



ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS, POLARIZING RHETORIC, AND  
DIVERSIONARY USE OF FORCE

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May 2021

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS, POLARIZING RHETORIC AND DIVERSIONARY USE OF FORCE**

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Experiencing economic and social problems make state leaders lose popularity among their constituencies. Eventually, they are likely to lose their positions, if problems persist. Motivated to stay in office, leaders resort to different policies as long as political systems that they exist within allow. Use of force to divert public attention is one of these policies. Scholars who have studied this phenomenon suggested several mechanisms to trace state leaders' efforts for creating diversionary conflict. In this thesis, I offer a novel approach which adds societies' political polarization into the relationship between leaders' need for diversion and conflict initiation. To test this approach, I chose post-2014 presidential election Turkey as my case study. The case is rich in content because of the deteriorating economic indicators, presence of a polarized society, and having different violent conflicts. I measured the polarization variable through president's speeches by using computational text analysis methods. Then, I conducted regression analyses to detect the relationship between polarizing rhetoric and diversionary use of force. My findings reveal that the ruling party elite has followed different practices in using polarizing elements in their speeches for conflicts inside and outside Turkey. While rhetoric becomes more polarized in the times that armed forces conduct more operations to PKK, it becomes less when the number of conflicts abroad increases.

Keywords: Computational Text Analysis, Diversionary Use of Force, Polarization, Rhetoric, Turkey

## ÖZET

### EKONOMİK ZORLUKLAR, KUTUPLAŞTIRICI SÖYLEM VE DİKKAT DAĞITICI GÜÇ KULLANIMI

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Ekonomik ve sosyal sorunlar yaşamak, devlet liderlerinin seçmenleri arasında popülerliğini kaybetmesine neden olur. Sorunlar devam ederse koltuklarını kaybetmeleri de muhtemeldir. Temel motivasyonları görevde kalmak olan liderler, içinde buldukları siyasi sistemler izin verdiği ölçüde farklı politikalara başvururlar. Dikkat dağıtıcı güç kullanımı bu politikalardan biridir. Bu fenomeni inceleyen bilim adamları, devlet liderlerinin dikkat dağıtıcı çatışma yaratma çabalarının izini sürmek için birkaç mekanizma önerdiler. Bu tezde, liderlerin dikkat dağıtma ihtiyacı ve çatışmanın başlaması arasındaki ilişkiye toplumların siyasi kutuplaşmasını ekleyen yeni bir yaklaşım öneriyorum. Bu yaklaşımı test etmek için 2014 cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimlerinden sonra vaka çalışması olarak Türkiye'yi seçtim. Bu vaka, kötüleşen ekonomik göstergeler, kutuplaşmış bir toplumun varlığı ve farklı çatışmaların süregelmesi nedeniyle içerik bakımından oldukça zengin. Çalışmamda kutuplaşma değişkenini devlet başkanının konuşmalarını hesaplamalı metin analizi yöntemlerini kullanarak ölçtüm. Daha sonra, kutuplaştırıcı retorik ve dikkat dağıtıcı güç kullanımı arasındaki ilişkiyi tespit etmek için regresyon analizleri yaptım. Bulgularım, iktidar partisi elitinin konuşmalarında kutuplaştırıcı unsurlar kullanmak konusunda Türkiye içindeki ve dışındaki çatışmalarda farklı uygulamalar izlediğini ortaya koyuyor. Silahlı kuvvetlerin PKK'ya daha fazla operasyon yürüttüğü dönemde söylem daha kutuplaşmış hale gelirken, yurtdışındaki çatışmaların sayısı arttıkça söylem daha az kutuplaştırıcı hale geliyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dikkat Dağıtıcı Güç Kullanımı, Hesaplamalı Metin Analizi, Kutuplaşma, Söylem, Türkiye

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

How can an embattled leader manage to keep his position despite all the indicators against himself/herself? To answer this question, it is crucial to know what policies are available to him/her in his/her policy toolkit. Contrary to what people expect from them as their countries' rulers, leaders prioritize their own interests instead of the states' as their toolkits allow (Miller, 1995). They act in line with their desire to be elected in the elections and not to lose the support they have from the public. What we witnessed in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea was claimed by some academicians and journalists as such a behavior (Marten, 2014; Theiler, 2017). They argued that at the time, Putin made a move to Crimea in order to overcome problems he was dealing with in domestic politics<sup>1</sup>. In the midst of the period that his popularity declined, and opposition leaders accused him of corruption in the constructions for the Sochi Olympic Games, he annexed Crimea. Research shows that after annexation, he was relieved from the pressure inside the country, and his approval rates inclined significantly (Theiler, 2017). On the opposite shore of the Black Sea, Turkish President has also been criticized for resorting to the use of force

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Levada Polling Center figures, Putin's approval ratings were at the 60s before his move to Crimea. However, it rose up to 89% after he managed to annex Crimea into Russia. See <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>.

to maintain his ruling after his party failed in the June 2015 elections (The Editorial Board, 2015). Some journalists, politicians, and academicians claimed that the government escalated the conflict in Turkey's southeast against PKK to create a rally around the flag effect and win the upcoming elections in November 2015 (Ünver, 2016; Machain & Rosenberg, 2018). While one can claim both leaders to be successful in using force to reach his goals by referring to their rising approval rates, the importance of leaders' priorities while making critical decisions became prominent once again.

The literature on diversionary conflict theory has predominantly been occupied with this question of how state leaders benefit from the use of force in dealing with domestic problems they face. Scholars have argued that leaders who struggle with economic, political, or social problems in domestic politics can initiate an international conflict to keep the ruling power in their hands (Jung, 2014). While this idea has long been agreed on, empirical research on the argument has not yet reached a consensus (Levy, 1989; Tir, 2010). On the other hand, to tackle the problem of lacking support to the theory, Tir and Jasinski (2008) propose to extend the range of diversionary targets in line with Levy's (1998) advice and include domestic targets as well. Besides geographical limitations to exert power over other countries, power imbalances between countries restrict leaders' decision-making as well (Tir & Jasinski, 2008), and thus we barely observe militarized conflict between countries to come up with evidence for the theory. In a world where countries hardly engage each other militarily, domestic ethnic groups might also be the suitable targets for embattled leaders. Therefore, some scholars consider domestic out-groups as diversionary targets as well.

Coupled with the literature's need to improve its state of lacking quantitative evidence, including domestic groups to would-be targets determined the path of my thesis. I believe that adding an extra variable as a mediator may affect the relationship between leaders' diversionary needs and the course of violent conflicts. Considering how state leaders' rhetoric effectively alters the political environment of their countries<sup>2</sup>, rhetoric may play the role of the third variable in this relationship. On the one hand, leaders may desire to consolidate its voter base by creating a polarized society so that they keep their re-election chances high and stay in office. On the other hand, they may give aggressive and hostile speeches to the nation by using the society's fragmented structure to galvanize the people against possible targets and make the country's politics more conducive to initiate violent conflicts. In line with this logic, this thesis will engage with two questions: Do economic hardships result automatically in diversionary use of force? Do leaders employ polarizing rhetoric to set the ground for the public before waging violent conflicts?

To draw an outline, this study consists of three chapters: 1) Diversionary Conflict Theory and its Theoretical Foundations, 2) Case Selection, 3) Empirical Analysis. In the first chapter, I compile the views in the literature of diversionary conflict theory. Based on the main assumption that state leaders do not want to leave office once they get into, I explain how they instrumentalize military force to hold their position longer while experiencing severe economic and social problems.

Leaders who resort to violence have certain motivations such as proving their competence in ruling or setting the agenda for public discussion. Nevertheless, their actions may not always be welcomed by citizens and may backfire as well. This is

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Trump's rhetoric during his presidency. He embraced a hostile stance towards his opponents by discriminating them from his supporters. While he was attributing good traits to his supporters, he constantly dehumanized his opponents. See Mercieca, J. R. (2020). *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump*. United States: Texas A&M University Press.

why, they use in-group/out-group dichotomy in framing conflict against other states or out-groups at home. In this respect, leaders need to persuade their constituencies by selecting target groups wisely. Target should be strong enough to convince the constituency but, at the same time, weak enough to be defeated. However, even though a target is sometimes obvious for the state leader, conditions to initiate an attack may not be present. Targets can avoid involving any conflict with a possible diverter if they observe that leader is in trouble and needs a diversion. Having explained these dynamics of diversionary conflicts, this chapter also presents my novel approach to political use of force by considering leaders' rhetoric.

My theoretical argument offers a new mechanism for diversionary conflicts to overcome the problem of having scant empirical evidence in the literature. I put forward that polarization of the political environment may have an influence on the leaders' decision to use of force in an effort to create a diversion. This polarized environment may be created by the state leader through his rhetoric with distributing symbolic rewards to supporters and punishments to opponents. While doing so, leader benefits from the existing cleavages among the society and positions his electorate into the favorable sides.

I choose post-2014 presidential election Turkey as my case study to test this mechanism. It is rich in content to study the different aspects of the theory. First of all, Turkey has been going through an economic crisis in recent years, affecting people's vote preferences significantly<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, polarization among the society reached a degree that people would keep their silence even when restricting the basic human rights of those who are supporters of other political parties (DW, 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> Local elections in 2019 resulted with a victory for the opposition bloc. AKP lost the municipalities of the biggest cities including Istanbul and Ankara after 25 years of uninterrupted ruling. Voters thought economic policies as one of the reasons for this defeat. See <https://medyascope.tv/2019/06/24/eyupsultanlilara-sorduk-akp-neden-kaybettil/>.

Lastly, the AKP government has had plentiful opportunities to initiate new conflicts or involve existing ones. There is a four-decades long enmity towards PKK terrorist organization. Moreover, historically governments have not hesitated to conduct military operations towards the organization whenever they are in trouble economically since the PKK began to operate (Tokdemir & Klein, 2021). Therefore, it would not be surprising to argue that the AKP government also followed that practice when it experienced difficulties in ruling the country. In addition to operations against PKK in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Libya have become stages for Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) since 2016.

The third chapter presents my research design and results. In the diversionary war literature, scholars study the relationship between economic indicators and aggressive foreign policy decisions. This tradition is in line with the idea that voters consider the economic performance of the incumbent government when they vote in the elections (Aytaç, 2018). Departing from this point, I argue that there is another stage between the two variables, and it is the use of polarizing rhetoric to set the ground for the public before initiating violent conflict. Therefore, initially I planned to conduct a mediation analysis with economic indicators as explanatory variable, leader's rhetoric as mediating variable, and violent conflicts as outcome variable.

However, I am not able to conduct mediation analysis due to the lack of method skills. This is why, I decided to test my mechanism with three hypotheses. I will firstly test my first hypothesis which indicates that when state leaders face domestic problems, the polarizing elements in their speeches increase. In this hypothesis, the independent variable is economic indicators and dependent variable is polarizing elements in leader's speeches. Secondly, with an increase in the polarization degree of state leaders' speeches, the frequency/lethality of the violent



clashes that their states' armed forces involve/initiate rises. Polarizing elements in leader's speeches is independent variable and conflict frequency/lethality is dependent variable in this hypothesis. As the third hypothesis, I will directly test how domestic problems affect the involvement/initiation of violent clashes. In this hypothesis, economic indicators are independent variable and conflict frequency/lethality is dependent variable. This chapter will explain these variables besides introducing what datasets I use to compile them and how I measure the polarization degree in the leader's speeches.

In the results section, I demonstrate that economic problems, measured with the change in TL-USD exchange rate and inflation rate, do not have a significant influence on the polarization degree of president's speeches. Furthermore, different models indicate that frequency and lethality of conflicts with PKK increases when his speeches become more polarized. This relationship turns into negative when TAF gets into clashes abroad, meaning that the President uses fewer polarizing elements in his speeches in the times that the military conducts operations abroad. Lastly, economic indicators do not directly predict the tendency of initiating/involving conflicts, meaning that the government do not resort to violence in return for country's deteriorated economic conditions.

### **1.1. Contribution of This Research to the Literature**

This study fits into the literature in three ways. Firstly, departing from Levy's (1989) advice of identifying internal conditions which lead to diversionary actions, I add the degree of polarization in the rhetoric of the state leader as the mediator to the relationship between diversionary motivations and conflict and try to find out whether the polarization levels of these speeches mediate this relationship. Unlike the mechanisms introduced in the literature, such as the rally-round-the-flag effect,

scapegoating, in-group/out-group dynamics, I will offer a new mechanism by adding state leaders' rhetoric. As the polarization grew much of a problem for some countries, its effect on using violence should be examined. This is why, while it is not aimed to explain all the cases around the world by this mechanism, I believe this mechanism will help to unveil the dynamics of violent conflicts in some polarized societies.

Secondly, I aim to go beyond the US-focused literature of diversionary conflict by working on Turkey as one of the latest case studies. Turkey seems like a promising case study because of its fragile region that has been conducive to intervention in recent years and its conflict with PKK terrorist organization that has been in a clash with the Turkish state for decades. Scholars who have studied diversionary behavior, especially focusing on the US, mostly argue that initiating a diversionary conflict is in the scope of the policy toolkit of great powers since it requires the country's military power far more from others. Furthermore, a potential attacker should be attentive to whether its target is in an alliance with great powers or not. Therefore, apart from few studies that were concentrated on Russia (Theiler, 2017), China (Kılıç, 2012), Argentina (Levy & Vakili, 1992), studies on the US have the larger portion. However, with the civil wars in the Arab world after Arab Spring, some countries fragmented into different parts. This allowed regional countries like UAE, Egypt, Turkey, and Russia to intervene in some of these conflicts. Having been involved in the conflicts in Syria and Libya with its army, and also having a conflict with a terrorist organization Turkey presents an opportunity to examine the decision-making process of the ruling elite.

The last contribution of this research is to offer a possible explanation why the ruling party ended the peace process right after June 2015 general elections. I

examine whether this decision was a political strategy of the government to divert attention from country's economic problems to a more existential threat which is terrorism.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **DIVERSIONARY WAR THEORY AND ITS THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

Embattled leaders are heavily criticized by the opposition because of their country's declining economic performance and mounting social problems. In the end, regardless of the political system, they face the danger of losing their seats. To avoid this end, some leaders resort to violence and try to deflect criticisms towards their unsuccessful ruling. Thus, they can manage to keep themselves in their office. Based on this standard definition of diversionary conflict theory, this research will seek an answer to how state leaders' rhetoric- its degree of polarization-affects the relationship between the need for diversionary conflict and the course of the conflict. The mechanism that I suggest answering this question is that leaders who lack the economic means to buy their constituencies' loyalty may choose to provide them symbolic rewards. These rewards are distributed by leaders' speeches, making it too costly to leave positive inducements by defecting. Furthermore, in this mechanism, initiating a conflict is key in diverting people's attention away from domestic problems and consolidating the leader's base.

In the following, I will present the views in the literature regarding the central tenets of my research. I will visit different research on the diversionary conflict

theory and explain the dynamics of the theory. Lastly, I will construct my theory in detail.

### **2.1. Diversionary War Theory**

Studies on diversionary conflict theory have multiplied with the need to uncover the hidden mechanisms behind state leaders' choice of resorting to violence in response to domestic problems they face. Moreover, even though many scholars have shown the relationship between domestic discontent and violent conflict in case studies, the correlation has yet to be proven with quantitative evidence (Jung, 2014). Therefore, in the last decades, scholars of international relations have been identifying specific circumstances that facilitate and restrain the use of force for political purposes. Before coming to delineate the discussions on different aspects of the theory, I will briefly present, first, the motivations for embattled leaders to follow belligerent policies at home and abroad in order to retain office, and second, the conflict-cohesion literature that explains the mechanism behind the effectiveness of diversionary conflicts.

In a country whose economy is in decline, it is intuitive that the government leader is supposed to be responsible for the low performance, and he/she can be perceived as incompetent to rule the country. This path pushes voters to search for alternative candidates to stabilize the country's economy. In such an environment, the leader may want to divert the public's attention from the economy in which the leader is viewed as incompetent to a militarized conflict that needed to be dealt with primarily (Machain & Rosenberg, 2018). Conflict gives the leader a chance to be re-evaluated by the electorate as competent if he/she becomes successful in it (Tarar, 2006). Furthermore, another motivation for leaders to resort to violence is to clear the political agenda in which the misery people live in is discussed by various actors in

the media. In this way, militarized conflict plays the role of agenda-setting tool in state leaders' hands (Kisangani & Pickering, 2007). Since these leaders are able to control a wide array of instruments in implementing their decisions thanks to having the presidency (Ostrom & Job, 1986), they can benefit from diversionary conflict to keep their re-election prospects high.

