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ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS SYRIA AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE ASSAD REGIME

ESAD REJİMİNİN ÇÖKÜŞÜNDEN SONRA İSRAİL'İN SURİYE'YE YÖNELİK DIŞ POLİTİKASI

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Öz

Bu makale Beşar Esad'ın devrilmesinden sonra, İsrail'in Suriye'ye yönelik dış politikasını analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bunu yapmak için, Başbakan Netanyahu'nun ifadelerinin içerik ve söylem analizleri yapılmaktadır. Netanyahu'nun ifadelerine ek olarak, Dışişleri Bakanı Gideon Sa'ar, Savunma Bakanı Israel Katz ve İsrail Savunma Kuvvetleri tarafından yapılan resmî açıklamalar analiz edilmektedir. 8 Aralık 2024'te, Esad rejiminin çöküşünden sonra İsrail, Suriye'nin askerî gücünü yok etti ve Golan Tepeleri'nde kurduğu yerleşimleri genişletme kararı aldı. Bu çalışma, İsrail'in Suriye'ye yönelik olarak güvenlik odaklı bir dış politika uyguladığını iddia etmektedir. Bölgesel bir güç olarak İsrail'i kavramsallaştırarak ofansif realizm üzerinden dış politikasını anlamak mümkündür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye, İsrail Dış Politikası, Ofansif Realizm, Defansif Realizm, Bölgesel Güç.

Abstract

This article aims to analyse Israeli foreign policy towards Syria after the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad. In order to do this, content and discourse analyses of Prime Minister Netanyahu's statements are conducted. In addition to Netanyahu's statements, official statements made by Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, Defence Minister Israel Katz and the Israel Defense Forces are analysed. After the collapse of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, Israel destroyed Syria's military power and decided to expand the settlements it established in the Golan Heights. This study argues that Israel implements a security-oriented foreign policy towards Syria. By conceptualising Israel as a regional power, it is possible to understand its foreign policy through offensive realism.

Keywords: Syria, Israeli Foreign Policy, Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism, Regional Power.

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Bu makale, Esad'ın devrilmesinden sonra, İsrail'in Suriye'ye yönelik uygulamış olduğu dış politikayı analiz etmektedir. Makalede, İsrail Başbakanı Netanyahu'nun açıklamalarının içerik ve söylem analizi yapılmaktadır. Netanyahu'ya ek olarak, Dışişleri Bakanı Gideon Sa'ar, Savunma Bakanı Israel Katz ve İsrail Savunma Kuvvetleri'nin resmî açıklamaları analiz edilmektedir. Netanyahu, Sa'ar, Katz ve İsrail Savunma Kuvvetleri'nin resmî açıklamaları üzerinden İsrail'in dış politikası ve güvenlik ikilemi çözümlenmektedir.

Bu makale, İsrail'in Suriye'de güvenlik odaklı bir dış politika uyguladığını ve teorik olarak ofansif realist bir pozisyonu benimsediğini öne sürmektedir. Netanyahu'nun ifadelerinde güvenlik, istikrar, tehditler, Ortadoğu siyaseti ve Ortadoğu'yu değiştirmek gibi kavramlar yer bulmaktadır. Ayrıca, Hamas ve Hizbullah ile İran'a vurgular vardır. İsrail Başbakanı'nın güvenlik konularını önemseyen bir konuşma içeriği benimsediği görülmektedir. Netanyahu'nun Suriye'de yeni kurulacak hükümet sonrasında ülkenin yeniden İran'ın operasyon sahasına dönmesini istemediği görülmektedir. Ayrıca, Suriye'nin askerî gücünü yok ederek ülkenin yakın gelecekte askerî açıdan İsrail'e tehdit oluşturmasının önüne geçmek istemiştir. Aynı zamanda İsrail'in hem kendi güvenliğini sağladığını hem de dünyayı ve insanlığı barbarlıktan kurtardığını ifade ederek, ülkesine siyasi ve normatif bir misyon yüklemektedir. Bu açıklamalarıyla Başbakan Netanyahu'nun Suriye politikasını meşrulaştırdığını görmekteyiz. Ayrıca, Suriye'deki İsrail dış politikasının güvenlik odaklı olduğunu ifade etmek abartı olmayacaktır. Netanyahu'ya benzer şekilde Dışişleri Bakanı Gideon Sa'ar ve Savunma Bakanı Israel Katz İsrail'in güvenliğine yönelik adımlar atıldığını vurgulamışlardır. Özellikle Suriye'de bulunan stratejik silahların İsrail düşmanı ve terörist olarak tanımlanan grupların ellerine geçmesinin engellendiğini ifade etmişlerdir. Benzer şekilde, İsrail Savunma Kuvvetleri'nin resmî açıklamalarında, ülkenin güvenliğine dair adımların atıldığı ifade edilmektedir.

Bu makale, İsrail'i bölgesel bir güç olarak kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Ayrıca, süper güç ABD ile İsrail'in aslında benzer çıkarları temsil ettiği öne sürülebilir. Bölgede İsrail, terörizmin yeniden canlanmasını istememektedir. İsrail'e göre, İran destekli gruplar terörizmin kaynağıdır. İran dış politikası biraz daha farklı açıdan Suriye'ye bakmaktadır. İran için Esad rejimi altındaki Suriye, önemli bir müttefik ve geçiş sahasıydı; fakat Esad'ın devrilmesiyle Suriye'deki İran kontrolü ve etkisinin zayıfladığını iddia etmek makul olabilir. İran her ne kadar Esad'ın gidişiyle etki açısından dezavantajlı görünse de, yine de yeni Suriye rejimiyle ilişki kurmak isteyecektir. İran'ın bu faaliyetleri, İsrail için tehdit oluşturmaktaydı. ABD ise genel olarak İsrail'in güvenliğini sağlayacak politikaları desteklemekte ve İran'ın etkisinin zayıflamasını istemektedir. ABD, İsrail'in en önemli müttefikidir. İsrail, Suriye'deki stratejik silahların kendisine karşıt olan grupların ellerine geçmesini engellemek istemiştir. Bunu yapmak için İsrail, Esad sonrasında Suriye'ye yönelik askerî saldırılar düzenlemiştir. Ayrıca, Suriye'de kurulacak yeni hükümetin kendi çıkarlarıyla uyumlu olmasını istemektedir.

