

# A Wall of Despair: The Interplay of the Turkish Wall and Foreign Policy in Syria

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*The wall constructed along the Turkish-Syrian border is one of the new wave of border barriers built in the twenty-first century and represents a radical shift in Turkey's Middle East policy. The decision to erect the "Turkish Wall" was the result of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government's desire to improve relations with the European Union, Russia, and the United States in the context of the Syrian Civil War. This article uses the concept of "fortified boundaries" as its framework to analyze the transformed border.*

"If Turkey wants to be influential in the region, instead of creating an electronic Berlin Wall between itself and its neighbors, it should pursue policies that can overcome the existing walls."

– Ahmet Davutoğlu, eventual foreign minister and prime minister of Turkey<sup>1</sup>

**I**n the 2010s, border stability and international boundaries gained increased importance in global politics due to the risks emerging from unwanted flows of people and goods, thus attracting varying degrees of attention from all states. Refugee flows, transnational terrorism, and smuggling began to weaken the discourse of an increasingly borderless world that prevailed in the earlier twenty-first century, bringing about what has been called "the most intensive and extensive period" of building border walls in history.<sup>2</sup>

The wall that spans Turkey's border with Syria now comes third in length of all walls in the world, after the Great Wall of China and the network of barriers between

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Dr. Sever and Dr. Karadeniz dedicate this article to the people of Hatay Province who lost their lives and loved ones in the 7.8-magnitude earthquake in the region on February 6, 2023. The authors will always remember their October 2021 field trip to Hatay with great appreciation and joy.

1. Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye'nin uluslararası konumu* [Strategic depth: Turkey's international position] (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001), 146.

2. Reece Jones and Corey Johnson, "Border Militarisation and the Re-Articulation of Sovereignty," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41, no. 2 (Apr. 2016): 187, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12115>.

the United States and Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Built between 2015 and 2021, the “Turkish Wall” consists of nine-foot high, six-foot wide concrete blocks accompanied by border patrols and a high-security surveillance system along a frontier stretching 566 miles (911 kilometers).<sup>4</sup> Currently, this border and the Wall symbolize a division between a nation-state, Turkey, and the various autonomous territorial entities within the political borders of a fragmented Syria.

There is no common name for the Wall despite a few alternatives being suggested, including the Great Wall of Turkey (*Türk Seddi*, literally “the Turkish Wall,” but a play on *Çin Seddi*, the Turkish name for the ancient Chinese barrier)<sup>5</sup> and the security wall (*güvenlik duvarı*).<sup>6</sup> Publicly, the Wall has been described as a part of the “Border Physical Security System” (*Sınır Fiziki Güvenlik Sistemi*),<sup>7</sup> but several interviews we conducted with officials revealed that no uniform name is in circulation within the Turkish government.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it is interesting to note that — in contrast to Turkey’s other policy pursuits regarding Syria, especially its cross-border military operations, which have been closely monitored in the press and by policy-makers — the Wall has remained almost “invisible” in both domestic and international politics. Internally, this appears to be a purposeful act to avoid criticisms of a sharp turn in Turkey’s Syria policy, as the Wall represents a radical shift away from the long-defended approach of building bridges with the Arab world. The Wall has even remained unnoticed in public discourse since its completion in 2021, with most people unaware of its existence.

Despite very little publicity about the Wall, the Turkish-Syrian border has received growing scholarly attention, especially in ethnographic, anthropological, and historical sociology studies.<sup>9</sup> This is in line with the growing prominence of anthropological and

3. “Turkey-Syria Border Wall to Be Completed by Spring,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 19, 2017, [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-syria-border-wall-to-be-completed-by-spring-124303](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-syria-border-wall-to-be-completed-by-spring-124303).

4. Zerrin Arslan, Şule Can, and Thomas M. Wilson, “Do Border Walls Work? Security, Insecurity and Everyday Economy in the Turkish-Syrian Borderlands,” *Turkish Studies* 22, no. 5 (2021): 753, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2020.1841642>.

5. Barbora Olejárová, “The Great Wall of Turkey: From ‘the Open Door Policy’ to Building Fortress?” *Border and Regional Studies* 6, no. 2 (2018): 117–33; Rauf Maltaş, “‘Türk Seddi’ nin inşası sürüyor” [“Construction of the Great Wall of Turkey is progressing”], *Anadolu Ajansı*, November 11, 2016, [www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/turk-seddinin-insasi-suruyor/693995](http://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/turk-seddinin-insasi-suruyor/693995).

6. Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, quoted in Turkish Grand National Assembly (hereafter TBMM, from the Turkish *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*), *Plan ve Bütçe Komisyonu tutanak dergisi* [Plan and Budget Committee record bulletin], 18’inci toplantı [18th session], 27. D, 3. Y (November 20, 2019): 13.

7. “Deputy PM (Bülent) Arınç: Border Security System Will Be Built,” *Bianet*, July 23, 2015, <https://bianet.org/english/politics/166220>.

8. This view was also affirmed during interviews with officials from several ministries during a study trip by the authors to Hatay, one of the border provinces.

9. In addition to works cited in this article, see Neşe Özgen, “Sınırın iktisadi antropolojisi: Suriye ve Irak sınırlarında iki kasaba” [“Economic anthropology of the border: Two towns on the borders of Syria and Iraq”], in *Gelenekten geleceğe antropoloji* [Anthropology from tradition to the future], ed. Belkis Kümbetoğlu and Hande Birkalan-Gedik (Istanbul: Epsilon, 2005), 100–129; H. Pınar Şenoğuz, *Community, Change and Border Towns* (London: Routledge, 2018); Deniz Ülke Arıboğan, *Duvar: Tarih geri dönüyor* [Wall: History returns] (Istanbul: İnkılap Kitabevi, 2017), 153–57. There are also various studies dealing with Turkey’s other borders. For instance, see: Özgün E. Topak, “The Biopolitical Border in Practice: Surveillance and Death at the Greece-Turkey Borderzones,” *Environment and Planning D* 32, no. 5 (Oct. 2014): 815–33. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d13031p>.

sociological literature on borders generally.<sup>10</sup> In examining the correlation between the politics of the Turkish Wall and Turkey's foreign relations, this article will be a rare attempt to analyze the border issue from a state and foreign policy perspective. In doing so, the article approaches the Wall not necessarily as a sign of the state's waning sovereignty over its borders, as political theorist Wendy Brown and others have suggested,<sup>11</sup> but more as an indication of its resurgence.

The global wave of fortifying frontiers, which the Turkish Wall is a part of, reminds us of the legacy of borders as indicating "the domain of states."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, whatever is done on a border provides in-depth clues about the trajectory of a state's security and foreign policies. The functions of the Turkish Wall as a security provider, identity protector, or performative tool have resulted in several foreign policy outcomes and thus influenced Ankara's international relations. However, among these functions, providing security will be the main point of inquiry here. Our article is based upon both primary sources — parliamentary debates, official statements, semi-structured interviews with officials, local newspapers, and national and international media — and relevant secondary sources.

The article will proceed with an examination of the changing nature of borders and border walls in the context of recent studies. We limit this study to the practice of administering the "physical functions of the border" with the tangible properties of walls rather than their social constructions or symbolic representations.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, the concept of "fortified boundaries" developed by political scientists Ron Hassner and Jason Wittenberg — alongside political sociologist William Walters's categorization of geopolitical boundaries — will be used to build a conceptual framework for analyzing Turkey's transformed border with Syria.<sup>14</sup> In this framework, the decision to construct a wall will be taken as an unprecedented sign of the ambitions of the Turkish

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10. Various aspects of borders have been included in studies by scholars of migration, ethics, biopolitics, and globalization. See Miriam Ticktin, "Border Walls," *Berlin Journal* no. 33 (Fall 2019): 74–76; Miriam Ticktin, "Borders: A Story of Political Imagination," *Borderlands Journal* 21, no. 1 (Jan. 2022): 138–70. <https://doi.org/10.21307/borderlands-2022-007>; Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, "Between Inclusion and Exclusion: On the Topology of Global Space and Borders," *Theory, Culture and Society* 29, nos. 4–5 (July–Sept. 2012): 58–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276412443569>; Didier Fassin, "Policing Borders, Producing Boundaries: The Governmentality of Immigration in Dark Times," *American Review of Anthropology* 40 (Oct. 2011): 213–26. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145847>.

11. Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2017). Brown's views are widely shared by many scholars. For examples, see William A. Callahan, "The Politics of Walls: Barriers, Flows, and the Sublime," *Review of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (July 2018): 456–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210517000638>; Karen E. Till et al., "Interventions in the Political Geographies of Walls," *Political Geography* 33 (Mar. 2013): 52–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2012.11.005>.

12. Seda Altuğ, "The Turkish-Syrian Border and Politics of Difference in Turkey and Syria (1921–1939)," in *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State*, ed. Matthieu Cimino (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 48.

13. Ron E. Hassner and Jason Wittenberg, "Barriers to Entry: Who Builds Fortified Boundaries and Why?" *International Security* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2015): 159. [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00206](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00206).

14. Hassner and Wittenberg, "Barriers to Entry"; William Walters, "Mapping Schengenland: Denaturalizing the Border," *Environment and Planning D* 20, no. 5 (Oct. 2002): 561–80. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d274t>.

government in the late 2010s, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to improve its worsening relations with the European Union, Russia, and the United States. At the time, serious disagreements over Syria had long been evident.

