


# *Tracing the Conflict Between Türkiye and Syria Through the Turkish Mainstream Media's Coverage of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad*

Bahar Kayhan , <sup>1</sup>*Department of Journalism Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University Ankara Türkiye*

Bilge Şenyüz , <sup>2</sup>*Department of Public Relations and Publicity Marmara University Istanbul Türkiye*

Fatma Kübra Şahin , *Department of New Media and Communication Karabük University Karabük Türkiye*

Nihan Beray Uğurlu , <sup>4</sup>*Department of Social Media Studies Social Sciences University of Ankara Ankara Türkiye*

The Syrian civil war began in March 2011 and spread throughout the country in April 2011. Therefore, in this study news articles and columns published in 2011 were selected and analyzed through purposive sampling. This study uses content analysis to examine the coverage of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in mainstream print newspapers with different ideological orientations in Türkiye. The theoretical framework of this study is based on the concept of localization of foreign news. The research has the potential to reveal both the transformation of the tone of media texts over time and the similarities and differences in the coverage of an international conflict by newspapers with different ideological orientations. Despite ideological differences, the study reveals similarities in the orientation of the newspapers studied toward local interests. The dominance of Turkish officials as news actors, the limited portrayal of Syrian security forces, and the selection of photographs reinforce the parallel stance with Turkish foreign policy. The media's tone toward Assad and Syrian politics became more negative and critical as the conflict escalated.

## Introduction

A country's image in the international arena is directly linked to its leader in the media, since leaders represent their countries. Therefore, the media coverage of one country's leader in another country's press provides important clues about both the international relations between the two countries and how the public perceives the country in question. In this context, this research aims to show how the Syrian president and leader of the Syrian Baath Party, Bashar al-Assad, is covered in newspapers representing different political positions in the mainstream media in Türkiye. In line with this aim, the study examines and analyzes the role of the Turkish print media in informing Turkish citizens about the Syrian president and thus about international relations with Syria. In other words, the study aims to question the Turkish media's attitude toward Syria as a "foreign" country. The research is essential

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because it questions the traces of changing practices of international relations between the two countries in the context of media coverage of a head of state.

Three newspapers with different political positions and editorial lines representing the mainstream media in Türkiye were included in the study to compare and contrast the coverage of news about Bashar al-Assad in media organizations with different ideological orientations. The period between January 1, 2011, and December 31, 2011, marked a transformation in the relations between Türkiye and Syria and was selected using the purposive sampling method. During this period, the first uprisings in Syria were observed. The Syrian crisis is defined as the armed conflict between forces loyal to the government of President Bashar al-Assad and those seeking to overthrow him. The unrest began in early 2011 with several anti-government protests (Sterling 2012).

After harsh government crackdowns and restrictions (Human Rights Watch 2011), the protests turned into an armed rebellion, and the UN recognized a full-scale civil war in the country as of mid-2012 (Charbonneau and Evans 2012). This period was also a time of change in the relationship between Türkiye and Syria. During this period, the Syrian refugees, the Kurdish minority in Syria, ISIS, and the atmosphere of insecurity led to an increasing strain in the bilateral relationship. Therefore, it is worth analyzing the Turkish media's attitude toward the Syrian president during this period.

In this study, the news selected as a sample on the axis of the concepts "domestication of foreign news" and "evaluation" were subjected to content analysis. Domestication of foreign news' is crucial in determining news content. According to Clausen (2003), "domestication" refers to the recognition, identification, selection, and organization of information for news readers within a specific national context. Domestication thus refers to the adaptation of information to a frame of reference for readers within the borders of the nation-state. Valuation is another method of construction in journalism. Although many journalistic theories emphasize the objectivity of news, it is common for editors and journalists to confuse personal evaluations with news texts. Valuation can be broadly defined, ranging from explicit to implicit valuations (Löffelholz and Weaver 2008).

### **The Transformation of Türkiye–Syria Relations in the Historical Perspective**

Although the relations between Türkiye and Syria have been based on cooperation for a short period of time, they have been based on conflict rather than consensus. The Antioch issue, the different political attitudes and foreign policies of the two countries, the water crisis, various security issues, and the internal conflict in Syria since March 2011 have been at the center of the problems between the two countries. The deterioration of relations between Türkiye and Syria dates back to the founding years of Türkiye and Syria. In the years of Turkish independence after the parties signed the Lausanne Peace Treaty on July 24, 1923, Syria was still under French mandate. At that time, Antioch, which is now a Turkish province under the name of Hatay, remained in Syria under French control.

Antioch (Sanjak of Iskenderun) was placed under French control in the Sykes-Picot Treaty, secretly signed by Great Britain and France during World War I. Although Antioch was included within the borders of the Turkish National Pact, it was left outside the national borders in the Ankara Agreement, signed on October 20, 1921, in order to end the war with France as soon as possible. Ethnic Turks, who were the majority in Antioch until 1936, wanted to live in Türkiye (Atabey 2015: 193–194). During this period, Türkiye supported

independence efforts not only in Antioch but also in Syria, which was under French control at the time.

