

Operation Olive Branch

Operacja militarna „Gałązka Oliwna”

Abstract:

The empirical goal of this paper is to conduct an in-depth analysis of Operation Olive Branch, with special attention to its underlying circumstances, timeline, and impacts. In order to tackle these aspects of the topic, I formulate the following hypotheses. First, three primary factors ultimately led to an armed offensive by a geopolitically diminished Turkey: the risk of further expansion of Kurdish influence in northern Syria (a likely scenario in the case of continued support from the United States), the Assad regime's attack on Sunni rebels in the province of Idlib, and the regional rivalry with Iran. Second, Russia's approval for Turkey's intervention in Afrin strengthened the tactical alliance between the two states. At the same time, it increased Turkey's geopolitical dependence on Russia in the Middle East. Third, Operation Olive Branch generated serious repercussions for Turkey on the international stage. On the regional level, given the disapproving reactions of Iran, Iraq, and Syria, Turkey has found itself isolated in its campaign against Kurdish aspirations to autonomy. On the international level, the operation has exacerbated the crisis in the relations between Turkey and the United States, which may ultimately produce an existential threat to the integrity of NATO. The article confirms all of the stated hypotheses.

Keywords:

Olive Branch, Turkey, Kurds, Middle East

Streszczenie:

Celem podjętych badań jest analiza operacji militarnej „Gałązka Oliwna”, z uwzględnieniem jej uwarunkowań, przebiegu i skutków. Dla potrzeb podjętego problemu przyjęto kilka założeń badawczych. Po pierwsze, ryzyko poszerzenia wpływów Kurdów na północy Syrii, prawdopodobne w przypadku trwałego zaangażowania się Stanów Zjednoczonych w pomoc im; atak Al-Assada na rebeliantów w prowincji Idlib; a także regionalną rywalizację z Iranem należy uznać za zmienne, które zdecydowały o ofensywie Turcji na Afrin. Po drugie, zgoda Rosji na ofensywę Republiki Turcji w prowincji Afrin oznacza umocnienie taktycznego partnerstwa pomiędzy tymi podmiotami. Jednocześnie zwiększa ona geopolityczną zależność Turcji od Rosji w regionie Bliskiego Wschodu. Po trzecie, zaangażowanie Turcji w operację „Gałązka Oliwna” wywołuje poważne międzynarodowe reperkusje dla tego państwa. W wymiarze regionalnym, z uwagi na krytykę ze strony Iranu, Iraku i Syrii, czyni je samotnym w walce z Kurdami. W wymiarze międzynarodowym pogłębia natomiast kryzys w relacjach Turcji ze Stanami Zjednoczonymi. To w dalszej perspektywie może zagrażać spójności Sojuszu Północnoatlantyckiego.

Słowa kluczowe:

„Gałązka Oliwna”, Turcja, Kurdowie, Bliski Wschód

1. Preliminary remarks

Experts believe that the military operation¹ launched by the Republic of Turkey in the northern Syrian region of Afrin in January 2018 marked the opening of a new front in the hybrid war in Syria. The goals of this armed intervention, which has primarily targeted the People's Protection Units (YPG), are threefold. First, the operation is geared toward preventing the areas controlled by Kurdish groups from fusing together into a unified autonomous region in northern Syria. Second, it aims to curtail cooperation between the Kurdish people on one side and both the United States and Bashar al-Assad's regime on the other. Third, it is meant to demonstrate the determination of the Turkish government in combatting the aspirations for autonomy that are so prevalent within the Kurdish population.² On the geopolitical level, Operation Olive Branch has resulted in deteriorating relations between the Republic of Turkey and Iraq, Syria, and Iran. It also points to a crisis in relations between Turkey and the United States, which may ultimately constitute an existential threat to the integrity of NATO.³

The empirical goal of this paper is to conduct an in-depth analysis of Operation Olive Branch, with special attention to its underlying circumstances, timeline, and impacts. In order to tackle these aspects of the topic, I formulate the following hypotheses. First, three primary factors ultimately led to an armed offensive by a geopolitically diminished Turkey: the risk of further of expansion of Kurdish influence in northern Syria (a likely scenario in the case of enduring support from the United States), the Assad regime's attack on Sunni rebels in the province of Idlib, and the regional rivalry with Iran. Second, Russia's approval for Turkey's intervention in Afrin strengthened the tactical alliance between the two states. At the same time, it increased Turkey's geopolitical dependence on Russia in the Middle East. Third, Operation Olive Branch generated serious repercussions for Turkey on the international stage. On the regional level, given the disapproving reactions of Iran, Iraq, and Syria,

¹ Turkey ironically called the intervention in the province of Afrin Operation Olive Branch. Throughout history, since Ancient Egypt and Greece, the olive branch has been a symbol of victory. In the Bible, an olive branch is brought to Noah by doves, which signals the end of the Flood and arrival on dry land. In modern times, the olive branch is a common component of flags, emblems, and coats of arms. This includes the flag of the United Nations. Wszystkie Symbole. Baza znaków i znaczeń, <https://wszystkiesymbole.pl/galazka-oliwna/>, 27.04.2019.

² P. Sasnał, K. Wasilewski, *Komentarz PISM: Turecka operacja wojskowa „Gałązka Oliwna” w Syrii*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 22.01.2018, <http://www.pism.pl/publikacje/komentarz/nr-5-2018>, 27.04.2019.

³ M. Chudziak, M. Marszewski, *Rosnąca presja Turcji na Kurdów w Syrii i Iraku*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich. 19.12.2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/node/26952>, 27.04.2019.

Turkey has found itself isolated in its campaign against Kurdish aspirations to autonomy. On the international level, the operation has exacerbated the crisis in the relations between Turkey and the United States, which may ultimately produce an existential threat to the integrity of NATO.

Having articulated the empirical goal and hypotheses of the paper, I will first outline the key factors and processes that determined the progression of the armed offensive in the province of Afrin. Second, I will conduct a detailed analysis of Operation Olive Branch as it unfolded. Finally, I will evaluate the impact of the operation on a number of levels.

2. Circumstances underlying Operation Olive Branch

Several factors affected the execution and course of Operation Olive Branch. The most important one of these is the changing status and leverage of the Kurdish population in the Middle East. Others include the interests and actions of regional actors – Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria – as well as external actors, particularly the United States and Russia. These factors are mutually dependent and collectively determine the distribution of geopolitical power in the Middle East.

