EVOLVING TURKISH POLICY IN THE FACE OF THE CHANGING SYRIAN CRISIS

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Abstract

The objective in this paper is to trace the responses of the Turkish government to the Syrian crisis, which began in March 2011 as a spill-over from the Arab Spring. The study identifies four distinct phases in Turkey's policy towards the Syrian turmoil. In the first stage, Turkey's response was to cajole the Assad regime into undertaking democratic reforms. In the second phase, rebuffed, Turkey, after a few months, joined the international community in imposing sanctions on Syria, and supported the Syrian opposition in its attempts to topple the Assad government. In the third phase, the downing of a Turkish jet by Syrian forces in June 2012 prompted Turkey to advocate a military intervention by the international community in Syria. Finally, in the fourth phase, the rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in Syria and Iraq in early 2014 opened a new period in the Syrian crisis, prolonging the unrest in Syria and extending the life of the Assad regime. In this period, Turkey did not only fight against the Assad regime but also targeted ISIS and PYD (the Democratic Union Party).

Keywords: *Arab Spring, Syria Policy, AKP, Zero Problems with Neighbours Policy*

DEĞİŞEN SURİYE KRİZİ KARŞISINDA DÖNÜŞEN TÜRKİYE POLİTİKASI

Öz

Bu makalenin amacı Arap Baharı'nın bir sonucu olarak Mart 2011'de başlayan Suriye krizine karşı Türkiye'nin verdiği tepkiyi ele almaktır. Çalışma Türkiye'nin Suriye kaosuna tepkisini dört farklı safhada ele almaktadır. İlk aşamada, Türkiye'nin politikası Esad rejimini demokratik reformlar konusunda adım atmaya teşvik etmekti. İkinci aşamada, bu teşvik politikalarına olumlu bir cevap alamayan Türkiye birkaç ay sonra uluslararası topluma katılmıştır. Suriye'ye yaptırım uygulamış ve Esad'ı devirme çabasındaki Suriye muhalefetini desteklemiştir. Üçüncü safhadaysa Haziran 2012'de bir Türk jetinin Suriye kuvvetleri tarafından düşürülmesi Türkiye'yi Suriye'de uluslararası toplumun yapacağı askeri bir müdahaleyi desteklemeye yönlendirmiştir. Dördüncü ve son aşamadaysa Irak ve Şam İslam Devleti'nin (IŞİD) 2014'ün başlangıcında yükselişi Suriye krizinde yeni bir dönem açmıştır. Bu durum Suriye'deki krizi ve Esad rejiminin ömrünü uzatmıştır. Türkiye bu dönemde sadece Esad'la mücadele etmekle kalmamış, IŞİD ve (PYD) Demokratik Birlik Partisi'ni de hedef almıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Arap Baharı, Suriye politikası, AKP, Komşularla Sıfır Sorun Politikası*

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Introduction

After coming to office in 2002, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government has adopted a novel strategy towards countries in its neighbourhood under the rubric "zero problems with neighbours". Turkey became an influential regional actor in the Middle East through its diplomatic engagements with the region's states, expanding trade relations, lifting visa restrictions with some neighbours and acting as a mediator in some of the region's long-standing disputes, such as the Syria-Israel conflict. The main driving forces behind Turkey's newly formulated foreign policy were its domestic transformation, the consolidation of democracy and economic growth.[1]

The unavoidable spill-over of the Arab Spring into Syria represented a significant spanner-in-the-works for Turkey's "zero problems" policy, since Syria had been the cornerstone of the policy. As the Syrian unrest unfolded, it clearly exposed the limits of Turkey's regional influence and "zero problems" policy, and it is the intention in this paper to explore the trajectory followed by Turkish policy towards the Syrian turmoil from the onset of the crisis in March 2011 to 2017. The piece demonstrates that Turkey's policy related to the Syrian turmoil has gone through four distinct stages. In the first stage, from March 2011 onwards, Turkish policy makers sought to fend off the Syrian turmoil by trying to steer the Syrian regime along a reformist path. In the second phase, following the failure of its engagement policy towards the Assad regime, in October 2011 Turkey joined the international community in imposing sanctions and supporting opposing forces, hoping that this would lead to the ouster of the Assad regime within a few months. The third stage started with the shooting down of a Turkish jet by Syria in June 2012, prompting Ankara to champion a military intervention in Syria, increasing the costs of the Syrian turmoil to Turkey's security. The rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in Syria and Iraq in the first half of 2014 represented the beginning of the fourth phase in Turkey's policy related to Syria, in which Turkey proposed a strategy prioritizing the fight against Damascus rather than ISIS. However, Turkey had to target the ISIS and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) / the People's Protection Units (YPG) elements in Syria, which gained ground through their collaboration with the USA.