Sonuç olarak, bu makale İsrail Başbakanı Netanyahu'nun açıklamalarının söylem ve içerik analizlerini yapmıştır. Buna ek olarak, Dışişleri Bakanı Gideon Sa'ar, Savunma Bakanı Israel Katz ve İsrail Savunma Kuvvetleri tarafından yapılan resmî açıklamaların söylem analizini de yapmaktadır. Bu makalede, 8 Aralık 2024 ile 17 Aralık 2024 tarihleri arasındaki açıklamalar seçilmiştir. Bu açıklamalardan anlaşılacağı üzere, İsrail'in Suriye'de güvenlik odaklı ve aynı zamanda ofansif realist bir dış politika uyguladığını ifade etmek mümkündür. Her ne kadar bu açıklama, resmin sadece bir parçasını gösterse de, makale bu iddianın İsrail'in Suriye'de uyguladığı dış politikayı aydınlatacağını öne sürmektedir.

INTRODUCTION

What kind of foreign policy does Israel pursue in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime? This is the research question of the study. In order to understand Israeli foreign policy, this article employs the method of content and discourse analysis. In addition to this, in this study, Israeli foreign policy is assessed through offensive realist approach. This study argues that Israel follows a security-oriented foreign policy towards Syria after President Assad escaped from the country. It is possible to understand Israeli foreign policy through offensive realism. Israel destroyed military vehicles and equipment in Syria in this process by carrying out attacks with its air and naval forces. Relations between Syria and Israel are based on an enmity in the historical process. The Ba'athist regime was the main actor in these relations (Mandell, 1996). After Assad escaped from the country, Israel wanted to benefit from the power gap and hit military points inside Syria. It implemented offensive and security-oriented foreign policy towards Syria. This article analyses Israeli foreign policy with the concept of regional power. In the next sections, literature review, theoretical framework, methodology and conceptual framework are described. Following these sections, an analysis is conducted.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In terms of military power, it can be stated that Israel has the best capacity in the Middle East. The main perception of Israeli public opinion is related to the legitimacy of the state. Enemies of Israel do not accept Israel's right to exist. Israel always prefers to carry out pre-emptive attacks to defend itself. The other foreign policy strategy of Israel is to establish friendship with a great power. An alliance with a great power can be beneficial to the security of Israel. This important ally is the USA. There are threats of regional isolation and military attack to Israel. These are two important threats to the security of the country. Otherness can easily define the situation of Israel in the Middle East, which includes Muslim and Arab countries. Israel is surrounded by Arab countries. In this political environment, traditional threats to Israel's security ended, and new menaces emerged. Israel perceived threats from its Arab neighbours such as Jordan, Egypt and Syria until the late 1980s. However, after these threats ended, new threats emerged. These new threats are Iran, Palestinians and proxy forces of the Iranian state such as Hezbollah. In addition to this, the entry of Russia into the Middle East was a factor limiting Israel's effect across the region. However, after the civil war in Syria, when Russia left Syria, it can be stated that this effect is no longer a concern for Israeli politicians. The other factor related to Israeli foreign policy is the competition between Sunni and Shia societies. Especially, Sunni groups that are against Iran and its political aims share similar targets with Israel. This creates a cooperation environment between Israel and Muslim Arab countries in which the majority of people are Sunni Muslims. In this political equation, Syria is an important country for Israel's security (Eiran, 2020).

Relations between Israel and Syria are very bad because the two sides have been in a desperate struggle since the establishment of Israel as a state on May 14, 1948. The two sides made war against each other many times (Muslih, 1993). Syria was an ally of Arab states in the First Arab-Israeli War that started on May 15, 1948. In this battle, Syria fought against Israel. The other war is the Six Day War that took place in 1967 (Neff, 1994; Ma'oz, 1999). Syria, in this war, fought against Israel. Israel occupied the Golan Heights in this battle (Kattan, 2019). With this occupation, a big problem of territory emerged between Israel and Syria. In addition to these battles, Syria fought against Israel in the Yom Kippur War that took place in 1973. After these wars, Syrian military forces played an active role in the 1982 Lebanon War (Hinnebusch, 1996; Slater, 2002). After Hafez al-Assad passed away in 2000, his son, Bashar al-Assad, became the president of Syria. During the presidency of Bashar al-Assad, relations between Israel and Syria did not develop. Syria was used as a base by Iranian armed groups. Notably, after the Syrian Civil War broke out in 2011, Syria weakened and Bashar al-Assad stayed in power with the aid of Russia and Iran. However, on December 8, 2024, the Assad regime collapsed, and Bashar Assad escaped to Moscow with his family (CNN, December 9, 2024).

Syria is a very important country in terms of Israel's security and regional politics of the Middle East. There is an adage attributed to Henry Kissinger about Syria and Egypt. It says that *''no war is possible without Egypt, and no peace is possible without Syria in the Middle East''* (Daoudy, 2008). This adage shows the importance of both Egypt and Syria for regional politics in the Middle East. These two countries are highly significant for understanding Israel's relations with its Arab neighbours.

In academic literature, there are many researches explaining wars between Israel and Arab states (O'neill, 1978; Catignani, 2008). Also, there are some studies describing Israeli foreign policy towards the Golan Heights (Hof, 2000). According to Aryeh Shalev (1995), the Golan Heights has geopolitical importance for Israeli foreign policy. It increases defence and deterrence capability of Israel. In addition to these qualities, the Golan Heights is also highly significant for Israel as a bargaining asset (Shalev, 1995). Some studies focus on the close relations between Israel and the USA. For instance, Darbaj (2024) analyses the USA's approach to Israeli foreign policy regarding the Golan Heights and questions the legality of Israeli actions in this region. Academic researches focus on Israel's relations with the USA, Iran, Middle Eastern Arab countries and other neighbours. Also, military and defence strategy is analysed.