2.1. The changing status of the Kurds in the Middle East

The military operations during the Syrian Civil War and the offensive of the so-called Islamic State in the Middle East has improved the regional standing and clout of the Kurdish population. The armed forces of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)⁴, taking advantage of the growing instability and developments in the course of the Syrian conflict, took control more than 365 towns through the rapidly deployed People's Protection Units (YPG) starting in September 2012.⁵ In each of these towns, the PYD formed local governmental authorities. As a result, the Assad regime effectively ceased to exercise real power along the entire length of its border with Turkey. As early as August 2011, after

⁴ The Democratic Union Party (PYD) is one of the three primary Kurdish political factions. The other two are the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (or Syrian National Coalition, SNC), and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). These parties share elements of their political platforms and programs while engaging in rivalry on the leadership level. The PYD enjoys the greatest support among the Kurdish population. Given President Bashar al-Assad's inconsistent approach to Kurdish politics, this group is viewed by the other political movements as an 'agent of the Syrian regime.' M. Szkudlarek, *Rola czynnika kurdyjskiego w syryjskiej wojnie domowej*, „Przegląd Politologiczny”, 2014/1, p. 302.

⁵ *Vacuum of uprising gives Syria Kurds rare freedom in western Kurdistan*, „Ekurd Daily”, 24.08.2012, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/8/syriakurd600.htm>, 13.08.2018.

ousting the Syrian government's forces from their main urban centers of power in northern Syria (Ayn al-Arab, Amuda, Efrin, Al-Malikiyah, Ras al-Ain, and Qamishli), the PYD and YPG declared that the territories over which they assumed control would remain neutral in the conflict while emphasizing that they would not tolerate the presence of either Assad's forces or rebel units.⁶ In response, the opposition and the Syrian government both withdrew from the areas occupied by the Kurdish forces. In January 2014, the northeastern territories of Syria, known as Rojava and controlled by the PYD, gained de facto autonomy.⁷ Two years later, on March 16, 2016, the regional parliament announced the establishment of federal authority in the areas controlled by Kurdish forces. Rojava, while still formally a part of Syria's territory, possesses its own armed forces, justice system, police and security units, local self-governing bodies, and schools where the medium of instruction is the Kurdish language. Local offices issue identity documents and other items of record. The Constitution of Rojava guarantees gender equality, freedom of religion, and equality of treatment among the area's ethnic groups, and forbids polygamy, torture, and the death penalty.

The geopolitical ramifications of the hybrid war in Syria have become an impulse for the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan. In response to a considerable increase of leverage of the Shi'a factions in Iraq, the marginalization of the Sunni as a balancing force, and the entrenchment of Iranian influence in the region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK), which holds power in Iraqi Kurdistan under the leadership of Masoud Barzani, decided to conduct an independence referendum. The referendum, scheduled for September 25, 2017, was intended as the cornerstone for the international recognition of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸ In its political messaging, the Barzani camp justified the sudden and unexpected referendum with the inability or unwillingness of the Iraqi authorities to fulfill their constitutional commitments with respect to the Kurdistan Region. Members of the PDK announced that the referendum would take place regardless of criticism and opposition from the countries of the region and the international community. The referendum was to be followed by a protracted period of negotiation between representatives of the Kurdistan Region and the government of Iraq, which was estimated to take 1.5 years. This

⁶ A. Busse, *Udział Kurdów w wojnie w Syrii*, „Trzecia Droga”, 25.01.2015, <http://3droga.pl/polityka/adam-busse-udzial-kurdow-w-wojnie-w-syrii/>, 09.08.2018.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ K. Strachota, J. Lang, *Iracki Kurdystan – początek nowego kryzysu na Bliskim Wschodzie?*, „Komentarze Ośrodka Studiów Wschodnich”, 2017/247, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2017-08-08/iracki-kurdystan-poczatek-nowego-kryzysu-na-bliskim-wschodzie>, 31.03.2019.

would serve as the primary channel through which the two sides would work out the conditions for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan to come to fruition.⁹

On the international level, controversy arose not only in response to the referendum itself, but also to the areas in which it was supposed to be carried out. It was decided that the referendum would extend beyond Iraqi Kurdistan and into contested land, including parts of the provinces of Nineveh and Diyala, the district of Tooz, and the province of Kirkuk.¹⁰ These territories had previously been taken by the Peshmerga in the course of their successful resistance to the so-called Islamic State. The referendum's leading question was, „Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?” Ultimately, 92.7% of respondents voted in favor of independence, with a turnout of 72%.¹¹ Three days later – that is, almost simultaneously – Rojava held the first round of its local elections.

Many analysts believe that the most important stimulus for both the formation of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Rojava) and the decision to conduct the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, besides the growing instability in Syria and Iraq, was the active involvement of Kurdish forces in the fight against radical Islamist organizations, particularly the so-called Islamic State. Given the speed at which the jihadist group's offensive advanced since the initial proclamation of the so-called Islamic state and the difficulties that regional and international actors had in stemming their advances, the Kurdish forces transformed into a key player in the war on terror. However, the participation of Kurdish units in the struggle against Islamic terror groups was not a foregone conclusion in this incipient phase. Indeed, the Kurds were forced to take up arms due to jihadist incursions and attacks that had begun to proliferate in the areas they occupied. Kurdish resistance to the advancing Islamist groups began in November 2012, but they were not their only adversary in this period. Two months later, in January 2013, Kurdish forces had to face armed units from local Arab clans, and clashed with Syrian Army forces the following month. Beginning in spring of 2013, jihadist militants organized regular, coordinated strikes against the Kurdish population in order to take over the territories controlled by this minority group in northern Syria and

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ W. Repetowicz, *Referendum w Kurdystanie. Krok do niepodległości ?*, „Defence 24”, 27.08.2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2017-08-08/iracki-kurdystan-poczatek-nowego-kryzysu-na-bliskim-wschodzie>, 15.08.2018.

¹¹ M. Kaciewicz, *Kurdowie chcą niepodległości, ale mają zbyt wielu wrogów (Wyniki referendum)*, „Newsweek”, 27.09.2017, <https://www.msn.com/pl-pl/wiadomosci/swiat/kurdowie-chc%C4%85-niepodleg%C5%82o%C5%9Bci-ale-maj%C4%85-zbyt-wielu-wrog%C3%B3w/ar-AAstdUh>, 15.08.2018.

obtain access to two large oilfields in the region.¹² Heavy clashes occurred in the province of Afrin. In mid-June 2013, the YPG was able to push the Islamist forces out of Ras al-Ain. Despite continuing terrorist attacks, the Kurds were also able to maintain control over more than a dozen cities in northern Syria.

