

Why the U.S. chose YPG to fight ISIS

A crucial test for (neo)-realist notions

Abstract

The U.S. decision to partner with the Kurdish militia YPG to combat ISIS in Syria has caused its longstanding ally Turkey to align with Russia and Iran, and risks doing permanent damage to the NATO-alliance, ostensibly to the detriment of U.S. national interests. Taken at face value, this seems to contradict standard notions in neo-realist theory about state behavior. Given this seeming paradox, and the aberrant nature of the U.S.-YPG partnership, I apply the crucial-case method of the *least likely* version to test neo-realist theory in highly unfavorable circumstances. The theoretical framework is condensed to three units of analysis: *security*, *alliance formation* and *national interest*. The analysis is systemic, discarding effects of individual leaders in the decision-making process. I conclude that security and national interests do not explain the U.S. decision to partner with YPG convincingly, and have weak explanatory force. However, alliance formation captures the complexities unleashed by the U.S.-YPG partnership rather well. The findings do not fully refute/confirm the theory, but show that the crucial-case method is useful for pushing theoretical concepts to their limit. Lastly, I conjecture that applying non-systemic concepts to the case, allowing for notions such as tactical errors and miscalculations, might prove insightful.

Key words: YPG, security, national interest, alliance formation, crucial-case
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1 Introduction

When the U.S. launched airstrikes against the so-called Islamic state (ISIS) in the besieged Kurdish town of Kobane in September 2014, few could have imagined that it would signal the start of one of the strangest military partnerships in recent memory. During the time of the airstrikes, Kobane was controlled by Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG), a group with ideological, if not operational, links to Partîya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK). Since then YPG has become a key partner in what U.S. general Jonathan Braga deemed “one of the most successful indigenous-force partnership relationships in US military history¹”. It simultaneously caused a significant crack in U.S.-Turkey relations, threatening to cause irreversible damage, since Turkey views YPG as a terrorist organization.

The U.S. decision to partner with a group which Turkey perceives to be a grave threat to their national security², right on the Turkish border, flies in the face of conventional wisdom in international relations theory about *realpolitik*, national interest and alliance policies. Although the partnership with YPG has proven to be very effective in combating ISIS, it has stunned Turkey and left many political analysts confused. It is indeed hard to think of a recent analogue where the security concerns of an allied state have been so blatantly discarded, making this a uniquely interesting case. The U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria has pushed Turkey towards Russia and Iran, and risks damaging the NATO-alliance. It is one of the major current geopolitical events, with potential to upset the entire power balance in the region.

¹ Jonathan Braga, interview with Richard Engel, *NBC News*, NBC, 30 March 2018, television broadcast.

² ‘Western allies act as shields for terrorist groups, Erdogan say’, *Daily Sabah*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/11/28/western-allies-act-as-shields-for-terrorist-groups-erdogan-says>, (accessed 4 October 2019).

1.1 Research problem

Scientific research problems often start with a genuine puzzle, e.g. a manifest contradiction between a well-established theoretical framework and recalcitrant data. To fully grasp the magnitude of the U.S. decision to side with YPG, and why this constitutes a genuine puzzle, one has to understand the special role Turkey has played within the wider international system since the Second World War.

Turkey became a full NATO-member in 1951, much to the dismay of the Soviet Union, who tried their utmost to make it part of the Soviet sphere of influence. Recent developments in Syria and the rapprochement between president of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin is evidence that Russia still maintains such ambitions³. The strategic importance of Turkey made it a sought-after prize after the Second World War. Turkey was assigned a special role, together with Israel, Egypt and Pakistan, in what the Nixon administration called “the local cops on the beat⁴”, ensuring security and U.S. dominance in arguably the most important geo-strategic region in the world. Turkey later became home to U.S. nuclear missiles and a heavily armed check on Russia’s aspirations in the Middle East and the wider the black sea region. In a recent rapport issued by the *Council of Foreign Affairs*, the authors conclude, “Turkey has long been an important country as a stalwart member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an aspirant to European Union (EU) membership, and an important link between the West and the East⁵”. Today Turkey hosts a U.S.-military base and has the second largest army in NATO. Turkey is what former president Barack Obama called a “critical ally⁶” and has remained so since it joined NATO.

³ J. Mankoff, ‘Russia and Turkey’s Rapprochement’, *Foreign Affairs*, 20 July 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2016-07-20/russia-and-turkeys-rapprochement> (accessed 12.04.2019).

⁴ N. Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors*, New Delhi, South End Press, 2003, p. 165.

⁵ M.K. Albright, S.J. Hadley and S.A. Cook, ‘U.S.-Turkey Relations a New Partnership’, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2012, https://cfrd8-files.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2012/05/TFR69_Turkey.pdf (accessed 10 April 2019).

⁶ M. Rubin, ‘From Ally to Enemy’, *Pundicity*, July/August 2010, <http://www.michaelrubin.org/7639/turkey-ally-enemy> (accessed 14 April 2019).

One cannot escape being struck by the U.S. decision to partner with a small non-state actor such as the YPG. Even within the narrow context of the “war against terror” in Syria, one is left wondering why the U.S. did not partner with Turkey or Turkish-backed forces to eliminate ISIS, as indeed has been suggested by president Erdogan on multiple occasions. It is safe to assume that had the United States chosen to partner with Turkey instead of the YPG in Syria, it would have achieved the immediate aim of defeating ISIS and more importantly, it would have preserved its deeper strategic interests in the region, its alliance with Turkey and its efforts to counter Iranian influence in Syria. It is hard to see how the U.S. is acting to preserve its *national interests* in the region, given what the potential repercussions can be for its “critical” alliance with Turkey, and by extension NATO.

1.1.2 Research question

I want to explore the question whether the U.S. decision to engage militarily in northeastern Syria, partnering with a non-state actor and enemy of a NATO-ally, can be explained within the framework of the neo-realist doctrine in international relations. The guiding question that will allow us to test the theory is the following: *Given that they are NATO-allies, and the crucial role of Turkey as a strategic partner in the region, why has the United States chosen to collaborate with the YPG in Syria, a group perceived by Turkey to be terrorist organization and a grave security threat?*

1.1.3 Organization of thesis

The thesis is divided into six parts. Following introduction and presentation of the research problem, I go on to pose the research question explicitly. Chapter 2 describes the methodology of the thesis. First, I make a distinction between science and non-science and make some general points about the scientific method before describing the crucial-case method in detail. I give an argument for why it makes sense to study the chosen problem using the crucial-case method of the least likely version. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework of the thesis. I attempt to make a case for why we need theories in order to explain political

phenomena. Secondly, a general presentation of realism is made, before I select and define three key concepts of the theory – security, alliance formation and national interest – to be used in the 5th chapter, namely the empirical analysis. In chapter 4, I present an extensive background of the events leading up to the current quagmire in northeastern Syria. In the 6th and final chapter I summarize my findings and draw conclusions. I also identify the limitations of my thesis and point to some directions for future research.

1.1.4 Previous research

Extensive research in various online databases show that academic work on the topic of my thesis is scarce. This is unsurprising given that the chosen case is a highly uncommon event and a developing story. However, application of the crucial case method on theories in international relations has been done extensively. In an article by Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, reviewing the use of case studies in international relations, the authors conclude that case-studies of the least-likely sort, among others, have contributed greatly to the field of IR over the recent decades⁷.