This article tries to contribute to the academic literature, analysing Israeli foreign policy after the collapse of the Assad regime. This study analyses Israeli foreign policy by using offensive and defensive types of realism. This research argues that Israel follows a security-oriented and offensive realist foreign policy towards Syria after Assad left.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: OFFENSIVE REALISM AND DEFENSIVE REALISM

One of the most important thinkers of realist approaches was Hans Morgenthau. He put realist theory into practice in the academic literature of international relations discipline. His approach is called classical realism (Morgenthau, 1958). In the 1970s, Kenneth Waltz expressed his neorealist thoughts. This was a different approach to relations between states. John Mearsheimer, who is an important scholar in international relations discipline, explained the idea of offensive realism as an effective way of understanding world politics. It is essential to say that according to Mearsheimer (2003), big states try to increase their power. States try to get more powerful. Foreign policies of states are based on the assumption that the world politics has anarchic structure. It means that there is no world state or government regulating relations between different actors (Snyder, 2002).

Defensive realism says that there is no need to get more powerful. In this sense, states are not required to have more power under current international system. Countries aim to sustain their current power level (Waltz, 2000; Taliaferro, 2000). They do not want to increase their power level because it is not necessary for them. However, in offensive realism, states want to increase their power level. They try to get more powerful. In this context, it must be noted that the international system provides states with opportunities and incentives. States want to benefit from the system's incentives, and they try to get a larger share of the pie. States want to become hegemon in their region or the world system (Snyder, 2002).

In the broadest sense, offensive realism, which is put forward by Mearsheimer, may bring new wars or conflicts to international actors. Compared to offensive realism, defensive realism, which is put forward by Kenneth Waltz, is more inclined to peace or diplomacy. If a state has more power than other countries, this state will be more inclined to use hard power because other states do not have enough material capacity to resist this power gap. In world affairs, big states will strive to be more powerful than their rivals because they can only reduce threats to their national interests by becoming more powerful. Security dilemma is an important part of this discussion. It means that states are not sure about the intentions or future plans of other states or actors. In the broadest sense, states cannot know the future plans or intentions of other states, so they want to increase their power and defend their national interests. These actions can sometimes be perceived as a threat by other rivals (Snyder, 2002).

This article argues that offensive realism is conceptually perfectly suitable for Israeli foreign policy instead of defensive realism. There are two main reasons behind this argument. First, according to the official foreign policy discourse of Israel, there are enemies trying to totally destroy Israel, such as Iran and its proxies in the Middle East. Israel suffers from a strong security dilemma because of these rivals. As widely analysed, Iran and its proxies define Israel as the biggest enemy. If Israel weakens, these actors will try to benefit from Israel's shortage of power. According to the official foreign policy discourse of Israel, if a gap emerges in Israel's security, Iran's proxies can use this situation for their interests. It is what Hamas and other Palestinian groups did on October 7, 2023, killing approximately 1,200 persons including civilians in Israel. In this political situation, Israel tries to increase its power and benefit from incentives provided by the international system all the time. This is the official thesis

of the state of Israel. Second, Israel suffers from a size problem. It has a very small population and a geography which is not big enough. In order to balance these shortfalls, Israel tries to keep on developing and sustaining a high military technology. In addition to these technologies, Israel keeps the Golan Heights, Gaza and the West Bank under tight control so that it can monitor hostile initiatives against itself. These actions of Israel are defined as violation of international law. However, for Israeli governments, this policy is necessary to protect the country's national interests. Israel tries to get more powerful all the time and become hegemon in the Middle East. Israel aims to establish hegemony over other states of the Middle East. In the event of a power gap in the Middle East, Iran and its proxies will be able to fill this gap. This situation will be a disadvantage for other states that are in regional competition, such as Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article employs qualitative research method. In this study, content and discourse analyses of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's statements are conducted. In addition to this, statements made by Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, Defence Minister Israel Katz and the Israel Defense Forces are analysed. Discourse analysis of statements made by Sa'ar, Katz and the Israel Defense Forces is conducted. Prime Minister Netanyahu made some speeches about Syria after the fall of Bashar al-Assad. Time frame of speeches is from 8 December 2024 to 17 December 2024. Netanyahu made these speeches after Bashar al-Assad escaped from Syria on December 8, 2024. These speeches are collected from the official website of Israeli prime minister's office. The article analysed these speeches by using QDA Miner Lite version that is a qualitative analysis program used by scholars. Statements of Netanyahu were collected and then codes are assigned to paragraphs of speeches that are connected with Israeli foreign policy towards Syria. These codes show the content of Netanyahu's speeches. In addition, the frequency of certain words used in Netanyahu's speeches is derived from the analysis program. These codes and words show the content of Netanyahu's speeches. In addition to content analysis, discourse analysis of speeches made by Netanyahu, Sa'ar and Katz is done in this article. Discourse analysis shows the approach of Israel to Syria after Assad left. It is significant that Israel, in this study, is conceptualised as a regional power in the Middle East, trying to expand its sphere of influence.

The period from 8 December 2024 to 17 December 2024 is selected as the time frame of this study. In this period, important developments happened in the Middle East. The Assad government collapsed in Syria and Israel started to carry out military attacks on Syria. In this article, speeches made by Prime Minister Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar and Defence Minister Israel Katz are selected for the analysis. The reason why their speeches are used in this article is related to their political importance. These persons are the main politicians who shaped Israel's foreign policy towards Syria. This is the main reason why the speeches of these politicians are used in this article. In addition to these politicians, declarations made by the Israel Defense Forces are used because it is an important foreign policy actor in Israeli politics. Statements, which focus on Israel's foreign policy towards Syria, are chosen for the analysis.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: REGIONAL POWER

The concept of regional power can be described as states that have enough military capacity to shape and affect external affairs and political developments in their regions (Heller, 2014; Parlar Dal, 2016a; Ehteshami, 2018). States, which are defined as regional power, generally have potential of leadership, essential military and soft power resources and capability to benefit from foreign policy strategies. Also, it can be mentioned that regional powers have a role defined by others in their regions. Their regional power roles are accepted by other states which are located in the same region (Flemes, 2007).