In August 2014, the so-called Islamic State launched an offensive in the Iraqi province of Nineveh, which is inhabited by Kurds, Yazidis, and Christians. After the massacre of 500 Yazidis that same month, U.S. President Barack Obama announced that U.S. forces would begin executing preventive strikes targeting the jihadi group and support both the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi security forces with airpower. On the night of September 22, the U.S. Air Force, in coordination with several countries in the region, commenced a bombardment campaign targeting the terrorists' positions in Syria. YPG units were actively engaged in the fight alongside the international coalition, which by that point had grown to include Turkey and other state actors from the region and beyond. It was thanks to their unconventional, partisan methods of warfare that the international coalition began to progressively liberate Islamist-occupied urban centers in Syria and Iraq. The only major offensive of the so-called Islamic State in 2015 was the capture of Palmyra, which until May had been controlled by the Assad regime. Additionally, the militants were able to gain access to oil- and gas-rich fields in the central regions of Syria.¹³ In the remaining months of that year, the jihadis entered a consistent spiral of defeat, successively yielding strategic points of control in the occupied territories. They were forced out of the city of Tikrit in March¹⁴, then out of Baiji in October.¹⁵ The Salafi radicals continued to lose ground the following year, punctuated by the recapture of Ramadi in February¹⁶, Rutba in May¹⁷, and Fallujah in June.¹⁸ October 2016 saw a large-scale operation

¹² A. Busse, *op. cit.*

¹³ M. Kucharczyk, „Podduszanie” przynosi efekty. Tak kurczy się „państwo” dżihadystów, tvn24, <http://www.tvn24.pl/magazyn-tvn24/podduszanie-przynosi-efekty-tak-kurczy-sie-panstwo-dzihadystow,16,326,25.06.2017>.

¹⁴ *Iraqi forces recapture government headquarters in Tikrit from Isis*, „The Guardian”, 31.03.2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/31/iraqi-forces-recapture-government-headquarters-in-tikrit-from-isis>, 25.06.2017.

¹⁵ *Iraqi forces and militia seize most of Baiji refinery: officials*, „Reuters”, 15.10.2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-baiji-idUSKCN0S91GS20151015>, 25.06.2017.

¹⁶ *Iraq Says Fully Recaptured Ramadi From ISIS*, „Haaretz”, 09.02.2016, <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.702297>, 25.07.2017.

¹⁷ L. Morris, M. Salim, *Iraqi forces retake Rutbah from ISIS and eye Fallujah for next battle*, „The Washington Post”, 19.05.2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraqi-forces-retake-rutba-from-isis-and-eye-fallujah-for-next-battle/2016/05/19/3cb32fad-33fe-43df-acba-0edb27865c91_story.html?utm_term=.62bc31eef66d, 25.06.2017.

¹⁸ P. Cockburn, *Isis in Fallujah: Iraqi forces end terrorist group's two-year occupation of city*, „Independent”, 17.06.2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-in-fallujah-iraqi-forces-end-terrorist->

by Iraqi forces to retake the city of Mosul – the last major urban agglomeration still controlled by the so-called Islamic State. As a result of this offensive, the eastern part of Mosul was liberated in January 2017. Several months later, on July 9, Iraqi Prime Minister Hajdar al-Abadi announced that the entirety of the city had been liberated from the jihadists.

It should be emphasized that, as part of the international coalition, Kurdish leaders and the units under their control worked in tandem with supporters of the Syrian regime, the central government in Iraq, Shi'a and Sunni militias, the Turkish Army, and Western forces, irrespective of any existing animosity and geopolitical disputes.

2.2. Interests and actions of regional actors in the Middle East

Aside from the growing clout of the Kurds on the international stage, the launch of Operation Olive Branch by Turkey was prompted by the particular geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, which in turn was conditioned by the interests and actions of regional actors. In addition to Turkey, the key players in this context are Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

The destabilization of the political landscape in the Arab World in the wake of the Arab Spring, in tandem with new threats to regional stability and security, became a significant challenge that tested the foreign policy of Turkey.¹⁹ Both of them severely undermined Turkey's ability to realize its 'zero problems with neighbors' policy as well as its policy of non-intervention with the internal affairs of other countries – two pillars of the Strategic Depth doctrine underlying the country's foreign policy. Given the shared border with Syria and the deep-seated economic ties with that state, the Erdoğan government has faced a major conundrum since the outbreak of war in Syria during the Arab Spring. Serious challenges to Turkey's stability and national interests arose in its wake. One of them is the newfound clout of the Kurdish minority in the region.²⁰

From the outset of the civil war, Turkish authorities focused on attempting to limit the enabling effects that the destabilization of Syria was likely to have for the PYD's efforts to established autonomy for the two million Kurds

groups-two-year-occupation-of-city-a7088346.html , 25.06.2017.

¹⁹ A. Dzisiów – Szuszczykiewicz, *Sukcesy i porażki „anatolijskiego tygrysa” - wyzwania dla polityki zagranicznej i bezpieczeństwa Turcji*, „Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe”, 2012/21, p. 69.

²⁰ R. Bahar, A. B. Çelik, *Ontological in security in asymmetric conflicts: Reflections on agonistic peace in Turkey's Kurdish issue*, „Security Dialogue”, 2017/4, s. 279-296.

who live in the northern part of the country.²¹ Turkey's actions in this regard tie into the state's overall strategy toward the Kurdish population – one whose chief goal is to undercut and weaken their attempts to gain autonomy and independence. According to Turkey's leadership, these aspirations to autonomy constitute a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. Capitalizing on this premise, Erdoğan has revised the country's foreign policy, which has resulted in the intensification and radicalization of the government's approach to the Kurdish issue. As a result, in August 2016, Turkey moved a number of infantry units into the Syrian borderlands. The Turkish incursion into Syria was officially and ostensibly a means of supporting the international coalition in Operation Euphrates Shield.²² As part of the operation, Islamic State positions in the district of Jarabulus in northern Syria were shelled and hit with airstrikes. Turkey's government argued that liberating Jarabulus would help clear the Syrian borderlands in close proximity to Turkey of terrorists, thus upholding the territorial integrity of Syria. However, most experts agree that the fight against the jihadist group was only a pretext. Instead, the primary goal of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was expanding Turkey's influence in Syria and limiting the areas controlled by Kurdish forces.

