

# Structural Characteristics and Political Correlates of Public Opinion on Turkish Engagement with the Syrian Civil War

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## Abstract

This study conducts a comprehensive quantitative examination of Turkish public opinion about its foreign and security policies, focusing on policy towards the Syrian civil war. By linking scholarly literature to policy, the paper analyzes structural characteristics and political correlates of foreign policy attitudes and perceptions of using military force in the Turkish public. The empirical analysis reveals that (i) increased soft power activism reduces support for policies favoring military interventions; (ii) the type of militarism affects support for a policy that resorts to cross-border military operations; (iii) foreign policy attitudes towards the war vary depending on the internationalization type; (iv) immigration policies shape support for foreign policy concerning the country-of-origin of immigrants affected by the conflict; (v) public support for foreign policy actions is contingent upon the level of knowledge on political matters; and (vi) on the alliance preferences and the self-image. Utilizing a binary logistic regression model, the study employs 2019 Turkish Foreign Policy Trends data, encompassing a wide range of foreign policy indicators on structural characteristics and political correlates of foreign policy attitudes in Turkey and a comprehensive set of indicators on the Syrian conflict. The findings contribute to the theoretical and practical understanding of the problem under examination, with implications for international relations and foreign policy policymaking.

**Keywords:** public opinion, foreign policy, military interventionism, Turkey, Syria

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## Introduction

Turkey's foreign policy toward Syria has been studied in the literature extensively (Tür and Hinnebusch 2013; Demirtas-Bagdonas 2014; Zahra 2017; Şenbaş 2018; Rüma and Çelikpala 2019; Kösebalaban 2020). Yet, a detailed examination of Turkish public opinion remains scarce due to the lack of systematic data availability. Syria has historically been a vital postern

of Turkish foreign policy, with its historical connections to Anatolia and existence of similar populations on both sides of the border. The incorporation of Hatay (Alexandretta) into Turkey in 1939 has remained one of the sore points between the two countries. Turkey's Syria policy during the Cold War was associated with efforts to contain the spread of socialism to the Middle East. In addition, the presence of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the separatist terror organization Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), first in the Syria-controlled Beqaa Valley and later in Damascus during the 1980s and 1990s, brought the two countries to the brink of war in October 1998 (Suer 2013). The expulsion of Öcalan under intense Turkish pressure opened the way for reconciliation, which the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government that came to power in 2002 later amplified. The High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was established in 2009 to foster bilateral dialogue, and a visa-free regime was adopted just before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war (Tür 2013).

The war has brought about variations in Turkish foreign policy. A "regime change" focus between March 2011 and January 2018 was followed by a relatively "cooperative" phase along the lines of a cosmopolitanism–communitarianism divide (Parlar-Dal 2015). It then transformed the instrumental soft-power values to realpolitik codes after 2015 (Canan-Sokullu 2020). As Altunışık (2013: 177) argues, "such a drastic evolution of relations between two countries in such a short period is uncommon and thus provides an interesting puzzle."

With its hard and soft security challenges and immediate day-to-day impact on public opinion, the war in Syria has not been a distant and non-figurative issue for Turkey. Despite the abundance of studies on the Syrian conflict and its transformative effect on Turkish foreign policy, investigation into the opinions of the Turkish public on the war has remained negligent. This article addresses a critical gap in the literature by asking: What drives Turkish public support for the government's foreign policy toward Syria? Drawing on six interconnected dimensions—soft power activism, militarism, internationalism, foreign policy approval, alliance preferences and the self-image, and political knowledge—we examine the domestic correlates of foreign policy attitudes in a politically charged conflict in an adjacent region. This has been especially noteworthy since foreign policy zigzagging has confused the Turkish public immensely with alternatives and rapid changes in security priorities. Besides hard security challenges on its border with a war zone, the Syrian conflict has produced a new source of anxiety to Turkish society; i.e., the arrival of around 3.6 million Syrian nationals and an additional 330,000 other asylum-seekers by 2020, making Turkey one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in the world (UNHCR 2020).

Over 98% of Syrian refugees live in Turkey among the public, with only about 56,000 in refugee camps.<sup>1</sup> Variations in Turkish public perceptions regarding the war and its consequences have a clear and direct connection to societal challenges, as the conflict

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1 For more information, please visit the official website of the Presidency of Migration Management at <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>.

is geographically nearby. With the massive number of people fleeing the conflict, it has become part of the everyday experiences of Turkish citizens. As such, understanding changes in Turkish public perceptions towards the Syrian conflict and Turkey's involvement allows us to test various hypotheses from different fields of study. Since the completion of the analysis presented in this article, significant political developments have occurred in Syria, culminating in the collapse of the Assad regime and seizure of power by opposition forces led by *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* from Idlib region in early December 2025. Although a thorough analysis of these recent events is beyond the scope of this article, the insights presented here offer crucial frameworks for anticipating and understanding Turkish public responses to the emerging reality. Turkey's diplomatic posture and involvement during this transformative period further underline the relevance of examining domestic public opinion regarding its foreign policy toward Syria.

