

# Turkey's approach to proxy war in the Middle East and North Africa

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**Engin Yüksel**

[eyuksel@clingendael.org](mailto:eyuksel@clingendael.org)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1448-6059>

Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael Institute, Clingendael 7, 2597 VH Den Haag, Netherlands

Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University, Rapenburg 70, 2311 EZ Leiden, Netherlands

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## Abstract

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*The last decade has seen a growing trend towards the use of proxies in the Middle East and North Africa following the outbreak of the Arab Spring. In this context, the issue of Turkey's approach to proxy war in these regions has received considerable attention since 2016. Thereby, the purpose of this article is to investigate the essential characteristics of Turkish proxy war strategy in Syria and Libya. As such, this study intends to trace the development of Turkish proxy war strategy by making use of the conceptual frameworks proposed by Groh (2019), O'Brien (2012) and Art (1998). The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that Turkey changed its indirect intervention strategy from donated assistance to proxy warfare in Syria and Libya when it saw a greater need to influence the result of the conflicts. In the case of Syria, this study has shown that the control-through-centralisation approach towards the Armed Syrian Opposition has enabled Turkey to carry out an effective proxy war strategy from 2016 onwards. In Libya, the results of this investigation have shown that the Turkish Army has pursued a proxy war strategy since Ankara and the Government of National Accord (GNA) signed an agreement on security and military cooperation in December 2019. The article concludes that Turkey has centralised many revolutionary groups under an Islamist-nationalistic vision and partnered them with its own military in order to expand its influence in the Middle East and North Africa.*

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## Keywords:

Turkey, strategy, proxy war, Middle East and North Africa

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## Introduction\*

\*Some of the key points of the article were previously discussed by Yüksel (2019).

Recent developments in Syria and Libya have heightened the need for an understanding of Turkey's proxy war strategy in the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, the outbreak of the Arab Spring has offered Turkey viable options to unleash tailored proxy war strategies in these regions. In Syria, Turkey provided financial assistance to the armed Syrian opposition at the outset of the Civil War. After Turkey shifted its priorities from unseating the Assad Regime to containing and undoing the gains of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2015/2016, it scaled up its backing for the armed Syrian opposition. Only then did Ankara put in place an effective proxy war strategy in Syria. Consequently, Ankara has revived Syria's 'Islamist nationalists' as an effective fighting force by gradually establishing centralised control over them. Turkey has gone even further by ensuring covert cooperation with the extremist factions of the armed Syrian opposition in order to establish its own sphere of influence in the Idlib province of Syria. (Yüksel, 2019). In Libya, Turkey's initially clandestine support for the revolutionary and Islamist armed groups of the Government of National Accord (GNA) has recently been ramped up after the latter's authority in Tripoli has been threatened by Marshall Haftar's multi-front offensive since April 2019. Thereafter, Turkey has concentrated on allocating conventional combat enablers and irregular components to the GNA aligned forces so as to improve their ability to defend Tripoli. Subsequently, thousands of fighters from the Syrian opposition have taken part in the Libyan Civil War under Turkish auspices. Taken together, Turkish acts in Syria and Libya over the previous five years can shed light on contemporary dynamics of proxy warfare.

Nevertheless, few writers have been able to draw on any systematic research into Turkey's approach to proxy war from a theoretical perspective. Therefore, this article intends to trace the essential characteristics of Turkish proxy war strategy by making use of the conceptual frameworks proposed by Groh (2019), O'Brien (2000 and 2012) and Art (1998). In the light of these frameworks, this paper sets out to investigate the development of Turkey's approach to proxy war in the Middle East and North Africa. For this reason, a case study approach is adopted in this paper. Accordingly, this article has aimed to compare different ways in which Turkey utilises proxy war strategies in Syria and Libya. Data has been collected from interviews, newspapers and published reports while mapping out the complex structure of proxies and their relations with Turkey. The findings of this article should make an important contribution to the field of contemporary proxy warfare.

## A theoretical approach to Turkish proxy war strategy

The use of proxies in the battlefield has been instrumental in understanding the evolution of modern warfare. Indeed, the utilisation of proxy forces in an intra-state conflict can be considered as one of the main instruments of indirect strategy. Especially after the end of the Cold War, state and non-state actors have resorted to various indirect strategies which have sought to attain political objectives by keeping violence "under the threshold of the conventional justification of war" (Johnson 2018, p. 142). Against this backdrop, the perception of *risk* and *interest* can play important roles for states while they are making intervention decisions. In a study conducted by Robert J. Art (1998), it is shown that risks to *vital interests* and *desirable interests* dichotomy could be useful in explaining a state's foreign policy decisions for or against *indirect intervention*. In this regard, while direct intervention happens if a state thinks that a conflict outside its borders poses high risks to its vital interests, indirect intervention occurs when "desirable interests are served less directly and in a more indirect fashion" (Art, 1998, pp. 84–95). Accordingly, this paper examines the notion of *proxy war* within the confines of the strategy of *indirect intervention*.