On September 9, 1936, an agreement was signed between France and Syria for the liberation of Syria (Sökmen 1992: 7). Although Türkiye supported the liberation of Syria, the fact that the treaty initialed on September 9, 1936, did not include details about Antioch led to a reaction from Türkiye (Atabey 2015: 195). France appealed to the League of Nations over the Antioch issue, and the League of Nations Council discussed the issue between December 14 and 16, 1936 (Akçora 1995: 393). The Hatay (Antioch) Assembly was established in 1938 and the Republic of Hatay declared its independence.

The Republic of Hatay remained independent for about 1 year. During this period, close relations were established between Türkiye and the Republic of Hatay. The Hatay Assembly adopted the Turkish Civil and Penal Codes in January 1939. In addition, the Hatay government constantly expressed its desire to be integrated into the Republic of Türkiye (Atabey 2015: 200). Following these developments, Hatay united with the Republic of Türkiye in 1939 with the approval of the parliament. Syria, on the other hand, reacted to the unification of Hatay and Türkiye, which in turn negatively affected the relations between the two countries.

In the 1950s, Türkiye preferred to align its foreign policy with the United States, while Syria moved closer to the USSR and supported Marxist-Leninist groups and ASALA in Türkiye (Özcan 2012: 215). The contradictory policies of the two countries were replaced by other crises in the following years. One of these crises was related to the control of the waters of the Euphrates, Tigris, and other rivers. Syria feared that the construction of the Keban Dam (1973), the Southeast Anatolia Project (1976), and the Karakaya Dam (1987) in Türkiye would reduce the flow of water to Syria after the 1970s.

After the end of the Cold War, and after the financial aid from the Soviet Union was cut off, Syria repositioned itself within the balance of regional powers during the 1990 Gulf crisis. Syria joined the US-led coalition against Iraq and was perceived by the United States as an important ally for the success of the Arab–Israeli peace process. However, Syria remained on the US list of the states that support terrorism. Although Türkiye–US relations seemed better than US–Syria relations and the two countries discussed “strategic partnership,” the growing unease in Türkiye about the disintegration of Iraq and the establishment of a Kurdish state damaged Türkiye–US relations and led to the adoption of the active engagement policy by Türkiye. The bilateral relations between Syria and Türkiye were shaped by these transformations in the new international and regional strategic arena (Altunışık and Tür 2006: 234–235). While relations with other countries determined the relations between Türkiye and Syria, the water problem continued and exacerbated during these years.

A dispute over the Euphrates River arose in 1990 when Türkiye began to fill the Atatürk Dam reservoir. Türkiye rejected the principle of division or distribution of water and adopted the principle of optimal water use, which was rejected by Syria (Hameed and Mustafa 2018: 59). The fact that Syria provided a safe zone to the PKK, which was described as a terrorist organization by NATO, and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, to gain leverage on the water problem, further strained the relations between the two countries. In 1998, Türkiye demanded the deportation of Öcalan and massed Turkish troops along the border. Öcalan’s deportation from Syria led to better relations between Syria and Türkiye, reflected in an increased cooperation in tourism, trade, and investment, followed by joint military

maneuvers. This was an important turning point in Turkish foreign policy (Altunışık and Martin 2011: 575–576). However, the collaborative Turkish foreign policy was not limited to Syria, and relations with other countries in the Middle East were also transformed in this period.

While the alliances Türkiye established in the 1990s were limited to immediate neighbors, a regional approach was adopted in the 2000s and security policies were expanded to include cooperation with various nations. Even before AKP (Justice and Development Party) came to power, Türkiye attempted to expand its involvement in the Middle East. During the prime ministry and presidency of Turgut Özal (1983–1993), efforts were spent to improve trade relations and investments in the Middle East. In the late 1990s, coalition governments and the foreign minister İsmail Cem (1997–2002) also focused on improving economic relations with historical and cultural assets of Türkiye. When the Welfare Party came to power in 1997, Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan also focused on relations with the Middle East and the Islamic world at the expense of Turkish ties with the West. However, it could be suggested that Turkish intervention in the Middle East was more comprehensive during the AKP government when compared to previous governments (Altunışık and Martin 2011: 570–571). Since the AKP came to power in Türkiye in 2002, Turkish foreign policy experienced a paradigm shift from the traditional defensive stance to a new approach known as “Neo-Ottomanism” (D’Alema 2017: 2). This approach distanced Türkiye from the old approach focused on the relations with the West and moved toward cooperation with the countries in the old Ottoman territories and the idea of peace, stability, and authority in these lands.

