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**TURKEY, IRAN, RUSSIA TRILATERAL COOPERATION IN
SYRIAN CIVIL WAR
AN AFTERMATH OF THE U.S WITHDRAWAL**

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the paper independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors has been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading.

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ABSTRACT

The United States strong presence in the Syrian Civil War has been previously highly influential for determining the outcome of the Syrian conflict. However, in December 2018 the U.S president Donald Trump decided to withdraw the U.S forces from the war. This paper studies the implications of this decision on Russia-Iran-Turkey cooperation. For understanding the level of trilateral cooperation after decreased presence of the U.S forces, three critical issues in Moscow, Ankara and Tehran partnership, such as: Syrian Kurdish diaspora, the future role of president Bashar al-Assad in Syrian government and states' stance against Radical Islam are analyzed. The research uses thematic analysis method relying on the "balance of power" and "security dilemma" theory in classical realism school. The research shows that the Kurdish issue is likely to be the most challenging problem in Russia, Turkey and Iran partnership, while questions about Bashar al-Assad governance could facilitate converge between these three states. Nevertheless, it is not possible to evaluate the general effect of the U.S. withdrawal based on facts and analysis collected in the framework of this research, as multiple external factors which were considered neutral in this research are also highly influential for determining the level of trilateral partnership between Russia, Turkey and Iran after the U.S withdrawal from the conflict.

Keywords: Syrian Civil War; Russia, Iran, Turkey cooperation in Syria, The U.S withdrawal from Syria

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PKK- The Kurdistan Workers Party

YPG -Kurdish leftist Democratic Union Party

ISIL- Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

HTS- Hayat Tahrir al -Sham

SDF- Syrian Democratic Forces

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian civil war is the greatest human disaster of the twenty-first century. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, over 470,000 people have been killed, 1,9 million wounded, 4.8 million people have fled the country and 6.6 million people are internally displaced (Phillips 2018). The conflict began with peaceful youth protests, demanding democratic reforms. However, as rumors spread about people getting arrested and tortured for painting revolutionary slogans on school walls, more demonstrations occurred (Carey 2018). This in turn led to security forces, loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, opening fire on the protestors. The more the security forces tried to crush the protests, the heavier the protests got and eventually, opposition forces took up arms to fight the government forces (Carey 2018). Rebel units were created and many soldiers loyal to al-Assad government, joined these. Violence rapidly escalated and Syria descended into a heavy civil war (Syrian Civil War Map 2019). The war extended, as Syria soon became the battlefield for the U.S, Russia, Iran, Turkey and other regional states proxy war (Phillips 2018).

On 20 December 2018 the president of the United States announced the shocking decision to withdraw all the U.S troops from Syria. Due to the increasing intensity of Russia, Iran and Turkey trilateral summits on Syria (Sökmen, Martínez, de Pedro 2018) and claimed common interests (Clarke, Tabatabai 2018), it could be argued, that the U.S power gap emerging after country's withdrawal will be refilled with joint Turkey, Iran and Russia presence. On one hand the withdrawal of the U.S forces will be beneficial for Turkey, Iran and Russia, as there will be no meaningful U.S opposition towards these three states interests, hence all three powers can enjoy their freedoms and fulfill their regional goals (Sökmen, Martínez, de Pedro 2018). However, the withdrawal of the U.S forces also means that Turkey, Iran and Russia have the possibility to become more assertive players in the conflict, which could in turn make the cooperation between three states increasingly constrained.

Cooperative relations between Russia, Iran and Turkey in the Syrian War have a highly influential impact for solving the brutal conflict in Syria. Moreover, the extent of partnership between major remaining powers in the conflict has a detrimental influence beyond the Syrian conflict as well as what happens in Syria does not stay in Syria (Stoicescu 2019). 2019). The latest example of this was during the European migration crisis, where massive amounts of refugees from Syria were the initial indicator for European political problems.

Moreover, the terrorist threat evident around the globe can only be solved with initiating peaceful solution in this war-torn country. It is also argued that due to Syria's geographically strategic position and distinct allies, influence over Syria determines the hegemon of the region (Fisk 2015). Therefore, any change in the U.S, Russia, Iran and Turkey actions is influential for regional power balance, which in turn is detrimental for region's stability and outcome of brutal Syrian Civil War.

The Syrian Civil War has been amongst the priorities of scholars from the beginning. Haian Dukhan focused on policies of the Syrian government towards its minorities and saw everything under influence of tribal structure of Syria (Dukhan 2018). John McHugo associated the problem to Western states in drawing the map of the Middle East, including Syria (McHugo 2015). Stephen J. Flanagan (2013) talked about trilateral relations between Iran-Turkey-Russia and proposed that the US should make a cooperation with these three in order to manage the crisis in Syria. Despite these researches, the US military presence in Syria and the impacts of their withdrawal has not been surveyed before but will be discussed in this research.

The central argument of this thesis claims that Donald Trump's announcement of the U.S forces withdrawal from Syria is highly influential for the regional power politics, as the balance of power has suddenly changed, leaving Russia, Iran and Turkey the main decision-makers in regionally important Syrian War. The assumption that Russia, Iran and Turkey will be major powers determining the future of Syria, is based on each state vital interests sourcing from Syrian conflict. Based on realist view, which assumes that states act in their self-interest, this research seeks to understand if the U.S decreased presence in the Syrian conflict will increase or decrease the cooperation between Turkey, Russia and Iran.

This question is analyzed through three common interests of Russia, Iran and Turkey, such as: Syrian Kurdish dilemma, future of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and issues concerning Radical Islam.

By analyzing the implications of the U.S withdrawal to Russia, Iran and Turkey cooperation through each above-mentioned variable, this paper seeks an answer to main research question:

- “How will the withdrawal of the U.S forces from Syrian Civil War affect the cooperation between Russia, Turkey and Iran in the conflict?”

This main question is answered through five sub -questions seeking to understand:

- What were the motivations for the U.S to become involved in Syrian War and why has the U.S presence and motivation in the conflict decreased?
- What is Russia's, Turkey's and Iran's interests regionally and in Syrian War?
- How does the Syrian Kurdish dilemma influence trilateral cooperation after the U.S withdrawal?
- How do Ankara, Moscow and Tehran view radical Islam in the region and is the U.S exit diverging or converging these viewpoints?
- What is Russia, Iran and Turkey stance towards Syrian current president Bashar al-Assad and how does the U.S withdrawal influence these attitudes?

This study employs a theoretical thematic analysis as a flexible method appropriate for analyzing extracted data from documents (Guest, Mac Queen and Namey 2012). Therefore, different primary sources (official statements and published national strategies) as well as secondary sources (research papers, think tank reports and books) have been surveyed. Since reliability is a weakness of the thematic method, data from different resources with opposite viewpoints has been analyzed and applied. The content of each theme was interpreted in light of the Realism school, particularly balance of power and security dilemma concept to form the discussion part of the research. Collected themes and data were reviewed simultaneously to guarantee the existence of a meaningful connection in between. Finally, themes were put in a logical order to achieve a clear answer for the research questions.