This study offers a two-fold contribution to the literature on public opinion and foreign policy analysis, focusing on Turkey. First, it aims to contribute to public opinion and foreign policy literature by examining Turkish foreign policy toward the Syrian civil war. The literature on Turkish public opinion on foreign policy has been qualitatively focused since Sezer (1972) first published her seminal book. Quantitative studies, however, either concentrate on specific themes such as European integration (Çarkoğlu and Kentmen 2011; Yılmaz 2011; Arıkan 2012), immigration and refugees (Getmansky, Sınmazdemir and Zeitsoff 2018), transatlantic relations (Canan-Sokullu 2012; Kennedy and Dickinson 2013; Şenyuva and Aydın 2021), or diplomacy (Çarkoğlu and Kirişçi 2004; Erdoğan 2013). There has been an evident lack of quantitative analysis of Turkish public opinion on foreign policy, with a specific reference to the use of military force (Sarigil 2015; Tokdemir et al. 2020). The scarcity of survey research and data on public perceptions of military activities abroad has been an essential challenge for such an empirical study. While the Transatlantic Trends Survey (TTS) conducted by the German Marshall Fund offered an in-depth collection of data on foreign policy attitudes in Turkey between 2003 and 2014, and the Public Perception on Turkish Foreign Policy Survey (TFP Trends) series since 2013 has continued data collection, these have not yet been studied analytically.

Second, building upon the literature on foreign policy, this study intends to draw up specific arguments to study Turkish public opinion on foreign policy and the war in Syria. Following the line of argument by Margolis and Mauser (1989), public attitudes toward foreign policy are taken as a dependent variable driven by structural and political factors. It tests the structural characteristics and political correlates of foreign policy attitudes and perceptions of military force, focusing on Turkey's involvement in Syria. It offers a thorough empirical analysis of public opinion on Turkish foreign policy, arguing that (i) soft power activism decreases support for military measures; (ii) typology of militarism with either hawkish or dovish postures determines the support for cross-border military operations to fight terrorism and to deploy military bases in foreign countries; (iii) foreign policy attitudes regarding the war depend on the type of internationalization, either being accommodationist or militant internationalist; (iv) approval of the host government's performance regarding immigration policies determines

popular support for the government's foreign policy toward the country-of-origin of immigrants; (v) support for foreign policy actions depends on the level of knowledge on political matters; and (vi) on alliance preferences and the self-image of the public.

To test these arguments, this study develops a binary logistic regression analysis of public support for Turkey's foreign policy in Syria with data from 2019 collected by the TFP Trends research (Aydın et al. 2019). The dataset holds an extensive set of foreign policy indicators that tap into the structural characteristics and political correlates of foreign policy attitudes and a detailed list of indicators on the war in Syria. Accordingly, the paper is structured as follows: Section one develops the hypotheses drawn from the literature on public opinion and foreign policy to create a multivariate model. Section two discusses the research design. Section three presents the empirical findings of the binary logistic regression analysis. The concluding section presents policy-relevant observations. It aims to contribute to understanding broad patterns in Turkish public opinion on foreign policy and the use of the armed forces.

## Theoretical Background

The literature on the linkage between public opinion and foreign policy revolves around two schools of thought. While the traditional realist school, which rests on the Almond-Lipmann consensus (Almond 1950; Converse 1970; Lippmann 1922, 1925), adopts a pessimistic view on the studying of public opinion, the liberal revisionist school (Caspary 1970; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Mueller 1970, 1973, 1994; Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998; Shapiro and Page 1988; Popkin 1991) offers a relatively sanguine avenue of the study of public opinion on foreign policy.

As Canan-Sokullu (2014: 2) argued, the public has increasingly become “more expressive of which policies they prefer and favor, and which ones they reject.” Klarevas (2002) identifies various schools of thought explaining why the American public supports military force, emphasizing that public opinion is the “essential domino” of military operations. His analysis holds significant academic and policy relevance. Drawing parallels with the Turkish case, understanding the determinants of public support for military intervention is crucial for formulating effective foreign policy strategies in the context of global and transnational issues. Kesgin and Kaarbo (2010) examine Turkey's 2003 decision to deny the United States (US) the use of its territory for the Iraq invasion, emphasizing the role of parliament, leadership, intraparty politics, and public opinion in shaping foreign policy. In line with the revisionist approach that public opinion is “attentive” (Krosnick 1988) to subtle nuances in foreign policy options and that it is “prudent and purposive” when it comes to using military force (Jentleson and Britton 1998), this paper presents to what extent and under what circumstances Turkish public opinion supported government approach toward Syria, based on hypothetical scenarios on cooperation formation, types, alliance preferences, perceived foreign policy challenges, as well as political correlates of foreign policy attitudes, namely partisanship, political ideology, and political knowledge.

## Structural Characteristics of Foreign Policy Attitudes

The concept of soft power (Nye 1990) has gained wide currency in foreign policy literature and achieved modest fame in public opinion studies, with specific reference to immigration, culture, or mass communication foci (Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Inoguchi 2005; Entman 2008; Datta 2009; Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012). However, there has been little acknowledgment of this concept in public opinion and foreign policy literature, particularly regarding the use of military force. Nye (1990) defines “soft power” as the ability of a country to get what it wants from other countries through acceptance and attraction, not coercion. We formulate the concept of “soft power activism” in this paper as the foreign policy preferences of the public, concentrating more on soft power measures ranging from the use of various forms of diplomacy - including public, economic, or coercive - toward the country at war, rather than involving hard power instruments in the conflict zone. To contribute to the refinement of the concept of soft power activism in Turkey (Oğuzlu 2007) and its empirical observation through public attitudes toward soft power alternatives in foreign policy, we propose the “soft power activism” hypothesis that,

provided there is soft power activism towards Syria, public support for Turkey’s foreign policy with military measures toward Syria decreases (Hypothesis 1).