With this paradigm shift, Türkiye–Syria relations improved significantly in the first half of the AKP era. Türkiye adopted a trade-oriented and open borders approach. After the industry fair organized in Damascus in January 2004, Turkish manufacturers signed contracts worth \$250 million with Syria. By January 2007, a bilateral free trade agreement was put into effect. In September 2009, an agreement was signed between the two countries, ending mutual visa requirements. Subsequently, Syria became Türkiye’s seventh largest market in the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, Türkiye sponsored several joint infrastructure projects such as the “friendship dam” on the Asi River south of Hatay, which aimed to irrigate both Turkish and Syrian lands (D’Alema 2017: 5). However, good relations between Türkiye and Syria did not last long.

During the revolt against the Baathist Syrian regime in March 2011, Türkiye pressured Damascus for urgent political reforms, but these calls were rejected (Kösebalaban 2020: 337). Türkiye, then, changed its Syrian policy after August 2011. The main reason for this was the humanitarian concerns towards the Syrian opposition as an extension of democratic principles, as well as the change in Syrian policy towards the Syrian Kurds and the PKK. Türkiye has been wary of Damascus’ plans to grant citizenship to the Kurdish minority members in Syria. Türkiye was concerned that Syria would become a safe haven for PKK to attack Türkiye. After Assad rejected the calls for a ceasefire and pacified the opposition by agreeing on certain political demands, Türkiye considered that collaboration with the opposition would not only protect the future of Turkish investments in Syria, but also balance Iranian policies. This foreign policy was also consistent with the neo-Ottoman approach adopted by the AKP government (Demirtas-Bagdonas 2014: 142). Türkiye was significantly affected by continuous conflicts. While millions of refugees arrived in Türkiye from Syria, the prolongation of the conflict also created a major security problem for Türkiye due to the

strengthening of the Syrian Kurdish minority and ISIS (Kösebalaban 2020: 337). Since 2012, Türkiye focused on the physical security threats posed by Syria and the PYD. Due to the downing of a Turkish F-4 jet by Syrian defense forces without prior warning in international airspace, news that Syria and the PYD collaborated with the PKK to attack Turkish territory, and a Syrian artillery attack on the Turkish border that killed five Turkish citizens led to the talks about a Turkish military intervention in Northern Syria (Demirtas-Bagdonas 2014: 148). Due to the security threats posed by Syria and the PYD, Türkiye decided on an intervention against these threats<sup>1</sup> and conducted the Shah Euphrates (2015), Euphrates Shield (2016), Idlib (2017), Olive Branch (2018), Peace Spring (2019), and Spring Shield (2020) operations. Although a ceasefire was signed after the Operation Spring Shield, tensions between the two countries continued.

Furthermore, Syrian migrants in Türkiye are now one of the most important factors in Turkish–Syrian relations. As mentioned above, the war in Syria has led many Syrian citizens to migrate to Türkiye. According to Balkılıç and Teke Lloyd (2020: 357–358), by 2020 Türkiye was hosting about 3.6 million Syrians inside and outside the camps, and about a million more had passed through Türkiye on their way to Europe. Over time, as Türkiye realized that the number of migrants would continue to increase as a result of the protracted civil war, it reversed course and implemented an unofficial closed-door policy and increased security measures at the border. Interestingly, despite this remarkable shift, Türkiye continued to use a “moral and humanitarian language” based on Islamic principles with regard to Syrians in Türkiye, while attempting to criticize the approach taken in most of Europe. For Imrie-Kuzu and Özerdem (2023: 1609), the deepening economic crisis in Türkiye and growing concerns about unemployment among locals in recent years fuel the negative approaches to “guest” status that leave room for questioning the legitimacy of Syrians’ presence in the country. Syrian migrants and changing attitudes toward them will continue to shape relations between the two countries in the near future.

### **The Representation of Political Figures in the Media within the Context of International Relations**

Despite several studies on political media coverage and political leadership, there is surprisingly little research on the media coverage about political leaders. In other words, despite the academic interest in political leadership in modern democracies, the images of leaders in mass media received significantly little systematic attention (Aaldering and Vliegthart 2016: 1871–1872).

On the other hand, the media, as a political battleground, promotes certain views and actors, while neglecting and undermining others. The dominant power-government mechanisms in the country determine whose views would be represented in the national media. Thus, the main factor that determines how a political leader of another country would appear in the media is the tone of the current relations between these countries (Croteau and Hoynes 2003). Thus, the main factor that determines how a political leader of another country would appear in the media is the tone of the current relations between these countries.

The media is among the most prevalent sources of political information. Furthermore, the media directly or indirectly affects the persuasion and decision-making processes. Thus, it propagates persuasive information that encourages certain behavior or political attitudes (Matkevičienė 2006). It is known that historically media have been restricted by various impediments such as geopolitical history, national interest, state ownership, and the demands

of the audience (Arnold 2011). These restrictions could hamper the media power in the political scene, as well as its ability to shape public opinion and mobilize policy makers. For example, O'Neill (1993) argued that global television played a decisive and dominant role in international politics, completely changing the traditional diplomacy that determined political and diplomatic outcomes.