In a major study, Tyrone L. Groh (2019, p. 2) has provided an in-depth analysis on indirect intervention, and more particularly on proxy war, so as to rectify misperceptions of its use as a foreign policy tool. Considering the relationship between an intervening state and its proxy, Groh (2019) scrutinises indirect intervention in two categories: *donated assistance* and *proxy war*. In this context, Groh (2019, p. 2) defines *donated assistance* as “providing resources, without intending to direct the actions of a local actor, to influence political affairs in the target state”. On the other side, *proxy war* requires the formation of a hierarchical relationship between a local actor and an intervening state. In this regard, Groh (2019, p. 29) defines proxy war as “directing the use of force by a politically motivated, local actor to indirectly influence political affairs in the target state”. Nevertheless, Groh’s study (2019, p. 29) offers no explanation for the use of mercenaries on the battlefield since it focuses only on “indigenous groups that are politically motivated”. A significant analysis and discussion about the *mercenary* is presented by O’Brien. O’Brien (2000) has suggested that mercenaries are usually hardened white soldiers or international brigades who brutally intervene in a local conflict, predominantly for financial gain. Having examined the use of mercenaries in modern conflicts, O’Brien (2012, p. 114) argues that the mercenary is “a soldier willing to sell his military skills to the highest bidder, no matter what the cause”. In addition to that, a formal definition of a mercenary has also been published by the UN (2001) in its 2001 Convention against the Recruitment, Use and Financing and Training of Mercenaries. Accordingly, a mercenary is any person who:

(a) Is specially recruited locally or abroad to fight in armed conflict; (b) Is motivated to take part in hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised or, by or on behalf of party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar rank and functions in the armed forces of that party; (c) Is neither a national or a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict; (d) Is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict; (e) Has not been sent by a State which is not a party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces (the UN, 2001).

Therefore, this article will examine Turkey’s arrangement with the proxies in Syria and Libya by making use of the conceptual frameworks discussed above.

The antecedents of Turkish indirect intervention strategy dates back to 2011, once the Arab Spring spread to Syria. When the Syrian Regime turned a deaf ear to Turkey’s proposal to enact structural political reforms, Ankara aimed at overthrowing the Syrian regime by rendering assistance to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in 2011 (Van Veen and Yüksel, 2018). Therefore, the overthrow of the Syrian regime was Turkey’s desirable interest. In this context, Turkey provided significant material support, such as training, salaries and equipment to the armed Syrian opposition. This strategy was defeated due to the FSA’s fragmentation, the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) and the Russian military backing for the Syrian Regime. Meanwhile, the Syrian Kurds led by the PYD set up three autonomous administrations in northeast Syria in 2015 following its fight against IS. These developments changed Ankara’s risk perception due to the fact that the PYD’s autonomy attempt in Syria posed an existential threat to Turkey. Consequently, 2015/2016 saw a sea change in Turkish strategy from unseating the Assad Regime to containing and undoing the gains of the PYD, which was recognised by Ankara as the Syrian offshoot of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) (Van Veen and Yüksel, 2018). Subsequently, a new Turkish strategy was operationalised through a combination of indirect and direct intervention. In both strategies, the armed Syrian opposition functioned as proxies under the command of and in collaboration with Turkish Army units. Accordingly, Syrian armed groups took part in four Turkish cross-border operations in northern Syria between 2016 and 2020. As a result, the Turkish strategy has been quite successful in holding sway over large swathes of territory in northern Syria (Van Veen and Yüksel, 2019).

In Libya, Turkey was relatively less assertive at the beginning of Libyan Civil War in 2014, arguably due to Ankara's inability to influence the Civil War approximately 2000 km away from its borders. To pursue its desirable interests, Ankara aimed at empowering the mainstream Islamist and revolutionary groups at the outset of the Libyan Civil War. To that end, Ankara began supporting the GNA aligned militia forces in Tripoli in 2014. However, the survival of the GNA became more vital for Turkey when Ankara was gradually excluded from energy politics in the eastern Mediterranean. In this regard, the discovery of very large amounts of hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean since 2013 shifted Ankara's perception of interest (*from desirable to vital*). There is something more serious at stake considering Ankara's recent "blue homeland" claim which seeks to expand its maritime jurisdiction zones in the eastern Mediterranean (Gingeras, 2020). By brokering a maritime deal with the GNA in late 2019, Turkey has de facto conditioned the future of its longstanding geopolitical ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean on the survival of the GNA regime. Even more importantly, Turkey has formalised and consolidated its military presence in Tripoli by signing a memorandum of understanding on security and military cooperation in December 2019. As a result, the Turkish Army has been tasked with a quasi-combat duty<sup>1</sup> in Libya which has intended on providing combat enablers and technical support to the GNA aligned forces (Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2019). Moreover, Turkey asked the fighters from the Syrian opposition to take part in the Libyan war in support of the GNA aligned factions (Al-Khateb, 2020). Ankara has therefore pursued an effective proxy war strategy by tightening its grip on the GNA aligned forces and Syrian armed groups in Libya.