Besides manipulating public opinion about a leader and his/her performance, initiating a conflict is a more promising strategy among others in the leader's toolkit when it represents a result of cost-benefit calculation. This calculation demonstrates that when the government performs low economically, the political use of force is the less costly way of rallying the people behind the leader. Otherwise, it would be done by distributing public and private goods (Klein & Tokdemir, 2019).

Beyond these motives, one needs to understand how diversion becomes successful in maintaining or increasing support for state leaders at the societal level. As Coser (1956) stated in *The Functions of Social Conflict*, "internal cohesion is likely to be increased in the group which engages in outside conflict" (p. 92). Intuitively, his claim seems contradictory to the sense that people should not follow policies that harm themselves and make them lose. Regarding conflicts, one should expect that people rise against their leaders' demands as their lives and taxes will be instrumentalized during the conflict. However, as examples from different countries demonstrate, people frequently behave in the opposite direction of the expectations and consider collective aim rather than individual wellbeing in the first place. They invest more personal resources such as time, effort, and money in the group's goals when their groups are in conflict with an out-group (Benard, 2012).

On the other hand, deriving from Social Identity Theory, Theiler (2018) identifies increased 1) attachment to the group and 2) attachment to the leader as to

be the reasons behind the behaviors of citizens. In this study, he states that group salience is an essential factor that enables us to identify ourselves more with the group and presents conflict as a powerful driver of group salience. For example, in a militarized interstate conflict, citizenship becomes the determining factor for identification purposes, and people identify themselves more with their states. Nevertheless, he puts forward that in order to mobilize people in favor of a conflict, the group has to have some negative feelings like hatred, distrust, or desire for revenge toward the outgroup as similar to the concept of negative reference group as Coser (1956) defined. During such conflicts, leaders inside the group embrace a protector role by visiting wounded soldiers or addressing nations in live broadcasts. This positioning allows them strengthening their inclusion into the group and hence getting more support from ingroup members. Furthermore, leaders may appeal to their constituents' feelings by referring to ancestries' successes in old times and establish familiarity with glorious times to benefit from increased group attachment.

Considering the internal diversion in which leaders target minority groups within their countries when they face domestic unrest, it is not the citizenship that defines the in-group/out-group dichotomy as in interstate conflicts but the ethnicity. According to Tir and Jasinski (2008), the leader who cannot present a threat beyond borders uses ethnic symbols to render an ethnic minority as posing a threat to the leader's constituents. In these cases, portraying an ethnic minority outside the in-group as an enemy allows the government to exploit society's fragmentation and boost support for the leader. However, while triggering a conflict, target selection becomes a concern for leaders to persuade the public about the response against the threat they face.

### *2.1.1. The effect of regime type on diversionary behavior*

Leaders' primary aim while resorting to diversionary conflict is to keep public opinion favorable to themselves. In this regard, regime types that leaders operate within is essential on defining their policies. They can strive to hold on to their positions as long as their regimes allow themselves.

The studies on diversionary conflict have divided into three camps on how domestic political institutions' structure influences the likelihood for the political use of force to gain an advantage in domestic politics. While some argue that democracies are more prone to use diversionary conflict than authoritarian regimes, others suggest the exact opposite. On the contrary of these two sides, the third stance denies any relationship between the tendency for diversion and the regime type.

To begin with the first camp, Kisangani and Pickering (2009) find that as opposed to the general belief that democracies have strong institutions to restrain executive power and thus are able to prevent the leader from taking such decisions favoring personal gain, it is this system that forces leaders to consider diversion as an option. They argue that these control mechanisms on decision-making process sometimes hinder them from implementing domestic policies that will affect their re-election chances. Therefore, they may turn to diversionary tactics to increase their approval ratings. Furthermore, Gelpi (1997) compares the available policies to leaders in times of strong domestic opposition and identifies three policy options for troubled leaders: fulfill the wishes of discontented groups, repress the discontented group by force and divert this group's attention by using force abroad. His claim is that it is likely for democratic leaders to divert people's attention from domestic problems by using force, while in authoritarian settings, leaders choose to repress their dissatisfied citizens directly instead of creating a diversionary conflict. Oneal



and Tir (2006) take this stance further and demonstrate that even democracies initiate militarized conflict with each other for diversionary purposes. Whereas it seems like a threat to democratic peace theory, their evidence is minor, hurting the theory very little.

The second camp on the relationship between domestic political institutions and regime types converges on the argument that leaders in authoritarian regimes engage more in diversionary behavior than leaders in democracies (Miller, 1995). Smith (1996), Clark (2003), Miller (1999), Leeds and Davis (1997), and Mitchell and Prins (2004) explain this pattern by one common characteristic of democratic regimes, which is transparency. Potential targets of democracies anticipate that in times of domestic turmoil, these states stay strong in external crises. The fact that democratic states have to be transparent in declaring their economic data, other states can adjust their relations accordingly. The logic behind these countries' behaviors is the strategic avoidance that I will review in the next sections. However, these scholars emphasize an exception in their studies. They claim that while strategic avoidance makes a militarized conflict with democratic states unlikely due to their nature, against autocratic leaders, the would-be targets may have little information about these countries' domestic conditions. Therefore, it may not be possible for them to avoid an attack coming from authoritarian governments. Consequently, this explanation brings us to the point that authoritarian leaders divert more than their democratic counterparts because of the transparency of democratic regimes.

In their research which examines a particular type of authoritarian regimes, Levy and Vakili (1992) explain the mechanism behind the decision of bureaucratic-authoritarian Argentine regime's invasion of the Falklands. They claim that although this regime was isolated from society and thus its pressure, there was a political elite

that needed to be unified with a common goal. Without internal unity, it would be possible for some members of the elite to create opposition and harm the state leadership. This is why Galtieri launched an operation to the Falklands and wanted to give a cause to maintain cohesion among the elite.

Apart from these two views in the literature, Heldt (1999) stands as a deviant in this discussion. His research indicates no relationship between regime type and the use of diversionary force in times of domestic crises. As a possible reason, he puts forward that the removal threats that leaders feel from their office are the same to all leaders regardless of the political system. This is why he finds no significant relationship between those variables.

### *2.1.2. Diversionary Target Selection*

To activate the in-group/out-group dichotomy effectively, the leader should wisely choose the diversionary target. Otherwise, the public cannot be convinced that there is an enemy that threatens themselves, and leader's attempts to elicit public support can be in vain. Then, in the upcoming elections, the probability of a leader's re-election would be quite low in democracies. To prevent this undesirable result, leaders must choose the right option that promises to produce domestic support. Although certain types of suitable diversionary targets are defined in the literature, it is essential to note the typical characteristics. The would-be target should be able to create sufficient distraction with its power to divert public attention from domestic problems to the militarized conflict. That said, while the target engages with the diverter, it should not be stronger than the initiator country to avoid any unnecessary costs (Levy, 1988). Beyond these characteristics, below, I will review the types of targets that are identified as would-be targets by several scholars.

One of the possible diversion targets can be a state's enduring rivals (Fordham, 2005). These states have relationships that involve ongoing conflict between them and thus a kind of hostility. This hostility allows the leader to initiate conflict without making an effort to establish such negative feelings with another group when dealing with domestic vulnerabilities. In his study, Fordham examines the United States in terms of perception of its public on enduring rivals vis-a-vis others and cites US' former President Bush in his coining of the term "axis of evil" for North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. He indicates that the public is more likely to widely support the president when fighting with such a rival since there has already been an existing conflictual relationship.

Jung (2014) contributes to this discussion with two different sets of states as attractive to diverter in times of economic and political problems at home. These are fear-producing targets and greed-producing targets. To justify their use of force, state leaders may indicate a threat from other states, which should be eliminated with a preventive strike. These threats induce fear in the nation with their increasing power capabilities and identity. Jung finds out that state leaders use not the identity but the rising power of other states to show the reason for the use of force. Jung argues that by targeting a state that becomes more powerful, leaders can start a militarized conflict by claiming it as pre-emptive or preventive. Regarding greed-producing targets, struggling leaders may target hegemonic powers in their regions in order to get the advantage of being the new regional hegemon when the hegemon is in decline but still has the status of being the highest. In this way, a leader can rally people behind himself/herself against this old-fashioned status power.

Another target type under this category is the states that hold territories where the people of diverter states have an eye on it. Jung (2014) states that leaders can

initiate conflict to gain disputed territories from another state. Thus, they can benefit from these lands' symbolic meaning to their constituents and use possible natural resources to boost the national economy. Concerning territorial targets, Tir (2010) shows that unpopular leaders are expected to distract the public by, specifically, waging territorial conflict. As land is more directly related to people's national identity, they give more attention to territorial conflicts than conflicts with other motivations. Moreover, he argues that leaders can manipulate the bond that people have with their lands in order to hide their desire to keep the office.

Another would-be target for diverters is the state that violates human rights practices (Tokdemir & Mark, 2018). Because people care about human rights and some are willing to protect them even if it is costly, leaders use human rights rhetoric frequently. This rhetoric lessens the damage that a conflict is likely to give to the president's reputation and generates support by persuading other political actors to help them. Beyond domestic politics, leaders are better able to legitimize attacking these targets to the international community since they have poor human rights records. In their research focusing on the United States, Tokdemir and Mark (2018) find that with the increase in the misery index, the probability of targeting those repressive states increases as well.

Apart from the possible targets I explained above, there is one more target type that state leaders utilize fighting with them to keep their position safe but not beyond borders. It is the ethnic minority groups inside the country that have been targeted occasionally by embattled leaders. Tir and Jasinski (2008) suggest including domestic diversionary options in the study of diversionary theory to address the problem of lacking empirical evidence in the literature. Before coming to the logic of internal diversion, it is essential to note the reasons why leaders turn to domestic

rather than abroad to wage war. Leaders who consider distracting the public with a more acute action from economic and political problems at home face certain limitations when choosing the right target.

As Levy (1998) pointed out, it is difficult to find suitable target states for struggling leaders. Firstly, the geopolitical environment sets the limits for a country for interaction, meaning that states that are not located near abroad are mostly not in the leader's orbit (Enterline & Gleditsch, 2000). Secondly, as any diversionary action requires a rational calculus, leaders do not attack stronger states and states with powerful allies that can intervene in the conflict and lead to a loss (Tir & Jasinski, 2008). Thirdly, the states perceived as suitable targets for the leader may be the partner in security or economic realms. Therefore, the leader may not want to risk the benefits of this good relationship they have. Lastly, these suitable target states can avoid being attacked when they predict future threats coming out of another state (Tir & Jasinski, 2008), as I will detail in the next section as strategic avoidance.

Regarding the selection of minority groups, leaders use historical hostilities between different ethnic groups to frame the cause for initiating conflict. Since the aim is not eliminating a threat from that minority but just creating a distraction, leaders want to avert possible retaliation and thus an escalation of the conflict (Klein & Tokdemir, 2019). A target with low capabilities for retaliation to an attack from state forces may present an opportunity for a short and decisive military victory. However, it may create sufficient diversion for the public's attention. On the other hand, if the out-group poses an adequate threat to rally the people behind the leader, it may have the capability to retaliate.

Nevertheless, while retaliation may extend the duration of the conflict, it also legitimizes the government's use of force. What is more about legitimacy is that if

the out-group supports a separatist movement, it is likely that the state represses this challenge against its authority (Klein & Tokdemir, 2019). When there is a separatist cause behind the conflict, people fear losing something they value, land (Tir, 2010). Therefore, leaders can utilize this fear in creating rally effects and keeping the prospects for retaining office high. Nevertheless, although target selection comprises a significant portion of the diversionary conflict, the other side's attitude -potential targets- may set a barrier to the leader's intention of initiating violence by strategically avoiding it.

### *2.1.3. Strategic Avoidance*

As I mentioned earlier, the calculus of the leader who wants to initiate the conflict is not the sole factor determining whether a diversionary conflict will be possible. When one state suffers from domestic problems, and the leader faces a possible loss in the ruling, it becomes a signal for other states that this struggling leader may have targeted them. The foreign policymakers who get this kind of signal may soften their policies with a would-be attacker in order to avoid conflict (Smith, 1996). Fordham (2005) states that would-be targets behave more cooperatively rather than aggressively when dealing with a leader who has sufficient motives to wage war. He further argues in this study, which examines the United States and claims that it is not enough for target states to not just initiate militarized conflict but should avoid any kind of incidents that can transform into one. Also, a diverter may participate in a conflict as a third party, and for this reason, states have to behave cautiously in their relations with others to not give a chance for intervention by eliminating any prospects of conflict.

As another possible target of troubled leaders, domestic minority groups also behave anticipating the threat coming from leaders in order to avoid any conflict

(Machain & Rosenberg, 2018). They can observe that the government faces unfavorable economic conditions and declining popularity among the public and be aware that the government can utilize the historical hostility between groups. If the government can present a justification to the rest of the population that force must be used to suppress this threat coming from the out-group minority, the leader may target the group militarily to maintain the office. Therefore, minority groups are less likely to rebel or protest the government to not draw attention from the in-group and create a justification for suppression. By keeping a low profile in their activities, these groups make the leader's job more difficult in persuading the rest of the population that they face an existential threat.

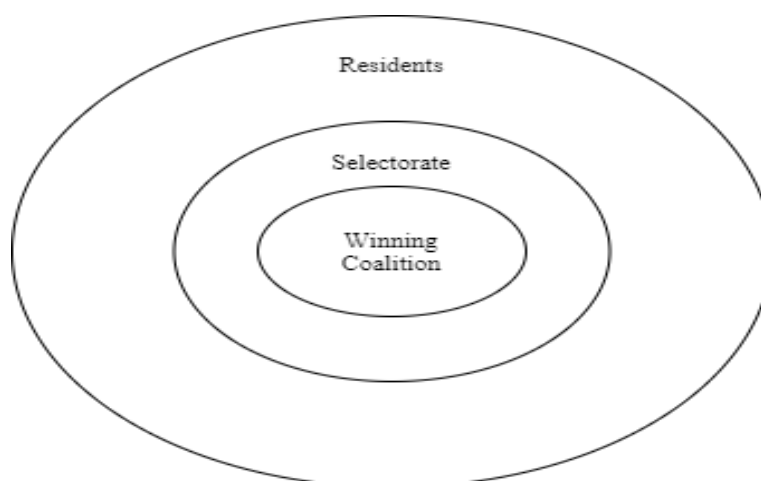
On the contrary to what these studies suggest, Clark et al. (2011) argue that some states may prefer to act aggressively toward countries that go through difficult times both economically and politically. When foreigners observe such a country, what they see is not a possible diversion from that country but an opportunity to exploit their weaknesses. In their research, Clark et al. conclude that in the US case, the countries which have the greatest conflict of interest try to take advantage of problems the US experiences. Furthermore, these attackers behave accordingly with the president's party affiliation. For example, if the US president is a Democrat, they assume that he is more vulnerable to exploitation than a Republican in their mutual relations.

## **2.2. Theoretical Argument**

The main assumption about state leaders is that their primary aim is to retain office (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003; Bueno de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995; Enterline & Gleditsch, 2000). Their actions are in line with maximizing their chances to keep their positions, and this logic stands as the center of politics regardless of the

regime type. However, leaders face different challenges in accomplishing this desire. As Bueno de Mesquita et al. state, leaders must have winning coalitions that keep them in power. While in democracies, the winning coalition is composed of people who vote for the leader, in other systems, it is a group of people who control instruments to ensure the leader is in power. Therefore, it seems crucial for leaders from any political regime to maintain the support of their winning coalitions within a selectorate-people with the ability to influence leaders' selection process.

Figure 1: Representation of the Selectorate Theory of Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003)



Leaders constantly face the risk of losing their supporters to the challengers, and these challengers can be from both internal and external opposition -e.g., within the political party/outside of the political party, within the junta group/outside of the junta group. This fact pushes them to be cautious about their political system as well (Bueno de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995). Consequently, maintaining their winning coalitions and keeping challengers away from persuading their supporters are the primary purposes of leaders to not to lose office.

The above studies seem complementary with what Levy (1989) argued about leaders' calculations regarding foreign policy. According to him, when leaders make



decisions in foreign policy, they may focus on a subgroup of their countries' population rather than the whole society. Taking what Bueno de Mesquita et al. argue about winning coalitions into consideration, Levy's subgroup represents the winning coalition which should be kept satisfied in order to retain office. When efforts are futile to hold the winning coalition together, leaders may resort to riskier strategies (Enterline & Gleditsch, 2000). Levy claims that these strategies may involve diversionary actions to increase the leader's support in the subgroup.

