspective of security studies, human rights, or international relations, but interdisciplinary approaches integrating the relationship between demographic engineering and geopolitical design remain inadequate. Furthermore, the absence of comprehensive studies addressing the formation of autonomous structures in the context of legitimizing terrorist organizations and restructuring regional power balances constitutes a notable gap. This study aims to fill this gap and offer a multidimensional analytical approach to the subject.

In this context, the fundamental problematic of the research is formulated in a multilayered structure: How is the systematic relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures established in the Syrian civil war; on which geopolitical engineering strategies and actor interests does this process depend; how do international legitimization mechanisms operate in the institutionalization process of autonomous structures; and in what manner and to what depth do all these dynamics affect regional security balances, particularly Turkey? The sub-dimensions of this problematic encompass questions regarding whether demographic change is coincidental or planned, whether local dynamics or external interventions are determinant in the formation of autonomous structures, how terrorist organizations have been legitimized in the international arena, and what the long-term effects of this process on regional stability might be. Additionally, the problematic also includes critical questions such as through which instruments and methods demographic engineering practices have been implemented, how the economic sustainability of autonomous structures is ensured, and how international law norms have been manipulated in this process. To seek answers to this fundamental question, the study questions whether demographic transformation emerged as a systematic strategy or as a natural consequence of the conflict, to what extent external actors' roles were determinant in the formation of autonomous structures, and how this process has affected regional security dynamics. The hypothesis of the research is that the demographic transformation occurring in Syria is not a coincidental or natural process but rather is part of a systematically implemented multi-actor engineering project aimed at achieving geopolitical objectives; that this process was designed with demographic changes aimed at creating an ethnic legitimacy basis for autonomous structures, fragmenting central state authority, selectively applying international law norms, and restructuring regional power balances; and furthermore that this engineering project is aligned with Israel's regional expansion strategies and Western powers' interests in controlling energy routes. The hypothesis also posits that this process has not remained limited merely to military and political dimensions but also encompasses economic, cultural, and ideological restructuring elements. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that demographic changes were designed to establish a legitimacy basis for autonomous structures, weaken central state authority, and restructure regional power balances.

The objective of the study is to examine the relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures occurring in the Syrian civil war from an analytical perspective within the framework of geopolitical engineering and regional security dynamics. In line with this general objective, it is aimed to reveal with concrete data how demographic engineering strategies have been implemented in the field, to analyze the institutionalization processes of autonomous structures historically and structurally, to determine the roles and interests of external actors, to analyze the legitimization mechanisms of terrorist organizations, and to evaluate the short and long-term effects of this process on the security of regional states, particularly Turkey. Additionally, analyzing the processes of selective application of international law norms, revealing the role of energy resources and economic interests, and examining the effects of the proxy wars method on regional instability are also among the specific objectives of the study. In line with this general objective, it is aimed to reveal the concrete applications of demographic engineering strategies, analyze the institutionalization processes of autonomous structures, determine the roles and interests of external actors, and evaluate the effects of this process on the security of regional states, particularly Turkey. The study aims to contribute to the subject at both conceptual and empirical levels by supporting theoretical discussions with concrete data.

The significance of this research manifests at both theoretical and practical levels. From a theoretical perspective, the study tests the analytical power of the concepts of demographic engineering and geopolitical transformation by concretizing them in the Syrian case and offers original contributions to the literature. Particularly, the conceptualization of demographic engineering, distinct from classical concepts of ethnic cleansing and forced displacement, as a strategic instrument serving long-term political projects will provide an important theoretical contribution to the literature. This conceptualization necessitates that demographic engineering be addressed as a holistic strategy encompassing not only physical population movements but also identity politics, legitimacy discourses, and international law manipulations. From a practical perspective, the research aims to offer scientifically-based recommendations to policymakers on the formulation of Turkey's security policies, the development of regional cooperation mechanisms, and the creation of long-term peace strategies. Considering the direct threats that demographic and political transformations in Syria pose to Turkey's national security, the urgency and importance of in-depth examination of this subject become even more evident. Furthermore, the findings of the study will provide opportunities for comparative analysis for other regions experiencing similar demographic engineering and geopolitical transformation processes and will contribute to the development of early warning mechanisms.

The expected contributions of the research concentrate in several fundamental areas. First, it is expected that the theoretical framework of the demographic engineering concept will be expanded and how this concept operates in the Syrian case will be systematically demonstrated. In this context, it is aimed that demographic engineering strategies be conceptualized as a multidimensional process encompassing not only population movements but also identity construction, legitimacy discourses, and manipulation of international law norms. Second, it is anticipated that the analysis of autonomous structures' formation processes from a geopolitical engineering perspective will also contribute to understanding similar processes in other regions. Particularly, analytical tools will be provided for understanding similar fragmentation processes occurring in countries such as Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. Third, it is aimed to provide an analytical framework for comprehending the multi-actor and multilayered structure of regional security dynamics. Fourth, the systematic examination of legitimization processes of terrorist organizations in the international arena will provide important information for understanding states' double standard practices. This contribution will reveal how terrorism definitions have been made flexible according to political interests and how legal norms have been instrumentalized. Fifth, the demonstration with concrete data of the determinant effects of energy geopolitics and economic interests on regional conflicts will contribute to understanding the

dynamics of resource wars. Finally, it is expected that the nature of security threats facing Turkey will be better understood and the scientific foundations of strategies that can be developed against these threats will be strengthened. The study will directly contribute to policymaking processes by providing scientifically-based recommendations for both Turkey's defense strategies and diplomatic initiatives. This study aims to offer original and applicable contributions to academic literature and policymaking processes while endeavoring to make sense of the complex dynamics of the Syrian civil war.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Syrian civil war emerges as a multidimensional research area within the discipline of international relations (Phillips, 2016). The literature review of this study is organized along the axes of demographic engineering, geopolitical transformation, formation of autonomous structures, legitimization of terrorist organizations, and regional security dynamics. When existing academic studies are examined, it is observed that different aspects of the Syrian civil war have been addressed (Lister, 2015). However, the number of studies examining the systematic relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures, the geopolitical engineering dimension of this process, and its multilayered effects on regional security dynamics from a holistic perspective remains limited (Balanche, 2018). A significant portion of the literature evaluates the Syrian crisis within frameworks of either anti-regime uprising, external intervention, or sectarian conflict, yet does not address in depth the causal link between the systematic transformation of demographic structure and claims of political autonomy (Phillips, 2016). This gap underscores the importance of the research's theoretical and empirical contribution.

The concept of demographic engineering emerges as a relatively new analytical tool in the international relations and security studies literature (Kasbarian & Öktem, 2023). When historical examples are examined, it is observed that demographic engineering practices have served as instruments employed by states to achieve their political objectives across a broad geography extending from the Balkans to the Caucasus, from the Middle East to Africa (Şeker, 2007). Unlike the classical concept of ethnic cleansing, demographic engineering denotes the systematic alteration of societies' ethnic, sectarian, or linguistic composition in accordance with long-term political projects (Kasbarian & Öktem, 2023). In the literature, demographic engineering is not limited merely to the management of population movements; it also encompasses the strategy of creating ethnic homogeneity in specific geographic regions and presenting this homogeneity as justification for claims of political autonomy (Şeker, 2007). The demographic engineering literature specific to Syria demonstrates that various methods such as forced displacement, voluntary or involuntary migrations, establishment of new settlement units, and alteration of existing settlement structures have been employed in combination (Balanche, 2018). International human rights organizations' reports provide comprehensive evidence regarding systematic displacement practices in various regions of Syria (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Cases documented by organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reveal that civilian populations have been targeted according to their ethnic identities and subjected to forced migration (Amnesty International, 2015). However, since these reports are generally written from the perspective of human rights violations, they do not sufficiently focus on the question of whether demographic change constitutes part of a geopolitical engineering project (Amnesty International, 2015).

The concept of geopolitical engineering signifies a broader analytical framework than demographic engineering (Cordesman, 2020). This concept defines strategic practices encompassing the planned reorganization of states' borders, sovereign territories, and regional power balances (Cordesman, 2020). The geopolitical engineering literature encompasses not only the alteration of physical borders but also the transformation of political regimes, the reconfiguration of alliance structures, and the repositioning of regional actors (Cordesman,

2020). This process also incorporates strategic instruments such as the routing of energy lines, the establishment of economic dependency relationships, and the deployment of military bases (Cordesman, 2020). In the Syrian context, geopolitical engineering is interpreted as the elimination of the centralized nation-state structure to create autonomous structures that could be divided into five parts and the alignment of this process with Israel's regional expansion objectives (Peters, 2006). The "Blood Borders" map published by Ralph Peters in the *Armed Forces Journal* proposes the redivision of the Middle East along ethnic and sectarian lines (Peters, 2006). Although this map is not accepted as an official American policy, it is evaluated as a significant indicator reflecting the mode of thinking of certain strategic circles regarding the region (Peters, 2006). In the literature, it is debated that the transformation initiative known as the Greater Middle East Project, while proposing objectives of democratization and economic liberalization in the region, in reality signifies a process meaning the weakening and fragmentation of regional states (Perthes, 2004).

The formation and institutionalization of autonomous structures emerges as a central area of debate in the Syrian civil war literature (Knapp et al., 2016). Particularly, the autonomous structures established under the leadership of the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* and its armed wing, the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, in Northern Syria have profoundly affected regional security balances (Knapp et al., 2016). NATO Parliamentary Assembly reports and various Western documents explicitly indicate that the PYD/YPG is the Syrian branch of the PKK (Anadolu Agency, 2018). The organic links between the YPG and the PKK have also been clearly established in testimonies submitted to the British Parliament (UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2018). However, a significant portion of the literature characterizes autonomous structures as local democratic movements by ignoring or relegating to a secondary plane these organizational links (Knapp et al., 2016). The Democratic Confederalism model developed by Abdullah Öcalan in messages sent from İmralı constitutes the ideological foundation of the autonomous governance structures established in Northern Syria (Öcalan, 2011). The canton system established in Northern Syria has been organized within the framework of the Democratic Confederalism ideology, and administrative mechanisms independent of central state authority have been created (Knapp et al., 2016). The fundamental point of divergence in the literature emerges in the question of whether the formation of these autonomous structures originates from local dynamics or from the strategic interventions of external actors (Lister, 2015).

The concepts of state sovereignty and territorial integrity are among the fundamental principles of international law and the Westphalian state system (Krasner, 1999). However, in the Syrian case, it is observed that these principles have been systematically violated and a new understanding of sovereignty has been imposed (Krasner, 1999). While United Nations Security Council resolutions emphasize the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty, in actual practice different regions of the country have come under the control of different external actors (Khallaf, 2016). The military presence of the United States in eastern Syria, Russia in the western and northwestern regions, Iran in the south and around Damascus, and Turkey along the northern line demonstrates Syria's de facto fragmented state (Phillips, 2016). This situation brings with it the debate as to whether what is at issue is an effort to establish a new norm in the international system or the flexibilization of the normative framework to achieve specific political objectives (Krasner, 1999). In the literature, the question of whether a new understanding of sovereignty is being constructed in which regional spheres of influence and autonomous structures are legitimized in place of the classical understanding of state sovereignty remains unanswered (Cordesman, 2020).

The process of legitimizing terrorist organizations in the international arena constitutes one of the most striking dimensions of the Syrian civil war (Hoffman, 2017). In the literature, the designation of structures recognized by some actors as terrorist organizations as legitimate political forces or allies by other actors raises serious questions regarding the selective

application of international law and the definition of terrorism (Schmid, 2012). The emergence of a structure on Turkey's southern border housing more than one hundred thousand fighters trained to NATO standards and equipped with advanced weapons has altered the regional security balance to Turkey's disadvantage (SETA, 2023). The military academies, training camps, and defense lines established in regions under the control of this structure are evaluated as indicators of long-term strategic positioning (SETA, 2023). However, a significant portion of the literature avoids discussing the threat dimension of this military structuring and instead characterizes it as local defense mechanisms (Knapp et al., 2016).

Demographic data and statistics hold critical importance in the analysis of the Syrian civil war (Balanche, 2018). When field research and Syria's official pre-civil war population records are examined, it is observed that the proportion of the Kurdish population within Syria's total population ranged between three and five percent (Gunter, 2004). However, during the civil war, the migration of approximately seven to nine million Arab and Turkmen populations from Northern Syria to Turkey, Jordan, and other Arab countries, coupled with the transfer of masses numbering in the millions under the designation "Kurd" to the same region, emerges as concrete developments strengthening claims of demographic engineering (SETA, 2023). The demographic change process in Northern Syria has been documented in detail in Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, n.d.). The alteration of population composition in strategic cities such as Tel Abyad, Ras al-Ayn, and Manbij constitutes concrete examples demonstrating that this process has been conducted in a planned and systematic manner (Amnesty International, 2015). In the literature, there exists a fundamental divergence regarding whether these demographic changes constitute natural migration movements or a planned engineering project (Balanche, 2018).

In the context of Israel's regional expansion strategies, the Syrian civil war holds special significance in the literature (Cordesman, 2020). The existence of a strong centralized Syrian state historically constituted a formidable obstacle to Israel's northward expansion plans (Peters, 2006). The fragmentation of Syria and the weakening of central authority signify the elimination of this obstacle (Cordesman, 2020). The depiction of Syria in diminished form and Israel with expanded borders in Ralph Peters's "Blood Borders" map is interpreted as a reflection of this strategy (Peters, 2006). Indeed, throughout the civil war process, Israel has intensified its military operations against Syrian territory, positioned itself in strategic regions, and de facto expanded its areas of control (Cordesman, 2020). The perpetuation of the occupation of the Golan Heights, regular air strikes conducted against Syrian territory, and operations against Iran-backed forces constitute concrete examples of Israel's efforts to derive strategic advantage from the Syrian crisis (Cordesman, 2020). These developments demonstrate that the Syrian civil war is not merely a local conflict but also constitutes part of a process of restructuring regional power balances (Phillips, 2016).

The concept of regional security dynamics denotes the complex interaction of all actors, processes, and structural factors affecting security in a geographic region (Cordesman, 2020). Regional security dynamics specific to Syria are not limited merely to interstate relations; they also encompass numerous factors such as the role of non-state armed actors, the politicization of sectarian and ethnic identities, refugee movements, and competition over economic resources (Cordesman, 2020). According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees data, more than six million people were displaced due to the Syrian civil war, and approximately five million Syrian refugees took refuge in neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2023). This refugee crisis has not remained merely a humanitarian problem; it has also profoundly affected the demographic structures, economic balances, and political priorities of neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2023). These dynamics are in continuous interaction with one another, and change in one area creates chain effects in other areas (Phillips, 2016).

Security dilemma theory provides an important analytical tool for understanding regional

instability (Jervis, 1978). Each state operates within a vicious cycle in which measures taken to enhance its own security increase the security concerns of neighboring states (Jervis, 1978). In the Syrian context, measures taken by one country for border security are perceived by the neighboring country as a threat to territorial integrity and trigger countermeasures (Jervis, 1978). Turkey's military operations conducted in northern Syria, while defined by Ankara as border security operations, have been characterized by the Syrian regime and some international actors as violations of sovereignty (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications, 2019). The purpose of these operations was explained as preventing the formation of a terror corridor on Turkey's southern border and establishing safe zones, but they have led to debates on regional balances and international law (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications, 2020). This security dilemma reinforces mutual distrust rather than cooperation and dialogue and complicates the resolution of problems (Jervis, 1978).

Perception management and media warfare constitute a dimension of critical importance that the literature has relatively neglected in the Syrian civil war (Powers & O'Loughlin, 2015). Different actors have attempted to direct international public opinion by presenting the same events in completely opposite ways (Simons, 2016). While in Western media the YPG/YPJ was presented with an image of a libertarian force with female fighters, especially after the Kobani defense, in Turkish media the same structures were depicted as the Syrian branch of the PKK (Benakay, 2016). Hollywood-style documentaries, striking photographs, and heroic narratives were systematically used to positively shape the perception of YPG/YPJ in Western public opinion (Benakay, 2016). The intensive use of social media platforms has revealed new dimensions of information warfare (O'Callaghan et al., 2014). Different actors have conducted complex propaganda campaigns to strengthen their own narratives and weaken their rivals' narratives (Powers & O'Loughlin, 2015). In these campaigns, techniques such as selective information sharing, distortion, misinformation, and emotional manipulation have been widely employed (Powers & O'Loughlin, 2015). Visual content disseminated through social media, hashtag campaigns, and influencer utilization have been effectively deployed in the Syrian civil war as instruments of modern perception management (O'Callaghan et al., 2014).

The Greater Middle East Project literature holds critical importance for understanding the regional context of the Syrian civil war (Perthes, 2004). In United States Department of State documents, the Greater Middle East Initiative is addressed under the headings of democratization, economic liberalization, and social transformation (Perthes, 2004). While this project proposes objectives of democratization and economic liberalization in the region, critics contend that in reality it signifies a process meaning the weakening and fragmentation of regional states (Washington Institute, 2024). While proponents of the project argue that the dissemination of liberal democratic values in the Middle East would bring long-term stability, critics contend that this constitutes part of a strategy to establish regional hegemony (Perthes, 2004). Whether the Syrian civil war is part of this grand transformation project remains at the center of ongoing debates in academic and political circles (Cordesman, 2020). In analyses by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and other think tanks, it is emphasized that internal dynamics such as authoritarian regimes, corruption, and sectarian politics lie at the root of collapses in the region (CSIS, 2019). While some authors argue that developments in Syria originate entirely from local dynamics and misguided interventions and that there is no systematic plan, other authors contend that the patterns behind events are not coincidental and are the product of strategic planning (Cordesman, 2020).

Energy routes and economic interests hold a central role in understanding the Syrian civil war (Cordesman, 2020). Natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, routes of oil pipelines, and control of energy transit routes shape the positioning of regional and global actors in Syria (Cordesman, 2020). The passage of the natural gas pipeline project planned to extend from Qatar to Europe through Syria and the Assad regime's distant stance toward this project reveal the economic dimension of regional dynamics (Cordesman, 2020). Russia's strengthening of its

position in Syria is also associated with its strategy of maintaining its monopoly over energy supply to Europe (Cordesman, 2020). While the role of the energy factor in the Syrian crisis is debated in the literature, the systematic connection of this dimension with demographic engineering and the formation of autonomous structures has not been sufficiently examined (Cordesman, 2020).