1. The reason for this is that the Turkish Army has been authorised to directly engage in conflict for self-defence purposes and in case battle developments jeopardise its mission (Aslan, 2020).

## Turkish proxy war strategy in Syria

The armed Syrian opposition does not represent a monolithic entity since it has been subjected to a constant process of fragmentation since the early stages of the Syrian Civil War.

Figure 1 Overview of the relations between Turkey and Syria's armed opposition groups



Figure 1. Overview of the relations between Turkey and Syria's armed opposition groups. (Source: Yüksel, 2019, p. 18).

Note: By 'secular revolutionary groups' we mean groups that have no intention of creating an Islamic state in Syria. 'Nationalist Islamist groups' can also be revolutionary in nature (against Assad).

Figure 1 shows an overview of the relations between Turkey and Syria's armed opposition groups. Closer inspection of the figure shows that the armed Syrian opposition can be categorised in three main clusters, namely secular revolutionary (blue), nationalist Islamist (green) and Salafi jihadist (black) groups with consideration of their ideological differences. It is apparent from this figure that Turkey has put tailored and adaptive arrangements in place with three categories of Syrian armed opposition groups. It can be seen that centralised control over secular revolutionary groups, ideological partnership with nationalist Islamist groups and covert cooperation with the pragmatic elements of Salafi-jihadist groups are essential characteristics of Turkey's settlement with the armed Syrian opposition.

Secular revolutionary armed groups predominantly contain the FSA which was founded in 2011 in Turkey during the initial phase of the revolution against the Syrian Regime (Şen, 2015). Owing to the fact that the Sunni-Arab defectors of the Syrian Arabian Army formed the FSA, this category does not have an evident religious agenda. On the other hand, nationalist Islamist armed groups have sought to establish a Syrian Islamic state based on sharia law whereas they have distanced themselves from the Salafi-jihadi discourse (Lefevre and Yassir, 2014 and Lund, 2015a). While the FSA faced the danger of marginalisation in 2015, nationalist Islamist armed groups have expanded their spheres of influence in the Syrian Civil War (Lister, 2017). The third category, Salafi Jihadist armed groups, comes down to the Islamic State (IS) and Hey'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a former Al-Qaeda affiliate who has operated in the Idlib province of Syria. The formation of HTS produced a split between those who prioritised a jihadist vision of Syria (the 'black' faction) and those who prioritised a revolutionary Islamic perspective (Nationalist Islamists, the 'green' faction) (Lister, 2017). Even though the HTS has claimed to distance itself away from the Al-Qaeda discourse, the US, Russia and Turkey have recognised the group as a terrorist organisation<sup>2</sup>.

At the outset of the Syrian Civil War, the FSA was the armed group that mostly depended on Turkish support. In this context, the FSA took sanctuary in Turkey, built strong networks with the Western and Gulf representatives and benefited from the US-led train and equip programme in 2014 to accelerate the overthrow of the Assad regime (Blanchard and Belasco, 2015). Turkey's early arrangement with the FSA could be analysed under the framework of *donated assistance*, since the former did not fully direct the latter's actions on the Syrian battlefield up to 2016. The FSA was an umbrella organisation that suffered from infighting between secular and Islamist factions (Şen, 2015). The FSA was also exposed to geopolitical politicking at the outset of the Syrian Civil War with several Gulf States competing for influence (Lister, 2015). Furthermore, the FSA faced the risk of marginalisation when Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait increased their direct and indirect financial assistance to nationalist Islamist armed groups (Lund, 2014; Dickinson, 2013). Therefore, it became difficult for Turkey to attain its desirable objectives through the use of a donated assistance strategy, especially when the PYD gradually started posing an existential threat to Ankara in 2015. In return, Turkey developed a *control-thorough-centralisation* approach towards the FSA for directing the group's acts and, at the same time, carried out an effective proxy war (Yüksel, 2019). By this means, Turkey aimed to restructure the FSA based on conventional brigade-corps architecture. Due to the presence of considerable ethnic (Turkmen) and/or religious (Sunni Arab) elements on both sides, the FSA was more prone to accept Turkey's approach.