Similarly, on the topic of U.S.-Turkey relations, academic contributions are vast, especially in the form of professional journal articles. Reviewing the whole literature is impossible, but I want to highlight some relevant cases. In *U.S.-Turkish alliance in disarray*, published in *World Affairs*, Michael M. Gunther, investigates the viability of the U.S.-Turkish alliance in the post-Soviet era. Gunther concludes that the U.S.-Turkish alliance was established to contain Soviet expansionism. Although many predicted that the alliance would disintegrate after the elimination of the common Soviet threat, it has remained surprisingly resilient⁸. In a paper termed *Testing the Strength of the Turkish-*

⁷ A. Bennett and C. Elman, 'Case Study Method in the International Relations Subfield', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 40 no. 2, February, 2007, p. 188. <https://minorthesis.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/bennett-elman-case-study-methods-in-ir.pdf> (accessed 15 April 2019).

⁸ M.M. Gunter, 'The U.S.-Turkish Alliance in Disarray', *World Affairs*, Vol. 167, No. 3, winter, 2005, p. 113. Available from: JSTOR journals (accessed 15 April 2019).

American through NATO: Convergence or Divergence within the Alliance? Tarik Oguzlu concludes that NATO-membership is no longer a matter of necessity for Turkey, rather a matter of choice. Turkey is only interested in the NATO alliance as long as it can play an active role within it. A recent paper termed *Kurds: an intersection of unusual alliances*, Verena Gruber shows that neo-realist concepts of alliance formation are still valid in explaining the U.S.-YPG partnership, but concludes that the concept of the state is an outdated notion and has to be revised within realist theory.

On the more specific topic of alliance-termination, Brett Ashley Leeds and Burcu Savun from Rice and Pittsburgh University respectively, have done the main research, examining the historical record from 1815 to 1989. In a joint paper termed *Terminating Alliances: Why Do States Abrogate Agreements?* the authors conclude that states tend to abrogate alliances opportunistically when the value of the alliance wanes, when power-distributions of the international order change or when domestic political institutions change. Ashley Leeds and Savun also conclude that states tend to abrogate alliances when their initial purpose is achieved. The main take from their research is that alliances, rather than being fixed entities, tend to change when crucial conditions, internal or external, of an agreement change.

The topic of my thesis revolves around the Syrian conflict and U.S.-Turkey relations within the context of the anti-ISIS campaign. However, it is not the conflict or the region *per se* that is the main interest of the study. Rather I am interested in the specific conditions of the current U.S.-Turkey conflict in Syria as a laboratory to test the basic tenants of the neo-realist doctrine in international relations. Although the abovementioned research might inform my thesis, my main interest is more abstract and theoretical.

2 Methodology

Few cases – if any at all – in the field of political science lend themselves to theory-testing in a manner that satisfy the goals of Popperian falsification, i.e. making risky prediction in order to corroborate or disprove a theory. What makes a theory scientific, according to Popper, is whether it *conceivably* can be disproven by way of some crucial test. Short of meeting this fundamental criterion, there is no way of conceptually distinguishing science from non-science. Popper’s demarcation problem remains unsolved, although I would argue that it provides us with a standard for scientific inquiry worth pursuing and contemplating. As social scientist, ideally, we want to be able to devise experiments and make specific predictions such that our predictions would render a theory true or false in a clear-cut manner. Alas, science, and social science in particular, is a much messier enterprise. Often when there is a glaring mismatch between our theories and data, rather than throwing the theory out the window, we check for potential errors in our data-gathering procedures or recalibrate or theoretical assumptions so as to make a closer fit between the two. A recent case that demonstrates this point rather succinctly are the results that came out of the *Oscillation Project with Emulsion-Tracking Apparatus* (OPERA) experiment in Italy in 2012. The results of the physics experiment were published in scientific journals and made the earthshattering claim that neutrinos, particles with mass, traveled, faster than the speed of light, thereby refuting one of the most fundamental axioms in all of science, namely Einstein’s special theory of relativity. As the initial shock wore off, physicist went to work and soon detected serious flaws in the measurement of the initial experiment. New experiments were done and Einstein was soon exonerated⁹. In the terminology of social science, the

⁹ G. Brumfiel, 'Neutrinos Not Faster than Light', *Nature*, 19 March 2012, <https://www.nature.com/news/neutrinos-not-faster-than-light-1.10249>, (accessed 10 April 2019).

OPERA experiment, and the subsequent experiments that refuted the initial claim, were clear examples of *crucial cases* in so far as they intended to prove/disprove a theory by a single test.

2.1 The crucial-case method

The choice of method in political science research is closely related to the actual phenomena we want to study. The relationship between method and research problem has to be made explicit and an argument must be given for why a particular method is selected. We want to choose a method that is conducive to the purposes of our research. Given the way I have set up the research problem, focusing on a highly *unlikely* political event, I have chosen a particular version of the crucial-case method first put forward by Harry Eckstein in 1975 known as the *least-likely case*. Eckstein defines a crucial case as one "that *must closely* fit a theory if one is to have confidence in the theory's validity, or, conversely, *must not fit* equally well and rule contrary to that proposed¹⁰". Within the framework of my research problem, it seems *prima facie* that we have case that *must not fit* the theory. Crucial cases of the least-likely version can be viewed as a critical test for a given theory in highly unfavorable circumstances¹¹. The rationale for exposing the theory to difficult tests is inherently Popperian. By making conscious attempts to falsify a theory, we gain more confidence in it every time it survives such a test. Furthermore, every crucial case is a test of the theory in uncharted territory, allowing us to draw a bigger circle around the theory's area of applicability - in case of confirmation. The aim of the least-likely case is therefore essentially to test a theory in circumstances where it is "predicted *not* to achieve a certain outcome and yet does so. It is confirmatory¹²".

¹⁰ H. Eckstein, *Regarding Politics: Essays on Political Theory, Stability, and Change*, Berkeley: University of California Press, c1991-1992, p. 157, Available from: ePublications, (accessed 10 April 2019).

¹¹ P. Esaiasson et al., *Metodpraktikan*, 4th edn. Stockholm: Norstedts Juridik, 2012, p. 150?

¹² J. Gerring, 'Is There a (Viable) Crucial-Case Method?', *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 40, issue. 3 March 2007, p. 232. Available from: Political Science Complete, (accessed 10 April 2019).

2.1.2 The relevance of the crucial-case method

Eckstein observes, rather tautologically, that crucial case studies presuppose that crucial cases exist¹³. However, we do not just want to assert that crucial cases exist, we want provide a explanation for how they exist and why it makes scientific sense to apply the crucial-case method on our particular case. As suggested above, finding crucial cases is rare and difficult, especially in the area of macro-politics. The fact that crucial cases are rare is often a reflection of the *underspecification* our theories, and not necessarily because of lack of such cases. Crucial cases are most amenable to theories that are law-like in their character, theories that generate rigorous predictions, such that any failure of a prediction would imply a refutation of the theory. Such theories are mostly found in the natural sciences, as Gerring points out¹⁴. I want to stress that this conclusion is not a value-judgement or an attempt to organize the natural and social sciences in some hierarchic scheme. It is merely an observation. Furthermore, when dealing with phenomena in the social sciences, we do not have the luxury of conducting laboratory experiments under controlled circumstances. Rather we are limited to observations of social phenomena involving unpredictable factors such as human agency, stochastic events and an excessively complex environment. Given this, it is incumbent upon us to precisely define what kind of role crucial cases can play in the social sciences, if any.

The fact that theories in the social sciences lack the rigor required to falsify them in a single case does not mean that we should abandon them. We are not in the business of proving or disproving theories; that lies mostly within the area of pure mathematics or logic. Science is a cumulative process, were we lose or gain confidence in theories and hypothesis by repeatedly testing them. We should reassess the value of crucial cases when applied to more open-ended theories. Even if we cannot elicit a knock-out argument for or against a specific theory in political science, applying the crucial case method may provide key insight into an empirical area of significance. The empirical results we yield by applying the

¹³ H. Eckstein, *Regarding Politics*, p. 157.