Klugman (1985: 582) argues in his paper on foreign policy behavior that “the two positions, hawk and dove, represent differently distorted solutions to the conflict between two tendencies.” Russett (1991: 516) adds to this dichotomy, defining hawks as those who “emphasize competitive elements, the need to keep up one’s military strength to deter war [and] are ready to use that strength periodically to defend their sphere of interest and to reduce the adversary’s.” Whereas doves support cooperation to avoid war and the risks of provoking the adversary, preferring negotiations and mutual agreement to military action, and speaking of connectedness, the need to find common ground and a community of interests transcends national borders (Russett 1991: 516). Borrowing from Klarevas (2002), we expect doves and hawks to develop diverging attitudes on various foreign policy issues ranging from diplomacy, alliances, trade, cultural exchanges, and immigration to the use of force. Building on the dove-hawk dichotomy, this paper hypothesizes that,

the typology of militarism with either hawkish or dovish postures determines the variation in support for cross-border military operations to fight terrorism and/or to deploy overseas military bases (Hypothesis 2).

Studies on attitudes towards foreign policy address how the use of military force or the peaceful and pacifist conduct of foreign policy are perceived at the public level. Military intervention in another country can take “latent” or “patent” forms, depending on the belligerence pattern and how the action is manifestly undertaken (Canan-Sokullu 2014). The latent types of military activity include military presence, i.e., “mere appearance on the scene” (Blechman and Kaplan 1978: 103), visits, and surveillance. The patent types of military activity require more specific and operational forms of using the armed forces rather than

mere military presence, i.e., using firepower, establishing a blockade, or placing ground forces on foreign soil or occupied territory. It is associated with the involvement of higher levels of physical force, such as the placement of ground forces.

Attitudes towards foreign policy go beyond the use of force. As foreign policy activity encompasses engagement with other states in different contexts (economic, social, political), public attitudes may vary in the direction and magnitude of these relations. Several studies on foreign policy attitudes have offered different typologies of internationalism. Wittkopf (1981) describes two dimensions of internationalism, namely “cooperative internationalism” and “militant internationalism.” Schneider (1983: 43) offers a three-fold categorization as liberal internationalists, conservative internationalists, and non-internationalists, and argues that non-internationalists have a limited understanding of the relevance of events that are complex and remote from their daily lives. They do not support involvement if there is no apparent interest at stake. Foreign policy liberals support cooperative internationalism yet disagree with militant internationalism. In contrast, foreign policy conservatives favor military interventionism and reject cooperative moves in foreign policy, such as diplomacy or humanitarian solutions to international conflicts.

Wittkopf’s (1990) typology of internationalism, however, yields four distinct attitude clusters or foreign policy belief systems: 1) internationalists, supporting active involvement in international affairs; 2) isolationists, opposing both types of international involvement; 3) accommodationists, embracing the tenets of cooperative internationalism but rejecting implicit militant internationalism; and 4) hardliners, manifesting just the opposite preferences. Building upon these typologies, we offer an “internationalist hypothesis” to explain Turkish public opinion on the conflictual and conciliatory strategies vis-à-vis the characteristics of the war in Syria and argue that,

foreign policy attitudes regarding the war in Syria depend on the type of internationalism (Hypothesis 3).

The Turkish foreign policy has seen dramatic changes in the last two decades. Public attitudes toward such shifts concern themselves with preferences driven through ethnocentrism, proximity with the Muslim/Middle Eastern neighborhood, or alignment with great power roles. “Ethnocentrism” represents a predisposition toward contemplating Turkey as a regional power or a leading country. “Regional power” status comprises serving as a security actor or rule provider (Neset et al., 2021). Due to the contextual shift in its foreign policy agenda, Turkey has also been oscillating between its traditional transatlantic alliance, particularly with the “pro-US” attitude (Şenyuva and Aydın 2021), and a novel Russophile “pro-Russia” self-alignment (Aydın, 2025). Turkey’s bilateral relations with the US have been challenged in line with this political re-configuration, particularly during the war in Syria (Canan-Sokullu 2020). Foreign policy preferences at the public level respond to these shifts along the following lines: Turkey’s threat perceptions and/or regional interests are substantially different from those of its Western allies; Turkey should practice a greater “autonomy” and “self-reliance” in



international affairs; and Turkey as a regional power needs to pursue an interventionist foreign policy (Kennedy and Dickinson 2013). Incorporating this brief overview with public opinion, we hypothesize that,

attitudes towards foreign policy depend on the change in alliance preferences and the self-image of a country's power status (Hypothesis 4).

Lastly, many studies on public attitudes to the war in Syria have focused on refugees and forced migration (Facchini et al. 2008; Salehyan 2019). Receiving a large number of refugees often creates negative sentiments among the host population toward the out-group (Ghosn, Braithwaite, and Chu 2018; Canan-Sokullu 2019). While the influx of refugees challenges the host country socially, politically, and economically, it is argued that there is no direct correlation between attitudes toward refugees and the approval of government policies toward them (Verbon and Meijdam 2008; Segovia and Defever 2010). Supporters of the government tend to support its approach toward immigrants in the short run, even if there is no structured policy. In the long run, however, public attitudes might take a more informed position, and support for the government's policies not only on the refugees but also on the causes of refugee flow may decline. Drawing on these observations, we examine whether

foreign policy preferences are affected by attitudes toward the government's refugee policies (Hypothesis 5).

## Political Correlates of Foreign Policy Attitudes

Scholarly evidence on the linkages between the variations, conditions, circumstances, and repercussions of public opinion and foreign policy interactions is abundant (Risse-Kappen 1991; Holsti 1992, 2004; Niedermayer and Sinnot 1995). While the main questions revolve around the accurate measurement of public opinion (Mueller 1973; Zaller 1992; Eichenberg 2005), rationality (Shapiro and Page 1988; Holsti 2004), determinants, and comparison (Isernia et al. 2002; Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Inoguchi 2005; Eichenberg and Stoll 2017;), the scholarship has gone beyond the Almond-Lippmann consensus that dominated the public opinion-foreign policy nexus, enabling research to approach public opinion as an 'object of study' that is relevant and important.