Indeed, the control-thorough-centralisation approach predominantly emerged out of Turkey's increasing eagerness to influence the course and outcome of the Syrian Civil War after 2015. The reason for this is that the establishment of three autonomous cantons (Afrin, Cazira and Kobane) in northern Syria by PYD posed an existential threat to Ankara. In An-

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2. The US have continued to view the HTS as a terrorist organisation. (U.S. Department of State, 2018; U.S. Department of State no date) Turkey belatedly recognised the group as a terrorist organisation in 2018 (Milli Gazete, 2018).



karas's thinking, this brought into being a "terror corridor" along the Turkish border which could be used as a safe haven for the PKK to pursue its operations in Turkey (Erdoğan, 2016). In consequence, 2016 saw a marked change in Turkish strategy in Syria from unseating the Assad Regime to undermining the gains of the PYD (Van Veen and Yüksel, 2018). At the beginning, this strategy was operationalised through the use of, first and foremost, the FSA acting as Turkish proxies. Next to that, Turkey sought to prevent the PYD territories from merging by carrying out direct interventions in northern Syria. In these operations, the FSA took an effective role as the irregular component of operating forces.

In 2016, about 30 different FSA groups took part in Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) alongside units of the Turkish Army (Tok, Temizer and Karacaoğlu, 2019). Afterwards, those groups, who joined the OES, formed the Syrian National Army (SNA) in December 2017 under Turkish auspices (Özkizilcik, 2018a). In its new centralised architecture, the SNA consisted of three corps, namely 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and special forces corps (Özkizilcik, 2019a). Thereby, Turkey succeeded in controlling the SNA in a gradual manner by centralising and restructuring the armed groups even though it was placed under the Ministry of Defence of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). Turkey provided the SNA with training, salaries and weapons in return for its participation in Turkish military operations (Gökkuş, 2018). Taken together, the new SNA became the dominant core of the Turkish proxy architecture in Syria. In addition, the selected Turkmen groups of the SNA are said to perform covert operations on behalf of Turkish intelligence (MIT) within the confines of a special arrangement between these groups and Turkey. These operations consisted of the launch of low calibre mortar fire from Syria to Turkey under the guise of the PYD<sup>3</sup>.

In pursuit of the FSA, Turkey sought to merge *nationalist Islamist* armed groups into its SNA proxy architecture in Syria. Thereby, Ankara pursued a similar 'control-through-centralisation' approach towards these groups in order to expand its influence, particularly in Idlib province. Indeed, Turkey's early arrangement with nationalist-Islamist armed groups can be analysed within the framework of donated assistance strategy. Between 2013 and 2016, Turkey lent its direct and indirect financial and military support – together with Saudi Arabia and Qatar – to nationalist Islamist armed groups in Syria (Lund, 2014). As a result of this, Ahrar al-Sham, the leading coalition of Syrian Islamists and Salafists, arguably became "the most powerful armed opposition group" in Syria from 2015 onwards (Lund, 2015). In addition to this, Turkey also backed Faylaq al-Sham, a Muslim Brotherhood (MB) affiliated Islamist armed group, presumably because of the Turkish Government's association with the MB movement (Özdemir, 2015). Similar to secular-revolutionary armed groups, Turkey aimed to merge these two groups into its proxy war architecture and incorporate them into its military operations in northern Syria. As intended, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham joined Turkish military's Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) in 2016 (Stratejik Ortak, 2017). Following this, Turkey attempted to tighten its grip on these groups in exchange for its financial and military backing. Since ideological and leadership differences made integration into the SNA structure more difficult, Turkey designed a new organisational scheme in Idlib in May 2018: The National Liberation Front (NLF). Although this new scheme initially consisted of 15 armed groups, of which six were Syrian Islamists and nine FSA-affiliated, it was led by the commander of Faylaq al-Sham (Taştekin, 2018a). Taken together, Turkey fulfilled its longstanding ambition to restructure and unify nationalist Islamist armed groups in Idlib.

The strategic idea behind the creation of the NLF was both to unite and consolidate the power of nationalist-Islamist and FSA-affiliated groups against the Syrian Regime and the PYD in Idlib. Another purpose of this merger was to counterbalance Salafi Jihadist armed groups in this province. In Ankara's thinking, this would subsequently 'force' the armed groups of Idlib to adjust their views more to the revolutionary objectives of the

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3. Based on an interview with a Turkish military officer who worked in Al-Babl Syria with the FSA armed groups in the second half of 2017. The interview took place under the conditions of anonymity (Anon, 2017).