In this context, U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement that the U.S. would continue to arm and train Kurdish police units elicited concern in Turkey and ultimately provided them with a direct motive for launching the operation in Afrin Province in January 2018, following months of signaling from the Turkish government.²³ The Turkish authorities' determination to fight the Kurds is corroborated by operations in northern Iraq²⁴ and in Turkey itself. In the southern areas of Turkey, the military continues to carry out massive, coordinated displacement of Kurds, confiscate their property, and torture those detained. Analysts argue that these acts are markers of regular war, which Turkey has extended from waging with only the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to the entire Kurdish minority.²⁵ One of the exceptions to this rule are Turkey's

²¹ „Syria - wojna domowa czy już konflikt międzynarodowy?,” http://www.wiadomosci24.pl/artykul/syria_wojna_domowa_czy_juz_konflikt_miedzynarodowy_236134.html, 20.07.2012.

²² M. Kaciewicz, *Tarcza Eufratu, czyli po co Turcja weszła do Syrii?*, „Newsweek”, 24.08.2016, <https://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/dlaczego-turcja-weszla-do-syrii-misja-tarcza-eufratu/kb43tgs>, 29.08.2016.

²³ M. Orłowski, R. Stefanicki, „Gałazka Oliwna” - turecka ofensywa przeciwko Kurdom w Syrii, „Wyborcza.pl”, 21.01.2018, <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,22926928,galazka-oliwna-turecka-ofensywa-przeciwko-kurdom-w-syrii.html>, 02.05.2019.

²⁴ M. Chudziak, M. Marszewski, *op. cit.*

²⁵ M. Orłowski, *Turcja otwiera nowy front w Syrii i atakuje Kurdów w regionie Afrin. Rosjanie nie interweniują*, „Wyborcza.pl”, 20.01.2018, <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,22923348,turcja-zbombardowala-kurdow-w-syryjskim-miescie-afrin.html>, 10.08.2018.

relations with the Barzani tribe in Iraq. By investing in the private sector in Iraqi Kurdistan – including infrastructure and oil refineries – Erdoğan aimed to demonstrate his influence in at least the Iraqi part of the territories where the Kurds hold sway. Collaborating with Barzani has also served as a means of weakening the PKK in the region.²⁶

Iran, the greatest beneficiary of the Arab Spring and the changes that it prompted in the region, is also conducting a coordinated, radical policy against Kurdish separatists.²⁷ This is confirmed in the armed operations carried out in 2011 and 2015 in the Qandil Mountains on the Iraq-Iran border, targeting militants from the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK).²⁸ Without Iran's support, the offensive in which Iraq's central government retook Kurdish-controlled Kirkuk would also likely have been impossible. Thanks to the patronage of Iran – a more powerful regional actor – Iraqi military forces and assorted militias under the banner of the Popular Mobilization Forces regained control of the city and surrounding areas on the night of October 16, 2017. Kurdish forces had previously seized these territories in the course of the battle against the so-called Islamic State.²⁹ Iran had also previously opposed the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, framing it as a threat to both the territorial integrity of Iraq and the stability of the entire Middle East. Were it to be carried out, Iran announced that it would close its territorial border with Iraqi Kurdistan, block its airspace in the border areas, and withdraw from their joint security agreement.³⁰

Turkey's approach to Kurdish attempts at emancipation should be viewed as consistent with those of Iran. However, given the numerous conflicts of interest between these two countries in the Middle East, a collaborative effort to erode the position of the Kurdish minority in the region was and remains unlikely. Iran's geopolitical advantage, obtained thanks to its successful efforts to strengthen its influence in Iraq and Syria, is of great concern to the Turkish authorities, as is the political marginalization of the Sunnis. Both factors bring Iran carrying out the notion of a „Shi'a Crescent,” which envisions the forma-

²⁶ B. Surdel, *Przyszłość Kurdystanu. Nowy kształt Bliskiego Wschodu?*, „Working Paper”, 2017/10, file:///C:/Users/lwowska/AppData/Local/Temp/CSM%20ANALIZA%20B.%20Surdel%20KURDYSTAN%2010.2017-2.pdf, 10.08.2018.

²⁷ K. Strachota, J. Lang, *op. cit.*

²⁸ T. Otłowski, *Dramatyczny los Kurdów w Iranie. Są zakładnikiem geopolitycznej gry między mocarstwami*, „wp. wiadomości”, 09.06.2015, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/dramatyczny-los-kurdow-w-iranie-sa-zakladnikiem-geopolitycznej-gry-miedzy-mocarstwami-6027414362284673a>, 03.05.2019.

²⁹ B. Surdel, *op. cit.*

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

tion of a territorially connected strip of land stretching from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, to Lebanon. This area would fall within the political and ideological sphere of influence of Iran.³¹ Iran's ballistic missile program also fosters distrust toward its leaders' intentions.³² At the same time, Iran is critical of the presence of Turkish military units in Syria and Iraq. The Iranian government interprets Turkey's creation of two 'safe zones' in Syria as laying the groundwork for Turkey's move to topple the Assad regime. In Iran, the shelling of PKK militant outposts and positions from more than a dozen military bases in northern Iraq is seen as dangerous due to the prospect of Turkish increased Turkish influence in the politics of the area.³³ For all these reasons, Iran demands the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syria and Iraq.

Much like Turkey, Syria and Iraq view the Kurds' aspirations to independence as a threat to their security and territorial integrity. Nevertheless, Turkey is not in a position to establish long-term cooperation with either of them for the following four reasons. First, both countries view the presence of Turkish forces on their territory as impinging on their independence and territorial integrity. Second, the Turkish government lent its support to opposition forces in Syria in the war against the Assad regime.³⁴ Third, Syria and Iran have a deep-rooted history of alliances. Finally, pro-Iran Shi'a factions have gained political clout in Iraq. Taking these factors into account, it is reasonable to state that Turkey's military activities in Syria – including Operation Olive Branch – and the stationing of Turkish troops in northern Iraq are not only instruments in Turkey's conflict with the Kurds. They are also strategic components of the regional rivalry between Turkey and Iran, which Turkey is attempting to use in order to strengthen its position in the Middle East, in response to its declining influence after the Arab Spring.