Additionally, it is so naive to believe that state leaders put their citizens' interests at the center of the policy-making process. Instead, as Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2012, p.13) state, "the self-interested calculations and actions of rulers are the driving force of all politics". Therefore, while assessing the leaders' actions, observers' primary consideration should be leaders' desire to survive in politics. Leaders put forward policies to ensure the continuity of their tenure and avoid taking decisions that potentially undermine their ruling. Furthermore, this notion is the same for any leader regardless of the regimes in which they operate. In every country, leaders have to keep some group of people satisfied with what they earn in the end, be it a group of oligarchs in autocracies or half of the population in democracies.

However, in times of economic crises keeping these groups content with the leadership becomes much more difficult because the scarce resources allocated to the supporters diminish even more with the tightening economy. Such countries mostly experience high inflation rates, low purchasing power, and a widening gap between rich and poor. A government leader in such a democratic country is likely to encounter discontented masses that vote against her/him in the upcoming elections. Thus, it is inevitable for embattled leaders in democracies to lose their ruling power under these circumstances. Autocrats also are not immune to such threats against

their ruling when their countries experience domestic problems. For example, the members of the military junta in Argentina at the beginning of the 1980s were not comfortable with Galtieri's regime and began to break down when the administration did not perform well to reach its economic goals (Levy & Vakili, 1992).

Nevertheless, leaders may have other tools to stay in power. They can build coalitions with groups from different segments of the society like political parties or business associates so that they retain ruling power with concessions as small as possible. Or, as it is widely discussed in the international relations literature as diversionary conflict theory, leaders can resort to violence to keep their positions (Levy, 1989).

When leaders' political survival is threatened with problems such as bad economic performance, initiating a conflict with a target inside or outside the borders may be an opportunity for leaders to maintain their base. Even though this is the standard definition of diversionary conflict theory for all scholars, the mechanisms to stay in power by resorting to violent conflict vary. I have identified five different mechanisms that scholars used in their research, and I will detail each of them separately. Then, I will propose my mechanism at the end.

The first mechanism is the rally-round-the-flag effect. James and Rioux (1998) explained it as the situation in which people rally behind the country and the leader in times of a crisis with foreign countries. According to the common assumption, these international crises force the public to leave their disagreements about government policies among themselves so that they can stay as united against a common enemy (Baker & Oneal, 2001). Eventually, when people are unified to ensure the country's existence, it is expected to observe an increase in presidential popularity because they think their opposition to the president may diminish the

prospects of a victory against the enemy (Mueller, 1970). Being aware of this positive impact, presidents instrumentalized such aggressive policies to keep their electoral chances high (DeRouen, 1995; DeRouen, 2000).

The second mechanism that lies behind the logic of diversionary conflict is activating the in-group/out-group dynamics. It is long believed that outside conflicts strengthen the group's internal cohesion (Coser, 1956). When the public perceives a threat is coming from an out-group, they are likely to put aside their differences and bind themselves together. While certain states might view other states as their out-groups, some may view minority groups inside their boundaries as threats. Leaders who experience a decline in their popularity ratings because of domestic economic and social problems may use these dynamics and initiate a violent conflict with the out-groups to make the group more cohesive (Jung, 2014). Additionally, a recent study by Carter (2019) shows that leaders who want to avoid the costs of a violent conflict can activate the in-group dynamics by using hostile foreign policy rhetoric.

The third mechanism that leaders use to relieve themselves from the accusations about bad government performance is scapegoating. They shift the blame of having domestic troubles to outside actors or to ethnic minorities inside the country even though they are not related to any of these accusations at all (Tir & Jasinski, 2008). In that way, leaders try to demonstrate themselves as being not responsible for the adverse effects of problems but rather make society angry and frustrated against the out-group targets (Kanat, 2012).

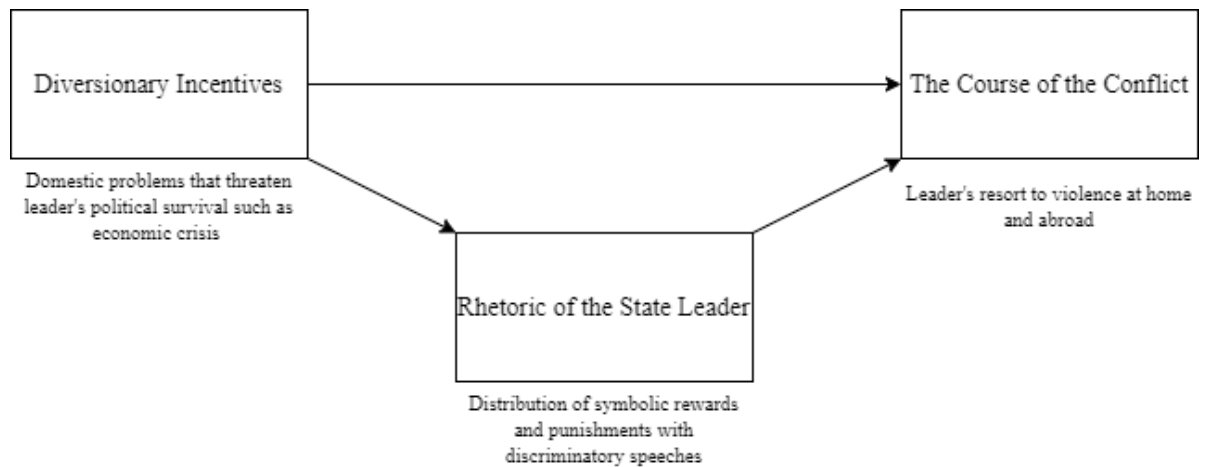
Another mechanism that enables diversionary conflict works is making sure that the leader is competent in ruling the country. In a country that experiences economic, social, or political problems, citizens are likely to see the leader as incompetent and demand him/her to replace (Tarar, 2006). Given the assumption that

leaders desire to maintain power, they try to compensate for these problems with success in other policy areas such as foreign policy (Heldt, 1999). As Tarar (2006, p.170) argues, if a leader becomes successful with ‘an aggressive foreign policy, ..., then the citizens may reassess the competence of their leader and reelect her despite the weak economy’. Although these policies may not be in line with national interests, they may help the leader to retain post as long as they persuade citizens that the leader is competent (Smith, 1996).

The fifth mechanism through which diversionary conflict benefits the incumbent leader is clearing the agenda. It is vital in every country to control the agenda since it determines what is debated in the public sphere (Kisangani & Pickering, 2007). When a country has high inflation rates or its political elites meddle with scandals, these issues are inevitably told among people and thus threaten state leaders’ political survival. This is why leaders may want to shift the focus of public discussion to high politics in such times. To this end, the use of military force is an instrument to set an agenda and clear what had been talking before against the leader’s unsuccessful policies (Kisangani & Pickering, 2007).

While the literature on diversionary conflict mainly focuses on these five mechanisms, I put forward a novel approach to understand the mechanism behind initiating diversionary conflict. According to this approach, leaders who experience discontent at home benefits from the polarized environment in their countries whether the poles have existed or just created by them when initiating diversionary conflicts.

Figure 2: Graphical Representation of the Mechanism



In explaining my proposed mechanism, I will use the concepts of the selectorate and winning coalition, which was defined by Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003). The fact is that leaders need to get the majority vote in order to be able to rule the country in democratic systems. According to the authors of *The Logic of Political Survival*, this majority's fundamental characteristic (the winning coalition) is access to certain benefits in return for their support to the leader. Moreover, these benefits can be symbolic as well as material (Enterline & Gleditsch, 2000). While the winning coalition members enjoy these benefits, what a challenger needs to do to depose the incumbent is persuading some of these members to defect. Otherwise, the leader cannot be defeated, and with anticipating this reality, the incumbent aims to protect its winning coalition from any defection. However, in a country whose economy is in decline and thus leader's approval ratings decrease, it is difficult for the leader to keep his/her winning coalition together.

For a leader who lacks the economic means to allocate public funds because of an economic crisis, an effective way of preventing defection is to polarize society with his/her rhetoric in order to make people fear the transition from voting ruling party to opposition. While constructing this rhetoric, firstly, leaders distribute

symbolic rewards to the members of their winning coalitions, such as portraying them as patriots or actual owners of the country. These compliments are benefits of belonging to the winning coalition of the incumbent. Secondly, they frequently blame their challengers (or opposition) by identifying them with bad traits as being from the establishment, puppets of foreign powers, traitors, terror supporters, or even terrorists. Consequently, this rhetoric gives rise to the emergence of two sides and makes defection so difficult for leader's winning coalition as if it is passing from the good to the evil side.

With polarization as the driving force of politics and domestic problems still keep their salience, the leader has to do nothing but consolidate his/her winning coalition more. As Levy (1989) stated, leaders may target some subgroups of society when considering making foreign policy decisions. In this respect, the leader resorts to violence to keep his/her target groups' attention away from problems and ensure their support because the leader is in the war against existential threats constantly.

There are three hypotheses that my research will test:

H1: Domestic problems increase the polarizing elements in state leaders' speeches.

H2: Increasing polarization in state leaders' speeches increases the frequency/lethality of violent conflicts.

H3: Domestic problems increase the frequency/lethality of violent clashes.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CASE SELECTION**

To test the mechanism that I offered in the previous chapter, I choose post-2014 presidential elections Turkey as the case study. This case fits my research question of how the state leaders' rhetoric mediates the relation between the need for diversionary conflict and the course of the conflict from different aspects. While there are still mixed results about this relationship in the literature, I believe this mechanism will help to explain at least some violent conflicts around the world. Regarding the fitness between case study and mechanism, AKP's Turkey after 2014 has been in parallel with my research in three essential aspects: 1. It has faced severe domestic problems that threaten the party's political survival, 2. Turkish society is historically polarized into several lines such as ethnicity, religion, and party affiliations, although some of these lines are cross-cutting, 3. Domestic and international conditions are conducive to initiate violent conflicts whenever it is desired during this period.

In this respect, this chapter will provide a detailed background of Turkey's three characteristics in different sections. I will first explain how the domestic problems surrounded the AKP government and affected president's approval ratings in the last decade. Secondly, Turkish society's polarization will be delineated and

why polarization should be considered a factor will be explained. I will benefit from some of the latest studies about Turkey's political polarization undertaken by different research and show how Turkish society is polarized with party affiliations. Thirdly, I will delve into Turkey's domestic conditions and international environment in order to show why Turkey offers one of the unique cases around the world to diversionary conflict theory. This section will include a brief history of the Turkey-PKK conflict as well as conflicts that Turkey involved in beyond its borders and how these conflicts can be framed from the perspective of the diversionary conflict.

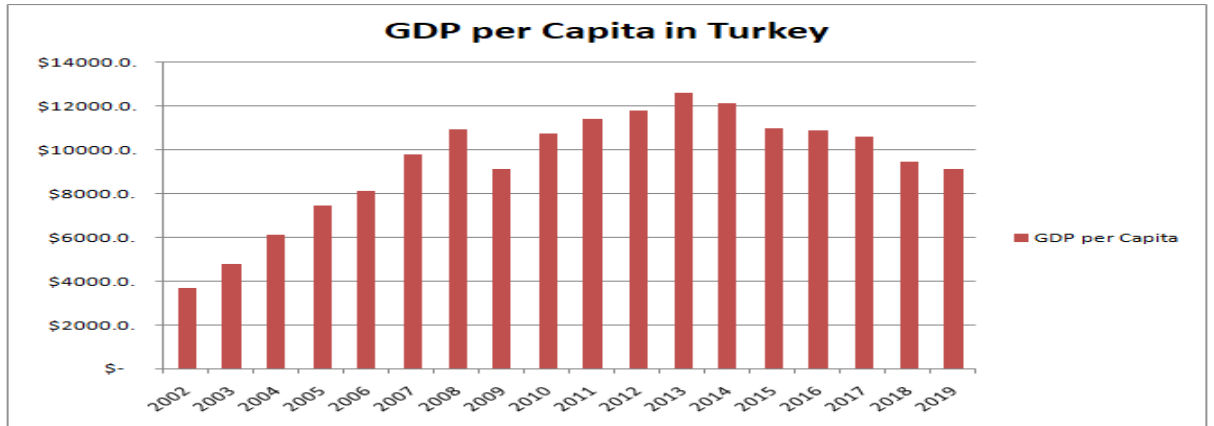
### **3.1. Domestic Problems**

#### *3.1.1. Economic Crisis*

After nearly two decades of AKP's ruling, scholars reached a consensus that it has positively and then negatively transformed Turkey. Roughly speaking, while in the first decade under AKP governments Turkey became wealthier and a role model with its increasing democratic standards, in the second decade what Turkish people observed has been downward economic trends and gradual authoritarianism (Taspinar, 2014). Especially in 2013, the survival of the AKP was threatened by different events. The way AKP responded to Gezi Park Protests and handled the post coup attempt period led intense criticisms from the opposition. Although it would not be true to establish a causal link between these events and the decline in the economy, indicators of the Turkish economy have begun to perform low after 2013. GDP per capita started to decrease that year and the figure in 2019 is even lower than in 2007 (Figure 3).



Figure 3: GDP per Capita in Turkey, Source: World Development Indicators



The declining trend in the Turkish economy can be traced from the institutional erosion as well. Ali Babacan who had been the head of the economy under AKP governments since 2002 left his chair in 2015. He was praised by many as the architect of the economic model that brought growth to the Turkish economy (Pitel & Guler, 2019). Furthermore, most analysts and opposition leaders claim that the Turkish Central Bank lost its independence from the government (Turak, 2019). While the term in office for central bank governors is five years under normal circumstances, the government has appointed four governors since 2016 and harmed its reliability according to experts. The allegations against the institutions' independence have not remained exclusive to the Central Bank.

Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), which provides data on the Turkish economy, has become a subject of these discussions, too. According to one of the former Chair of TÜİK, Birol Aydemir, the data released by TÜİK on inflation, employment, and growth has become questionable (T24, 2020). Even though suspicions exist on the trustworthiness of the data, inflation of the official sources has already seen above two digits figure in the last three years (Figure 4). However, a group of researchers (ENAGrup) who measure inflation independently from any

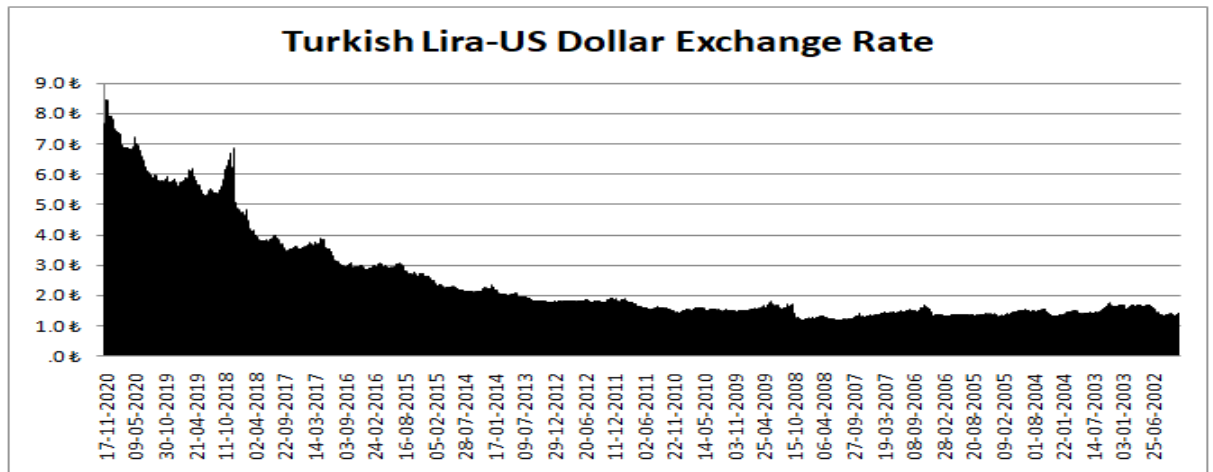
official institution found huge discrepancies between the figures they calculated and TÜİK's. This group suggested that the inflation rate of 2020 was not 14.60% as TÜİK announced but 36.72% as their calculations show (Cumhuriyet, 2020). The public also became suspicious of official data as the Metropoll survey indicates. Its December 2020 survey shows that 80% of the voters believe the inflation rate is much higher than what TÜİK declared officially (Metropoll, 2020).