When it comes to the Middle East, in terms of these definitions and explanations, I believe Israel can be defined as a quintessential regional power. There are many researches discussing Israel's position in the region (Heller, 2014; Kappel, 2014; Beck, 2020). Israel has some advantages and disadvantages in terms of becoming a regional power in the Middle East. Israel is surrounded by bigger countries such as Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the Middle East. Israel suffers from a shortfall of human resource and geographical size (CIA, Israel). However, it also has some big advantages to become a regional power. Israel is a developed nation. It can provide a stable welfare system for its people. It can

be seen in Table 1 that GDP per capita of Israel is 53 thousand dollars (International Monetary Fund, Israel). Compared to other nations, it is a significant indication of welfare in Israel. It is evident that Israeli nation is rich. Also, it can be stated that Israel is a big economy, especially when we think about its small geography and the shortfall of human resource. Israel is an important example for other states of the Middle East. As a regional power, Israel is also a country providing high economic standards for its citizens. These features increase both soft power and regional power of Israel.

Table 1: Israel's Capacity as a Regional Power in the Middle East

Location	The Middle East
Area	21,937 sq km
Coastline	273 km
Population	9,402,617
GDP, Current Prices	528 Billion Dollars (October 2024)
GDP Per Capita, Current Prices	53 Thousand Dollars (October 2024)

Source: CIA, Israel, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/israel/#economy; International Monetary Fund, Israel, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/profile/ISR.

In addition to these qualities, Israel has high technology. In order to become a regional power, a state must have a strong army. Israel has a high military technology. It can produce high-tech products on its own. Also, it is militarily supported by the United States of America. There is a strong bilateral relation in military field between the two sides (Burki, 1989; Bar-Siman-Tov, 1998; Holt, 2014). The Israeli Air Force is stronger than its rivals in the region. It has F-35 fighter jets that are fifth generation aircraft. In addition to this, it has a developed army including modern technologies such as Merkava tanks. These tanks form the nucleus of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). In addition to these technologies, Israel has a strong and modern air defence system called Iron Dome. It can protect Israel from heavy air attacks. Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) is a strong indication of Israel's military power. It is a leader company in military products, ranging from vehicles to missile systems (Israel Aerospace Industries, About).

According to Asher Susser (2014), there are three important regional powers in the Middle East. These countries are Turkey, Iran and Israel. They are not Arab countries. Also, it is significant that these three countries are regional powers in the Middle East. After Iraq and Syria weakened, Iran had more opportunity to increase its sphere of influence. Notably, in Iraq, after Shiite groups took over administration, Iran broadened its control field in the country. In addition to Iran, Turkey, as a strong country, tries to shape political developments taking place in the Middle East. Also, Israel is an important regional power shaping the future of the region. Israel has a higher military technology, compared to its Arab neighbours. It is equipped with the most advanced military technology, ranging from modern tanks to air defence systems. In addition to a strong army, Israel also has a powerful economy bolstering its military advance (Susser, 2014).

5. ANALYSIS OF ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS SYRIA AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE ASSAD REGIME

The Israeli government does not want to let anti-Israel groups get hold of strategic weapons that Syria has in its stockpiles. Israeli politicians also try to prevent terrorist groups that will find beneficial spaces in Syria from carrying out attacks on Israel and protect the Jews who are living in the Israeli-Syrian border. Syria is an important country for Israel's security (Olmert, 2011). Israel was against Bashar al-Assad who allowed Iran to use Syrian territories for its own political interests. Under the Assad government, Syria was a transfer route for sending weapons to Hezbollah. This is a security problem for Israel. As a consequence, it is evident that Israel followed a foreign policy based on national security in Syria. The main issue for Israel is not only Syria but also Iran. Bashar al-Assad was an important ally of Iran; therefore, the Iranian government is unhappy with the fall of Assad. The Assad regime was a part of Iranian Shiite axis. Syria was the gateway to the corridor that was used for transferring aid to Hezbollah. In December 2024, after the collapse of the Assad regime, Ali Khamenei, who is the Supreme Leader of Iran, announced that Assad was ousted from power by Israel and the United States (Reuters, December 11, 2024). In this political equation, Israeli foreign policy is for the most part supported by the USA.

The most important aim of the USA in Syria is to guarantee Israel's security, so it tried to overthrow Assad from the power. Israel succeeded in getting American political aid when necessary. Assad was an enemy of Israel and facilitated Iran's hostile actions against Israel on Syrian soil. Iran was using Syrian territory as a base for its actions against Israel (Alam, 2019). Syria is a strategic point for regional powers in the Middle East (Sarı Ertem, 2018; Öğür and Baykal, 2018; Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2023). Israeli foreign policy was similar to that of Turkey which is a neighbour in the region. Both sides thought that Assad was the source of political problems in the region. Since the Arab Spring, Turkey's aim has been to topple Bashar al-Assad. Turkey accused Assad of being a dictator slaughtering civilians, children, women and innocents (Demirtaş, 2013; Kuru, 2015; Zahra, 2017; Hale, 2019; Alam, 2020). This demonstrates that Israeli foreign policy is shared by other regional powers with some minor differences.

Also, Israeli politicians doubt that the new Syrian government may use the country's armed forces against Israel in the near future. By destroying Syrian military capability, Israel strengthens its hegemonic position in the region. Israel, as a regional power, tries to demonstrate its power in the region by controlling political developments taking place in Syria. Regional powers demonstrate their power in their regions with different tools (Parlar Dal, 2016b; Demir, 2023). Israel wants to establish friendly relations with the new Syrian government and ensure that the new Syria will not pose a threat to its national security. Israel viewed the Kurds in Syria as an important ally against jihadist groups in the Middle East (Ergun, 2018). Iran challenges Israel in regional affairs and struggles to become a more powerful country. It is the ideological enemy of Israel. Iranian government tried to keep Bashar al-Assad in power because Assad is a close partner of Iran. In Syria, Iran will absolutely try to sustain its sphere of influence to continue strong ties with its proxies in the region. After the fall of Assad, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated that young people of Syria must act because their country is not anymore safe (Daily Sabah, December 25, 2024).