¹⁴ J. Gerring, 'Is There a (Viable) Crucial-Case Method?', p. 246.

crucial case method may be utilized as evidence for or against a theory within the context of a different scientific investigation, adding to our overall theoretical understanding. This alone suggests that there is an argument for conducting crucial-case studies in political science. Furthermore, testing a theory by focusing on a single case may also provide useful theoretical insight. Crucial tests have the potential to help us sharpen our theoretical assumptions and elucidate new causal mechanisms. As Gerring points out, by adopting a “softer version” of the crucial case method, “possibilities abound¹⁵”, as to what we can achieve. In conclusion, the crucial case method has both empirical and theoretical significance.

2.1.3 Material

The material used in this thesis relies on both primary and secondary sources. The selection process for the empirical data has been rather straightforward. Given that the case at hand is a developing story, a good portion of the empirical evidence is based on primary sources from official statements released by government institutions or reputable international newspapers. In order to determine behavior of states I have relied on direct quotes by public officials, heads of states, generals etc. in newspapers or television interviews. Information on developing stories on the ground relies on news reports and journalistic accounts. Other primary sources used in the thesis are original scholarly articles and books, such as for example Stephen Walt's *The Origins of Alliances* or Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Relations*. These are authoritative works in the structural realist tradition. To the extent that secondary sources have been used, it has mainly been textbooks such as *International Relations Theory* by Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi or work in academic journals. Other secondary sources include reviewed articles in well-established think tanks as the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) or the *Institute for the Study of War (ISW)*. A full list of references is provided at the end of the thesis.

¹⁵ J. Gerring, p. 236.

2.1.4 Conclusion

The highly unlikely partnership between the United States and the YPG will be treated as crucial case of the Ecksteinian type. Given the key role Turkey has played in the NATO-alliance and the overwhelming disparity between the YPG and Turkey in terms of what they mean to the United States strategically, the current conflict qualifies as a *least likely* case, in the technical methodological sense. Due to its unambiguous and rather specific ontology, *realist theory* is arguably the most rigorous theory in the field of international relations and thus is conducive to crucial case application, albeit in a softer version as per Gerring's definition.

3 Theory

Not all phenomena in the world are amenable to scientific investigation. For example, if we are interested in giving a theoretical explanation of why states behave the way they do, it is not sufficient to merely observe and reproduce their behavior accurately. By the same token when a physicist wants to explain the world, he or she does not just record what is happening in the external world. State behavior or physical phenomena is merely data and are in and of themselves completely neutral. “Data never speak for themselves¹⁶”. Data only becomes scientifically meaningful when explained within the framework of a theory, i.e. becomes evidence. Scientist don’t just *observe* the world, collect data and draw inductive generalizations. They *inquire* of the world in order to formulate precise theories.

Although what we ultimately want to explain is empirical, the analytical tools we use usually do not correspond to “real” objects in the world. As Waltz notes “A theory, though related to the world about which explanations are wanted, always remains distinct from that world¹⁷”. We construct models and theories by selecting phenomena in the world imbued with sufficient structural unity such that studying these properties abstractly and theoretically makes scientific sense. These abstract models are then employed to predict and explain the data that we have generated. Take the concept of state in the realist tradition. A state is assumed to have both concrete and abstract properties. A state is a concrete thing insofar as it is made up of a geographical territory, institutions and people of flesh and blood living within its officially recognized borders. However, a state is also assumed to be a *unitary actor* acting *rationally* in accordance with its *national interest*. The concepts of unity, rationality and national interest are abstract notions that do not correspond to physical objects in the world. Yet these concepts

¹⁶ K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Waveland Press, 1 edn., February 2010, p. 23.

are assumed potent analytical tools to be employed when attempting to explain state behavior. Kauppi and Viotti write, “for purposes of theory building and analysis, realists view the state as being encapsulated by a metaphorical hard shell or opaque black box¹⁸”. The fact that the state can be broken down into an amalgam of different, and often antagonistic entities such as class gender and race, is discarded in the realist tradition. Instead, in order to make a theoretical leap, the state is assumed to act on the international stage as an “integrated unit¹⁹”.

3.1 Realism

Realism is a theoretical framework in the field of international relations which aims at explaining international affairs and why political entities – primarily states – behave the way they do. Often a distinction is made between classical realism and neo-realism, or structural realism. These distinctions notwithstanding, the different varieties of realism all share the same basic ontological assumptions about the anarchic structure of the international system. In the context of this thesis, when referring to realism, it is to be understood in the neo-realist sense. The *level of analysis* in neo-realism is systemic, which will be the main distinction from classical realism relevant to my thesis. Thus, I will not be looking inside the metaphorical “black box” in the analysis. Whenever a public official is quoted, the words are understood to be a function of the state’s behavior in the systemic sense, and not as a reflection of human agency or will.

Realist theory relies on a specific ontology, which is assumed (not proven) and allows it to make predictions and generalizations of state behavior. Ontology is, generally speaking, the study of “what there is²⁰”, often contrasted with epistemology, which is the study of *how* we acquire knowledge of what there is.

¹⁷ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 6

¹⁸ P. R. Viotti and M. V. Kauppi, *International Relations Theory*, Boston, Longman, 5th edn. 2012, p. 39

¹⁹ Viotti and Kauppi, *International Relations Theory*, p. 39

²⁰ Hofweber, Thomas, ‘Logic and Ontology’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/logic-ontology/>, (accessed 17 April 2019).

This formulation however, is too general to be useful. What we mean by ontology in the area of political science is more specific and pertains to the question are there “...actual structures out there that influence the behavior of actors?”²¹ The fundamental structure that is assumed to exist, and makes up the core-ontology, or the “ordering principle”, of the realist tradition, is the notion that the international system is inherently anarchical. Anarchy is to be understood as the absence of a government at the international level. In the absence of a such a universal arbiter, realist theorists argue that competition and struggle for survival becomes the primary objective of states. States are viewed as the primary actors in the international system, acting rationally to preserve their *security* and to promote their *national interest* through the process of competitive selection. State achieve these goals through the use of *power* which is understood to be “material capabilities relative to other states²²”. Another key concept in neo-realist theory is the *balance of power* among states. The balance of power is the tendencies of states to form alliances in order to protect themselves from external threats. Alliance-formation can take different shapes depending on whether the international system is unipolar or multipolar at any given moment. Anarchy, power and the balance of power, alliance-formation and national interest are all fundamental properties of realist theory. Having explained the level of analysis applied by realist theory, let us now turn to some of the *units of analysis* that will guide or empirical analysis.

3.1.2 Units of analysis

There are a number of theoretical concepts in the realist tradition. For the purposes of our thesis we will employ a couple of these and assume them to be valid. Our aim is to test aspects of the realist theoretical framework, not to engage in an evaluation of the validity of the concepts themselves. Any evaluation of the concepts will be informed by the results of the empirical analysis of our particular case. The concepts we have chosen are *security*, *alliance formation* and *national interest*. These are technical notions that

²¹ Viotti and Kauppi, *International Relations Theory*, p. 3.

are only intelligible when specific theoretical conditions are met. They are constructed to perform a specific task within realist theory and are not to be confused with our everyday usage of these terms.