SIG and to accept Turkish sponsorship. Turkey's approach paid off. The NLF gathered around 55.000 to 70.000 fighters (Suriye Gündemi, 2018; Taştekin, 2019a). The group proved willing to resist the Syrian regime's expansion into Idlib and to secure the area against the PYD. The NLF also expressed its willingness to collaborate with the Turkish-backed SNA during Turkish military operations in northwest Syria (Taştekin, 2018b; Lund, 2015b). In this regard, Turkey made significant progress in consolidating its SNA proxy architecture.

Nevertheless, Turkey intended to strengthen control over the NLF by merging it with the SNA. Even though Turkey was able to temporarily 'purchase' NLF loyalties by paying wages and providing considerable amounts of military equipment, the NLF umbrella were nevertheless not full Turkish proxies. Turkish-NLF collaboration was seen as "a mutually beneficial, pragmatic alliance that was reinforced by compatible political and ideological outlooks" (Yüksel, 2019, p. 11). Led by Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups, political Salafists and nationalists, the NLF shared Turkey's enmity towards the Syrian Regime and the PYD (Pierret, 2018; Lister, 2017). For instance, the head of the political bureau of the NLF, Hussam Tarsha, expressed the organisation's full support for Turkey "as the most significant ally [*but not the only one*] of the NLF, after God" (Özkizilcık, 2018b). However, despite the presence of Syrian Islamists in its ranks and files, the NLF leadership upheld a revolutionary - rather than Islamic - discourse, describing themselves as "the formation of FSA elements under a single roof in Idlib" (Görücü, 2018). Accepting such rebranding enabled the nationalist Islamists to benefit from closer Turkish patronage and protection against Russian-backed Syrian regime attacks. In exchange, NLF groups carried out tasks aligned with shared Turkish-NLF priorities in northwest Syria. For instance, Ahrar al-Sham counterbalanced Salafi Jihadist armed groups while Faylaq al-Sham and several other NLF groups took part in Turkey's anti-YPG (People's Protection Units military wing of the PYD) operations in Afrin in 2018 (Özçelik, Acun, 2018). As well as that, Turkey aimed to get NLF's participation in the Turkish operation, Peace Spring (in October 2019) which sought to establish a safe zone of 30 km stretching along the Turkish Syrian border in the east of Euphrates River and eliminate the YPG presence there (Gürcan, 2019).

As intended, Turkey convinced NLF leaders to merge into the SNA just five days ahead of the operation Peace Spring in October 2019 (Ayaydın, 2019; Özkizilcık, 2019a). Despite ideological and leadership discrepancies between the SNA and NLF, the strategic priority of "defending the liberated territories and regaining the lost ones in Northern Hama and Idlib" against Russian and Syrian regime attacks probably obliged the sceptical NLF commanders to come to an agreement with Turkey's firm request (Lister, 2019). The merger has created a more centralised SNA that consists of seven corps<sup>4</sup> and about 80.000 fighters (National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, 2019). During the unification ceremony in the Şanlıurfa province of Turkey, the Defence Ministry of SIG, Salim Idris, announced its eagerness to crack down on terrorist groups, first and foremost the PYD/PKK (TRT Haber, 2019). Following the merger, about 3.000 fighters of the former NLF groups, i.e. Firqat al-Hamzah, Faylaq al-Sham and Jaysh al-Ahrar, took part in the Turkish operation Peace Spring as the irregular component of the force (Taştekin, 2019a).

The 'control-through-centralisation' approach towards Idlib's NLF groups has helped Turkey consolidate its proxy architecture in Syria. To that end, Turkey has gradually turned the secular-revolutionary (FSA) and national-Islamist (NLF) groups into a centralised organisation with clearer command and control architecture under the banner of the SNA (AA, 2019). The SNA technically operates at the helm of SIG's Ministry of Defence; however, it is commanded by Turkey as part of Turkish Army military operations in Syria (TRT, 2019). For that reason, the Turkish Army has attempted to address

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4. The first three corps were formed by the FSA and the new four corps were formed by the NLF.

the issue of the SNA's compatibility with the Turkish Army's conventional operations. For instance, SNA units conducted military drills on counter terrorism in a bid to increase their combat readiness just before the 2019 Turkish offensive into northern Syria (Musa and Koparan, 2019). Furthermore, some SNA groups were observed while using Turkish inventory M113 armed personnel carriers during the same operation (Özkizilcik, 2019b). Presumably under Turkish auspices, the SNA has issued a code of conduct in an attempt to prevent human rights violations from taking place, especially after the operation Peace Spring in October 2019 (Al-Tamimi, 2019).