To understand the possible extent of trilateral cooperation, this paper is divided into four parts. First, the paper looks into the actors' interests in Syrian civil war starting from the U.S and tries to understand country's decreased involvement in the conflict. Then the paper moves on to explain Russia, Iran and Turkey motivations and interests in Syrian War. From these interests, the most important and colliding ones, such as the Syrian Kurds, Syrian future government and radical Islam, are chosen. Then author elaborates on the necessity and suitability of Realist theory, which is used in the following analysis. As Syrian Kurds, future government of Syria and Radical Islam are highly important for each country, the level of cooperation is analyzed through these variables. After each topic, the importance of the U.S in the matter is analyzed and the implications of the U.S withdrawal to trilateral cooperation are discussed. The final conclusion analyzes if the U.S withdrawal is beneficial or not for the trilateral cooperation.

1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

1.1. Theoretical framework

To predict the implications of U.S forces withdrawal on trilateral cooperation between Russia, Iran and Turkey, this paper analyzes the motivations, interests and actions of the states in realist perspective. The theory assumes that the international political system is anarchic as there is no supranational authority, the central actors of international politics, the states, are rational and act in self-interest way and that all states are desired to gain power, which is necessary for ensuring their own preservation (Mearsheimer 2001). Based on these claims, following paper is explained through two realist theories: balance of power theory and security dilemma.

The balance of power theory points out that states are fundamentally concerned with their own survival, within the anarchic international system (Waltz 1979). Therefore, states are inclined to act in self-interest manner regards to their own interests and hope for survival (Mearsheimer 2001). For fulfilling their own interests, survive or dominate, states must also use all the means for achieving their goals. Therefore, states tend to form alliances and weaken their opposition. (Waltz 1979). According to these claims Russia, Iran and Turkey intensified cooperation and opposition against the U.S can be analyzed.

The balance of power theory also inclines that the increased power of one state comes at the expense of others, which makes states vary towards each other, because the states do not wish to see other states to shift the balance of power in one's favor (Mearsheimer 2001). Therefore, states aim to achieve balance of power can explain future constrains in the Russia, Iran and Turkey trilateral cooperation.

Second explanation for understanding Russia, Iran and Turkey cooperation can be understood through security dilemma issue which elucidates the competition among states in the absence of international authority (Posen 1993). Therefore, through security dilemma issue, Russia, Iran and Turkey mistrusting cooperation could be explained, due to the former regional hegemon- the U.S withdrawal.

Moreover, security dilemma issue asserts that states cannot trust other states, because if the interests of two states contradict, the intentions of states change as well (Tang 2009). The

security dilemma issue explains problematic relations between different players in the region and defines Russia, Iran and Turkey interests.

1.2. Trans-regional actors' interests in Syria: From Russia to the U.S

1.2.1. The U.S and its decreasing interests

The U.S- led intervention in Syrian Civil war has been present almost a decade. Already in 2011, the U.S established international group called "Friends to Syria," which intended to coordinate international support to the Syrian government opposition. The group first began to supply the Free Syrian Army with food and aid supplies, but soon began to provide intelligence, money, equipment and trainings to other opposition forces as well (Goldman 2017).

The initial aim of helping Syrian rebel forces such as Free Syrian Army, Syrian Democratic forces and the Kurds was to decrease the power Syrian President Bashar Assad and government forces loyal to him (Orion 2016). Moreover, it is argued that the U.S began its participation in the conflict to prevent shift of regional power balance in the Middle East, as Assad's power in Syria would have meant increasing power of Syrian government close allies- Russia and Iran.

In 2014 the Obama administration started an active military involvement in Syria, as emerged terrorist organization ISIL became increasingly dangerous security threat. This meant that the U.S primary goal shifted towards defeating ISIL, while ousting al-Assad became secondary (Conway 2017). Together with other sixty anti-ISIL countries the fight against "Islamic State" militants in northern Syria began. The U.S invasion under "War on Terror" pretext, enabled the U.S simultaneously to confront al- Assad's government, after his forces conducted chemical attacks, which were internationally considered as war crime against the Syrian people (Nebehay 2018). Hence, in the summer 2018 President Trump conducted multiple airstrikes towards Syrian government targets. Nevertheless, the U.S direct opposition of Bashar al-Assad government has stayed rather minimal, as previous violations of international law by Syrian president has not brought serious consequences for Syrian regime. For example, chemical attack in 2013 was associated to al- Assad, but the Obama administration failed to respond to the attack, because the U.S congress did not approve the U.S military involvement (Hollyer 2017).

The U.S started to lose its interests in Syria recently, as the large-scale investments into the conflict have only brought minimal gains for the U.S. Although the U.S has been successful in

reducing ISIL extensive caliphate to few dusty villages in Syrian deserts, other U.S gains remain minimal (Sly 2019). For example, the U.S has not been able to oust Assad's regime, but has rather increased his power throughout the conflict. Moreover, even when leading the coalition for defeating ISIL, the U.S has not seen strong alignment to its influence in the Middle East region. Wilson Center journalist Marina Ottaway has argued that the U.S "remains an outsider, unwelcome or barely accepted, in Iraq." In addition, Iranian military forces have repeatedly declared that "U.S. presence should end as soon as the caliphate ceases to exist." (Ottaway 2017). Moreover, the Kurdish allies in Iraq are upset about the U.S rejection of their independence referendum (Ottaway 2017). Therefore, the U.S only has efficient and strong alliance with Syrian Kurds, whose partnership in the fight against ISIL was vital, but now after claiming the destruction of the terrorist organization, the importance of this alliance has decreased. Rather it brings additional problems with the U.S NATO ally- Turkey, who sees Syrian Kurdish forces as the main security threat for the country (Specia 2018).

Hence, due to the decreasing interests in the Middle East region during Trump's presidency and minimal benefits received from the conflict, the U.S president announced unilaterally in December 2018 the withdrawal of remaining 2000 U.S troops from Syrian conflict (Specia 2019). Already, in January 11th the American military began withdrawing its equipment from the conflict (Schmitt 2019). According to the White House statements, around 200 troops for peace keeping purposes will remain (DeYoung ja Ryan 2019). However, after falling under heavy criticism for this decision, President Trump started to soften his claims about quick withdrawal. The president has stated: "We're pulling out of Syria... but we won't be finally pulled out until ISIL is gone." (BBC 2019). Therefore, the U.S extensive withdrawal has become questionable.

Nevertheless, after this statement the U.S decreased interests and reduced involvement in the conflict remains obvious. This means, that the U.S influence in the region will certainly decrease, making other regional actors to increase their own involvement. This situation can be understood through realist Arnold Wolfers "law of nature" explanation, which states that: "Since nations, like nature, are said to abhor a vacuum, one could predict that the powerful nation would feel compelled to fill the vacuum with their own power." (Wolfers 1962).

As this paper assumes, that regional players such as Turkey, Iran and Russia are most likely to fill this power vacuum, as their domestic and foreign policy is highly influenced by Syria's political situation, each state interests in the conflict are analyzed.