Before focusing on the Wall and its foreign policy implications, it is imperative to recount the different layers of Turkey's border security policy to map out its particularities. Despite the construction of the Wall, the Turkish government's military interventions in Syria from 2016 to 2020 and its implementation of a "buffer zone" there reveal an unusual double-layered border area. Confronting cross-border challenges via the Wall for defensive purposes was unexpectedly accompanied by "an offensive instrument" (i.e., the buffer zone) inside Syria to carry out military operations against the emerging Kurdish-led autonomous administration in northern Syria.<sup>15</sup>

Both the building of the Wall and the creation of this buffer zone — a strip 75 miles (120 km) in width and 19 miles (30 km) in depth — were hard choices for Ankara but were simultaneously put into effect.<sup>16</sup> It could therefore be argued that Turkey's border security policy not only built the Wall on the borderline but extended the horizon of the state beyond the border via military incursions. Although international relations scholars David Carter and Paul Poast have described walls as attractive alternatives to military interventions,<sup>17</sup> the Wall was not regarded as such in the Turkish case. In some places, the Wall actually divides Turkish territory from the buffer zone.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, unlike most border barriers, the Turkish Wall does not appear to be aimed at removing Turkey from Syrian affairs, as evidenced by the country's concomitant and ongoing military operations across the border.

### *FROM A BORDERLESS WORLD TO THE AGE OF WALLS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS OF BORDERS AND BORDER WALLS*

The traditional approach to studying borders as lines that divide states, naturally or historically, is incomplete. While borders continue to define the territorial limits of states and identify nations within enclosed territories, the traditional image of a border as "a line in the sand" has long been contested.<sup>19</sup> Borders are no longer accepted as

15. The term *buffer zone* is used here to define the Turkish military presence inside Syria instead of other names preferred by the military, such as "security zone," "safe zone," or "peace corridor." Some areas of the buffer zone are also called by the name of the military operation in which they were established, such as the Olive Branch zone. Interview by the authors with A, a Presidency of Migration Management official, October 26, 2021, Hatay; İbrahim İrdem et al. *Türkiye'deki Suriyeliler ve sınır ötesi güvenli bölge* [Syrians in Turkey and the cross-border safe zone] (Ankara: Polis Akademisi Yayınları, 2020).

16. İrdem et al., *Türkiye'deki Suriyeliler* [Syrians in Turkey], 85.

17. David B. Carter and Paul Poast, "Why Do States Build Walls? Political Economy, Security, and Border Stability," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 2 (Feb. 2017): 246, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715596776>.

18. For more on the four military operations Turkey conducted during the construction of the Wall, see Francesco Siccardi, "How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy," Carnegie Europe, *Working Paper* (Sept. 2021).

19. Mark B. Salter, "Theory of the /: The Suture and Critical Border Studies," *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (2012): 736–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2012.660580>.

only delimited lines but as zones, processes, or institutions. At the same time, borders are mostly accepted as social constructs. As a result, there is no unified theory to study them.<sup>20</sup> Yet, popular approaches such as critical border studies argue that “borders are not static, and can take on meaning through movements and flows.”<sup>21</sup>

In this context, William Walters addressed three types of territorial borders: geopolitical, national, and biopolitical.<sup>22</sup> While the former two remind us of traditional interpretations of borders, the biopolitical border refers to a more current understanding. The geopolitical approach defines “the border as a physical geographical line” determining territorial sovereignty and positions the border issue in the realm of “high politics.” On the other hand, the national border approach focuses on how borders represent the territorial boundaries of populations on the grounds of national unity. In this respect, borders are closely linked with “homogenizing” and the “standardization” of the nation-state.<sup>23</sup> Finally, having been inspired by philosopher Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower and the role of institutions, Walters singled out biopolitics as the most relevant trajectory for the study of borders today.

In the biopolitical approach, borders are often classified according to their permeability, and in this context, they are then classified most frequently as either hard or soft. A hard border refers to one under rigorous control through aggressive management — such as the erection of border walls or mining — whereas a soft border manifests accessibility by creating contact places via economic integration or other means.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, borders may be transformed from hard to soft or vice versa in a short space of time. In this respect, Ron Hassner and Jason Wittenberg developed another category of borders: *fortified boundaries*. This concept refers exclusively to a border that has been strengthened asymmetrically with a physical obstacle making it less impermeable than a militarized frontier. Fortified boundaries carry three common features: First, they are constructed to create “border control, not military defense or territorial demarcation.”<sup>25</sup> Second, these boundaries are physical barriers making the border impermeable by increasing the cost for non-state actors trying to pass through it. Third, fortified boundaries are asymmetrically enforced by states that perceive threats more than their counterparts on the other side of the border. Hassner and Wittenberg argued that fortified borders are empowered if they are included in “a broader repertoire of border control measures” like “control of territory on the far side of the fortified boundary.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, fortified boundaries show that borders have become harder in recent years but have also become more expansive.

By the end of the 2000s, constructing border walls and fortifying them became almost a routine practice in many states, regardless of their political regimes or eco-

20. David Newman, “The Lines that Continue to Separate Us: Borders in Our ‘Borderless’ World,” *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 2 (Apr. 2006): 145, <https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132506ph599xx>.

21. Callahan, “Politics of Walls,” 460.

22. Walters, “Mapping Schengenland,” 561–62.

23. Walters, “Mapping Schengenland,” 563, 564, 566.

24. For the complexity of the hard/soft border divide, see Joan DeBardeleben (ed.), *Soft or Hard Borders? Managing the Divide in an Enlarged Europe* (London: Routledge, 2005).

25. Hassner and Wittenberg, “Barriers to Entry,” 160.

26. Hassner and Wittenberg, “Barriers to Entry,” 187.

conomic capacity.<sup>27</sup> In 2018 the number of border walls reached more than 75 worldwide and thus reversed the expectation of an increasingly borderless world that emerged in 1989 with the downfall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>28</sup> Increased fortifications after the September 11 attacks on the United States in 2001 accelerated borders' securitization — the discursive of political matters to the realm of security.<sup>29</sup> A “border industrial complex” has emerged to support this securitization worldwide. It has been predicted that, by 2025, the border security market will grow to \$65–68 billion.<sup>30</sup>

In this global context, the reasons why states build walls and the implications of wall politics have become a significant area of research.<sup>31</sup> Explanations for the objectives of wall-building seem to be moving away from finding one common cause toward treating every new barrier as the outcome of its own particular circumstances.<sup>32</sup>

From a security perspective, it is widely accepted that walled borders illustrate states' responses “to real or imagined threats to national sovereignty.”<sup>33</sup> David Carter and Paul Poast specified economic migrations as the main reason for the emergence of border walls.<sup>34</sup> Hassner and Wittenberg underlined the security function of walls in repelling non-state actors, immigrants, smugglers, refugees, insurgents, and terrorists from crossing fortified borders. Walls' physical appearances enhance border control, and the fact that they are different from conventional militarized borders due to their asymmetry means they have become useful tools for states wishing to fortify their borders.<sup>35</sup> In addition to providing security, walls show “tangible evidence” performing governments' act of “doing something” independent of its effectiveness, and in some cases, it is more about perception, as a wall provides “the image of a fortified border.”<sup>36</sup>

27. Joshua Hagen, review of *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, by Wendy Brown, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101, no. 6 (2011): 1393, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2011.603648>; Reece Jones, “Why Build a Border Wall?” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 71.

28. Christopher Linebarger and Alex Braithwaite, “Do Walls Work? The Effectiveness of Border Barriers in Containing the Cross-Border Spread of Violent Militancy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (Sept. 2020): 487, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa035>.

29. See Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

30. Mark Akkerman, *Financing Border Wars: The Border Industry, Its Financiers and Human Rights* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2021), 1.

31. Elisabeth Vallet (ed.), *Borders, Fences and Walls: State of Insecurity?* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

32. Élisabeth Vallet and Charles-Philippe David, “Introduction: The (Re)Building of the Wall in International Relations,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 27, no. 2 (2012): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2012.687211>.

33. Jessica Becker, “Speaking to The Wall: Reconceptualizing the US-Mexico Border ‘Wall’ from the Perspective of a Realist and Constructivist Theoretical Framework in International Relations,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 36, no. 3 (2021): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2018.1482775>.

34. David B. Carter and Paul Poast, “Why Do States Build Walls? Political Economy, Security, and Border Stability,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 2 (Feb. 2017): 240, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715596776>.

35. Hassner and Wittenberg, “Barriers to Entry,” 160.

36. Elisabeth Vallet, “Introduction,” in *Borders, Fences and Walls*, 3. See also Becker, “Speaking to The Wall,” 20.

As underscored, “each wall tells its own story” and needs to be evaluated according to its circumstances.<sup>37</sup> Many factors, exogenous and endogenous and of varying complexity, could be the driving force for constructing a border wall. Thus, exploring the possibilities behind border wall construction may provide important insights into the domestic and foreign policies — and the interactions between them — of states building walls.<sup>38</sup>

### *THE TURKISH-SYRIAN BORDER BEFORE THE WALL*

For most of the twentieth century, Turkey and Syria were separated by a hard border. Turkey kept the border fortified as a means of protecting its territorial integrity and national unity against possible Syrian or Syrian-backed hostile actions. However, relations between the two states were significantly improved in the 2000s as a result of a new policy carried out by the Justice and Development Party (AKP, from the Turkish *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), often referred to by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s description of “zero problems with neighbors.”