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[1] Cengiz Dinç, "Turkey as a New Security Actor in the Middle East: Beyond the Slogans," *Perceptions*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2011, p. 61.

Turkish Policy Towards Syria in The Pre-Crisis Era

Throughout the Cold War era, relations between Syria and Turkey were affected by the Ottoman legacy, the Cold War rivalry, Hatay and mutual misperceptions about each other.[2] In more recent times, it was the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) issue and the dispute over the sharing of the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris that dominated the agenda of bilateral relations. Tension between the two countries escalated during the 1990s due to the support provided by Syria to the PKK, which was operating out of the Syria-dominated Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, and whose head, Abdullah Öcalan, was living in Damascus. These issues were eventually concluded with Turkey's issuing of an ultimatum to Syria that led to the conclusion of the Adana Accord on 20 October, 1998, as a result of which, Öcalan was expelled from Syria and the PKK camps in the country were closed.

Following the signing of the Accord, relations between Damascus and Ankara developed quickly, with the Iraqi war of 2003 marking a significant milestone in the ties of the two countries as a result of the shared security concerns. Above all, it was the possibility of the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq that was the main concern of the two parties with respect to the Iraq war.[3] Bashar al-Assad's coming to office, Damascus' desire for economic development, the international isolation of the Syrian regime and the AKP's new vision in foreign policy were other important factors that spurred the increasing pace of reconcilement between the two countries.

As a result of these developments, the two sides have come to resolve their bilateral disputes. The water issue has come to be considered more of a technical issue than a significant source of bilateral dispute, and Turkey now allows Syria to use more water from the Tigris River for its agricultural needs.[4] A Free Trade Agreement came into force in 2007, leading to a dramatic increase in trade levels and a jump in investments from Turkish companies in Syria. In the space of only four years, from 2006 to 2010, bilateral trade between Damascus and Ankara tripled in value from $796 million to $2.29 billion,[5] and Turkey became the largest foreign direct investor in Syria.[6]

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[2] For details, see Bülent Aras and Hasan Köni, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Revisited," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2002, pp. 47-60.

[3] Özlem Tür, "Turkish-Syrian Relations – Where are we Going?" *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, No. 23, May 2010, p. 168.

[4] Ibid., p. 169.

[5] Joshua W. Walker, "Turkey's Time in Syria: Future Scenarios", *Middle East Brief*, Brandeis

Up until the eruption of the crisis in Syria in early 2011, Syria was the most frequently visited country by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Turkey provided lifeline to Damascus by supporting it at a time when the latter was internationally isolated due to suspicions internationally of its involvement in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Moreover, Turkey acted as conciliator in the conflict between Israel and Syria, and also mediated in Syria's problematic relations with Iraq when the Iraqi government accused Syria of being involved in the bombings in Baghdad in August 2009. Militarily relations improved as well, with the two countries taking part in a joint military exercise in April 2009.

As relations progressed, the two countries aimed for economic integration, with the lifting of visa restrictions in 2009 being a key step in this direction. Of similar importance, and at the same time, was the decision to set up a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council, whereby important ministers of each state headed by each country's prime minister pledged to meet at least once a year.

Turkey's Policy of Engagement Towards the Assad Regime

When the Arab Spring reached Syria in March 2011, the response of the Assad regime was to clamp down on the protesters brutally. Despite the severity of the regime's attitude towards its opponents, the AKP government refrained from taking a critical stance against the regime, preferring to engage in back-door diplomatic efforts to assist the peaceful transformation of the Assad regime. This was in stark contrast to the AKP government's treatment of the Ben Ali and Mobarak regimes in Tunisia and Egypt.[7] The AKP government described the situation in Syria as a domestic matter rather than a foreign policy issue, unlike the uprising in Libya[8], and so its relatively more cautious stance against Syria was no surprise, despite the more authoritarian and brutal nature of the response of the regime.

