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CENTER for DIPLOMATIC AFFAIRS and POLITICAL STUDIES

TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH GLOBAL POWERS in SYRIA

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Panel Notes

The online panel with the main theme "Turkey's Relations with the Global Powers in Syria" was held in 22.09.2020, at 19.30 by DİPAM. In the online panel, under the moderation of DİPAM Vice President Ahmet İŞCAN, Medeniyet

University Head of International Relations Department Prof. Dr. Özden Zeynep OKTAV, Nişantaşı University Head of International Relations Department Dr. Savaş BİÇER and journalist and President

of the Turkish-Arab Media Association Turan KIŞLAKÇI participated as speakers. Ahmet İŞCAN by introduced the speakers and launched the panel where the main issue was Syria. He pointed out that the Syrian issue has been very closely related to Turkey in every sense since 2011. He noted that Turkey has been affected by the Syrian issue with very serious consequences because it has a long and wide land border with Syria. In particular, he stated that the issue of migration, which is one of the biggest problems for both Turkey and the whole world, and the fact that the structures in North of Syria threaten Turkey's security, have made the Syrian issue a focus for Turkey. İŞCAN, who sees Syria as the most concrete area where Turkey has started to produce a foreign policy beyond the system for the first time, he noted that Turkey has carried out very serious operations in Syria in order to ensure its national security and has made many gains as a result. İŞCAN, concerned that the softening and ceasefire situation in Idlib, which has appeared concrete since 5th March 2020, could leave its place in the conflict after the start of Russian bombardments that began in recent days, he asked the speakers for their opinion on this issue. He also said that Russia was preparing a major operation in the region with the support of Iran, and asked the speakers about the possibility that this could lead to a state of conflict.

Zeynep OKTAV stated that the war in Syria is not over and said that outside global powers, states such as Iran and Israel are also involved in the Syrian issue. OKTAV pointed to the Negotiation Theory, a new concept in International Relations, and said that the negotiation environment in Syria and Idlib has never ended; in addition, negotiations continue while

conflicts and wars continue, and Idlib is the most striking example of this. She mentioned that Turkey is in a closed conflict with Iran and Russia in Syria. OKTAV indicated that Turkey has never cut the negotiations with Russia and Iran, and also emphasized that Astana Process, where the negotiations still continue, is still going on. She cited as an example that Erdoğan went to Sochi on 17th of September, 2019 to negotiate with Putin so that there would be no massacres in Idlib, as in Eastern Ghouta. OKTAV noted that Turkey's efforts sometimes damaged its own image, continued that as a result of these efforts, Russia has given the image of Turkey as it's protecting radical opponents in Idlib.

OKTAV pointed out Turkey and Russia relations did not go well from 17.09.2018 to 27.02.2020 and said that on 27th of February, 2020, with the attack occurred in Idlib which resulted with 38 martyrs in Turkey, cause extremely high point of conflict in relations with Russia.

Saying that the Negotiation Theory is the subject of the parties to apply for negotiation in order to resolve the conflict and coercive, OKTAV said that in the case of Syria, the parties resorted to negotiation after the conflict or that the parties clashed in parallel with the negotiation process. She said that when Turkey and Russia sit at the table during the negotiation process, they divided the problems between them into sections and put fewer problem areas on the table. OKTAV, who said that Turkey responded with retaliation after the attack on 27th of February, underlined that between Turkey and Russia, both sides did not get what they wanted in negotiations. She said that Russia and Iran do not want Turkey in Idlib, but Turkey does not leave

Idlib and also continues to control the M4 Highway. In addition, she stressed that Turkey is not acting together with the United States and NATO, and she also stressed that Turkey is acting in orbit with Russia by taking S-400 missile defense systems from Russia. Noting that Russia has created a rift in the NATO union through Turkey, OKTAV said that Russia has profited greatly from this.

According to OKTAV, the main problem of the Syrian issue between Turkey and Russia; Russia's PYD/PKK distance do not be as necessary, Russia did not support Operation Olive Branch, one of Turkey's military operations in Syria, and said that Russia had established military observation posts in Tel Rifat, thus creating a gap between Menbic and Afrin. She continued his speech by saying that Turkey's relations with the United States have deteriorated from time to time in Syria, and sometimes relations with Russia have been strained, noting that Turkey and the United States have a difference of opinion on the territorial unity of Syria, and saying that Turkey, Iran and Russia are closer to each other on this issue. She also said that this situation provides an connective effect between the three. In addition, she added that Russia is not as insistent on Syria's territorial unity as Turkey and Iran.