1.2.2. Russia's interests in Syria

Russia started to provide strategic aid to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in 2015, as the power of current president is strategically important for Russia in three major aspects (Gorbachev 2017).

First, the power of al-Assad is key for Russia to break its international isolation through political compromises. Fighting against ISIL in cooperation with al-Assad government, improves Russia's image and reduces international attention after its invasion into Ukraine, Crimea. Therefore, Moscow has hoped that fighting common and more dangerous enemy in Syria would make Western countries more accepting of Russia's Ukraine venture (Frolov 2017). Moreover, as the solution of Syrian conflict relies in cooperation between all political sides, Russia supporting al-Assad government forces other international actors, especially the U.S around the negotiation table with Russia (Croocke 2016).

Secondly, for president Vladimir Putin to preserve its authority and reliability at home, Russia cannot lose the Syrian war, nor have extensive casualties in the conflict. According to Levada Centre polls only 30 percentage of Russians are supporting the continuation of military engagement in Syrian War (Gorbachev 2017). Therefore, negative outcomes from Syria could be fatal for Putin's presidency. Hence, for avoiding backlash at home, Russian operations in Syria have been limited to air or naval support, while official ground presence remains limited (Manlove 2018).

Thirdly, Russia seeks to preserve strong alliance with the Middle East major powers, such as Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, for achieving dominance in the region. For example, Russia's vice prime minister Juri Borissov publicly stated that Bashar al-Assad government is willing to rent Syrian naval port Tartus for Russia for 49 years (EuropePorts 2019). This enables Russia to establish presence in strategically important Mediterranean Sea (Reuters 2017).

However, according to the realist view, states are uncertain about each other's intentions, because when the interests of two states contradict, states intentions change as well (Jervis 1978). Therefore, in the Middle East region, Russia is interested in conditional alliance, who would fill Russia's interests and comply with the country's larger world-order goals. According to Carnegie Endowments for International Peace political scientist Dimitri Trenin:" Russia is maneuvering constantly and engaging in different tradeoffs when necessary." (Trenin 2018).

1.2.3. Iran's interests

According to UN special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, Iran spends around six billion dollars annually for supporting Syrian president Bashar al- Assad government.” (Ali Fathollah-Nejad 2018). This is because, Iran has been Syria's closest ally since 1979 and remains vital for Tehran strategy to counterweight country's international opposition. For example, Syria and Iran have always been commonly opposed to the U.S presence and Israel's growing power in the region (Mohseni 2018).

The continuation of Syria's present government with president al-Assad is necessary for Iran, as this ensures the continuation of “axis of resistance.” “Axis of resistance” composes of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas forces and intends to hold common opposition towards coalition's enemies. Syria is center part of this “axis of resistance,” and losing al-Assad government is seen as direct threat to stability of Iran. Therefore, if Syria would be lost to Western-fomented regime or jihadist forces, Iran would lose its partner for counterweighting the influence of its opponents (International Crisis Group 2018) and the continuation of the Islamic Republic of Iran would become increasingly uncertain. Moreover, it has been claimed” if we lose Syria, we will not be able to preserve Tehran” (Mohseni 2017).

Iranian involvement in Syria also reduces country's internationally isolated situation. For example, partnership with Russia and Turkey have enhanced due to Iran's influential position besides al-Assad government in Syria (Akbarzadeh, Conduit 2016).

1.2.4. Turkey's interests

Turkey has taken assertive position in its foreign politics towards Syria, as Ankara needs cooperative relations and strong partnership with its neighbors, for reducing its security dilemma issue with the Syrian Kurdish force People's Protection Units (YPG). As al-Assad governance has not showed extensive opposition towards Syrian Kurds, the cooperation between president Erdogan and al-Assad has suddenly worsened. Therefore, Turkish government aims for regime change and supports Syrian government opposition with extensive military equipment (Coop 2018).

However, simultaneously, Turkey seeks to preserve and increase its influence through alliances with major players in the east and west. When both sides reduced their opposition (the U.S) or increased support towards Bashar al-Assad (Iran, Russia), Ankara simultaneously shifted its opposition away from al- Assad and towards commonly condemned terrorist organization ISIL.

This was done to reestablish Turkish regional diplomatic, cooperative and multi-alliance image (Manhoff 2017). For example, in May 2019, al-Assad declared that the relations with Turkey are in the way for normalization as two sides have started their intelligence and military cooperation. He expressed his readiness for having a meeting with president Erdogan (Etemadonline 2019, 12).

Nevertheless, according to Turkish ambassador to Estonia, Turkey continuous its efforts to fight against highly dangerous terrorist organization ISIL, but Kurdish dominated YPG forces in Syria are seen same threatful terrorist organization for the country internally and externally (Kumaşcioğlu 2019). The Kurds pose external threat, especially after the U.S increased cooperation with the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga and Syrian YPG forces, who have been effective allies for countering the ISIL stronghold in Syria and Iraq (Clarke 2018). Through the cooperation with the U.S, Syrian Kurds conquered “the entire territory east of the Euphrates River along the Syrian-Turkish border,” which could mean occurrence of new state near Turkish border (Manhoff 2017). Internally, possible YPG autonomy close to Turkish border, poses threat to Turkish domestic stability, as YPG forces are claimed to be affiliated with Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), entity who waged a bloody civil war in Turkey in 1980s (Phillips 2018).

2. DISCUSSION

The outcome of Russia, Turkey and Iran cooperation is dependent on the convergence of countries main interests after the U.S withdrawal. After analyzing general interests of Turkey, Iran and Russia in the Middle- East region, the author has chosen three most relevant topics in Syrian conflict, which are all important to each state. The variables include:

- How each state sees the future of Syrian Kurds,
- The continuation of Syrian president Bashar al- Assad leadership,
- Stance towards radical Islam.

By analyzing the importance of these interests through realist lens, these chosen variables are expected to determine the actions of Russia, Turkey and Iran in the region and simultaneously dictate the extent of cooperation between those states.

In addition, to analyzing Russia, Iran and Turkey interest independently through above-mentioned variables, the influence of the U.S in the matter is considered, as the extent of the U.S influence in the variable is expected to determine how the U.S withdrawal affects Moscow, Ankara and Tehran future cooperation.

2.1. The Syrian Kurds dilemma

Kurds around the world are the largest stateless minority, who have been mainly split into Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran (GRAY 2015). Throughout the history the Kurds have sought their autonomy and independence. This is posing security dilemma for countries hosting these minorities. For example, Realist John Herz argues that absence of higher authority and law is leading towards doubt and mistrust among the communities. He states that “individuals who live alongside each other without being organized into a higher unity must be... concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other groups and individuals” (Wagner 2007). Due to constant search of autonomy from the host countries, it is argued, that the Kurds are less subordinate to state’s authority, which in turn increases the domestic instability of host states (Wagner 2007). Therefore, the Kurdish diaspora in the region is highly detrimental for states hosting the minority.