There were many factors directing Turkey's policy of appeasement towards Syria. First of all, the AKP government was anxious that the instability

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University, No. 62, May 2012, p. 2.

[6] Ibid.

[7] For a fuller analysis of Turkey's reaction to the Arab Spring and its varying policies to the affected countries, see Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Spring: Between Ethics and Self Interest," *Insight Turkey* Vol. 14, No. 3, 2012, pp. 45-63.

[8] "Suriye adeta iç politika," *Hürriyet,* 15 May 2011.

in Syria could spill easily into Turkey, with the separatist PKK terrorist group taking advantage of the political vacuum in Syria. Moreover, in case of a major humanitarian crisis, as a neighbour of Syria with traditional ties of kinship, Turkey would be a natural destination for Syrian people fleeing the chaos in their country. Secondly, to Turkey, Syria is a commercial gate to the Arab world, and the Turkish provinces of Gaziantep and Hatay along the Turkish-Syrian border are the most important transit gates for commercial trucks carrying Turkish goods and products to the Middle East, and vice versa. Before the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, 106,750 commercial trucks crossed into Syria in 2010,[9] and every year Turkey hosts around 1 million Syrian visitors.

Most importantly, the AKP government did not wish to brush aside its achievements in Syria over the last decade so easily. Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP government has invested more in Syria, both diplomatically and economically, than in any of its other neighbours, turning Syria into the "poster child" of its "zero-problem with neighbours" policy. This policy resulted in the transformation of Turkish-Syrian relations from one of military confrontation into exemplary ties based on economic cooperation and partnership, and Damascus has stopped supporting the PKK and has relinquished its claim to Turkey's southernmost province of Hatay.[10] Within the context of Turkey's "zero-problem with neighbours" policy, Damascus and Ankara established the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council, a free trade zone and a visa-free zone (including also Iran and Iraq). Furthermore, Turkey has played a mediating role between Syria and Israel towards a negotiated settlement of their conflicts. With so much at stake, Ankara believed that the most practical way to ensure stability in Syria and to minimize the costs of the Syrian crisis to Turkey was the continuation of the reforms under Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Relying on his convivial relationship with Assad, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pinned high hopes on his ability to persuade Assad to take a reformist path in response to the disturbances in Syria. Davutoğlu and other Turkish officials made numerous phone calls and paid repeated visits to Syria between March and August 2011, and after the disturbances across the Arab world spilled over into Syria, as early as March

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[9] "Önce Suriye sonra navlun vurdu, Ro-Ro da çare olmadı," *Milliyet*, 28 August 2012.
[10] For a detailed account of the transformation of Turkey-Syria relations from enmity to partnership, see Meliha Benli Altunışık and Özlem Tür, "From Distant Neighbours to Partners: Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations," *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2006, pp. 229-248; and Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat, "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran," *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2008, pp. 495-515.

2011, Turkey urged Syria to respond to the crisis by launching political, social and economic reforms, hoping for a peaceful transformation of the regime.

However, the continued violence of the Syrian regime against its opponents rendered the Turkish policy of engagement with Damascus unsustainable; and this compelled the AKP government to alter its standpoint regarding Syria, albeit slowly. The AKP government was mindful of the fact that siding with a regime that was harming its own people could damage Turkey's popularity on the Arab street, and thus its aspirations to be a regional power. Another factor in the changing Turkish policy towards Damascus was the sharpening of the tones of the European Union and the United States towards the Syrian regime regarding the atrocities being committed against demonstrators. In his May 19, 2011 speech on the situation in the Middle East, US President Barrack Obama told Assad for the first time to either "lead the transition, or get out of the way", providing moral support to the opponents of the Syrian regime.[11] Washington also declared sanctions, including a freeze on Assad's US assets and those of six senior Syrian officials.[12] Ethical concerns also made it increasingly difficult for the AKP government to sustain its prudent policy towards the Syrian regime. The persecution of thousands of opponents from the Sunni majority at the hands of the Syrian regime, which is dominated by the Nusayri minority, forced the Sunni Muslim-conservative AKP government to reverse its policy towards Damascus. Moreover, Turkey had by now begun to experience the side-effects of the ongoing crisis in Syria with the arrival of thousands of refugees into its territory.