Figure 4: Inflation Rate, Source: Turkish Central Bank



Besides these two figures, another indicator of Turkey's declining economy is the value of the Turkish Lira (TL) against foreign currencies, especially the US dollar. Several factors affected the loss in TL's value such as relations with the US - imprisonment of Pastor Brunson, Halkbank Case, S-400s-, hesitancy in increasing interest rates, etc (Eğilmez, 2018). Coronavirus pandemic also had a negative effect on TL's value last year. As figure 5 shows, in the last decade, TL lost its value by nearly 400% against USD and thus Turkish people have become impoverished significantly (Duran, 2018). Other than the economy that created discontent among Turkish people, millions of Syrians that seek refuge on these lands have become another source to disapprove the AKP governments.

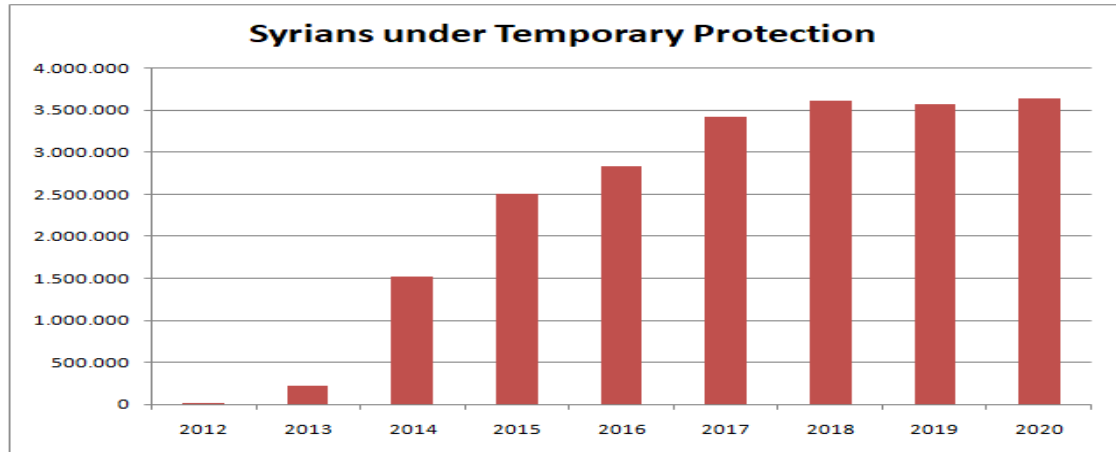
Figure 5: Turkish Lira-US Dollar Exchange Rate, Source: Central Bank



### 3.1.2. Refugee Crises

With the breakout of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Turkey has become one of the destinations for Syrian refugees as well as a road to reach Europe. Turkey's open-door policy allowed those who escaped from the regime's forces and ISIS brutalities to settle in Turkey. While at first Turkey considered hosting these people in southern provinces for a short period until stability in Syria is reached, it turns out that conflict would not end so swiftly (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016). According to Turkey's Immigration Authority, there are now over 3.5 million Syrians residing in Turkey under temporary protection. As the number of refugees increased over the last ten years, discontent among Turkish people about refugees' impacts on cities and the economy became visible.

Figure 6: Syrians Under Temporary Protection, Source: Göç Müdürlüğü



To trace Turkish people's unhappiness about Syrian refugees, one way is to examine social media posts that have been circulated for years through thousands of personal accounts. Turkish citizens have been frustrated with the rumors about how the government provides free services to Syrians. The most widely spread lies were that the government put Syrians on a salary without fulfilling a service and Syrians can receive education from any university they want without an examination (Refugees Association, 2019). This discontent is wide among Turkish people as different surveys indicate. Konda's (2016) report suggests that 75% of the Turkish society feels Syrians made cities insecure, harmed the economy, and also reduced job opportunities. The discomfort related to Syrians' presence in the country is expected to alter voters' preferences against the ruling party because it is a sign of incompetence in the management of the refugee influx just like the declining economic performance. Having combined these two factors, approval rates of the president can show how they affected people's opinions regarding his competency.

### *3.1.3. Approval Rates of the President*

Competencies in certain policy areas such as economy, foreign policy, or national security are evaluated by voters in their assessment of government leaders'

performances. They are expected to consider such evaluations when they vote in elections. In this respect, the approval rates of Turkish President, also, has seen ups and downs throughout his nineteen years of ruling. When one closely examines the below figure that shows the leader's approval rates since December 2011 (Metropoll), it can be observed that these lines are parallels with election results, meaning that when the disapproval rate is higher than the approval rate, his party is likely to lose an election. June 2015 general elections and March 2019 local elections are significant examples of this pattern. While in June 2015 it lost the majority in the parliament, in March 2019 the mayorship of metropolitan cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Adana, and Mersin passed to candidates of the opposition bloc. Another pattern is how people react to crisis situations. Events like military operations, and the coronavirus pandemic have clearly gathered citizens around him and increased his approval rates. Consequently, it should not be a mistake to perceive him as a rational agent who makes his decisions on the basis of these rates.

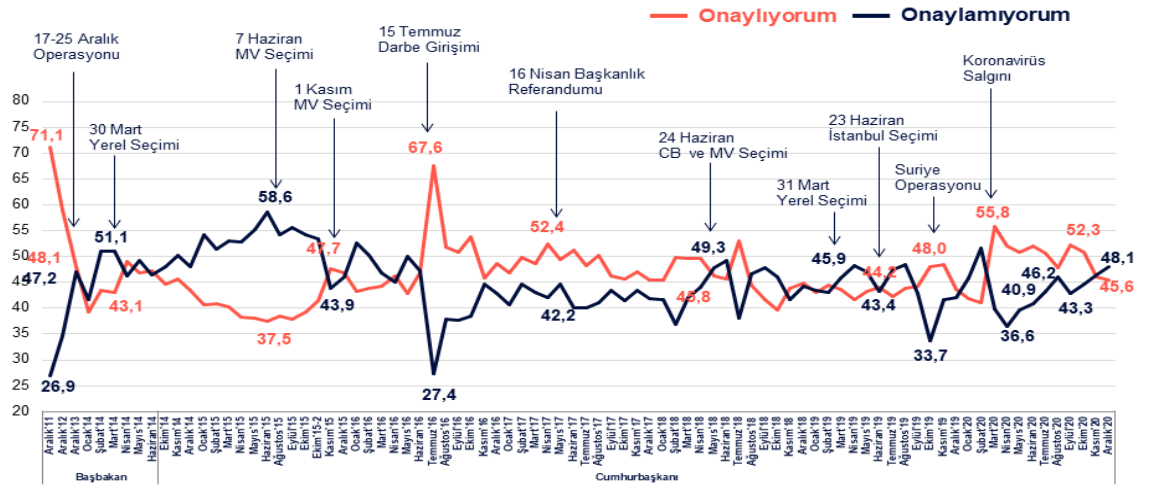
However, as a general rule for all leaders, it is not always in the hands of leaders to adjust their approval rates by implementing favorable policies for the public. Because of the hardships they experience people may be forced to turn their back to the ruling party they voted for. In the end, this process may result even in losing the office. Nevertheless, a phenomenon that these leaders also help to emerge may keep their constituencies together: polarization. It makes the life of politicians easier because when polarization deepens, they do not need to strive for taking votes from citizens. Rather, what they do is just showing people to vote for which pole (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2018). This rule is not restricted only to ruling party politicians, but opposition party politicians can also benefit from a polarized society.

Turkey has been considered as an example of this phenomenon by different research as well.

Figure 7: President's Approval Rates since 2011, Source: Metropoll Survey

Company

**Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın Görev Onayı Zaman Grafiği - %**



KAYNAK: METROPOLL TÜRKİYE'NİN NABZI ARALIK 2020

metropoll

### 3.2. Political Polarization in Turkey

This research deals with the political aspect of polarization and borrows the definition of the term from the research of Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci (2018).

According to them, political polarization refers to a situation in which the distance between different party supporters increases and sides gradually move away from one another. These constituencies begin to identify themselves with their party affiliations and thus experience difficulties when they want to change the party they supported.

As an opportunity for leaders to consolidate their bases, polarization in Turkish politics represents an issue to be disclosed and scrutinized carefully. Though

the term was frequently circulated around the media under AKP governments, it is not a product of the AKP era. Its source goes back to the founding period of the republic. Somer (2019, p.46) identifies two ‘formative rifts’ since the late-Ottoman period. The first rift is between Turkish speaking Muslim majority and minority groups while the second one is within the Turkish speaking Muslim majority. Somer (p.47) calls the sides of this second division as ‘republican-centrist’ and ‘provincial revisionist’. He argues that these sides had balanced each other before AKP came to power, having one side dominant in the state bureaucracy and the other side in the political sphere. This is why pre-AKP polarization had not become dangerous despite these divisions among people. With AKP governments, what Turkey experienced was initially a subtle polarization that was ignored by moderates for the sake of reforms such as EU membership and eliminating the military's control over politics (Somer, 2019). However, upcoming years witnessed more obvious polarization attempts by ruling party figures.

Being in the tight-knit poles with their party identifications, the distance between these groups is measured in the Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey project (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2018). In such a polarized environment, what is to be expected is having issues that tend to end up with conflict rather than consensus. Therefore, every attempt to handle such issues may result in opening the distance between different party supporters. Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci (2018) find that Turkey ranks first in terms of polarization within the party system among 38 countries based on data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Moreover, what they conclude after conducting research among Turkish voters is the existence of polarization between different party bases. As an indicator of this polarization, they measure to what degree these bases claim the moral high ground.

This indicator implies what people assume different characteristics, whether good or bad, fit into which party supporters. Results suggest that people mostly attribute good characteristics to those who support the same party and negative ones to those who support other parties. For example, while patriotic, honorable, intelligent, generous, and open-minded are adjectives to describe people who feel close to themselves in terms of their party affiliations, cruel, hypocrite, bigoted, arrogant, and selfish to characterize people who feel distant (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2018).

Having such a polarized society, Turkey has been a party for several conflicts in recent years. In this environment, people are hesitant to express their opinions, especially on sensitive issues. Therefore, a ‘spiral of silence’ emerges and views that are not embraced by the majority are treated as if they do not exist (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2018, p. 87). This research shows that some people do not share their views on sensitive issues even at dining tables with their families.

### **3.3. Conducive Domestic and International Environment to Initiate Violent Conflict**

A prerequisite to act aggressively and wage a conflict in response to inclining discontent among the public is having an external environment that provides opportunities to conduct violence. As Tir and Jasinski (2008) indicate, it may be exclusive to great powers to make an external diversion and a privilege for only some countries to target internal groups because of the availability of such groups. Turkey has both options. Its southern borders are surrounded by a country in a civil war and a country with weak state authority. Furthermore, it has a conflict with a terrorist organization for nearly forty years. Therefore, when the ruling party needs a target to divert public attention from domestic problems, it is not difficult to find one.



In the following, I will explain the violent conflicts to demonstrate why we need to examine them by considering the diversionary logic.

### *3.3.1. Turkey-PKK Conflict*

As a party for nearly a forty-year-long conflict, PKK terrorist organization was established in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan and started its violent campaign against the Turkish state in 1984. In its early years until the 1980 coup, the PKK did not target state forces and rather attacked rival Kurdish organizations and landlords in Kurdish villages. While eliminating rival forces, it attracted new recruits thanks to its war against tribal leaders who oppressed Kurds for years (Güneş, 2013). When the 1980 military coup happened, it benefited the PKK because its leadership was not in Turkey but in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. Thus, although all revolutionary organizations were destroyed by the military regime, it managed to survive (Yeğen, 2016). When they returned to Turkey, PKK's leadership found Kurds who have grievances against the state and instrumentalized them in their fight against the Turkish state. Furthermore, the terrain was in favor of the armed group in its fight with state forces as well as external support from different regional actors (Tezcür, 2015). Consequently, the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state began under these conditions and still persists.

During these four decades, there were some periods that violence had stopped due to different reasons. Apart from the short ceasefires declared by PKK, the first pause happened when PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured by the state in 1999. Turkish state seemed to have a military victory against the terrorist group but failed to propose a political plan to curb the Kurdish question (Aydınlı, 2002). According to Aydınlı, in the political debate within the Turkish state to respond to new developments, the army's position to stand against ensuring cultural rights and

proposing political solutions prevailed. The PKK restarted its campaign in 2004, two years after the AKP rose to power. The second significant period that sides thwarted armed struggle occurred with AKP's Democratic Opening process. However, nationalist backlash in response to the Habur Incident<sup>4</sup> and PKK's attacks on security forces combined with AKP's embracing war-prone discourse made this attempt fruitless (Pusane, 2014). The third and the last period without violence was during the peace process between 2013 and 2015. After eliminating the military from politics, the AKP government sought to solve the Kurdish question with political methods such as dialogue and negotiation (Özpek, 2019). Nevertheless, when AKP lost its majority in the parliament with general elections on 7 June 2015 it immediately returned to the old strategy of resorting to violence rather than following political measures (Özpek, 2019). My research examines whether the reason for initiating conflict after the defeat in the election was ensuring the political survival of the AKP government. In this respect, this research seeks for quantitative evidence to the claims that the government instrumentalized the conflict with PKK to divert the public's attention from economic and social problems.

### *3.3.1.1. End of the Peace Process between Turkey and the PKK*

As the case study of this research is how the ruling AKP has instrumentalized the diversionary force at home and abroad in order to deal with domestic problems after 2014, it is important to get familiar with the resuming of Turkey's long-lasting conflict with PKK after the peace process. In this regard, this section will be devoted to reviewing the literature which focuses on the causes of the collapsing peace process, which started with the ceasefire in 2013 and ended with the June 7 elections

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<sup>4</sup> While the Democratic Opening was an ongoing process, on 19 October 2009 eight PKK terrorists entered into Turkey via Habur border gate. State security forces did not arrest these terrorists and their coming turned into a show that infuriates Turkish nationalists. For more, see <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/251-squaring-the-circle-the-pkk-return-to-violence-and-turkeys-intractable-kurdish-problem.html>

in 2015. Turkish security forces launched operations against PKK after the murders of two police officers at their home by PKK-affiliated group TAK (Dag, 2018). This was the end of two years' negotiations between parties. The discussion in the literature emphasizes three main reasons as to why the peace process did not last long, and violence returned to Turkish politics: 1) effects of transborder relations, especially with PYD in Syria; 2) structure of the process; 3) ensuring the government's political survival.

The first camp in this discussion argues that it was mainly the PYD's progress in Syria, which brought the process to an end. According to Ozkahraman (2017), when PYD declared autonomy in Northern Syria, the Turkish state thought this development as an eventual threat to its security. He argues that with the autonomous region in Syria, a possibility of a Kurdish unification appeared in the Middle East. This was an undesirable result for the Turkish state and pushed Turkish policymakers to return to the traditional security approach in the Kurdish issue. Similarly, Savran (2020) suggests that the Turkish government was worried about a possible spillover of Kurdish independence from there to Turkey and threaten Turkey's territorial integrity. On the other hand, Arslan (2019) indicates Turkey's relation with PYD that worsened the peace process, and the Kobane siege represents a milestone. The developments in Syria, such as having an autonomous Kurdish region, affected the bargaining between Turkey and PKK. Also, Dag (2018), Weiss (2016), and Kose (2017) view this end as the result of PYD's advancement in Syria. Dag states that PKK perceived PYD's ruling as autonomous regions in Syria as an example for their struggle and followed the same practices in Turkey. However, according to Dag, what they missed was the structural differences between Turkey and Syria, and they could not succeed.

The second camp on the collapse of the peace process defends the idea that it was the structure of the peace process that made negotiations impossible to conclude. Baser and Ozerdem (2019) clarify this stance by claiming that the process should have been framed as a transformation rather than a resolution. The settlement was tried to be accomplished at the elite-level by their endeavors, and therefore its fate was bound to elites' preferences. Instead of an elite-driven political settlement, the process should have addressed structural inequalities and aimed at transforming them. Authors also posit that there were other impediments such as the asymmetric power relations between parties and ambiguity in long-term goals in peace. Regarding what parties' aim in the future, Saeed (2019) puts forward that HDP's two demands brought the process to an end: democratic autonomy and recognition of cultural rights. He states that these two demands were incompatible with what state and the establishment could propose for peace.