2.1.1. Turkey and threatful Syrian Kurds

The largest group of Kurds is living in Turkey, where they make up approximately 20% of Turkish society (Fondation-Institut kurde de Paris 2018). The Kurds in Turkey and in its neighborhood are clearly the source of security dilemma issue, as the president, ministers and other high-ranking officials have repeatedly claimed the Kurds as the main security threat for the country (Sökmen 2018). This threat has emerged due to brutal armed conflict between The Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and Turkish government forces in 1980s. Since then, the Kurds have been extensively suppressed minority in Turkey causing dangerous confrontations between both sides. The conflict in the past and present is directly interlinked with Kurdish wish for autonomy and independence, which causes threats for Turkish territorial integrity and in turn increases its security-dilemma issue. In addition to Kurdish hopes for autonomy, they also pose internal threat for Turkey, due to Kurdish dominated PKK terrorist attacks in the country (Starr 2013).

As Syrian Kurd have grown more influential after the extensive cooperation with the U.S for defeating ISIL (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2018), the Turkish security dilemma issue has increased. This has been evident with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan statements about Turkish military being massed at the Syrian border, being prepared to move into northeast Syria once the Americans leave (DeYoung 2019). Moreover, Turkey has always successfully opposed any role of the Kurdish dominated PYD forces in any peace talks concerning Syria's future (Wilgenburg 2018).

In Russia, Turkey and Iran trilateral cooperation, Kurdish issue remains certainly a "red line" for Turkey. Turkey is not willing to allow any further concessions or increased influence for Syrian Kurds, as this would further increase the security dilemma issue and threaten the preservation of Turkish territorial integrity (Phillips 2018). Hence, containment of Syrian Kurds influence in Syria is Ankara's main priority, as it can reduce internal and external security dilemma issue for the country.

2.1.2. Iran's Kurdish issue is not about the Syrian Kurds

For Iran, the situation of Syrian Kurds is also important, as the country has 13% Kurdish minority (GRAY 2015). On one hand, Iran also does not want to see the increasing autonomy of Kurds in Syria nor in Iraq, as it could give rise to Iranian Kurdish demands and therefore

threaten the territorial integrity of Iran (Wilgenburg 2018). Moreover, Iran is the main supporter of al-Assad government, who's opponents in the Syrian War are the Syrian Kurds (Fisk 2015).

Nevertheless, Iranian direct support for Turkish anti-Kurdish policies, would result in domestic instability. Instability resulting from Kurdish suppression has previously been avoided, as Iran is only country in the region who has been able to consistently preserve decent relations with its Kurdish population (Tabatabai 2017). In addition, since 2014, Iran has showed support towards Iraqi and Syrian Kurds for countering ISIL emerging influence in the region (Tabatabai 2017). Therefore, although Tehran wishes to see the *status quo* of Syrian Kurdish power, it does not wish to see suppression of Syrian Kurds. For example, when Ankara officials made a statement about joint raids with Iranian forces against Kurdish rebels in Syria, Iranian officials strongly opposed these claims (Wilks 2019).

Iran is rather more threatened about Turkish aims for growing influence from the Syrian Kurds territory, as it will undermine Iran's highly important ally- Bashar al-Assad government (Wilgenburg 2018). As according to Kenneth Waltz "Alliance of a state with other states militarily or economically strengthens the status and security of the allied state," the power of al-Assad government is of utmost importance to Tehran (Waltz 1979).

Therefore, Iran tries to take neutral stance towards the Kurdish issue, for not irritating its domestic Kurdish minority, while simultaneously is opposed to Turkish claims for constraining the minority, as this could undermine Bashar al- Assad power (Phillips 2018).

2.1.3. Russia's conditional cooperation with Syrian Kurds

Russia is similarly concerned about Turkish strong opposition towards the Syrian Kurds. Since the Arab Spring there has been rapprochement between Syrian Kurds and Moscow, as the Kurds proved to be influential and with strong military capabilities on the ground facing ISIL (Borshchevskaya 2016). Good relations with Syrian Kurds enable Russia to achieve balance of power in the region, by decreasing the U.S hegemony. According to John Mearsheimer Balance of Powers theory, great powers strive for survival and security and cannot allow other actors to dominate or undermine the power of others (Meashimer 2001). Therefore, Russian forces have conducted joint operation against ISIL in the eastern city of Deir ez-Zor, where Russian warplanes provided air cover for the Kurdish YPG forces, while the Kurdish forces fought together with Russian forces on the eastern side of the Euphrates river (Tol, Yildiz 2018). This cooperation with the Kurds from both sides resulted in obstacles for both U.S and Russia, who

neither could not dominate nor undermine the other power, establishing balance of power in the region (Mearsheimer 2001).

Moreover, Russia sees Kurds as a beneficial economic partner. For example, 2017, Moscow and Iraqi Kurdistan signed another contract for 20 years, according to which, Russian oil company Rosneft is supposed to buy Kurdish oil. The Russians are also expected to help the Kurds in the operation of the five oil fields with a project to fund the construction of a gas pipeline infrastructure in Iraqi Kurdistan, which will have reached a capacity of 30 billion cubic meters per year by 2020 (Koduvayur, Everett 2019).

Nevertheless, Kurdish aspiration to establish autonomy in the Northern Syria are highly condemned and opposed by Russia, as Russian Chief of Staff, General Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov has accused the Kurdish claims to be cover for the U.S attempts to establish a quasi-state entity on the Syrian Kurds territory (Middle East Monitor 2018).

Simultaneously, Russia is opposed to Turkish aspirations for countering the Syrian Kurds, as this would increase Turkish influence and bargaining power in the region (Phillips 2018). For example, when president Erdogan claimed for increase of Syrian safe zones to 32km (Al-Jazeera 2019), it followed Moscow agitated response. Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated in Sochi Summit, that there is no need for new ground for eliminating Turkish security threats, because, the legal ground has been set with Adana agreement in 1998, referring to contract of 5km safe zone on Turkey-Syria border (Koçak 2019). Russian mistrust towards the U.S and Turkey can be understood through John Mearsheimer realist statement: "States can never be sure about each other's intentions" (Mearsheimer 2001).

Therefore, for Russia the solution for state's security dilemma is strong Syrian leadership, which on one hand would control the Kurdish forces from establishing autonomy and on the other hand constrain Turkish claims for gaining Syrian Kurds territory.

2.1.4. The U.S influence in Syrian Kurds matter

The U.S previous strong presence in the region has prevented extensive confrontation between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds. The U.S has been only power who has supported the Syrian Kurds with the goodwill to claim their legitimate rights and supplied Kurds with extensive number of military weapons and trainings (Rustem 2017). This support has resulted in Syrian Kurds greater political importance and increased abilities to deter Turkish forces operating against the Kurds

(The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2018). Therefore, it could be argued the level of the U.S support for the Syrian Kurds plays detrimental role for Syrian Kurds future.