Considering regional balance and policies, it is evident that Israel is a regional power which is faced with threats. Iran and its proxies are the main threats to its national security. Israel wants to sustain its regional power position and tries to protect its security in a region including many Arab countries. Israel aimed to eliminate potential threats by destroying Syria's stockpiles of strategic weapons. By hitting military points in Syria, it can be stated that Israel implemented an offensive realist foreign policy. In addition to this, this article argues that Israel implemented a security-oriented foreign policy by prioritising the security of its citizens. This can be considered a theoretical contribution to the existing academic literature. This policy can be inferred from statements made by Prime Minister Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, Defence Minister Israel Katz and the Israel Defense Forces. These statements are compatible with the foreign policy implemented by the state of Israel. In this situation, when it comes to relations with Syria, it is possible to say that Israel's main concern is its own national security. Statements made by these politicians and the Israel Defense Forces are consistent with foreign policy in field. Offensive realist perspective seems perfectly suitable to Israel's foreign policy towards Syria after the collapse of the Assad regime. The Israeli government wanted to gain advantage by attacking its enemies. This is also a way of protecting the country's national security.

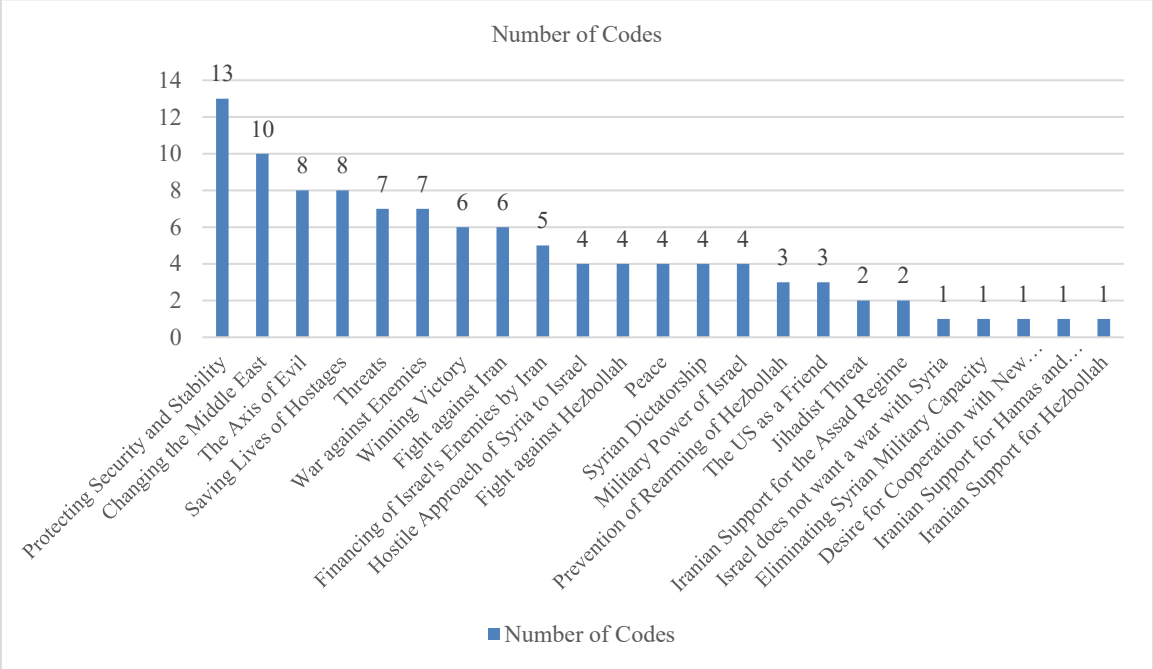
In this section, Israeli foreign policy towards Syria is analysed. In order to understand the driving force behind the foreign policy implemented by Israel, content analysis of Netanyahu's speeches is conducted. In addition to this, discourse analysis of speeches made by Netanyahu, Sa'ar and Katz is conducted. Furthermore, press releases of the Israel Defense Forces are described and analysed. Subsequently, Israel's overall foreign policy towards Syria after the collapse of the Assad regime is explained through offensive realism. Israel tries to protect its security by carrying out attacks on Syria. When Syria becomes a weak state in terms of military power, Israel will easily control the regional politics.

5.1. Content Analysis

Analysing the content of Prime Minister Netanyahu's statements, it can be stated that after the collapse of the Assad regime, Prime Minister Netanyahu delivered security-oriented speeches. This type of speech is compatible with Israeli foreign policy. Today, Israel is in a battle against Hamas in Gaza; therefore, it is normal for Netanyahu to utilise concepts which are related to security, war or threats.

Figure 1 shows that the topic Prime Minister Netanyahu most frequently addresses is the protection of security and stability. The second topic is Israel's capability to change the political situation in the Middle East by force. The third topic is about the axis of evil including Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. The other topics that Prime Minister Netanyahu brings up include hostages in the battle against Hamas, security threats, the fight against Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, Israeli victory over jihadist threat and the destruction of Syria's military capacity.

Figure 1: Number of Codes Showing the Content of Prime Minister Netanyahu's Statements[1]



Source: The author prepared this figure by using QDA Miner Lite version.

The topics that can be seen in Figure 1 indicate that Prime Minister Netanyahu's agenda is full of security-oriented politics. Israel aims to change political balance in the Middle East and win an important victory against its enemies. Also, Israel aims to protect its security and national interests. One of the most important priorities of Prime Minister Netanyahu is to defeat Hamas and Hezbollah. Destroying Syrian military capability, Israel wants to feel safe because in the near future, new Syrian regime may use its force against Israel or open its doors again to Iranian armed groups that are planning to do hostile actions against Israel. By implementing such a policy, Israel violates the rules of international law. Iran can use Syrian territory as a base for its military actions.