3.1.3 Security

According to realist theorists, national and international security is the single most prioritized concern of states. “Military and related political issues dominate world politics²³”. The realist tradition define security as “the security of the state” and focus almost exclusively on “the preservation of the state’s territorial integrity and the physical safety of its inhabitants²⁴”. Security is also thought of as the ability to protect oneself against a violent attack or coercion. Given the inherently insecure arena of international politics, security is something that every state has to provide for itself. The focus on security is thought of as a natural consequence - as are all other aspects of realist theory – of the anarchical international system. The necessity to acquire security compel states to act in “predictable ways and eliminating those states who fail to compete effectively²⁵. So fundamental is the notion of security that realist theory “would lose much of its analytic power and potential relevance” if it did not predict the behavior of states, Walt suggests²⁶. Mearsheimer extrapolates the insecurity of the international system to the point of saying that no state can be sure of another state’s intentions. Given this, states will assume that other actors, even allies, have bad intentions, and will seize upon every opportunity to increase their own power at the expense of others²⁷. Security, and how states acquire security in a hostile international environment is *the* central problem of realist theory.

²² Viotti and Kauppi, p. 40

²³ Viotti and Kauppi, p. 41

²⁴ Stephen M. Walt, ‘Realism and Security’, *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, 1 edn., 2017, p. 2, <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-286?print=pdf>, (accessed 20 April 2019).

²⁵ Walt, ‘Realism and Security’, p. 3.

²⁶ Walt, p. 3.

²⁷ Walt, p. 5.

Thus, in our definition security is achieved when a state is able to (i) protect its physical territory and inhabitants, and (ii), when it is capable of protecting itself from a violent attack. I will label these two premises of the argument as the *two security qualifications*, were the first premise is of greater priority than the second one.

3.1.4 Alliance formation

In an international system defined by anarchy, “balance of power and alliances among states are the means realists conceive for sustaining international order²⁸. The notion of alliance formation within realist doctrine poses somewhat of a puzzle. The challenge is to explain why some states decide to form alliances in a world of anarchy, mistrust and zero-sum competition. Perhaps the most authoritative study of alliance formations is Stephen M. Walt’s *The origins of alliances*. Walt defines alliances as “formal or informal arrangements between two or more sovereign states²⁹”. Drawing on the work of Kenneth Waltz, Walt identifies two primary modes of alliance-formation, balancing and bandwagoning. States will either *balance power*, i.e. join together against a common external threat, or they will *bandwagon*, i.e. they will align with the source of danger.

Although Walt acknowledges that balancing and bandwagoning are potent tools when trying to understand alliance formation, he argues that the concepts must be revised and that other factors have to be considered when explaining why states decide to form alliances. While balancing and bandwagoning can only be understood in terms of capabilities and power, Walt suggests that it is more “accurate to say that states tend to ally with or against the foreign power that poses the greatest *threat*³⁰. Shifting focus from power and capabilities to threat, makes the hypothesis into a broader and more general proposition. We would

²⁸ Viotti and Kauppi, *International Relations Theory*, p. 59.

²⁹ S. M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press; New edn., 1990, p. 12.

³⁰ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p. 21.

therefore expect alliances and security-related collaborations between states to be fluid and driven by narrow and short-term self-interest.

For the purpose of this thesis I will restrict the analysis to the concepts *balancing of power* and *threat-perception*. I include these two notions under the umbrella-term alliance formation. Threat-perceptions and balancing of power are distinct but not mutually exclusive concepts. Formal allies will in most cases have common threat-perceptions and consequently balance power against rival states. However, divergent threat-perceptions within an alliance may yield short-term fall outs between friendly states. In extreme cases, divergent threat-perceptions risk up-ending alliances when crucial conditions of the agreement are altered. Given the primacy of security and power, the inherently competitive structure of the international system, recent researchers have, following Walt's definition of threat-perception, suggested that alliances are predicted to be "vulnerable to opportunistic abrogation³¹".

3.1.5 National interest

Despite being termed the *essence of foreign policy*³² by the founder of modern realist theory Hans Morgenthau, theorists have struggled to give a satisfying description of what national interest actually means. A definition provided by realist theorist Donald E. Nuechterlein, which will also be our working definition, explains national interest as "the perceived needs and desires of one sovereign state in relation to other sovereign states comprising the external environment³³". Consequently, a national interest is whatever grants one state leverage or power over another state. National interests are often divided into four parts, (i) defense interests (ii) economic interests, (iii) world

³¹ B.A. Leeds and B. Savun, 'Terminating Alliances: Why Do States Abrogate Agreements?' *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 69, No. 4, November 2007, p. 1118. Available from: JSTOR Journals, (accessed 25 April 2019).

³² H. J. Morgenthau, 'What Is the National Interest of the United States?' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 282, 1952, p. 4. Available from: JSTOR Journals, (accessed 25 April 2019).

³³ D. E. Nuechterlein, 'National Interests and Foreign Policy: A Conceptual Framework for Analysis and Decision-Making', *British Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3, October 1976, p. 247. Available from: JSTOR Journals. (accessed 15 April 2019).

order interests and lastly (iv) ideological interests³⁴. According to Nuechterlein states rank the importance of their interests depending on their intensity. Issues regarding *survival* are unsurprisingly the top priority, followed by *vital* interests such as serious threats to a state's economic and political wellbeing that require military action. Further down the list are *major* issues, which are threats posed against a state's economic, political and ideological wellbeing. Most international conflicts are of this sort and are usually solved diplomatically. Lastly there are peripheral issues which primarily affect private citizens and corporations operating abroad, and not the wellbeing of the state itself. The aim of these definitions is not to predict specific policy decisions for every given event in international relations. Rather, it is to provide us with understanding of why states behave the way they do when specific national interests are at stake. In my analysis I will mostly focus on *world order* interests as the primary analytical tool, defined as a vital interest. Defense interests fall under the broader category of security and will be treated separately. Economic and ideological factors are only of marginal interest, and to the extent that they have any significance for the chosen case, they can be derived from the concept of world order interests.

3.1.6 Conclusion

The units of analysis that we have chosen are not mutually exclusive, rather they reinforce each other and co-occur. They are to be viewed as natural consequences of the fundamental ontology of realist theory, namely the anarchical international world order. Security, alliance formation and national interest constitute key units of analysis in the realist toolkit. As such the expectation is that these concepts will have explanatory force on the case that we have chosen for our thesis. A failure to do so would pose a challenge to the theory, at least within the context of the chosen case. Thus, the use of the three chosen concepts satisfy the principal aim of our research, namely to test fundamental aspects of the realist framework.

³⁴ Nuechterlein, 'National Interest and Foreign Policy, p. 248.

4 Overview of conflict

In March 2011 the so called “Arab spring” reached Syria as a wave of protests against the Assad family erupted in various parts of the country. The protesters were brutally beaten down by force, prompting the opposition to take up arms against government forces. Within a short period of time large factions of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) defected and formed what would later be known as the so called Free Syrian Army (FSA), a loosely affiliated and ideologically mixed anti-Assad military insurgency. By 2012 the country was locked in a full-fledged civil war which has cost countless casualties and is still ongoing to this day. The Obama administration took a clear anti-Assad stance from the very beginning of the conflict and demanded that the Syrian president step down³⁵. As the belligerents got deeper entrenched president Obama sought congressional approval in 2013 to defend “the Syrian people from attacks by the Syrian regime³⁶”. The emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria however soon shifted focus from support of a vetted opposition to direct counterterrorism efforts. When ISIS overran the small Kurdish town of Kobane in northern Syria, president Erdogan declared the town is “about to fall” and called for three measures “one, for a no-fly zone to be created; two, for a secure zone parallel to the region to be declared; and for the moderate opposition in Syria and Iraq to be trained and equipped³⁷”. Instead, the U.S. decided to partner with the Kurdish YPG, and soon after the Defense Department established Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) with the purpose of combating ISIS in Iraq and Syria. CJTF-OIR consists of more than 70 countries and together with its Kurdish partners on the ground it soon began to push ISIS out of Kobane. Impressed by the effectiveness of the YPG in combating ISIS, the U.S. deepened its partnership and steadily increased its number of military advisers in

³⁵ Carla E. Humud, Christopher M. Blanchard and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, ‘Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response’, *Congressional Research Service*, 25 March 2019, p. 1, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf>, (accessed 25 April 2019).