The proxy wars literature provides an important framework for understanding the global dimension of the Syrian civil war (Mumford, 2013). The conflict in Syria has transcended a local civil war to become a proxy war arena in which regional and global powers indirectly confront one another (Mumford, 2013). The United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors have sought to realize their strategic interests by supporting different armed groups (Oğuz & Çelik, 2017). This proxy war structure has caused the prolongation of conflict, the stalling of resolution processes, and the increase of civilian casualties (Mumford, 2013). While the dynamics of proxy wars are debated in the literature, the question of how this structure has laid the groundwork for demographic engineering strategies has not been sufficiently addressed (Oğuz & Çelik, 2017).

The selective application of international law emerges as a contested area in the Syrian civil war literature (Krasner, 1999). The ineffectiveness of the United Nations Security Council on the Syria issue strengthens criticisms that international law norms are subordinate to power politics (Lieber Institute, 2021). The fact that some states emphasize the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity while disregarding these principles in other contexts inflames debates on double standards (Krasner, 1999). The selective use of the terrorist organization designation, wherein a structure considered a terrorist organization by one actor is characterized as freedom fighters by another actor, calls into question the normative consistency of international law (Schmid, 2012). In the literature, the relationship of this selective application practice with demographic engineering and the legitimization of autonomous structures has not been sufficiently discussed (Chicago Journal of International Law, 2022).

In conclusion, while the existing literature addresses different dimensions of the Syrian civil war, the number of studies examining the systematic relationship between demographic engineering and the formation of autonomous structures, the geopolitical engineering dimension of this process, and its multilayered effects on regional security dynamics from a holistic perspective remains limited (Balanche, 2018). Particularly regarding how demographic engineering strategies have been implemented, which actors have played roles in this process, and what the long-term consequences of these strategies might be, significant gaps exist in the literature (Balanche, 2018). Existing academic studies address the Syrian civil war either from the perspective of security studies, human rights, or international relations, but interdisciplinary approaches integrating the relationship between demographic engineering and geopolitical design remain inadequate (Phillips, 2016). Furthermore, the absence of comprehensive studies addressing the formation of autonomous structures in the context of legitimizing terrorist organizations and restructuring regional power balances constitutes a notable gap (Lister, 2015). This study aims to fill this gap and offer a multidimensional analytical approach to the subject.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study has been designed to comprehend the relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures in the Syrian civil war from a multidimensional and multilayered perspective (Dunne et al., 2013; Burchill et al., 2013). The theoretical framework aims to provide original explanatory power to the research problematic by integrating geopolitical realism, structuralist theories, the securitization approach, and critical geopolitical analyses. Understanding phenomena such as demographic engineering and geopolitical transformation necessitates transcending the limited field of vision offered by a single theoretical perspective and employing different theoretical instruments in a complementary manner (Dunne et al., 2013; Burchill et al., 2013). In this context, the theoretical

framework of the study, drawing from different schools of the international relations discipline, aims to systematically explain the structural forces, actor strategies, and discursive construction processes underlying the demographic and political transformations specific to Syria. The integrative structure of the theoretical framework enables the production of consistent explanations across a broad analytical spectrum ranging from macro-level geopolitical calculations to micro-level identity construction processes. This multilayered theoretical approach demonstrates that the phenomena occurring in Syria are positioned at the intersection of local, regional, and global dynamics, and offers an integrated analytical framework for understanding this complex interaction.

Geopolitical realism constitutes the first fundamental approach forming the theoretical backbone of the study (Morgenthau, 2006; Mearsheimer, 2001). The state-centric, power-oriented, and interest-based analytical form of classical realism provides a critical framework for understanding external interventions, regional competitions, and strategic calculations in the Syrian civil war (Morgenthau, 2006; Mearsheimer, 2001). One of the fundamental assumptions of realist theory is that the anarchic structure of the international system directs states toward the pursuit of security and that states seek to maximize their own interests in this process (Waltz, 1979). In the Syrian context, the interventions of the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and other regional actors can be explained by the motivation to protect and expand their own national interests. From the perspective of geopolitical realism, the Syrian civil war has transcended a local anti-regime uprising to become a competitive arena where the strategic interests of regional and global powers clash (Mearsheimer, 2001; Phillips, 2016). The positioning of the United States in Northern Syria, Russia's efforts to maintain its access to the Mediterranean, Iran's Shia Crescent strategy, and Turkey's security priorities constitute concrete examples of interest-based foreign policy behaviors predicted by the realist paradigm (Mearsheimer, 2001). Particularly, geopolitical objectives such as control of energy routes, deployment of strategic bases, and expansion of regional spheres of influence are among the fundamental motivations shaping actors' positioning in Syria. Realist theory predicts that states operate according to zero-sum game logic and that one actor's gain means another's loss, which explains the underlying rationale of the complex alliance structures and constantly changing coalitions in Syria.

The second dimension of geopolitical realism elucidates the theoretical foundations of demographic transformation being utilized as a strategic instrument. In realist theory, states employ traditional instruments such as military power, economic resources, and diplomatic tools to enhance their security and gain strategic advantage (Waltz, 1979). However, in contemporary geopolitical struggles, alteration of population composition, creation of ethnic homogeneity, and adaptation of demographic structure to political objectives also emerge as important strategic instruments (McGarry, 1998; Bookman, 1997). In the Syrian context specifically, the displacement of approximately seven to nine million Arab and Turkmen populations in Northern Syria and the transfer of new masses under the designation "Kurd" to the same region, when evaluated from a realist perspective, can be interpreted as a planned process serving the strategic interests of specific actors. This demographic transformation aims to prepare the ethnic legitimacy foundation necessary for the creation of autonomous structures, to weaken central state authority, and to alter regional power balances in favor of specific actors. Geopolitical realism posits that such strategic engineering practices emerge as a natural extension of the power struggle of states and non-state actors. The utilization of demographic engineering as an instrument of warfare demonstrates that the diversity of instruments predicted by classical realist theories has expanded in the contemporary context and that population movements have become an integral part of geopolitical strategies.

Structuralist theories constitute the second fundamental pillar of the study's theoretical framework (Burchill et al., 2013; Wallerstein, 2004). Structuralism focuses on the deep structural factors that shape events and processes rather than reducing them merely to actors' conscious choices (Wallerstein, 2004). Structuralist approaches in international relations argue that the

structure of the international system, the organizational form of economic relations, and the distribution of power determine actors' behaviors (Burchill et al., 2013; Wallerstein, 2004). A structuralist analysis in the context of the Syrian civil war requires linking events not to individual actors' decisions but to the structural characteristics of the Middle East, the dynamics of the global capitalist system, and the historical evolution of regional power balance. From a structuralist perspective, the demographic transformation and formation of autonomous structures in Syria should be evaluated as part of a broader structural transformation process occurring in the Middle East in the post-Cold War period. Structural factors such as the unipolar world order that emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the regional effects of globalization, the increasing strategic importance of energy resources, and the politicization of ethno-national identities constitute the backdrop to developments occurring in Syria (Burchill et al., 2013; Wallerstein, 2004). Structuralist theory posits that Syria's semi-peripheral position rendered the country vulnerable to the structural contradictions of the global capitalist system and that this structural position played a determinant role in the outbreak of the civil war.

The second important contribution that structuralist theories offer to Syrian analysis draws attention to the role of economic structures and class relations. Immanuel Wallerstein and the world-systems school argue that the core-periphery-semi-periphery dynamics of the global capitalist system shape international conflicts and regional instabilities (Wallerstein, 2004). In the Syrian context specifically, the country's economic structure in the semi-peripheral position emerges as a structural weakness that renders it open to external interventions. The global distribution of energy resources, the routes of oil and natural gas pipelines, access to regional markets, and economic dependency relations play a role as structural determinants in the outbreak, intensification, and prolongation of the Syrian civil war (Wallerstein, 2004; PAX & The Syria Institute, 2017; Phillips, 2016; Geneva Academy & IBAHRI, 2019). The passage of the Qatar-Turkey-Europe natural gas pipeline project through Syria and the Assad regime's distant stance toward this project constitutes one of the economic structural factors shaping regional actors' Syria policies. Similarly, Russia's efforts to maintain its position in European energy markets and Israel's objective of accessing Eastern Mediterranean energy resources demonstrate how structural economic dynamics transform into geopolitical strategies. Structuralist analysis reveals that the economic interests underlying the Syrian crisis are related not only to short-term calculations but also to the long-term restructuring needs of the global capitalist system.

The securitization approach constitutes the third fundamental component of the study's theoretical framework (Buzan et al., 1998). Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, examines how specific issues are rendered security matters and through which discursive and political mechanisms this process operates (Buzan et al., 1998). This approach, systematized by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, posits that security is a discursive construction process rather than an objective condition (Buzan et al., 1998; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The designation of an issue as a security problem enables the legitimization of extraordinary measures and the suspension of normal political processes. In the Syrian context, the securitization of different issues by different actors has profoundly affected the dynamics of the conflict. From Turkey's perspective, the securitization of the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat and Yekîneyên Parastina Gel structure as a terrorist organization has created a discursive foundation legitimizing cross-border military operations (Buzan et al., 1998; Demir & Yılmaz, 2020). From the United States' perspective, the securitization of the Islamic State organization has been presented as justification for maintaining military presence in Syria and forming an alliance with Yekîneyên Parastina Gel. The securitization process is not merely a discursive construction but also a powerful political instrument that enables these discourses to produce material consequences and legitimize actual interventions.

The second dimension of the securitization approach elucidates the process of selective legitimization of terrorist organizations in the international arena. Whether a structure will be

designated as a terrorist organization or a legitimate political actor depends not on objective criteria but on the discursive strategies of powerful actors (Buzan et al., 1998; Kennedy, 2004). In the Syrian civil war, the characterization of the same organizational structure in completely opposite ways by different states provides a vivid example of the discursive construction processes predicted by securitization theory. Although NATO Parliamentary Assembly reports and various Western documents explicitly state that *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* and *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* are the Syrian branch of *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, the same structures have been designated by some Western states as key partners in the struggle against the Islamic State (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019; UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2015). In testimonies submitted to the British Parliament, the organic links between *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* and *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* were clearly established, yet this determination has been ignored at the political level (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019; UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2015). This selective designation and legitimization process demonstrates that international law and counter-terrorism norms have been flexibilized and instrumentalized according to strategic interests. Securitization theory reveals that the labeling of a structure as a terrorist organization or freedom fighter is determined not by the objective characteristics of that structure but by the geopolitical interests and discursive power of the entity doing the labeling.

Critical geopolitical approaches constitute the fourth fundamental pillar of the study's theoretical framework (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2003). Critical geopolitics interrogates the geographic and political categories naturalized by traditional geopolitical thought, examining how geopolitical discourses are constructed and how these discourses reproduce power relations (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2003). The critical geopolitics school, pioneered by thinkers such as Gearóid Ó Tuathail, John Agnew, and Simon Dalby, argues that geopolitical knowledge is not an impartial reality but a discursive construction serving specific political projects (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2003; Dalby, 1991). Critical geopolitical analysis in the context of the Syrian civil war requires interrogating how different actors define Syria, how they partition the region, and which geographic imaginaries serve which political projects. The map prepared by Ralph Peters and known as "Blood Borders," when evaluated from a critical geopolitical perspective, constitutes a concrete expression of a geopolitical imaginary envisioning the redivision of the Middle East along ethnic and sectarian lines. Although this map is not accepted as an official American policy, it is evaluated as a significant indicator reflecting the mode of thinking of certain strategic circles regarding the region (Peters, 2006). Critical geopolitics demonstrates that such maps do not merely reflect existing realities but are also discursive instruments aimed at constructing future realities and shows how geographic imaginaries serve political projects.

The second dimension of the critical geopolitical approach focuses on the analysis of identity construction and discursive strategy processes. Regional and global actors produce specific identity discourses to legitimize their geopolitical objectives and justify their interventions through these discourses (Agnew, 2003; Brubaker, 2004). The legitimization of the United States' presence in Syria through democracy and human rights discourse, Russia's employment of counter-terrorism and sovereignty discourse, Iran's resort to sectarian solidarity discourse, and Turkey's invocation of border security discourse constitute examples of the legitimization of geopolitical interests through discursive construction. The critical geopolitical perspective aims to reveal the real motivations behind these discourses and to interrogate how geopolitical knowledge is produced (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2003). Particularly, the presentation of autonomous structures established in Northern Syria through discourses of democratic autonomy, women's freedom, and pluralist governance constitutes a typical example of the discursive legitimization strategies examined by critical geopolitics. The claim of implementing the Democratic Confederalism model developed by Abdullah Öcalan in Northern Syria has enabled autonomous structures to gain international legitimacy through radical democracy discourse (Öcalan, 2011; Schmidinger, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2013). However, critical

geopolitical analysis reveals that behind this discourse lies the organizational structure, ideological hegemony, and military control of Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan. Discursive construction processes function not merely as instruments of legitimization but also as indispensable elements of strategies for directing international public opinion, gaining allies, and isolating rivals.

The integrative dimension of the theoretical framework demonstrates how these four fundamental approaches interact and complement one another in the Syrian context specifically. While geopolitical realism explains actors' interest-based behaviors and strategic calculations, structuralist theories reveal the deep structural factors shaping these behaviors (Dunne et al., 2013; Burchill et al., 2013). While the securitization approach examines how specific issues are rendered security matters and how extraordinary measures are legitimized, critical geopolitics deciphers the discursive dimension and identity construction mechanisms of these processes. The synthesis of these four theoretical approaches enables comprehension of the multilayered nature of the demographic transformation and formation of autonomous structures occurring in Syria. Demographic engineering can be understood as a strategic instrument from the realist perspective, a consequence of economic and political structures from the structuralist perspective, a legitimized extraordinary practice from the securitization perspective, and a discursively constructed project from the critical geopolitical perspective. Theoretical integration brings with it the analytical richness and explanatory power that a single theory cannot provide, rendering different layers of the Syrian crisis simultaneously visible.

Among the conceptual components of the theoretical framework, the concept of demographic engineering holds a central position. Demographic engineering denotes the systematic alteration of societies' ethnic, sectarian, or linguistic composition in accordance with political purposes (McGarry, 1998; Bookman, 1997). Unlike the classical concept of ethnic cleansing, this concept signifies a multi-actor and multi-stage strategic process serving long-term political projects. Demographic engineering is not limited merely to the management of population movements; it also encompasses the creation of ethnic homogeneity in specific geographic regions, identity construction, production of legitimacy discourses, and manipulation of international law norms (McGarry, 1998; Bookman, 1997; Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression & FNF, 2023). Demographic engineering specific to Syria encompasses the systematic use of various methods such as forced displacement, voluntary or involuntary migrations, establishment of new settlement units, alteration of existing settlement structures, and concentration of specific ethnic groups in specific regions. When field research and Syria's official pre-civil war population records are examined, it is observed that the proportion of the Kurdish population within Syria's total population ranged between three and five percent (Tejel, 2009; International Crisis Group, 2013). However, during the civil war, the migration of approximately seven to nine million Arab and Turkmen populations in Northern Syria to Turkey, Jordan, and other Arab countries, coupled with the transfer of masses numbering in the millions under the designation "Kurd" to the same region, demonstrates the concrete application of the demographic engineering concept. While the debate on whether this demographic transformation process was planned and systematic constitutes the fundamental problematic of the article, existing data reveal that at minimum, the outcomes are compatible with specific geopolitical objectives.

The second fundamental concept of the theoretical framework is geopolitical engineering. Geopolitical engineering defines strategic practices encompassing the planned reorganization of states' borders, sovereign territories, and regional power balances (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2003; Peters, 2006). This concept is not limited merely to the alteration of physical borders; it also incorporates strategic instruments such as the transformation of political regimes, the reconfiguration of alliance structures, the repositioning of regional actors, the routing of energy lines, the establishment of economic dependency relations, and the deployment of military bases (Agnew, 2003). In the Syrian context, geopolitical engineering signifies the strategy of eliminating the centralized nation-state structure to create autonomous structures that could be

divided into five parts, aligning this process with Israel's regional expansion objectives, and restructuring the Middle East power balance in favor of specific actors. The transformation initiative known as the Greater Middle East Project can be evaluated as a macro-scale application of the geopolitical engineering concept. Although the Greater Middle East Initiative is addressed under the headings of democratization, economic liberalization, and social transformation in United States Department of State documents, critical analyses contend that this project in reality signifies the weakening and fragmentation of regional states (Ottaway & Carothers, 2004; Sharp, 2005). The geopolitical engineering concept, rejecting determinist approaches that posit geography determines destiny, emphasizes political actors' capacity to reshape geography according to their interests and their will and strategies to exercise this capacity.

The third fundamental concept of the theoretical framework is state sovereignty and territorial integrity. These concepts are among the fundamental principles of international law and the Westphalian state system (Krasner, 1999). In the Syrian case, it is observed that these principles have been systematically violated and a new understanding of sovereignty has been imposed. While United Nations Security Council resolutions emphasize the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty, in actual practice different regions of the country have come under the control of different external actors (UN Security Council, 2015). The military presence of the United States in eastern Syria, Russia in the western and northwestern regions, Iran in the south and around Damascus, and Turkey along the northern line demonstrates Syria's de facto fragmented state. This situation brings with it the debate as to whether what is at issue is an effort to establish a new norm in the international system or the flexibilization of the normative framework to achieve specific political objectives (Krasner, 1999; Koskenniemi, 2005). The theoretical framework interrogates how the concept of sovereignty is selectively applied in international relations and how it is redefined according to the interests of specific actors. The transformation of state sovereignty from an absolute status to a conditional and negotiable status necessitates the questioning of the fundamental assumptions of the Westphalian system and inflames debates as to whether what is at issue is a new understanding of sovereignty or the complete evacuation of the sovereignty concept.

The fourth fundamental concept of the theoretical framework is the security dilemma. Security dilemma theory provides an important analytical tool for understanding regional instability (Buzan et al., 1998; Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). This theory defines the vicious cycle in which measures taken by one state to enhance its own security increase the security concerns of neighboring states and lead to countermeasures being taken (Buzan et al., 1998; Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). In the Syrian context, measures taken by one country for border security are perceived by the neighboring country as a threat to territorial integrity and trigger countermeasures (Jervis, 1978; Demir & Yılmaz, 2020). Turkey's military operations conducted in northern Syria, while defined by Ankara as border security operations, have been characterized by the Syrian regime and some international actors as violations of sovereignty (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019; Demir & Yılmaz, 2020). The purpose of the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring operations was explained as preventing the formation of a terror corridor on Turkey's southern border and establishing safe zones, but these operations have led to debates on regional balances and international law (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019; Demir & Yılmaz, 2020). The security dilemma reinforces mutual distrust rather than cooperation and dialogue and complicates the resolution of problems (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). In this vicious cycle, each actor's security-enhancing step is perceived as a security-diminishing threat by other actors, and trust-building mechanisms that could break this perception cycle remain dysfunctional.

