



**Dimensions**  
for Strategic Studies

Analytical report

# Navigating Turkey's Diplomatic Landscape with Hard Power

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In a comprehensive address given at the 14th annual conference of Turkish ambassadors on August 8 of the current year, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan outlined Ankara's increasingly influential role in both regional and international political landscapes. Mr. Erdogan emphasized that Türkiye is committed to safeguarding its national interests and is strategically leveraging all available diplomatic avenues, along with both hard and soft elements of power, to achieve this objective. <sup>(1)</sup>

Erdogan's statements encapsulate an ambitious strategic vision he has been steering since his ascent to power two decades ago. His objective is to elevate Türkiye from a regional actor to a pivotal player on the international stage, especially in an era marked by intensifying geopolitical competition among the world's major powers. This ambition is underpinned primarily by Türkiye's enhanced capabilities in hard power. Over the past twenty years, Türkiye has made significant strides in amplifying its hard power, not only through a revolutionary overhaul of its defense industries but also by broadening the scope and function of what hard power entails for the nation. No longer is this form of power solely deployed to counter traditional security threats such as terrorism, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) insurgency, or the geopolitical intricacies of the Cyprus issue. Instead, it has evolved into a dynamic tool in Türkiye's foreign policy arsenal, wielded to navigate a myriad of emerging geopolitical challenges and to secure influence in diverse regions globally. Amid a tumultuous regional and global security environment, hard power stands as a pivotal cornerstone in shaping the foreign policies of nations deeply impacted by such disturbances.

(1) Erdogan's speech before the 14th Turkish Ambassadors' Conference in Ankara, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, August 8, 2023, [Link](#)



Türkiye, given its geographical location, is emblematic of this scenario. It finds itself encircled by a belt of chronic geopolitical unrest. The escalation of these upheavals over the past decade can be attributed to Ankara's increasing reliance on hard power. This approach is aimed at mitigating the ramifications of such disturbances on Türkiye itself. Simultaneously, it positions Türkiye as an active force in reshaping the surrounding regional political landscape on its four flanks. This strategy further bolsters Türkiye's geopolitical standing as it interacts with major powers such as Russia and the United States.

Since Ankara initiated a radical shift in its foreign policy at the beginning of 2021 towards mending relations with former regional adversaries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, as well as recalibrating its ties with Moscow and Washington, it has been working to create a synergy between hard and soft power. This nuanced approach is set to characterize President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's foreign policy in the next five years of his new presidential term. In doing so, Türkiye aims to navigate a complex geopolitical landscape, balancing its traditional forms of hard power with diplomatic finesse and strategic alliances, thereby enhancing its global influence and regional stability .<sup>(2)</sup>

(2) Features of the new Turkish foreign policy, Mahmoud Alloush, Al Jazeera Net, June 6, 2023, [Link](#)



## THE EMERGENCE OF TÜRKIYE'S CONCEPT OF HARD POWER

While Türkiye's foreign role since the founding of the Republic in 1923 until the rise of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the early 2000s was limited, and it had no significant military engagement abroad, the concept of hard power was nonetheless present in shaping Ankara's foreign policy towards the Cyprus issue in the 1970s. On July 20, 1974, the Turkish army deployed forces to the northern part of the island of Cyprus to protect Turkish Cypriots from a persecution campaign they were undergoing at the time at the hands of the Greek-backed southern Cypriots.