Accordingly, Turkey began to change its policy towards the Syrian regime. On the one hand, Ankara has continued to be hopeful that Assad would carry out the suggested reforms, which would constitute a "shock therapy" to end the ongoing crisis in his country,[13] while also preparing itself for a future scenario, in which the opponents of the regime gained the upper hand in the country. With this in mind, at the end of May 2011, Turkey indicated its tacit support of the Syrian opposition, and hosted a conference entitled "The Syrian Conference for Change", organized by the opponents of the Syrian regime in the Turkish Mediterranean province of Antalya. Subsequently, opponents of

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[11] Whitehouse, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," 19 May 2011, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa, Accessed on: 20 June 2014.
[12] Steven Lee Myers and Anthony Shadid, "U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Syrian Leader and 6 Aides," *The New York Times*, 18 May 2011.
[13] Anthony Shadid, "Turkey Calls for Syrian Reforms on Order of 'Shock Therapy'," *The New York Times*, 25 May 2011.

the Syrian regime established the Syrian National Council (SNC) in September 2011 in Istanbul. Turkey also permitted the formation of an armed opposition group, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), on July 29, 2011 in the south-eastern Turkish city of Hatay on the Turkish-Syrian border.

Turkey made a last-ditch effort in August 2011 to convince Assad to end the violence and accelerate the reform efforts. On August 10, 2011, Davutoğlu held a critical six-and-a-half-hour meeting with Assad and other Syrian officials, during which a roadmap for the reforms was agreed upon. As it would turn out, Turkey's efforts to engage the Syrian regime to a peaceful path were all in vain. Humiliated by the redeployment of Syrian forces following Davutoğlu's visit, the AKP government voiced its deep resentment at the Assad regime, finally burning its bridges with Damascus.

Turkey Joins International Community Against the Syrian Regime and Supports the Syrian Opposition

The failure of Turkey's policy of engagement towards Damascus compelled Turkey in October 2011 to join the international community and increase its support to opposition groups, hoping to effect a regime change in Syria and believing that Assad would fall from power within a few months. Like the United States, at this stage Turkey also objected to the military route, unless it was to be undertaken jointly under the auspices of the Arab League and the United Nations. Turning a deaf ear to repeated calls from the SNC, Turkey had long resisted the establishment of a buffer zone along the border in Syria, since such a move would require military involvement, and had the potential to contribute to the division of Syria on a sectarian basis, and the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region within Syria along the Turkish border. This would then pave the way for the establishment of a united Kurdistan with Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq, which would also possibly include the Kurds in Turkey.[14]

In this context, Turkey endorsed an EU-drafted UN Security Council resolution dated October 5, 2011, condemning Syria, and hinting that it could face sanctions if it continued its crackdown against protesters. The resolution failed to be adopted after being vetoed by permanent UN Security Council members China and Russia, on the grounds that the draft contained no

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[14] Cengiz Çandar, "Türkiye: Suriye rejimi düşerse, Irak parçalanırsa…," *Hürriyet*, 29 February 2012.

provision against outside military intervention.[15] Davutoğlu for the first time received the representatives of the SNC on October 18, 2011, granting implicit recognition to the organization and the Syrian opposition, and a peace plan unveiled by the Arab League on November 2, 2011 further extended *de facto* recognition to the opposition, calling on the Syrian regime to launch dialogues with the opposing camp, among others, while calling into question the legitimacy of the Assad government.[16] Turkey threw its support behind the decision of the Arab League, which suspended Syria's membership of the organization based on its failure to keep its promise to stick to the peace plan drafted by the Arab League and bring to an end the violence in the country.[17]

The Arab League announced in November 2011 a comprehensive set of sanctions against Damascus that included a travel ban on numerous senior aides of Assad, a freeze on Syrian government assets in Arab countries, a ban on transactions with Syria's central bank and an end to all commercial exchanges with the Syrian government.[18] Turkey adopted the Arab League-imposed sanctions, and announced that it would consider taking additional steps in the future. These sanctions, along with those of the European Union and the United States, which included also a ban on the import of Syrian oil, would increase international pressure on the Syrian regime. In addition, Turkey announced that it would prevent all shipments of arms and military equipment from passing through Turkey's territory, airspace and seas, and that it would suspend the mechanism of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council.[19]

The Arab League transition plan came to the agenda of the UN Security Council on February 4, 2012, but again the Morocco-submitted resolution, among the sponsors of which was also Turkey, was vetoed by permanent members Russia and China, while all other 13 members of the Council voted in favour.[20] Upon the defeat of the UN resolution calling for Assad's resignation, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for the

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[15] "China and Russia veto UN resolution condemning Syria," *BBC*, 5 October 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15177114, Accessed on: 24 June 2015.