³⁶ Humud, Blanchard and Nikitin, ‘Armed Conflict in Syria’, p. 1. (accessed 25 April 2019).

northeastern Syria to around 2000, setting off alarm bells in Ankara. Turkey has been adamant that the United States puts the YPG on its terrorist-list and has repeatedly warned “you cannot use one terror group to fight another³⁸”. The U.S. does not officially consider the YPG to have links with the PKK, although there is no doubt that they are keenly aware of the connection³⁹. In an attempt to appease Turkey, the U.S. urged the YPG to rebrand itself and include Arab units into their ranks. Thus, in October 2015 the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was established, the bulk of which was made up of YPG units and commanders. The United States has also repeatedly stated that their partnership with YPG/SDF is merely “tactical and transactional⁴⁰”, implying that Turkey need not worry about long-term commitments or political recognition of the Syrian Kurds. Despite these assurances and the establishment of the SDF, Turkey has not waned in its criticism, viewing the matter as a vital national security concern⁴¹. The fact that national security advisor John Bolton recently stated that U.S. troops would remain in Syria “until Iran leaves⁴²” only helped to increase Turkey’s ire.

The growing tension between the United States and Turkey has reached critical levels. This has not gone unnoticed by Russia who has actively used the Syrian conflict to drive a wedge between the two countries, in an attempt to split the NATO-alliance⁴³. In January 2018 Russia opened up the airspace over YPG controlled Afrin – a city in the northwestern part of the country, geographically detached from the areas controlled by

³⁷ H. Saul, ‘Erdogan Warns Kobani is About to Fall to ISIS as Militants Advance on Syria-Turkey Border Town’, *Independent*, 7 October 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-fighters-in-kobani-civilians-flee-as-militants-enter-syria-turkey-border-town-9778770.html>, (accessed 28 April 2019).

³⁸ M. Kursun, ‘You Can’t Use One Terror Group to Fight Another’, *Anadolu Agency*, 8 December 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/you-cant-use-one-terror-group-to-fight-another/1333252>, (accessed 30 April 2019).

³⁹ A. Stein and M. Foley, ‘The YPG-PKK Connection’, *Atlantic Council*, 26 January 2016, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection>, (accessed 30 April 2019).

⁴⁰ A. Sloat, ‘Trump Is Making the Mess in Syria Even Messier’, *Foreign Policy*, 16 January 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/16/trump-is-making-the-mess-in-syria-even-messier/>, (accessed 30 April 2019).

⁴¹ ‘YPG threatening Turkey’s national security: Presidential spokesperson’, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 4 October 2018, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/ypg-threatening-turkeys-national-security-presidential-spokesperson-137544>, (accessed 29 April 2019).

⁴² J. Gould and T. Copp, ‘Bolton: US Troops Staying In Syria Until Iran Leaves’, *Defense News*, 24 September 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/the-americas/2018/09/24/bolton-us-troops-staying-in-syria-until-iran-leaves/>, (accessed 25 April).

U.S.-backed SDF/YPG forces. Soon after the Turkish military, together with jihadi proxies, initiated operation “Olive Branch” to “correct American flaws” and drove the YPG out of Afrin⁴⁴. In January 2017 Russia, together with Iran and Turkey, launched the *Astana Peace Process* in an attempt to end the Syrian conflict while simultaneously sidelining the United States⁴⁵. On December 17th 2017 Turkey stated that it would procure the s-400 surface to air missile system from Russia⁴⁶, citing national security reasons and an unwillingness by the U.S. to provide the American equivalent Patriot missiles. The Pentagon has warned of “grave consequences” should Turkey proceed to acquire the s-400 from the Russians. They also warn that the s-400 missiles are incompatible with NATO’s own systems, and could give Russia access to vital information, potentially jeopardizing the defense networks of the alliance. Despite these warnings president Erdogan and Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu have repeatedly stated that the s-400 purchase is a “done deal⁴⁷”. The war of words culminated on April 3rd 2019 as vice president Mike Pence explicitly stated “Turkey must choose: Does it want to remain a critical partner of the most successful military alliance in the history of the world? Or, does it want to risk the security of that partnership by making reckless decisions that undermine that alliance⁴⁸?” To which Pence’s counterpart, Fuat Oktay responded, “The United States must choose, does it want to remain Turkey's ally or risk our friendship by joining forces with terrorists to undermine its NATO ally's defense against its enemies⁴⁹?”.

⁴³ M. Demir, ‘Russia’s Grand Strategy: How Putin is Using Syria Conflict to Turn Turkey Into Moscow’s Proxy’, *The Conversation*, 16 October 2018, <http://theconversation.com/russias-grand-strategy-how-putin-is-using-syria-conflict-to-turn-turkey-into-moscows-proxy-104699>, (accessed 26 April).

⁴⁴ M. Cavusoglu, ‘The Meaning of Operation Olive Branch’, *Foreign Policy*, 5 April 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/05/the-meaning-of-operation-olive-branch/>, (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁴⁵ ‘Syria: the Astana Peace Process’, *france24* 5 September 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180905-syria-astana-peace-process>, (accessed 29 April 2019).

⁴⁶ Burak E. Bekdil, ‘How Turkey’s Industry Could Suffer From the S-400 Deal With Russia’, *Defense News*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2019/04/11/how-turkeys-industry-could-suffer-from-the-s-400-deal-with-russia/>, (accessed 1 May 2019).

⁴⁷ T. Gumrukcu, ‘Turkey Says S-400 Purchase From Russia a Done Deal, Cannot Be Canceled’, *Reuters*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa/turkey-says-s-400-purchase-from-russia-a-done-deal-cannot-be-canceled-idUSKCNIRG2MF>, (accessed 2 May 2019).

⁴⁸ J. Gehrke, ‘Mike Pence: Turkey Must Choose Between NATO and Russia’, *Washington Examiner*, 3 April 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/mike-pence-turkey-must-choose-between-nato-and-russia>, (accessed 25 3 May 2019).

⁴⁹ ‘US Must Choose Between Turkey and Terrorists, Vice President Oktay Says’, *Daily Sabah*, 3 April 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/defense/2019/04/03/us-must-choose-between-turkey-and-terrorists-vice-president-oktay-says>, (accessed 2 May 2019).

There is no doubt that the decision to partner with YPG/SDF has caused a major rift between the United States and Turkey, and by extension NATO. Despite all efforts to save the alliance, many analysts argue that the split is irreversible and the damage is already done, much to the delight of Russia. Given that Turkey views the establishment of a YPG/SDF controlled area along its border with Syria as a top national security issue, in fact, as a matter of survival, many have been genuinely perplexed by the moves the United States has made. The remainder of the thesis will be an attempt to examine this question.

5 Analysis

I shall now proceed to apply to the chosen units of analysis directly on the case at hand. Each unit will be treated separately and independently for maximum effect and conceptual clarity. Whatever overlap exists between the units will be summarized in the conclusion of the findings. I stress that the aim is to test specific technical notions. When applying these concepts, we are moving within a specific conceptual space and not referring to some general notion or commonsense understanding of security, alliance formation or national interest.