Since that intervention—which Türkiye dubbed "Cyprus Operation Peace"—the Turkish army has maintained a presence of around 40,000 troops in areas controlled by Turkish Cypriots. Thanks to the use of hard power in Cyprus, Ankara was able to assist Turkish Cypriots in forming their own republic on November 15, 1983. Although Türkiye remains the only country that recognizes this republic to date, it has imposed a new approach on the West for resolving the Cyprus crisis and has strengthened its position in the geopolitical struggle with Greece and southern Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>(3)</sup>

Continuing in the vein of this initial use of hard power abroad, Erdogan revealed for the first time in October 2022 that Türkiye had deployed both regular and armed drones in the northern part of Cyprus. This move came in response to the United States' decision to extend the lifting of restrictions on arms exports to the Roman Cyprus.<sup>(4)</sup>

(3) History of the Cyprus Issue, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Link](#)

(4) Erdogan reveals the deployment of drones in northern Cyprus, Anadolu Agency, October 10, 2022, [Link](#)



## TÜRKIYE'S WAR ON TERRORISM AND AMBITIONS FOR EXPANDING INFLUENCE: DRIVERS OF HARD POWER ENHANCEMENT TGYTT

Following years of insurgency led by the PKK against Türkiye that erupted in the 1980s, Türkiye started expanding its use of hard power overseas, focusing on Iraq to deny the organization a foothold in Northern Iraq. On March 20, 1995, the Turkish military launched its first anti-terrorism operation in Northern Iraq, dubbed "Operation Steel." Two years later, Türkiye initiated two land operations targeting PKK camps in the region. In February 2008, Ankara launched a third military operation in Northern Iraq<sup>(5)</sup>.

While there are no official Turkish figures regarding its military presence in Northern Iraq, Türkiye maintains at least thirty military sites in the region, including a military base in the Bashiqa region near Mosul, and training facilities for Peshmerga forces, as well as smaller military bases in provinces such as Erbil, Duhok, Soran, and Zakho<sup>(6)</sup>.

This military presence has reduced the PKK's ability to launch attacks from Northern Iraq into Türkiye. However, Ankara still faces challenges in fully eliminating the organization's activities in Iraq.

Before the year 2011, which marked an escalation in Türkiye's use of military power abroad, the role of hard power was primarily centered around counteracting the threats emanating from PKK activities in Northern Iraq. However, the scope and function of this concept started to broaden significantly after the outbreak of the Arab Spring for three main reasons:

1. The rise in security threats due to the growth of the Kurdish separatist project in Northern Syria following the Syrian war.

(5) Turkish Military Operations in Northern Iraq, Turkish Ministry of Defence, [Link](#)

(6) Turkish Military Presence in Iraqi Kurdistan, Washington Institute for Near East Studies, May 18, 2022, [Link](#)



2. The emergence of new geopolitical challenges on its southern border, on the western front with Greece, on the northern front in the Black Sea, and on the eastern front in South Caucasus.
3. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's long-term ambitions to transform Türkiye into an active power in its near and distant regional neighborhood.

These three reasons, collectively, have contributed to the development of the concept of using hard power in foreign policy, particularly in volatile regions like the Middle East and the South Caucasus, and to a lesser extent, North Africa.

## ARAB SPRING AND SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES

When the Arab Spring protests erupted in 2011, the wars in Syria and Libya and the rising activities of terrorist organizations on Türkiye's southern border, such as ISIS and the PKK in Northern Iraq and its Syrian affiliate, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), created a security vacuum threatening Türkiye's national security and regional ambitions. Between 2011 and 2016, Türkiye applied the concept of hard power in response to these challenges by escalating its military operations against the PKK in Northern Iraq and indirectly engaging in the Syrian war to topple Bashar al-Assad's regime.

However, with the rise of the separatist project in Northern Syria and the breakdown of peace talks between the Turkish state and the PKK in 2015, Ankara began to develop its use of hard power in Syria through direct engagement in the conflict. Since 2016, Türkiye has launched four major military operations in Northern Syria: "Euphrates Shield," "Olive Branch," "Peace Spring," and "Spring Shield." Türkiye has since controlled areas in northwestern Syria and a limited pocket in northeastern Syria<sup>(7)</sup>.

The primary goal of developing the use of hard power was to eliminate the Kurdish units' efforts to link their areas of control on either side of the Euphrates and cut off geographic communication between the YPG-controlled areas in Syria and PKK areas in Northern Iraq, in addition to curbing waves of Syrian refugees into Türkiye by presenting itself as a guarantor for the Syrian opposition and rehabilitating the regions it administers in cooperation with opposition factions in northwestern Syria.