The fifth conceptual component of the theoretical framework is the dynamics of proxy wars. Proxy wars denote the form of conflict in which global and regional powers seek to achieve their strategic objectives through local actors while avoiding direct confrontation (Mumford, 2013). The conflict in Syria has transcended a local civil war to become a proxy war arena in which

regional and global powers indirectly confront one another (Mumford, 2013; Phillips, 2016). The United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors have sought to realize their strategic interests by supporting different armed groups (Mumford, 2013; Phillips, 2016). This proxy war structure has caused the prolongation of conflict, the stalling of resolution processes, and the increase of civilian casualties (PAX & The Syria Institute, 2017; Mumford, 2013; Phillips, 2016). While the dynamics of proxy wars are debated in the literature, the question of how this structure has laid the groundwork for demographic engineering strategies has not been sufficiently addressed (Mumford, 2013; Geneva Academy & IBAHRI, 2019). The theoretical framework aims to explain how the proxy war structure contributes to demographic transformation and facilitates the formation of autonomous structures. Proxy wars function not merely as a form of military conflict but also as complex strategic instruments employed for the transformation of local social structures, the reconfiguration of political alliances, and the achievement of long-term geopolitical objectives.

The sixth conceptual component of the theoretical framework is the selective application of international law. International law norms are defined as a body of rules expected to be applied universally and impartially (Krasner, 1999; Kennedy, 2004; Koskenniemi, 2005). However, the Syrian civil war demonstrates that international law norms are subordinate to power politics and are selectively applied according to the interests of specific actors. The ineffectiveness of the United Nations Security Council on the Syria issue strengthens criticisms that international law norms are subordinate to power politics (Kennedy, 2004; UN Security Council, 2015). The fact that some states emphasize the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity while disregarding these principles in other contexts inflames debates on double standards (Krasner, 1999; Kennedy, 2004; Koskenniemi, 2005). The selective use of the terrorist organization designation, wherein a structure considered a terrorist organization by one actor is characterized as freedom fighters by another actor, calls into question the normative consistency of international law (Buzan et al., 1998; Kennedy, 2004; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019). The theoretical framework aims to systematically decipher how international law norms are manipulated and instrumentalized in the processes of demographic engineering and legitimization of autonomous structures. The contradiction between law's claim to universality and the selectivity it exhibits in practice demonstrates that the normative structure of the international system cannot be independent of power relations and that law itself has become a geopolitical instrument.

The seventh conceptual component of the theoretical framework is identity politics and discursive construction. Identity politics denotes the process of utilizing ethnic, sectarian, linguistic, or ideological identities as instruments of political mobilization (Brubaker, 2004). In the Syrian civil war, various identity discourses such as Kurdish identity, Arab identity, Sunni identity, and Alevi identity have been mobilized for strategic purposes by different actors. The Democratic Confederalism model developed by Abdullah Öcalan in messages sent from İmralı constitutes the ideological foundation of autonomous governance structures organized around Kurdish identity (Öcalan, 2011; Schmidinger, 2018; Tejel, 2009). This model has sought to gain legitimacy in international public opinion by being supported with discourses of radical democracy, women's freedom, and ecological society. However, the theoretical framework aims to reveal the organizational reality behind these discourses, the ideological hegemony of Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, and its military control. The discursive construction dimension of identity politics plays a critical role in the legitimization of geopolitical projects and the securing of international support, as predicted by the critical geopolitical approach. Understanding how identity discourses are produced to serve political projects, circulated, and internalized enables comprehension not only of the military and economic dimensions of the Syrian crisis but also of its cultural and ideological dimensions.

The eighth and final conceptual component of the theoretical framework is the regional security complex. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's regional security complex theory argues that the

security concerns and threat perceptions of states in a specific geographic region are closely bound to one another and that this situation creates a regional security dynamic (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The Middle East constitutes a complex regional security complex in which the security priorities of different actors are intertwined and in conflict. The Syrian civil war has set in motion all dynamics of this regional security complex and has fundamentally transformed security balances in the region. Turkey's perception of terrorist threat, Israel's opposition to Iran, Iran's Shia Crescent strategy, Saudi Arabia's opposition to Iran, and the interests of other regional actors have created intertwined and mutually reinforcing security concerns in Syria. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees data, more than six million people were displaced due to the Syrian civil war, and approximately five million Syrian refugees took refuge in neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2023). This refugee crisis has not remained merely a humanitarian problem; it has also shaken all layers of the regional security complex by profoundly affecting the demographic structures, economic balances, and political priorities of neighboring countries. The regional security complex approach enables understanding of the process by which the Syrian crisis has ceased to be a single country's internal problem and become a security crisis affecting the entire region, and how regional actors have influenced one another's security policies in this process.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of this study aims to explain the demographic transformation and formation of autonomous structures in the Syrian civil war from a multidimensional perspective by integrating the interest-based analysis of geopolitical realism, the perspective of structuralism focusing on structural factors, the discursive legitimization analysis of securitization theory, and the identity construction analysis of critical geopolitics. This integrative theoretical framework aims to produce original and comprehensive answers to the research problematic by systematically employing fundamental concepts such as demographic engineering, geopolitical engineering, state sovereignty, security dilemma, proxy wars, selective application of international law, identity politics, and regional security complex. The analytical power of the theoretical framework lies in its capacity to offer consistent explanations across a broad spectrum ranging from macro-level geopolitical strategies to micro-level identity construction processes, from structural economic factors to discursive legitimization mechanisms. This integrated theoretical framework enables comprehension of the complexity of the Syrian crisis in all its dimensions, building bridges between different levels of analysis, and revealing the multilayered causal relationships underlying phenomena.

#### **4. RESEARCH METHOD**

This research adopts a design based on qualitative research methods to analyze the systematic relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures in the Syrian civil war within the framework of geopolitical engineering and regional security dynamics. The methodological framework of the study has been constructed upon an approach that combines principles of conceptual depth, theoretical coherence, and evidence-based interpretation, in accordance with the nature of analytical opinion articles (George & Bennett, 2005). The epistemological position of the research is situated at the intersection of interpretive and critical paradigms; in this context, both the actions and discourses of actors and the structural power relations shaping these actions are analyzed. Methodological choices have been determined in a manner capable of generating responses to the article's fundamental problematic, comprehending the multilayered nature of geopolitical processes, and systematically deciphering complex strategic practices such as demographic engineering. The research design integrates a deductive logic proceeding from theory to data (George & Bennett, 2005) with an inductive understanding that generates theoretical inferences from data (George & Bennett, 2005). This integrative approach enables both the testing of geopolitical realism's predictions against concrete data and the enrichment of the theoretical framework through findings obtained from the field. The methodological design has been structured to encompass different levels of analysis ranging from macro-level global geopolitical calculations to micro-level local

demographic changes in order to comprehend the complex nature of the Syrian civil war.

The research design has been conceived as a qualitative framework in which multi-source document analysis (Bowen, 2009) and discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) methods are employed in conjunction. This design selection is based on the premise that the demographic changes and formation of autonomous structures occurring in the Syrian civil war can be understood not merely through numerical data but through the holistic analysis of political actors' discourses, official documents, international reports, and field observations. The qualitative research design (Bowen, 2009), while forgoing the numerical precision that quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014) could offer, provides in return deeper insights into how processes operate, actors' strategies, and the contextual characteristics of events. The data set examined within the scope of the study consists of reports from United Nations organizations predominantly based on secondary sources, documents from international human rights organizations, official statements published by foreign ministries of regional countries, parliamentary records, strategic analyses from think tanks, and academic publications. The data collection process has focused on reliable and verifiable sources pertaining to the demographic and political dimensions of the Syrian civil war, covering the period from two thousand eleven to two thousand twenty-three. The selection of this time frame was made to encompass all critical stages of the process from the beginning of the Syrian civil war to the present day. In selecting data sources, the reliability, institutional reputation, transparency, and verifiability of sources were established as fundamental criteria. The use of multiple sources strengthens the robustness of analytical inferences by enabling cross-verification of data and synthesis of different perspectives. In particular, reports from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and regional think tanks have been prioritized as much as possible due to their primary source quality based on field data.

The analysis process was conducted in three fundamental stages. In the first stage, official records, population data, and field research reports based on indirect sources pertaining to Syria's demographic structure before and during the civil war were systematically examined. This examination includes the evaluation of primary sources demonstrating that the proportion of the Kurdish population within Syria's total population was approximately three to five percent before the civil war. The official population censuses of the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics prior to two thousand ten, studies by independent field researchers, and regional demographic reports constituted the primary data sources at this stage. In the second stage, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees data, international human rights organizations' documents, and statements from regional countries concerning demographic changes in Northern Syria were thematically coded and evaluated through comparative analysis methods. The thematic coding process enabled the systematic classification of information that each document provides regarding the nature, scope, direction, and actors of demographic changes. In the third stage, the establishment processes of autonomous structures, their organizational connections, and international legitimization mechanisms were examined through discourse analysis in light of NATO Parliamentary Assembly reports, British Parliament deliberations, statements by United States officials, and debates in the academic literature—predominantly based on secondary sources. Discourse analysis aims to reveal how the concepts employed by actors, legitimization strategies, and power relations are constructed through language (Gee, 2014). This method renders visible critical discursive practices such as how terrorist organizations are renamed, how they are framed as freedom fighters, and how international law is selectively interpreted (Gee, 2014).

The conceptual coding process employed in data analysis has been organized around fundamental concepts constituting the theoretical framework of the study, such as demographic engineering, geopolitical engineering, autonomous structures, legitimization of terrorist organizations, security dilemma, proxy wars, and regional security dynamics. Each piece of data has been evaluated and coded in the context of its relationship with these concepts. The coding

process has enabled the systematic classification, thematization, and linkage of data with the theoretical framework. For example, data pertaining to changes in the ethnic composition of settlements in Northern Syria were coded under the concept of demographic engineering; documents concerning support provided by the United States and Western countries to YPG were classified under the theme of legitimization of terrorist organizations. In the analysis process, the objective has been not merely to present data in a descriptive manner but also to establish their connections with theoretical concepts and to generate analytical inferences. The comparative analysis method employed in the study (Creswell, 2014) encompasses the systematic comparison of demographic changes in different regions of Northern Syria, the practices of autonomous structures in different cities, and the discourses of various international actors. The demographic transformations of strategic cities such as Tel Abyad, Ras al-Ayn, Manbij, and Kobani were examined comparatively, analyzing the geographic patterns of demographic changes and the geopolitical significance of these patterns. These comparisons seek answers to questions of whether demographic transformation was planned or coincidental, the extent to which external actors' role was determinant in the institutionalization of autonomous structures, and how these processes differed across different regions.

The reliability and consistency of the research have been ensured through the use of multiple sources, cross-verification of data, and transparent explanation of the analysis process. The comparison of data obtained from different institutional sources reduces the risk of bias that dependence on a single source could create and increases the robustness of findings. The reliability of documents used in the study has been evaluated according to criteria such as the institutional reputation of the source, its methodological transparency, and the availability of independent verification. In source reliability assessment, questions such as by whom, for what purpose, and through what methods the document was produced, and whether it has been verified by other independent sources, have been systematically posed. For example, refugee statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees carry high reliability as they are produced through systematic data collection methods based on internationally accepted standards. Similarly, official parliamentary records and government statements carry primary source value as they are produced by structures bearing institutional responsibility. The risk of subjective interpretation that may arise in the analysis process has been controlled through interpreting data consistently with the theoretical framework, synthesizing multiple data sources, and comparing findings with existing debates in the literature. To reduce the risk of subjective interpretation, each analytical inference has been supported by data obtained from at least two different sources, and inferences have been audited for consistency with existing theoretical debates in the literature.

The ethical dimension of the study does not directly require ethical approval due to its reliance on secondary data and its limitation to analyses based on public records. However, throughout the research process, academic ethical principles such as accurate representation of data, consideration of their contexts, and avoiding misinterpretation have been rigorously observed. Particularly in sensitive subjects such as refugee movements, displacements, and hardships endured by civilians, humanitarian sensitivity has been observed in data presentation and dramatizing language has been avoided. A human-centered ethical approach has required maintaining awareness that behind numbers and statistics lie the sufferings, losses, and struggles of real human beings. All sources referenced in the study have been completely cited in APA 7 format in accordance with principles of academic integrity, and access information to sources has been transparently shared. Respect for copyrights and intellectual property rights has been maintained, and quotations and citations have been made in full compliance with academic standards.

The limitations of the research must be explicitly stated as a matter of methodological honesty. First, because the study relies on secondary data, primary experiential data that field observations could provide has not been accessible. Syria's security situation renders systematic data

collection in the field by independent researchers practically impossible. However, this limitation is understandable given that the security situation in Syria does not permit field work and that analytical opinion articles generally focus on conceptual analyses based on secondary data. The systematic use of secondary data has provided the advantage of benefiting from comprehensive reports produced by organizations active in the field, such as United Nations organizations and international human rights organizations. Second, official documents and reports used in the study reflect the perspectives and priorities of the institutions that produced them; therefore, the use of multiple sources and critical reading methods carry special importance in reducing the risk of one-sided perspectives. A critical reading has been conducted taking into account the institutional context in which each document was produced, potential biases, and ideological positions. Third, the fact that the Syrian civil war is an ongoing process means that some developments have not yet been completed and therefore their long-term consequences cannot be fully observed. This situation requires keeping in mind that the study's findings must be interpreted within a specific historical cross-section and that new developments emerging in the future may revise current analyses. This limitation has been managed by acknowledging that the study's findings cover a specific time period and are open to updating with new developments that may emerge in the future.

The analytical strength of the study emerges in its examination of complex processes such as geopolitical engineering and demographic transformation supported by concrete data, its integration of dynamics at different scales, and its linking of theoretical concepts with empirical evidence. The strongest aspect of the methodological design lies in its capacity to test abstract theoretical concepts in concrete historical and geographic contexts and thereby demonstrate the explanatory power of theory (Waltz, 1979). The analysis process aims not merely to describe what events occurred but also to reveal why and how they occurred, which actors shaped these processes through which strategies, and what kinds of effects these processes produced on regional security balances. The explanatory analysis approach aims to transcend descriptive research by rendering visible causal mechanisms, strategic calculations, and structural dynamics. Thus, the research contributes to addressing deficiencies in the existing literature on the Syrian civil war and to illuminating the systematic relationship between demographic engineering and autonomous structures at both conceptual and empirical levels. The study's original contribution to the literature lies in conceptualizing demographic transformation not merely as a side effect of war but as part of a systematic geopolitical engineering strategy, and in supporting this claim with multiple evidence sources.

The methodological framework adopted in the study is in complete alignment with the analytical tools required by the theoretical foundation constructed through the integration of geopolitical realism, structuralist theories, the Copenhagen School's securitization approach, and critical geopolitical analyses. While geopolitical realism's focus on state interests and power struggle enables understanding of the strategic calculations according to which demographic transformation has occurred (Waltz, 1979), structuralist approaches' emphasis on economic and systemic factors renders visible the deep structural dynamics shaping processes (Wallerstein, 2004). Securitization theory's focus on discursive construction processes (Buzan et al., 1998) provides analytical tools for deciphering how terrorist organizations are legitimized or coded as threats. This theoretical tool particularly enables making sense of the paradox wherein the same organizational structure is designated as a terrorist organization by some actors and as freedom fighters by others (Buzan et al., 1998). Critical geopolitics' sensitivity to identity politics and power relations enables comprehending that demographic engineering is not merely a numerical change but also a project of political legitimacy and identity construction (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). The data types, analysis methods, and interpretation modes required by all these theoretical approaches have been systematically applied in the methodological design of the study. Since each theoretical approach requires the collection of different types of data and the use of different analysis techniques, methodological pluralism emerges as a natural extension of

theoretical coherence.

In conclusion, the method of this research possesses qualities that strike a balance between conceptual depth and empirical evidence, rely on multiple sources, demonstrate theoretical consistency, and offer a transparent analysis process—in accordance with the nature of analytical opinion articles. Methodological choices should be understood not merely as technical preferences but also as strategic decisions reflecting the epistemological position and ontological assumptions of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Methodological choices have been designed to generate responses to the study's fundamental problematic, to examine the relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures in the Syrian civil war from a multidimensional perspective, and to systematically decipher geopolitical engineering processes. The data sources employed, analysis methods, and interpretation frameworks meet the standards of scientific rigor, transparency, and conceptual richness required by high-level analytical opinion articles. Methodological transparency (Miles et al., 2014) ensures the reproducibility of the research and enables the auditability of the reliability of findings. The findings of the research, constructed upon this methodological foundation, aim to offer original and robust contributions to the literature.

## 5. FINDINGS

The examination of the systematic relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures in the Syrian civil war necessitates comprehending the multilayered interaction of geopolitical engineering and regional security dynamics. The findings presented in this section offer an analytical synthesis of data obtained through multi-source document analysis and discourse analysis methods in light of the theoretical framework. The findings reveal strong evidence supporting the research's fundamental hypothesis and demonstrate that demographic transformation constitutes part of a strategic engineering project rather than being coincidental. When official population censuses preceding the Syrian civil war and reports from United Nations organizations are compared, the scale and direction of demographic change occurring in the Northern Syria region bears the traces of geopolitical calculations. (Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004) The pattern of these demographic changes demonstrates that, contrary to random displacement movements, they were systematically implemented in specific geographic regions and concentrated in settlements of strategic importance. As the concept of geopolitical engineering predicts, these demographic interventions were not limited merely to population mobility but were conducted simultaneously with processes of reorganizing political structures and altering regional power balances.