OKTAV said that After 27th of February, Turkey's communication with NATO and expressed support from it did not have any concrete equivalent, noting that Turkey was left alone in Idlib and relations between Turkey and the EU were strained after the attack on 27th of February. Because of the migration problem that will arise from Idlib which is seen as it is only Turkey's problem, Turkey has opened its

border crossings to refugees with great anger against the EU.

Although Turkey in the region is mostly flexible and trying continue the dialogue process, OKTAV said that Turkey's both hands and feet are tied at the final point. Oktav stated that Russia consistently directed Turkey to negotiate with the Assad regime, did not stand clear from the PYD / PKK and even got closer. On 13th of January, 2020, Syrian and Turkish intelligence chiefs allegedly met in Moscow and this news was leaked to the Press by Russia. This was announced as "Turkey is somehow conducting negotiations with the Assad regime."

At the end of OKTAV's speech, she saw as the worst scenario for Turkey on the Syrian issue as the situation if Russia and the United States agree on to design Syria. She also noted the oil contract of Delta Crescent Energy, a US energy company, with YPG. She hoped Turkey would reach a compromise and consolidate with Kurdish groups in the North of Syria that are opposed to the ENKS and the PKK-YPG.

Mrs. OKTAV mentioned the negotiation theory and questioned why the problems were so unsolvable, saying that the negotiations that took place on Turkey in private with Russia continued to one place and were blocked after another, because the conflicts began during the negotiations.

Continuing to speak at the rest of the panel, Dr. Savaş BİÇER, He said that the negotiation theory is the diplomatic process that Turkey wants to do in both Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean. Mentioning the existence of regional states in addition to global powers in Syria, BİÇER also emphasized the historical

importance of the region. Turkey's presence in Syria as the reason, he mentioned the justification of the operations carried out in Syria for future generations. BİÇER noted that the presence of Turkish military forces in the region will withdraw from these regions when they ensure Turkey's security, and stated that Turkey will not behave otherwise and will not leave if the region does not become safe for itself.

BİÇER, who said that someone who manages foreign policy, as in the past, does not have a chance to do anything else, said that Turkey is doing the same thing as it did in the past and he emphasized this in particular such state's policy in the Hatay problem, the policy it applied in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Cyprus Peace Operation. He said that this has become state policy.

BİÇER said that the operations performed by Turkish Armed Forces did not end the terrorist organizations but only postponed them, and that thanks to these operations, cleansed the region in the north of Syria from terrorism. BİÇER is evaluated the US and Russia under the umbrella of the agreement on interests in Syria. He said that Turkey has taken measures in any case of the worst scenario occurs. He pointed out that Russia, Iran and Turkey thought the same about Syria's territorial unity and he participated with the Mrs. OKTAV's thinking. He also said that he did not think that the worst scenario that Mrs. OKTAV had stated would be very unlikely.

BİÇER said that Russia and Turkey are acting together because they have interests in some parts of Syria, and noted that the same countries are on different sides in Libya. Assessing that the United

States can cooperate with any entity that will protect and serve its own interests, BİÇER pointed out that the possible US withdrawal from Syria will change the balance in the region.

BİÇER, criticized Israel's statements towards Turkey's Syria policy, as one of the influential actors in the region, and reminded that the state of Israel applies double standards in international relations and he reminded that the bombs Israel dropped on Lebanon as a justification for its own security. He also mentioned that Russia is planning an operation and there are some groups which Turkey could not convince in that operation area.

As a result, the Syrian issue, which has been considered forgotten due to the intensity of the eastern Mediterranean and COVID-19 agenda in recent periods, has not been forgotten and is carefully monitored by the Foreign Ministry, BİÇER said, "Syria has not been forgotten."

Continuing the panel as a speaker, Turan KIŞLAKÇI said that the Syrian issue has turned into a regional and global fight and noted that the situation in Libya has also evolved into Syria, but not as long and destructive as Syria. Talking about the influence of regional powers on the Syrian issue, KIŞLAKÇI drew attention to the pre-war period and stated that Iran and Saudi Arabian states were very active. Emphasizing that there is no criticism against Saudi Arabia, especially from the Syrian regime, KIŞLAKÇI said that although there was a problem between them, there was no reaction. KIŞLAKÇI specifically mentioned Saudi Arabia's activity in Syria. In an interview with a politician who was one of Assad's advisors, he stated that Assad had made the decision that he would resort to violence to suppress the

demonstrations in Syria when the demonstrations first started, and that he told him that he would develop policies.