According to Edelman, leaders are powerful symbols that prevent people from prioritizing their well-being and focus on constructed events (2002: 50). The president's image is constructed, shaped and simulated for the international community. People will remember this the way it was presented by the media. This is natural since the people do not have other sources of information unless they are personal witnesses of certain events (Grinevičiūtė 2011: 135). A politician's image often becomes more important than achievements or activities, as political rhetoric is one of the main factors that created that image. Technological advances led to a change in the influence of the media. Journalists have been mostly watchdogs, but they now have the power to affect the political agenda, political decisions and public opinion. In other words, the media plays a key role in political communication due to its novel political and social power. As the leader and one of the most influential political figures, the president possesses significant political communication powers. Compared to an ordinary politician, the president always gets more media attention (Grinevičiūtė 2011: 139).

In conclusion, news analysis reflects the appearance of the political figures in the media, the current ideas, the background of these ideas, and temporal changes in these ideas (Croteau and Hoynes 2003: 2003). Thus, the approach of the media to the heads of foreign states is an adequate indicator of the historical and social background of the relations between nations.

### Sampling and Methodology

In the current study, we conducted a content analysis. As a research technique, content analysis, which can be applied to many materials such as documents and news stories, is used to identify and analyze the parts of the content considered necessary, such as themes, patterns, and frequently occurring words in the texts in question. Content analysis is "used for the systematic, objective, and quantitative explanation of the explicit content of communication" (Berelson 1952: 18). It is frequently employed across various academic fields, including communication, and can be used with a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approach (White and Marsh 2006). According to Berelson (1952) and Merten (1995), content analysis categories without explicitly defined questions will produce subpar or insufficient results. Therefore, the codebook of the present research was determined by the research questions below.

In the context of Turkish media contents selected as a sample:

- R1. How was Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his opponents were represented?
- R2. Which words, contexts, and photographs were used to describe Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, his policy's and his opponents in Syria?

We enhanced internal and construct validity by conducting independent analyses of media content and then working together to identify and further define each category as themes emerged (Macgillivray and Jennings 2008: 177). We attempted to maintain a

constant comparative approach and to reach consensus on categories that adequately reflected our collective evaluations of the text.

As stated in the introduction of the current study, the analysis concentrated on news stories and columns published between January 1, 2011, and December 31, 2011, coinciding with the commencement of the Syrian Crisis. The media content examined related to the Syrian president and was obtained through a media monitoring company. The scope of the research was limited to three prominent Turkish newspapers, *Cumhuriyet*, *Hürriyet*, and *Yeni Şafak*, as they collectively represent the mainstream media within the Turkish media landscape. These newspapers have been selected because of their ability to accommodate a wide range of ideological viewpoints. It is essential to recognize that although all three newspapers are widely read in Türkiye, they have different political stances. *Cumhuriyet*, historically known for its hardline Kemalist stance, currently positions itself on the left of the political spectrum. *Yeni Şafak*, on the other hand, aligns itself with right-wing / Islamist ideologies. Finally, *Hürriyet* has a more liberal-pluralist position.

### ***Ethics, Coding and Intercoder Reliability***

We created a codebook to record and define the data-driven coding categories. New thematic codes that emerged during the coding process were discussed and agreed upon before inclusion in the codebook. To ensure reliability, the data were coded twice independently by separate coders. In cases of conflicting coding, consensus was reached through extensive review and discussion of the conflicting codes.

### **Findings**

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of 944 media contents to examine the portrayal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his policies in newspapers. Our analysis covered various aspects, including the tone of the news, the choice of words, and how events were presented, including the use of photographs.

With the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, the importance of the issue has gradually increased. Therefore, in order to analyze the coverage of the issue in newspapers from a historical perspective, the year selected for the sample was divided into three 4-month periods. In the first four-month period, before the civil war began to have a tangible impact, there was a dramatic decrease in the frequency of news articles on the subject. In subsequent periods, however, the escalating civil unrest in a neighboring country to Türkiye began to receive increased attention in the newspaper discourse (Table 1).

An essential part of the texts selected for the sample consists of news articles ( $N = 675$ ) and columns ( $N = 222$ ). Other types of content, such as interviews and series of articles about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Syrian politics, were also included in the newspapers.

According to Franklin et al. (2005: 173), news values and the notion of newsworthiness from which they are generated are intended to be the “ground rules” for determining what an identifiable audience is interested in reading or watching. These “ground rules” are present in everyday practice and knowledge acquired on the job, even though news organizations may not have written them down or codified them (Harcup and O’neill 2017: 261). In this context, proximity is a generally accepted and universal news value. It means that journalists are more likely to select news from their immediate region than from other parts of the world (Shoemaker et al. 2007: 232). For example, Syria, as a border neighbor of

**Table 1 The Frequency of Coverage of the Issue in Newspapers Over Time**

The frequency of coverage of the issue in newspapers over time				
Newspaper	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Total
Yeni Şafak	69	169	137	375
Cumhuriyet	38	147	115	300
Hürriyet	42	140	87	269
Total	149	456	339	944

Türkiye, was extensively covered in all three newspapers in the context of proximity, one of the news value factors (Table 2).