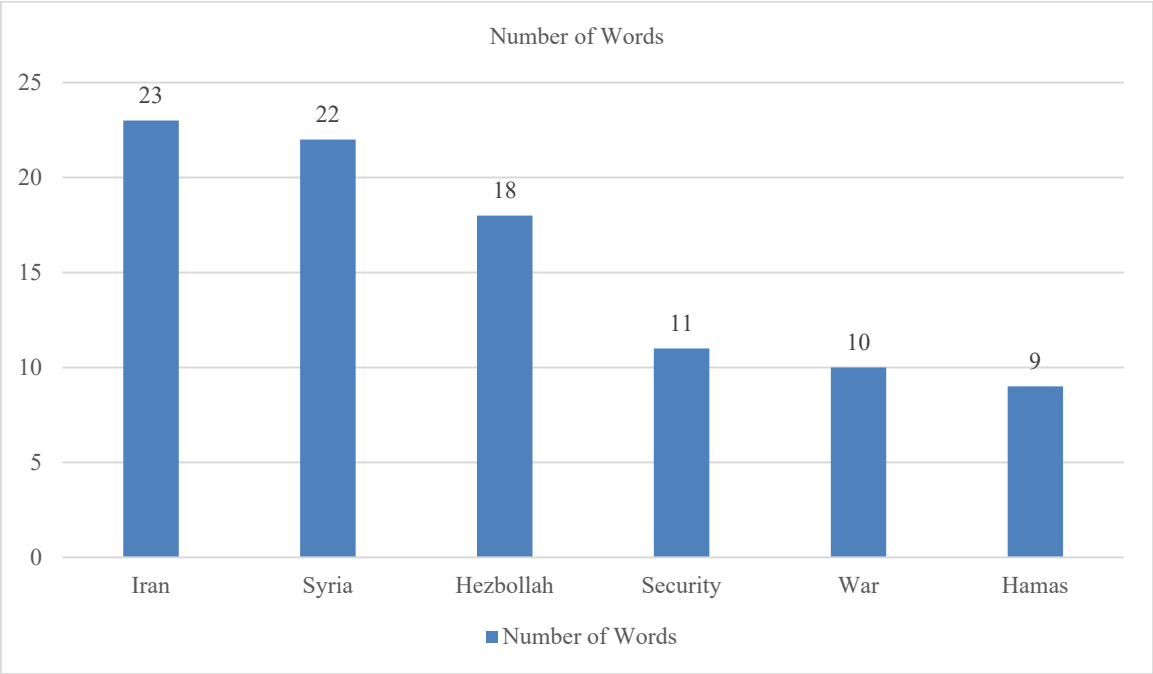
Prime Minister Netanyahu also mentions that Israel has the necessary military power to defeat its enemies. By saying this, Netanyahu wants to show that he has confidence in the military capacity of Israel. In addition to these topics, Netanyahu mentions Iranian support for Hamas and Hezbollah and also jihadism as a threat. In the broader context of Israeli foreign policy, it seems reasonable to say that after the fall of the Assad regime, in Netanyahu's speeches, protecting Israel's security and changing the Middle East by making war against the axis of evil including Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and militants of the Assad regime are the most important policies. Changing the Middle East is connected with Israel's regional power position. For Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israel has the power to change the Middle East because it is the hegemon of the region.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is concerned about his country's security. By mentioning Iran and its proxies, he is trying to legitimise Israel's attacks on Syrian territories. This can be seen as one of his political strategies in foreign policy. His agenda is full of security and foreign policy. From his perspective, Syria is a source of threat, including groups related to Iran, controlled by the Iranian regime. In order to eliminate this threat, Israel will change the political situation in the Middle East. It

[1] There is not enough space for the concepts in the twenty-first and twenty-second lines of Figure 1. The twenty-first line refers to desire for cooperation with new Syrian regime. The twenty-second line refers to Iranian support for Hamas and Palestinians.

has the necessary power to realise this. This is the main approach adopted by Netanyahu.

Figure 2: Important Words Used by Prime Minister Netanyahu



Source: The author prepared this figure by using QDA Miner Lite version.

Figure 2 shows the number of words used by Netanyahu. Figure 2 also demonstrates that the content of Netanyahu's speeches is dominated by security-related topics. Prime Minister Netanyahu most frequently mentioned Iran, Syria and Hezbollah in his speeches. Security, war and Hamas are the other concepts that are used most by Netanyahu. Figure 2 shows that following the fall of the Assad regime, Netanyahu's agenda prioritises Israel's security and the political situation of its adversaries. The collapse of the Assad regime is a turning point for Israeli foreign policy. Israel wants to benefit from this power gap in Syria, destroying the military capacity of the country so that these military vehicles will not be used against Israel in the near future. In order to get the whole picture, Netanyahu's speeches provide important data. As widely analysed, the argument that Prime Minister Netanyahu's political agenda is focused on the protection of Israel's security is evidenced by a content analysis of his speeches. In addition to this, Israel wanted to benefit from political power gap in Syria.

5.2. Discourse Analysis

This section of the article provides a discourse analysis of the speeches made by Netanyahu, Sa'ar and Katz. Since they held the positions of the cabinet related to foreign policy, a discourse analysis of their speeches is highly significant for understanding offensive realist position of the state of Israel. In addition to them, in this section, press releases of the Israel Defense Forces are described and analysed so as to see the official view of the army about Syria's political situation.