The third group of scholars in this discussion suggests the explanation that it was the AKP's and its leader's political survival that caused ending the peace process. As the result of the June 7 general elections, the AKP lost its majority to form a single-party government. Pro-Kurdish HDP entered the parliament as a party for the first time in their history. With these developments, the AKP executives declared that the peace process was over and Kurdish question no longer existed in Turkey (Balta, 2016). This end was argued by Balta (2016), Weiss (2016), and Özpek (2019) as the result of AKP's strategy to stay in power. Balta claims that the AKP realized that while at first the peace process was thought to marginalize Kurdish politics, it led to opposite results and strengthened Kurdish political actors at the end. In the cities where AKP and HDP were receiving almost equal amounts of votes, HDP increased its vote share significantly and became the first party in the

southeastern provinces. Therefore, after seeing the undesirable results of negotiation, AKP decided to take a tough position on the Kurdish issue. Weiss (2016) also posits that launching a fight with PKK was government's plan in order to gain an advantage in the upcoming elections in November 2015. Keeping voters away from HDP and increasing support of nationalist votes were the main aims of the president, Weiss (2016) argues.

Considering Özpek's (2019) point of view, there is a continuation behind the AKP's decision to make security forces to leave weapons with the peace process and employ them after the June 7 elections. It is the desire for political survival. He compares the two periods of AKP, before and after the June 7 election, and reaches a conclusion that while AKP was not reformist before the election, it did not embrace the established security paradigm of the republic after June 7, too. Özpek (2019) continues to argue that AKP instrumentalized the Kurdish question to suppress criticisms during the peace process, and to eliminate its political rivals after the end of the peace process by criminalizing criticisms towards the conflict against PKK.

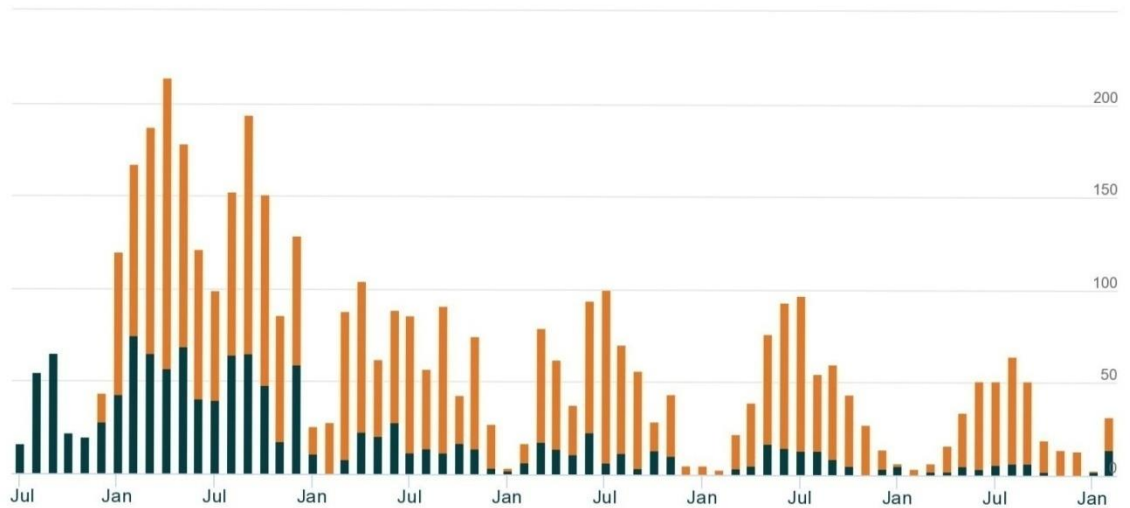
### *3.3.1.2. Ethnicity as the driver of in-group/out-group dichotomy*

Levy (1998) states that leaders cannot always find suitable target states in their quest for remaining in power. Therefore, they may not be able to use force to create a diversion and this may cost them to their political survival. Tir and Jasinski (2008) argue that to avoid such an outcome some embattled leaders attack the ethnic minorities who are citizens of their countries. Nevertheless, this selection process requires rational calculations conducted by the leader because otherwise, it may not be successful (Klein & Tokdemir, 2019). Firstly, there should be a historical enmity between the ethnic groups. Secondly, threats coming from the minority group should be enough to divert the public's attention. Thirdly, although retaliation from the

group may legitimize the state's use of force, it should not have such strength to defeat government forces or at least prevent a victory for them. In this respect, the ruling party's choice to attack PKK seems logical. It is important to note that although the terrorist organization does represent only a portion of the Kurds living in Turkey, this framework can be implemented to PKK, too.

As I told the story above, the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state traces back to 1984. Until 2015, the year that the peace process ended, from the members of security forces 7.230 died and 21.128 wounded (TRT Haber, 2015). This is why the Turkish public had hatred toward the PKK and it was plausible to expect no significant reaction to emerge from the public at the end of the process. Secondly, PKK was a threat that needed to be dealt with immediately. Between July 2015 and October 2015, 158 members of Turkish security forces had been killed in PKK's attacks (International Crisis Group, 2021). Killings galvanized animosity towards the organization. Also, PKK's declarations of self-governance in some city centers that Kurdish people dominated were perceived by some Turkish audiences as separatism (AA, 2015; Kasapoğlu, 2015). These developments led to significant reactions among Turkish people and drew public attention to the conflict with PKK from mismanagement of the country.

Figure 8: Fatalities from Turkish Security Forces (blue) and PKK (orange) between July 2015 - February 2021, Source: International Crisis Group



Lastly, while PKK had been seen as an existential threat to Turkish state authority by the public, it is obvious that its forces did not focus just on Turkey but also on Northern Syria around 2015 (Callimachi, 2015). PKK/YPG forces were fighting with ISIS and thus to what extent their presence in Turkish soils had the potential to retaliate security forces may be debated. Although Turkish security forces still had the capacity to defeat PKK even PKK had their full strength, there may have been more fighting between sides and further extensions in the conflict may have demoralized the Turkish public. Consequently, the government may have been aware of the PKK's declining power in Turkey and behaved accordingly.

### 3.3.1.3. Why restarting of the conflict might be a diversion?

As I indicated in the beginning of this section, scholars are divided in the debate over why the peace process collapsed and conflict restarted. One camp of scholars asserts that it was the fear of a possible Kurdish unification with the developments in Syria. The Regional Kurdish Government has already existed in Northern Iraq and Kurdish Cantons have declared their independence in Northern

Syria. The conflict would have spilled over to Turkey's Kurdish-populated cities and threatened Turkey's territorial integrity (Ozkahraman, 2017; Savran, 2020).

Furthermore, Dag (2018), Weiss (2016), and Kose (2017) claim that PKK tried to imitate what PYD did in Northern Syria to reach autonomy in Turkey. The authors believe the change in PKK's tactic brought an end to the process. However, both arguments are empirically weak. Firstly, Kurdish forces in Syria announced its three cantons -Afrin, Kobani, and Jazirah- in January 2014, nearly seventeen months before the end of the peace process (Radpey, 2016), meaning that the Turkish government had plenty of times to cut negotiations with HDP and initiate war with PKK. Rather, the government preferred to do nothing and continue with the process. Secondly, considering what PKK did in Turkey's southeastern region such as declarations of self-governance and digging ditches to fight with security forces, these are mostly after the end of the peace process (Kamer, 2015; Al Jazeera, 2015). This implies that PKK's strategy change came after the 7 June elections and this is why it cannot be the reason for ending the peace. The argument of the scholars from the second camp is also not convincing because of the timing issue, again. They argue that it was the structure of the negotiations and demands of the sides that brought an end (Baser & Ozerdem, 2019; Saeed, 2019). Although their explanations have merits, they do not answer why the violence started right after the June 2015 elections but not before or later.

To find the reason lying beneath ending the peace process and starting military operations against PKK forces, what rationale was AKP government pursued during the process has to be considered. Özpek (2018; 2019) argues that the ruling party perceived peace as a way to reach Kurdish votes in his quest for a presidential system. In one of rallies for the June 2015 election campaign, its leader



demanded from the public to ensure himself 400 deputies in order to continue with the peace process (Özpek, 2018). However, on 7 June what Turkey witnessed was a success from pro-Kurdish HDP and Turkish nationalist MHP. The Kurdish movement entered the parliament as a party for the first time in its history while MHP increased its votes as well. Having lost the majority in the parliament because of the inclining vote shares of HDP and MHP proved that government's strategy was wrong. The peace process cost the party both Kurds and Turkish nationalists. Consequently, party's political survival was threatened by other parties' electoral success for the first time since his rise to power in 2002.

As one of the main assumptions that this study acknowledged, leaders' primary goal is to stay in office. In line with this goal, after facing the threat of losing office, it can be claimed that the ruling party changed its strategy on the Kurdish issue and returned to violence by leaving negotiations aside. Furthermore, it is important to note that this turn was not because of the established paradigm of the Turkish state regarding its security concerns but rather was a result of the party's desire to maintain its ruling power (Özpek, 2019). Nevertheless, it was not the responsibility of solely the AKP to end the process. PKK also 'left no room for politics' (Özpek, 2019, p.55) and thus did not choose to avoid the conflict.

#### *3.3.1.4. Strategic Avoidance by PKK?*

Some scholars of international relations argue that potential target states of embattled leaders may strategically avoid being attacked (Smith, 1996; Fordham, 2005). Machain and Rosenberg (2018) take this a step further and claim this logic as true also for minority groups that leaders may target inside borders. The rationale for strategic avoidance by potential targets implies that when a leader has declining popularity because of the problems that citizens experience, he/she may resort to

violence to divert people's attention from these problems and rally them behind himself/herself. Therefore, would-be targets can observe the domestic politics of their potential attackers and try to avoid spark any conflict. In the case of PKK, Tokdemir and Klein (2021) show that the terrorist organization avoids initiating conflict when Turkey performs poorly in its economy between 2004 and 2018.

However, what seems after June 2015 elections, PKK militants did not refrain from inciting the Turkish public but rather they preferred to attack fiercely. The killing of two policemen in their sleep and declarations of self-governance in some Kurdish cities were significant examples of PKK's behaviors in this period. They provoked the fear of separation among the Turkish public and allowed the AKP government to act freely in these cities (BBC Türkçe, 2015). As research (Tir, 2010; Klein & Tokdemir, 2019) indicate, separatist movements provide legitimacy to governments in their repressive tactics and PKK's attitudes strengthened the government's hand after the election.

### *3.3.2. Conflicts beyond Turkey's Borders*

Having said the restarting of the Turkey-PKK conflict after the June 2015 general elections, it can be claimed that the ruling party's desire to survive in politics pushed it also to involve conflicts abroad. Turkey sent its military forces to Iraq, Syria, and Libya on different occasions.

#### *3.3.2.1. Iraq*

Turkish military interference in Iraq goes back to 1983. Turkey targeted PKK camps located in Northern Iraq with both its air and land forces several times (Al Jazeera, 2011). However, the operations stopped after 2011 until 24 July 2015 and Turkey bombed PKK camps in Iraq simultaneously with the operations conducted

inside borders. In March 2018 and May 2019, Turkish armed forces initiated two more operations in Northern Iraq. In the first one, it aimed to build military bases in the places that are cleared from PKK militants (TRT Haber, 2019). Although little information we have about the Turkish presence in Iraq, the last declaration in July 2020 by Turkey's Directorate of Communications announced 37 military bases in the region have been established so far (Milliyet, 2020).

#### 3.3.2.2. *Syria*

Since 2016, the Turkish army has conducted four main military operations in Syria. In Operation Euphrates Shield, which was launched on 24 August 2016, TAF captured Jarablus and Al-Bab from ISIS and lost 71 soldiers (BBC, 2019). While ISIS militants had been cleared from the Turkish borders with this operation, the government aimed to prevent the YPG's desire to establish a corridor that links its eastern territories with the ones in the west (Ulgen & Kasapoglu, 2017). The second operation was the Olive Branch, initiated on 20 January 2018. The Chief of Staff declared the operation's aim as to eliminate YPG terrorists from the Afrin region (BBC, 2018). 52 soldiers have been killed during this operation and Turkey succeeded its aim by freeing Afrin from YPG (BBC, 2019). Thirdly, Operation Peace Spring was launched on 9 October 2019. It was announced that the main aim of the operation as eradicating the terror corridor in Northern Syria and establishing a safe zone -30 km depth- to both end cannon shots to Turkey and settling Syrians (BBC, 2019). Operation Spring Shield is the last Turkish incursion into the Syrian lands. It was started on 27 February 2020 and still continues.

Apart from what Turkey gained or lost from these operations, since this study deals with the diversionary logic behind waging conflicts, I will explain how these operations may help the AKP to keep people's attention diverted from the domestic

problems from two different perspectives. Firstly, all three operations have a common enemy, the YPG, which is the armed forces of the PYD. Turkish public's hatred towards the PKK is reflected in the PYD as the latter is perceived by Turkish authorities as an extension of the former (Euronews, 2020). This is why, for the Turkish public, an operation against the YPG/PYD does not differ from an operation against the PKK in terms of legitimizing the use of force by the government.

Regarding the change of the PYD's status from the perspective of Turkish authorities, one must consider how authorities welcomed its former leader Salih Müslim in Ankara. In 2013, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, could negotiate with Müslim in Ankara and tell that Müslim's opinions are in line with Turkey's (AA, 2013). Although he did not meet directly with state officials but with intermediaries, Müslim visited Turkey in 2014 and 2015 even after the PYD's declaration of cantons in Northern Syria (Habertürk, 2014; Selvi, 2015). Moreover, when the PYD was fighting with ISIS in Kobane in 2014, Turkish government allowed Iraqi peshmerga forces to use Turkish soils to pass Kobane and helped the PYD to not to lose the town (BBC, 2014). Therefore, sitting around a negotiation table with the PYD was an option for Turkish authorities while a peace process had been going on in Turkey.

Secondly, Turkey secured territorial control in the areas that have been controlled by the military operations. This enabled the Turkish government to establish state institutions on Syrian soil. Now, there are university faculties (DW, 2019), religious officials (Koparan, 2018a), hospitals (Koparan, 2018b), and PTT offices (Sözcü, 2018) in places such as Jarablus, Al-Bab, Afrin, and Azez. All have been funded by Turkey and operationalized by Turkish officers. Therefore, what seems now is that these operations turned into attempts to establish state authority

with encountering little retaliation rather than cleansing areas from terrorist elements as stated at first.

### 3.3.2.3. *Libya*

A more distant place than Syria that Turkey deployed its army is Libya. The road to involvement in the Libyan Civil War began on 27 November 2019, when Turkey signed an agreement with the Government of National Accord (the GNA) in Tripoli to define their maritime borders (BBC, 2019). This agreement is in line with what the Turkish public has discussed for almost a year with the concept of ‘Mavi Vatan’ -blue homeland-. The term was coined and improved as a doctrine by two admirals of Turkey’s naval forces. One of them, Cem Gürdeniz, told the press that he used Mavi Vatan in 2006 to identify Turkey’s maritime jurisdiction. The other admiral, Cihat Yaycı, furthers this coining and argues that claiming a part of Turkey’s Mavi Vatan is not different from claiming a part of Turkish lands (Yalçınalp & Temel, 2020). The agreement with the GNA seems like a part of the broad plan of implementing this doctrine.

However, implementing this agreement required GNA’s survival against the Khalifa Haftar’s forces which marched to Tripoli from the east of Libya. Backed by Egypt, UAE and Russian mercenaries, the balance of power in the country seemed as tilted to Haftar’s side (BBC, 2020). In response, Turkey decided to send troops to Libya and help the GNA to survive. While it may have had several reasons behind this decision, the main one was to ensure the agreement’s implementation. Otherwise, in a scenario that Khaftar would emerge as the victor of the civil war, it was highly likely that he would not recognize such an agreement and moreover allow the bloc against Turkey to do whatever they want. Consequently, the involvement in Libyan civil war gained a territorial aspect with emphasizing the Mavi Vatan

doctrine and so arose as a suitable diversion chance. On the one hand, it gives legitimacy to the operation by making it territorial, on the other hand, it enables the AKP government to divert people's attention from bad economic performance.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS**

#### **4.1. Research Design**

The primary aim of this thesis is to reveal the impact of polarization on diversionary conflicts. As I clarified in previous chapters, when their countries experience troubles economically or socially, state leaders try to distract the electorate's attention to violent clashes from those events that may cause them to lose their office. However, the evidence is scant in the literature to prove this relationship between domestic politics and conflicts (Jung, 2014). I offer to add the political polarization of a country as the mediator into this phenomenon. However, I cannot conduct mediation analysis in this thesis because of lacking necessary skills and knowledge about mediation analysis. Thus, I continue with testing the mechanism in three steps with regression analyses. Having explained my mechanism in the theoretical argument section, I will not repeat it and dive into my research design details in this chapter.

Turkey after 2014 presidential election stands as a suitable case for my research in three aspects. It has been struggling with severe economic and social problems in recent years. Turkish people began to suffer from the government's policies on economy and refugees. Secondly, it is a fragmented society alongside several cleavages like ethnicity, religion, and old establishment vs. new Turkey.