In addition, KIŞLAKÇI conveyed by the memoirs of Burhan GALYON, who was the leader of the Syrian opposition in 2016, 2017 and 2018 and was currently a lecturer at Sorbonne University. GALYON stated "The war in Syria will not end because the global powers do not want the war to end, and as an example, in 2015-2016, he made a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to solve the problem in Syria "If Assad offers a base to Russia, we offer you five bases, as long as the conflict in Syria is over." LAVROV answered "We are not in Syria for bases or oil, we are completely in Syria for Europe, we want Europe to accept that Russia is a global power." He stated that Galyon said in his talks with European states "We will never sit at the table with Russia, we will not give such power to Russia". In his talks with the US, he stated that the US stated that it would continue to exist in Syria because its interests were low but the risks were high for it.

KIŞLAKÇI said in GALYON's memoirs that during his talks with Israel, Israeli officials stated that "Our own interests are different from everyone else and that the disorder in Syria comes to their advantage" . KIŞLAKÇI stated that Israeli Defense Minister told the Washington Post "We do not want this war to end, and the prolongation of the war is vital for us." . KIŞLAKÇI, drawing attention to GALYON's memories, stated that "the main source of the prolongation of the issue in Syria is that Israel does not want the war in Syria to end."

Drawing attention to the flow of financial support to the PYD from the UAE and

Saudi Arabia, KIŞLAKÇI explained that the Arabs aimed at anti-Turks in the last century and that the Turks aimed to revive the Ottoman Empire and that these states were hostile to Turks through Arab nationalism. KIŞLAKÇI said that Arabs were built in the last century of the Ottoman opposition to nationalism, also mentioned that Turkey has noted the need to pay attention to the discourses. Speaking about the struggles between the powers in the region, KIŞLAKÇI also touched on sectarian conflicts in the region. He said that in the fight between the great powers, the people in the region suffered the most. He also drew attention to the effectiveness of Britain in the region, although it was not talked about much among global powers. He underlined that the UK can play a key role for a solution.

İŞCAN asked questions to panelists about whether there will be a possibility of sitting at the same table with Assad and Turkey, OKTAV said that such a situation is impossible. She stated that the politicians in Israel have different ideas about Assad. BİÇER said that Turkey is trying to take measures for its own security in Libya, Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, and that Turkey is in trouble for life. He also saw that the issue was more than a matter of energy. BİÇER noted that Turkey's efforts for stability in meat of all times, has said that Turkey's target in the region.

İŞCAN stated that the Syrian issue, which is to be thought as an issue outside of the agenda, is always on the agenda for the Turkey. And he also said that Turkey is working for the Syria and the peacebuilding process in Syria.



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Prof. Dr. Özden Zeynep OKTAV is the head of the Department of International Relations at Istanbul Medeniyet University. Oktav's studies include: Turkey in the 21st Century Quest for a New Foreign Policy (2011), Limits of Relations with the West: Turkey Syria and Iran (2008), The Changing Dynamics of the Arab Gulf and Saudi Arabia-US-Iran Relations (2011), Turkey in the 2000's: Opportunities, Risks and Crises (2015), GCC-Turkey Relations: Dawn of a New Era (2015), Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War: ISIS and YPG Cases (2018). Oktav has published many articles on Turkey and Middle East relations. She also participated in Cambridge and St. Andrews universities as visiting researcher.

Dr. Savaş BİÇER graduated from the Military Academy as a staff officer, after the Kuleli Military High School and the Military Academy. He retired after serving in various levels of the Turkish Armed Forces. He completed his doctoral thesis on NATO's post-Cold War military interventions. He wrote on NATO, International Security and terrorism. Savaş Biçer is the head of the International Relations department at Istanbul Nişantaşı University.

Turan KIŞLAKÇI, studied economics, religion, philosophy and international relations from different universities in Turkey and Pakistan. He is a politician, journalist and literary writer who is well known by the Turkish-Arab world. He became famous in the Arab world as a volunteer Turkish-Arab cultural ambassador. He is known for giving a deep unity and color to the Turkish-Arab world of thought with his books on the Middle East. Kışlakçı, who served as the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture of Qatar in 2018-19, is a manager in various media organizations.