However, after the U.S withdrawal announcements, president Trump has encouraged Turkey to deepen its safe zones in Syrian Northern parts: “Erdogan said he held a "quite positive" telephone conversation with Trump late on Monday where he reaffirmed "a 20-mile (32-km) security zone along the Syrian border ... will be set up by us” (Aljazeera 2019). Although, president Trump has warned to destruct Turkey economically if Ankara would attack the Syrian Kurds (Aljazeera 2019), it is widely argued, that Syrian Kurds will be in great danger after the U.S withdraws and if the Turkish forces take control of Kurdish territories.

2.1.5. Implications of Kurdish issue on trilateral cooperation after the U.S withdrawal

It is evident that the Kurdish issue will be matter of disagreement between Russia, Iran and Turkey, as the interest of Moscow and Tehran differ from Ankara. According to the Balance of Power theory, states are threatful for the increase of other state’s power, as it comes at the expense of others (Mearsheimer 2001). Therefore, it is understandable, that Iran and Russia do not wish to see the decrease of Syrian Kurds territory by Turkish government, as it translates to the decreased allies’ influence. Moreover, according to realist’s theory: “States can never be sure about each other’s intentions,” (Mearsheimer 2001) because in the case of diverging interests the intentions of the state may change (Jervis 1978). Therefore, Russia and Iran will continue to show mistrust towards Turkish expandatory claims, because additional territory for Turkey means that Russia and Iran have decreased bargaining power in Syrian matters (Phillips 2018).

On the other hand, Turkish security dilemma issue with the Syrian Kurds remains relevant as well, as possible autonomous Kurdish entity would release instability among Turkish Kurdish population and pose direct security threat to Turkey on its border. Therefore, the issue remains important but problematic for both sides.

Previous U.S strong presence in the conflict was beneficial for trilateral cooperation, as the U.S efficiently opposed Turkish anti-Kurdish aims. Now if the U.S is withdrawing, Russia and Iran need to pressure Ankara themselves, which would certainly damage the trilateral cooperation (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2018).

The U.S withdrawal can reach two distinct outcomes for Turkey, Iran and Russia cooperation. First one aims at the U.S success for attracting other NATO allies to the fight for common values in Syria. For example, in December, President Trump stated that the United States should not become “the Policeman of the Middle East,” and it was “time for others to finally fight” (Trump 2018).

After these statements, the U.S started slowly withdrawing from the conflict with the intention to keep around 200 troops in Syria (BBC 2019). According to David Des Roches, associate professor at the Near East South Asia Center for Security Studies, these remaining troops are only deployed for political gesture: “It’s not a large number of forces. It’s too small to be militarily significant. So, it has to be political“ (Aljazeera 2019). Therefore, the intent of these 200 troops is to provide high intelligence support for the U.S EU allies and simultaneously encourage EU countries to deploy greater numbers of forces to the conflict (Klein ja Ryan Browne 2019). As the EU belong to the U.S-led coalition, it could be expected that if Trump manages to attract more EU allies into the region the U.S values for protecting the Kurds would be still followed.

If the U.S influence is preserved through the EU allies, it is more likely that Turkey will act in accordance to unipolar world order, where according to William Wolforth, there is no rivalry, as the power of the hegemon (the U.S) cannot be contested (Wolforth 1999). Therefore, with the joint opposition from EU and the U.S towards Turkish anti-Kurds claims, Turkish foreign policy aims would be constrained. This in turn enables Russia and Iran to continue their partnership with the country, as the security dilemma issues with Ankara would be solved through western forces opposition.

However, there has been little excitement from the EU side to replace the U.S troops in Syrian conflict. For example, British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said that “there is no prospect of British forces replacing the Americans” in Syria. Moreover, the Washington Post journalists wrote in mid-February, that the EU allies have “unanimously stated, that they won’t stay in Syria if the U.S leaves” (DeYoung, Ryan 2019).

Therefore, the U.S and EU support towards the Kurdish minority is likely to remain minimal, giving possibilities for Turkey to act in self-interest manner and confront Syrian Kurds for dissolving their own security threats (Fisk 2015). President Erdogan has already stated, that the

Turkish military is massed at the border and prepared to move into northeast Syria once the Americans leave (DeYoung 2019).

Moreover, the Kurds are likely to lose the U.S aid. For example, the U.S commanders have recommended that Syrian Kurds should keep nearly all of U.S-supplied weapons, which could be useful for protection if the Turkish forces would invade Syrian Kurds territories (Shahbazov 2019). This first shows that the U.S sees Turkey highly threatful for Syrian Kurds and also, the U.S does not intend to directly confront Turkey, but rather lets other international actors and Syrian Kurds to confront the country themselves.

This means that Russia, Iran and Syrian government will be the main sources who could deter Turkish anti-Kurdish claims. Recent Kurdish initiated talks with Damascus and Moscow, are proof of this claim, as the Kurds see these powers only possible opposition forces who could deter possible incursion in northern Syria by the Turkish army (Shahbazov 2019).

Russian president, Vladimir Putin has stated “Neither Russia nor Iran nor the Syrian regime will tolerate Turkish military presence controlling large swathes of territory once the U.S. is gone” (Tol ja Yildiz 2018). Therefore, trilateral cooperation after the U.S withdrawal from Syrian War will certainly become increasingly complicated, due to diverging interests and security dilemma issues (Tol ja Yildiz 2018).

2.2. Radical Islam- is the fight against terrorism collective for Russia, Turkey and Iran?

Arab Spring begun with educated youth peaceful protests in 2011. At first, these protests were not focused on Islamic ideologies (Beaumont 2011). However, when initial protesters were killed, arrested and fled by the Assad regime, radical ideologies became increasingly dominated (Phillips 2018, 189). Soon the radical Islamic entity Islamic State (ISIL), established its Caliphate with the capital of formerly peaceful Syrian city Raqqa (Phillips 2018). By 2014 the caliphate became the most successful jihadi movement ever, by dramatically expanding its territory from Western Iraq to Eastern Syria (Phillips 2018). Due to the extensive growth of influence, multiple states from international community declared ISIL to be the primary security

threat for their countries. (Wright 2017). Therefore, states mobilized major resources to counter the new terrorist threat from rising in the region.

Russia, Iran and Turkey have shown common and continuous interests in degrading the threatful organization. For example, in recent trilateral summit in Astana, all three states released joint statement which: “Reaffirmed their determination to continue cooperation in order to ultimately eliminate DAESH/ISIL...” (Astana 2018). Therefore, fighting ISIL remains priority for all of the three powers.

However, for Russia, Turkey and Iran, radicalism in Syria, beyond ISIL has distinct meaning, as the national interests of each state differ extensively.

2.2.1. Russia stance on radical Islam based on previous experiences in Chechen Republic

Russia, due to its 15% Muslim majority is highly threatened by any Islamic insurgency, as it could pose threats for the current state regime (Fisk 2015). For example, President Putin has made a statement, that extremism in Syria is intolerable and must be eliminated, otherwise Syria will face similar situation to Moscow in Chechenia, where Russia still struggles with Muslim insurgency (Fisk 2015). The Chechen insurgency movements has destabilized Russia domestically, for example, with suicide bombing attacks in Moscow metro and theater hostage crisis (Bhattacharji 2010). Nevertheless, it is argued, that as recently multiple Chechen insurgents have joined the ISIL forces, the terrorism threat in Russia has significantly been reduced (Souleimanov ja Petrylova 2015). As the return of these fighters will probably result in further security issues, the destruction of ISIL forces in Syria is one of the main priorities for Russian security (Phillips 2018).