Thirdly, Turkey has been fighting with PKK for over four decades and conducting military operations abroad, particularly after 2016. Adopting this case to the theory, I expect to find that president uses more polarizing words in his speeches when the Turkish economy performs poorly. Then, Turkish security forces' involvement in violent conflict will increase with his increasing use of polarizing elements in his rhetoric.

I test my hypotheses with two datasets, weekly and monthly. For the weekly one, I have the exchange rate for US Dollar-Turkish Lira, the ratio of polarizing words in president's speeches, the number of clashes that Turkish security forces initiated, and the number of killed PKK militants. Different from the weekly one, the monthly dataset includes the inflation rate, too.

#### *4.1.1. Mediating Variable*

##### *4.1.1.1. Polarizing Elements in Leader's Rhetoric*

Being the independent variable for the first hypothesis and the dependent variable for the second one, I use president's speeches to determine the degree of political polarization among society. The scope of this research begins after the presidential election in August 2014 and ends with 2020. There are approximately 850 speeches that this research included within the time frame. These speeches vary both in content and length, besides the type of meetings in which he made speeches. He addresses in election campaigns, facilities' opening ceremonies, national holidays, and other numerous occasions. However, April 2017 represents a turning point in his speeches because the April referendum allowed him to become the chairman of the AKP. In the first three years of his presidency, he was obliged to behave impartially to all parties by law and thus resigned from his party when he was



elected president<sup>5</sup>. He could not be able to participate and address in AKP's group meetings anymore. Nevertheless, he participated in new gatherings like meetings with mukhtars or opening ceremonies and did not stop speaking publicly. After the constitutional change and adopting the Turkish-style presidency, mukhtar meetings have been replaced with party group meetings as he was elected as chairman of the AKP.

There are two primary reasons regarding the rationale behind choosing the AKP leader's speeches to detect the degree of political polarization among the public. Firstly, his audience is vast in terms of his electorate's size, as election results have shown. He won the presidential elections in 2014 and 2018 with 21 million votes and 25 million votes. Therefore, his words have an impact on altering Turkey's political atmosphere by demonizing opposition groups (DW, 2019). Secondly, president has several means in media to convey his messages to his audience. The AKP weakened the mainstream media after the 2007 general elections and encouraged its cronies to buy newspapers and TV channels (Aydın-Düzgit, 2019). Currently, on the one hand, pro-government businesspeople hold a significant share of media ownership and provide outlets for streaming his speeches live and promoting them on discussion programs. On the other hand, opposition leaders experience difficulties in reaching the public because of the media's restrictions (DW, 2018; Cumhuriyet, 2018). This is why ruling party politicians have captured Turkey's political climate in recent years.

Political polarization's measurement through the speeches was the most challenging part of the data collection phase. I had three options to measure it. First, I could have read all of the 850 speeches and code them according to their polarization

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<sup>5</sup> Although he was constitutionally responsible for being impartial to all political parties after being elected as president, he frequently declared that he was against this rule and would be sided with the 'nation'. For more, see <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-i-will-not-be-an-impartial-president-68831>.

degrees, of which I would determine its coding procedure. However, it may have exposed certain biases of the coder and harmed reliability of the data. Secondly, I could have used artificial intelligence to teach the computer coding polarization degrees. Still, it had inevitable obstacles like lack of skills and information. My third option was to identify specific words or phrases to find the ratio and frequency of using polarizing elements in speeches. This way keeps human error at a minimum level because I was involved in the process only when choosing polarizing elements. Therefore, it eliminates any possible problems arising from the coder. So, I picked the last one.

While implementing this option, I opened txt files for each week since August 2014 and put these speeches into them. Then, I founded the weekly and monthly polarization degrees of these speeches through a Python code<sup>6</sup>. This code gave me both ratio and frequency since these two may have different implications for my research. While the ratio is the number of polarizing elements over the total word count, frequency represents just the number of polarizing elements. At this point, one should consider that sometimes politicians speak too much about their works and projects such as constructions during their addresses. Thus, the ratio can decline in longer speeches, although these elements may mean much for the political environment.

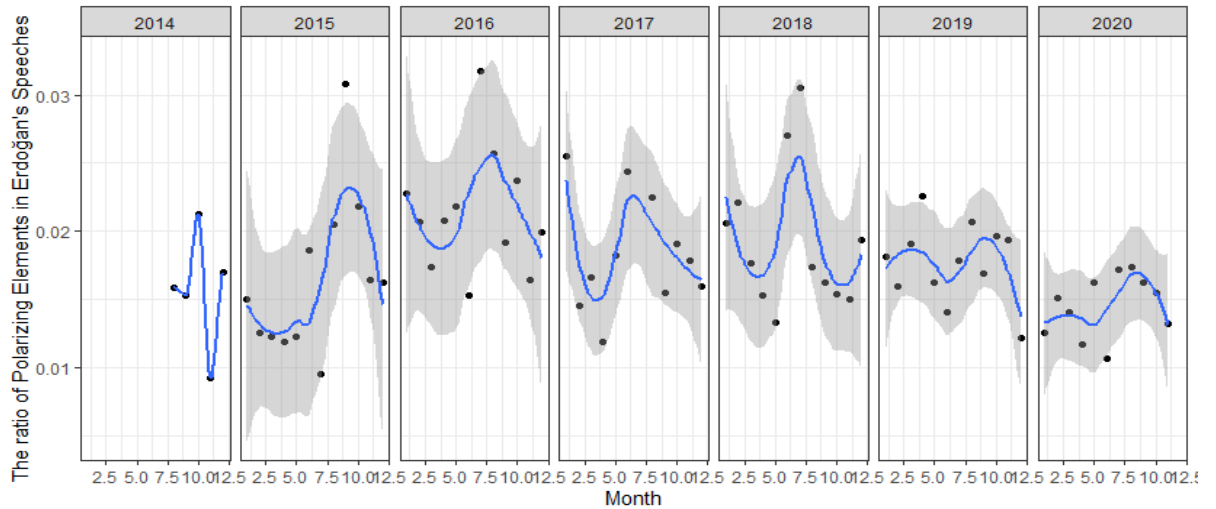
However, overall, if the ratio is high -the highest is around 3%-, this means that president frequently used polarizing elements in his speeches within the time frame and took advantage of existing cleavages among society. By doing so, he may have consolidated his voter base. On the other hand, if the ratio is low -the lowest is

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<sup>6</sup> A friend of mine, Samet Özcan, wrote this code with his immense knowledge on data science.

below 1%-, it can be interpreted as his effort to address the segments of society which are not among his voters by not intimidating them.

Figure 9: The Ratio of Polarizing Elements in President's Speeches



The selection of words and phrases that induce polarization among society is critical to get more accurate results at the end of the analysis. I chose those words in line with cleavages that Turkish people have divided on and named them as 'Polarizing Elements'. I identified three main lines that the Turkish President instrumentalized in his speeches: Turkish-Kurdish, Conservative-Secularist, and People-Establishment. Firstly, the Turkish state has a long history of conflict with the PKK, and it restarted after a brief pause between 2013 and 2015 with the peace process. As a pro-Kurdish party, the HDP has succeeded in exceeding the 10% electoral threshold in the last three general elections and became an important political actor in Turkish politics. However, ruling party politicians continuously accuse them of being equal to the PKK, although the party operates under the legal framework (AA, 2021). During both campaigns for the 2017 referendum and 2018 general elections, the AKP's leader and members placed the CHP with the HDP, which was already labeled as terror supporters (Aydın-Düzgit, 2019). Moreover, the

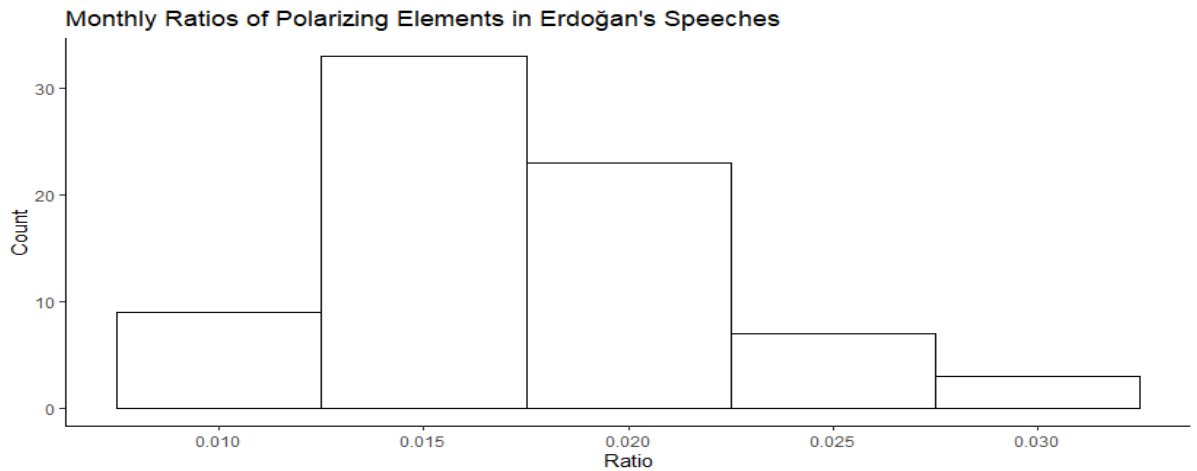
president warned about voting ‘no’ in the referendum by claiming that this vote would benefit the PKK (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017). Therefore, I decided to add any words that connote opposition parties cooperating with HDP to blame them as terrorists and prevent possible defections from the AKP’s electorate (see Appendix for the list of Polarizing Elements).

The second divide that leads to polarization in Turkey is between conservatives and seculars. As a critical driving force, religion has occasionally come to the fore in Turkish politics and determined voters’ behaviors by causing more division among the two mentioned poles, particularly in the last two decades (Aydın-Düzgit, 2019). The ruling party elite's blaming of Gezi Parkı protesters that they drunk alcohol in a mosque in Istanbul and assaulted a woman with a headscarf represents a hallmark moment of this divide in recent years (Krajeski, 2013). One of the significant examples to show how they confront conservatives and seculars is the comparison between "Asım" and "Haluk", sons of two Turkish intellectuals Mehmet Akif -symbol for conservatives- and Tevfik Fikret -symbol for seculars-. They praise Asım by idealizing him for conservative youth (SputnikNews, 2016), while vilifying Haluk as not being from the people (T24, 2016).

Related to this cleavage, president creates a dichotomy as the third polarization line within society. He brands opposition as descendants of the old secular establishment and his supporters as the ‘people’ (Aydın-Düzgit, 2019). According to Aydın-Düzgit (2019), the AKP has utilized the dichotomy between establishment and people by emphasizing victimhood feelings. In this way, the party has received support from the groups that feel discriminated against. While the CHP has been shown as the representative of the establishment, AKP has introduced itself as the people’s voice (Aydın-Düzgit, 2019). Considering AKP’s framing of

opposition as such, I included phrases such as ‘Bay Kemal (Mr. Kemal)’ to my word list.

Figure 10: Monthly Ratios of Polarizing Elements in President's Speeches



#### 4.1.2. Outcome Variable

##### 4.1.2.1. Conflict Intensity/Lethality

The dependent variable of my second hypothesis is conflict intensity/lethality. I benefited from three different existing datasets to create these variables. Turkey Terrorism Incidents Database (Alptekin, 2021) is the resource that I used for extracting the data on Turkish security forces’ operations against PKK. Since my research is about diversionary conflicts, it would not be accurate to include all clashes between the Turkish state and PKK. The state security forces should initiate the clash in order to qualify as a diversionary action. Taking into consideration this distinction among violent clashes with PKK, this variable consists of the total number of clashes weekly and monthly until the end of 2018. Secondly, TPCONED (Kibris, 2021) is the dataset to create a variable which measures conflict lethality by counting the number of killed PKK terrorists until 2020. Lethality also can demonstrate the government's efforts to create diversionary effects from domestic problems so that helps to get more insight about the tools that AKP

instrumentalizes to stay in power. The more TAF kills PKK terrorists, it means the more intensifies the conflict. These two datasets were brought weekly and monthly formats by Tokdemir and Klein (2021) and I used that one in my research.

Figure 11: TAF's Operations against PKK

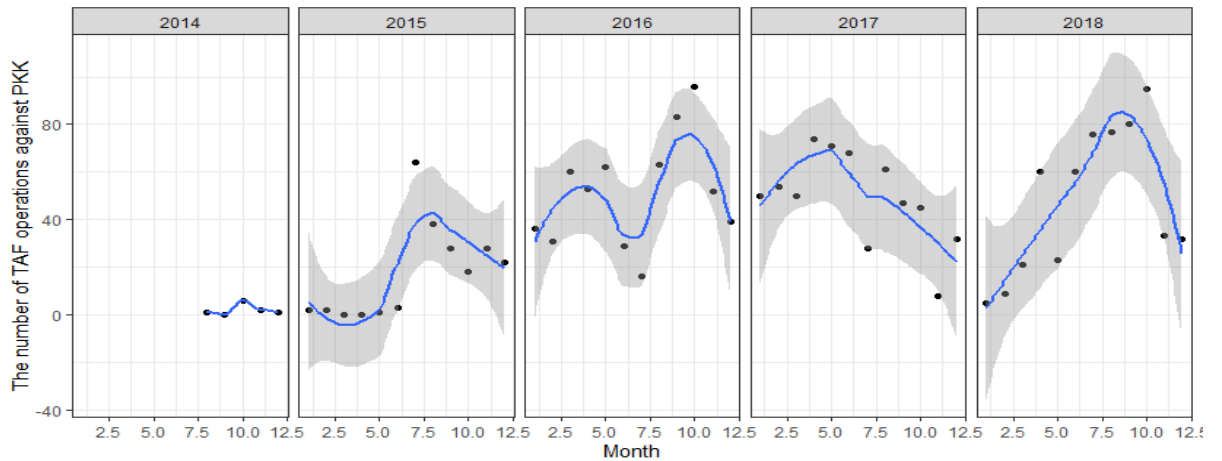
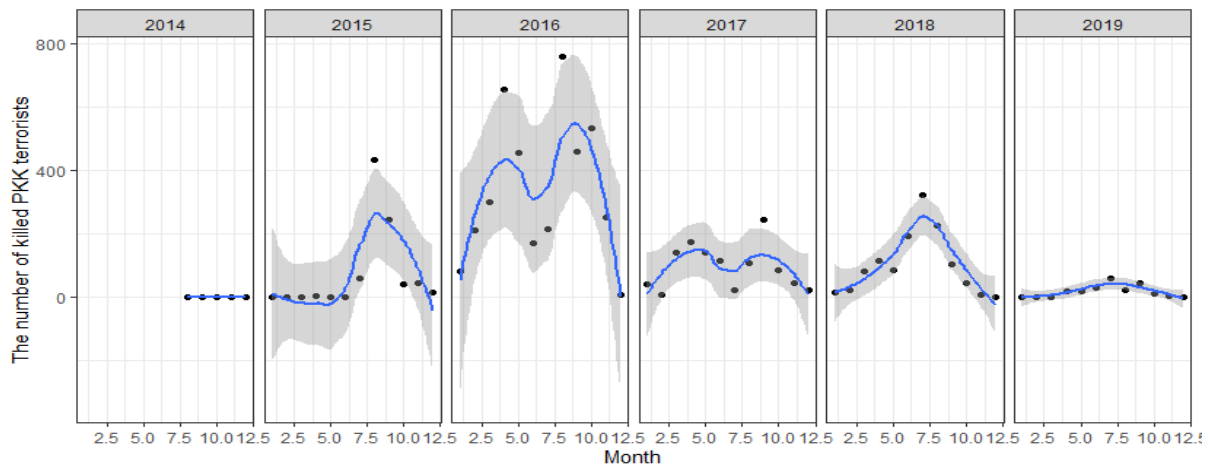


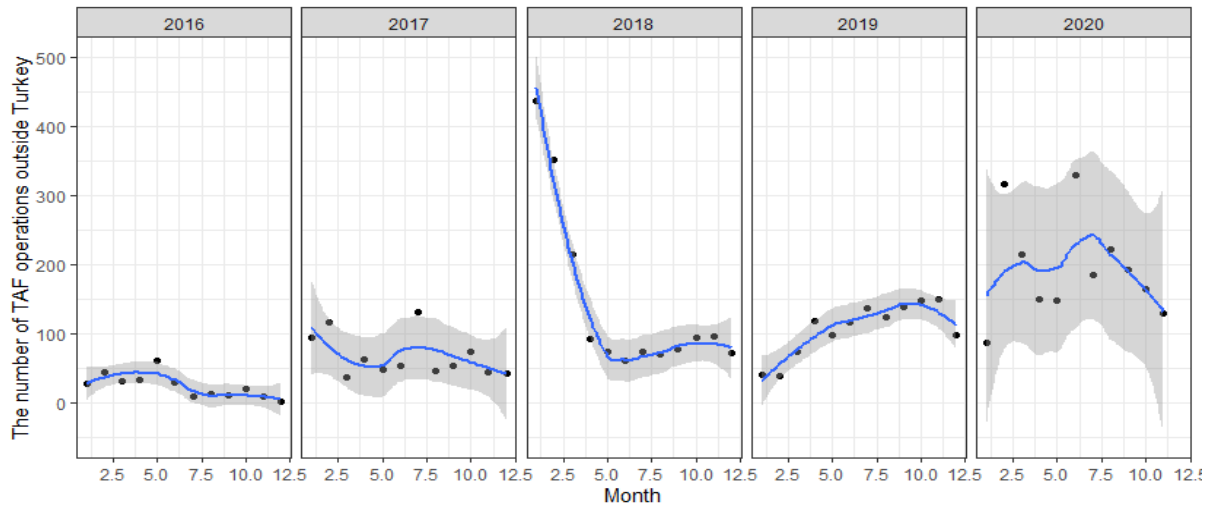
Figure 12: The Number of Killed PKK Militants



Nevertheless, TTID and TPCONED is not sufficient to measure the Turkish state's armed clashes because they do not include military operations abroad. This led me to include data from The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data includes clashes that the Turkish army has been involved in Iraq, Syria, and Libya since 2016. Unlike clashes inside Turkey's borders, this data has all the violent clashes that the Turkish military engaged in regardless of the

initiator. These clashes are the consequences of the AKP government's foreign policy decisions, and if the ruling party had not sent its troops to conflict zones, these clashes would not have existed. Therefore, it seems pointless to make any distinction between clashes.