Regarding information asymmetry between policymakers and the public, the people's ability (or inability) to collect, process, and analyze necessary information regarding foreign policy is considered a significant issue (Holsti 2004). However, Sniderman et al. (1991) present evidence that individuals may overcome this deficiency using informational shortcuts such as cues from trusted opinion leaders and the media. Destler (2001) takes the argumentation one step further and claims that the public can remain informed, attentive, and active on issues related to foreign policy. To check the validity of these arguments, we introduce the 'level of knowledge' hypothesis, testing whether

support for foreign policy actions depends on the level of knowledge on political matters (Hypothesis 6).

There is also strong evidence that ideological orientations, education level, gender, and generational variations drive public attitudes toward a strong military presence abroad. The literature on American public opinion has already indicated that conservatives are more likely to favor increased presence abroad, while liberals are more peaceful interventionists and less supportive of increasing military spending (Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge 1994; Schultz 2001). Considering the importance of political orientation, we test the validity of political orientation and the partisanship assumption in the Turkish case, looking into whether support for foreign policy decisions stems from an individual's self-positioning regarding ideology and partisanship (Kennedy and Dickenson 2013).

## Data and Methods

The data for this study comes from the Public Perception on Turkish Foreign Policy Survey (TFP Trends 2019), conducted between 27 May and 20 June 2019 across Turkey.<sup>2</sup> The dependent variable in this analysis is “public support for Turkey's foreign policy in Syria.” We operationalize it using the TFP Trends question: “How successful do you think Turkish foreign policy towards Syria?” This 5-point ordinal categorical variable, modeled as a true Likert scale, increasing in positivity from “definitely successful,” “successful,” “neither/nor,” “unsuccessful” to “definitely unsuccessful,” is recorded into a binary variable “successful” (1) and “not successful” (0).<sup>3</sup>

The TFP Trends 2019 survey incorporates independent variables that tap (i) structural characteristics and (ii) political correlates of foreign policy preferences (see Table I for operationalization). The first group of structural variables is “soft power activism.” It is composed of dummies that ask about foreign policy preferences, concentrating more on the use of soft power measures, ranging from the use of various forms of diplomacy (public diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and coercive diplomacy). The second group includes the “typology of militarism”, consisting of hawkish vs. dovish postures, tapping into support for Turkey's cross-border operations to fight terrorism and create military bases in foreign countries. The third group of structural variables is “type of internationalism”, ranging from “non-militant

2 Replication data for this article is available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OBUUPS>. The fieldwork for the TFP Trends 2019 was conducted by the Akademetre Research and Strategic Planning on behalf of the Center for Turkish Studies, Kadir Has University, İstanbul, Turkey. Data were collected with a random sampling method from 1000 individuals over 18 at the NUTS 2 level. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in 26 cities. The data is weighted for gender/age. The Scientific Research Projects Fund of the Kadir Has University sponsored the research, which the University's Scientific Research Committee oversaw. For methodological details and survey results, see [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334260972\\_Public\\_Perceptions\\_on\\_Turkish\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_-\\_2019](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334260972_Public_Perceptions_on_Turkish_Foreign_Policy_-_2019). Neither the original collectors of the data nor the sponsor of the study bears any responsibility for the analysis or interpretations presented here.

3 The “definitely successful” value had remarkably low observations. Leaving those distinct would be a false precision, and thus, collapsing the “definitely successful”, “successful” and “neither/nor” categories into the successful category would improve the stability of the results. First, to avoid the subjective scaling, the skewness was tested. Secondly, Factor Analysis was run on Likert items for this question to enhance the validity of recoding decision and to determine which Likert items should be combined for analysis.



internationalism” (pragmatic, diplomatic, and humanitarian) to “militant internationalism” with its unilateral or multilateral forms of military intervention.

The fourth group measures the “shift of axis” argument, which comprises a list of indicators that tap into alliance preferences regarding power status, military collaboration, and leaning toward the Middle East. In more detail, “ethnocentrism” includes dummies for preferences on whether Turkey is a “regional power” or a “leading country” in the region. An interaction variable (“Islamist Middle Easterners”) is created with an indication of Islamist conservative political and ideological preference and preference to position Turkey as a Muslim and Middle Eastern country. “Pro-US” and “pro-Russia” indices are composed of measures that collect opinions concerning the U.S. and the Russian Federation as a “friend,” “strategic ally,” and “country that Turkey should cooperate with” (Table 1). “Shift of axis” also contains preferences about whether Turkish interest lies together with the US or the Russian Federation, or if they are in competition with those of Turkey’s allies, namely agreement or disagreement about countering terrorism, the future of Syria, the Kurdish issue, and relations with the Democratic Union Party (PYD).<sup>4</sup> Our analysis also includes a dummy variable on support for Syrian refugees in Turkey since refugees have become an indispensable structural aspect of the war.

To test the impact of political correlates of foreign policy attitudes, we built an index of the “level of knowledge that is constructed with values” “low” (1), “medium” (2), and “high” (3). We included seven issues debated in the context of the Syrian civil war (namely, the S-400 missile deal, the F-35 program, Manbij, Idlib, Patriot missiles, the PYD/YPG, and the Free Syrian Army), which have been discussed as individual items in the TFP Trends 2019. We also included “political ideology” and “party preference” among the other political correlates of foreign policy attitudes. Lastly, we included dummies for “age,” “gender,” and “education” as control variables (See Table I). The level of education is considered an essential indicator of attitudes toward involvement in world affairs, as more educated people are found to be more likely to support internationalist policies (Witkopf 1994: 37). Gender differences have sparked considerable interest in recent years in the literature (Conover and Sapiro 1993; Tessler and Warriner 1997; Eichenberg 2016), with men and women differing significantly on international conflicts and wars. Finally, the generational difference thesis on foreign policy beliefs argues that the experiences that different generations accumulate significantly impact beliefs (Holsti and Rosenau 1990). Descriptive statistics for all the variables used in the analysis are presented in Table 1.