2.3. Interests and actions of external actors in the Middle East

In addition to the interests and actions of regional actors, the geopolitical order in the Middle East is conditioned by those of external players, in particular the United States and the Russian Federation.

³¹ T. Otłowski, *Bliski Wschód po upadku centrali Państwa Islamskiego*, „Pułaski Policy Papers”, 23.08.2017, https://pulaski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Pulaski_Policy_Papers_Nr_17_17.pdf, 10.08.2018.

³² See: K. Wasilewski, *Zakup systemu S-400 przez Turcję: perspektywy i konsekwencje*, „Biuletyn PISM”, 2017/81 (1523).

³³ *Id*, *Rywalizacja i współpraca: dualizm w polityce Turcji wobec Iranu*, „Biuletyn PISM”, 2018/92 (1665).

³⁴ See V. Leila, *The changing borders and borderlands of Syria in a time of conflict*, „International Affairs”, 2017/4, p. 809-827.

The restrained Middle East policy of the Obama administration – exemplified in the starting phase of the Arab Spring (especially in Syria) – as well as the relatively late decision to send U.S. land forces to enter the conflict resulted in the United States not currently being the key veto player in the Middle East. This is particularly apparent in the lack of an effective response to the formation of the Russia-Turkey-Iran axis³⁵ as well as the United States' reactive approach to regional geopolitical circumstances.³⁶ Instead, the fundamental goal of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East in recent years has been to maintain stability and thwart extremist actors in their pursuit of dominance in the region. In this context, the engagement of American forces in the international coalition battling the so-called Islamic State is critical. In the context of the regional balance of power, the United States aims to marginalize the international standing of Iran and weaken the influence of Russia. It also aspires to exert its own influence on post-war Syria and Iraq.

In analyzing the U.S. approach to the Kurdish campaign for autonomy in the Middle East, it is important to remember that, since the Iraq War and the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, these two parties remain allied. This alliance is rooted in American pragmatism and the flexibility of U.S. foreign policy to the geopolitical conditions in the region. The support that Kurdish forces provided to U.S. troops during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 resulted in the formation of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. Considering that, on the regional level, the primary goal of the United States is stability in the Middle East and defeating extremist groups, U.S. leadership does not wish to officially support those Kurdish efforts toward eventual political independence that provoke the most opposition among regionally significant actors.

The reserved approach of the United States is confirmed in the U.S. government's reaction to the independence referendum, which took place in Iraqi Kurdistan and the surrounding contested areas on September 25, 2017. In its official statement, the U.S. took a strong stance against the referendum and called for it to be cancelled or postponed. Once the vote took place, the U.S. did not recognize the results.³⁷ Furthermore, U.S. authorities argued in favor of maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq, affirming that only a united Iraq can constitute an effective foil against the expansionist policy of Iran in the region. They also expressed concern that the referendum process and its

³⁵ B. Surdel, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Ł. Kobierski, *Dziwny sojusz – polityka USA wobec irackiego Kurdystanu*, Fundacja im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego, 08.07.2015, <https://pulaski.pl/dziwny-sojusz-polityka-usa-wobec-irackiego-kurdystanu/>, 10.08.2018.

³⁷ B. Surdel, *op. cit.*

repercussions would negatively impact the international coalition's effective fight against the so-called Islamic State.³⁸ At the same time, they publicly opposed threats to use force against the Kurds by Turkey and Iran. They also announced that they would continue to provide financial and military support to the Kurds in Syria and Iraq.³⁹ These measures are intended to prevent a resurgence of radical Islamist forces in the territory currently controlled by the Kurds in the north of Syria.⁴⁰

Turkey's participation in Operation Euphrates Shield and its armed intervention in Afrin would have been unlikely without the tacit approval and active support of Russia.⁴¹ However, the Russian Federation's approach to the Kurdish push for independence is ambiguous and inconsistent. The only key objective for Russia is collaboration with Iraqi Kurdistan, which has manifested itself in the energy sector, with a view to monopolizing it. Russia is also interested in retaining a certain degree of influence on the Kurds of Syria and Iraq, but without jeopardizing existing areas of partnership with the central government in Iraq or the strong relationship it has developed with Iran and Turkey.⁴²

Overall, in analyzing the foreign policy of the Russian Federation toward the Middle East, it can be argued that its goal is to maximize Russia's interests. The most important of these include: weakening the position of the U.S. in the region, combatting Sunni extremism, fostering alliances and positive relations with Iran and Turkey, retaining its influence in post-war Syria, and maintaining its existing economic channels in the region. Realizing these goals is supposed to enable Russia to build a regional order predicated on a 'concert of powers' that involves Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, assuming all of them desist from efforts toward regional hegemony.⁴³ Russian authorities believe that, out of these countries, only Iran and Turkey are predisposed to fulfill the role of regional powers. They possess both a long tradition of imperial statehood and strong economic and military potential. At the same time, they have sufficient resources to engage in rivalry with Russia with regard to spheres of influence in post-Soviet areas and exercise soft power to influence Muslims in Russia. These factors result in Russia's priority treatment of its re-

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Ł. Kobierski, *op. cit.*, *The Eagle Has Landed*, <http://theeaglehaslanded.pl/zaangazowanie-rosji-i-usa-w-konflikt-w-syrii-i-iraku/>, 11.08.2018.

⁴⁰ M. Orłowski, R. Stefanicki, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ M. Orłowski, *op. cit.*

⁴² B. Surdel, *op. cit.*

⁴³ W. Rodkiewicz, *Rosja wobec Iranu*, „Komentarze Ośrodka Studiów Wschodnich”, 2019/292, 31.01.2019, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2019-01-31/rosja-wobec-iranu>, 04.05.2019.

lations with Turkey and Iran. The importance of the other states in the region is clearly instrumental.⁴⁴

3. Timeline of Operation Olive Branch

Turkey's military intervention in the province of Afrin began on Saturday, January 20, 2018, combining a ground assault with an air offensive. Turkish units entering Syria from the north were first repelled by rebels from the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The primary goal of the Turkish commanders was to capture the city of Tel Rifaat, southeast of Afrin.⁴⁵ In the first two days of the operation, 72 bombers conducted airstrikes on more than 200 targets. The strikes focused on shelters and hideouts used by the PKK, PYD, and YPG, all of which Turkey considers to be terrorist groups.⁴⁶ The Turkish government claimed that the offensive in Afrin took place after Kurdish militants fired upon Turkish positions in the border areas.⁴⁷ Kurdish authorities denounced these claims. Several hours after the offensive began, the border province of Kilis in Turkey was hit by three rockets fired from Syria, likely as retribution for the incursion.⁴⁸