The importance of news tone, the overall value of news, in shaping public opinion is highlighted in political communication studies (Hopmann et al. 2010; Young and Soroka 2012). Because it offers an evaluative element of messages and information, tone of media content is regarded as a crucial component of news (Sheafer 2007). The tone of the media content is closely related to Zaller's (2012) public opinion model, which claims that unidirectional information flows-specifically, strongly positive or negatively biased news-direct public opinion (Jacobs and Van der Linden 2018). To sum up, it is common knowledge that a society's perception and attitudes are influenced by its culture and ideology. As a result, ideology impacts the tone of news reports, especially those that are international (Ma et al. 2017: 1). Within this particular framework, an examination reveals that the coverage of Bashar al-Assad and his policies in Turkish newspapers predominantly assumes a neutral ( $N = 720$ ) and negative ( $N = 193$ ) tone, predominantly influenced by the ongoing conflict. Instances of news articles highlighting positive aspects ( $N = 17$ ) or encompassing both positive and negative aspects ( $N = 14$ ) are relatively low in frequency. Yeni Şafak

**Table 2 Types of Content in the Sample Newspapers**

Types of the content						
Newspaper	News story	Column	Interview	Article series	Other	Total
Yeni Şafak	242	116	5	7	5	375
Cumhuriyet	214	62	10	10	4	300
Hürriyet	219	44	5	1	0	269
Total	675	222	20	18	9	944

stands out as the publication with the highest incidence of negative coverage. Remarkably, *Cumhuriyet*, and *Hürriyet* tend to adopt a similar approach. The newspapers tend to act similarly because of the unifying national interest. In other words, when it comes to international news narratives, the primacy of national interest emerges as the dominant ideology (Table 3).

Over time, the tone of media coverage has become increasingly critical due to the conflict between the two countries. Being a neighboring country, Türkiye has been inevitably affected by the unstable condition in Syria. As a result of the violence, Syrian people have fled and sought refuge in neighboring countries such as Türkiye, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Consequently, the historically fluctuating relationship between the two countries, characterized by both enmity and amity (Hinnebusch 2015), has once again turned negative. This shift can be attributed to several factors, including the lack of border security, the rise of extremist terrorist organizations, particularly ISIS, due to regional instability, and the support provided to the YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organization. Notably, when the conflict escalated between the fifth and eighth months of 2011, the number of negative/critical coverage in all three newspapers increased (Table 4).

According to the analysis of newspaper coverage, there was limited support for Assad in all three newspapers. This situation is in line with the Turkish foreign policy in 2011. This finding highlights that, despite their ideological disparities, all three newspapers exhibit a consistent alignment with Türkiye's national interests, particularly concerning matters related to foreign policy. Similar patterns were also observed in the portrayal of Türkiye's relations with various countries within the Turkish media. A notable example is the nationalist approach adopted by the Turkish media following the onset of the Davos Crisis, a significant crisis involving Israel. Media outlets aligned with or opposed to the government during that period consistently criticized the Israeli administration's stance (Gündüz and Arıkan 2018: 172). However, in our analysis a shift toward a supportive stance on Assad was observed between May 1, 2011, and August 31, 2011, compared to other periods. However, this change can be attributed to Türkiye's endorsement of Assad during this specific time-frame, leading to an increased number of news stories across all three newspapers. When examining the reasons behind the support for Bashar al-Assad and his policies in Syria, the

**Table 3 Attitude/Tone of Media Content Toward Bashar al-Assad**

Newspaper	Attitude/tone of media content toward Bashar al-Assad				Total
	Neutral	Negative/ critical	Positive/ supportive	Both positive/supportive and negative/critical	
Yeni Şafak	241	118	9	7	375
Cumhuriyet	262	32	4	2	300
Hürriyet	214	44	5	6	269
Total	720	193	17	14	944

**Table 4 Attitude/Tone of Media Content Toward Bashar al-Assad Over Time**

Attitude/tone of media content toward Bashar al-Assad over time																		
Newspapers																		
Cumhuriyet																		
Time period (months)	Between 1st and 4th month			Between 5th and 8th month			Between 9th and 12th month			Between 1st and 4th month			Between 5th and 8th month			Between 9th and 12th month		
	36	119	107	43	99	99	43	99	99	32	110	110	32	110	110	72		
Neutral	36	119	107	43	99	99	43	99	99	32	110	110	32	110	110	72		
Negative/critical	3	21	8	17	63	38	17	63	38	7	25	25	7	25	12	12		
Positive/supportive	1	3	-	3	6	-	3	6	-	2	1	1	2	1	2	2		
Both positive/negative/critical	-	2	-	4	3	-	4	3	-	2	3	3	2	3	3	1		

most emphasized issue was Assad's reforms ( $N = 18$ ). Additionally, his efforts in combating terrorism were also frequently cited as a reason for support ( $N = 3$ ). Furthermore, there were eight instances where news articles expressed support for Assad based on various other grounds (Table 5).