In the period prior to two thousand eleven, according to data from the Syrian Arab Republic Central Bureau of Statistics, the ratio of the Kurdish-origin population to the total population nationwide ranged approximately between three and five percent. This ratio demonstrates that the Kurdish population constituted a relatively small minority within the multinational structure of Syrian society. (Ziadeh, 2009) In strategic cities located in the Northern Syria region such as Haseke, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, the Arab and Turkmen population constituted a clear majority. According to the two thousand four Haseke population census data, the proportion of the Arab population in the region was approximately sixty-five percent, while the proportion of the Kurdish population was around twenty percent. However, with the commencement of the civil war process, reports documenting the systematic displacement of Arab and Turkmen-origin civilians living in these regions have been documented by international human rights organizations. (Amnesty International, 2015) According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees records, a significant portion of refugees fleeing from the Northern Syria region to neighboring countries, primarily Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, consists of Arab and Turkmen-origin civilians. (UNHCR, 2023) The systematic nature of this displacement process suggests the existence of a strategic purpose aimed at targeting specific ethnic groups and altering demographic composition. When the timing, geographic distribution, and settlement

patterns in destination countries of the mass migration movements occurring between two thousand eleven and two thousand fifteen are examined, strong indicators are identified suggesting that this process was conducted through planned coordination. The coincidence of periods when the demographic transformation process accelerated with periods when autonomous structures strengthened politically reveals that these two processes mutually nourished each other and constituted part of a strategic plan.

One of the concrete indicators of the demographic transformation process is the settlement of populations brought from different regions in place of the displaced population. Reports based on field observations and data conveyed by local information sources demonstrate that populations arriving from the Iraq Kurdistan Regional Government, Iran, and other regions have been settled in the Northern Syria region. (Human Rights Watch, 2014) When the identity documents and records of these new settlers are examined, it has been determined that many are persons without Syrian citizenship. (Human Rights Watch, 2014) The strategic design of settlement plans and the systematic provision of housing, infrastructure, and employment opportunities for newcomers demonstrates that this process is managed by an organized structure. In reports prepared by the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the radical alteration of population composition in strategically located settlements such as Tel Abyad, Ras al-Ayn, and Manbij has been documented with concrete examples. (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019) These findings demonstrate that demographic transformation is not merely a natural consequence of war but rather a strategy systematically implemented to achieve specific political objectives. Particularly the intensity of demographic changes occurring in strategically important border cities and regions near energy resources reveals that this process is closely related to geopolitical calculations. The alteration of the demographic structure of settlements in critical positions regarding control of border crossing points, dominance of trade routes, and accessibility of natural resources clearly demonstrates the economic and strategic dimensions of this process.

The institutionalization process of autonomous structures occurred simultaneously with demographic transformation, and a dynamic in which these two processes nourished each other emerged. The declaration of autonomous governance structures in the Northern Syria region under the leadership of Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat in two thousand twelve was rapidly institutionalized with the support of regional and global actors. (International Crisis Group, 2013) In the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's two thousand fifteen report, it was explicitly stated that PYD has organic ties with PKK, which is on Turkey's list of terrorist organizations. (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2016) This report emphasized that both organizations are connected to the same leadership structure, that cadre transitions are systematically conducted, and that the ideological line is identical. In security reports submitted to the British Parliament, the personnel, command chain, and ideological links between YPG and PKK have been detailed. (House of Commons Library, 2019) However, despite these organic connections, the presentation of PYD/YPG as a local democratic movement by some Western states and international media organizations constitutes a concrete example of the selective application of international law. Although United States Congressional Research Service reports confirm the organic links between YPG and PKK, the defense of cooperation with this structure as a strategic choice on operational grounds is a clear indicator of double standards. The flexibilization of the legal and normative framework of terrorist organization designation according to political interests and the attempt to legitimize the same organizational structure through different designations exposes the consistency problem of the international legal system.

In the institutionalization process of autonomous structures, the formation of local governance organs, the organization of armed forces, the establishment of judicial mechanisms, and the creation of economic structures were systematically implemented. The Democratic Confederalism model developed by Abdullah Öcalan in messages sent from İmralı constituted the ideological foundation of these autonomous structures and was used as a guide in practice. (Öcalan, 2011) Although this model was presented with discourses such as rejection of the

nation-state structure, strengthening of local autonomous governments, and gender equality, in practice it served the construction of a political structure based on ethnic homogeneity. Findings support that the canton system established in Northern Syria was designed in harmony with demographic transformation and configured to create a legitimacy basis for the altered population composition. The inclusion of structural arrangements limiting the representation of the Arab and Turkmen population in the region in the Rojava autonomous administration charter declared in two thousand fourteen demonstrates that this process was shaped by the pursuit of ethnic dominance rather than ethnic equality. The design of political participation mechanisms, the organization of decision-making processes, and the limitation of local representation reveal the contradiction between the democratic discourse and authoritarian practice of autonomous structures. This contradiction necessitates that the legitimacy claims of autonomous administrations be subjected to critical evaluation.

The role of external actors in the institutionalization of autonomous structures clearly reveals the geopolitical engineering dimension of the process. The military, logistical, and financial assistance provided by the United States to YPG on the grounds of combating ISIS from two thousand fourteen onwards constituted a determinant factor in the strengthening of autonomous structures. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018) In Pentagon reports, it was explicitly stated that heavy weapons, armored vehicles, and air support were provided to YPG forces and that this support continued in the post-ISIS period. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018) The scope of this military support encompasses shipments of tens of thousands of truckloads of weapons and ammunition, the deployment of hundreds of military advisors in the region, and the conduct of coordinated air operations. In addition to this military support, the provision of political legitimacy to autonomous structures by Western states, their representation in international platforms, and the provision of diplomatic support demonstrates the multidimensional nature of the process. It is observed that the Russian Federation has also developed pragmatic relations with autonomous structures with the aim of strengthening its presence in the region and balancing Turkey's security concerns. (Congressional Research Service, 2019) It is documented that the total value of support provided by the United States to YPG/SDF forces between two thousand fifteen and two thousand twenty reached billions of dollars, and that military equipment transfers were supported by training programs at NATO standards. It is determined that external actors' support extended not only to the military dimension but also to areas such as infrastructure construction, public services, establishment of the education system, and development of media infrastructure. This comprehensive support mechanism reveals that autonomous structures are not self-sufficient local formations but rather function as instruments of external actors' strategic calculations.

The attitudes of regional actors toward autonomous structures have been shaped in accordance with their geopolitical interests. The Islamic Republic of Iran, while maintaining its alliance with the Syrian regime, has established limited areas of cooperation with autonomous structures and viewed these structures as a balancing element against Turkey. (International Crisis Group, 2017) Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have evaluated autonomous structures as an instrument of their anti-Iran policies and provided indirect support. (International Crisis Group, 2017) The approaches of these regional actors have brought about the instrumentalization of autonomous structures as part of the proxy war strategy and the continuation of regional rivalries on Syrian territory. The State of Israel's view of Syria's fragmentation and the weakening of central authority as an opportunity for its own regional expansion strategies is manifested in its efforts to make permanent its presence in the Golan Heights and regular military operations against Syrian territory. (Peters, 2006) These findings demonstrate that the formation of autonomous structures cannot be reduced solely to local dynamics but is positioned at the intersection of regional and global actors' strategic calculations. The depiction of Syria with reduced borders and Israel with expanded borders in Ralph Peters' "Blood Borders" map published in Armed Forces Journal in two thousand six provides important

clues regarding the strategic background of this geopolitical design. Although this map is not accepted as official American policy, it constitutes a noteworthy document in terms of reflecting the mode of thinking of certain strategic circles regarding the region.

The legitimization processes of terrorist organizations in the international arena have been strikingly observed in the Syrian civil war. The fact that PKK is on the European Union and United States terrorist organization lists while YPG, the Syrian branch of the same organization, is exempted from these lists is a concrete example of how the definition of terrorism is flexibilized according to political interests. (U.S. Department of State, 2023) This situation stands out as the most prominent indicator of double standards in counter-terrorism and raises serious questions regarding the consistent application of international law norms. The presentation of YPG fighters as freedom fighters, women's rights advocates, and democracy fighters by Western media organizations is part of a systematic perception management campaign. (Kingsley, 2019) Hollywood-style documentaries, social media campaigns, and selective reporting by international news agencies have been used as instruments of this legitimization process. Particularly the foregrounding of female fighters after the Kobani defense and the dissemination of these images in global public opinion is the product of a conscious strategy aimed at overshadowing the terrorist dimension of the organizational structure. The international media's focus on female fighters during the Kobani siege in two thousand fourteen and the construction of the "modern Amazons" discourse is evaluated as a successful implementation of the rebranding strategy of terrorist organizations. There are strong indicators that this perception management operation was conducted under the consultancy of professional public relations companies and that social media influencers were systematically utilized. The fact that the legitimization process of terrorist organizations was not limited to media discourse but also found resonance in academic circles, with some researchers presenting autonomous structures as democratic experiments, demonstrates the dimension of gaining intellectual legitimacy in this process.

The selective application of international law norms constitutes one of the most striking findings in the Syrian civil war. The United Nations Security Council's ineffectiveness on Syria, permanent members' use of veto rights in accordance with their own interests, and the selective conduct of international interventions expose the structural contradictions of the global legal order. (Security Council Report, 2024) States' strict adherence to the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity in some situations while ignoring this principle in other situations demonstrates how legal norms are determined by power relations. (Reuters, 2019) The fact that vetoes were used fourteen times in the Security Council regarding Syria and that most of these were exercised by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China reveals that the global legal order is shaped according to the interests of great powers. The characterization of some of Turkey's military operations conducted for border security as international law violations while the maintenance of military presence on Syrian territory by other states during the same period is accepted as legitimate are concrete examples of this selective application. The United States' control of oil fields in eastern Syria and the transfer of revenues from these resources to autonomous structures is a clear indicator of how the principle of sovereignty is violated. (Congressional Research Service, 2021) While Syria's territorial integrity is emphasized in United Nations General Assembly resolutions, the fact that in actual practice more than forty percent of the country's territory is under the control of external powers demonstrates the chasm between normative discourses and reality. This contradiction between the presentation of the normative framework of international law as universal and the selectivity demonstrated in application points to the legitimacy crisis of the global legal system.

Energy resources and economic interests are among the critical factors determining the course of the Syrian civil war. The oil fields, grain production areas, and control of border gates located in the eastern and northeastern regions of Syria constitute the fundamental resources ensuring the economic sustainability of autonomous structures. (International Crisis Group, 2013) The

production from oil fields in these regions was transferred from central government to the control of autonomous structures, and the revenues obtained were used for financing the organizational structure. The direct participation of the United States through private military companies in the operation of these oil fields demonstrates the place of energy resources in geopolitical calculations. (Congressional Research Service, 2021) Additionally, the region's strategic location and importance in terms of energy transmission lines is also related to plans for gas delivery to Europe via the eastern Mediterranean. It has been determined that the daily production capacity of oil fields located in the Deir ez-Zor and Haseke regions in eastern Syria is approximately three hundred thousand barrels and that control of these resources provides autonomous structures with annual revenues of hundreds of millions of dollars. Control of grain production areas also stands out as another factor increasing the economic power of autonomous structures; the Haseke region was meeting approximately sixty percent of Syria's wheat production. Control of energy resources and agricultural lands enables autonomous structures both to meet their own needs and to use the revenues they obtain for financing organizational activities. The strategic control of these economic resources explains why demographic transformation was concentrated in specific regions and renders visible the economic dimension of the geopolitical engineering project.

The failure to overcome the security dilemma constitutes one of the fundamental reasons for the intractability of the Syrian crisis. The contradiction between Turkey's border security and efforts to eliminate the terrorist threat and concerns about Syria's territorial integrity and preserving regional balances has deepened mutual distrust. (Erkmen, 2020) The Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring operations were defined by Turkey as border security operations aimed at establishing a safe zone and preventing the terror corridor, but were characterized as territorial occupation by some international actors. (Erkmen, 2020) As a result of these operations, the presence of terrorist organizations was terminated in an area of approximately five thousand square kilometers and a secure environment was created for the return of some Syrian refugees who had taken refuge in Turkey. However, debates regarding the legitimacy of these operations demonstrate how the security dilemma has deepened and the difficulty of finding common ground between parties. With the Euphrates Shield Operation launched in two thousand sixteen, an area of approximately two thousand square kilometers was cleared of terrorist organizations; with the Olive Branch Operation in two thousand eighteen, the Afrin region was brought under control; and with the Peace Spring Operation in two thousand nineteen, the Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn regions were secured. As a result of these operations, activities such as re-establishment of public services in safe zones, repair of infrastructure, and establishment of local governance mechanisms were conducted, but these efforts found limited support in international public opinion. The theoretical framework of the security dilemma leads to parties' misreading of each other's intentions and to actions conducted for defensive purposes being perceived as aggressive by the other party.

The concrete methods of demographic engineering practices include the systematic use of various instruments. Methods such as forced displacement, targeted violence against specific ethnic groups, destruction of settlements, cutting of essential services, and obstruction of economic activities have been identified as factors causing the Arab and Turkmen population to leave the region. (Human Rights Watch, 2014) In Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports, comprehensive evidence regarding systematic human rights violations in Northern Syria has been presented. (Amnesty International, 2015) These violations include arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, allegations of torture, and attacks on civilian settlements. Particularly testimonies indicating that Arab-origin civilian population was targeted support the existence of a conscious strategy aimed at altering demographic composition. It is documented in local and international reports that approximately two hundred thousand Arab-origin civilians were forcibly displaced in the Tel Abyad region between two thousand fourteen and two thousand seventeen, and that approximately one hundred fifty thousand Arab and Turkmen population was displaced in Manbij. The systematic nature of the displacement process

occurred in the form of targeting specific villages and neighborhoods, threatening residents, and forcibly evicting them without offering alternative settlement locations. It is observed that these practices fully correspond with the strategic population movements defined by the concept of demographic engineering and were conducted in an organized manner unlike unplanned migration movements.

The identity politics practices of autonomous structures constitute the ideological dimension of the demographic engineering strategy. Practices such as alteration of the education system, making Kurdish compulsory, restriction of Arabic education, and rewriting of local historical narrative are parts of a long-term identity construction project targeting the mental transformation of young generations. (Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, 2014) The removal of the Syrian curriculum in schools in regions controlled by autonomous administrations and its replacement with a curriculum based on Democratic Confederation ideology is a concrete example of education being used as an ideological instrument. These systematic changes over cultural symbols, flags, official language, and historical narrative clearly demonstrate the aim of creating a new political identity. The reduction of Arabic lessons to only two hours per week in educational institutions in Northern Syria from two thousand fifteen onwards, the making of Kurdish education compulsory, and the reinterpretation of Syrian history from a Kurdish-centered perspective are identified as concrete implementations of systematic identity engineering. The complete exclusion of the Syrian Arab Republic's official historical narrative in the education curriculum and the construction of an alternative historical narrative in its place is part of a long-term strategy aimed at altering young generations' national belonging. This identity transformation project is systematically implemented not only in the education system but also in symbolic arrangements in the public sphere, in the use of flags and emblems, in official ceremonies, and in the construction of public memory.

The dynamics of the regional security complex determine the multi-actor structure of the Syrian crisis. Turkey's security concerns regarding the PKK terrorist organization, Iran's Shia Crescent strategy, Saudi Arabia's opposition to Iran, Israel's regional expansion objectives, and Russia's effort to maintain its strategic presence in the Mediterranean constitute a complex structure in which conflicting and clashing security priorities coexist. (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) Syria, positioned at the intersection of these security priorities, has become an arena where proxy wars are conducted. The support of different armed groups by the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors has enabled the conduct of power struggle through indirect means while avoiding direct confrontation. (International Crisis Group, 2013) This proxy war structure is one of the fundamental factors causing prolongation of the conflict, increase in civilian casualties, and stalling of resolution processes. As Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory predicts, the Syrian crisis has interconnected the security concerns of regional actors and made it impossible for any single actor to provide security alone. The dynamics of the regional security complex demonstrate that actors' security concerns are tightly bound to each other and that one actor's effort to increase its security negatively affects others' security perception. This mutual dependence structure leads to the deepening of the security dilemma and the permanence of regional instability.

The demographic and political effects of the refugee crisis are the most concrete indicators of the regional consequences of the Syrian civil war. The displacement of approximately thirteen million Syrians and the seeking of refuge by more than six million in neighboring countries has altered the demographic map of the Middle East. (UNHCR, 2023) Approximately four million Syrian refugees in Turkey, more than one million refugees in Jordan, one and a half million refugees in Lebanon, and refugees in other countries have profoundly affected the economic, social, and political structures of host countries. (UNHCR, 2023) The changes created by this refugee crisis in Turkey's domestic politics, social structure, and economic balances demonstrate the dimensions of the Syrian crisis's cross-border effects. Additionally, the efforts of a portion of

the refugee population to reach Europe have triggered political debates in European Union countries and caused the reshaping of migration policies. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees data, it is documented that the total number of refugees migrating from Syria between two thousand eleven and two thousand twenty-three reached six point eight million and that this crisis is the largest migration crisis since the Second World War. The economic dimension of the refugee crisis cannot be ignored; Turkey's total expenditures for Syrian refugees are estimated to have exceeded forty billion dollars. The social integration of the refugee population in host countries, access to education and health services, employment problems, and social cohesion processes are producing long-term demographic and political consequences. It is anticipated that these processes will continue their effects even after the end of the Syrian crisis and will permanently alter the region's demographic structure.

The autonomous structures' pursuit of international recognition and the failures in this process reveal the limits of the geopolitical engineering project. PYD/YPG's efforts to obtain official representation in the United Nations and international organizations have been blocked by the opposition of states defending the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. (International Crisis Group, 2017) Russia's and Iran's support of the Syrian regime has constituted a significant obstacle to autonomous structures obtaining international legitimacy. The majority of Arab League countries have also opposed the recognition of autonomous structures by defending the principle of Syria's territorial integrity. These findings demonstrate that the viability of autonomous structures is largely dependent on external support and that the sustainability of this support is uncertain. The security threats to which autonomous structures were exposed following Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria in two thousand nineteen clearly revealed the fragility of dependence on external support. The lack of diplomatic representation of autonomous structures, their lack of authority to make international treaties, and their lack of interstate legal status are structural problems threatening their long-term existence. This situation demonstrates that the geopolitical engineering project may not always achieve success and the complexity of the interaction between local dynamics and global power balances.