On January 21, 2018, President Erdoğan's spokesperson stated that „[i]n its second day, [Operation Olive Branch] continues to ensure peace and security for our people, protect Syria's territorial integrity and eliminate all terrorist elements in the region.”⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım announced that Turkey would be forming a 30-km buffer zone in the province of Afrin.⁵⁰ The Turkish military's next objective was Manbij, located 100 km to the east. Afrin had been under Kurdish control since 2012, when President Assad's troops withdrew; Manbij, on the other hand, had been liberated from occupation by the so-called Islamic State in August 2017.⁵¹ The declarations above tied into the ongoing military activities under Operation Euphrates Shield and the broader Turkish strategy, whose main goal was to curtail the influence and clout of Kurdish actors in northern Syria and secure Turkey's southern bor-

⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁵ A. Rybczyński, *Galazka Oliwna ociekająca krwią. Jak Rosja sprzedała sojusznika*, TVPInfo, 24.01.2018, <https://www.tvp.info/35733159/galazka-oliwna-ociekajaca-krwia-jak-rosja-sprzedala-sojusznika>, 04.05.2019.

⁴⁶ M. Orłowski, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁹ M. Orłowski, R. Stefanicki, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁵¹ *Ibidem.*

der.⁵² In the broader sense, the marginalization of the Kurds in the region aims to prevent the formation of further emancipatory movements and render the creation of an independent state impossible.

Turkey's decision to carry out a military intervention in northern Syria was precipitated by important events that threatened the country's interests and generated major geopolitical changes in the Middle East. The most important ones were the aforementioned declaration of continued support for the Kurds by the United States and the Assad regime's assault on the border city of Idlib – the last major rebel stronghold in Syria. It should be noted that Idlib Province is one of four 'de-escalation zones' in Syria, which Iran, Russia, and Turkey agreed to in Astana in 2017.⁵³ Turkey is responsible for maintaining security in these zones.

The Afrin Region, governed by the Kurdish PYD, is an exclave of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Rojava).⁵⁴ From a military standpoint, the Turkish assault on Afrin cannot be considered a coincidence. It is the weakest link in the structure of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria due to the presence of strategically placed Turkish units in its vicinity. Turkish army units were deployed south of Afrin after they were entrusted to ensure security in the 'de-escalation zones' in 2017; they were also present to the north of the province. Moreover, Free Syrian Army (FSA) units allied with Turkey were stationed to the east of Afrin. Immediately before the offensive began, the province of Afrin was controlled by Kurdish militias whose numbers were estimated at 8-10,000.⁵⁵

Operation Olive Branch also would not have been possible without support from the Russian Federation. Before the attack, approximately 300 Russian troops were stationed in Afrin. They were concentrated primarily in the Kafr Jannah camp, located between Azaz (the target zone of Operation Euphrates Shield that is controlled by Turkey) and Afrin. These soldiers would find themselves directly in the line of fire. Besides withdrawing them, it was also necessary to make the airspace above Afrin available to the Turkish Air Force.⁵⁶ Paradoxically, Russia's tacit approval for Turkey's incursion into the province of Afrin coincided with Turkey's own green-lighting of a plan to build

⁵² M. Marszewski, M. Chudziak, *op. cit.*

⁵³ mm/rzw, „WSJ”: *Asad zgodził się na atak chemiczny na enklawę rebeliantów*, tvn24, 10.09.2018, <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-ze-swiatea,2/wojna-w-syrii-asad-zgodzil-sie-na-atak-chemiczny-w-idlibie-wsj,867353.html>, 04.05.2019.

⁵⁴ M. Marszewski, M. Chudziak, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ A. Rybczyński, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*

the second line of the natural gas pipeline *Turkish Stream* in its economic zone in the Black Sea.⁵⁷ This investment will significantly increase the influence of Gazprom in Southern Europe while limiting the transit of natural gas from Russia through Ukraine.

Operation Olive Branch was met with disapproval from the international community. However, no military response to it was forthcoming. President Bashar al-Assad voiced the strongest criticism of the attack on Afrin, threatening to shoot down Turkish aircraft in response. Given its alliance with Russia, however, the Syrian regime never carried through on a military response. Iran, which counts a sizable Kurdish minority among its population, called on Turkey to cease bombarding and shelling Afrin and to withdraw from Syria as quickly as possible. Iran believed that the Turkish intervention in northern Syria would not resolve the problems created by the emancipatory activities of the Kurds, but will instead embolden and strengthen terrorist groups.⁵⁸ The government of Egypt took a more negative tone with regard to the events in Afrin, stating that they constitute a violation of Syria's sovereignty. Out of all the Middle Eastern states, only Qatar was less critical in its response to Operation Olive Branch.⁵⁹

The United States deemed the intervention in Afrin „destabilizing” and called on Turkey to concentrate on the fight against the so-called Islamic State.⁶⁰ At the same time, the U.S. government expressed understanding for Turkey's need to defend its borders. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also did not discount the possibility of Turkish-American cooperation in this area. The Pentagon's spokesperson underscored that the United States supported the PYD only in their role as a force to combat Islamist terrorists, not as a political project carried out against Turkey.⁶¹ The European Union also expressed concern about the intervention in Afrin due to the possibility of a new humanitarian crisis. In terms of the reactions of actors outside the Middle East, that of Russia deserves special attention. The Russian Foreign Ministry urged all belligerent sides to exercise „mutual restraint and calm.”⁶² The Ministry of Defense stated that the crisis in northern Syria was induced by the Pentagon's „supplying [of] uncontrolled modern weapons” to pro-American militias. Operation Olive Branch was also discussed in a special session of the UN Security Council. However,

⁵⁷ M. Marszewski, M. Chudziak, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ P. Sasnal, K. Wasilewski, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*

⁶⁰ M. Orłowski, R. Stefanicki, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ M. Marszewski, M. Chudziak, *op. cit.*

⁶² A. Rybczyński, *op. cit.*

this did not produce a resolution or communiqué.⁶³ It cannot be ruled out that the permanent members of the Security Council were unable to come to a consensus given Russia's unofficial participation in the conflict.

Afrin was captured by Turkish forces on March 18, 2018. Despite losing control of the region, the Kurds did not suspend their partisan campaign against Turkey.