The Republic of Turkey declared independence in 1923, but it was not until the 1930s that its southeastern border was finalized by a demarcation process with France, which then ruled Syria through a League of Nations mandate. With an increase in smuggling due to the Great Depression, both Turkey and France regarded illicit cross-border trade as “an urgent problem” that needed to be solved.<sup>39</sup> In addition, there was a territorial dispute over the District of Alexandretta, the northwesternmost in the French mandate of Syria, which had a significant ethnic Turkish population. The area was given a special status in 1937 and declared independence as the State of Hatay following a 1938 Franco-Turkish agreement. Hatay then joined Turkey as a province in 1939 after a referendum. While Hatay Province has been a part of Turkey ever since, with a stable border, Syrian governments have continued to claim the area.<sup>40</sup>

During the Cold War, Turkish-Syrian relations were often tense due to the two states’ alignment with the global conflicts’ rival blocs, with Turkey joining the Western bloc and Syria, after a spate of coups, forming close ties with the Soviet Union and its allies. The intensity of the ideological divide between the two blocs was echoed in border control. Fortification of the border on the Turkish side began in 1947, to which Syria “responded with frontier forts and posts.”<sup>41</sup> After “the period of border markers,” from the 1920s to early 1950s, the Turkish-Syrian frontier became impermeable and securitized when Ankara decided to place landmines along it. In addition to mines,

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37. Tim Marshall, *Divided: Why We’re Living in an Age of Walls* (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2018), 42.

38. Aslı S. Okyay, “Turkey’s Post-2011 Approach to Its Syrian Border and Its Implications for Domestic Politics,” *International Affairs* 93, no. 4 (July 2017): 836, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix068>.

39. Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, “The Great Depression and the Making of Turkish-Syrian Border, 1921–1939,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 2 (May 2020): 312, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743820000021>.

40. Lacin Idil Oztig, “Syria and Turkey: Border Security Priorities,” *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 117–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12404>.

41. Oztig, “Syria and Turkey,” 118.

barbed wire fences and watchtowers were introduced later on during the Cold War.<sup>42</sup> As a result, human mobility — apart from smuggling — became very limited between the two sides of the border, despite cross-border family ties, kinship, and ethno-religious affinities. By the 1990s, “[m]ore than half of [Turkey’s] Syrian border” had mines on it,<sup>43</sup> and relations between the two countries began to deteriorate rapidly. Syria had been supporting an armed insurgency against the Turkish state by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK, from the Kurdish *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) until 1998, when Ankara threatened Damascus with force unless it stopped, which it did.

Relations improved rapidly following the AKP’s accession to power in 2002. Serving first as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s chief foreign policy adviser, then as foreign minister from 2009 to 2014, and as prime minister himself from 2014 to 2016, Ahmet Davutoğlu described these circumstances as one of “the most striking example of the success of Turkey’s policy of zero problems with [the] neighbours.”<sup>44</sup> The 2000s were a golden age of Turkish-Syrian relations, marked by the de-securitization of the border. In line with Davutoğlu’s theory of strategic depth, Ankara abandoned its “traditional concept of borders as barriers rather than places of contact.”<sup>45</sup> In 2003, Turkey signed the 1997 Ottawa treaty banning landmines, and the process of demining the border started.<sup>46</sup> On October 13, 2009, ministers and businesspeople from both Turkey and Syria visited the border and made a show of pulling down the old-fashioned barriers in front of reporters.<sup>47</sup> That year, both countries lifted visa requirements, and travel between the two reached new heights. Syrian tourist visits to Turkey increased from 154,000 in 2003 to 500,000 at the end of the decade.<sup>48</sup> An emerging neoliberal border policy appeared to be in full swing, with plans to formulate a visa program along the lines of the open borders prevailing in Europe since the Schengen Agreement in 1985 — called Şamgen in reference to Şam/al-Sham, the Turkish name for Damascus and the Arabic name for historical Syria, respectively — and a free trade zone.<sup>49</sup> While still foreign minister, Davutoğlu described the Turkish-Syrian border as meaningless, stating that Ankara would “transform the borders from a wall into a door as the real meaning of border gates. Doors are for entry, they are open. You can’t open a wall.”<sup>50</sup>

42. Ramazan Aras, *The Wall: The Making and Unmaking of the Turkish-Syrian Border* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 71–72, 92.

43. Oztig, “Syria and Turkey,” 119.

44. Özlem Demirtas-Bagdonas, “Reading Turkey’s Foreign Policy on Syria: The AKP’s Construction of a Great Power Identity and the Politics of Grandeur,” *Turkish Studies* 15, no.1 (2014): 139, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2014.890412>.

45. Olejárová, “The Great Wall,” 130.

46. Aras, *The Wall*, 80.

47. “Suriye ile aramızdaki bariyerler kaldırıldı” [“The barriers between us and Syria have been lifted”], *Yeni Şafak*, October 12, 2009, [www.yenisafak.com/gundem/suriye-ile-aramizdaki-bariyerler-kaldirildi-216570](http://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/suriye-ile-aramizdaki-bariyerler-kaldirildi-216570).

48. Damla Aras, “Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill, The Syrian Uprising,” *Middle East Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 45.

49. N. Ela Gokalp Aras and Zeynep Sahin Mencutek, “The International Migration and Foreign Policy Nexus: The Case of Syrian Refugee Crisis and Turkey,” *Migration Letters* 12, no. 3 (2015): 199, <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v12i3.274>.

50. Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Sayın bakanımızın ikinci Büyükelçiler Konferansı Değerlendirme Toplantısı Vesilesiyle Mardin Artuklu Üniversitesi’nde Yaptığı Konuşma, 09 Ocak 2010” [“His Excellency the Minister’s address to the second Ambassadors’ Conference evaluation

This transformation came to an abrupt end in 2011. Not long after the anti-regime protests began in the Syrian city of Dar‘a, all previous relations between the AKP government and its Syrian counterpart ceased suddenly. By that November, Prime Minister Erdoğan had begun calling for Syrian president Bashar al-Asad to step down, and ties between the two countries were broken the following year.<sup>51</sup>

### *THE RELUCTANT CONSTRUCTION OF THE TURKISH WALL*

After the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the status quo on the Turkish-Syrian border changed dramatically. The Syrian army eventually lost control of over 85 percent of the country’s land borders.<sup>52</sup> In the first few years of the conflict, the Turkish-Syrian border came to be controlled by non-state armed groups, including Syrian opposition militias, Kurdish groups like the People’s Defense Units (YPG, from the Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*), and jihadist groups like the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). As a result of the fighting, the world witnessed millions of refugees leave Syria.<sup>53</sup>

At the onset of the conflict, the Turkish government did not anticipate the ability of the Asad regime to hold onto power and “expected a maximum of 100,000 Syrian refugees to come” into the country.<sup>54</sup> The first group of refugees — numbering 252 — arrived in Turkey in April 2011, but numbers quickly increased to 14,237 by January 2012 and up to 1,519,286 two years later.<sup>55</sup> With such high numbers of refugees coming in, the government attempted to curb the flow, and the “open door” policy was closed.<sup>56</sup>

[Continued from preceding page]

meeting at Mardin Artuklu University, January 9, 2010”], [www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-ikin-ci-buyukelciler-konferansi-degerlendirme-toplantisi-vesilesiyle-mardin-artuklu-universitesi\\_nde-yaptigi-ko.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-ikin-ci-buyukelciler-konferansi-degerlendirme-toplantisi-vesilesiyle-mardin-artuklu-universitesi_nde-yaptigi-ko.tr.mfa).

51. For more, see Ömer Önhon, *Suriye: Büyükelçinin gözünden* [Syria: Through the eyes of the ambassador] (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 2021).

52. Fabrice Balanche, “The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty over Syria,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *PolicyWatch* no. 3433 (Feb. 2021): 2.

53. In this article we use the term *refugee* to refer to Syrians who came to Turkey after 2011, but we should note that they are officially in the country with a “temporary protection status.” Due to the geographic limitations of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Turkey regards only those fleeing events in Europe as refugees. For details, see Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, Presidency of Migration Management, “Temporary Protection in Turkey,” <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection-in-turkey>. Turkey “is home to the world’s largest refugee population, with almost 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection and close to 370,000 refugees and asylum-seekers of other nationalities.” UN High Commissioner for Refugees, “Türkiye: Overview,” [www.unhcr.org/tr/en/overview-2](http://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/overview-2).

54. Ayhan Kaya, “Which Way to Go? Understanding Migration Policies and Their Influence on EU-Turkey Relations,” FEUTURE (Future of EU-Turkey Relations), *Extended Voice* (June 2019): 3.

55. M. Murat Erdoğan, *Suriyeliler barometresi 2019: Suriyelilerle uyum içinde yaşamın çerçevesi* [Syrians Barometer 2019: A Framework for Achieving Social Cohesion with Syrians in Turkey] (Ankara: Orion Kitabevi, 2020), xx.

56. Burcu Toğral Koca, “Deconstructing Turkey’s ‘Open Door’ Policy towards Refugees from Syria,” *Migration Letters* 12, no. 3 (Sept. 2015): 209–25. <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v12i3.275>.