4 *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party) is the main Kurdish group in Syria and with the support of the US, controls parts of the Syrian territory east of the Euphrates River through its military wing, the YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* - People’s Protection Units), both of which are affiliated with the PKK, thus considered as terror organizations by Turkey.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of Variables

	Mean	SD	Obs.
Dependent Variable: Support for Turkish foreign policy in Syria	,3827	,48645	1000
Structural Variables			
<i>Support for Turkish foreign policy (general)</i>	,4336	,49593	1000
<i>Soft power activism</i>			
Strengthening political relations with other countries	,62	,486	1000
Increasing economic and foreign aid	,64	,932	1000
Diplomatic and economic sanctions	,88	1,366	1000
Conflict mediation	1,15	1,810	1000
Strengthening friendship with other countries	1,70	2,368	1000
Public diplomacy	1,21	2,866	1000
Enhanced pro-activism at IOs	1,39	3,259	1000
Conflict resolution activism	1,07	3,257	1000
Developing an integrated foreign policy	1,27	3,331	1000
Use or threat of military force	1,22	2,661	1000
<i>Typology of use of force</i>			
Doves	,2500	,43323	
Hawks	,4250	,49459	1000
<i>Type of internationalism</i>			
Non-militant: Pragmatic	,1150	,31918	1000
Non-militant: Diplomatic	,1880	,39091	1000
Non-militant: Humanitarian	,1330	,33974	1000
Militant: Unilateral military	,0670	,25015	1000
Militant: Multilateral military	,0600	,23761	1000
<i>Support for Syrian refugees</i>	1,1971	,59647	751
<i>Shift of axis</i>			
Attitudes towards allies: pro-U.S.	2,1140	,49925	1000
Attitudes towards allies: pro-Russia	,8120	,90081	1000
Ethnocentrism: Turkey regional power	,4810	,49989	1000
Ethnocentrism: Turkey, a leading country	,2190	,41378	1000
Islamist-Middle Eastern orientation	,2240	,41713	1000
EU orientation	,1760	,38101	1000
Cooperation with Russia on the future of Syria	,4310	,49546	1000
Cooperation with Russia on counterterrorism	,4030	,49075	1000
Competition with Russia on the future of Syria	,4030	,49075	1000
Competition with Russia in counterterrorism	,3870	,48731	1000
Military cooperation with the U.S.	,3670	,48223	1000
Cooperation with the U.S. on counterterrorism	,2490	,43265	1000
Competition with the U.S. on counterterrorism	,6046	,48918	999
Competition with the U.S. on Kurdish policies of the U.S. in the Middle East	,3123	,46367	999
Competition with the U.S. on U.S. support for PYD	,3734	,48394	999

Political Correlates				
<i>Political knowledge</i>	Low	,5300	,49935	1000
	Medium	,1290	,33537	1000
<i>Party preference</i>	AKP	,3690	,48278	1000
	CHP	,2130	,40963	1000
	MHP	,0880	,28344	1000
	HDP	,1010	,30148	1000
	IYI	,0890	,28489	1000
	Political Islamist	,2700	,44418	1000
<i>Political ideology</i>	Conservative	,1040	,30541	1000
	Nationalist (right wing)	,2350	,42421	1000
	Nationalist (left-wing) <i>ulusalcı</i>	,0240	,15313	1000
	Republican	,1850	,38849	1000
	Social Democrat	,0950	,29336	1000
Control variables				
Age	Young	,4540	,49813	1000
	Middle-aged	,3570	,47935	1000
Education	Elementary school	,2360	,42483	1000
	Middle school	,1680	,37405	1000
	High school	,3900	,48799	1000
Gender	Female	1,50	,500	1000

The analysis was run to gauge the changing impacts of general foreign policy preferences and attitudes toward using force (Model II) and the effects of political ideology and party identification of Turkish voters (Model I) on support for Turkey's foreign policy in Syria. Model III included variables to test the impact of "shift of axis" preferences on Turkish foreign policy in Syria. A complete model (Model IV) including all three models incorporated a holistic approach to how opinion on the Syrian War is formed.

#### *Model 1. Political ideology and party identification*

Logit (support for policy towards Syria) = f (party preferences (AKP, CHP, MHP, HDP, IYI), political ideology (political Islamist, conservative, nationalist (right-wing), nationalist (left-wing), republican, social democrat), knowledge (low, medium), age (young, middle-age), gender, education (elementary, middle school, high school))

#### *Model 2. Foreign policy preferences*

Logit (support for policy towards Syria) = f (support for TFP in general, soft power activism (strengthening political relations with other countries, increasing economic and foreign aids, diplomatic and economic sanctions, conflict mediation, strengthening friendship with other countries, public diplomacy, enhanced pro-activism at I.O.s, developing an integrated foreign policy, use or threat of military force, conflict resolution activism), militarism typology (hawks, doves), 'non-militant internationalism' (pragmatic, diplomatic and humanitarian), 'militant internationalism' (unilateral, multilateral), attitudes towards Syrian refugees, knowledge (low, medium), party preferences (AKP, CHP, MHP, HDP, IYI))

*Model 3. Shift of axis*

Logit (support for policy towards Syria) = f (ethnocentrism, Islamist-Middle Eastern orientation, EU orientation, attitudes towards allies (pro-U.S., pro-Russia), perceptions about competition or cooperation with the allies (terrorism, future of Syria, Kurds, PYD), knowledge (low, medium), party preferences (AKP, CHP, MHP, HDP, İYİ)

*Model 4 (FULL MODEL - structural and political correlates)*

Logit (support for policy towards Syria) = f (Model I, Model II, Model III)

This study tested each model through binary logistic regression to detect the relationship between the binary dependent variable and a set of independent categorical variables (Norušis 2005).<sup>5</sup> A positive coefficient of independent and control variables was considered as support for Turkish foreign policy toward Syria, and a negative coefficient would indicate opposition.