5.1 Security

When former U.S. president Barack Obama announced his strategy for defeating ISIS in September 2014, he made it clear that his top priority is “the security of the American people” and vowed to keep America safe⁵⁰. He further declared that ISIS “poses a threat to the people of Iraq and Syria, and the broader Middle East – including American citizens, personal and facilities. If left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including the United States⁵¹”. One quickly concludes from official U.S. statements that the reasons for getting involved in the Syrian war were due to security and counterterrorism considerations.

A joint study conducted by *the Institute for the Study of War* (ISW) and *The Critical Threats Project* (CTP) argues that ISIS, together with other Salafi groups, pose the greatest threat to the security of American citizens. Furthermore, these groups “pose an existential threat because they accelerate the collapse of world

⁵⁰ D. Hudson, ‘President Obama: We Will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL’, *the White House President Barack Obama*, 10 September 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isil>, (accessed 3 May 2019).

order, provoke domestic and global trends that endanger American values and way of life, and plan direct attacks against the U.S. and its partners⁵²”. ISIS is described as an insurgency (as opposed to a conventional terrorist group) with the aim of overthrowing the governments in the region and staging attacks against the west. The term existential threat implies that it is a vital security concern, a top priority requiring military action.

These conclusions notwithstanding, in order to get a broader picture of the motivations behind the U.S. involvement in Syria we must turn to theoretical considerations. From the point of view of the technical definition of security, the notion that ISIS ever has posed a threat to the United States seems problematic. Given the comparison in capabilities, size, power and geographical remoteness, it indeed seems an unsustainable notion. This is the view of Stephen Walt, the principal architect of security conception in realist theory who calls America’s security concern in Syria a “myth”⁵³. It is safe to assume that ISIS never posed a genuine threat to the physical territory of the United States, in the theoretical sense. To the extent that ISIS could carry out attacks against the United States, the threat was minimal and as described by some analysts, “inflated⁵⁴”. Thus, whatever security challenges ISIS may have posed for the United States, it certainly would not have been anything that could conceivably challenge its physical territory, as per the assumption of the theory. There is also no conceivable attack from ISIS that it could not protect itself from.

We thus have two diametrically opposite views on the question of legitimate U.S. security-concerns in Syria, from authoritative sources. This suggests that either

⁵¹ D. Hudson, ‘We Will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL’.

⁵² Frederick W. Kagan et al, ‘U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and Al-Qaeda, Report One’, *Institute For the Study of War*, January 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/PLANEX%20Report%201%20--%20FINALFINALFINAL.pdf>, (accessed 5 May 2019).

⁵³ Stephen M. Walt, ‘The Great Myth About U.S. Intervention in Syria’, *Foreign Policy*, 24 October 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/24/the-great-myth-about-u-s-intervention-in-syria-iraq-afghanistan-rwanda/>, (accessed 5 May 2019).

⁵⁴ R. Sokolsky and Aaron D. Miller, ‘5 Reasons Why Trump is Right About Getting America Out of Syria’, *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, 3 January 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/01/03/5-reasons-why-trump-is-right-about-getting-america-out-of-syria-pub-78064>, (accessed 4 May 2019).

one viewpoint is wrong, or that the concept of security is inherently vague and unfalsifiable, and by extension, not prone to scientific application. However, if we apply the *two qualifications of security* more rigidly – following Walt – the emergence of ISIS in Syria does not qualify as a security concern as per premise (i). Premise (ii) is by definition vaguer and therefore more open to interpretation. The notion of being able to protect oneself from attacks is separate from, having capability to protect one’s physical territory as a matter of survival. ISIS can undoubtedly launch attacks on American territory and poses a threat to the region and American facilities and personnel in the Middle East. However, this does not pertain to security within context of premise (i), i.e. security of territory and inhabitants as a matter of survival. There is an argument, as suggested in the ISW report, that ISIS poses a threat to the United States in so far as it aims to overtake states in the region, using them as launching pads for attacks. This would to some extent satisfy premise (ii) and thus have some explanatory force on the behavior of the United States and its decision to take military action against ISIS.

5.1.2 Alliance formation

Whether or not the United States entered the Syrian war for pure security reasons, the question still remains why it chose to partner with the YPG/SDF to achieve its aims. The United States and Turkey are not just NATO allies. They are also formally partners in the global coalition of 79 nations fighting ISIS. The fact that the U.S. is using the Incirlik airbase in Turkey to assist YPG/SDF – a mortal enemy to Turkey – in Syria, shows the unusual dynamics and complexities of the conflict.

As partners, with a common security threat on the NATO-border, one would predict, theoretically, that the U.S. and Turkey would join forces against ISIS and balance power against Russia, Iran and Hezbollah in the Syrian war. Instead the alliance dynamics of the conflict has been constantly shifting since the onset of the civil war. Initially there was alignment between the United States and Turkey on the question of toppling Assad. The emergence of ISIS and YPG/SDF, and the direct military involvement of Russia in the war in 2015, shifted the tactical considerations on how this was best achieved. An attempt to analyze the Syrian

conflict, presuming fixed and rigid alliances, becomes an impossible task. Since the outbreak of the war we have seen U.S.-Turkish alignment, Turkish-Russian alignment (in Afrin)⁵⁵, Turkish-Iranian alignment⁵⁶, etc. The one thing that has remained constant on the everchanging stage of the Syrian civil war is the what the different actors involved have perceived as a *threat* and how they have responded to the perceived threat.

The case of ISIS has presented the U.S. and Turkey with an unusual challenge. While both view the terrorist organization as a threat, the gravity they've attached to the threat has been very different up until recently. Turkey has always viewed the YPG/SDF as *the* major security threat and, according to some analysts, has been worryingly relaxed about the presence of ISIS at its border⁵⁷. The frustration of the U.S. with Turkey's weak response to ISIS, while the group were in control of large parts of the northern Syrian border, added to the divergent views on what constituted the greatest threat in Syria. Former special presidential envoy for the *Global Coalition To Counter ISIL*, Brett McGurk, explained rather bluntly in an article after his recent resignation that Turkey "was not a reliable partner"⁵⁸ in the fight against ISIS in Syria. The main reason for this is that the Turkish-backed opposition are too few and consists of jihadi extremists and al-Qaeda linked groups. McGurk, who was the main person behind the U.S. strategy to defeat ISIS, concludes that there was no "alternative to the SDF"⁵⁹. This was put rather succinctly in a paper published in The Atlantic Councils Rafik Hariri Center, by two leading experts on US-Turkish relations:

⁵⁵ Wladimir V. Wilgenburg, 'Syrian Kurds Say Russia Gave Turkey the Green Light to Bomb Efrin After Coalition Strikes in Deir Ezzor', *The Defense Post*, 11 February 2018, <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/02/11/russia-allowed-turkey-strikes-afrin-syria-kurds/>, (accessed 5 May 2019).

⁵⁶ Colin P. Clarke and Ariane M. Tabatabai, 'Is Major Realignment Taking Place in the Middle East?' *Foreign Affairs*, 31 October 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2018-10-31/major-realignment-taking-place-middle-east>, (accessed 5 May 2019).

⁵⁷ Steven A. Cook, 'Turkey Is Lying About Fighting ISIS', *Foreign Policy*, 28 December 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/28/turkey-is-lying-about-fighting-isis/>, (accessed 6 May 2019).

⁵⁸ B. McGurk, 'Trump Said He Beat ISIS. Instead, He's Giving It New Life', *Washington Post*, 18 January 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/trump-said-hed-stay-in-syria-to-beat-isis-instead-hes-giving-it-new-life/2019/01/17/a25a00cc-19cd-11e9-8813-cb9dec761e73_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.101fe0c92da7, (accessed 6 May 2019).

⁵⁹ B. McGurk, 'Trump Said He Beat ISIS'.