At the same time refugees were coming through Turkey's open door, anti-Asad Syrian opposition groups began to cross the border to take shelter when necessary, leading to Turkey's increased involvement in Syrian politics. In addition, jihadists and arms smugglers benefited from the open border policy to enter and leave Syria. In line with scholar Aslı Okyay, we would categorize Turkey's border management policies as having "gradually and partially" hardened in 2013 and 2014 before becoming fully securitized the following year.<sup>57</sup> With the YPG and ISIS solidifying control on the Syrian side of the border, Ankara's serious security concerns led to the Davutoğlu government declaring its July 2015 decision to build the Wall.<sup>58</sup>

*PARTIAL FORTIFICATION OF THE BORDER IN 2013–14:  
THE LEAD-UP TO THE DECISION TO BUILD THE WALL*

While Kurds had long been a demographic majority in much of northern Syria along the Turkish border, the Democratic Union Party (PYD, from the Kurdish *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) turned this into a territorial political reality in November 2013 with the declaration of the Interim Transitional Administration, known as Rojava (Kurdish for "the west," short for *Rojavayê Kurdistanê*, "Western Kurdistan").<sup>59</sup> As the PYD's armed wing, the People's Defense Units (YPG), expanded its control over the Syrian side of the border, so did Syrian Arab rebel groups — including jihadists, other Islamists, and nationalists. In 2014, both the PYD and the Turkish-supported Free Syrian Army (FSA), an umbrella group of Syrian rebel militias, lost ground to the rising Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), creating a situation where Turkey bordered the expanding jihadist organization.<sup>60</sup>

Meanwhile, Turkey had been gradually and partially hardening the border in 2013 through 2014, with small-scale fencing and new limitations introduced for passage. Indeed, during our interviews, Turkish foreign ministry officials also underlined that the eventual decision to build the Wall had not been planned but grew out of the need to control the border due to increasing refugee flows and the transnational terrorist threat.<sup>61</sup> It was in 2013 that a few Turkish officials first mentioned the possibility of building a security wall for border enforcement. The policy initially seemed neither well grounded nor decisive, with several senior state officials making contradictory statements on the issue.<sup>62</sup> That same year, the first temporary fences were built. After two car bombings on May 11 in the Turkish town of Reyhanlı near the border, which

57. Okyay, "Turkey's Post-2011 Approach," 837.

58. "Bülent Arınc: HDP'li yöneticiler neden o grubun içinde yoktu?" ["Why were HDP leaders not in that group?"], *Hürriyet*, July 23, 2015, [www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/bulent-arinc-hdpli-yoneticiler-neden-o-grubun-icinde-yoktu-29616141](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/bulent-arinc-hdpli-yoneticiler-neden-o-grubun-icinde-yoktu-29616141).

59. Fehim Taştekin, *Rojava: Kürtlerin zamanı* [Rojava: The time of the Kurds] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016), 16.

60. Okyay, "Turkey's Post-2011 Approach," 835–36.

61. Interview by Radiye Funda Karadeniz with B, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official from Ankara, April 30, 2021, via Zoom; interview by the authors with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, October 25, 2021, Hatay.

62. Aras, *The Wall*, 201.

was “the first major spillover of the Syrian conflict” into Turkey,<sup>63</sup> authorities declared their intention to enhance physical border security with the construction of barriers at specific places along the border.<sup>64</sup> A protocol between the Ministry of Interior and the army was signed about building a security wall.<sup>65</sup>

In late 2013, the construction of eight miles (or thirteen kilometers) of wall separating the Turkish city of Nusaybin and the Syrian city of Qamishli, both mostly inhabited by Kurds, caused protests on both sides of the border. The Wall was believed to have been built to prevent contact between Kurds in the two states.<sup>66</sup> Within Turkey, opposition to the Wall was limited to members of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP, from the Turkish *Bariş ve Demokrasi Partisi*), the pro-Kurdish leftist faction, and the Republican People’s Party (CHP, from the Turkish *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), the main opposition party.<sup>67</sup> At this stage, some legislators submitted written queries to Prime Minister Erdoğan, calling the barrier a “wall of shame” and a “wall of separation” between Kurds and Turks.<sup>68</sup> Defense Minister İsmet Yılmaz pointed to the government’s difficult position in controlling the Syrian border and tried to justify the Wall’s construction on security grounds by citing examples from Israel, the United States, and Greece.<sup>69</sup> In response to criticisms of the Wall in Nusaybin, the Interior Ministry stated that it was built for humanitarian purposes to protect people, and declared that it would not extend to the entire length of the border.<sup>70</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç also stated, “We prioritize the security of our citizens and therefore apply some temporary precautions. If what is done there is called a wall, it is not a wall. A barbed wire will be placed over the existing structure, as we implemented in other places before.”<sup>71</sup> The government was thus reluctant to call the emerging physical structure on the border a wall, even though it was just that.

During our interviews, it was understood that local governments were the first to demand that border control measures be increased against the growing threats of refugee flows and terrorist attacks.<sup>72</sup> For some military officials, the main reason to build a wall was the lack of administrative standards, as localities on the border had different border policies. For example, severe preventive measures, like those implemented in

63. Okyay, “Turkey’s Post-2011 Approach,” 839.

64. Dasha Afanasieva, “Turkey Builds Wall in Token Effort to Secure Border with Syria,” *Reuters*, May 5, 2014, [www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-turkey-wall-idUSBREA4409Z20140505](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-turkey-wall-idUSBREA4409Z20140505).

65. “Suriye sınırına duvar protokolü” [“Protocol for the Syrian border wall”], *Milliyet*, May 25, 2013, [www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/1713695](http://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/1713695).

66. “BDP, Suriye sınırında mitinge hazırlanıyor” [“The BDP is preparing a rally on the Syrian border”], *Mardin Life*, November 5, 2013, [www.mardinlife.com/bdp-suriye-sinirinda-mitinge-hazirlaniyor.html](http://www.mardinlife.com/bdp-suriye-sinirinda-mitinge-hazirlaniyor.html).

67. Aras, *The Wall*, 203; Mustafa Sezgin Tanrikulu et al., *Meclis araştırma önergesi [Parliamentary inquiry proposal]*, no 1197, TBMM, 24. D, 4. Y (January 8, 2014).

68. Bingöl MP İdris Baluken in TBMM tutanak dergisi [Parliament record bulletin], 24. D, 4. Y, 60. C, 10. B (October 30, 2013): 863–65.

69. TBMM tutanak dergisi [Parliament record bulletin], 24. D, 4. Y, 63. C, 22. B (November 27, 2013): 29.

70. Çağıl Kasapoğlu, “Nusaybin’de duvara karşı ölüm orucu” [“Hunger strike against the wall in Nusaybin”], *BBC*, November 1, 2013, [www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2013/11/131101\\_nusaybin\\_duvar](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2013/11/131101_nusaybin_duvar).

71. “Arınç: Nusaybin’deki duvar değil, tel örgü” [“It is not a wall in Nusaybin, but a wire fence”], *Yüksekova Haber*, November 4, 2013, [www.yuksekovahaber.com.tr/haber/arinc-nusaybindeki-duvar-degil-tel-orgu-115730.htm](http://www.yuksekovahaber.com.tr/haber/arinc-nusaybindeki-duvar-degil-tel-orgu-115730.htm).

72. Interview, A, Presidency of Migration Management official, Oct. 2021, Hatay.

Hatay Province, were unable to be applied in the nearby provinces of Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa because of the strength of cross-border kinship relations. Therefore, the construction of the Wall was planned for only those administratively uncontrollable areas along the border, with the central government claiming that hindering kinship relations was out of the question.<sup>73</sup>

Not long after the protests against the Nusaybin-Qamishli border barrier in 2013, the central government halted construction so as not to endanger Turkey's then-ongoing peace process with groups representing Kurds inside the country. However, partial securitization of the border continued in the following year.<sup>74</sup> By 2014, the 8-mile-long wall had been connected to 207 miles (333 km) of ditches and 99 miles (160 km) of barbed wire along the border.<sup>75</sup> This fortification went in tandem with the implementation of an "unofficial 'close[d]-door' policy," which had begun in 2012, to register Syrians coming across the border.<sup>76</sup> When the pressure at the border had grown significantly by early 2015, Turkish officials remained reluctant on the issue of extending the Wall along the entire frontier with Syria, and thus only some partial barriers were built. At the time, they were arguing that ISIS had already seized a significant portion of the territory on the Syrian side, so walling off such a distance would be expensive and require a huge number of personnel.<sup>77</sup>

#### *PHYSICALLY DEMARCATING THE BORDER AFTER MID-2015: CONSTRUCTING THE WALL*

The need for border control had increased by mid-2015, which led Ankara to take asymmetric precautions and strengthen physical demarcation. Despite Turkey's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its eastern borders marking the outer limits of that alliance, the West's campaign against ISIS in Syria did not alleviate the power vacuum emerging there and did not satisfy Turkey's interest in establishing a safe zone.

As ISIS control of the border and its spillovers intensified in 2015, so too did pressure on Ankara from Washington and Brussels due to growing security transborder risks. With much of the border remaining porous and thousands of Syrians coming over, Turkey was accused of providing sanctuary for radical jihadist groups.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, in

73. Murat Yeşiltaş, "Neighboring a Civil War: Turkey's Border Security with Syria," *SETA Analysis* no. 17 (Oct. 2015): 18.

74. Arslan, Can, and Wilson, "Do Border Walls Work?" 751.

75. Okay, "Turkey's Post-2011 Approach," 839.

76. N. Ela Gokalp-Aras and Zeynep Sahin-Mencutek, "From Assertive to Opportunist Usage of Mass Migration for Foreign and Asylum Policy: Turkey's Response to the Refugees from Syria" in *Turkish Migration Policy*, ed. Ibrahim Sirkeci and Barbara Pusch (London: Transnational Press, 2016), 104.

77. Ryan Gingeras, "Turkey beyond Borders: A History of Ankara's Attempts to Control the Frontier," *Foreign Affairs*, May 10, 2016, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2016-05-10/turkey-beyond-borders](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2016-05-10/turkey-beyond-borders).