## Empirical Analysis

Before proceeding with the logistic regression analysis, we checked for collinearity to test how much the independent variables were linearly related to each other. Menard (2001) suggests that a tolerance value less than 0.1 indicates a serious collinearity problem, while Myers (1990) suggests that a variance inflation factor (VIF) greater than 10 is a cause for concern. In line with what Menard (2001) and Myers (1990) suggested, VIF and tolerance values in all models in the analysis were within these boundaries (See Table 2). Standard errors provided the parameter estimates (log-odds) we requested for 95% confidence intervals (CI) for the odds ratios.<sup>6</sup>

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5 For a binary/categorical dependent variable  $Y$  and an explanatory variable  $X$ , the regression model is  $\pi(x) = \frac{\exp(\alpha + \beta x)}{1 + \exp(\alpha + \beta x)}$  (Leech, Barrett and Morgan 2005: 109).

6 Confidence intervals and Wald values are not reported in Table 2 to make the interpretation of the table easier. However, these data and results are available on request to the authors.

**Table 2.** Binary Logistic Regression of Support for Turkey's Foreign Policy in Syria (2019)

	<i>Model I</i>	<i>Model II</i>	<i>Model III</i>	<i>Model IV</i>
	Coefficient (Standard error)			
<i>Constant</i>	-1.520*** (.215)	-2.739*** (.414)	-2.440*** (.393)	-4.864*** (.570)
Structural Variables				
Support for Turkish foreign policy (general)	<i>na</i>	2.635*** (.338)	2.987*** (.321)	2.570*** (.352)
Soft power activism				
Strengthening political relations with other countries	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Increasing economic and foreign aid	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Diplomatic and economic sanctions	<i>na</i>	-.217* (.119)	<i>na</i>	-.199* (.119)
Conflict mediation	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Strengthening friendship with other countries	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Public diplomacy	<i>na</i>	-.112* (.059)	<i>na</i>	-.126** (.061)
Enhanced pro-activism at IOs	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Conflict resolution activism	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Developing an integrated foreign policy	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Use or threat of military force	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Typology of use of force				
Doves	<i>na</i>	-1.126*** (.406)	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Hawks	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	.983*** (.349)
Type of internationalism				
<i>(Non-militant)</i>				
Pragmatic	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Diplomatic	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	.893** (.441)
Humanitarian	<i>na</i>	.820* (.472)	<i>na</i>	1.072** (.492)
<i>(Militant)</i>				
Unilateral military	<i>na</i>	1.190** (.569)	<i>na</i>	1.520*** (.629)
Multilateral military	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
Support for Syrian refugees	<i>na</i>	1.116*** (.258)	<i>na</i>	1.208*** (.263)
Shift of axis				
Attitudes towards allies: pro-U.S.	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

	Attitudes towards allies: pro-Russia	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	.635*** (.198)
	Ethnocentrism: Turkey regional power	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	.632* (.366)	.819* (.465)
	Ethnocentrism: Turkey, leading country	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	1.063** (.406)	1.144** (.524)
	Islamist-Middle Eastern orientation	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	EU orientation	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	Cooperation with Russia on the future of Syria	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	Cooperation with Russia on counterterrorism	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	Competition with Russia on the future of Syria	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	-.500* (.289)	<i>a</i>
	Competition with Russia in counterterrorism	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	Military cooperation with the U.S.	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	Cooperation with the U.S. on counterterrorism	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	Competition with the U.S. on counterterrorism	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	Competition with the U.S. on Kurdish policies of the U.S. in the M.E.	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	-1.111*** (.395)
	Competition with the U.S. on U.S. support for PYD	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
Political Correlates					
Political knowledge	Low	-.504** (.199)	<i>a</i>	-.566** (.285)	<i>a</i>
	Medium	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>	.854** (.415)
Party preference	AKP	1.227*** (.238)	<i>a</i>	.839*** (.319)	<i>a</i>
	CHP	<i>a</i>	-.793* (.433)	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	MHP	.947** (.370)	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	HDP	-.768* (.409)	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
	IYI	<i>a</i>	-1.613** (.840)	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>
Political ideology	Political Islamist	1.366*** (.239)	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	1.067** (.395)
	Conservative	1.396*** (.319)	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	1.104** (.523)
	Nationalist (right-wing)	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
	Nationalist (left-wing) <i>ulusalcı</i>	.997* (.572)	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
	Republican	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>
	Social Democrat	<i>a</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>



Control variables				
Age (ref=old)	Young	.342 * (.200)	na	na
	Middle-aged	a	na	na
Education (ref=university)	Elementary school	a	na	na
	Middle school	a	na	na
	High school	a	na	na
Gender (ref=male)	Female	a	a	a
Hosmer and Lemeshow $\chi^2$ (df); sig.		5.469(8); p=.706	9.038(8); p=.339	3.602(8); p=.891
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>		.327	.616	.607
Model $\chi^2$		161.785***	231.280***	278.160***

\*p<.01, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\* p<.001;

na The variable is not included in the Model as detailed in the Data and Methods section.

a The backward stepwise WALD method was applied to Models II, III, and IV, with variables incrementally added for each respective model. Model II underwent twenty iterations, Model III underwent eighteen iterations, and Model IV underwent forty-four iterations. Variables denoted by (a), which were included in Step 1 for each model, were ultimately excluded in the final iterations due to their significance levels exceeding the 0.01 threshold (p > 0.01). Detailed results for Models II, III, and IV are available upon request from the authors.