“The U.S. needed an ally in Syria that would meet several criteria: it should function as a mobile expeditionary force in or near the areas held by ISIS; it should not espouse an Islamist ideology; and, perhaps most importantly, it would not drag the United States into an armed confrontation with regime forces. The YPG met all these criteria...⁶⁰”.

The authors conclude that the United States formed their entire ISIS strategy in Syria on the YPG. Thus, we have a case of divergent perceptions of what constitutes a threat within a formal alliance, leading to different outcomes in state behavior. This makes the focus on threat-perception, as opposed to capabilities and balancing of power, a potent and unifying analytical tool when explaining the shifting alliance formations and power-dynamics of the Syrian conflict - as suggested by Walt. In a study focusing on alliance formation in the context of the conflict against ISIS, Verena Gruber draws a similar conclusion. However, she contends that threat-perception, although a potent analytical tool, is short term predictor and that the U.S.-YPG/SDF cooperation is best viewed as an ad-hoc partnership. Any notion of “expected duration of the threat is still absent in the idea of shared enemy perceptions⁶¹”. This would imply that the partnership with YPG/SDF is, as suggested on multiple occasions by the United States, a temporary solution to a particular threat, and that, Turkey, although an unreliable partner in the fight against ISIS, is an indispensable ally in the region in the grand scheme of things. On this analysis, the United States would still rely on Turkey to balance power against Russia, Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, once the temporary threat of ISIS is eliminated. There is evidence that suggests this to be part of a long-term U.S. calculus to “counter Iranian expansionism, curb Russia’s influence in the region and prepare the ground for post-Assad leadership⁶²”. Pentagon has recently indicated that the U.S. will stay in Syria for the “long haul⁶³”, for the

⁶⁰ F. Itani and A. Stein, ‘Turkey’s Syria Predicament’, *Atlantic Council Rafik Hariri Center For the Middle East*, May 2016, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Turkey_s_Syria_Predicament.pdf, (accessed 7 May 2019).

⁶¹ V. Gruber, ‘Kurds: An Intersection of Unusual Alliances’, *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, Issue 13, October 2015, p. 12. Available from: Political Science Complete (accessed 5 May 2019).

⁶² Hannah L. Smith, ‘US Will Be In Syria For the Long Haul, Says Rex Tillerson’, *The Times*, 19 January 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/us-will-be-in-syria-for-the-long-haul-says-rex-tillerson-assad-putin-erdogan-turkish-kurdish-damascus-ypg-trump-r6gdgknpX>, (accessed 6 May 2019).

⁶³ ‘U.S. in Syria For the Long Haul, Says Pentagon Official’, 30 April 2019, <https://ahvalnews.com/us-sdf/us-syria-long-haul-says-pentagon-official>, (accessed 8 May).

abovementioned reasons. Any intention of the United States to keep an open-ended presence in Syria, right on the Turkish border, would require a rapprochement with Turkey, or a complete breakdown of the alliance.

The analysis has shown that the concept of *threat-perception* explains the decision by the United States to partner with the YPG/SDF in Syria. Although the partnership has been described as short-term, “tactical and transactional”, the United States has worked tirelessly to salvage its gains in Syria and its partnership with Kurds, while at the same time appeasing its NATO-partner Turkey. Despite the current crisis between the two countries, the U.S. has always referred to Turkey as a key NATO-ally. After the recent territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria the U.S. has taken quick steps to address what it calls Turkey’s “legitimate security concerns⁶⁴”. Recent amicable gestures towards Turkey together with official statements on maintaining an open-ended presence in Syria, suggests an intention to *balance power* against Russia and Iran with Turkish help. Whether or not this is a feasible strategy remains to be seen.

5.1.3 National interest

National interest is a broad term referring to a variety of ways in which sovereign states act to leverage power over other states in an anarchical world. The two previous concepts in the analysis, security and alliance formation, can be viewed as integral parts of the broader national interest term. In defining national interest four central concepts were identified: defense interests, economic interest, world order interests and ideological interests.

Economic interests did not play a significant role *per se* regarding the U.S. decision to back YPG/SDF in Syria. However, in the process of wresting territory back from ISIS, YPG/SDF has come to control 30 % of Syrian territory, critical “oil and gas

⁶⁴ Office of the Spokesperson, ‘Special Representative Ambassador James Jeffrey Travels to Turkey and Switzerland’, *U.S. Department of State*, 29 April 2019, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2019/04/291398.htm>, (accessed 6 May 2019).

installations, including two of Syria's largest and most productive oil fields; essential water resources; and rich agricultural land⁶⁵." Although not part of their initial calculus, by asserting control over these resources, the U.S. has acquired critical economic leverage over the Syrian regime and its main backer Russia. Russia and the Syrian regime desperately seek to re-establish control over these areas to fund the reconstruction of Syria, making the U.S. an influential player in any post-war settlement. The economic leverage the United States has acquired in Syria is therefore tied to its broader *world order* ambitions.

Ensuring "stability" in the middle east – arguably the most important geo-strategic region in the world - has been a U.S. top priority since the strategy was explicitly announced by former president Eisenhower in 1957⁶⁶. In the context of realist doctrine stability is a technical term meaning the "maintenance of an international political and economic order in which the nation-state feels secure⁶⁷". As already mentioned, the United States has expanded its goals in Syria from the immediate defeat of ISIS to more strategic goals such as curbing Russian expansionism and "Iran's malign influence in the region⁶⁸". The attempt to prevent Iran from building a "land bridge" through Iraq and Syria has emerged as the single most important factor in the United States' strategy. This mainly has to do with protecting its critical allies in the region, Israel and Jordan, by preventing Iranian military fortification in Syria. Iran has trained and equipped 100 000 Shia-fighters in Syria and fortified its positions across the country, but also throughout the region in Yemen and Iraq, filling vacuums wherever they have occurred⁶⁹. Removing Iran completely from Syria never was a realistic goal, given the key role Iran has played in maintaining the Syrian regime in power and their historic

⁶⁵ M. Yacoubian, 'U.S. Policy Toward Syria: Part 1', *United States Institute of Peace*, 27 September 2018, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/09/us-policy-toward-syria-part-i>, (accessed 10 May 2019).

⁶⁶ Peter L. Hahn, 'Securing the Middle East: The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, p. 38. Available from: JSTOR Journals.

⁶⁷ Nuechterlein, 'National Interest and Foreign Policy', p. 248.

⁶⁸ J. Garamone, 'DoD Official Explains U.S. Strategy in Syria to House Panel', *U.S. Department of Defense*, 26 September 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1646188/dod-official-explains-us-strategy-in-syria-to-house-panel/>, (accessed 9 May 2019).

⁶⁹ Seth G. Jones, 'War By Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint In the Middle East', *Center For Strategic & International Studies*, 11 March 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-proxy-irans-growing-footprint-middle-east-0>, (accessed 11 May 2019).

ties. However, the Syrian war has presented the United States with an opportunity to gain a strong foothold in one of the few countries in the Middle East where Iran has influence. With control of a large chunk of Syria, most of its natural resources, an armed opposition group consisting of over 50 000 thousand fighters in YPG/SDF, the United States has leverage to create conditions more conducive to its own interests and its allies in the region. One can only surmise from the current facts on the ground and official statements that the United States is going to take advantage of the conditions it has created in Syria to forward their world order interests.