78. Joby Warrick, "Double Game? Even as It Battles ISIS, Turkey Gives Other Extremists Shelter," *Washington Post*, July 10, 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/double-game-even-as-it-battles-isis-turkey-gives-other-extremists-shelter/2016/07/10/8d6ce040-4053-11e6-a66f-aa6c1883b6b1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/double-game-even-as-it-battles-isis-turkey-gives-other-extremists-shelter/2016/07/10/8d6ce040-4053-11e6-a66f-aa6c1883b6b1_story.html); Dmitry Solovyov, "Russia Says Turkey Helps 'Jihadis, Mercenaries' to

areas of the border where ISIS was losing ground, most dramatically after a months-long battle at the Syrian border town of Kobanî (sometimes spelled Kobanê), the PYD and YPG were becoming the primary players, and the Kurdish-led autonomous administration gained ground. This was countered by the Turkish government's withdrawal from the Kurdish peace talks following the June 2015 elections and attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that summer.<sup>79</sup> The securitization of the border and the expansion of the Wall gained further ground amid rising turbulence in the area.

In the face of external pressure, and despite its long-held desire to topple the Asad regime by supporting Syrian opposition forces, Turkey had to take preventive measures against easy border passage. Moreover, the Turkish government was also facing increasing public concern inside the country, especially in the border provinces in the wake of deadly cross-border attacks and the ongoing flow of refugees.

As anthropologist Ramazan Aras underlined, the media in Turkey and abroad were reporting by 2015 that the Turkish-Syrian border had become “a gateway for newly-recruited ISIS fighters and other terror organizations.”<sup>80</sup> That March, as a precaution against intensifying clashes in northern Syria, Turkey closed the two remaining border gates, Öncüpınar in Kilis Province and Cilvegözü in Hatay.<sup>81</sup> After the deadliest ISIS attack in the country up to that point, killing 33 people in the border town of Suruç on July 20, the decision was made to reinforce the whole border with a concrete wall. Thus, Ankara presented ISIS as the leading driver of its wall-building policy — when it was even acknowledged: up until the last minute, any references to the barrier were avoided by government officials.<sup>82</sup>

Eventually, in a reversal of his 2013 statement that had firmly excluded a wall as an option, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç announced that Ankara would extend the barrier along its entire border with Syria as a measure to stop ISIS militants.<sup>83</sup> As the first phase of the expansion began in August 2015, between Reyhanlı and Bükülmez in Hatay,<sup>84</sup> Turkey joined the United States–led Operation Inherent Resolve air campaign against ISIS. The need for physical demarcation of the border was mainly to halt the flow of refugees, foreign fighters, and ISIS terrorists, while

[Continued from preceding page]

Penetrate Syria,” *Reuters*, February 15, 2016, [www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-syria-idUSR4N15Q00C](http://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-syria-idUSR4N15Q00C); David Dolan and Nick Tattersall, “In Fight against Islamic State, Turkey’s Erdogan Sees Chance to Battle Kurds,” *Reuters*, July 27, 2015, [www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-turkey-erdogan-idUKKCN0Q120G20150727](http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-turkey-erdogan-idUKKCN0Q120G20150727).

79. Okayay, “Turkey’s Post-2011 Approach,” 836, 844.

80. Aras, *The Wall*, 200.

81. Ceylan Yeginsu and Karam Shoumali, “Turkey Moves to Close All Gates at Border with Syria,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/03/30/world/europe/turkey-moves-to-close-all-gates-at-border-with-syria.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/30/world/europe/turkey-moves-to-close-all-gates-at-border-with-syria.html).

82. “Arınç: Sınır güvenlik sistemi kurulacak” [“A security system will be established on the border”], *Bianet*, July 23, 2015, <https://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/166210>.

83. “Physical Security System Being Set Up at Turkey-Syria Border,” *Daily Sabah*, July 23, 2015, [www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2015/07/23/physical-security-system-being-set-up-at-turkey-syria-border](http://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2015/07/23/physical-security-system-being-set-up-at-turkey-syria-border); Laura Pitel, “Turkey Continues Construction of Wall along Border with Syria,” *Engineering News-Record*, April 17, 2017, [www.enr.com/articles/41851](http://www.enr.com/articles/41851).

84. Branislav Micko and Martin Riegl, “Towards a Schmittian Theory of Border Hardening: Nomos, Sovereignty, Political Unity and Barriers in the Middle East,” *Geopolitics* 27, no. 1 (2022): 228, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1749840>.

the advancement of the Kurdish YPG militia in Syria and its emboldening of Kurdish groups in Turkey seemed to have played a less direct role in the initial decision to construct the Wall.<sup>85</sup> As already pointed out, the Wall was built not as a deterrent to or a barrier against a traditional sovereign state, like most of the barriers being built along the world's other fortified borders, but to curb transnational terrorism and refugee flows. As Prime Minister Davutoğlu said on December 3, 2015: "There is nothing more difficult than protecting a border on the other side of which there is no political authority. There is no functioning state system or counterpart administration on the other side. At the moment, around 98 kilometers [i.e., 61 miles] of our border seem [to be] under [ISIS] control."<sup>86</sup>

After official approval in July 2015, the building process started on 514 miles (828 km) of the land border, excluding the Orontes and Tigris Rivers.<sup>87</sup> The Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of National Defence, and the Housing Development Administration (*Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı* or TOKİ) were all involved.<sup>88</sup> As has been the case with almost any barrier, the planned wall was to embrace "a heterogeneous range of structures" and would turn the Turkish-Syrian borderland into a zone of surveillance.<sup>89</sup> In addition to the increasing number of military personnel at the border in 2015, the Wall rapidly expanded: from 50 miles (80 km) in February 2016 to 124 miles (200 km) that September to 238 miles (383 km) the following February.<sup>90</sup> By 2021, the Wall's construction covered 530 miles (854 km) of the 566-mile-long border,<sup>91</sup> but the need to improve its surveillance capacity with advanced technology continued.<sup>92</sup>

No details of the actual plan were revealed when the Turkish government declared that it would construct an integrated border security system on the Syrian border.<sup>93</sup> This distanced attitude probably resulted from the government's reluctance to have a border wall that exemplified the dramatic turn in its Syria policy.

The Turkish government's position regarding the Wall seems to conform to political scientist Serghei Golunov's argument that "the decision to construct a fence is usually a choice, not between good and bad, but only between bad options."<sup>94</sup> External demands on Turkey to seal its Syrian border played a large part in deciding to build the Wall, and its construction would have a significant impact on the country's relations with

85. Yeşiltaş, "Neighboring a Civil War," 12, 18–19.

86. "Turkey Gives the Cold Shoulder to US Proposal to Seal Syria Border," *Milliyet*, December 3, 2015, [www.milliyet.com.tr/en/2157790](http://www.milliyet.com.tr/en/2157790).

87. Önder Bozkurt, "Sınır yönetimi alanında yapılan çalışmalar: Sınır ve göç yönetimi" ["Studies in the field of border management: Border and migration management"], *İdarecinin Sesi Dergisi* no. 185 (Sept.–Oct. 2018): 20.

88. Hakan Bostan and Deniz Kuş Demiray, "Türkiye'de düzensiz göçle mücadelede yeni bir yaklaşım: Sınır Güvenlik Duvarı" ["A New Approach to Struggling with Irregular Migration in Turkey: Border Security Wall"], *Türk İdare Dergisi* 91, no. 488 (June 2019): 138–40.

89. Vallet, "Introduction," 3.

90. Okyay, "Turkey's Post-2011 Approach," 839–40.

91. Sedat Ergin, "Amerika, Amerika gibi hareket etmeli" ["America must act like America"], *Hürriyet*, September 12, 2021, [www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/amerika-amerika-gibi-hareket-etmeli-41892878](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/amerika-amerika-gibi-hareket-etmeli-41892878).

92. Interview by the authors with a Turkish military officer at the border, October 25, 2021, Hatay.

93. Aras, *The Wall*, 202.

94. Serghei Golunov, "Border Fences in the Globalizing World: Beyond Traditional Geopolitics and Post-Positivist Approaches," in *Borders, Fences and Walls*, ed. Vallet, 126.

the European Union, Russia, and the United States. The construction also coincided with extraordinary domestic circumstances in Turkey, whereby freedom of expression was constrained after the collapse of the Kurdish peace process in 2015 and the failed July 15 coup attempt the following year.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the politics of Turkey changed dramatically after the latter, and a state of emergency was declared until 2018. The impacts of the coup attempt have been an accelerating factor in the securitization of the border.<sup>96</sup>

As suggested by Ron Hassner and Jason Wittenberg, it is generally accepted that walls only make for effective barriers if they are supported by a range of other border security mechanisms.<sup>97</sup> Thus, the Turkish border has become increasingly fortified with supportive, high-tech installations. As such, the Turkish Wall is similar to other recently built barriers with cement fences, barbed wire, border guards, drones, and night-vision cameras.<sup>98</sup>

Like its counterparts in other countries, the Turkish Wall represents growing cooperation between the security state and profit-seeking companies. It has become a space where growing numbers of Turkish military firms could demonstrate their capabilities. In addition to the state-owned company Aselsan (short for *Askeri Elektronik Sanayi*, Military Electronic Industries),<sup>99</sup> the number of private firms in the security sector has grown enormously, from 56 in 2002 to nearly 1,500 in 2021.<sup>100</sup> However, based on our observations in Hatay Province and interviews, it can be inferred that the Wall is not homogeneously equipped with technological installations in every city it passes through. For instance, in Hatay's Bükülmez area there are no high-tech installations, but in Şanlıurfa Province's Akçakale District, 25 miles (40 km) of the Wall are equipped with a "Smart Border Security System."<sup>101</sup>

Strengthening border security and using drones has also been backed by direct military intervention into Syria.<sup>102</sup> As a result, Turkish state power now enforces the border within the country as well as on the other side.<sup>103</sup> In 2016, "fighting terror at its source" became the official motto for military operations beyond the Wall.<sup>104</sup>

95. Aras, *The Wall*, 13.

96. N. Ela Gokalp Aras and Zeynep Sahin Mencutek, "Border Management and Migration Controls: Turkey Report," RESPOND *Working Paper* no. 15 (Aug. 2019): 60, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3402839>.