4. Effects of Operation Olive Branch

Operation Olive Branch generated a series of major consequences on at least two levels: first, on the international level, in relation to the foreign policy of Turkey, and second, on the regional level, in relation to the geopolitical order in the Middle East. We should assume that these two levels are mutually dependent.

Turkey's armed intervention in northern Syria generates many severe repercussions for the former, weakening its position as a state actor on the international level. In the regional dimension, it aggravates Turkey's relations with Iran, Iraq, and Syria, extends the conflict with the Kurds, and isolates Turkey in its fight against Kurdish ambitions to full autonomy. In the international dimension, it deepens the crisis in Turkey's relations with the United States while reinforcing the tactical partnership with Russia, which in turn increases Turkey's geopolitical dependence on the latter country in the Middle East.

Operation Olive Branch triggered serious concern in Iran, widening the chasm in relations between the two countries. Much like Turkey, Iran perceives the Kurds' strivings toward independence in Syria and Iraq as a threat. Nonetheless, it categorically opposes the presence of Turkish troops on the territory of these countries. The Iranian government fears an increase in Turkey's influence in these countries and the prospect of Turkey exerting pressure on their domestic policy. In this context, Iran approaches Turkey's military operations in northern Syria and its campaign against the PKK in Iraq with restraint. Iranian authorities claim that these actions violate the sovereignty of the two countries.⁶⁴ In conclusion, we can state that the regional rivalry – particularly apparent in Syria and Iraq – rules out the possibility of Turkey and Iran forging a strong partnership in their fight against the Kurds. Other differences only

⁶³ M. Marszewski, M. Chudziak, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ K. Wasilewski, *op. cit.*

reinforce this statement, including relations with the Assad regime and Israel as well as plans for an anti-missile system in Turkey.

However, it should be underscored that future relations between these countries are bound to be affected by external players, particularly the United States and Russia. If the U.S. decides to carry out the interests of Turkey in the region and withdraw from their cooperation with the Kurds, it is plausible that Turkey will amplify its adversarial policy toward Iran. Russia may also play a significant role in this context. Its current objective is to balance the roles of Turkey and Iran in the hybrid war in Syria. However, the United States' withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran will likely produce a further warming of relations between Iran and Russia. This will result in closer collaboration between these two actors and a weakened Republic of Turkey.⁶⁵

Iraq shares Iran's negative stance toward the expansionist policies of Turkey in the region, fueled by the fact that Turkish troops did not withdraw from its territory following the liberation of Mosul from jihadist forces. Erdoğan engaged Turkey in the events in northern Iraq under the pretext of protecting Sunnis in the region, who have often become victims of harassment and persecution in cities liberated from the occupation of the so-called Islamic State. In reality, Turkey's president retained his troops in the northern areas of Iraq for two reasons: first, to continue monitoring and influencing events in Iraqi Kurdistan, and second, to neutralize the growing influence of Iran in Iraq and Syria. These measures were taken in coordination with decision-making powers in Saudi Arabia.⁶⁶ The Iraqis view the stationing of Turkish troops in their country as a „Turkish invasion.” The policy of the Iraqi government toward the Kurds also differs from that of Turkey. While authorities in Iraq did not recognize the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, it commenced talks with the separatists, demanding that they acknowledge the central governments' primacy and the rules and regulations set forth by the country's constitution. In this way, they contest Turkey's aggressive policy toward the Kurdish minority.

Turkey's isolation in their battle against the Kurds exacerbates its already hostile relations with the Assad regime. Syria's government mirrors that of Iraq in perceiving the presence of Turkish troops on its territory as an occupation, particularly given that Turkey has assisted anti-regime rebels. Unofficial reports

⁶⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁶ T. Bednarzak, *Turcja i Irak na wojennej ścieżce. Kolejny konflikt zbrojny na Bliskim Wschodzie?*, wiadomości.wp.pl, 20.10.2016, <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,1356,title,Turcja-i-Irak-na-wojennej-sciezce-Kolejny-konflikt-zbrojny-na-Bliskim-Wschodzie,wid,18550932,wiadomosc.html?ticaid=117ffd>, 30.10.2016.

claim that Turkey opened its occupied territory to the remnants of the Free Syria Army in order to prepare for a larger military operation against the forces of the Assad regime.⁶⁷ Turkey was also supportive of the joint proposal by the Arab League and Western countries to impose economic sanctions on Syria. Furthermore, since June 2012, when Assad's forces shot down a Turkish jet fighter, Erdoğan has tried to convince the international community that peace and stability in Syria and the region are not possible without overthrowing the Assad regime.

In the context of Turkey's future policy toward the Kurds, it is important to view the intervention and the capture of Afrin as a stimulus for the escalation of military aggression toward the minority. In December 2018, Turkey began a bombing campaign in the district of Sinjar in northern Iraq, targeting the PKK.⁶⁸ At the same time, Erdoğan announced another intervention in Syria and his troops' impending entry into Manbij. This urban center fell into the hands of the YPG after they successfully pushed out militants from the so-called Islamic State.⁶⁹ It is entirely possible that further operations are being drawn up to further capitalize on the existing ones.

The consequences of Operation Olive Branch beyond the region are also notable, manifesting themselves most visibly in the changes in Turkey's relations with the United States and the Russian Federation. These two countries can influence the balance of power in the region and thus shape the new geopolitical order in the Middle East and beyond. Experts in international relations agree that Turkey's offensive in Afrin deepened the crisis in Turkey's relations with the United States. In the long run, it might also threaten the integrity of NATO, particularly since the intervention can be read as a categorical rejection of the United States' Middle East policy.⁷⁰ In this context, the most significant bone of contention is the United States' declaration of continued support and assistance to the Kurds. Turkey interprets the plan to create a 30,000-strong border protection force in Rojava as the formation of a regular army, which would threaten Turkey's security and territorial integrity. Turkey and the United States are also split on other important issues beyond their approach to the Kurdish minority. Turkey accuses the U.S. of assisting Fetullah Gülen and

⁶⁷ A. Dziśiów-Szuszczykiewicz, *Sukcesy i porażki „anatolijskiego tygrysa” - wyzwania dla polityki zagranicznej i bezpieczeństwa Turcji*, „Bezpieczeństwo narodowe” 2012/21, p. 71.