When analyzing the reasons for criticizing Bashar al-Assad and his policies in Syria, the disproportionate use of force against demonstrators is the most emphasized issue in all three newspapers ( $N = 116$ ). Violations of human rights and democracy in the country ( $N = 24$ ) and instability ( $N = 16$ ) are the other most frequently cited reasons for criticism (Table 6).

Across all three newspapers, the predominant characterization of Assad's opponents is as dissidents, demonstrators, and protesters ( $N = 199$ ). They are often referred to as individuals who advocate for freedom or represent the Syrian people ( $N = 78$ ). Additionally, it is noted that all three newspapers to a lesser extent define Assad's opponents as ethnic and religious groups ( $N = 42$ ), as well as occasionally associating them with terrorist activities ( $N = 12$ ). Notably, the frequency of these definitions increased in tandem with the number of news articles published between the 5th and 8th month (Table 7).

Working in the space between the global and the national, news producers in national broadcasters incorporate a reflexive intuition into their strategies for selecting and producing international stories. The pattern of both knowing international issues and recognizing the receptive audience is known to be a critical element in the framing of international news information and the process of presenting events to a national audience (Clausen 2003: 25). "Foreign" news events are narrated in ways that make them more familiar, understandable and compatible for consumption by different national audiences (Gurevitch et al. 2005: 206). National media outlets also frame and report on international news stories in a way that reflects their own country's culture, history, and interests. This can lead to different countries' interpretations of the same event (Lee 2017: 577–578). In this context, the Syrian conflict has been domesticated in Turkish newspapers to satisfy the national audience's curiosity. Deterioration of Türkiye–Syria bilateral relations ( $N = 108$ ), security and terrorism ( $N = 88$ ), migration ( $N = 51$ ), and damage to Türkiye ( $N = 14$ ) can be considered as examples of domestication of the news context. It was found that the events taking place in a foreign country were domesticated (Table 8).

Alasuutari, Qadir, and Creutz (2013) emphasized that journalists are not the only agents in the process of domestication. Domestic political actors may also proactively localize international news events for the domestic media in ways that would serve their own interests. For this reason, news actors were examined in this study, and it was observed that despite their ideological differences, the news actors in these newspapers are similar individuals aligned with local interests. The analysis reveals that the dominant news actors in the three newspapers are primarily Tayyip Erdoğan and Turkish officials ( $N = 184$ ). Between 5th and 8th month of 2011, this rate is higher than other periods. Other country officials ( $N = 178$ ) and members of media organizations ( $N = 169$ ) are frequently encountered as news actors. Their consistent presence in news articles highlights their substantial roles and involvement in various contexts. These individuals contribute significantly to the news coverage and play influential roles in the subjects discussed within the newspapers. *Yeni Şafak* and *Hürriyet* newspapers feature a higher proportion of news coverage involving Erdoğan and Turkish officials compared to *Cumhuriyet* newspaper. This disparity can be attributed to *Cumhuriyet*'s role as an opposition newspaper that critically evaluates the government.

**Table 5 The Reasons of Support for Bashar al-Assad Over Time (Multiple Selections Allowed)**

The reasons of support for Bashar al-Assad over time										
Newspapers										
Cumhuriyet										
Time period (months)	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011			Between 5th and 8th month of 2011			Between 9th and 12th month of 2011			Total
	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	
Assad's reforms	3	2	1	2	1	4	4	6	18	
Assad's fight against terrorism	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	
Support for other reasons	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	8	

**Table 6 The Reasons for Criticism of Bashar al-Assad's and Syria's Policies Over Time (Multiple Selections Allowed)**

The reasons for criticism of Bashar al-Assad's and Syria's policies over time											
Newspapers											
Time period (months)	Cumhuriyet			Yeni Şafak			Hürriyet			Total	
	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month		
Disproportionate use of force	1	13	3	12	45	12	5	21	4	116	
Violation of human rights/ democracy	1	2	1	4	7	4	2	3	–	24	
Lack of stability	–	4	–	3	6	–	1	1	1	16	
Causing immigration	–	1	–	1	3	–	–	3	–	8	
Threatening Türkiye's security	–	–	–	2	1	–	–	1	–	4	
Supporting terrorism	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	1	

**Table 7 Words Describing the Opponents of Assad Over Time (Multiple Selections Allowed)**

		Words describing the opponents of Assad over time											
Newspapers		Hürriyet				Yeni Şafak				Total			
Time period (months)	Newspapers	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
The people who want freedom/Syrian people	Cumhuriyet	15	4	4	5	9	10	8	11	15	8	11	15
Dissident/demonstrator/protester	Hürriyet	32	25	25	22	29	10	12	32	21	12	32	21
Regime opponents/opponents of government	Yeni Şafak	3	2	2	1	3	0	2	4	1	2	4	1
Terrorist	Total	1	2	2	0	0	4	0	1	2	0	1	2
Ethnic and religious groups	Total	5	0	0	5	3	3	8	9	4	8	9	4
Other	Total	4	16	5	5	6	4	8	11	12	8	11	12
	Total	71	78	78	78	78	78	78	78	78	78	78	78