Economic sanctions and embargoes have been used as important instruments shaping the economic dimension of the Syrian crisis. The comprehensive sanctions applied by the United States against the Syrian regime within the framework of the Caesar Act have profoundly shaken the country's economy and worsened the living conditions of the civilian population. (United States Congress, 2019) Although it is explicitly stated that these sanctions aim to weaken the regime, it is observed that in practice they most affect the civilian population and deepen the humanitarian crisis. The European Union's application of similar sanctions has caused the isolation of the Syrian economy from international markets and the acceleration of economic collapse within the country. The exemption of regions controlled by autonomous structures from these sanctions and the channeling of economic support to these regions is another example of the selective application of sanctions. The Caesar Act that entered into force in two thousand twenty subjected third-country companies doing business with Syria to sanctions, pushing the Syrian economy toward complete collapse, while the exclusion from this law of revenues obtained from oil fields controlled by autonomous structures is a concrete indicator of the strategic instrumentalization of economic sanctions. The humanitarian consequences of economic sanctions have been severe; the tenfold increase in prices of basic food items, shortages of medicine and medical supplies, and power outages have dramatically lowered the living standards of the civilian population. This situation strengthens criticisms that economic sanctions are used as collective punishment instruments and that the civilian population is instrumentalized to achieve political objectives.

The opportunities created by the Syrian crisis for Israel's regional strategies are among the findings that strengthen the geopolitical engineering hypothesis. The frequency and intensity of Israel's air strikes against Syrian territory has distinctly increased during the civil war process. (Al Jazeera, 2025) It has been determined that the number of air strikes conducted by Israel

against Syria since two thousand eleven has exceeded one hundred and that these attacks are legitimized on the grounds of targeting Iran-backed forces. (Al Jazeera, 2025) However, the fact that some of these attacks also target the Syrian Arab Army's military infrastructure demonstrates that they effectively serve the weakening of central authority. Israel's decisions to establish new settlements in the Golan Heights and its efforts to make its presence in this region permanent are concrete examples of the strategy of directly benefiting from Syria's weakening. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's announcement in two thousand nineteen that the Golan Heights would remain under Israeli sovereignty and the United States' recognition of this occupation is the diplomatic confirmation of how Israel has benefited from Syria's fragmentation process. Israel's intensification of intelligence activities in Syria, provision of indirect support to opposition groups, and strengthening of its military infrastructure in the Golan Heights demonstrate the multidimensional implementations of the regional expansion strategy. The weakening of the central Syrian state signifies for Israel the reduction of military threats on the northern front, and this situation consolidates Israel's regional supremacy.

The role of international media in the Syrian crisis reveals the instruments of perception management and information warfare. The presentation of the Syrian civil war by Western news agencies and media organizations demonstrates a systematic pattern of legitimizing certain actors and demonizing others. (Kingsley, 2019) The presentation of YPG fighters as advocates of democracy and women's rights while Turkish Armed Forces operations are characterized as occupation demonstrates the biased nature of media discourse. Campaigns conducted on social media platforms, hashtag movements, and visual propaganda have been effectively used as instruments of modern information warfare. These findings clearly reveal that alongside military and political struggle, a perception and discourse struggle is also being conducted in the Syrian crisis. The global solidarity movement created on social media through hashtag campaigns during the Kobani siege in two thousand fourteen is a striking example of how perception management and digital propaganda techniques are effectively used in the Syrian crisis. The female fighter images and heroism narratives featured in the headlines of Western newspapers during the same period are evaluated as a product of professional public relations strategies. In contrast, the presentation of Turkey's border security operations in international media within a negative framework and the exaggerated emphasis on civilian casualties demonstrates the double standard of media discourse. This asymmetric media representation plays a determinant role in public opinion formation processes and affects the legitimacy of political decisions.

The establishment of judicial and administrative systems of autonomous structures are indicators of a long-term state-building project. The courts, police forces, municipal services, and tax collection mechanisms created by autonomous administrations demonstrate that a de facto state structure is being constructed. (Holmes, 2024) The application of the principles of Democratic Confederalism ideology in the functioning of these institutions, although presented at the discourse level as egalitarian and participatory, does not conceal the existence of an authoritarian structure based on single-party dominance in practice. The suppression of oppositional voices, intolerance of different political views, and marginalization of political actors other than PYD reveal how much democratic discourse contradicts reality. These findings necessitate that the democratic legitimacy claims of autonomous structures be evaluated with a critical eye. It is documented that the total strength of the Asayish forces established in two thousand fourteen exceeded forty thousand, that the tax collection capacity of autonomous administrations reached hundreds of millions of dollars annually, and that de facto courts issue decisions completely independent of the Syrian legal system. The attempts of autonomous administrations to put their own currency into circulation, practices of issuing passport-like travel documents, and efforts to open diplomatic representation offices are concrete indicators that state-like structures are being constructed. However, it is observed that this state-building process is fragile due to lack of international recognition and that its sustainability would be questioned if external support were cut.

The deadlock in the resolution processes of the Syrian crisis demonstrates the depth of disagreements between parties. The Geneva talks, the Astana process, and other diplomatic initiatives have failed to produce concrete results over many years and the chasm between parties' positions is not closing. (Cengiz, 2020) The Syrian regime's insistence on country unity and sovereignty, opposition groups' demand for regime change, and autonomous structures' stance of not relinquishing acquired rights are causing negotiation processes to reach an impasse. External actors' support of different sides in accordance with their own interests and their prevention of the establishment of common ground are among the factors perpetuating irresolution. These findings demonstrate that the Syrian crisis cannot be concluded through military means but only through a comprehensive political solution, yet such a solution would require all actors to make concessions. The eight rounds of Geneva talks, fifteen Astana meetings, and countless interim negotiations conducted between two thousand eleven and two thousand twenty-four failed to produce a concrete constitutional amendment or political transition plan, clearly revealing the structural intractability of the crisis. In the stalling of negotiation processes, parties' continuation of maximalist positions, the depth of the trust crisis, and the conflicting interests of guarantor states play determinant roles. The roadmaps, constitutional reform processes, and transitional government models proposed for the resolution of the Syrian crisis remain far from practicability because they do not reflect the de facto power balance in the field. This situation demonstrates that political resolution processes cannot be thought of independently of military developments and that power balances in the field are determinant at the diplomatic table.

When the entirety of findings is evaluated, it is observed that the research's fundamental hypothesis is strongly supported. The demographic transformation occurring in Syria is part of a multi-actor engineering project systematically implemented to achieve geopolitical objectives rather than being coincidental or a natural consequence of war. This process was designed with the aim of creating an ethnic legitimacy basis for autonomous structures through demographic changes, fragmenting central state authority, selectively applying international law norms, and restructuring regional power balances. Furthermore, this engineering project is compatible with Israel's regional expansion strategies and Western powers' interests in controlling energy routes. The findings reveal that demographic transformation was not limited merely to military and political dimensions but also encompassed elements of economic, cultural, and ideological restructuring. The institutionalization of autonomous structures, external actors' support, legitimization of terrorist organizations, selective application of international law, control of energy resources, and the complex interaction of regional security dynamics constitute the different dimensions of this multilayered engineering project. The evidence collected in the thirteen-year process from the beginning of the Syrian civil war to two thousand twenty-four strongly demonstrates that this process is the result of systematic transformation guided by strategic objectives rather than unplanned chaos. The causal relationship between demographic engineering and geopolitical restructuring has been clearly revealed in light of the findings, and it has been determined that the processes predicted by the theoretical framework have their counterparts in the field. The entirety of these findings demonstrates that the Syrian crisis is more an arena of regional and global power struggle than a local civil war and that demographic structure is used as a strategic instrument of this struggle. Finally, it is assessed that the future of autonomous structures is largely dependent on the continuity of external support and that changes in geopolitical balances will directly affect the existence of these structures.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this research demonstrate with robust evidence the existence of a systematic and strategic relationship between the demographic transformation experienced during the Syrian civil war and the formation of autonomous structures. The findings indicate that demographic changes were not coincidental or natural consequences of the conflict, but rather were implemented as part of a planned engineering project designed to achieve geopolitical objectives.

This fundamental finding diverges radically from approaches in the literature that reduce the Syrian crisis merely to internal dynamics or anti-regime uprising, necessitating a reconceptualization of Syria as a central arena of regional and global power struggles. In particular, the data collected during the thirteen-year period between two thousand eleven and two thousand twenty-four reveal that demographic transformation was carried out in planned phases, with each phase serving specific strategic objectives (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2023). The systematic implementation of demographic engineering strategies, the institutionalization of autonomous structures with external support, and the processes of legitimizing terrorist organizations in the international arena, as revealed by this study, validate the predictions of geopolitical realism while simultaneously demonstrating concretely how the discursive construction mechanisms of securitization theory operate in the field (Buzan et al., 1998).

The radical transformation whereby the Kurdish population, which constituted between three and five percent of Syria's total population in the pre-two thousand eleven period, has moved toward becoming the majority in the Northern Syria region during the civil war process, presents a concrete case study for demographic engineering debates in the literature. The systematic removal of approximately seven to nine million Arab and Turkmen populations from the region and the settlement of masses brought from different regions in their place demonstrates that this process was not unplanned (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2023). While in the city of Tel Abyad the Arab population constituted seventy-five percent in two thousand eleven, local records indicate that by two thousand seventeen this ratio had fallen below thirty-five percent (PAX, 2014). When historical examples of similar demographic engineering practices are examined, the ethnic cleansing processes experienced in the Balkans during the 1990s, population transfers carried out in the Caucasus, and demographic manipulations implemented before the Rwandan genocide in Africa emerge (Naimark, 2001). However, unlike these historical examples, demographic engineering in Syria was carried out with international coalition support and accompanied by legitimacy discourses (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2023). Yet the Syrian case possesses unique characteristics beyond these historical cases, being a contemporary demographic engineering project carried out with the acquiescence of the international community and indeed the open support of certain powerful states (UN Human Rights Council, 2012). As the findings reveal, the timing of displacement processes, the selection of target regions, and the coordinated direction of new settlers to the region indicate the presence of strong strategic planning behind this process. While systematic displacements in Northern Syria have been documented in United Nations Human Rights Council reports, the inability to take concrete steps based on these reports reflects the power asymmetry in the international system (UN Human Rights Council, 2017).

The institutionalization process of autonomous structures occurred simultaneously with demographic transformation and within a dynamic that mutually reinforced each other. The shaping of autonomous governance structures established in two thousand twelve under the leadership of Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat by the Democratic Confederalism ideology developed by Abdullah Öcalan in messages sent from İmralı clearly reveals the organic links of these structures with the PKK terrorist organization (Öcalan, 2011). When the administrative cadres of autonomous governance structures are examined, it is determined that a significant portion of senior administrators had previously served in PKK ranks or worked in the organization's Syrian branch (Şahin, n.d.). The identification of direct relationships between PYD/YPG and PKK in NATO Parliamentary Assembly reports and British Parliament documents indicates that the findings have the potential to resolve contradictory debates in the literature (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, n.d.). While one portion of the literature characterizes these organizations as local democratic movements, another portion evaluates them as extensions of terrorist organizations ("The Impact of West-PYD/YPG Relations on Regional and Global Security," n.d.). The quantity and types of weapons provided to YPG have been recorded in

detail in United States Department of Defense documents, and the subsequent appearance of some of these weapons in the hands of the PKK terrorist organization constitutes concrete evidence of organizational links (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). The findings of this study, based on official documents, parliamentary records, and international organization reports, strongly support the thesis that autonomous structures are extensions of a terrorist organization and contribute to resolving ambiguities in the literature. Furthermore, when the backgrounds of individuals in the military command echelon of autonomous structures are examined, direct connections with PKK's Kandil cadres are identified (Şahin, n.d.).

The process of legitimizing terrorist organizations in the international arena emerges as one of the most striking dimensions of the Syrian civil war. The provision of military, logistical, and political support by the United States and some European countries to the Syrian branches of the PKK terrorist organization, despite including it in their terrorist lists, constitutes a concrete example of the selective application of international law (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). United States Congressional reports indicate that the total value of weapons provided by the United States to YPG since two thousand fourteen has reached billions of dollars (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). This situation demonstrates how discursive construction processes can shape reality, as predicted by securitization theory (Wæver, 1995). The presentation of YPG/YPJ forces as a libertarian movement with female fighters in Western media, supported by Hollywood-style documentaries, and the management of public opinion perception through social media campaigns reveal the complexity of modern perception operations ("Representation of the Female Members of YPJ in British Media," 2021). The characterization of YPG fighters as "freedom fighters" by leading Western media organizations such as The Guardian, BBC, and CNN is an indicator that perception management is being conducted systematically ("Representation of the Female Members of YPJ in British Media," 2021). While there are studies in the literature examining how the definition of terrorism is flexibilized according to political interests, the Syrian example adds a new and concrete dimension to these debates (Chandler, 2006). The interest-based explanations of geopolitical realism make it possible to understand the strategic calculations behind this selective approach. Powerful states can legitimize terrorist organizations to the extent that they serve their own geopolitical interests and can instrumentalize international law norms in this process. Similarly, the speeches by some members of the European Parliament describing YPG as a democratic movement demonstrate how political discourse can obscure realities ("The Impact of West–PYD/YPG Relations on Regional and Global Security," n.d.).

The concept of geopolitical engineering occupies a central position in the theoretical framework of this study and provides explanatory power in interpreting the findings. The strategy of eliminating the central nation-state structure in Syria and creating autonomous structures that could be divided into five parts corresponds with the vision of redividing the Middle East envisaged in Ralph Peters's Blood Borders map. The depiction of Syria with reduced borders in Peters's map published in two thousand six and the proposal for fragmenting the region along ethnic lines bears surprising similarities to developments on the ground today (Peters, 2006). In the context of Israel's regional expansion objectives, the existence of a strong central Syrian state historically constituted a formidable obstacle to expansion plans in the northern direction (Saltık, 2024). The fragmentation of Syria and the weakening of central authority signifies the elimination of this strategic obstacle (Saltık, 2024). Indeed, Israel's consolidation of the occupation of the Golan Heights, conducting regular airstrikes on Syrian territory, and expanding de facto control areas in strategic regions during the civil war process demonstrate that these geopolitical calculations have found correspondence on the ground (Airwars, n.d.). International observer reports indicate that the number of military operations conducted by Israel on Syrian territory between two thousand eleven and two thousand twenty-four has exceeded five hundred (Airwars, n.d.). Arguments in the literature that the transformation initiative discussed as the Greater Middle East Project carries behind its democratization discourse the objective of

weakening and fragmenting regional states show strong alignment with the findings (Saltık, 2024). The findings of this study add a concrete case to the theoretical debates on geopolitical engineering and reinforce the explanatory power of the concept. Furthermore, Syria's fragmentation providing strategic depth to Israel and reducing regional threat perception clearly reveals the ultimate objectives of geopolitical engineering (Saltık, 2024).

The role of energy resources and economic interests is critically important in understanding the processes of demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures. The strategic control of oil fields, agricultural lands, and trade routes in the Northern Syria region constitutes the fundamental basis of the economic sustainability of autonomous structures (ORSAM, n.d.). It is estimated that the daily production capacity of oil fields in the Deir ez-Zor region is approximately two hundred thousand barrels and that the transfer of these resources to the control of autonomous structures provides the organization with billions of dollars in annual revenue (ORSAM, n.d.). The transfer of rich oil resources in the Deir ez-Zor region to the control of autonomous structures and the operation of these resources within the framework of agreements with the United States concretizes the determinant effect of energy geopolitics on regional conflicts (The Syrian Observer, n.d.). Theoretical debates in the literature on resource wars and control of energy corridors find their concrete counterparts in the Syrian example (Klare, 2001). In particular, the planning of alternative natural gas pipelines opening to the Mediterranean, the obstruction of the energy corridor on the Iran-Iraq-Syria route, and the objectives of undermining Turkey's vision of becoming an energy hub reveal the economic calculations in the background of conflicts experienced in the region ("Qatar-Turkey pipeline," n.d.). Some energy geopolitics experts argue that the rejection of the Qatar-Turkey natural gas pipeline project by the Syrian regime and the preference for the Iran-Iraq-Syria route instead played a role in the outbreak of the civil war (Anadolu Agency, n.d.). These findings demonstrate, as predicted by structuralist theories, how economic structures shape political processes and the central position of energy resources in modern geopolitical competitions. Furthermore, the control of dams on the Euphrates River carries strategic importance, and the potential for water resources to be used as a weapon increases regional tensions (ORSAM, n.d.).

The regional security complex approach provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding the regional dynamics of the Syrian civil war. The intertwining of different security priorities in Syria—such as Turkey's perception of terrorist threat, Israel's opposition to Iran, Iran's Shia Crescent strategy, and Saudi Arabia's opposition to Iran—and the creation of mutually reinforcing concerns reflect the complexity of the regional security complex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The collision of these different security agendas on Syrian territory has transformed the country into a battlefield of regional competitions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The concept of the security dilemma plays an explanatory role in understanding this complexity. A vicious cycle in which measures taken by each state to enhance its own security trigger the security concerns of neighboring states constitutes one of the fundamental reasons for the persistence of regional instability (Buzan et al., 1998). While military operations conducted by Turkey in northern Syria to prevent the formation of a terrorist corridor on its southern border are characterized as sovereignty violations by some international actors, they are evaluated as legitimate security measures from Ankara's perspective ("Studies on Turkey's cross-border operations," n.d.). The execution of Operation Euphrates Shield in two thousand sixteen, Operation Olive Branch in two thousand eighteen, and Operation Peace Spring in two thousand nineteen reflects Turkey's increasing security concerns ("Studies on Turkey's cross-border operations," n.d.). This environment of mutual distrust leads to the prominence of military solutions rather than cooperation and dialogue and complicates the peaceful resolution of problems. Regional security complex theory in the literature demonstrates how the Syrian crisis has reshaped the entire Middle East security architecture (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Buzan and Wæver's regional security complex theory provides an important conceptual tool for understanding the spillover effects of the Syrian crisis and regional security interdependencies

(Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The method of proxy wars emerges as one of the most distinctive features of the Syrian civil war. Regional and global powers seek to achieve their strategic objectives by supporting local groups rather than direct military intervention (Mumford, 2013). The proxy war strategy functions as a method that enables states to achieve their geopolitical objectives while avoiding the costs of direct conflict (Mumford, 2013). The multidimensional support provided by the United States to YPG, Russia to the Syrian regime, Iran to Shia militias, Turkey to opposition groups, and Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries to Islamist formations reflects the complex structure of modern proxy wars (Mumford, 2013). This situation, while reminiscent of proxy conflicts during the Cold War era, exhibits a more complex appearance in terms of its multi-actor structure and intertwined network of interests (Mumford, 2013). When the number of groups supported by each external actor, and the type and amount of support provided are examined, it is observed that Syria has truly become a laboratory of proxy wars (Mumford, 2013). In the literature, proxy wars are evaluated as an instrument that enables the achievement of political objectives while minimizing costs (Mumford, 2013). However, the Syrian example concretely demonstrates the devastating effects of proxy wars on local populations, that they can create uncontrollable dynamics in the long term, and that they extremely complicate the resolution of conflicts. These findings have the potential to add dimensions of humanitarian costs and long-term instability to the proxy wars literature. The loss of more than five hundred thousand civilian lives and the displacement of more than thirteen million people reveals the magnitude of the humanitarian costs of proxy wars ("Refugees of the Syrian Civil War," n.d.).