Figure 13: TAF's Operations outside Turkey



#### 4.1.3. Explanatory Variables

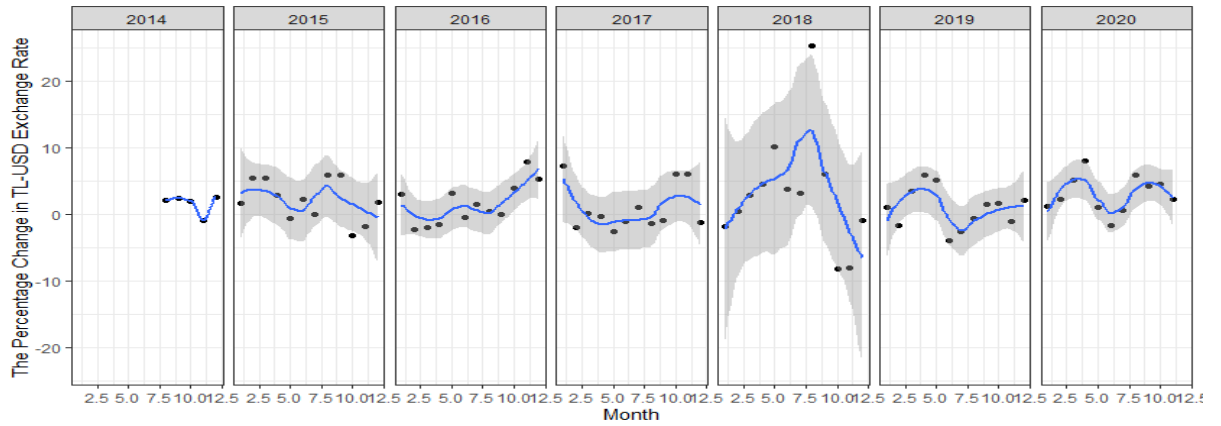
For my first and third hypotheses, the independent variable representing the ruling party's, the AKP, performance is economic indicators. Although opposition politicians, journalists, and scholars have criticized AKP governments for several reasons, such as Syrian refugees and increasing authoritarianism, I cannot include them all because of the measurement limitations but just the economic indicators.

##### 4.1.3.1. The Change TL-USD Exchange Rate

I use the value of Turkish Lira (TL) vis-a-vis US dollar for both weekly and monthly analysis. I extracted them as daily figures from the Turkish Central Bank's website and arranged them weekly and monthly. TL's value is critical for the Turkish economy because economists claim that the loss is likely to result in higher inflation and higher unemployment (Ünker, 2020). Citizens face the immediate effects of TL's

declining value and it may be an indicator to change their voting preferences. To consider the reaction time, I also add one week lagged values while using the change in TL-UD dollar exchange rate in my weekly dataset,

Figure 14: Monthly Change in TL-USD Exchange Rate



#### 4.1.3.2. Inflation Rate

Regarding how AKP governments performed, the monthly inflation rate also impacts citizens' perception of their ruling. Thus, I added this indicator utilizing the official figure of the Central Bank of Turkey in my monthly analysis to see whether it affects polarizing rhetoric and conflict initiation.

#### 4.1.4. Control Variables

To find more robust results, I included two control variables in my analyses: election period and season (winter coded as 1). These variables are present in the dataset that Tokdemir and Klein (2021) formed. State leaders can initiate a violent conflict or alter the tone of their speeches during the election periods. They may desire to take advantage of rally around the flag effects that emerged after military clashes with enemies. Or they may increase the nationalistic tone in their speeches to get votes from the nationalist electorate. Therefore, I think adding these two variables will strengthen the results of my analyses.



## 4.2. Results

Regarding my research question of how state leaders' rhetoric affects the relationship between diversionary needs and violent conflicts, I tested my three hypotheses with different methods. While I made a linear regression analysis to examine the impact of bad government performance on polarizing elements in leaders' speeches, I conducted negative binomial regressions to reveal the relationships that involve conflicts as the dependent variable. The reason for using different methods is the over dispersion that conflict variables have, as Tokdemir and Klein (2021) explain that negative binomial regression suits the data better rather than Poisson estimators.

Before diving into the results of my analysis, two points need to be clarified about the models. Firstly, I differentiated conflicts whether they are at home or abroad because these two may require different dynamics. The Turkish army has not been used to operate on other country's territories except Iraq and some peacekeeping operations. Furthermore, opposition parties have warned the ruling party to prevent any involvement in conflicts in other countries, although they have expressed their constant support to operations against PKK terrorist organization. This is why I analyzed conflicts inside and beyond Turkey's borders separately.

Secondly, I used different periods when including frequency and lethality to the analyses due to data availability. For the conflicts with PKK, the number of TAF operations against the organization is counted until 2018 by Alptekin (2021). On the other hand, data for lethality, measured by the number of killed PKK terrorists, is available until 2019 (Kibris, 2021). Therefore, I will present my findings regarding frequency and lethality separately, although little has differed.

#### *4.2.1. Weekly Tests*

Table 1 reports the findings from the tests of three hypotheses using the weekly data. Model 1 indicates that the first hypothesis, which requires a relationship between the economic indicators and president's use of polarizing elements in his speeches, is invalid as the relationship is insignificant. Related to the second hypothesis, Model 2 reveals that when his addresses become more polarized, Turkish security forces tend to initiate more conflicts with PKK terrorist organization. However, this logic does not hold for conflicts abroad (Model 3). Even though the presence of TAF's frequent operations outside Turkey in recent years, there is no significant relationship between polarization in the Turkish president's speeches and conflicts abroad.

I reached similar results on conflicts with PKK in Model 4. The number of killed PKK militants is positively related to the ratio of polarizing elements in his speeches. Lastly, Models 5-6 and 7 demonstrate that deteriorating economic conditions in the country, which the change in TL-USD exchange rate represents, do not directly predict the conflict initiation behavior of TAF. Thus, in the weekly format, I can conclude that bad economic performance does not result in involving more violent conflict in Turkey after 2014.

To express the findings from Models 2 and 4 in more concrete terms, the effect of an increase in president's use of polarizing words in his speeches on the number of TAF-initiated conflicts and killed PKK terrorists needs to be explained. My calculations show that a two percent increase equates with one more operation against PKK in a week (Model 2), while the same increase in using polarizing words results in two more killings of PKK members (Model 7).

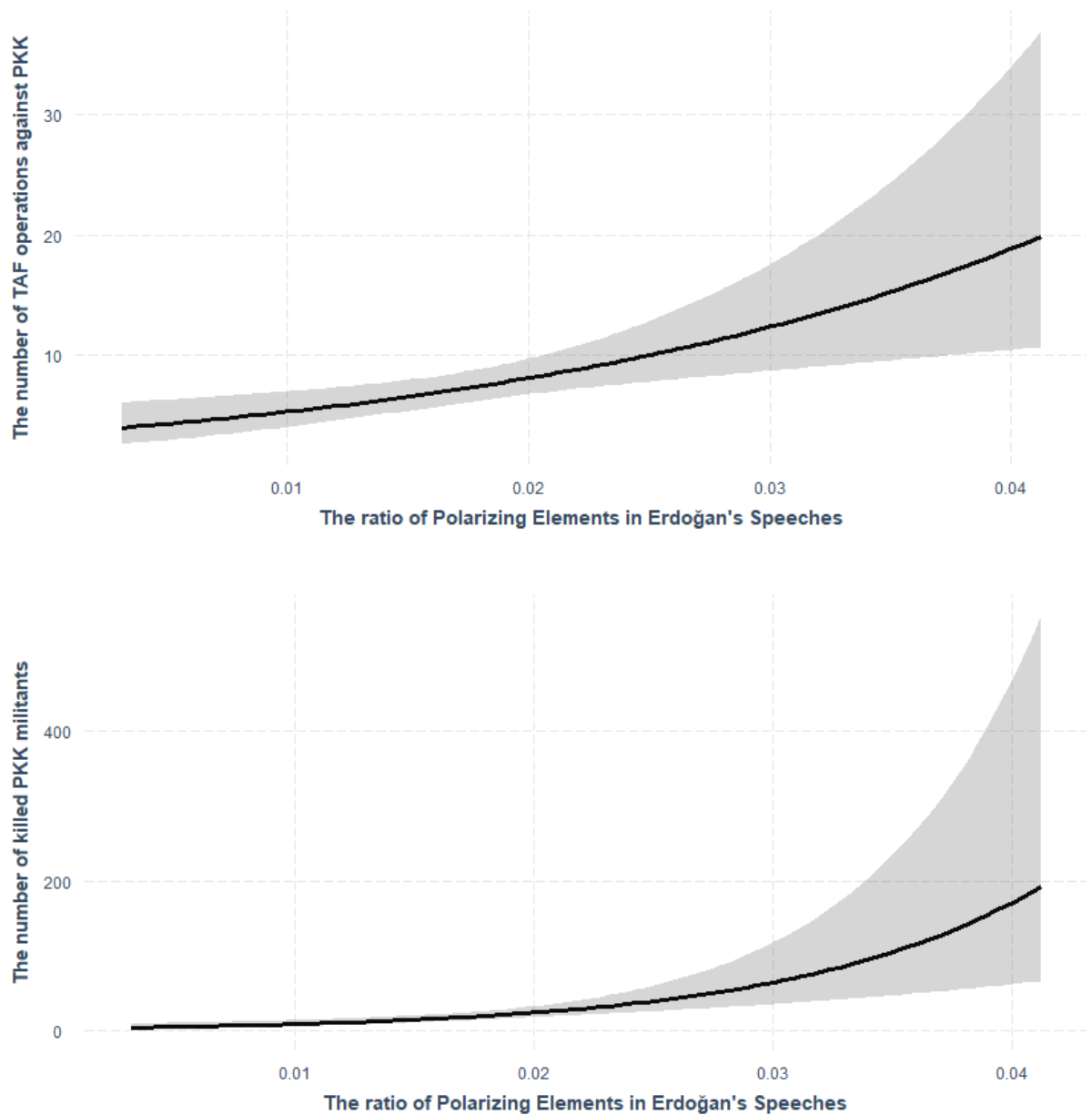
Table 1: Weekly Results

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	The Ratio of Aggressive Elements in Erdoğan's Speeches	Conflicts with PKK (TAF-initiated)	Conflicts Outside Turkey	The Number of Killed PKK Militants		Conflicts with PKK (TAF-initiated)	Conflicts Outside Turkey
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Ch. In Exchange Rate	0.006 (0.017)				4.804 (5.216)	0.717 (2.858)	0.746 (3.772)
The Ratio of Aggressive Elements in Erdoğan's Speeches		42.297** (13.066)	2.977 (15.961)	96.872*** (22.104)			
Winter		-0.533** (0.179)	0.118 (0.199)	-1.165*** (0.282)	-1.185*** (0.236)	-0.564*** (0.141)	0.150 (0.166)
Constant	0.011 (0.017)	1.489*** (0.271)	2.974*** (0.309)	1.782*** (0.446)	-1.206 (5.240)	1.636 (2.874)	2.151 (3.791)
Observations	248	159	248	202	282	230	328
R <sup>2</sup>	0.0005						
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-0.004						
Log Likelihood		-489.165	-971.659	-709.760	-1,031.706	-732.921	-1,262.431

Note:

+ p<0.1; \* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001.

Figure 15: Substantive effects of the findings in Table 1 (Models 2-7)



#### 4.2.2. Monthly Tests

To continue with monthly tests of the same three hypotheses, I added the inflation rate into my analysis to obtain better insights into the outcome variables. It is measured monthly by the Turkish Statistics Agency to inform the public about changes in consumer prices. While it was just the exchange rate that signals the

government's economic performance in the weekly dataset, I believe that including the inflation rate as an explanatory variable may help reach robust results.

Table 2 shows the results of the analysis that incorporates TAF-initiated conflicts against PKK into the models. Same with the weekly results, economic indicators do not hold significant relationships with AKP leader's use of polarizing words. These results conclude that economic conditions do not have an impact on his speeches, as I expected in hypothesis 1.

Table 2: Monthly Results by Using TAF-initiated Conflicts

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	The Ratio of Aggressive Elements in Erdoğan's Speeches		Conflicts with PKK (TAF-initiated)				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Ch. In Exchange Rate	0.0001 (0.0001)			-0.007 (0.029)		-0.004 (0.029)	
Inflation		0.0002 (0.001)			0.100 (0.126)		0.104 (0.125)
The Ratio of Aggressive Elements in Erdoğan's Speeches			28.946 (28.687)	30.040 (28.703)	29.345 (28.490)		
Election	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.186 (0.488)	-0.197 (0.488)	-0.216 (0.486)	-0.231 (0.486)	-0.271 (0.483)
Winter			-0.559 <sup>+</sup> (0.297)	-0.569 <sup>+</sup> (0.299)	-0.493 (0.301)	-0.593* (0.290)	-0.532 <sup>+</sup> (0.291)
Constant	0.018*** (0.001)	0.018*** (0.001)	3.299*** (0.596)	3.296*** (0.598)	3.166*** (0.609)	3.862*** (0.206)	3.731*** (0.238)
Observations	52	52	52	52	52	53	53
R <sup>2</sup>	0.007	0.004					
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-0.034	-0.036					
Log Likelihood			-239.985	-239.945	-239.614	-244.887	-244.503
<i>Note:</i>			+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001.				

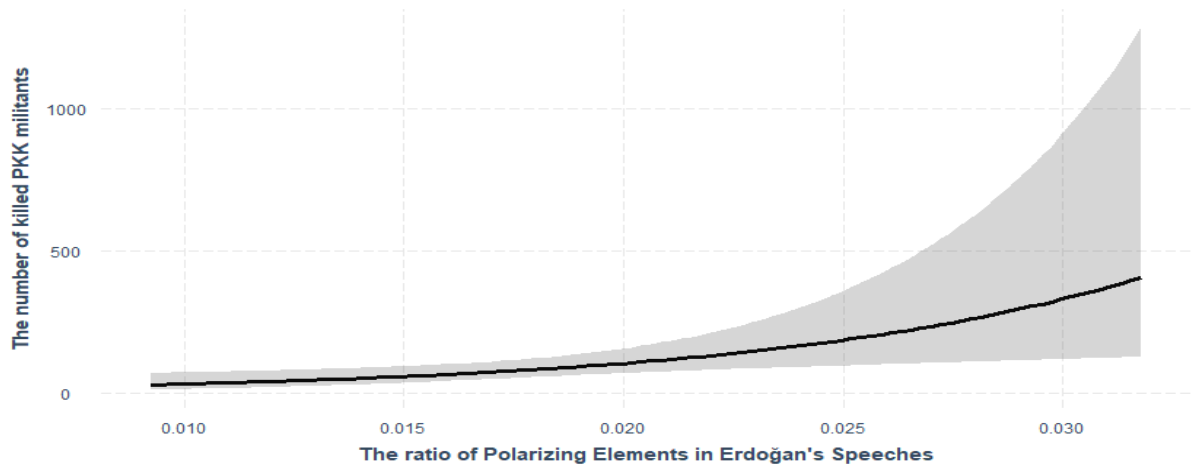
The monthly test of the second hypothesis with TAF-initiated conflicts demonstrates less than the weekly tests. In contrast to the weekly test, Models 3-4 and 5 indicate that the relationship between the ratio of polarizing elements in his speeches and TAF-conflict initiation is not statistically significant. Therefore, this nullifies the hypothesis at the monthly level. Regarding the third hypothesis, economic indicators -change in TL-USD exchange rate and inflation- do not predict TAF's conflict initiation patterns (Models 6-7).