⁶⁸ M. Chudziak, M. Marszewski, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ Turkey ultimately did not intervene in the city of Manbij because the city was captured by Assad's forces in December 2018. *ft, ads/rzw, Turcja nie będzie interweniować w Manbidżu, jeśli nie będzie tam oddziałów YPG*, „Gazeta Prawna.pl”, 28.12.2018, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1389539,turcja-nie-bedzie-interweniowac-w-manbidzu-jesli-nie-bedzie-tam-oddzialow-ypg.html>, 06.05.2019.

⁷⁰ M. Marszewski, M. Chudziak, *op. cit.*

of failing to provide support during the escalation of the war in Syria, which produced serious challenges to Turkey's security.⁷¹ Disagreements on these subjects have led Erdoğan to accuse the U.S. of opportunism in the Middle East.

The United States perceives with great concern the transition away from democracy in Turkey and the repression of those suspected of being involved in the failed coup d'état.⁷² It also believes that Turkey's regional policy has included decisions that were incongruous with the interests and overall strategy not only of the United States, but of NATO as a whole. In addition to Turkey's treatment of the Kurds (e.g., in Kobane)⁷³, this position is reinforced by Turkey's engagement in the war in Syria alongside Russia, the steadily progressing partnership between those two countries, tense relations with Israel, the pragmatic cooperation between Turkey and Iran (despite their regional rivalry), Erdoğan's initial indifference toward the activity of the so-called Islamic State in Turkey⁷⁴, and the forging of relation with the Muslim Brotherhood. Given that both sides' attempts to improve their relations have so far failed to bring about any tangible effect, if the crisis continues to deepen, it is possible that the integrity of NATO will be at risk. This scenario should be viewed in the broader context of the geopolitical transformation of the entire area that falls under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

Russia exerts a significant amount of pressure in the direction of exacerbating the crisis between Turkey, the United States, and NATO, as destabilizing the alliance is in the country's strategic interest. The instability weakens the position of Turkey and the United States in the Middle East. Indeed, one of Russia's goals is to marginalize the United States and its influence in the region while tightening relations with Turkey, which is isolated on several fronts in the region. Despite their differences, Russia views the Republic of Turkey as one of its tactical allies (in addition to Iran) and a key component in creating a Russia-Iran-Turkey axis that gives primacy to the role of Russia among the Sunnis. Thus, the main beneficiary of Operation Olive Branch is Turkey. In exchange for Russia's unofficial support for the operation, Turkey permitted the construction of the second

⁷¹ See Sz. Ananicz, *Bezradność i osamotnienie: Turcja wobec wojny w Syrii*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 12.05.2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2014-05-12/bezradnosc-i-osamotnienie-turcja-wobec-wojny-w-syrii>, 11.02.2015.

⁷² A. Balcer, *W stronę strategicznego partnerstwa Unii Europejskiej i Turcji w polityce zagranicznej*, Warszawa 2010, p. 39.

⁷³ akt, *Turcja nie pomoże obrońcom kurdyjskiego Kobane*, „Wp wiadomości”, 15.10.2014, <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,1356,title,Turcja-nie-pomoze-obroncom-kurdyjskiego-Kobane,wid,16962049,wiadomosc.html?icaid=117a29>, 29.08.2016.

⁷⁴ See Sz. Ananicz, *Dylematy Turcji w wojnie przeciwko Państwu Islamskiemu*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 15.10.2014, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2014-10-15/dylematy-turcji-w-wojnie-przeciwko-panstwu-islamskiemu>, 05.05.2017.

line of the *Turkish Stream pipeline* through its economic zone in the Black Sea. This is a strategic investment for Russia, as it creates a viable alternative to the transit of Russian gas through Ukraine. Analysts believe that the construction of the pipeline creates the prospect of serious restrictions to the supply of gas to Ukraine, which will increase the economic and energy dependency of that country on Russia. On the other hand, it will strengthen Russia's position as a key supplier of natural gas in Southern Europe.⁷⁵ Turkey has also withdrawn its objections to the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue, which took place at the end of January 2018 in Sochi. This was an important event for the Russian government, as it portended a possible agreement between the Assad regime and part of the opposition. On their part, the rebels would recognize Russia's key role in shaping the post-war order in Syria.⁷⁶

In summary, the above analysis confirms that Turkey's armed intervention in the province of Afrin was determined largely by events in the Middle East that were unfavorable to Turkey's interests. The most important of these include: the risk of growing Kurdish influence in northern Syria, the United States' continuing engagement in assisting the Kurdish minority, the Assad regime's attack on Sunni rebels in the province of Idlib, and the regional rivalry with Iran. With regard to the effects of Operation Olive Branch, it is crucial to recognize that it has weakened Turkey's position in the region. At the same time, Russia's tacit approval of Turkey's offensive in northern Syria has strengthened the pragmatic partnership between these two states. Russia, ostracized and marginalized by the West, aims to secure an alliance with Turkey for three reasons: to emerge from international isolation, to legitimize its actions among the Sunni population of the Arab World⁷⁷, and to minimize the influence of the United States in the Middle East. For Turkey, partnering with Russia serves to increase its bargaining power in relations with the West and help them neutralize Kurdish opposition in the region. However, cooperation between the two countries exacerbates Turkey's geopolitical dependence on its much stronger partner, who has an instrumental approach to the alliance. The operation in Afrin has also brought isolation to Turkey in their fight against the Kurds and has deepened the crisis in its relations with the United States. Con-

⁷⁵ See T. Wójcik, *Wójcik: Turkish Stream, czyli gra o ostatni bastion Rosji na Bałkanach*, Biznes Alert, 17.01.2019, <http://biznesalert.pl/turkish-stream-serbia/>, 07.05.2019.

⁷⁶ M. Marszewski, M. Chudziak, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ M. Chudziak, Sz. Kardaś, W. Rodkiewicz, *Turcja – Rosja: partnerstwo z rozsądku*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 12.10.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2016-10-12/turcja-rosja-partnerstwo-z-rozsadku>, 07.05.2019.

sidering the other disagreements and discrepancies between the two formal allies, this may ultimately threaten the integrity of NATO. For the United States, Turkey's actions are incompatible with U.S. interests and their strategy in the region while directly targeting the only stable U.S. ally in the Syrian Civil War. From Turkey's perspective, the United States is providing complex support to its primary adversary, which generates an existential threat to Turkey.

The analysis above confirms the three research hypotheses outlined in the introduction to this paper.

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