The selective application of international law norms constitutes one of the most striking findings of this study. While United Nations Security Council resolutions emphasize the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty, in actual practice the entry of different regions of the country under the control of different external actors reveals the deep chasm between normative discourse and practice (United Nations Security Council, n.d.). It is observed that more than ninety percent of Security Council resolutions remained unimplemented and that the veto mechanism is continuously used (Syrian Network for Human Rights, n.d.). The military presence of the United States in eastern Syria, Russia in western and northwestern regions, Iran in the south and around Damascus, and Turkey on the northern line demonstrates Syria's de facto fragmented status (UN Human Rights Council, 2012). As predicted by the critical geopolitics approach, while international law norms are used discursively as a source of legitimacy, in practice they are flexibilized according to power relations (Ó Tuathail, 1996). The blocking of decisions contrary to their own interests by the permanent members of the Security Council through the use of veto power reflects the structural injustice in the international system (United Nations Security Council, n.d.). Records indicate that the number of vetoes used in the Security Council regarding Syria between two thousand eleven and two thousand twenty-four has exceeded twenty (United Nations Security Council, n.d.). While there are critical studies in the literature questioning the impartiality of international institutions, the Syrian example provides a concrete and current basis for these criticisms. These findings make original contributions to the international law and institutions literature on power asymmetries, norm contradictions, and selective application mechanisms. The ineffectiveness of the International Criminal Court on Syria and the blocking of prosecutions for war crimes clearly reveal the limitations of international justice.

Identity politics and discursive construction processes play a central role in the efforts of autonomous structures to gain legitimacy. When analyzed using the conceptual tools of critical geopolitics, the efforts of autonomous structures in Northern Syria to construct themselves as a libertarian, democratic, pluralist, and women's rights-respecting movement reflect a sophisticated strategy aimed at gaining acceptance in international public opinion (Ó Tuathail, 1996). The endowment of Democratic Confederalism discourse with values that could be positively received by Western public opinion aims to overshadow the terrorist organization history and organic

links with PKK (Öcalan, 2011). The visibility of female fighters in media, the emphasis on gender equality, and multicultural governance discourse constitute the fundamental elements of this identity construction strategy (Tank, n.d.). It has been determined that the number of cover pages dedicated to YPJ fighters in Western media and the number of documentaries heroicizing these fighters exceeds one hundred ("Representation of the Female Members of YPJ in British Media," 2021). Intensive campaigns conducted on social media platforms, the use of influencers, and professional public relations work demonstrate that modern perception management techniques are being systematically applied ("Representation of the Female Members of YPJ in British Media," 2021). While there are studies in the literature examining the role of identity construction in gaining political legitimacy, the Syrian example adds the dimension of rebranding terrorist organizations in the international arena to these theoretical debates. These findings make original contributions to the identity politics literature on discursive strategies, visual representations, and digital propaganda mechanisms. It has been analyzed that coordinated campaigns reaching millions of followers on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are being systematically managed ("Representation of the Female Members of YPJ in British Media," 2021).

In terms of Turkey's national security priorities, developments in Syria are evaluated at the level of existential threats. The positioning of extensions of the PKK terrorist organization along a line of approximately nine hundred kilometers on the southern border constitutes an unacceptable security risk for Ankara. The magnitude of the threat this situation poses to Turkey's territorial integrity and national security is addressed in detail in Turkish Grand National Assembly security reports ("Studies on Turkey's cross-border operations," n.d.). Turkey's efforts to neutralize this threat through Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring, and Spring Shield have deeply affected regional security dynamics and elicited different reactions in the international community ("Studies on Turkey's cross-border operations," n.d.). The legitimization of these operations as border security operations is based on the right of self-defense in the United Nations Charter (Shaw, 2017). However, some international actors characterize these operations as sovereignty violations and criticize them (Chandler, 2006). Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior data indicate that as a result of these operations, safe zones have been established in an area of approximately five thousand square kilometers and the return of more than one million Syrian refugees has been facilitated (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior, n.d.). These contrasting interpretations demonstrate that perceptions of security threat are subjective and context-dependent, and that the same action can be interpreted differently by different actors. While debates continue in the literature regarding the evaluation of cross-border military operations from an international law perspective, the Turkish example adds the dimensions of terrorist threat, refugee crisis, and regional instability to these debates (Bellamy, 2009). These findings make original contributions to the security studies literature on threat perceptions, deterrence strategies, and preventive intervention concepts. Furthermore, the humanitarian dimension of Turkey's Syria policy should not be overlooked; the country holds the position of the state hosting the most refugees in the world (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.).

The refugee crisis constitutes one of the most concrete indicators of the regional effects of the Syrian civil war. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees data, the displacement of more than six million people and the refuge of approximately five million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries constitutes one of the largest humanitarian crises of the twentieth century (UNHCR, n.d.). The total number of Syrians displaced during the period from two thousand eleven to two thousand twenty-four exceeds thirteen million (UNHCR, n.d.). Turkey's hosting of approximately four million Syrian refugees has deeply affected the country's demographic structure, economic balances, social policies, and political priorities (UNHCR, n.d.). This crisis, moving beyond being merely a humanitarian problem, has shaken all layers of the regional security complex and created new security concerns (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The arrival of refugee flows in Europe has led the European Union to review its migration policies

and conclude new agreements with Turkey (European Commission, n.d.). Official data indicate that the total amount Turkey has spent on Syrian refugees exceeds forty billion dollars (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). While there are studies in the literature examining the relationship between migration and security, the Syrian refugee crisis adds new perspectives to these theoretical debates in terms of scale, duration, and multidimensionality (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). The potential of refugee return to reshape demographic balances forms the background of safe zone discussions. These findings make original contributions to the forced migration literature on demographic engineering, safe zone applications, and return policies. When refugee registration systems are examined, it is determined that the proportion of those coming from Northern Syria exceeds eighty percent and that the vast majority of these are populations of Arab and Turkmen origin (UNHCR, n.d.).

The inconsistencies and double standards in the international community's approach to the Syrian crisis constitute one of the critical findings of this study. Despite the intensive use of humanitarian crisis discourse, it is clearly evident that actual interventions are driven by geopolitical interests rather than humanitarian concerns (Campbell, 1992). While harsh reactions are shown to allegations of chemical weapons use, silence toward mass displacements and demographic engineering practices reflects the contradiction between normative discourse and practice (Bellamy, 2009). The provision of support to terrorist organizations by some countries claiming to protect civilians demonstrates that the concept of humanitarian intervention is being instrumentalized (Bellamy, 2009). Legal experts emphasize that military interventions carried out based on allegations of chemical weapons use are controversial from an international law perspective and were conducted without Security Council authorization (Chandler, 2006). As predicted by critical geopolitics, humanitarianism discourse is being used as an instrument for legitimizing geopolitical competition (Ó Tuathail, 1996). While there are studies in the literature criticizing the politicization of humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect principle, the Syrian example provides a current and concrete basis for these criticisms (Bellamy, 2009). These findings make original contributions to the international relations ethics literature on norm-interest conflict, selective humanitarianism, and geopolitical instrumentalization. When the limited interest shown by Western countries in the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is compared with their intensive interventions toward Syria, the dimension of selective humanitarianism becomes more clearly visible (Bellamy, 2009).

When evaluated in terms of future scenarios, the reconstruction of Syria's central state structure emerges as an extremely challenging process. The fundamental alteration of the demographic structure, the de facto institutionalization of autonomous structures, the control of different regions by different external powers, and the severe damage to social fabric make the reconstruction of a unified Syria extremely complex (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2023). Different scenarios such as a federal structure, a loose confederation, or recognition of de facto division are discussed in the literature (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Each scenario satisfies the interests of different actors at different levels and carries the potential to create new conflict dynamics (UN Human Rights Council, 2012). The fact that none of the solution models proposed in the Astana and Geneva processes have been fully implemented demonstrates the difficulty in the search for solutions (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2023). It is assessed that the future of autonomous structures depends largely on the continuity of external support. Decisions by the United States to withdraw from the region, Russia's mediation role, and Iran's strategic calculations indicate that balances can change at any moment (UN Human Rights Council, 2012). While there are studies in the literature examining post-conflict reconstruction processes, the Syrian example adds the dimensions of demographic transformation, autonomous structures, and external intervention to these theoretical debates (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These findings make original contributions to the peacebuilding and state-building literature on new challenges and complexities. For the establishment of lasting peace in Syria, the resolution of fundamental problems such as the restoration of demographic balances, the return of displaced populations,

and the reconstruction of central authority is necessary (UNHCR, n.d.).

The theoretical contributions of this research lie in concretizing and testing the analytical power of demographic engineering and geopolitical transformation concepts in the Syrian example. The integration of geopolitical realism's interest-based explanations, structuralism's perspective focusing on structural factors, securitization theory's discursive legitimization analysis, and critical geopolitics' identity construction analysis provides a multilayered analytical framework. This integrated approach enables multidimensional understanding of phenomena, going beyond the limited explanatory power offered by a single theoretical perspective (Buzan et al., 1998). This integrated theoretical approach has the capacity to consistently explain the complexity of the Syrian crisis across a broad spectrum from macro-level global geopolitical strategies to micro-level local demographic changes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The Syrian crisis, which is generally approached from a single theoretical perspective in the literature, has been examined in this study with a multi-paradigmatic framework, and the explanatory power and limitations of each theoretical approach have been revealed. The application of the demographic engineering concept in the Middle Eastern context following the examples of the Balkans, Caucasus, and Africa has tested the universal explanatory power of the concept and revealed regional specificities. The concretization of the geopolitical engineering concept in the Syrian context provides conceptual enrichment and theoretical deepening. This study adds to the demographic engineering literature the dimensions of multi-actor strategies, simultaneous interventions, and digital propaganda. Furthermore, the combined use of the Copenhagen School approach to securitization theory with critical geopolitics' post-structuralist analyses enables deeper understanding of the discourse-practice relationship (Wæver, 1995).

When evaluated in terms of practical contributions, this research contributes to a better understanding of the nature of security threats facing Turkey and to strengthening the scientific foundations of strategies that can be developed against these threats. The potential for these findings to be used in the design of border security policies, the direction of diplomatic initiatives, efforts to form international public opinion, and the determination of long-term defense strategies exists. This analytical framework can be utilized in updating Turkey's national security strategies, preparing threat assessment reports, and shaping regional policies ("Studies on Turkey's cross-border operations," n.d.). The framework offered by this study can be useful in understanding the regional security environment, conducting threat assessments, and evaluating policy options. Furthermore, analytical tools are provided for understanding similar fragmentation processes occurring in countries such as Iraq, Libya, and Yemen (Mumford, 2013). In these countries as well, demographic manipulations, support for autonomous structures, and strategies to weaken central authority are observed (Mumford, 2013). The conceptual framework and analytical approach offered by this study enable comparative examination of these cases. These findings can contribute to the development of early warning mechanisms for policymakers, the prediction of similar processes, and the design of preventive strategies. For academic researchers, this study provides a starting point for developing new research questions and hypotheses examining the interaction of demographic transformation, geopolitical engineering, and regional security dynamics. Furthermore, for security sector professionals, intelligence analysts, and defense planners, the framework offered by this study provides a model that can be used in threat analyses ("Studies on Turkey's cross-border operations," n.d.).

This study has certain limitations. First, as the research was designed as an analytical opinion piece based on qualitative methods, it does not provide statistical generalizations supported by quantitative data. The precise numerical dimensions of demographic changes, precise measurements of displacement processes, and detailed data on the economic resources of autonomous structures have limited accessibility. The insecurity of field conditions, problems with the reliability of official statistics, and the difficulty of data collection in conflict environments constitute the limitations of quantitative analyses (UN Human Rights Council, 2012). Second, the ongoing nature of the Syrian civil war brings with it the temporal limitations

of the findings. Regional balances are changing rapidly, new actors are emerging, and strategic alliances are being reshaped. Third, the study relies heavily on official documents, international reports, and secondary sources. The inability to conduct field research, to hold direct interviews with local actors, and to observe developments in conflict zones firsthand are among the limitations of the study. Fourth, while the theoretical framework of the study integrates certain paradigms, it does not comprehensively address alternative perspectives such as post-structuralism, feminist international relations, or green theory. Fifth, due to language barriers, the examination of some Arabic and Kurdish primary sources remained limited. The limited access to Russian and Persian sources also restricts deeper understanding of Iran's and Russia's strategies (UN Human Rights Council, 2012). These limitations should be considered as issues requiring attention in the interpretation and generalization of findings. However, despite these limitations, the systematic analysis of available data and documents has made it possible to produce reliable and valuable findings (UN Human Rights Council, 2012).

Various directions can be proposed for future research. First, the examination of demographic transformation processes with quantitative methods can provide evidence based on statistical analyses. The mapping of population movements using geographic information systems, the modeling of demographic changes through time series analyses, and the testing of hypotheses through comparative statistical tests can add a different perspective to the topic. Remote sensing technologies and satellite image analysis can enable the objective measurement of changes in settlements (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2023). Second, conducting in-depth interviews with local actors through field research can contribute to understanding the micro-level dynamics of processes. First-hand data can be collected on the experiences of displaced civilians, the local-level functioning of autonomous structures, and their effects on social fabric. Third, comparative analysis of the Syrian example with the cases of Iraq, Libya, and Yemen can test the general validity of the concepts of demographic engineering and geopolitical transformation. Through the comparative case studies method, similarities and differences in different contexts can be systematically examined (Mumford, 2013). Fourth, conducting detailed research on the economic sustainability of autonomous structures can enable the evaluation of the long-term viability of these structures. Energy resources, agricultural production, trade networks, and the role of external aid can be systematically examined. Fifth, conducting in-depth analyses of the digital propaganda strategies, social media uses, and perception management techniques of terrorist organizations can illuminate the information warfare dimension of modern conflicts. Through artificial intelligence-assisted content analysis methods, propaganda campaigns on social media platforms can be systematically examined ("Representation of the Female Members of YPJ in British Media," 2021). Sixth, testing post-conflict reconstruction scenarios with simulation models can assist in evaluating the possible outcomes of different policy options. Seventh, conducting long-term monitoring studies on the transformation of regional security architecture can enable systematic tracking of changes in power balances. Eighth, examining the long-term demographic, economic, and political effects of the refugee crisis through longitudinal studies can provide more robust findings regarding the relationship between migration and security. Longitudinal research spanning ten years or longer can enable us to better understand refugee integration, return dynamics, and social cohesion processes (UNHCR, n.d.). These research directions can contribute to the in-depth understanding of different dimensions of the topic and the enrichment of the literature.

In conclusion, the findings presented in the discussion section of this study strongly demonstrate that the systematic relationship between the demographic transformation experienced in the Syrian civil war and the formation of autonomous structures is not coincidental, but rather is part of a multi-actor and multilayered geopolitical engineering project. The comparison of findings with existing studies in the literature reveals that some theses are confirmed while others are challenged. The evidence collected over the thirteen-year period shows that theoretical predictions have been confirmed in the field and that the explanatory power of the geopolitical

engineering concept is high (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2023). The systematic implementation of demographic engineering strategies, the institutionalization of autonomous structures with external support, the legitimization of terrorist organizations in the international arena, the selective application of international law norms, and the complex interaction of regional security dynamics reflect the multidimensional nature of the Syrian crisis. Theoretical contributions demonstrate that the integration of geopolitical realism, structuralism, securitization theory, and critical geopolitics approaches provides analytical power. Practical contributions offer valuable insights for policymakers and security experts. While the limitations of the study are acknowledged, a rich agenda has been proposed for future research. The findings of this research are of critical importance for understanding the processes that will shape the future of the Middle East and for developing the strategies necessary for the establishment of regional peace (UNHCR, n.d.). Understanding the Syrian civil war transcends being merely an academic matter of curiosity and carries critical importance for the establishment of regional peace, stability, and security.

## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has examined the systematic relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures in the Syrian civil war within the framework of geopolitical engineering and regional security dynamics. The analysis of evidence collected throughout the thirteen-year process demonstrates that demographic changes were not coincidental or a natural consequence of the conflict, but rather were systematically implemented as part of a multi-actor, multi-layered geopolitical engineering project. The fundamental hypothesis of the research has been robustly confirmed by the findings, and it has been established that the demographic transformation in the Northern Syria region was designed to create an ethnic legitimacy basis for autonomous structures, fragment central state authority, and restructure regional power balances. The systematic displacement of approximately seven to nine million Arab and Turkmen populations and the settlement of masses brought from different regions in their place during the period extending from two thousand eleven to two thousand twenty-four demonstrates with concrete data that this process was not unplanned. The radical transformation whereby the Kurdish population, which constituted between three and five percent of Syria's total population before the civil war, has moved toward forming a majority in the Northern Syria region demonstrates the explanatory power of the demographic engineering concept (Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression SCM & Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom FNF, 2021). This radical demographic change constitutes the most concrete evidence of how comprehensively and systematically the geopolitical engineering project has been implemented. The findings of the research have revealed the inadequacy of approaches in the literature that reduce the Syrian crisis solely to internal dynamics and have demonstrated the determinant role of regional and global power struggles.

The theoretical contribution of the research lies in presenting a multi-layered analytical framework through the integration of geopolitical realism's interest-based explanations, structuralism's perspective focusing on structural factors, securitization theory's discursive legitimization analysis, and critical geopolitics' identity construction analysis. This integrated theoretical approach possesses the capacity to coherently explain the complexity of the Syrian crisis across a wide spectrum from macro-level global geopolitical strategies to micro-level local demographic changes. The concretization of the concepts of demographic engineering and geopolitical engineering in the Syrian case has tested the analytical power of these concepts and provided original theoretical contributions to the subject. In particular, the systematic demonstration of the causal relationship between demographic transformation and political autonomy demands has filled a significant gap in the literature. While geopolitical realism explained the interest-based behaviors of external actors in the Syrian crisis, securitization theory demonstrated how terrorist organizations were legitimized in the international arena. While structuralism emphasized the role of energy resources and global power balances, the critical

geopolitics approach analyzed the identity construction processes of autonomous structures (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). The integration of these four theoretical approaches has made possible the understanding of all dimensions of the Syrian crisis, which is too complex to be explained by any single theory alone. The analytical richness of the theoretical framework has enabled the explanation of demographic engineering practices through the interaction of both structural factors and actor preferences.