Table 2 presents the logit estimates of the models. Model, I analyzed the individual's support for Turkey's policy towards the Syrian civil war, depending on their political orientation, party preferences, and level of foreign policy knowledge. To start with, analyzing how bare political correlates affected attitudes towards Turkey's Syria policy, a binary logistic regression was performed to test the role of party preferences and political ideology of the respondent, controlling for demographic variables, namely age, gender, and education. It showed that those who vote for AKP (conservative populist ruling party) or MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* - Nationalist Action Party; ultra-nationalist far-right party; former opposition - the partners in *Cumhur İttifakı* (People's Alliance)- ( $B = 1.227$  and  $.947$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ ) and those who politically identify themselves as 'political Islamist,' 'conservative', or 'left-wing nationalists' -which are called *ulusalcı* and adhere to orthodox Kemalism ( $B = 1.366$ ,  $1.396$ , and  $.997$ , respectively)- were supportive of the government's foreign policy toward Syria, while those with a low level of political knowledge ( $B = -.504$ ,  $p < .01$ ) or HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* - People's Democratic Party; pro-Kurdish opposition party) voters ( $B = -.768$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were significantly not supportive. The model I was statistically significant,  $\chi^2 = 161.785$ ,  $p < .0005$ . It explained 33.0% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variance in support for Turkish foreign policy in Syria depending on political orientation and party preferences.

Model II analyzed the impact of general foreign policy attitudes toward the war in Syria and indicated that supporting Turkish foreign policy overall is positively and strongly linked with the support for Turkish policy toward the war in Syria ( $B = 2.635$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Regarding soft-power activism, favoring the use of diplomatic and economic sanctions and public diplomacy as foreign policy tools made individuals more likely to oppose the Turkish

foreign policy regarding the war in Syria. Furthermore, as expected, doves were highly unsupportive of it ( $B = -1.126$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Regarding internationalist postures, humanitarian non-militant interventionism or unilateral military interventionism contributed positively to supportive attitudes toward Turkish foreign policy on the Syrian war. Moreover, support for accommodating the Syrian refugees positively impacted attitudes about the policy toward Syria, be it the prospect of success in increasing the return of refugees or avoiding the further arrival of more refugees as the underlying reason. Yet, this could not be tested with the available data. Finally, the supporters of the two parties in *Millet İttifakı* (Nation's Alliance), namely the CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* - Republican People's Party; social democrat opposition party) and İYİ Party (*İyi Parti* - The Good Party; centrist, nationalist, and secularist opposition party), categorically rejected Turkish foreign policy toward the war in Syria, as Model II showed.

The role of perceptions about the “shift of axis,” whether the country is leaning toward the East and abandoning its existential Western ties, was tested in Model III on the war in Syria. Model III explored the potential influences on perceptions about Turkey's “shift of axis” in its foreign policy, particularly about the war in Syria. A binary logistic regression was utilized to examine associations among factors such as ethnocentrism, attitudes toward Russia and the US, perceptions of geopolitical dynamics, and foreign policy orientations while controlling for party preferences and political knowledge. The analysis revealed significant associations suggesting that the belief in Turkey being a regional power ( $B = .603$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and a leading country ( $B = 1.063$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were correlated with support for the AKP government's foreign policy toward Syria.

The results indicated a correlation between competition with Russia over Syria's future and opposition to Turkish foreign policy in the region ( $B = -.500$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In other words, the likelihood of competition with Russia in Syria is linked with the opposition of foreign policy towards Syria, signaling a tendency on avoiding such confrontation. Additionally, it was observed that AKP voters were more likely to support Turkey's policies in Syria ( $B = .839$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting a link between party preference and attitudes toward the shift in Turkey's foreign policy. Contrarily, a negative correlation was found between political knowledge and support for government actions in Syria ( $B = -.566$ ,  $p < .05$ ), like the findings of Model I. This suggests that those with less political knowledge were more likely to oppose the government's actions.

However, it is important to interpret these findings as correlational rather than causal. The significant associations between certain beliefs and support for foreign policy decisions do not necessarily imply direct causation. For instance, perceptions of Turkey as a regional power or leading country might stem from approval of its policy in Syria rather than causing such support. Similarly, the correlation between overall support for Turkish foreign policy and specific policies in Syria should be understood as a link rather than one causing the other. Model III explained 60% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variance in attitudes towards Turkish policies in Syria based on the ‘shift of axis’ narrative, as presented in Table 2. It is, therefore, crucial to approach these relationships as indicative of correlated trends rather than definitive causal relationships

Finally, Model IV measured the support for foreign policy in Syria, putting all independent variables in a single composite model. Table 2 shows that Turkish public support for the government's policy toward the war in Syria was positively and strongly associated with the general support for Turkish foreign policy. Regarding the role of attitudes toward the shift of axis in foreign policy, an increase in ethnocentric preferences and pro-Russian attitudes was associated with an increased likelihood of support for policy actions in Syria. Attitudes toward transatlantic allies or alliances remained insignificant in explaining preferences. Furthermore, competition with the US regarding the Kurdish issue in the war had a significantly negative impact on the support ( $B = -1.111$   $p < .001$ ). Variations in attitudes to the types of interventionism made no changes in the direction of opinion to support or oppose the war.