97. Hassner and Wittenberg, "Barriers to Entry," 184.

98. Arslan, Can, and Wilson, "Do Border Walls Work?" 753–54; Mark Akkerman, *The Business of Building Walls* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2019).

99. AselsanNET, "Field of Activities: Border Security Systems," [www.aselsanet.com.tr/en-us/field-of-activities/security-systems](http://www.aselsanet.com.tr/en-us/field-of-activities/security-systems).

100. Bahadır Özgür, "Koç'tan Sancak'a: Türkiye'nin 'savaş makinesi'" ["From Koç to Sancak: Turkey's 'war machine'"], *Gazete Duvar*, February 23, 2021, [www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/koctan-sanca-ka-turkiyenin-savas-makinasi-makale-1514116](http://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/koctan-sanca-ka-turkiyenin-savas-makinasi-makale-1514116).

101. Halil Fidan, "Suriye sınırı 'akıllı' sistemle daha güvenli" ["The Syrian border is safer with a 'smart' system"], *Anadolu Ajansı*, January 5, 2019, [www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/suriye-siniri-akilli-sistemle-daha-guvenli/1356451](http://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/suriye-siniri-akilli-sistemle-daha-guvenli/1356451).

102. Elisabeth Vallet and Charles-Philippe David, "Walls of Money: Securitization of Border Discourse and Militarization of Markets," in *Borders, Fences and Walls*, ed. Vallet, 144.

103. Harout Akdedian and Harith Hasan, "State Atrophy and the Reconfiguration of Borderlands in Syria and Iraq: Post-2011 Dynamics," *Political Geography* 80 (June 2020): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102178>.

104. Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, quoted in TBMM, *Plan ve Bütçe Komisyonu tutanak dergisi* [Plan and Budget Committee record bulletin], 17'inci toplantı [17th session], 27. D, 2. Y (November 15, 2018): 11.

*THE WALL AND BEYOND*

To increase the effectiveness of its fortified borders, Turkey changed its security policy in 2016, from one based on defensive measures to a more proactive one, by engaging in military operations in Syria.<sup>105</sup> As President Erdoğan put it during a conference that autumn: “We will no longer wait for the threats [to] come knocking on our door. We will address them right on and resolve them at the source.”<sup>106</sup> Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu also declared in the parliament that this new security strategy had three pillars: “fighting terrorism at its source, uninterrupted operations, and offense rather than defense.”<sup>107</sup> Since 2016, Turkey’s National Security Council documents have consistently declared that its priority is aimed at preventing a “terror corridor” along the country’s southern border and instead to create a “peace corridor.”<sup>108</sup> While construction of the Wall continued, Turkey conducted four military operations in Syria. As a result, the barrier embodied a dual-layered border policy, showing how building walls along borders could differ in function. Ankara advanced Turkey’s territoriality to reinforce national sovereignty by building the Wall but also embraced the state’s extraterritoriality by establishing and enforcing unilateral buffer zones in Syria with its cross-border military operations. These simultaneous actions reveal that Ankara did not see the Wall as the only solution to its challenges in border security.

There are different explanations for this radical shift from a soft to a hard border policy. Ramazan Aras and sociologist Pinar Şenoğuz both discussed the shift as a reaction to Kurdish militias’ increased power in northern Syria.<sup>109</sup> This explanation seems to only partially explain the idea of the Wall, since before the Syrian Civil War, Turkish governments had already seen Kurdish groups across the border as a threat but had never discussed building such a barrier. Our interviews with officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs revealed that the decision to build the Wall was taken unwillingly, and priority was given to border control rather than its symbolic meaning as an identity shift.<sup>110</sup> This telling credits the barrier to the effects of the war, confirming the minority view in the literature that civil conflicts are closely related to border wall construction.<sup>111</sup> During our interviews, military and foreign ministry bureaucrats agreed that the

105. Mesut Özcan, “Türkiye’nin güvenlik anlayışındaki değişim ve Fırat’ın doğusu” [“Changes in Turkey’s concept of security and the east of the Euphrates”], *İnsamer*, October 10, 2019, [https://insamer.com/tr/turkiyenin-guvenlik-anlayisindaki-degisim-ve-firatin-dogusu\\_2415.html](https://insamer.com/tr/turkiyenin-guvenlik-anlayisindaki-degisim-ve-firatin-dogusu_2415.html).

106. “Nothing Can Stop a Nation that Does Not Fear Death,” Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, November 22, 2016, [www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/61094/nothing-can-stop-a-nation-that-does-not-fear-death](http://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/61094/nothing-can-stop-a-nation-that-does-not-fear-death).

107. TBMM, *Plan ve Bütçe Komisyonu tutanak dergisi* [Plan and Budget Committee record bulletin, 24’üncü toplantı [24th session], 27 D., 4. Y (November 26, 2020): 10.

108. Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, Secretariat-General of the National Security Council, meeting notes from July 17, 2017; January 17, 2018; and July 30, 2019.

109. Aras, *The Wall*, 193; H. Pinar Şenoğuz, “Border Contestations, Syrian Refugees and Violence in the Southeastern Margins of Turkey,” *Movements* 3, no. 2, (2017): 165–78.

110. Online interview, B, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official in Ankara, Apr. 2021, Zoom.

111. Katrina L. Browne, “The Borders of Conflict: Three Essays on Border Management and Conflict Escalation” (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, Aug. 2017): 49–84. <https://doi.org/10.7298/X40R9MJW>.

Wall was a necessary step — first, to stop refugees and, second, terrorism.<sup>112</sup> In addition, Turkey's conducting of military operations in Syria *after* the construction of the Wall began to reveal that the barrier was regarded as a means and not an end. Therefore, it can be said that the need to control its borders against transnational actors is what led to the Turkish government to physically fortify its border with Syria, asymmetrically, making the Wall a suitable case to analyze within Hassner and Wittenberg's framework of fortified boundaries.

### *TURKEY'S FOREIGN RELATIONS IN THE SHADOW OF THE WALL*

Until work began on the Wall in 2015, the European Union, United States, and Russia had frequently asked Turkey to seal off its border with Syria as a means to combat terror and curb the flow of refugees. However, this pressure varied according to how much each polity was affected by the Syrian Civil War. Among the three, the EU was by far the most sensitive about the refugee flow because of how many Syrians (and others) were headed there. Brussels also differed from Washington and Moscow in that it had a long-established relationship with Ankara over border control management. On the other hand, the US and Russia were more focused on the porosity of the Turkish-Syrian border in the context of radical Islamist groups.

#### *EU-TURKEY RELATIONS*

In 2015, more than a million refugees reached the doorstep of the EU, causing a crisis and making border security and migration the cornerstone of its relations with Turkey. The country had become a major transit route for Syrians and others trying to enter Europe, bringing about a new “strategic partnership” between Brussels and Ankara.<sup>113</sup> On an ad-hoc basis, this partnership paved the way for interest-led, practical cooperation on border security alongside ongoing collaboration in institutionalizing border management and fortifying frontiers.<sup>114</sup>

Since the 1999 endorsement of Turkey's candidacy for EU membership, bringing the country's migrant and border policy in line with Europe's had been on the agenda of relations between Ankara and Brussels.<sup>115</sup> In 2015, when refugee flows toward Europe began to put pressure on EU member states, there was a short-lived rapprochement between Brussels and Ankara, including the revival of EU accession talks after they had frozen in 2006. However, the EU evaluated cooperation on migration and border security separately from accession, while Turkey preferred to use its buffer state position to revive negotiations.<sup>116</sup> However, Turkey-EU relations over border security have

112. Interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, Oct. 2021, Hatay.

113. Beken Saatçiođlu et al., “The Future of EU-Turkey Relations: A Dynamic Association Framework amidst Conflictual Cooperation,” *FEUTURE Synthesis Paper* (Mar. 2019).

114. Sibel Karadađ, “Extraterritoriality of European Borders to Turkey: An Implementation Perspective of Counteractive Strategies,” *Comparative Migration Studies* 7 (2019): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0113-y>.