[16] "Arab League announces peace plan for Syria," *The Washington Post*, 2 November 2011.

[17] Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Arap Ligi'nin 12 Kasım tarihinde Suriye hakkında almış olduğu karar hakkında 255 no'lu Dışişleri Bakanlığı Açıklaması," 13 November 2011, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-255_-13-kasim-2011_-arap-ligi_nin-12-kasim-tarihinde-suriye-hakkinda-almis oldugu-karar-hk_.tr.mfa, Accessed on: 24 June 2015.

[18] Neil MacFarquhar and Nada Bakri, "Isolating Syria, Arab League Imposes Broad Sanctions," *The New York Times*, 27 November 2011.

[19] "Turkey imposes economic sanctions on Syrian regime," *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 December 2011.

[20] "Russia, China Veto UN Resolution on Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 February 2012.

formation of a group known as "The Friends of Syria." Furthermore, Davutoğlu announced that along with the Arab League, Turkey would launch a new initiative for the creation of a broad international platform that would bring together the Islamic countries, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the Arab countries, the UN Security Council members as well as other relevant parties.[21]

Following on from the agreement reached by the international community, anti-Assad regime countries held a series of conferences entitled "Friends of Syria", the first of which was hosted in Tunisia in February 2012. The aim of the conferences was to put pressure on the Assad regime and its supporters and bolster the international legitimacy of the SNC, however the objectives were only partially fulfilled as the supporters of the Assad regime on the UN Security Council continued to veto resolutions calling for sanctions against Syria, and due to the indecisiveness of the international community about supporting the Syrian opposition.

As it would turn out, the policy of Turkey and the international community of overthrowing the Assad regime through external sanctions and by supporting the regime's opponents inside the country would be unsuccessful. Contrary to initial expectations, the Assad regime proved itself to be more durable and resilient, thanks in part to the help of its allies Russia, Iran, Iraq and China.[22] Furthermore, the regime also enjoyed popular support within Syria from the Alewites, Sunnis, Christians and Druzes, who were concerned about a post-Assad Syria, in which Islamists could gain the upper end.

Turkey Recalibrates Its Syrian Policy

With the entry of the Syrian crisis into its second year, Turkey felt its security was coming increasingly under threat. When a Turkish F-4 reconnaissance jet was shot down in the region in June 2012, killing the two Turkish pilots, tensions between the two countries escalated significantly. Turkey maintained that the Turkish jet had been downed by Syrian forces without prior warning while in international airspace at the 13th nautical mile

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[21] "İşte Türkiye'nin Suriye girişimi," *Hürriyet,* 9 February 2012.
[22] For factors playing a role in Iran-Syria partnership, see Jonathan Gelbart, "The Iran-Syria Axis: A Critical Investigation," *Standord Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2010, pp. 36-42; for an elaboration of the reasons behind Russia's support of the Assad regime, see Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment With a Regime in Crisis", *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4, 2013, pp. 795-823.

(nmi), and had then crashed in Syrian territory eight nmi off the Syrian coastline.[23] On June 24, 2012, Turkey sent a diplomatic note to Syria related to the incident, and called on NATO to meet, citing Article Four of the NATO charter, which permits any ally to request consultations when it feels its security is threatened. Furthermore, Erdoğan declared that the rules of engagement of the Turkish armed forces had changed, and that "any military element that approaches the Turkish border from Syria, posing a security risk and danger, will be regarded as a threat, and will be treated as a military target".[24] He also stated that Turkey would provide "any" kind of support to the Syrian opposition until Assad was toppled. A few days after the incident, Turkey began deploying rocket launchers and anti-aircraft guns along the Syrian border.[25] Shooting down of the Turkish jet became an important milestone in Turkey's attitude towards the Syria crisis. From that point onwards, Turkey has been a champion of a military intervention in Syria. In line with Turkey's changed rules of engagement, the Turkish armed forces downed a Syrian helicopter in mid-September 2013 and a Syrian fighter jet in March 2014 for crossing into its territory. The shooting down of the Turkish jet also prompted Turkish officials to mobilize the international community to create a buffer zone within Syria. However, the Turkish initiative for a buffer zone in Syria found little support at the meeting of the UN Security Council on August 30, 2012, which was attended by only five countries out of 15 at the level of foreign minister.