5.2.1. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

It must be noted that Israel does not want to intervene in Syria's internal affairs, but it also wants to protect its security, destroying security threats. On December 10, 2024, Prime Minister Netanyahu (Gov.il, 10.12.2024) stated that Israel does not aim to intervene in Syria's internal affairs, but it only wants to protect its security. In recent days, Syria is an issue of security for Israel. In the same speech, Netanyahu (Gov.il, 10.12.2024) also said that Iran must not be permitted to politically control the new Syrian government. Syria must not become a proxy of Iran in the near future. Prime Minister Netanyahu (Gov.il, 10.12.2024) also stated that Israel destroyed Syrian military vehicles because there is a risk that these military vehicles can be used by jihadists against Israel. By doing this, Israel weakened Syria's military power while increasing its own military capacity. Israel tried to benefit from the incentives provided by the international system because by destroying Syria's military power, it increased its

military superiority over this country. This is connected with the international system because while going to a multipolar world order, Russia, which was busy fighting with Ukraine, did not have enough capacity and opportunity to keep Assad in power. China is not actively involved in the conflicts of the Middle East. For other Arab countries, it is impossible to become involved in a war against Israel because Israel is stronger than its Arab neighbours in terms of military forces and supported by the USA. Arab dynasties do not have the power to resist the Israeli Defense Forces. However, if Arab dynasties that are American allies collapse, the approaches of new governments to Israel may get unclear. In this world system, in the Middle East, it can be challenging for a country to militarily resist Israel's politics and power supported by the USA and European nations. Also, Syria does not have the military power to resist Israel's army, especially while trying to construct a new state. Today, only Iran challenges Israel by using its military power and proxies.

According to Netanyahu, Israel also has the mission of saving the world from uncivilised terrorists. On December 12, 2024, Netanyahu (Gov.il, 12.12.2024) stated that his government only wants to strongly defend the state of Israel. While doing this, he points out that his government saves the world and humanity from barbarism (Gov.il, 12.12.2024). Establishing a connection between the Assad regime and barbarism, Netanyahu also, in this speech, mentioned the name of Bashar al-Assad (Gov.il, 12.12.2024). As an indication of offensive realist position, Israel hit military infrastructure and armouries of Syria to cut off network of supply that is used for weapons going to Hezbollah. Carrying out such an attack, Israel made considerable gains and destroyed an important supply route providing weapons for Hezbollah. On December 15, 2024, Prime Minister Netanyahu (Gov.il, 15.12.2024) declared that Israel totally destroyed Syria's infrastructure of weapon and cut off routes that were used in the past to send weapons to Hezbollah. This policy shows that Israel implements a security-oriented foreign policy in Syria. By conducting military operations on Syrian territories, Israel also violates international law.

5.2.2. Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar and Defence Minister Israel Katz

Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, on the morning of December 9, 2024, held a meeting with foreign journalists. Sa'ar talked about Syria and issues related to its domestic politics. Also, he mentioned some issues related to Israeli foreign policy. Sa'ar stated that Iran's authority over Syria's domestic politics ended. The government of Bashar Assad was not based on the consent of Syrian nation. It was based on the consent of foreign powers. It would appear that Iran will not shape Syria's domestic politics, and this situation is normal. This is not a surprise for Israel. What interests the Israeli government is to provide the necessary standard where Israeli citizens and Israel will be safe. In order to fulfil this aim, the Israeli government aimed to destroy long-range missiles, chemical weapons, rockets and strategic weapons that Syria had. Israel does not want to let extremists get hold of these weapon systems. The Israeli government mobilised soldiers so as to prevent the recurrence of the October 7 attacks (Gov.il, 09.12.2024).

Like Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, Defence Minister Israel Katz also stated that Israel aimed to destroy Syria's missile infrastructure. Especially, heavy strategic weapons were among targets hit by Israel's attacks. Air defence systems and long-range rockets were destroyed (Reuters, December 9, 2024). It should be noted that Israel planned to weaken Syria's military capacity by demolishing its missile infrastructure. In addition to this, it did not want to let enemy groups capture strategic weapons such as long-range missiles. It is worth noting that this is a common approach and can be seen in the speeches of Prime Minister Netanyahu, Minister of Foreign Affairs Gideon Sa'ar and Defence Minister Israel Katz. This demonstrates the driving force behind the security-oriented and offensive policies of Israel. Ideas of Sa'ar and Katz are compatible with foreign policy of the country. They demonstrate the official view of the country. Israel's main target is to remain the strongest state of the region.

5.2.3. Israel Defense Forces Press Releases

In the press release dated December 12, 2024, the Israel Defense Forces announced that it extirpated Syria's strategic weapons by carrying out a series of attacks. It carried out these attacks in order to eliminate the possibility that groups that are defined as terrorists by Israel use these strategic weapons. Israel conducted several naval operations to extirpate Syria's military power. Israel hit two naval bases of Syria on December 9 and destroyed military equipment and weapons in these bases.

These were the ports of Latakia and Al-Bayda. The aim was to destroy sea-to-sea missiles which may be a threat to ships in the region. In addition to this, Israel carried out over 350 aerial attacks. It destroyed Syria's anti-aircraft guns and military airports. Moreover, facilities, which were used to manufacture military equipment and guns, were demolished in the cities of Tartus, Palmyra, Damascus, Homs and Latakia. It is evident that Israel totally destroyed the military power of Syria. Syrian military vehicles and aircraft were destroyed by Israeli attacks. Scud missiles, fighter jets, unmanned aerial vehicles, cruise missiles, helicopters, tanks, military facilities, electronic equipment and radars were among equipment and vehicles destroyed by Israel. Israel also did ground operations so as to weaken Syria's military power. Israel carried out attacks on 130 facilities located in Syria, consisting of warehouses, launching pads, hangars and military points (IDF Press Releases, December 12, 2024).

When IDF press releases are analysed, this article found evidence that Israel was implementing a security-oriented foreign policy. On December 14, 2024, Herzi Halevi, who was the Chief of the General Staff at that time, explained the driving force behind Israeli foreign policy towards Syria. He stated that controlling Syria's domestic politics is not an aim of Israel. The Israel Defense Forces is only seeking to protect the state of Israel from external threats such as terrorism and Syria which is considered to be a state implementing hostile policies. Israel does not want to be involved in the internal affairs and management of Syria. Israel must safeguard its citizens from regional threats. In terms of defence, the Golan Heights is highly significant. Israel sustains its line of defence in the Golan Heights (IDF Press Releases, December 14, 2024).