Yet the former NLF only formed a part of Idlib's varied cast of Islamist groups. The remaining part united under Hey'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), which was created in 2017 from the legacy of Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria<sup>5</sup>. Even though nationalist-Islamist armed groups in Idlib came to terms with Turkey's 2018 unification offer, the HTS refused to associate itself with the NLF. Even worse, HTS held sway over almost all Idlib in February 2019 during an inter-factional struggle (against the NLF) through a mix of co-optation, intimidation and coercion (Taştekin, 2019b). HTS has also formed the Salvation Government in Idlib as a rival to the SIG. Overall, the successes of HTS helped draw a line between those who advocated for a more jihadist vision for Syria and those who defended the Syrian revolution's vision from a nationalist Islamist angle (Lister, 2017).

However, the HTS leadership has two different opinions on the war in Syria. On the one hand, the pragmatist factions, which are led by the leader of the group Abu Muhammed al-Jolani, has leaned towards collaboration with Turkey (Yüksel, 2019). In return, this faction has attempted to dictate its terms to Turkey, particularly on the issue of legitimising the HTS governance in Idlib (Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism, 2018). Collaboration between the HTS and Turkey was visible when Turkish Army units were escorted by HTS fighters in the first phase of the Turkish de-escalation deployment to Idlib in October 2017 (Mcdowall, 2017). The HTS religious authorities have also justified the status of cooperation with Turkish units in Idlib by releasing a fatwa which has stated that "recourse to the infidel [Turkey] against the infidel [Syrian Regime]" is possible (Heller, 2020). However, these measures have not yet appeased the *dogmatist* wing of the HTS i.e. the Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD), which has continued to criticise HTS abandoning the Al-Qaeda discourse and its collaboration with Turkey.

Turkey has developed a distinctive approach to dealing with HTS even though its end-state has remained unchanged: 'to consolidate its proxy architecture in Syria'. This is because HTS has long been willing to preserve autonomy in Idlib even though Turkish deployments during the operation Spring Shield in February-March 2020 changed the military balance in favour of Ankara (Heller, 2020). To make things more complicated, the dogmatist wing of HTS (THD) has rejected the status-quo brokered by Turkey and Russia on Idlib in 2018 and 2020. In 2018, Turkey and Russia pledged to enforce a de-militarised zone up to a depth of 15-20 km around Idlib in a bid to clear the area of radical rebels including Jabhat Al-Nusra (former HTS) (Tsvetkova, 2018). Nevertheless, the THD has kept on carrying out several attacks against the Syrian regime and Russian positions bordering Idlib. Furthermore, Turkey's reluctance to deal with HTS provoked the Syrian regime to launch the operation Dawn of Idlib-2 in December 2019. Turkey responded by conducting operation Spring Shield in February 2020 with the participation of 12.000 Turkish Units and Idlib's proxies (including HTS) which collaborated under the framework of the Al-Fateh al-Mubin joint operations room (Gürcan, 2020a and Al-Kanj, 2020). After a period of military escalation between the two sides (The Turkish Army, SNA and HTS versus the Syrian and Russian Army), Turkey and Russia signed the Sochi 2.0 deal in March 2020. In this new framework, Turkey has been given one last chance to eliminate all terrorist groups in Syria including the HTS (Gürcan, 2020b). In

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5. Since 2014, the US Treasury has claimed that Turkish, Qatari and Kuwaiti individuals financially support Jabhat Al-Nusra, the former incarnation of HTS. Even though Ankara designated the group as a terrorist organisation, it has remained indifferent to HTS's global jihad narrative and its extremist activities in Idlib (Lister, 2017).



return, Turkey has developed a cautious *divide-and-rule* approach that has sought to split up *pragmatist* wing of HTS from the *dogmatist* ones (Özkizilcik, 2018c). Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, made this approach public as “separating the moderate opposition from the terrorists” (TRT Haber, 2018). In conformity with this, the HTS leadership has attempted to marginalise the THD by repression and use of force (Christou and Nofal, 2020). By this means, Turkey’s ultimate aim could be to attach the pragmatist wing of HTS to the SNA and to gradually neutralise the THD in coordination with the US and Russia (Hasan, 2019).

In summary, Turkey has put into effect well-tailored and effective arrangements with the different segments of the armed Syrian opposition since 2016. After a period of centralisation and restructuring, the SNA has become the backbone of Turkey’s proxy architecture in Syria. The SNA has been effective in carrying out Turkey’s *safe zone strategy* as a core irregular component under nearly full Turkish control via training, equipment and payroll. To that end, the SNA helped create three semi-autonomous Turkish protectorates in the area between Azaz-Jarabulus; Afrin and between Tal Abyad – Ras Al-Ayn in northern Syria. Key variables that influenced the effectiveness of Turkey’s strategy towards the SNA include: “a) the level of centralised control it was able to achieve over such groups; b) the extent to which it could partner such groups with its own military; c) the possibility of providing significant material support, such as training, salaries and equipment; d) geographic proximity” (Yüksel, 2019, p. 1). Even though HTS has put up strong resistance against Turkey’s *control-through-centralisation* approach, Ankara has attempted to overcome this difficulty by developing a tailored *divide-and-rule* approach towards the HTS (Yüksel, 2019, p. 1). In this regard, Turkey strives to push the group’s pragmatist wing to disassociate itself from the Al-Qaeda ideology and merge it into the SNA. This approach has sought to see the pragmatist factions of HTS emerge dominant from the group’s internal power struggles. In the event of a merger, Turkey can help consolidate its proxy architecture in Syria and expand its influence in Idlib in the long term.