Conducting the same analyses with the number of killed PKK militants as outcome variables revealed different results for the second and third hypotheses. Table 3 reports that the use of polarizing elements in president's speeches positively affects the number of killed PKK militants (Model 3). Regarding the third hypothesis, again, economic indicators do not relate to the government's diversionary actions (Models 6-7).

Table 3: Monthly Results by Using The Number of Killed PKK Militants

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	The Ratio of Aggressive Elements in Erdoğan's Speeches		The Number of Killed PKK Militants				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Ch. In Exchange Rate	0.0001 (0.0001)			0.013 (0.041)		0.014 (0.042)	
Inflation		0.0004 (0.001)			-0.122 (0.182)		-0.151 (0.187)
The Ratio of Aggressive Elements in Erdoğan's Speeches			113.832** (40.579)	114.408** (40.672)	110.610** (40.487)		
Election	-0.0002 (0.002)	-0.0002 (0.002)	-0.319 (0.645)	-0.286 (0.644)	-0.284 (0.643)	-0.631 (0.667)	-0.529 (0.664)
Winter			-0.984* (0.389)	-0.970* (0.390)	-1.053** (0.395)	-1.216** (0.393)	-1.288** (0.398)
Constant	0.018*** (0.001)	0.018*** (0.001)	2.835*** (0.823)	2.792*** (0.823)	3.026*** (0.839)	5.121*** (0.275)	5.294*** (0.332)
Observations	64	64	64	64	64	65	65
R <sup>2</sup>	0.009	0.007					
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-0.023	-0.025					
Log Likelihood			-338.441	-338.382	-338.211	-346.334	-346.079
<i>Note:</i>	+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001.						

Figure 16: Substantive effects of the findings in Table 3 (Model 3)



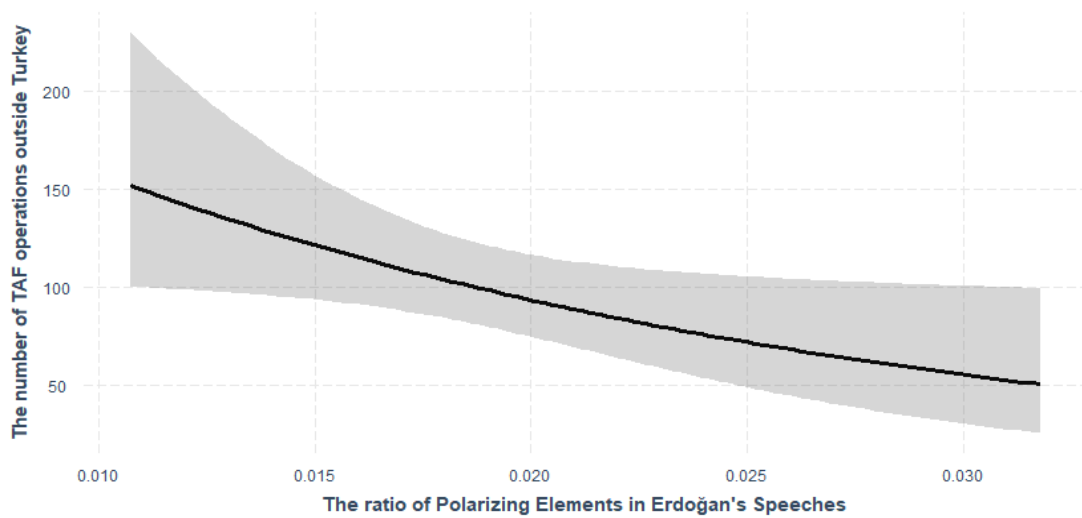
To understand how the government instrumentalizes diversionary conflicts to maintain ruling power, one must incorporate the army's operations outside Turkey into the analyses, as well. Turkey has sent its troops to Iraq, Syria, and Libya several times for different reasons and lost hundreds of soldiers on these countries' lands. Therefore, these operations also have the potential to change president's tone in his speeches and distract the public's attention from daily problems to more existential threats. Table 4 demonstrates the results of models that use Turkey's operations abroad as their dependent variable.

Models 3-4 and 5 report a statistically significant relationship between the ratio of polarizing elements in president's speeches and conflicts abroad. When he makes his speeches more polarizing, the number of events that the Turkish army involves abroad decreases. In other words, he reduces the number of polarizing elements in his speeches in the periods that the military conducts operations beyond Turkey's borders.

Table 4: Monthly Results by Using Conflicts Outside Turkey

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	The Ratio of Aggressive Elements in Erdoğan's Speeches		Conflicts Outside Turkey				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Ch. In Exchange Rate	0.00003 (0.0001)			-0.006 (0.022)		-0.008 (0.022)	
Inflation		-0.00002 (0.001)			0.060 (0.103)		0.034 (0.105)
The Ratio of Aggressive Elements in Erdoğan's Speeches			-52.282* (23.849)	-52.071* (23.840)	-53.482* (24.235)		
Election	0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.343 (0.467)	-0.339 (0.467)	-0.386 (0.474)	-0.478 (0.477)	-0.500 (0.486)
Winter			0.185 (0.211)	0.174 (0.212)	0.223 (0.221)	0.136 (0.214)	0.162 (0.223)
Constant	0.018*** (0.001)	0.018*** (0.001)	5.524*** (0.466)	5.535*** (0.468)	5.471*** (0.494)	4.637*** (0.147)	4.576*** (0.187)
Observations	58	57	58	58	57	59	58
R <sup>2</sup>	0.004	0.003					
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-0.032	-0.034					
Log Likelihood			-323.936	-323.905	-318.207	-331.698	-326.084
<i>Note:</i>	+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001.						

Figure 17: Substantive Effects of Findings in Table 4 (Model 3)





## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

In this thesis, I examine how the polarization degree in state leaders' rhetoric impacts their decisions for diversionary use of force. While polarization is a driving force of politics in some countries, leaders' calculus on critical decisions such as initiating a conflict with another state or sending troops on to a terrorist organization operates within those fragmented societies. Therefore, considering polarization with diversionary conflict dynamics seems worthwhile to enhance the theory's foundations. Different from the mechanisms that help diversionary logic works in the literature, I theorize that bad economic indicators and possibility to lose ruling power push state leaders to use more polarizing language. Furthermore, the increase in the use of polarizing language results in involving more violent conflicts.

This study contributed to the literature from three aspects. Firstly, as a potential mediator and a novel approach, I examined the effect of the state leader's rhetoric in terms of its polarization degree in the relationship between diversionary needs and violent conflict. Secondly, I used Turkey as the case study to test my mechanism different from the most of the literature which focuses on the US. Thirdly, regarding the end of the Turkey-PKK peace process in 2015, I demonstrated

that quantitative evidence does not support the argument that the AKP instrumentalized diversionary conflicts after it lost the majority in the parliament in June 2015 elections.

### **5.1. Discussion**

In this research which takes Turkey after 2014 presidential elections as its case study, I demonstrate that the president follows different practices for the conflicts abroad and at home in terms of polarization degree of his rhetoric. On the one hand, he employs more polarizing elements in his speeches during the time that Turkish armed forces clash with PKK more frequently. On the other hand, he makes his speeches less polarized when the army increases the frequency of operations abroad . This means that he attempts to rally people behind himself regardless of which segments they belong when TAF make operations outside of Turkey. In contrast, he puts more polarizing elements in his speeches when TAF conduct operations against the PKK terrorist organization.

Adopting Levy's (1989) argument, that leaders can take foreign policy decisions to satisfy certain groups within the society, to this pattern may imply that when the government conducts operations against PKK, it aims to prevent defections from its voter base by intensifying polarizing language. The polarizing elements include words that intend to demonstrate opposition parties, especially HDP, affiliated with PKK terrorist organization. President's rhetoric can be a sign for ruling party elites' strive to bring CHP and İYİ Party together with HDP in their speeches on the basis of the claim that they collaborate with PKK. Consequently, the AKP

aims to keep its constituency away from the Nation Alliance<sup>7</sup> (Millet İttifakı) and so prevents its winning coalition from diminishing.

The strategy of lessening the polarization degree of the president's speeches when the military operations abroad become frequent may be the result of opposition parties stance about these operations. Different from operations against PKK, opposition party leaders have constantly presented Syria as swamp that Turkey should definitely need to avoid interfering (Cumhuriyet, 2016; TRT Haber, 2019; BBC Türkçe, 2020). Opposition leaders have claimed that if Turkey pulled into this complicated country, it would be stuck in that swamp and give several casualties. Unlike the operations against PKK, the ruling party have not had a broad support within the political spectrum although these parties said 'yes' to the parliament resolutions to enter Syrian soil. Therefore, one can argue that president's rhetoric is less polarizing when conflicts abroad intensify in order to capture the support of other segments of the society, as well. Another explanation for using fewer polarizing elements in these periods can be the government's desire to prevent criticisms that are likely to arise when the number of casualties increases in the operations on other countries' lands.

Regarding the president's rhetoric, what I expected to find in the initial phases of my research which is a relationship between government's economic performance and polarization degree of the leader's rhetoric does not emerge. It turns out that President does not alter the degree of polarization in his speeches with the changing economic indicators.

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<sup>7</sup> The opposition bloc which consists of CHP, İYİ Party, SP, and DP. Pro-Kurdish HDP does not belong to the Nation Alliance but supported the alliance candidates in some cities in 2019 local elections and helped to get a victory against ruling coalition. For more, see <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/demirtas-declares-support-imamoglu-attract-stay-home-kurdish-voters>

Apart from considering president's rhetoric in the process of initiating/involving violent conflicts, my research shows that in contrast to the scholars (Lawrence, 2016; Türker & Sazak, 2018), politicians (Ünver, 2016; Coskun et al., 2020), and journalists (NYT, 2015), who have argued so far that the ruling party has benefited from the waging conflicts both inside and outside Turkey to gain politically, the government has not utilized diversionary conflicts when it performed poorly in the economic realm and lost elections since 2014. That said, my research has several limitations that are likely to hinder reaching accurate results as I explain in the next section.

## **5.2. Limitations to This Thesis**

As my research demonstrates, it turns out that economic indicators affect neither president's speeches in terms of polarized content nor government's decision to use force. To explain this pattern plausibly, one must take into consideration the allegations about AKP government's efforts to hide real economic figures from the public. My thesis has two variables to measure government's economic performance: change in TL-USD exchange rate and inflation. Both indicators have been allegedly manipulated by the government-controlled institutions in order to alleviate economic crisis' costs. For example, while Turkstat announced 2020's inflation rate as 14.6%, independent researchers-called ENAGrup- claimed that it was 36% by putting forward that Turkstat calculates the price changes in a way to show the figures lower (Öztürk, 2021).

Furthermore, opposition parties have recently accused AKP to sell the US dollars in Central Bank's reserves to prevent the decrease in Turkish Lira's value against other currencies. Although AKP executives denied the accusations at first, Minister of Treasury and Finance admitted that reserves were sold in line with CB's

monetary policy (Habertürk, 2021). As the result of these manipulations, my analysis might have been led to the wrong conclusions. It might have been the case that government-initiated conflict to divert people's attention from the misery they live in because although numbers could have been changed, rise in the number of poor people could not have been prevented artificially.

Related to government's control over state institutions, it should be noted that this thesis contains the time period that Turkey had been ruled under a competitive authoritarian regime (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016; Özbudun, 2015; Castaldo, 2018). The AKP government consolidated its power over state, eroded checks and balances, and took media under control. Adding up to the incumbency advantage, the limitless influence of the party, over state institutions enabled them to implement any policies that can benefit to their survival without considering citizens' wellbeing. Therefore, while they were able to hide the 'real' economic figures from the public with their tight control over institutions, they might have been initiated violent conflicts to maintain their ruling with the 'real' numbers they have.

AKP's strenght in terms of having a broad public support besides controlling the state can be another explanation for not obtaining the expected results. The party's strength comes from the legitimacy that public provides them in every election it has competed in since 2002. It has received at least 40% of the votes after its first victory in 2002. Considering that creating a diversion is a tool for weak governments who lack a strong voter base, it can be argued that the AKP has never been in such a situation in which it desperately needed gaining broader support from the electorate. In this respect, I also conducted negative binomial regressions to examine whether there is an association between the AKP's expected vote share and TAF's operations inside and outside Turkey.

I received the Konda Survey Company's data on the expected vote rates of the AKP. Results supported the idea that having such a broad voter base makes the AKP government to avoid resorting to diversionary conflicts. While diversionary logic requires initiating violent conflict in response to declining vote rates of the ruling party, Turkey case shows the opposite. My analyses resulted in a positive relationship between the AKP's expected vote rate and the armed forces' conflict initiation behavior.

The last limitation to my research arises from the time span that I conducted analysis. Since president's speeches are available for the period after he became president in August 2014, I had to exclude the period in which he was the prime minister. This resulted in having a very limited time span and observation number. If additional observation could have been added to the dataset and the period could have been extended, it might have been possible to get different results about the overall AKP governments.

### **5.3. Future Studies**

Considering these possible limitations to my research, future studies may take this thesis one step further by making mediation analysis. Although my initial aim was to conduct a mediation analysis with the three variables-economic indicators, leader's rhetoric, and the course of the conflict-, I realized that my method training is not sufficient to make such analysis. Since Bilkent offers only a introductory level quantitative method course, my knowledge is limited to basic statistical analysis. Therefore, I aim to advance this research while doing my PhD after taking more method courses.

Another path for further research is by expanding the time span of this research. It would be great if all the presidents' or prime ministers' speeches were collected since the beginning of the PKK's armed campaign. In this way, one can examine how leaders' rhetoric has changed in response to PKK's violence or how the operations against PKK have been affected by leaders' rhetoric. Furthermore, future research may examine how state leaders use violent non-state actors (VNSAs) to divert their electorate's attention. As it is present in Turkish case, leaders may decide to attack VNSAs on other states' land instead of confronting directly with states.

Besides focusing on Turkey, my mechanism can be iterated for large-n analysis, too. While collecting tens of leaders' speeches cannot be possible, political polarization of different societies can be measured with other sources. After that, how polarization affects diversionary conflicts can be tested. In this way, it can be possible to make generalizable claims regarding the relationship between polarization and diversionary use of force.

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## APPENDIX

### Polarizing Elements to Detect the Polarization Degree in President's Speeches

bay kemal, terör, uzantı, sabote, yerli, milli, bedel, vesayet, darbeci, tetikçi, zihniyet, rahatsız, bölücü, bölme, bölünme, ihanet, badire, operasyon, saldırı, kutsal, milletim, milli irade, Asım'ın nesli, nesli, nesil, maşa, fırsatçı, oyun, senaryo, cihat, cihad, tehdit, beka, gafil, fitne, çukur, hain, alçak, eskiden, eski türkiye, yeni türkiye, kol kola, tuzak, tuzağ, kaos, üst akıl, üst akl, kirli ittifak, gezi, karanlık eller, komplo, mahfil, kan gölü, tahrik, vicdan, ahlak, güruh, hicap, figüran, yandaş, destekçi, odak, provokasyon, provokatör, çığırkan, şebeke, ikircik, kalleş, işbirlikçi, bedel, güdüm, ajanda, 28 şubat, zat, başörtü, monşer, ezan, heves, milletin sahibi, elit, payanda, mankurt, sinsi, sabotaj, şer güç, tasallut, pranga, minare, tek parti, imam hatip, paralel yapı, hazmedemeyenler, kırıntı, ana muhalefet, alavere, dalavere, tahakküm, vandal, yağmacı, piyon, methiye, malum parti, zillet.