5.3. Understanding Israeli Foreign Policy towards Syria through Offensive Realism and Defensive Realism

According to offensive realism, states try to maximise their gains in the international system because by doing this, they can eliminate security dilemma, but this approach to relations between different actors can bring conflicts or wars. States try to get more powerful and aggressive in foreign policy. Countries aim to increase their share of the pie (Snyder, 2002). For the Israeli government, the most important policy is to have strong equipment and vehicles because Iran and its proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, want to totally annihilate Israel. This is the official and political perception of the state of Israel. If Israel does not develop new high military technologies and increase its economic power, its rivals may become stronger in some fields, compared to Israel, and then this situation will be a problem for Israel's security. This is the main reason why Israel generally tries to sustain its power superiority over its rivals. This is the main security dilemma of Israel. Israeli politicians cannot be sure about the intentions of rivals or enemies. This is the main reason why Israel developed its Iron Dome system because it is generally under threat of air attack from Iran or its proxies.

With an aggressive policy, Israel destroyed Syria's military capacity because there is a power gap in Syria and this can be defined as an important opportunity. Although the new Syrian regime tries to become more compatible with the USA, Prime Minister Netanyahu does not trust the Syrian regime. For the future, there is not any guarantee that Syria will not be used as a base to carry out attacks on Israel. Jihadist groups or Iran's proxies can use Syria as a base to carry out attacks on Israel. Deciding to widen settlements that Israel establishes in the Golan Heights, Prime Minister Netanyahu, with an aggressive foreign policy, tries to protect Israel's security and make considerable gains in this power gap. While increasing relative power, Israel also aims to protect its security and decrease terrorism threat. Israel implements a security-oriented foreign policy in the Middle East, especially in Syria. Also, Israel tries to improve its regional power position especially in Syria by widening fields that it controls in the Golan Heights. On December 9, naval forces of Israel hit warships of the Assad regime and sank them in Latakia (Naval News, 10 December 2024). Israel destroys Syria's military power because there is a risk that the Syrian regime may adopt a hostile attitude towards Israel in the future. After Bashar al-Assad left, the Netanyahu government decided to increase the number of settlements in the Golan Heights. At present, 20,000 persons live in the settlements of the Golan Heights. These settlements are against the international law (BBC, 16 December 2024).

Israel's offensive realist foreign policy includes the Dahiya doctrine. The Dahiya doctrine can also be seen as a part of Israeli foreign policy which is analysed from the perspective of offensive realism. The Dahiya doctrine of Israel can be evaluated under offensive realist approach. According to

the Dahiya doctrine, the infrastructure, economy and important facilities of governments adopting hostile approach to Israel are destroyed when necessary (Pahlavi and Ouellet, 2012). For Israel, it is one of the ways of defeating enemies. This policy may result in civilian casualties, but it seems to be an effective way to defeat enemies. The Dahiya doctrine has an important place in Israeli military strategy (Buttu, 2014).

Defensive realism gives priority to peace and diplomacy (Waltz, 2000). It is very difficult to solve problems between Syria and Israel by implementing defensive realist position because the two sides do not approach each other with friendliness. In addition to this, there is not any diplomatic relation between Syria and Israel. In their relations, diplomacy did not bring peace until now. For the time being, diplomacy does not promise a brilliant future to the region in terms of relations between Israel and Syria. However, if the new Syrian government and the Israeli government can arrive at a compromise for the future of their relations, the two states, maybe in the future, can sustain their relations at an enough level. However, today, Israeli officials hold meetings with other partners in the region, instead of Syrian counterparts, and implement a security-oriented foreign policy. In addition to this, for Israel that is surrounded by Iran's proxies trying to kill Israeli soldiers as much as possible, Syria is not a safe territory. It is one of the biggest security dilemmas of Israeli politicians. Israel is accused of occupying Palestinian territories and the Golan Heights. This situation complicates political matters further. Israel and Iran use diplomacy as a last resort while making war or becoming involved in military conflicts.

CONCLUSION

As a consequence, it seems reasonable to say that Israel implements a security-oriented foreign policy towards Syria. Analysing statements made by Prime Minister Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, Defence Minister Israel Katz and the Israel Defense Forces, we can say that Israel has security concerns, so it destroyed Syria's military capacity. Netanyahu mentioned Iran and Syria repeatedly in his speeches. He also devoted a large portion of his speeches to maintaining political stability in the region and ensuring Israel's security. In terms of theoretical analysis, it must be noted that offensive realism is suitable for Israeli foreign policy because the war between Israel and Iran's proxies is based on total annihilation. If Israel weakens, Iran's proxies will try to advance across Israeli territories because their ultimate aim is to liberate Jerusalem which is a very important city for Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Iran's proxies have a very strong ideological motivation for fighting against Israel. Defensive realism is also important, but even if diplomacy is sometimes a beneficial tool for Israel-Arab conflicts, unfortunately, it did not bring peace to the region. It can be stated that Israel implements an offensive realist foreign policy on Syria.

From Israeli security perspective, it is widely acknowledged that Israel is faced with existential threats posed by Iran and its proxies. In addition to them, Syria, which was led by Bashar al-Assad, allowed Iran's proxies to use its territories for military purposes. Like Iran, Syria, led by the Assad government, was one of the sources of threat. It was providing the necessary environment for Iran and its proxies. This is the main Israeli argument put forward by the Netanyahu government. From the Syrian perspective, it can be stated that Israel has been violating the rules of international law for a long time by keeping the Golan Heights under occupation and trespassing on the territories of Syria. This research seeks to contribute to the existing literature by stating that Israeli foreign policy on Syria after the collapse of the Assad government is associated with offensive realism. Israeli foreign policy can be explained by offensive realist perspective. While Israel explains its security concerns, Syria states that Israel violates international law by occupying the Golan Heights. Also, from the Syrian perspective, it can be stated that Israel is the main source of threat in the region. This is a big discussion containing counterclaims. Iran has financed anti-Israeli groups in the region. It used Syria as a base to deliver aid to its proxies. Iran tried to keep Assad in power, but it did not get the result that it wanted. After the fall of Assad, Iran tries to control Syrian domestic politics by intervening in the country's internal affairs. In this picture, Israel will continue protecting its security in Syria by controlling the Golan Heights.

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