For ensuring the destruction of ISIL forces, Russia has put extensive efforts to support al-Assad regime, which according to many Russian politicians statements is one and only legitimate actor in the conflict (Wright 2017).

Moreover, supporting al-Assad in the fight against ISIS enables Russia to prevent security dilemma issue, as Western dominated fight against the ISIL are believed to be used as pretext to undermine the Syrian opposition and Moscow’s influence in Syria through it (Souleimanov, Petrylova 2015).

2.2.2. Iranian stance towards radical Islam

For Iran, the stance towards radical Islam is similar to Russia. As the Islamic Republic has declared itself as a defender of Shia values, the country puts an effort to counter radical Sunni influence in Syria, which mainly focuses on countering ISIL (Fisk 2015). For example, Tehran deployed Shia- dominated forces- Hezbollah, to support the al- Assad governance in the fight against ISIL terrorists (Phillips 2018).

Moreover, Iran similarly to Russia, faced security dilemma from U.S-led coalition fighting against the ISIL (Phillips 2018). As mentioned above, al- Assad presidency is key for Iranian preservation of power in the region, therefore, for Iran al- Assad growing influence is the only possibility for finding a solution for radicalized Islamic entities in Syria.

2.2.3. Turkey multiple perspectives on radical Islam

In Turkey radical Islam is extensive problem, as over 2,000 Turkish citizens have joined the ISIL forces (Demirtas 2019). According to Foreign Affairs journalist, flourishing civil society, but decaying political institutions have created a radical environment in Turkey, where educated and socially well-connected people have the highest possibility rate for joining the radical movements (Tezcur, Ciftci 2014). Therefore, to contain terrorist organization near its border, Turkey joined with the U.S-led international coalition for defeating ISIL.

Nevertheless, Turkey's terrorist threat is also viewed through the lens of Kurdish militancy, due to Syrian Kurds increasing power after their successful countering of ISIL forces in Syria (Starr 2013). Therefore, since 2015 when Turkey announced joining war against ISIL, the country also became more assertive towards the Kurdish forces in Syria, by targeting their military personnel and bases (Gazientep 2015). This has given rise to further instability, which according to Crisis Group 2017 analysis has taken at least 2,981 Turkish-Kurdish lives (Mandıracı 2017). Hence, According to Hoshang Waziri, a political analyst based in Erbil: "The Kurds are bigger threat to Turkey than ISIS" (Gazientep 2015). Moreover, Turkish former Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, has stated about the Syrian Kurds: "How can you say that this terrorist organization is better because it's fighting ISIS? They are the same. Terrorists are evil. They all must be eradicated. This is what we want" (MacAskill ja Letsch 2015).

As Syrian current governance has had downgrading cooperation with Turkey and president Bashar al-Assad governance has been dependent and unable to control Syrian Kurds territorial

gains, Turkey is highly opposed for relying on Assad regime to counter any radicalization threat in Syria and in the region (Phillips 2018).

This strong opposition towards the Syrian Kurds and al-Assad government has led Ankara towards accusation for turning a blind eye to foreign jihadists getting into northern Syria, as well as allowing supplies to flow to al-Qaida-linked groups fighting the Kurdish PYD militias (Fisk 2015). For example, according to chief of Russian National Centre for State Defense Control, Lt. Gen. Mikhail Mizintsev: “Up to 2,000 fighters, 120 tons of ammunition and 250 vehicles have been delivered to Islamic State and Al-Nusra militants from Turkish territory” (Tsvetkova ja Kelly 2015). Moreover, Iranian government had also expressed deep concern about extremists going into Syria through Turkey (Fisk 2015). Therefore, even if Turkey sees ISIL as problematic terrorist organization, it has been evident that Syrian Kurds are seen same or even more threatful.

2.2.4. The U.S stance- backing Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIL

The U.S presence in Syria has been mainly focused on defeating ISIL terrorist organization. The U.S main contribution for reducing the threat of ISIL has been through aerial and advisory support for the Kurdish forces in ISIL occupied areas in the eastern bank of Euphrates river (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2018). This support has significantly decreased ISIL power and simultaneously enabled the Syrian Kurds to defend themselves from Turkish expansionist ideas (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2018).

Moreover, the U.S support towards the Kurds has enabled Russia, Iran and Turkey, to fade three states’ divergent perspectives on radical Islam, because Russia and Iran have not had to show significant support towards effective Syrian Kurdish militias in the fight against ISIL, which would irritate Turkey (Fisk 2015). Therefore, the U.S presence in the region has been enabling Russia and Turkey to maneuver with the problem.

2.2.5. The implications of the U.S withdrawal on trilateral cooperation concerning the radical Islam matter

However, as the U.S troops are withdrawing, it is expected that the influence of ISIL could return, because the U.S stopped presence is likely to encourage the terrorist organization, as the Kurdish forces will become less dangerous to terrorists after the U.S aerial support to Syrian Kurds forces is lost (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2018). As the Kurds are let down by the U.S, it can be presumed, that they will start to look for new strategic

support from Russia, Iran and al-Assad government, because all of those countries are threatful of ISIL reemergence. Therefore the future cooperation between the Kurds and above-mentioned players is prospective (Francis 2018). However, this cooperation means divergence between Russia Iran and Turkey cooperation, as countering Kurds near its border is of utmost importance to Turkey.

This divergence has been apparent in Syrian province Idlib, where countering Islamic radicalization has been hindered by Turkish government (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2018). Although, in 2017 Astana summit, three countries agreed to establish 15 to 20 km safe zones for deterring the ISIL terrorism threat around the Idlib Governorate, Turkish officials have repeatedly postponed the oppression of radicalized jihad groups in the region (Manhoff 2018). This is because, Turkey has developed cooperative goals with the most powerful jihadist grouping in Idlib – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)- to face common enemy al -Assad and reduce Syrian Kurdish influence (Wilgenburg 2019). According to the Kurdistan news agency, Kurdistan 24, the radical group's leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani has stated in a recent interview, that the Kurds are enemies of Syrian revolution and that the HTS seeks to liberate areas in the East of the Euphrates, presently controlled by the Syrian Kurds (Wilgenburg, Kurdistan 24 2019).

As Russia and Iran want to counter ISIL power immediately and preserve al-Assad position they have expressed frustration over Turkish behavior. For example, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova has expressed his concerns with Ankara over Idlib: "Turkey must do more to uphold its agreement and clear hard core jihadist fighters from Idlib" (Jones 2019).