## Turkish Proxy war strategy in Libya

The outbreak of civil war offered Turkey assertive policy options not only in its near abroad, but also in the north of Africa. Since mid-2014, Ankara has become involved in the Libyan war in support of the Government of National Accord (GNA) which has been fighting against Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA). Ankara’s backing for the GNA can be explained by three principal reasons: shared ideology fed by political Islam, \$18 billion worth of Turkish pre-war business contracts and the rising importance of maritime jurisdiction zones in the Eastern Mediterranean (Harchaoui, 2020). To that end, Ankara has sought to ensure the survival of an Ankara-friendly regime in western Libya, primarily since the second half of 2014. Initially, Turkey pursued a donated assistance strategy by providing training for the GNA’s Islamist and revolutionary groups in the Isparta province of Turkey. Further to that, Ankara clandestinely transferred weapons and ammunition to Tripoli in contravention of a United Nations’ arms embargo (Harchaoui, 2020). Turkish military involvement in Libya was scaled up in the second half of 2019 after the LNA launched a multi-front offensive against the GNA aligned forces in Tripoli. Consequently, the Turkish Army’s inaugural covert forward presence was made official in November 2019 when Turkey and the GNA brokered a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on security and military cooperation (Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2019). Ever since, Turkey has concentrated on allocating conventional combat enablers and irregular elements to the GNA in a bid to improve its ability to defend against the LNA offensive.

Since the signing of a military agreement, high-ranking Turkish military personnel have assumed command of the operations in Tripoli. Thanks to the formation of a joint com-

mand centre, the Turkish Army has directed the GNA aligned factions to repel the LNA offensive and defend Tripoli at any cost ([Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2019](#)). Therefore, the military agreement has authorised Turkey to utilise the GNA aligned forces as local proxies. Nevertheless, Turkish technical assistance and arms support could not make up for the GNA's manpower deficiency. Since the MoU has tasked the Turkish military with a quasi-non-combat duty in Libya, the GNA aligned force's manpower requirements have been met by the deployment of Syrian armed groups to Tripoli. In February 2020, President Erdoğan ([2020](#)) revealed Turkey's new Libyan strategy in a speech by stating that "our gallant soldiers together with our units from the Syrian National Army are now in Libya".

At the beginning, it was difficult to convince the SNA to take part in the Libyan war, since the group had assumed a (Syrian) nationalist discourse. In due time, fighting abroad has gradually become endorsed as a social norm for Syrian fighters due to the decreasing salaries of the SNA and increased poverty in Turkish controlled areas ([Tsurkov, 2020](#)). For these reasons, Ankara has offered monthly salaries of \$2000 to \$3000 GNA money by means of three to six-month contracts to those who would like to participate in the Libyan war ([Al-Khateb, 2020](#); [Mckernan and Akoush, 2020](#)). Furthermore, Turkey has promised the volunteers Turkish nationality, medical support for the injured and repatriation aid (to Syria) for the dead ([Mckernan and Akoush, 2020](#)). While secular revolutionary and nationalist Islamist groups have been interested in the Turkish offer, the Salafi Jihadists have not paid any attention to it ([Debre, 2020](#)). As a result, as many as 3.800 SNA fighters have become involved in the Libyan war ([US DoD, 2020](#)). In this context, the SNA fighters have coalesced into battle-weary GNA units by pieces in order to increase their battle effectiveness. This strategy paid off in the sense that the SNA fighters helped the GNA repel the LNA offensive in the east and south of Tripoli in the first half of 2020.

A much-debated question is whether an SNA fighter in Libya can be called a *mercenary* or a *proxy*. At first glance, Groh's study ([2019, p. 29](#)) may seem to offer no explanation for Turkey's arrangement with Syrian armed groups in Libya, since it focuses only on "indigenous groups that are politically motivated". In the case of Libya, the fighters of the SNA could have weak political interest in defeating the LNA given that they are Syrian nationalists and they have signed high-priced contracts with the GNA under Turkish auspices. Therefore, the research has utilised the definition proposed by O'Brien ([2010 and 2012](#)) and the UN on mercenaries while investigating the status of SNA fighters in Libya.