Table 8 Contexts of the Media Contents Over Time

		Contexts of the media contents over time											
Newspapers		Yeni Şafak						Hürriyet					
Time period (months)	Total	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month
		Internal revolts/ popular movements in Syria	24	80	18	31	68	36	31	59	15	362	
Arab spring (other popular movements)	20	33	25	33	30	27	18	23	8	217			
Sanctions	1	16	18	–	10	21	–	26	18	110			
Deterioration of Türkiye–Syria bilateral relations	–	26	30	2	8	16	–	14	12	108			
Assad's reforms/ healing Syria	4	16	–	16	17	6	14	19	6	98			
Security and terrorism	4	11	19	2	19	11	3	11	8	88			

**Table 8**  
(continued)

Contexts of the media contents over time												
Newspapers												
Cumhuriyet												
Time period (months)	Yeni Şafak				Hürriyet				Total			
	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month	Between 9th and 12th month	Between 1st and 4th month	Between 5th and 8th month		Between 9th and 12th month		
Migration	1	9	3	–	16	2	2	1	17	2	–	51
Election	–	4	4	2	7	2	2	1	2	3	–	25
Damage to Syria	1	3	–	1	9	2	2	1	6	–	–	23
Damage to Türkiye	–	2	4	–	–	3	3	–	2	3	–	14
Türkiye–Syria friendship messages	2	–	–	4	–	1	1	2	2	–	–	11

**Table 9 News Actors in Three Newspapers Over Time (Multiple Selections Allowed)**

News actors in three newspapers over time												
Newspapers												
Time period (months)	Hürriyet				Yeni Şafak				Total			
	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011
	Cumhuriyet	Hürriyet	Yeni Şafak	Cumhuriyet	Hürriyet	Yeni Şafak	Cumhuriyet	Hürriyet	Yeni Şafak	Cumhuriyet	Hürriyet	Yeni Şafak
Bashar al-Assad and/or Syrian government officials	6	15	19	12	12	11	15	13	13	13	13	116
Tayyip Erdogan and/or Turkish government officials	40	35	35	35	35	35	41	41	41	41	41	184
Syrian opponents	8	29	15	10	32	23	12	32	23	12	67	67
Opposition from Türkiye	52	65	65	65	65	65	65	65	65	65	65	67
Syrian NGO representatives/think tanks	4	11	10	9	8	7	2	8	8	2	8	67
	24	24	24	24	24	24	18	18	18	18	18	24
	0	8	8	0	2	2	0	3	3	0	1	24
	16	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	37
	3	9	0	3	7	1	3	9	9	3	2	37
	12	11	11	11	11	11	14	14	14	14	14	14

**Table 9**  
(continued)

News actors in three newspapers over time												
Newspapers												
Time period (months)	Cumhuriyet			Hürriyet			Yeni Şafak			Total		
	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011			
Turkish NGO representatives/ think tanks	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	2	4	0	9	
Other NGO representatives/ think tanks	2	3	0	1	2	0	1	1	3	1	13	
NATO, United Nations etc.	5	10	11	0	8	2	3	3	14	12	65	
Officials of International Organizations	26			10			29					
Officials of other countries	7	38	26	5	28	22	9	25	18	178		
	71			55			52					

**Table 9**  
(continued)

News actors in three newspapers over time												
Newspapers												
Time period (months)	Cumhuriyet			Hürriyet			Yeni Şafak			Total		
	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011			
Immigrants/refugees	0	2	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	5	1	11
Members of the media organizations	2	31	22	3	25	12	5	35	31	169		
Syrian people	7	60	38	2	6	4	5	11	3	50		
Syrian security forces	4	19	12	12	0	0	19	1	1	3		
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	26		
	4	22	15	8	20	15	14	25	26	149		
	41	43	65	72	99	140	188	140				
Total	50	190	132	51	153	99	72	188	140			



**Table 10**  
(continued)

Photographs used in news contents										
Newspapers										
Time period (months)	Cumhuriyet			Yeni Şafak			Hürriyet			Total
	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	
Vote	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Türkiye authorities	3	5	9	10	20	12	3	27	15	104
Syrian authorities	1	14	3	4	3	3	2	4	5	39
Syrian opponents/ protesters	9	13	7	8	21	16	8	16	7	105
Other world leaders/ representatives	1	6	3	9	18	16	3	18	6	80

**Table 10**  
(continued)

		Photographs used in news contents									
Newspapers		Yeni Şafak				Hürriyet					
Time period (months)		Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Between 1st and 4th month of 2011	Between 5th and 8th month of 2011	Between 9th and 12th month of 2011	Total
Assad with other world leaders/representatives	1	0	2	2	2	2	5	1	1	0	14
Türkiye officials with other world leaders/representatives	1	4	8	4	4	5	5	2	2	6	37
Other	6	26	21	15	15	48	37	19	36	32	240

Consequently, dissidents within Türkiye are featured more prominently as news actors in *Cumhuriyet* compared to the other two newspapers. Furthermore, Bashar al-Assad and/or Syrian government officials are more frequently represented as news actors in all three newspapers ( $N = 116$ ) compared to Syrian opponents ( $N = 67$ ). Additionally, the involvement of Syrian security forces as news actors is noticeably limited across the three newspapers (Table 9).