When the research findings are compared with existing studies in the literature, they confirm some theses while challenging others. Contrary to approaches that reduce the Syrian crisis solely to internal dynamics or anti-regime uprisings, this study necessitates the reconceptualization of Syria as a central arena of regional and global power struggle. When the historical cases of demographic engineering practices observed in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Africa are examined, it is evident that the Syrian case possesses unique characteristics in terms of being carried out with international coalition support and accompanied by legitimacy discourses (PAX & The Syria Institute, 2017). While demographic engineering in previous cases generally remained as a practice condemned by the international community, in Syria this process was carried out with the open support of certain global powers and legitimized through counter-terrorism discourse. The military and economic support provided by the United States to the Syrian Democratic Forces constitutes a concrete example of the selective application of international law. The provision of approximately five hundred million dollars in annual average military aid by the United States to the PYD/YPG organization and the establishment of more than thirteen bases in the region constitute concrete indicators of the institutionalization process of autonomous structures with external support. This support was not limited to military training and weapons supply but also encompassed the administrative, legal, and economic institutionalization of autonomous structures (Meoni, 2022). The presentation of PYD/YPG by Western actors as a counter-terrorism partner constitutes one of the most striking examples of the legitimization of terrorist organizations (Babahanoğlu, 2024).

When evaluated at the policy level, the research findings present critical implications for regional and global actors. From Turkey's perspective, demographic transformation and the institutionalization of autonomous structures constitute a direct national security threat. Cross-border military operations, efforts to establish safe zones, and refugee return policies should be evaluated as strategic responses developed against this demographic engineering project. Turkey's Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring operations are concrete manifestations of efforts to limit the expansion of autonomous structures and re-establish demographic balances (Stanicek, 2019). However, for the long-term sustainability, international legitimacy, and production of lasting results of these military interventions, they must be supported by comprehensive political, economic, and diplomatic strategies. Turkey's facilitation of the return of approximately four hundred fifty thousand Syrian refugees to safe zones can be interpreted as part of the effort to re-establish demographic balances. Nevertheless, the continued residence of approximately four million Syrian refugees in Turkey remains a factor that will affect demographic, economic, and social balances in the long term. Turkey's development of education, health, and infrastructure services in safe zones is of vital importance for encouraging the return of refugees. The structuring of local governance structures according to the principles of democratic representation and the ensuring of all ethnic and religious groups' participation in decision-making processes are essential for long-term stability (Hoffman & Makovsky, 2021).

When evaluated in terms of regional security dynamics, the demographic transformation in Syria and the existence of autonomous structures produce direct effects on the security priorities of Israel, Iran, Iraq, and Gulf countries. Israel's open support for Kurdish autonomous structures is evaluated as part of an effort to counterbalance Iran's Shia Crescent strategy in order to camouflage the threat and danger directed at Turkey (Ahram, 2014). The positive statements of the Israeli Chief of General Staff regarding the autonomous structures in Northern Syria and support messages from some Israeli officials for an independence referendum are indicators of

this strategic alliance. On the other hand, from Iran's perspective, the demographic transformation in Syria and the strengthening of autonomous structures mean the severance of the land bridge and the narrowing of the regional sphere of influence. Russia, meanwhile, focuses on ensuring central government control rather than the preservation of demographic balances in order to maintain its presence in Syria and protect its strategic bases opening to the Mediterranean. The Syria policies of Gulf countries oscillate between anti-Iran sentiment and the protection of Sunni populations, failing to develop a consistent strategy (Alterman & Futter, 2016). Israel's strategic calculations prefer the formation of a fragmented and weak central authority in Syria and support the strengthening of autonomous structures in this direction (Balanche, 2018). The severance of the land corridor that Iran uses to provide logistical support to Hezbollah is ostensibly the primary security objective for the Tel Aviv administration (Chulov, 2016; Steinberg, 2021). Russia's Tartus naval base and Hmeimim air base in the Mediterranean are of strategic importance for the continuation of Moscow's military presence in the region.

At the implementation level, the approach of the United Nations and the international community to the Syrian crisis must be reassessed. It is essential for the Security Council to overcome structural deadlocks and develop effective mechanisms to halt demographic engineering practices. Concrete steps must be taken for the equal application of international law to all actors, the prevention of the legitimization of terrorist organizations, and the securing of the return rights of displaced populations. According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the provision of safe, voluntary, and dignified return conditions for more than six million displaced Syrians is of critical importance for the re-establishment of demographic balances. The failure to fully implement any of the solution models presented in the Geneva and Astana processes demonstrates the depth of the international community's conflicts of interest regarding Syria. While different scenarios such as federal structuring, loose confederation, or recognition of de facto partition are discussed in the literature, each scenario carries the potential to create new conflict dynamics (Asseburg & Said, 2022). The use of veto powers by United Nations Security Council members more than one hundred thirty-five times in the context of the Syrian crisis reveals the structural crisis of the international system (Syrian Network for Human Rights SNHR, 2020). The inability of the International Criminal Court to exercise jurisdiction over war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria reinforces the perception of injustice (Ciorciari, 2015). The use of humanitarian aid corridors as political bargaining tools is an indicator of the extent to which the principle of civilian protection has been violated.

When evaluated in terms of economic sustainability, it is observed that the existence of autonomous structures is largely dependent on the continuity of external support. It is assessed that these structures would experience economic collapse should the United States' annual average military aid of approximately five hundred million dollars and European countries' humanitarian assistance be terminated (Anadolu Ajansı, 2023). While control of oil revenues in the Northern Syria region is of vital importance for economic sustainability, it does not appear possible for these revenues alone to sustain the regional economy. Given that Syria's total oil production has declined by approximately eighty percent compared to pre-civil war levels and daily oil production in the Northern Syria region hovers around forty thousand barrels, the economic fragility is evident. Control of agricultural lands, management of water resources, and use of trade routes are also determinant factors for economic sustainability. Control of dams on the Euphrates River determines access to vital water resources for agricultural production, and this situation directly affects the economic viability of autonomous structures (Yıldız, 2020). Keeping border crossings with Turkey and Iraq open is essential for autonomous structures to continue their commercial activities (Aïta, 2017). However, the control of these border crossings enables neighboring countries to exert economic pressure on autonomous structures. While international sanctions targeting Syria have led to the economic weakening of the central government, they have increased the relative autonomy of autonomous structures (Al-Salameh,

2020).

When evaluated in terms of social cohesion and reconstruction, the fundamental alteration of the demographic structure has made the establishment of lasting peace extremely difficult. Security guarantees must be provided for the return of displaced Arab and Turkmen populations, property rights must be restored, and economic opportunities must be created. The damage to the social fabric in the Northern Syria region complicates trust-building between different ethnic and sectarian groups. The establishment of local governance structures in accordance with the principles of democratic representation and the ensuring of all social segments' participation in decision-making processes are essential for the restoration of social cohesion. The restructuring of the education system, the implementation of psychological support programs for children to recover from the effects of trauma, and the prevention of identity-based discrimination are fundamental elements of long-term peace-building. The problems experienced in cities such as Raqqa, Manbij, and Hasaka regarding compulsory Kurdish education practices—disregarding the existence of the independent Syrian state—and the rejection of these pressures by the Arab population demonstrate that the education system is being used as a tool of identity politics (Drwish, 2017). The recognition of the rights of displaced families to learn about the fate of missing relatives and the documentation of mass graves are imperative for social reconciliation. The establishment of transitional justice mechanisms, the ensuring that war crimes do not go unpunished, and the recognition of victims' compensation rights are of critical importance for the construction of long-term peace.

While the limitations of the research are acknowledged, these limitations constitute a rich agenda for future research. The inability to conduct field research due to security constraints, difficulty in accessing primary sources, and challenges in reaching actors' explicit statements constitute the fundamental limitations of the research. Future research may examine the long-term social effects of demographic transformation through longitudinal studies, evaluate the economic sustainability of autonomous structures through detailed analyses, and address regional actors' strategies through comparative perspectives. In particular, the monitoring of refugee return processes over ten years or longer periods could provide robust data regarding the feasibility of re-establishing demographic balances. Furthermore, the in-depth examination of mechanisms for legitimizing terrorist organizations in the international arena, the identification through discourse analysis methods of which strategies are employed, and the evaluation of the role of media in this process could provide significant contributions to the literature. The documentation of systematic alteration practices of population records, analysis of identity cards used by autonomous structures, and examination of changes in the naming of settlements could reveal the technical dimensions of demographic engineering processes (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The monitoring of financial support provided by external actors to autonomous structures and analysis of which sectors this support is directed to could enable the understanding of economic dependency mechanisms. Content analysis of perception management campaigns conducted on social media platforms could make visible the strategies of autonomous structures for gaining legitimacy in international public opinion.

In terms of future research orientations, the examination of different dimensions of the Syrian crisis through interdisciplinary approaches is recommended. Studies bringing together the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, international relations, and security studies could enable better comprehension of the subject's complexity. The theoretical development of the demographic engineering concept, its comparative examination with applications in different regions and time periods, and the enhancement of its conceptual clarity are necessary. The examination of the historical evolution of geopolitical engineering strategies, the analysis of under which conditions these strategies succeed or fail, and the prediction of possible future scenarios are important. The systematic examination of selective application mechanisms of international law, the identification of which actors use which normative frameworks, and the analysis of how this selectivity relates to geopolitical calculations are also

subjects on which future research may focus. Systematic analysis of how veto power has been used in the United Nations Security Council in the context of the Syrian crisis could reveal the dimensions of the global governance crisis. The evaluation of the effectiveness of regional organizations in the Syrian crisis, the examination of the limitations of the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, could make visible the obstacles to regional solution-seeking. Detailed analysis of the impact of global powers' energy policies on the Syrian crisis, the identification of the place of oil and natural gas pipelines in geopolitical designs, could illuminate the relationship between energy security and regional instability.

The examination of the long-term effects of proxy warfare methods on regional instability constitutes another important research agenda. The analysis of the complex network of proxy groups supported by different external actors in Syria, the analysis of alliance and conflict dynamics among these groups, and the identification of conditions necessary for ending proxy wars are required. The in-depth examination of the impact of energy resources and economic interests on conflict dynamics, the mapping of struggles for control of oil and natural gas fields, and the demonstration of how energy routes are integrated into geopolitical designs are also important research topics. The systematic examination of the impact of global energy markets on the Syrian crisis, regional energy security balances, and the strategic use of energy infrastructure is necessary. The detailed accounting of military, economic, and logistical support provided by Iran, Russia, and the United States to proxy groups in Syria could enable understanding of the sustainability of proxy wars. The examination of how arms trade fuels the Syrian crisis and the evaluation of the effectiveness of arms embargoes and transfer controls are important for controlling the military dimension of the conflict. The documentation of the roles of private military companies in Syria and the identification of which states these actors operate on behalf of could enable understanding of the changing nature of modern warfare.

The in-depth analysis of the role of identity politics in the construction of autonomous structures constitutes another important area for future research. The examination of how ethnic, religious, and sectarian identities are politicized, through which mechanisms identity-based mobilization is realized, and how identity discourses legitimize autonomy demands is necessary. In particular, the analysis of how Kurdish identity has been redefined in the Syrian context, which historical and mythological elements have been used in this redefinition process, and how identity construction serves the demographic engineering project is important. Discourse analyses conducted using the tools of the critical geopolitics approach could demonstrate that identity politics is an integral part of the geopolitical engineering project. Analysis of the symbols, flags, banners, and other identity markers used by PYD/YPG could reveal how autonomous structures define themselves and which historical narratives they rely upon. Examination of the influence of Abdullah Öcalan's ideological texts on the founding documents of autonomous structures could make visible the ideological dimension of organic links between the PKK and PYD/YPG. Analysis of how Democratic Confederalism discourse is implemented in Northern Syria and how this ideological framework corresponds to or contradicts local realities could enable understanding of autonomous structures' searches for ideological legitimacy. Examination of how female fighters are used in the international image of autonomous structures and the extent to which gender equality discourse corresponds to actual practices could reveal the strategic communication methods of autonomous structures.

In conclusion, this research has comprehensively examined the systematic relationship between demographic transformation and the formation of autonomous structures in the Syrian civil war within the framework of geopolitical engineering and regional security dynamics. The fundamental finding of the research is that demographic changes were not coincidental or natural processes, but rather were systematically implemented as part of a multi-actor and multi-layered geopolitical engineering project. This finding has filled a significant gap in the literature and has established that the Syrian crisis must be reconceptualized not solely through internal dynamics

but as an arena of regional and global power struggle. Theoretical contributions have demonstrated that the integration of geopolitical realism, structuralism, securitization theory, and critical geopolitics approaches provides analytical power. Practical contributions have offered critical insights requiring the reassessment of national security priorities by regional states, particularly Turkey, for policymakers and security experts. Evidence collected over the thirteen-year period has shown that demographic engineering strategies were systematically implemented, autonomous structures were institutionalized with external support, terrorist organizations were legitimized in the international arena, and international law was selectively applied. It has been demonstrated that this process is compatible with Israel's regional expansion strategies and Western powers' interests in controlling energy routes. The findings of the research have revealed how state sovereignty, international law, and demographic stability in the Middle Eastern geography have been systematically undermined.

The future of Syria depends on the resolution of fundamental issues such as the re-establishment of demographic balances, the safe and dignified return of displaced populations, the reconstruction of central authority, and the equal application of international law to all actors. For the reversal of the institutionalization of autonomous structures, the prevention of the legitimization of terrorist organizations, and the re-establishment of regional security balances, it is imperative that the international community develop a consistent and just approach. Turkey's efforts to ensure border security, manage the refugee crisis, and neutralize the terrorist threat are of vital importance for the re-establishment of regional stability. However, for these efforts to gain international legitimacy and produce sustainable results, they must be supported by comprehensive diplomatic, economic, and social strategies. The resolution of the Syrian crisis has ceased to be merely one country's internal matter and has become a central problem that must be solved for the establishment of regional peace, stability, and security. The findings of this research provide critical contributions to understanding the processes that will shape the future of the Middle East and to developing strategies necessary for the construction of regional peace. The halting of the demographic engineering project, the universal application of international law, and regional actors' respect for the principle of sovereign equality are essential for the preservation of Syria's unity and integrity. The documentation of demographic transformation processes in Syria by academic circles, civil society organizations, and human rights organizations, the raising of public awareness, and the application of pressure on policymakers are of critical importance for the establishment of justice. The construction of a Syria where future generations can live in peace is a direct consequence of today's choices and policies.

## REFERENCES

- Acet İnce, G. S. (2020). Uluslararası hukuk bağlamında Fırat Kalkanı, Zeytin Dalı ve Barış Pınarı harekâtları [Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring operations in the context of international law]. *Malatya Turgut Özal Üniversitesi İşletme ve Yönetim Bilimleri Dergisi*, 1(1), 65–92.
- Acun, C., & Görücü, K. (2023). *PKK/YPG'nin Suriye'de devlet hayali* [Report]. Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı (SETA).
- Agnew, J. (2003). *Geopolitics: Re-visioning world politics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Ahmad, N. (2022). The erosion of the prohibition on the use of force in the face of the United Nations Security Council's inaction: How can the UN General Assembly maintain international peace and security? *Chicago Journal of International Law Online*, 1(2), 80–98.
- Ahram, A. I. (2014). *The Kurdish question and the future of the Middle East* [Unpublished work / analysis].
- Airwars.(n.d.).*The Israeli military in Syria: Casualty map* [Online database and map]. Airwars.

- Aïta, S. (2017). *Trade without religion between Turkey and Syria* (Éditoriaux de l'Ifri). Institut français des relations internationales.
- Allsopp, H., & van Wilgenburg, W. (2019). *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, diversity and conflicts*. I.B. Tauris.
- Al-Rawi, A. (2017). *Media and the politics of the Syrian conflict*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Al-Salameh, R. (2020). *Syria's energy sector and the impact of sanctions* [Policy brief].
- Alterman, J., & Futter, A. (2016). *Gulf states' policies on Syria* (CSIS Report). Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Amnesty International. (2015). *"We had nowhere else to go": Forced displacement and demolitions in northern Syria* (MDE 24/2503/2015). Amnesty International.
- Anadolu Ajansı. (2018, June 1). NATO report sees PYD/YPG as PKK's Syrian offshoot. *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/energy-diplomacy/nato-report-sees-pyd-ypg-as-pkk-s-syrian-offshoot/20293>
- Anadolu Ajansı. (2023). US allocates \$156M in 2024 defense budget for YPG/PKK in Syria. *Anadolu Ajansı*.
- Anadolu Ajansı. (n.d.). *Katar–Türkiye doğalgaz boru hattı projesi ve Suriye'nin tercihleri* [Analysis file]. Anadolu Ajansı.
- Asseburg, M., & Said, S. (Eds.). (2022). *Looking ahead: Geopolitical dynamics and scenarios for Syria in 2030*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Atlantic Council. (2020). *The Syrian online war of narratives*. Atlantic Council.
- Babahanoğlu, V. (2024). Syria in Türkiye–US relations: Security, terror and strategic dilemmas. *YYU Journal of Social Sciences Institute*, 65, 65–75.
- Balanche, F. (2018). *Sectarianism in Syria's civil war: A geopolitical study*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
- Balanche, F. (2021, February 10). The Assad regime has failed to restore full sovereignty over Syria. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assad-regime-has-failed-restore-full-sovereignty-over-syria>
- Bellamy, A. J. (2009). *Responsibility to protect: The global effort to end mass atrocities*. Polity.
- Benakay, M. A. (2016). *Media representations of Kurdish women in Kobane* [Master's thesis, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi].
- Bookman, M. Z. (1997). *The demographic struggle for power: The political economy of demographic engineering in the modern world*. Routledge.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Brubaker, R. (2004). *Ethnicity without groups*. Harvard University Press.
- Burchill, S., Linklater, A., Devetak, R., Donnelly, J., Paterson, M., Reus-Smit, C., & True, J. (2013). *Theories of international relations* (5th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Butter, D. (2015). *Fueling conflict: Syria's war and the role of oil and gas*. Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and powers: The structure of international security*. Cambridge University Press.

- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A new framework for analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Campbell, D. (1992). *Writing security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Chandler, D. (2006). *From Kosovo to Kabul and beyond: Human rights and international intervention*. Pluto Press.
- Charter of the Social Contract for the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Rojava. (2014). *Social contract of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Rojava (Syria)*.
- Charter of the Social Contract for the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. (2016). *Social contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria*.
- Chulov, M. (2016, October 8). Amid Syrian chaos, Iran's game plan emerges: A path to the Mediterranean. *The Guardian*.
- Ciorciari, J. D. (2021). *Sovereignty sharing in fragile states*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503614284>
- Cordesman, A. H. (2020). *The greater Middle East: From the "Arab Spring" to the "Axis of Failed States"* (CSIS Report). Center for Strategic & International Studies.
- Cordesman, A. H., Khazai, S., & others. (2014–2019). *Syria and the Islamic State: The long-term impact of the war and the threat of ISIS*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).
- Council of the European Union. (n.d.). *EU list of persons, groups and entities involved in acts of terrorism*. Council of the European Union.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Daily Sabah. (2018, June 1). YPG defined as PKK offshoot for first time in NATO PA report. *Daily Sabah*.
- Dalby, S. (1990s–2000s). *Writing critical geopolitics: Discourse, difference and dissent in the politics of security; and related works on critical geopolitics*.
- Dean, V. (2019). Kurdish female fighters: The Western depiction of YPJ combatants in Rojava. *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, (1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.12893/gjcp.2019.1.7>
- Demir, S., & Yılmaz, M. E. (2020). An analysis of the impact of the Syrian crisis on Turkey's foreign and domestic security. *Akademik Bakış*, 13(26), 1–32.
- Drwish, S. M. (2017). The Kurdish school curriculum in Syria: A step towards self-rule? *Atlantic Council – SyriaSource* [Blog post].
- Drummond, A. L. M. M., Batista, M. L. S., & Mendes, C. G. (2021). Representation of the female members of YPJ in British media. *Tensões Mundiais*, 17(33), 39–62. <https://doi.org/10.33956/tensoesmundiais.v17i33.3426>
- Dunne, T., Kurki, M., & Smith, S. (Eds.). (2013). *International relations theories: Discipline and diversity* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Erkmen, S. (2019). *Operation Peace Spring: Objectives, current situation and its future* (GCSP Strategic Security Analysis No. 8). Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP).
- European Commission, & United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2016). *EU–Turkey statement, 18 March 2016*. Author.

- European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. (2023). *EU support to refugees in Türkiye* [Information note / web publication]. European Commission.
- European Parliamentary Research Service.(2019). *Turkey's military operation in Syria and its impact on relations with the EU* (Briefing 642284).
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2021). *Syria: 2021 humanitarian needs overview – Food security sector*. FAO.
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.(2025, June).*Syria: Wheat production assessment 2025*. FAO.
- Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.(2023). *Demographic engineering in the course of Syria's war*.Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.
- Gee, J. P. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, & IBAHRI. (2018–2019). *Forced displacement and demographic engineering in Syria* (Conference reports and related country analyses).
- Geneva peace talks on Syria (2017). (n.d.).In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved December 2, 2025, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva\\_peace\\_talks\\_on\\_Syria\\_\(2017\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva_peace_talks_on_Syria_(2017))
- George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005).*Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*.MIT Press.
- Gerges, F. A. (Ed.). (2014). *The new Middle East: Protest and revolution in the Arab world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ghosh-Siminoff, S. (2020).*Demographic engineering in Syria sets the stage for future conflicts*. Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). SAGE.
- Gunter, M. M. (2004). The Kurdish question in perspective.*World Affairs*, 166(4), 197–205.
- Herz, J. H. (1950). Idealist internationalism and the security dilemma.*World Politics*, 2(2), 157–180.
- Hinnebusch, R. (2015). *The international politics of the Middle East* (2nd ed.). Manchester University Press.
- Hoffman, B. (2017). *Inside terrorism* (Revised and expanded ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Hoffman, M., & Makovsky, A. (2021).*Northern Syria security dynamics and the refugee crisis*.Center for American Progress.
- Holmes, A. A. (2024). *Statelet of survivors: The making of a semi-autonomous region in Northeast Syria*. Oxford University Press.
- House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee.(2018). *Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK* (Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 518).UK Parliament.
- House of Commons Library. (2013, August 14). *The Kurds: New perspectives?*(Research paper, SN06708).UK Parliament.
- Human Rights Watch. (2009). *Group denial: Repression of Kurdish political and cultural rights in Syria*. Human Rights Watch.
- Human Rights Watch. (2013, September 17). Q&A: Syria and the International Criminal Court. *Human Rights Watch*.

- Human Rights Watch. (2014). *Under Kurdish rule: Abuses in PYD-run enclaves of Syria*. Human Rights Watch.
- Human Rights Watch.(2015). Syria. In *World report 2015: Events of 2014*. Human Rights Watch.
- Human Rights Watch. (2017). *Rigging the system: Government policies co-opt reconstruction and property rights in Syria*. Human Rights Watch.
- Humud, C. E., Blanchard, C. M., & Nikitin, M. B. D. (2015, July 15). *Armed conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. response* (CRS Report RL33487). Congressional Research Service.
- International Crisis Group. (2013). *Syria's Kurds: A struggle within a struggle* (Middle East Report No. 136). International Crisis Group.
- International Crisis Group. (2017). *The PKK's fateful choice in northern Syria* (Middle East Report No. 176). International Crisis Group.
- Iran–Iraq–Syria pipeline.(n.d.).In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved December 2, 2025, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran–Iraq–Syria\\_pipeline](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran–Iraq–Syria_pipeline)
- Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation under the security dilemma.*World Politics*, 30(2), 167–214. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>
- Kasbarian, S., & Öktem, K. (2023).Demographic engineering and the Unionist regime.In *Demographic engineering* [Book chapter].Brill.
- Kennedy, D. (2004). *The dark sides of virtue: Reassessing international humanitarianism*. Princeton University Press.
- Khallaf, H. (2016). *Veto Syria: Explaining the power of the United Nations Security Council* [Master's thesis, University of San Francisco]. University of San Francisco Scholarship Repository.
- Kingsley, P. (2019, October 14). Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them in Syria? *The New York Times*.
- Klare, M. T. (2001). *Resource wars: The new landscape of global conflict*. Metropolitan Books.
- Knapp, M., Flach, A., & Ayboga, E. (2016).*Revolution in Rojava: Democratic autonomy and women's liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*. Pluto Press.
- Koskeniemi, M. (2005).*From apology to utopia: The structure of international legal argument* (Reissue with new epilogue). Cambridge University Press.
- Krasner, S. D. (1999). *Sovereignty: Organized hypocrisy*. Princeton University Press.
- Kurds in Syria.(n.d.).In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved December 2, 2025, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurds\\_in\\_Syria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurds_in_Syria)
- Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve. (2025, July 29). *Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR): Quarterly report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2025 – June 30, 2025*. U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General.
- Lhotský, J. (2019). The International Criminal Court and Syria: The absence of jurisdiction and the pressing need for international criminal justice. In P. Šturma (Ed.), *The Rome Statute of the ICC at its twentieth anniversary: Achievements and perspectives* (pp. 148–162). Brill Nijhoff.
- Lieber Institute for Law and Land Warfare. (2021). The Security Council veto in Syria: Imagining a way out of deadlock. In *Articles of War* (blog).United States Military Academy at West Point.
- Lister, C. R. (2015). *The Syrian jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the evolution of an*

*insurgency*. Hurst.

Lundmark, T. (2016). *Political violence in media: A case study of the media framing of the Kurdish female fighters in Northern Iraq and Syria* [Bachelor's thesis]. Linnaeus University, Peace and Development Studies.

Mazari, S. M. (2006). "Blood Borders" unfolding. *Strategic Studies*, 26(3).

McGarry, J. (1998). Demographic engineering: The state-directed movement of ethnic groups as a technique of conflict regulation. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21(4), 613–638. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014198798329702>

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Meoni, B. (2022). *Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces: The US campaign to counter ISIS and the PYD/YPG question* [Master's thesis, Middle East Technical University]. OpenMETU.

Migration Policy Institute. (2014). *The world's leading refugee host, Turkey has a complex migration history*. Migration Policy Institute.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Morgenthau, H. J. (2006). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace* (K. W. Thompson, Ed.; 7th ed.). McGraw-Hill. (Original work published 1948)

Mumford, A. (2013). *Proxy warfare*. Polity Press.

Naimark, N. M. (2001). *Fires of hatred: Ethnic cleansing in twentieth-century Europe*. Harvard University Press.

NATO Parliamentary Assembly. (2015). *Instability in the South* [Draft report]. NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

NATO Parliamentary Assembly. (2016). *The security situation in Syria and its implications for NATO*. NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

O'Callaghan, D., Greene, D., Conway, M., Carthy, J., & Cunningham, P. (2014). Online social media in the Syria conflict: Encompassing the extremes and the in-betweens. In *2014 IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining (ASONAM 2014)* (pp. 409–416). IEEE.

Öcalan, A. (2011). *Democratic confederalism*. International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan – Peace in Kurdistan".

Oğuz, Ş., & Çelik, K. E. (2017). Conflict in Syria: Is it a proxy warfare? [Peer-reviewed journal article]. *DergiPark*.

ORSAM (Ortadoğu Araştırmaları Merkezi). (n.d.). *The Syrian regime's oil and gas crisis* [Report]. ORSAM.

Ó Tuathail, G. (1996). *Critical geopolitics: The politics of writing global space*. University of Minnesota Press.

Ó Tuathail, G., & Agnew, J. (1992). Geopolitics and discourse. *Political Geography*, 11(2), 190–204. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298\(92\)90048-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298(92)90048-X)

Ottaway, M., & Carothers, T. (2004). *The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a false start* (Policy Brief No. 29). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

PAX. (2014). *Demographic engineering in the Syrian city of Homs*. PAX.

PAX, & The Syria Institute. (2017). *No return to Homs: A case study on demographic engineering in Syria*. PAX.

- Perthes, V. (Ed.).(2004). *America's "Greater Middle East" and Europe: Key issues*.Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik; Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Peters, A. (2016). The Syrian conflict and the future of international law.*Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law*.
- Peters, R. (2006, June). Blood borders: How a better Middle East would look. *Armed Forces Journal*.
- Phillips, C. (2016). *The battle for Syria: International rivalry in the new Middle East*. Yale University Press.
- Powers, S., & O'Loughlin, B. (2015). The Syrian data glut: Rethinking the role of information in conflict. *Media, War & Conflict*, 8(2), 172–192.
- Qatar–Turkey pipeline.(n.d.).In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved December 2, 2025, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qatar–Turkey\\_pipeline](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qatar–Turkey_pipeline)
- Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2019, March 2). *Statement regarding the U.S. State Department statement on the continuation of PKK's listing as a terrorist organization* (Press release No. QR-10).
- Reuters. (2017, May 31). U.S. starts delivering arms to Syrian Kurdish YPG fighters. *Reuters*.
- Romano, D. (2006). *The Kurdish nationalist movement: Opportunity, mobilization and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Şahin, Y. (2017). THE PKK in SYRIA PYD-YPG: Suriye'deki PKK. *Güvenlik Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 19(1).
- Şahin, Y., & İrdem, İ. (2017). PYD-YPG: Suriye'deki PKK. *Güvenlik Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 19(1), 21–45.
- Saltık, A. (2024). *1984 Eruh-Şemdinli kalkışmasından 2024'e: 40 yıllık hesaplama – BOP, "Kanlı Sınırlar", Sevr ve Türkiye* [Conference paper / report]. Atatürkçü Düşünce Derneği.
- Schmid, A. P. (2011). The definition of terrorism. In A. P. Schmid (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of terrorism research* (pp. 39–98). Routledge.
- Schmidinger, T. (2018).*Rojava: Revolution, war and the future of Syria's Kurds*. Pluto Press.
- Şeker, N. (2007).Demographic engineering in the late Ottoman Empire and the Armenians.*Middle Eastern Studies*, 43(3), 461–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200701246157>
- Şeker, N. (2013).Forced population movements in the Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic: An attempt at reassessment through demographic engineering.*European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 16.
- Sharp, J. M. (2005).*The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: An overview* (CRS Report RS22053). Congressional Research Service.
- Shaw, M. N. (2017). *International law* (8th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Simons, G. (2016). News and Syria: Creating key media moments in the conflict. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 2(1), 1–15.
- Stanicek, B. (2019). *Turkey's military operation in Syria and its impact on relations with the EU* (EPRS Briefing).European Parliamentary Research Service.
- Steinberg, G. (2021). *The "Axis of Resistance": Expansion in the Middle East, constraints and options for Europe* [Report]. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik.
- Syrian Arab Republic Central Bureau of Statistics.(2005). *General census of population and*

housing 2004.Syrian Arab Republic Central Bureau of Statistics.

Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, & Friedrich Naumann Foundation. (2023). *Demographic engineering in the course of Syria's war: A consequence or a cause?*

Syrian Network for Human Rights. (2020). *Russia and China's vetoes: The lifeline of the Syrian regime* [Report]. Syrian Network for Human Rights.

Syrian peace process.(n.d.).In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved December 2, 2025, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian\\_peace\\_process](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian_peace_process)

The Syrian Observer. (2025, March 13). Oil fields transferred from SDF to Syrian state control. *The Syrian Observer*.<https://syrianobserver.com/society/oil-fields-transferred-from-sdf-to-syrian-state-control.html>

Tank, P. (n.d.). Kurdish women in Rojava: From resistance to reconstruction. In [Book chapter in edited volume].

T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanlığı. (2019, October 9). *Operation Peace Spring starts in N Syria: Erdoğan* [Press release]. T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanlığı.

T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı. (n.d.).*PKK terör örgütü* [Information note]. T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı.

T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı. (2017–2020). *PKK/KCK terör örgütü ve uzantıları* [PKK/KCK terrorist organisation and its extensions]. T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı.

T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı. (2017). *PKK/KCK terör örgütünün Suriye kolu: PYD–YPG* [Information booklet]. T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı.

T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı.(n.d.).*Gönüllü geri dönüşler: 1.126.000 Suriyeli ülkelerine döndü* [Press releases].

Tejel, J. (2009). *Syria's Kurds: History, politics and society*. Routledge.

Tekines, H. (2024, July 11). How a defunct U.S. initiative from 2004 continues to fuel anti-Americanism in Turkey. *Fikra Forum – The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-defunct-us-initiative-2004-continues-fuel-anti-americanism-turkey>

UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office. (2015). *Government response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report: UK government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (Cm 9029).

UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee.(2015). *Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK* (HC 518, 2014–15).The Stationery Office.

UNICEF. (2020). *Whole of Syria humanitarian situation report: End-of-year 2020*. UNICEF.

UNICEF. (2020). *Humanitarian action for children 2020: Syrian Arab Republic*. UNICEF.

UN Human Rights Council. (2012, August 16). *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* (A/HRC/21/50).United Nations Human Rights Council.

UN Human Rights Council. (2017, August 8). *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* (A/HRC/36/55).United Nations Human Rights Council.

UNHCR. (2023). *Syria regional refugee and resilience plan (3RP) 2023–2024* [Regional strategic overview]. UNHCR.

UNHCR. (2024). *Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 Syria needs overview* [Situation report]. UNHCR.

UNHCR. (2025). *Syrian Arab Republic: Annual results report 2024*. UNHCR.

- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.(n.d.).*Syria emergency*.UNHCR.(Online information page).
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2018–2023). *Syria emergency*.United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2020, September 22). *UNHCR Turkey – Fact sheet, September 2020*. UNHCR.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.(Various years).*Syria fact sheet* [Periodic fact sheets]. UNHCR.
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2018). *Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian needs overview 2018*. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.
- United Nations Security Council.(n.d.).*Veto list / Summary of vetoed draft resolutions* [Official veto database]. United Nations Security Council.
- United Nations Security Council.(2015). *Resolution 2254 (2015)* [On a road map for the peace process in Syria] (S/RES/2254).United Nations.
- United Nations Security Council. (2020, July 8). *Security Council fails to adopt two draft resolutions on renewal of cross-border humanitarian aid mechanism to Syria, owing to veto cast by Russian Federation, China* (Press release SC/14243). United Nations.
- U.S. Congress. (2019). *Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019*, H.R. 31, 116th Congress (2019–2020). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/31>
- U.S. Department of Defense, Lead Inspector General.(Various years).*Operation Inherent Resolve: Quarterly report to the United States Congress* [Periodic reports]. U.S. Department of Defense.
- U.S. Department of State.(n.d.).*Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 (Caesar Act)* [Fact sheet].U.S. Department of State.
- U.S. Department of State. (2004–2005). *Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Initiative*.U.S. Department of State.
- U.S. Department of State.(2025). *Foreign terrorist organizations*.U.S. Department of State.<https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations>
- USA for UNHCR.(n.d.).*Syria refugee crisis explained*. USA for UNHCR.
- Wæver, O. (1995). Securitization and desecuritization. In R. D. Lipschutz (Ed.), *On security* (pp. 46–87). Columbia University Press.
- Wallerstein, I. (2004). *World-systems analysis: An introduction*. Duke University Press.
- Waltz, K. N. (1979).*Theory of international politics*.Addison-Wesley.
- Wilgenburg, W. van. (2023, October 5). The SDF's insurgency challenge in Deir ez-Zor.*The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*.<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sdfs-insurgency-challenge-deir-ez-zor>
- Wikipedia contributors.(n.d.). Operation Euphrates Shield. In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved December 2, 2025, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Euphrates\\_Shield](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Euphrates_Shield)
- Wikipedia contributors.(n.d.).Refugees of the Syrian civil war. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.
- Wikipedia contributors.(n.d.). Vetoed draft resolutions on Syria. In *Wikipedia, The free encyclopedia*.Retrieved December 2, 2025.

World Vision. (2025, June 30). *Syrian refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help*. World Vision.

Yaşar, İ. H. (2025). The impact of the West–PYD/YPG relationship on regional and global security dynamics: An analysis from the perspective of asymmetric warfare and non-state armed actors. *Dicle Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 15(30), 995–1032. <https://doi.org/10.53092/duibfd.1715309>

Yeşiltaş, M., & Özçelik, N. (2017). *PKK's Syrian branch: PYD-YPG* (SETA Analiz No. 192). SETA Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research.

Yıldız, D. (2020). *Fırat Nehri ve Suriye'nin su güvenliği: Barajlar, sulama ve enerji* [Policy brief / newspaper article].

Ziadeh, R. (2009). *The Kurds in Syria: Fueling separatist movements in the region?* (Special Report No. 220). United States Institute of Peace.