First and foremost, SNA fighters have been deployed to Libya even though they are neither a national nor a party to the Libyan conflict. Secondly, SNA fighters are motivated to take part in the Libyan war essentially by the desire for private gain. Nevertheless, it is also plausible to argue that Syrian fighters are also involved in the Libyan conflict to achieve Turkey's foreign policy objectives. This is exemplified in the works undertaken by Mckernan and Akoush ([2020](#)) and Al-Kanj ([2020](#)). Accordingly, SNA fighters have asserted their eagerness to fight in Libya to defend Islam subsequent to the earning income ([Mckernan and Akoush, 2020](#); [Al-Kanj, 2020](#)). Furthermore, it is not plausible to argue that the Syrian armed groups would have taken sides with the LNA if Marshall Haftar had offered them a better deal.

Nevertheless, religion is only one of many factors that help SNA fighters to decide on fighting in a foreign country. Since 2016, the majority of SNA fighters have encountered financial difficulties because they have been disconnected from traditional sources of income in areas under effective Turkish control. For instance, the salaries of the SNA have been cut from \$300 to \$50 per month since 2016 ([Tsurkov, 2019](#)). Therefore, the desire for private gain has played a crucial role for the individual members of the SNA to fight in Libya. Even though there seems to be some evidence to indicate that

SNA fighters share the Turkish vision fed by political Islam, and religion is more likely a background factor that ensures collaboration rather than the actual driver. Taken together, the evidence presented thus far supports the idea that SNA fighters in Libya fit into the definition of mercenaries.

Against this backdrop, Turkey has enlisted the support of Syrian mercenaries to carry out an effective proxy war strategy in Libya. While GNA-aligned militias operate under Turkey's command as proxies, SNA fighters serve as mercenaries. By this means, Ankara has sought to amalgamate its proxy architecture in Libya by merging Syrian mercenaries into GNA aligned units in groups of 300-600 fighters. Taken together, the use of proxies and mercenaries under the command of the Turkish Military represent a distinctive example of waging an indirect war in a local conflict.

## Conclusion

This article has found that Turkey changed its indirect intervention strategy from *donated assistance* to *proxy warfare* in Syria and Libya when it saw a greater need to influence the results of these conflicts. Therefore, both the PYD's autonomy attempt in 2015 and the LNA offensive in April 2019 posed a threat to Turkey's vital interests in Syria and Libya. Afterwards, Turkey put tailored approaches in place to command and direct proxies in parallel with its own military operations in these countries. Despite the differing circumstances, the SNA has become an essential element of Turkey's indirect war strategy in Syria and Libya. This proxy architecture encapsulates the secular revolutionary (FSA) and nationalist Islamist (NLF) armed groups of the Syrian opposition. On top of that, the pragmatist elements of the HTS could be the next candidates for the SNA if the group could distance itself from the Salafi Jihadist narrative and prioritise the SIG's revolutionary objectives. Taken together, Turkey's proxy warfare strategies in Syria and Libya have considerably affected the results of the crises in Ankara's favour.

In the case of Syria, this study has shown that the control-through-centralisation approach has enabled Turkey to carry out an effective proxy war strategy since 2016. In this context, Turkey has centralised many Syrian armed groups under an Islamist-nationalistic vision by making use of this approach. Likewise, Turkey brought the fragmented FSA under its control in 2016, restructured these forces into a centralised SNA in 2017, and merged the NLF into the SNA architecture in 2019. The consolidation of proxy architecture ensured Turkey to establish three semi-autonomous protectorates in northern Syria and expand its influence in Idlib province. Therefore, one of the most distinctive features of Turkish proxy war strategy in Syria is the extent to which it has been able to combine its proxies with its own armed forces during the military incursions in Syria between 2016 and 2020. Apart from that, Turkey has developed a *divide-and-rule* approach to the HTS. This approach has aimed at merging the group into the SNA structure by empowering the pragmatist factions and by marginalising the dogmatist ones. Overall, the main effect of Turkey's proxy warfare strategy in Syria is that it has effectively expanded Turkey's area of influence in northern Syria to the detriment of the Syrian regime and the PYD.

In the case of Libya, this article has found that Turkish Army has pursued an effective *proxy war* strategy after Ankara and the GNA signed an agreement on security and military cooperation in December 2019. By this means, Turkey has assumed the command of GNA-aligned militias in Tripoli and has empowered them with conventional combat enablers and mercenaries. The article has shown that the deployment of Syrian mercenaries to Libya has reinforced Turkish proxy architecture in Tripoli. Taken together, Turkish strategy has proved effective due to the fact that SNA fighters helped the GNA aligned forces repel Marshall Haftar's offensive in the first half of 2020.

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