Therefore, in the matters concerning radical Islam, Turkey has divergent goals from Russia and Iran and the gap of different interests have enlarged after the U.S withdrawal. According to the realist balance of power theory, states take defensive action, if the cost of being exploited remain high (Jervis 1978). Therefore, due to Turkish divergent interests from the U.S, Russia and Iran, the security dilemma for Ankara is likely to rise, making the trilateral cooperation over radical Islam increasingly difficult. If the interests on the matter continue to diverge Turkey will act in self- defensive manner and continue its cooperation with HTS, which in turn will decrease the common ground between Russia, Turkey and Iran.

2.3. Future political leadership of Syria- Russia, Iran, Turkey views towards Bashar al-Assad government

The future leader of Syrian government is detrimental factor for Syria's peace and highly important aspect for the international actors present in the conflict. As the power of president Bashar al-Assad has recently increased, the main cooperation dilemma between Iran, Turkey and Russia focuses on the views of necessity for the continuation of current Bashar al-Assad regime.

2.3.1. Bashar al- Assad- Iran's vital partner

For Iran, strong Assad regime in the head of Syrian government is highly important. In 2013 Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stated: "The Islamic Republic of Iran aims to strengthen its relations with Syria and will stand by it in facing all challenges... The deep, strategic and historic relations between people of Syria and Iran... will not be shaken by and force in the world"(Independent 2013).

According to Iranian expert Jubin Goodarzi, Iran has decided to stay the regime's most committed ally, as Syrian government is key for preserving Iranian security interests (Goodarzi 2013). First, present regime is key for delivering weapons to Iran supported Hezbollah proxy forces, which enables Iran to secure its geostrategic position in Syria. This in turn enables Iran to confront its main adversaries Israel and Saudi Arabia (Phillips 2018, 152).

Moreover, without the Assad regime, the Iran would face pro-western regime change, which due to multiple enemies is argued to be fatal for the current leadership (Goodarzi 2013).

As Bashar al-Assad presidency is in the center part for resolving Iranian security dilemma issue it can be argued that Iran is willing to increase its support to Assad government indefinitely, as the damage for loosing Syria for opposition forces would be highly extensive.

2.3.2. Russia seeks for continuation of the regime, not Bashar al-Assad

In 2015 Russian President Vladimir Putin stated: “There is no other solution to the Syrian crisis than strengthening the effective government structures and rendering them help in fighting terrorism, but at the same time urging them to engage in positive dialogue with the national opposition and conduct reforms” (Phillips 2018).

Russia begun to support President Al-Assad, due to its own benefits. First, Assad regime has been opposing rebellious resurgence in Syria, which is threatful for Russia’s domestic stability, due to ties between Middle East Islamists and secessionists in its Muslim north Caucasus region (Phillips 2018 pp. 29).

Moreover, Assad’s continuous presidency enables Russia to achieve co-equality with the U.S influence in the region. First, Russian support towards Assad, has enforced rapprochement with its ally Iran. This cooperation has shifted balance of power in favor of Syrian government and effectively weakened the U.S backed opposition forces (Azodi 2018). Furthermore, by backing Assad regime Russia is enabled to secure its military bases in the Mediterranean Sea and gain other geopolitically strategic positions. Russia Former defence minister Sergei Shoigu stated in 2017: “Last week the Commander-in-Chief (President Vladimir Putin) approved the structure and the bases in Tartus (naval base) and in Khmeim (air base)” (Ivanova 2017). Therefore, it is argued that Russia has secured its strongest presence ever in the Mediterranean Sea (Sly 2018) Hence, strong cooperation with the current Assad regime enables Russia to enforce its realist balance of power strategy, by forming strong alliances and effectively deterring the U.S presence in the region.

Nevertheless, Russia tries to remain cooperative relations with multiple powers in the region. Hence it cannot be assumed that the country remains strongest supporter of Assad regime. First, Russian concerns are again in accordance with John Mearsheimer’s views, who states that: “states can never be certain about other states ‘intentions” (Elman, Jensen 2014, 179). Hence, Russia does not like to see Iranian increasing power, which sources from strong alliance with Bashar al- Assad. This can be explained with Kenneth Waltz structural realist theory, which argues that powerful allies will always appear threatful, because states can never be certain about other states intentions (Waltz 2000). Hence, Russia does not want to see Iran becoming too powerful ally, as the country could eventually threaten Russian regime.

Moreover, for preserving its regionally powerful position, Russia is keen to preserve its cooperative relations with Iran's main rivals Israel and Saudi Arabia, who both are opposed to present Syrian government and afraid of Iranian growing influence.

Therefore, Russia needs to preserve cooperative relations with the regime, but preservation of President Assad presidency is not necessary for the country, as it could further hinder Russian multiple alliance strategy. Therefore, the ideal situation for Russia would be leadership change with similar political direction to al-Assad.

2.3.3. Turkey- strong opponent of Bashar al-Assad presidency

Since 2011 Turkey and Syrian president's views have been in stark disparity, despite previous cooperative relations between two governments. The relations worsened deeply after on Syrian government opposition (Syrian National Council) was formed in Istanbul and gained Ankara's blessing (Phillips 2018). After that, Assad government allowed the Kurds to establish Kurdish dominated forces know as Syrian Democratic Force () on Syria – Turkey border (Phillips 2018). Since then, Turkish main goal in Syria became to topple al- Assad government and replace it with Turkish friendly and anti-Kurdish regime.

Nevertheless, once Turkey invaded to Syrian territory in 2016, it was not for toppling Assad, but to rather eliminate security threat on country's border, emerging from Kurdish Democratic union Party and ISIL assaults (Phillips 2018). This change in Turkish foreign policy happened, due to Turkish difficult political situation. On one hand the U.S distanced itself from Turkish anti-Kurdish claims and on the other hand Russia and Iran did not like Ankara's anti-Assad intentions (Phillips 2018). Therefore, to break from international isolation Turkey changed its anti-Assad policy and focused on deterring more threatful Syrian Kurds near its border (Manhoff 2018).

This strategy has increased Turkish cooperation with Russia. For example, in 2017, Ankara and Moscow launched Operation Euphrates Shield, with the aim of clearing ISIS and Kurdish PYD forces near Turkish border (Jacinto 2017). Stronger cooperation with Russia has resulted in Turkey officially stating its main intention to assure control over Syrian Kurdish terroristic forces, who's containment is less strategically important than toppling al- Assad government (Jacinto 2017). Therefore, Turkey has made concessions about al-Assad government, for better relations with Russia, as long as Moscow provides effective support for countering Kurdish threat near its border (Issaev 2018). Nevertheless, today these goals are only achievable with

Russian military support, who are not interested in large-scale Kurdish offensive in Syria, as this would increase Turkish bargain power in Syrian matters extensively (Koçak 2019).

2.3.4. The U.S inability to oppose Bashar al-Assad regime

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict the U.S has expressed its aim for replacing the Assad governance. Former president Barack Obama has announced: “The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way” (President Obama, 2011). Nevertheless, the means and motivation to overthrow Syrian present regime have been insignificant. This has become evident by the U.S unwillingness to intervene or hold promises during the Syrian conflict. For example, after al-Assad chemical attack, the Obama administration claimed the action to be “crossing the red line,” but no consequences followed (Phillips, 2018). Moreover, President Trump’s decision to withdraw its troops from Syria shows the U.S lack of motivation and abilities to topple Bashar al- Assad government.