Seven years after Türkiye's first military incursion into Syria, it is clear that hard power has become a fundamental part of Türkiye's strategy in Syria and Iraq. Even as Ankara has begun talks with the Syrian regime under Russian sponsorship since the end of last year to mend relations, there are no indications that Türkiye is prepared to withdraw its forces stationed in Northern Syria<sup>(8)</sup>.

(7) Turkish military operations in Iraq and Syria, Reuters, October 12, 2019, [Link](#)

(8) Guler: Drafting a new constitution and adopting it is the most important stage for bringing peace to Syria. Turkish Defense Minister: President Erdogan is making sincere sincere efforts to bring peace to Syria. Anadolu Agency, August 12, 2023, [Link](#)



Türkiye links any potential withdrawal to achieving a comprehensive settlement of the Syrian conflict and addressing its security concerns regarding Kurdish militias and the return of Syrian refugees in Türkiye to their homeland. After Türkiye entered the Astana process, Ankara expanded its military posts in contact areas within de-escalation zones between the regime and the opposition to reach 125 locations, including 12 military bases and 113 points distributed across six provinces. <sup>(9)</sup>

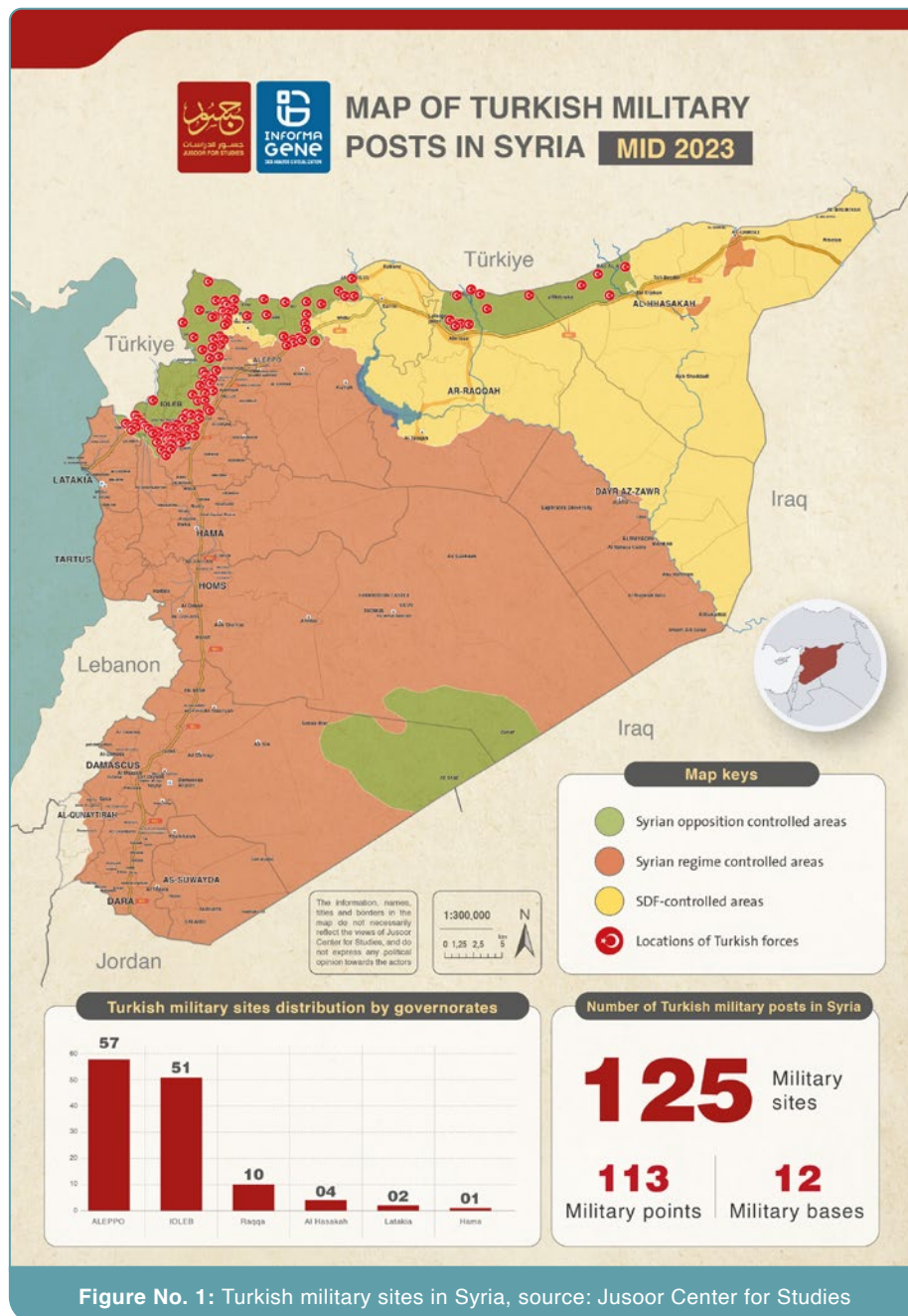


Figure No. 1: Turkish military sites in Syria, source: Jusoor Center for Studies

(9) A team of researchers, Map of the Military Sites of Foreign Powers in Syria in Mid-2023, Jusoor Center for Studies, July 3, 2023, [Link](#)



Türkiye's escalating use of hard power since the beginning of the last decade also falls within the broader vision of Türkiye's perception of itself as a rising regional power. This explains the wave of developments that have occurred in Türkiye's use of hard power in other parts of the world. For instance, in 2019, Türkiye signed a defense cooperation agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord at the time to assist the latter in repelling General Khalifa Haftar's assault on the capital, Tripoli. Thanks to this support, Türkiye succeeded in thwarting Haftar's bid to capture the capital and established a strong foothold in Libya. While Türkiye does not explicitly acknowledge a clear military presence in Libya, it says its support for Tripoli is limited to military advisors. However, Turkish drones have played a significant role in altering the dynamics of the Libyan conflict in favor of Ankara and its Libyan allies<sup>(10)</sup> since 2019.