115. Karadađ, “Extraterritoriality of European Borders to Turkey,” 10.

116. Angeliki Dimitriadi et al., “EU-Turkey Relations and Irregular Migration: Transactional Cooperation in the Making,” *FEUTURE Online Paper* (Mar. 2018): 11–12, 17.

quietly taken the form of an operational partnership as if Turkey's candidate status were not on the agenda.<sup>117</sup>

In the first phase of the Syrian Civil War, from 2011 to 2013, Ankara had an open-door policy. Most EU states quickly adopted a strict border policy, securitizing the issue of migration. There was no well-integrated border security or refugee policy among EU states, but they came to see the new immigrant challenge as an “existential threat”<sup>118</sup> and eventually began implementing policies that raised doubts about their liberal, cosmopolitan values.<sup>119</sup> Despite Turkey's early contradictory position on refugees with the open-door policy and its condemnation of the EU for not accepting them, Ankara gradually embraced Brussels's aggressive border policy, including the construction of the Wall.<sup>120</sup> This decision did not elicit any particular reaction from Brussels, as some EU member states had already built walls after the securitization of the refugee issue. Several took other extraordinary measures on their borders, militarizing them — even those shared with other EU states. As early as May 2011, Denmark disregarded the Schengen agreement and reintroduced border controls.<sup>121</sup> In 2013, Greece became the first EU country to build a wall on its border with Turkey. The European Commission publicly opposes land walls and does not finance their construction but leaves the decision to build to its individual member states. By 2017, within “EU borders or inside the Schengen area,” 13 walls had been constructed after migration was labeled as a threat to state security.<sup>122</sup>

Meanwhile, Turkey's construction of the Wall was also in line with the externalization of the EU's border policy, aimed at supporting and tightening border controls beyond Europe.<sup>123</sup> Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding in May 2012 with the European Border and Coast Agency (Frontex, from the French *Frontières extérieures*, “external borders”), followed in February 2014 by a renewable action plan for cooperation. The EU adopted a concentric governance model to manage migration and border security, with three circles consisting of: member states, “candidate countries aligning their border legislation with the Schengen acquis,” and “transit countries contributing to enhanced transit checks.”<sup>124</sup> According to this model, Turkey's position is somewhat awkward, being in the second circle because of its candidate status but being treated as a transit country in the third.

In March 2016, Brussels and Ankara agreed “to end irregular migration from Turkey to the EU and replace it with legal channels of resettlement of refugees to the

117. Çiğdem Nas, “The EU's Approach to the Syrian Crisis: Turkey as a Partner,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 16, no. 62 (2019): 64, <https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.588912>.

118. Jones and Johnson, “Border Militarisation,” 193.

119. Andrey Makarychev, “Bordering and Identity-Making in Europe after the 2015 Refugee Crisis,” *Geopolitics* 23, no.4 (2018): 750, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1499380>.

120. Koca, “Deconstructing Turkey's ‘Open Door’ Policy,” 215.

121. Jean-Jacques Roche, “Walls and Borders in a Globalized World: The Paradoxical Revenge of Territorialization,” in *Borders, Fences and Walls*, ed. Vallet, 111.

122. Ainhoa Ruiz Benedicto and Pere Brunet, “Building Walls: Fear and Securitization in the European Union,” trans. María José Oliva Parada, Centre Delàs report no. 35 (Sept. 2018): 5–7.

123. Theodore Baird, “Functional Actorness? Border Security in the EU and Turkey,” *International Journal of Public Administration* 38, no.12 (2015): 851, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2015.1015548>.

124. Melanie Bonnici Bennett, “The Refugee Crisis and the EU's Externalisation of Integrated Border Management to Libya and Turkey,” *College of Europe EU Diplomacy Paper* no. 6 (Dec. 2018): 14.

EU.” In return for resuming admission talks, Brussels offered the liberalization of visa regulations for Turkish citizens and €3 billion (around \$3.4 billion at the time of the agreement) in financial assistance in exchange for Ankara’s cooperation on curbing the refugee flows.<sup>125</sup>

With EU cooperation, Turkey revised its border control policy and introduced a single Integrated Border Management Bureau.<sup>126</sup> However, border control is still managed by five other Turkish government bodies.<sup>127</sup> Additionally, there was no special force formed for border security, which is still provided by the main branch of the army, the Turkish Land Forces.<sup>128</sup> By early 2018, the EU had provided the Turkish government with more than €80 million (\$98.6 million at the time) in security and surveillance technology for its borders. Accordingly, the Turkish arms company Otokar had been given €35.6 million (\$43.9 million) to produce Cobra II border patrol cars.<sup>129</sup> However, Brussels did not withhold criticisms of Ankara’s human rights violations.<sup>130</sup>

The fortified Turkish-Syrian border has become a display of practical cooperation between Ankara and Brussels while membership negotiations remain deadlocked. Meanwhile, with regard to Turkey’s pushing the outer limits of the Syrian border, the EU backed the country’s right of self-defense against attacks by the Islamic State organization (ISIS) and turned a blind eye to the Turkish military’s cross-border operations.<sup>131</sup> Despite disagreements over the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) and the People’s Defense Forces (YPG), which Turkey considers terrorist organizations while many EU member states give them support, both Ankara and Brussels agreed to work together for the sake of Syria’s political stability. The EU has continued to pursue humanitarian assistance programs such as funding brick housing in the Turkish-controlled town of Atma just beyond the Wall.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, Frontex training on data collection and monthly payments to Syrian refugees continue. Yet, Ankara may be tempted to use the migrants as a trump card at some point due to its disappointments with the long-delayed membership negotiations — or out of desperation in the face of possible future refugee flows.<sup>133</sup>

125. European Commission, “Implementing the EU-Turkey Agreement: Questions and Answers,” April 4, 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/MEMO\\_16\\_1221](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/MEMO_16_1221). Exchange rates approximated based on data from Laurent Pelé, “Historical Rates,” FXTOP, <https://fxtop.com/en/historical-exchange-rates.php>.

126. Bennett, “The Refugee Crisis,” 22.

127. Baird, “Functional Actorness?” 854.

128. Delegation of the European Union to Türkiye, “EU Supports Stronger Border Management in Türkiye,” December 20, 2022, [www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/turkiye/eu-supports-stronger-border-management-turkiye\\_en](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/turkiye/eu-supports-stronger-border-management-turkiye_en); Republic of Turkey, Hatay Province, “Entegre sınır yönetimi çalıştayı Hatay’da yapıldı” [“Integrated border management workshop held in Hatay”], February 17, 2020, [www.hatay.gov.tr/entegre-sinir-yonetimi-calistayi-hataydayapildi](http://www.hatay.gov.tr/entegre-sinir-yonetimi-calistayi-hataydayapildi).

129. Maximilian Popp, “EU Money Helped Fortify Turkey’s Border,” *Spiegel International* March 29, 2018, [www.spiegel.de/international/world/firing-at-refugees-eu-money-helped-fortify-turkey-s-border-a-1199667.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/firing-at-refugees-eu-money-helped-fortify-turkey-s-border-a-1199667.html).

130. European Commission, “Turkey 2015 Report,” *Staff Working Document* no. 216 (Nov. 2015): 20–25.

131. Nas, “The EU’s Approach to the Syrian Crisis,” 57.

132. Interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, Oct. 2021, Hatay.

133. Interview, A, Presidency of Migration Management official, Oct. 2021, Hatay.

*RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND THE US*

Unlike with the EU, neither Turkey's decision to build the Wall nor its construction received much attention from Russia or the United States.<sup>134</sup> Although it did not directly affect Ankara's relations with Moscow or Washington, they both welcomed rather than contested its construction. The main reason for Russia and the US's implicit acceptance of the Wall was that it meant Turkey was fortifying its porous southeastern border, and they both had underlined the need to do this as a means to stop the flow of foreign fighters into Syria. However, while Russia was interested in blocking Russian-speaking militants, especially from the North Caucasus through Turkey, from joining jihadist fighters supporting anti-Asad forces and the Islamic State organization (ISIS),<sup>135</sup> the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were mainly focusing on the route of ISIS terrorists to Europe through Turkey. Indeed, it had been the US that had pushed Turkey the hardest to close its border with Syria.

While Turkey's mid-2015 announcement of the Wall's construction was an expected response to transnational terrorist threats and refugee flows, it was also a signal to Russia. After launching its own intervention in Syria that fall, the Russian military was now operating along Turkey's southern border and controlling some critical areas. Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Turkey and Russia had had conflicting attitudes toward the Asad regime, which determined both states' attitudes toward border security. Turkey's original plan for creating a "safe zone" along its border with Syria had been rejected by Russia.<sup>136</sup> But by the time direct Russian intervention began in September 2015, Ankara was concerned about Moscow's ties with Syria's Kurdish militias, as there appeared to be signs of it offering military support for the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) and People's Defense Forces (YPG) "linking" their stronghold of Afrin with the besieged town of Kobani.<sup>137</sup> Turkey's downing of a Russian Su-24 fighter jet in November 2015 worsened the already tense relationship,<sup>138</sup> and it began to change its Syria policy focus from supporting regime change to providing security against ISIS and the PYD/YPG in northern Syria. Meanwhile, Russia began increasingly criticizing Turkey for allowing radical Islamist anti-Asad forces into Syria and for its weak control of the border crossings.<sup>139</sup>

In early 2016, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov noted that the gaps in the border were being used to infiltrate terrorist militants into Syria and called for an agreement to take necessary measures within the framework of the United Nations Security Council.<sup>140</sup> In March, Lavrov accused Turkey of sending militants and weapons under the guise of humani-

134. Online interview, B, Ministry of Foreign Affairs official in Ankara, Apr. 2021, Zoom.

135. International Crisis Group, "[The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?](#)" *Europe Report* no. 238 (Mar. 2016).

136. Emre Erşen, "[Evaluating the Fighter Jet Crisis in Turkish-Russian Relations](#)," *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 88.

137. Fabrice Balanche, "[The Struggle for Azaz Corridor Could Spur a Turkish Intervention](#)," Washington Institute for Near East Policy *PolicyWatch* no. 2532 (Dec. 2015).

138. Nur Çetinoğlu Harunoğlu, Ayşegül Sever, and Emre Erşen, *Turkey between the United States and Russia: Surfing on the Edge* (London: Lexington Books, 2021), 126–27.