2.3.5. Impact of U.S withdrawal on Russia, Turkey, Iran trilateral cooperation

As the U.S does not hold a strong position nor motivation for overthrowing the Assad regime, it can be assumed that the U.S will not bring any extensive changes for Russia-Iran-Turkey trilateral cooperation on Bashar al-Assad presidency. Even if the U.S would increase its presence and motivation in Syrian conflict, it would be very difficult to topple the regime, as Iran and Russia are strong supporters of the current president. In addition, Washington’s extensive support for Syrian Kurds makes anti-Assad alliance with Turkey unlikely as well.

Rather, it can be argued that when the U.S withdraws its forces from Syria, Turkey does not have any means, partners or motivation to fight against Syrian government (Yildiz 2018).

Rather, it would be rational for Turkey to reheat its relations with Bashar al-Assad government, on the example of past mutual interests and cooperation (Phillips 2018). For example, before the Arab Spring, Turkey and Syria were strong partners, having several close trades, economic and industrial agreements (Yilmaz 2013). As both governments were threatful about Kurdish independence claims, these Ankara-Damascus contracts hindered the Syrian and Turkish Kurds situation. For example, Kurdish political rights and lands were taken, and many pro-Kurdish parties were shut down (Husein 2017).

As the opposition towards al- Assad government has decreased, especially after the U.S withdrawal, possibilities and motivations for Turkey-Syria rapprochement are increasing. The cooperation would be beneficial for both states, as Syrian government receives beneficial economic traits and decreases its domestic power struggle, while Turkey eliminates its external security threats together with anti-Kurdish Syrian government. Turkey- Syria cooperation in turn increases the cooperation between Turkey, Iran and Russia, due to the convergence of interests and benefits resulting from Bashar al- Assad government.

CONCLUSION

Donald Trump announcement of the U.S withdrawal from the Syrian War in December 2018 was highly detrimental for the Syrian Civil war, because the power balance of the conflict and Middle- East region shifted. Instead of the U.S influence Russia, Iran and Turkey have become three main players determining the outcome of Syrian conflict. This trilateral cooperation remains highly important for finding an outcome in Syrian War, hence author gathered most important foreign policy interests to each state. Based on three most important interests- the Syrian Kurdish dilemma, radical Islam question and President Bashar al- Assad future, the extent of Russia, Iran and Turkey cooperation in Syrian War was determined.

- 1) With the question of Syrian Kurds, it is evident that Iran, Turkey and Russia interests are diverging, hence the trilateral partnership will most likely face difficulties. This is due to Turkish strong opposition towards Syrian Kurds. For example, the U.S withdrawal has resulted in Syrian Kurds weakened positions, which has given possibilities for turkey to become increasingly assertive towards this minority. On the other side, Russia and Iran have taken advantage from the U.S withdrawal and established good relations with the Kurds in Iraq and see advantage in future cooperation with Syrian Kurds for establishing favorable balance of power position in the region. Moreover, Syrian Kurds are vital partners for Russia and Iran to confront ISIL terrorist organization and constrain Turkish claims over Syrian territory.

As Turkish main goal is to decrease Syrian Kurds positions, while Iran and Russia see the Kurds as a possibility to increase their influence, the trilateral cooperation in the Syrian Kurdish matter is expected to be problematic and diverging. In the other words, the Kurdish problem is the most challenging issue in between the actors, and the US withdrawal, resulting in Turkish intensified claims, will make the cooperation more complicated.

- 2) Analysis of trilateral cooperation through radical Islam variable also indicated divergence of Iran, Russia and Turkey interests after the U.S withdrawal. Although, ISIL is perceived as immediate security threat for each state, Tehran and Moscow see other radical Islamic entities distinctively threatening than from Ankara's perspective.

As already mentioned, for Turkey, the Syrian Kurdish forces are seen highly threatening. Therefore, Ankara has used controversial measures for reducing this security concern. For example, Turkey has been accused in cooperating with terrorist organizations such as

Al- Nursa militants and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) forces, both highly condemned by Russia and Iran.

As the U.S exit is expected to result in power gap likely facilitating the reemergence of ISIL and another terrorist organization, further strains are likely to emerge between Ankara, Moscow and Tehran. On one hand, Russia and Iran seek to counter its most immediate terrorist threat ISIL through cooperating with the Syrian Kurdish forces, but on the other hand, these forces are highly condemned by Turkey, resulting in Ankara acting in self- interest manner and cooperating with other terrorist forces. Therefore, trilateral cooperation again appears to be problematic and constrained.

- 3) When analyzing Russia, Turkey, Iran cooperation through Bashar al- Assad presidency variable, it appears that states' cooperation is likely to increase after the U.S withdrawal. This is because, the U.S opposition towards al-Assad presidency has decreased over time and now with the U.S forces withdrawal, the U.S influence over the matter is further declining. With the U.S withdrawal, Turkey in turn loses additional opponent in the fight against al- Assad presidency and although, Turkey is currently highly opposed to al-Assad, the U.S withdrawal has increased the rationality for Turkey to side with Russia and Iran alliance with current Syrian regime.

In addition to strengthening its alliance with Syria, Russia and Iran, Turkey could be able to enforce control over Syrian Kurds through Bashar al-Assad regime, with whom the Kurdish minority has been jointly suppressed prior to the Arab Spring. Moreover, by making concessions in al-Assad presidency matter, Turkey could increase its demands in other issues, such as Syrian Kurds. Therefore, in the case of al-Assad presidency after the U.S withdrawal, Russia, Turkey, Iran interests are likely to converge.

In addition, converging interests in Bashar al- Assad presidency could further facilitate trilateral cooperation between three countries. First, Syria-Turkey cooperation for confronting Kurds would be acceptable for Russia and Iran, because Turkish claims over Syrian Kurds territory will most likely fade if Syrian central government establishes control over Syrian Kurdish territory. In addition, the necessity for Turkey to cooperate with terrorist organizations (HTS and Al-Nursa) for confronting Syrian Kurds, would decrease if Ankara has legitimate Bashar al- Assad forces backing its anti-Kurdish claims. Therefore, above-mentioned constrains in trilateral cooperation could be solved with Turkey starting to cooperate with the Syrian government.

Nevertheless, it is not possible to evaluate the general impact of the U.S withdrawal on Russia, Turkey, Iran trilateral cooperation based on these three above- mentioned variables. This is because the implications of other external factors, such as each states relation with Israel, Iranian Nuclear deal, Russian military bases in Syria, Turkey's relation with West and East and many more, must be considered for entirely understanding the level of cooperation between Moscow, Ankara and Iran. The demand for analyzing these additional variables show the complexity of the topic, giving further potential and necessity for analyzing the extent of trilateral cooperation in more detail in future.

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