In addition to the importance of Türkiye's military engagement in building influence in Libya, Ankara has also worked to strengthen its position in the geopolitical conflict with Greece and Southern Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean. It has aimed to break regional and international efforts to isolate it in this vital area. Moreover, Türkiye has resorted to cautious and limited use of hard power in its maritime conflict with Greece in 2020 by sending exploration ships escorted by naval vessels<sup>(11)</sup> to disputed areas with Athens.

The success of Türkiye's use of hard power is evident in the maritime boundary demarcation agreement it concluded with Tripoli in 2019, which subsequently led to the dismantling of its competing regional bloc in the Eastern Mediterranean. This pushed Egypt to enter into talks with Ankara to end the crisis in 2021, culminating in the two countries' decision to exchange ambassadors on July 4th of this year<sup>(12)</sup>. The shifting dynamics of the conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean have also prompted other powers like Israel to improve relations with Türkiye and explore ways to cooperate in exporting Israeli gas to Europe through Türkiye.

(10) In Libya, Turkish aircraft are weakening Haftar more and more, Al Jazeera Net, April 19, 2020, [Link](#)

(11) Türkiye and Greece and the risks of escalating tensions, Mahmoud Alloush, "Al Jazeera Net", September 5, 2022, [Link](#)

(12) Türkiye and Egypt...historical relations, Anadolu Agency, July 4, [Link](#)



## TÜRKIYE'S HARD POWER IN THE GULF

In parallel with the deployment of hard power in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, Türkiye turned to partially utilizing its hard power in the Gulf region in 2017 by sending forces to Qatar to assist it against the blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt. In reality, the Gulf crisis presented Türkiye with an opportunity to establish a military foothold in the region. Türkiye currently maintains a military base in Doha, created under a military cooperation agreement between the two countries in 2014, and housed approximately 200 soldiers and military advisors<sup>(13)</sup> in 2017.