On the other hand, hawkishness strongly boosted support for Turkish foreign policy toward Syria. Contrary to the negative impact of soft power activism in foreign policy in general, non-militant internationalists (those who favored diplomatic, humanitarian, and even unilateral military interventions) strongly support Turkey's Syria policies. When the war and Turkish foreign policy in Syria were modeled compositely, individuals with more political knowledge offered more support. Being a political Islamist ( $B = 1.067$ ,  $p < .05$ ) or a conservative ( $B = 1.104$ ,  $p < .05$ ) positively and significantly increased support for the government's policies in Syria. Favoring Syrian refugees contributed positively to support for Turkish foreign policy regarding Syria. All in all, Model IV was statistically significant,  $\chi^2 = 247.060$ ,  $p < .005$ . It explained 65.0% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variance in support for Turkish foreign policy in Syria.

Table 2 tested four different models from the literature on public opinion and foreign policy. Model I tested the bare impacts of the demographic characteristics of individuals on the structural characteristics of foreign policy attitudes. Model II brought together indicators to test if individuals have selective attention to and prudent understanding of the nuances of foreign policy issues, such as soft power instruments and variations in foreign interventionism. The latter would have a different attitude on Turkish policy toward Syria, where various foreign policy strategies have been adopted under other circumstances. Model III was composed of indicators to test if preferences regarding 'Turkey should or should not shift its foreign policy axis toward a new direction' would make individuals more attentive and supportive of Turkey's Syria policy. Finally, Model IV assumed that attitudinal, contextual, and demographic indicators play a holistic role at the time of opinion-forming, thus containing all the variables included in the previous models. However, looking at the four models' constant values, the more a model contains information about Turkish foreign policy, the more negative an individual becomes toward Turkish policy in Syria.

To summarize, Hypothesis 1, that public support for Turkey's foreign policy with military measures toward Syria decreases if soft power activism is preferred toward Syria, has been partially confirmed. Our analysis confirmed Hypothesis 2. Hawks supported the war in and Turkish foreign policy toward Syria, whereas doves opposed it. A further test for Hypothesis 3 needs to be carried out by future research, as mixed foreign policy attitudes were observed regarding the type of internationalization of accommodationists, including pragmatic, diplomatic, humanitarian interventionism, or militant internationalism, involving unilateral or

multilateral forms of military intervention. Another significant implication of our study is that attitudes toward foreign policy in Syria depended on the change in alliance preferences and self-image regarding Turkey's power status. As far as ethnocentric and recently emerging pro-Russian preferences were concerned, there has also been a shift of axis in public preferences, as argued in Hypothesis 4. Finally, our analysis also confirmed Hypothesis 5. It found that foreign policy preferences toward Syria, one of the sources of the influx of refugees into the country, have become positively driven by support for Syrian refugees in Turkey.

This analysis offers insights into Turkish public attitudes toward foreign policy, with findings that hold significant implications for forecasting future trends. The strong positive association between general support for Turkish foreign policy and specific support for policies in Syria underscores the importance of cultivating overall trust in the government's agenda. Ethnocentrism and support for a shift in foreign policy orientation toward non-Western alliances are pivotal factors, suggesting that domestic attitudes about identity and geopolitics strongly influence foreign policy preferences.

The negative impact of concerns over US competition regarding the Kurdish issue highlights the sensitivity of Turkish public opinion to perceived threats to national sovereignty and security, particularly in the context of longstanding regional disputes. Meanwhile, hawkish attitudes continue to bolster support for aggressive policy actions, reflecting a population segment that prioritizes strength and assertiveness in foreign engagements.

Political Islamism and conservatism emerge as significant predictors of support, reaffirming the centrality of ideological alignment in shaping foreign policy attitudes. This finding also underscores Turkey's unique geopolitical and cultural position as a moderate Islamic democracy with regional leadership aspirations, particularly in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

Several policy implications can be derived from the empirical analysis in this paper. First, the significantly negative support for the war in Syria, independent of preceding structural or political variables, highlights the importance of evaluating alternative approaches to foreign policy in the region. Second, the strong correlation between general support for Turkish foreign policy and support for Turkey's policy towards Syria suggests that coherent and consistent foreign policy messaging could be crucial in garnering public backing.

The findings indicate that when soft power activism is prioritized, support for the war and Turkish foreign policy toward the war decreases. This suggests that policymakers should consider utilizing soft power instruments or strategies in foreign policy to deter individuals from supporting military intervention in Syria. The ethnocentric and pro-Russian postures that support Turkish foreign policy in Syria imply that changes in foreign policy at the state level may reflect similar shifts in public preferences.

Moreover, party preferences significantly impact individual decisions supporting the overall policy toward Syria. The strong alignment between supporters of the governing People's

Alliance and the government's foreign policy suggests that party lines significantly influence public opinion. In contrast, opposition party supporters are vehemently opposed, indicating intense polarization in support for a foreign policy based on party political preferences.

While these outcomes confirm the Turkish public's highly politicized and polarized nature, the overall average support for Turkey's foreign policy in Syria remains lower than expected. This underscores the necessity of exploring other determinants for foreign policy support in Turkey beyond party lines.

Interestingly, political knowledge enhances support for government policies in Syria, but this raises critical questions about the sources and quality of that knowledge. Media followership, the potential for information bias, and the spread of disinformation are untested variables in this study. Yet, they likely play a crucial role in shaping informed or misinformed public attitudes. Future research should explore these dimensions to understand how the Turkish public's foreign policy opinions are formed and manipulated.

In conclusion, the study points to a complex interplay of ideological, geopolitical, and informational factors that shape public support for Turkish foreign policy. As Turkey continues to navigate its regional and global roles, understanding these dynamics will be essential for policymakers and scholars alike.

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