One crucial factor in deciding which interests are vital enough to act upon is “attitudes of allies and friends”, which “few nations can afford to ignore⁷⁰”. It is clear that the concerns of Turkey were ignored when the U.S. decided to give air-support to YPG in the battle of Kobane 2014. Turkey’s concerns were then blatantly ignored as the U.S.-Kurdish cooperation deepened and president Trump authorized the Department of Defense to directly train and equip the YPG/SDF in preparation for the battle of Raqqa⁷¹. The decision to ignore Turkish concerns seem to have been for both practical and ideological reasons. Although ideology is occasionally defined as part of national interests, it does not function as an independent category in neo-realist theory. Ideological considerations inform state behavior in so far as it serves to increase its power. Brett McGurk acknowledged that Turkey and its proxies in Syria were not reliable partners due to ideological reasons, simply because the ideology of the Ankara sponsored jihadi groups would not serve U.S. power. This, along with other factors such as availability, capability etc., made YPG the most practical option for the United States, not its ideology. The ancillary role of ideology becomes starker when considering that YPG has strong ties to the PKK, a group with a Marxist/anti-imperialist/capitalist profile⁷².

⁷⁰ Nuechterlein, ‘National Interest and Foreign Policy’, p. 255.

⁷¹ Michael R. Gordon and E. Schmitt, ‘Trump to Arm Syrian Kurds, Even as Turkey Strongly Objects’, The New York Times, 9 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/us/politics/trump-kurds-syria-army.html>, (accessed 11 May 2019).

⁷² M. Bradley and J. Parkinson, ‘America’s Marxist Allies Against ISIS’, The Wall Street Journal, 24 July 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-marxist-allies-against-isis-1437747949>, (accessed 12 May 2019).

Turkey was initially ignored because the United States did not see it as a reliable partner to tackle the immediate threat of ISIS. As the U.S. got more entrenched in Syria, deepened its partnership with the YPG/SDF and took control of large parts of the country, it now seeks to further its national interests. Recently the U.S. has tried to remedy the situation by balancing between Turkey's security concerns and its goal of persevering stability in northeastern Syria through its partnership with YPG/SDF⁷³. Talks of a security zone in northern Syria has so far produced no tangible results. Meanwhile Turkey has aligned with Russia through its invasion of Afrin, de-escalation zones in Idlib and the s-400 missile deal. It has also pivoted towards Iran through the Astana framework and their common interest of curbing Kurdish aspirations in the region. In pursuit of its perceived interests in countering Russia and Iran, the U.S. decision to partner with a small non-state actor such as YPG/SDF, may push its NATO-ally Turkey, a major player in the region, towards the very actors it seeks to combat. This can only be described as highly counterproductive from a national interest, in particular a world order interest, point of view.

⁷³ M. Eisenstadt and S. Cagaptay, 'A Turkish Safe Zone in Syria: Prospects and Policy Implications', *The Washington Institute For Near East Policy*, 1 March 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-turkish-safe-zone-in-syria-prospects-and-policy-implications>, (accessed 12 May 2019).

6 Summary and conclusion

My research problem was based on a *prima facie* contradiction between the well-established theory of realism and the U.S.-Turkey conflict over YPG. The rise of ISIS in Syria posed a slight security threat to the United States, but an incomparably greater one to Turkey, seeing that the terrorist organization fortified its positions right on its borders. Our theory predicts that the NATO-allies would jointly tackle the immediate threat and balance power regionally. Instead the U.S. partnered with an arch-enemy of Turkey, the YPG/SDF, threw its longstanding partnership with Turkey to an unprecedented low which now risks changing the power-balance of the entire region. This highly unlikely event has been treated as a crucial case to test the basic assumptions of realist theory in international relations. To test the theory, I identified three units of analysis: security, alliance formation and national interest.

From the point of view of security, the analysis showed that ISIS did not pose a security threat to the United States in the theoretically most prioritized sense, i.e. constituting a threat to its territorial survival. An argument could however be given that the U.S. entered the Syrian war to prevent ISIS from attacking its own territory and its allies in the region. In the technical sense this would satisfy premise (ii) of the security qualifications. Although this argument can be made from a theoretical standpoint, it is nonetheless a weaker argument than premise (i). I would therefore conclude that concept of security has *some* explanatory force on the U.S. decision to enter the Syrian war, although in a weak sense.

The primary factor explaining U.S. behavior in the Syrian war has been threat-perception, as defined by Steven Walt. Divergent threat-perceptions between the NATO-allies is the main explanatory factor for why the U.S. chose to partner with the YPG/SDF, instead of Turkey. Judging from the fresh diplomatic record, there also seems to have been genuine mistrust from the U.S. against Turkey in the fight against ISIS. Walt's prediction that threat-perception, instead of power and

capabilities, will inform state behavior and alliance formations, explains the shifting alignments in Syria rather neatly. The primacy of threat-perception as an explanatory factor ties well with the underlying ontological assumptions of anarchy in realist theory. If the world truly is anarchical, then threat-perception would override all other factors in explaining state-behavior. This is exactly what we observe in our case.

Given that ISIS only posed a threat in a weak sense, as the analysis showed, one would expect the U.S. to take a measured response in Syria, and take attitudes and concerns of allies into consideration. The fact that the U.S. partnered with YPG/SDF, contradicts this basic assumption, which begs the question whether or not it has acted in accordance with its *national interests*, in the theoretical sense. The analysis showed that there is an argument that the United States partnered with YPG/SDF in Syria not only to defeat ISIS, but to further its world order ambitions by curbing Russian and Iranian expansionism in the region. However, if this comes at the cost of doing irreparable damage to its relationship with Turkey, this would undoubtedly undermine whatever gains it can make in Syria, and consequently not serve its long-term *world order* ambitions. Turkey is a major player in the region, a significant military power and a longstanding ally to the U.S. Despite recent efforts to solve the crisis with Turkey, the Turkish pivot towards Russia and Iran is very real, may prove to be irreversible and would consequently be detrimental to U.S. national interests in the long run.

In conclusion, the units of analysis employed, have displayed varying explanatory force in explaining the U.S. decision to partner with YPG/SDF in Syria. Security considerations seem to be an adequate, although weak, explanation. Perceptions of threat as a predictor of alliance formations has strong explanatory force. The concept of national interest is harder to measure precisely, but as things stand today, one would have to conclude it does not explain the behavior of the United States in a convincing manner.

6.1 Implications for theory, limitations and future research

The results of the analysis indicate that the chosen case is a highly unlikely event. The case is accounted for by the theory to some extent, but also poses a challenge to some of the theoretical concepts, *as I have come to define them*. This mixed picture does not, in my estimation, undermine the description of the research problem as a crucial case study. Rather it reinforces our skepticism about testing theories with the ambition of full confirmation or refutation. At the same time, the results show the benefits of adopting a softer version of the crucial case method and applying theoretical concepts in difficult circumstances. Every instance where the units of analysis do not explain the empirical data in a satisfactory manner, may provide fertile ground for revising assumptions and our theoretical constructs.

The results of my research are inevitably limited by the manner in which I have defined the units of analysis. Similarly, it is limited by the *level of analysis*. Rather than exclusively focusing on the systemic level, it may prove fruitful to include analysis at the individual level as well. This would amount to opening the metaphorical “black box” and looking at the impact of specific individuals in the decision-making process. Doing so would allow us to conceive of human agency, mistakes and miscalculations, which are analytically unintelligible at the systemic level. A miscalculation would be defined as a decision that fails to meet some abstract notion of national interest, security, etc., or a misconceived threat-perception resulting in irrational behavior and mistakes. Applying this approach to study the decision-making process behind United States’ tactical choices in northeastern Syria could potentially resolve some of the challenges faced in my analysis. There are non-systemic models in the realist tradition that allows for this kind of research. The U.S.-YPG partnership in Syria provides challenging material for future research within the broad realist tradition. Hopefully my results can stimulate further debate and discussion, in whatever limited way.

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