Since Türkiye began mending relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE starting in 2021, it has been working to evolve the concept of hard power by blending it with diplomacy and soft power. This is to enhance its presence in the Gulf region through establishing defense partnerships with other Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait. On August 6, 2023, Saudi Arabia's military industries company signed a strategic localization agreement with Türkiye's Baykar Technologies to establish drone manufacturing in the Kingdom<sup>(14)</sup>.

The UAE has been in talks with Türkiye for months to invest in Turkish defense industries, and on June 13 of this year, Kuwait contracted with Türkiye to purchase Bayraktar TB2 drones through direct negotiations between the two governments<sup>(15)</sup>.

(13) The military agreement between Turkey and Qatar, Al Jazeera, June 10, 2017, [Link](#)

(14) Türkiye and Saudi Arabia conclude agreements and memorandums of understanding in defense industries, Anatolia, August 7, 2023, [Link](#)

(15) Kuwait contracts with Türkiye to purchase drones, Anadolu Agency, June 13, 2023, [Link](#)



These agreements, along with others concluded by Ankara and Riyadh on the sidelines of President Erdoğan's Gulf tour in July of this year—which included Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar—reflect the strong momentum in the new relationships Türkiye is seeking to establish with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries at large. While economic dimensions take up the most significant space of interest in the strong interaction between Türkiye and the Gulf since the restoration of relations between Ankara, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi, the Gulf's increasing interest in Turkish defense industries actually transcends mere commercial gains in Türkiye's arms sales to Gulf countries. It particularly reflects how Türkiye is on its way to becoming a vital partner for the Gulf region in the realms of security and defense. It also demonstrates how Türkiye's hard power operates alongside its soft power in shaping Ankara's foreign policy.



## TÜRKIYE'S EXPANSION INTO AFRICA

Before its growing influence in the Gulf, Türkiye had already been working on expanding the concept of hard power to establish a foothold in other regions, particularly in Africa. In 2015, Ankara and Mogadishu signed a defense cooperation agreement, followed by a similar pact with Sudan two years later. These agreements paved the way for Türkiye to establish its first military bases in the Horn of Africa, with the potential for additional bases in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean in North Africa.

In 2017, Türkiye inaugurated its largest overseas military training academy in Somalia. Since 2022, Turkish arms sales to African nations have emerged as another aspect of hard power in building partnerships with the African continent. Türkiye has sold drones to the West African nation of Togo, which is struggling to curb the infiltration of jihadist fighters moving south from Burkina Faso. In May of the same year, Niger acquired a number of these versatile and reasonably priced drones for its military operations against rebel groups in the Sahel region south of the Sahara Desert and around Lake Chad<sup>(16)</sup>.

This arms trade underscores Türkiye's strategy of utilizing hard power to build partnerships while supporting its geopolitical interests in the region. It also indicates how Türkiye is leveraging its military and technological capabilities as instruments of hard power to establish and deepen relationships in Africa, adding another layer to its global outreach.

(16) Why are African countries buying Turkish drones? BBC Arabic, August 25, 2022, [Link](#)



## TÜRKIYE'S HARD POWER AS A TOOL IN SHAPING FOREIGN RELATIONS

In addition to effectively responding to security and geopolitical challenges, Turkish hard power has emerged as a tool for reshaping relations with major powers like the United States and Russia. To achieve a balanced stance in the Russo-Ukrainian war, Türkiye has not hesitated to use hard power in regions where Russia is active, such as Syria, South Caucasus, and Libya. Despite the strong relationship that has developed between Ankara and Moscow since the mending of ties following the 2015 incident of shooting down a Russian fighter jet in Syria, Türkiye went ahead to purchase the S-400 missile system from Russia under a contract signed between the two countries in 2017<sup>(17)</sup>.