139. "Russia Says Turkey Helps 'Jihadis, Mercenaries' to Penetrate Syria," *Reuters*, February 15, 2016, [www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-syria-idUSR4N15Q00C](http://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-syria-idUSR4N15Q00C).

140. Xinhua News Agency, "Russia Urges to Close Syrian-Turkish Border," *China Daily*, April 2, 2016, [www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-04/02/content\\_24248196.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-04/02/content_24248196.htm).

tarian aid and pressured it to seal the border.<sup>141</sup> That June, as Turkey intensified its wall construction on the border, Russia took the issue to the Security Council, where it expressed concern about incursions into Syrian territory and sought more information on the Wall.<sup>142</sup>

From the US perspective, the need for the Turkish-Syrian border to be sealed increased after the rise of ISIS in 2014. This led Washington to urge Ankara to play an active role in the anti-ISIS coalition and to cut the flow of foreign fighters and logistical supplies to Syria by sealing the border.<sup>143</sup> For NATO as well, blocking the flow of fighters joining ISIS became crucial, since it was thought that Turkey's open-border policy was undermining the coalition forces' fight against the group. As previously mentioned, the Wall's construction began in mid-2015, before Turkey joined the anti-ISIS coalition, but neither NATO nor the US raised any objections.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, after the ISIS-directed attacks in Paris that November, US president Barack Obama openly and firmly expressed the need for the border to be closed, thus accelerating its construction.<sup>145</sup> Hence as analyst Barbora Olejárová (now Hrozenská) argued, by building the Wall, Turkey aimed at complying "with the demands of its NATO allies" while also curbing increasing military support from the US to the YPG/PYD.<sup>146</sup>

In January 2016, US vice president Joe Biden visited Turkey seeking new cooperation areas in their joint efforts against ISIS and insisted the country "do more to control its porous border."<sup>147</sup> After this visit, US homeland security secretary Jeh Johnson came to Turkey, and it was reported that "a menu of specific border-control technologies" was suggested to the Turkish government.<sup>148</sup> As noted to Reuters by an official from Turkey's Housing Development Administration (TOKİ), this meeting left the Turkish parties influenced by the fortified nature of the US-Mexico border — even before its later expansion into a wall under President Donald Trump.<sup>149</sup> In addition, EU and US officials called on their Turkish counterparts to share the cost of securing the border in order to "rapidly implement it."<sup>150</sup>

141. "Russia: Turkey-Syria Border Should Get Closed," *Bianet*, March 1, 2016, <https://bianet.org/bianet/world/172599-russia-turkey-syria-border-should-get-closed>.

142. "Briefing on the Situation on the Syrian/Turkish Border," Security Council Report, *What's in Blue*, June 22, 2016, [www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2016/06/briefing-on-the-situation-on-the-syrianturkish-border.php](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2016/06/briefing-on-the-situation-on-the-syrianturkish-border.php).

143. Interview with Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, *The Situation Room*, CNN, September 24, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1409/24/sitroom.02.html>.

144. Joëlle Garriaud Maylam, "The War in Syria and Iraq: Humanitarian Aspects," NATO Parliamentary Assembly Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security report no. 157 (Oct. 2017).

145. The White House, Press Conference by President Obama at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Centre at Issy-les-Moulineaux, France, December 1, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/01/press-conference-president-obama>.

146. Olejárová, "The Great Wall," 129.

147. Burak Ege Bekdil, "US to Turkey: Secure Syria Border — with US Gear," *Defense News*, January 30, 2016, [www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2016/01/30/us-to-turkey-secure-syria-border-with-us-gear](http://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2016/01/30/us-to-turkey-secure-syria-border-with-us-gear).

148. Warren Strobel, Jonathan Landay, and Phil Stewart, "U.S. Offers Turkey Technology to Block Islamic State at Syria Border," *Reuters*, January 21, 2016, <https://reut.rs/3NZT4SO>.

149. Orhan Coskun and Daren Butler, "Turkey to Complete Syria Border Wall within 5 Months, Official Says," *Reuters*, September 28, 2016, <https://reut.rs/43mrPGE>.

150. "Turkey Gives the Cold Shoulder to US Proposal to Seal Syria Border," *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 3, 2015, [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-gives-the-cold-shoulder-to-us-proposal-to-seal-syria-border-92016](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-gives-the-cold-shoulder-to-us-proposal-to-seal-syria-border-92016).

By continuing the construction of the Wall, Turkey sent the message to Russia and the US that their concerns about the border were being taken into account. Turkey needed their support for military operations in northern Syria because much of that country's airspace was under their control. Ankara may have received a "green light" to start these military operations,<sup>151</sup> since, as stated above, the Wall was not an end but a means for Turkish border security policy.

While building the Wall was a decision planned to undermine Russian criticism about Turkey letting anti-Asad forces cross into Syria, bilateral Russian-Turkish relations were fairly stable compared to those between Turkey and the US. However, Russia has remained critical of Turkey's military operations in Syria and Turkey's keeping at least the minimum number of crossings open for humanitarian purposes to prevent a new surge of refugees.<sup>152</sup> On the other hand, the Wall itself has not been an issue of contention between Washington and Ankara, despite their clashing views concerning the YPG in northern Syria and some US objections to Turkish military operations there.

## CONCLUSION

By examining the correlation between wall politics and foreign relations, this study is a rare attempt to analyze the issue of Turkey's border with Syria from a state and foreign policy perspective within the framework of "fortified boundaries" developed by Ron Hassner and Jason Wittenberg alongside William Walters's geopolitical boundary categorizations. We have argued that, in the post-2015 period, Turkey's transformed border policy after the decision to construct the Wall is an unprecedented sign of the government's desire to restore or improve its worsening relations with the European Union, Russia, and the United States over Syria.

One of our study's findings is that the Turkish Wall, which Turkey only began to build due to its government's desperate attempts to contain the asymmetric challenges of the war in Syria, has remained limited in its impact on its Syria-related foreign relations. Moreover, while the Wall has helped to reduce illegal border crossings, its preventive capacity can be overwhelmed easily in places, like in 2019, when thousands of refugees in the Syrian town of Atma walked toward the border en masse and were nearly unstoppable.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, despite all the fortification efforts, the physical capacity of the Wall as a barrier is still questionable, and all the interested stakeholders in the Turkish government agree that it can only be an interim, not an ultimate, solution for securing the border with Syria.<sup>154</sup>

151. Galip Dalay, "Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts: Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, *SWP Research Paper* no. 5 (Aug. 2021): 9, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2021RP05>.

152. Natasha Hall, "The Implications of the UN Cross-Border Vote in Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies, *CSIS Briefs* (June 2021).

153. "Güvenli bölgedeki Suriyeliler Türkiye sınırına yürüdü" ["Syrians in the safe zone marched to the border with Turkey"] *T24*, August 30, 2019, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/guvenli-bolgedeki-suriyeliler-turkiye-sinirina-yurudu,837248>.

154. TikTok videos showing how to bypass the Wall went viral among human smugglers, see Mohammed Hardan, "Smuggling across Syrian-Turkish Border Grows Despite Risks," *Al-Monitor*, April 24, 2022, [www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/smuggling-across-syrian-turkish-border-grows-despite-risks](http://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/smuggling-across-syrian-turkish-border-grows-despite-risks).

Another finding is that, even though it was external pressure on the Turkish government to stop refugees and terrorists that led to its construction, the Wall has not been instrumentalized in foreign relations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not had enough of a role in, nor even knowledge about, the politics of the Wall to use it as a performative act if necessary. That said, this indifference to the Wall in the context of foreign policy mainly originates from the reality that it is a physical manifestation of the U-turn in the ruling party's acclaimed pre-2011 policy of making borders meaningless, especially in the Middle East. Thus, there appeared to be no benefit expected by the government in publicizing the Wall in foreign relations. International players — especially the EU but also Russia and the US — demanded Turkey better control its borders, but they were reluctant to be seen as promoters of the Wall.

In the context of foreign policy, the Wall, more than anything else, has demonstrated how Turkey had to search for compromises with the EU, Russia, and the US on some issues in its Syrian policy despite its emphasis on self-initiated independent policies to undermine the emerging Kurdish autonomous area ruled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Defense Forces (YPG). Turkey had to deal with the dilemma of both distancing itself from Syria with the Wall, because of imminent cross-border pressures, while also continuing to fight against the PYD and YPG with military intervention. Wall construction and military intervention have thus been complementary, turning all transborder movements and identities into security issues. These two policies are, in fact, novel and had never been implemented in Turkey's Middle East policy.

Since fortifying its Syrian border, Turkey has made wall-building a routine part of its border security, constructing new barriers along its borders with Iran and Iraq. But in the words of political scientist Erik Ringmar, "Walls in the end are nothing in themselves and only something as part of a tactic, but tactics often change . . . and the walls, as a result will be rendered obsolete and useless."<sup>155</sup> Turkey's government and policy-makers may come to regard the country's walls as such, at some point. As with the construction of the initial Turkish Wall along the border with Syria, the new barriers on the Iranian and Iraqi borders have not become an issue of public debate in Turkey's deeply polarized domestic politics or its foreign relations. However, this reality also signals how far the securitization of transnational challenges has gone and how the building of border walls has become normalized. Under these circumstances, the spread of border walls in Turkey has opened the way for new angles for researchers to map the country's politics, sociology, and security.

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155. Erik Ringmar, "The Great Wall of China Does Not Exist," in *Walling, Boundaries and Liminality: A Political Anthropology of Transformations*, ed. Agnes Horvath, Marius Ion Bența, and Joan Davison (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), 122, quoted in Aras, *The Wall*, 211.