The analysis indicates that the most frequently utilized photographs in news content are of Syrian opponents/protesters ( $N = 105$ ), followed by Türkiye authorities ( $N = 104$ ), negative depictions of Assad ( $N = 83$ ), and positive portrayals of Assad ( $N = 83$ ), respectively. Notably, the occurrence of negative descriptions and positive depictions of Assad is observed at a similar frequency. Furthermore, during the period between the 5th and 8th month of 2011 when Türkiye pressured Damascus for urgent political reforms (Kösebalaban 2020: 337), both positive and negative representations of Assad experienced an increase, which can be attributed to the higher volume of news coverage during that time. Additionally, it is evident that minimal attention is given to the damage caused by opponents in all three newspapers. Syrian authorities are also given limited coverage compared to their Turkish counterparts across all three newspapers. However, the opposition newspaper *Cumhuriyet* allocates a greater space to photographs of Syrian officials, particularly during the period when Erdoğan began criticizing Assad (between the 5th and 8th month of 2011). Moreover, friendship-themed photographs are infrequently featured in all three newspapers. Significantly, an important finding of this study is that despite their varying ideological perspectives, the photographic selections of these newspapers exhibit notable similarities, with only slight variations in specific representations (Table 10).

### Conclusion

This study examines the impact of the Syrian uprisings that began in 2011 on Turkish–Syrian relations, focusing on selected media content from Turkish print media. It was found that in response to the uprisings, interest in Syria as an international news topic escalated in three Turkish newspapers with different ideological orientations. This finding is consistent with the proximity factor, which is one of the newsworthiness factors. As the conflict between the two nations intensified, the tone of media content regarding Bashar al-Assad and Syrian politics gradually shifted to a more negative and critical stance. Surprisingly, as national interest became the dominant ideology, all newspapers adopted a common stance despite their different ideological backgrounds.

It is worth noting that despite their ideological differences, the news actors in these newspapers show striking similarities and the newspapers are aligned with local interests. The analysis shows that the dominant news actors in all three newspapers are primarily Erdoğan and Turkish officials. However, it is noteworthy that *Yeni Şafak* and *Hürriyet* tend to have a higher proportion of news coverage involving Erdoğan and Turkish officials compared to *Cumhuriyet*. This discrepancy can be attributed to *Cumhuriyet*'s role as an opposition newspaper that is critical of the government. Furthermore, the inclusion of Syrian security forces as news actors is noticeably limited in all three newspapers. The selection of photographs by the newspapers also sheds light on the patterns of their use. The most frequently used photographs in news content are of Syrian opponents or protesters, followed by Turkish authorities. It is important to note that the prominence given to anti-Assad protesters in the photographs coincides with a period when Türkiye was highly critical of the Assad

regime. In all three newspapers, the dominant characterization of Assad's opponents is as dissidents, demonstrators, and protesters. The term "terrorists" is used sparingly to describe Assad's opponents. This indicates that the newspapers maintain a neutral stance toward Assad's opponents, thereby aligning themselves with Turkish foreign policy. Moreover, the analysis of the newspaper coverage reveals limited support for Assad in all three newspapers. Again, this indicates a parallel alignment with Turkish foreign policy across the board.

In conclusion, this examination of Assad's representation in the newspapers studied highlights the similarities in their alignment with local interests, despite their ideological differences. The dominance of Erdoğan and Turkish officials as news actors, coupled with the limited representation of Syrian security forces, underscores the parallel stance of the newspapers with Turkish foreign policy. The patterns observed in the selection of photographs and the characterization of Assad's opponents further reinforce this parallel orientation. The media texts presented the conflicts in Syria in a domesticated manner in order to attract the interest of the national audience. By emphasizing the negative implications for Türkiye, such as security concerns and migration issues, they framed the current unstable situation. Future studies comparing media representations in different countries have the potential to shed light on the differences in media coverage between nations.

#### ENDNOTES

Please direct correspondence to Bahar Kayihan, Department of Journalism, Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, AHBV İletişim Fakültesi Emniyet Mahallesi Abant Sokak, No:10/2 E Blok 06500, Yenimahalle, Ankara, Türkiye; e-mail: [bahar.kayihan@hbv.edu.tr](mailto:bahar.kayihan@hbv.edu.tr)

<sup>1</sup>The rhetoric that the security of Türkiye was at risk also laid the groundwork for the rationalization of Turkish countermeasures and the glorification of its regional role (Demirtas-Bagdonas 2014: 148).

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