Simultaneously, Ankara has employed hard power to balance its position in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war for over a year and a half by supplying Kyiv with drones and bolstering defense cooperation. After Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula in 2014, military cooperation between Türkiye and Ukraine has increased<sup>(18)</sup>.

On a parallel track, Türkiye has used hard power against the U.S.-allied Kurdish units in Syria. Although resorting to hard power in interactions with both Russia and the United States has caused tensions, it has enabled Ankara to strengthen its position in the process of reshaping relations with Moscow and Washington since the mid-last decade.

(17) On the implications of Türkiye testing the Russian system, Mahmoud Alloush, Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed, October 9, 2020, [Link](#)

(18) Russia Attempts to Control the Black Sea, Atlantic Council, August 3, 2023, [Link](#)



## PROSPECTS OF TURKISH HARD POWER

As much as security and geopolitical challenges have played a significant role in bolstering Turkish hard power in foreign policy, particularly since the dawn of the third millennium, several other factors have also contributed. The substantial advancements in Türkiye's defense industry over the last two decades, the sweeping reforms President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made to the military establishment, and the transition to a presidential system in 2017 have all collectively expanded the scope of Türkiye's hard power abroad.

The most important factor determining the strength and impact of any country's hard power is its military capability. This is especially true for Türkiye, given the notable rise in its defense industries recently<sup>(19)</sup>. This development has enabled Türkiye to be more active in its fight against terrorism and in its military interventions in various conflicts, while also utilizing military force as a means to build partnerships with different regional and international actors.

Furthermore, the reforms that Erdogan undertook within the military establishment after the failed coup attempt in July 2016 have refocused the army on its core duties of maintaining security and countering threats facing Türkiye abroad. Therefore, it's not surprising that the first land military operation in Syria took place just about a month after the attempted coup against Erdogan. The broad powers that Erdogan acquired after the transition to the presidential system have also enabled him to make swift decisions concerning the activity of Turkish hard power abroad<sup>(20)</sup>.

(19) Assessing the Growth of Türkiye 's Defense Industries, Atlantic Council, December 22, 2022, [Link](#)

(20) What does the presidential system in Türkiye offer, TRT, [Link](#)

## CONCLUSION

Since 2016, Türkiye's expansive use of hard power in foreign policy has elevated its role as a significant actor in both regional and global security dynamics. However, this approach hasn't been without its drawbacks, notably in straining relations with key regional and international players. Recognizing these challenges, Türkiye initiated a considerable shift in its foreign policy strategies starting in 2021. By improving ties with influential regional powers like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, and seeking to reduce tensions with Western countries, Türkiye is attempting to find a more balanced approach between hard power and diplomatic efforts.

Circumstances largely define the extent to which any state can wield hard power, both regionally and globally. In Türkiye's case, the changing geopolitical landscape, characterized by regional de-escalation in the Middle East over the past three years, has called for a recalibration of its hard power activities. This is especially evident in places like Libya, where Türkiye has dialed back its military involvement, aligning more closely with its traditional foreign policy that emphasizes diplomacy and conflict resolution.

Moving forward, Türkiye aims to strategically deploy its hard power capabilities in specific contexts. In the South Caucasus, it seeks a lasting peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia while paving the way for normalized relations with Yerevan. In Cyprus, Türkiye is likely to continue its use of hard power to strengthen its position, as well as that of the Turkish Cypriots, in prospective reunification talks. Regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Türkiye is poised to use its hard power to maintain a balanced stance between Russia and Ukraine, and to promote equilibrium between Moscow and Western powers.

In Africa, Türkiye plans to sustain its hard power influence primarily through arms sales, particularly as the continent becomes an increasingly significant arena in global geopolitical competition. Overall, Türkiye is navigating a complex international landscape, attempting to harmonize its hard power capabilities with diplomatic imperatives.





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