The tension between Syria and Turkey escalated even further when a Syrian shell landed in the Turkish town of Akçakale along the Syrian border on October 3, 2012, killing five members of one family and injuring 13 others. Consequently, Turkey called for a meeting of NATO ambassadors under the terms of Article Four, who expressed solidarity with Turkey and condemned Syria's actions.[26] Furthermore, on October 10, 2012 Turkish F-16 fighter jets intercepted a Syrian passenger plane *en route* from Moscow to Damascus, forcing it to land in Ankara and declaring that "illegal cargo" had been found aboard.[27] In mid-November 2012 Ankara took another crucial step against possible aerial and short-range missile attacks from Damascus by demanding the deployment of a Patriot missile defence system from NATO.

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[23] "Davutoğlu Suriye ile yaşanan krizi değerlendirdi," *Hürriyet*, 24 June 2012.
[24] "Başbakan'dan tarihi konuşma," *Hürriyet,* 26 June 2012.
[25] "Turkey sends anti-aircraft guns to Syrian border," *BBC*, 29 June 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18622140, Accessed on: 25 June 2015.
[26] "Syrian shelling of Turkish village condemned by NATO and Pentagon," *Guardian*, 3 October 2012.
[27] "Uçaktan 'meşru olmayan unsur' çıktı," *Hürriyet*, 10 October 2012.

The destabilizing influence of the Syrian crisis on Turkey increased further when on February 11, 2013 a car bomb exploded at the Cilvegözü border gate in Hatay's Reyhanlı district on the Turkish-Syrian border, killing 17 and wounding 26 others. Turkey arrested the perpetrators of the explosion and accused Syrian intelligence and the Syrian armed forces of being behind the blast,[28] claiming that the intention had been to thwart the supply of humanitarian aid to Syria.

In the meantime, Erdoğan claimed that turkish officials had uncovered evidence of syria's use of chemical weapons against the opponents of the regime. Maintaining that damascus had crossed the previously declared red line of the united states in its use of chemical weapons, erdoğan went to washington in may 2013 with the expectation that he could talk obama into carrying out a military intervention in syria.[29] the reyhanli car-bomb explosions on may 11, 2013 that killed at least 53 people and injured more than 200 prompted erdoğan to push us president obama to agree to a military intervention in syria. however, after his meeting with obama, he agreed to give diplomacy another chance.[30]

Turkey's argument for a military intervention in syria gained strength when it was reported that the syrian forces had used chemical weapons against the opposition forces in august 2013. The international community reacted strongly to reports that rocket attacks loaded with toxic agents had killed more than 1,000 people in the suburbs of the Ghouta region on August 21, 2013.[31] Syria denied using chemical weapons,[32] however Turkey called on the UN Security Council to meet as a matter of urgency, and called for an investigation into the incident.[33] Davutoğlu proposed that if enough evidence of the use of chemical weapons in Syria could be found, the international community could intervene without a UN Security Council decision, as had been the case in the Srebrenica massacre in the past.[34] In 1995,

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[28] "Bombalı saldırıyı yapanlar yakalandı," *Hürriyet*, 11 March 2013.
[29] "Esad halkına karşı kimyasal silah kullandı," *Hürriyet*, 9 May 2013.
[30] Deniz Zeyrek, "Türkiye'nin Suriye siyaseti: Başarı mı iflas mı?" *Radikal*, 26 May 2013.
[31] "Syria conflict: 'Chemical attacks kill hundreds'," *BBC*, 21 August 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23777201, Accessed on: 15 August 2015.
[32] Patrick J. McDonnell, "Syria's Assad reportedly denies use of chemical weapons," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 August 2013.
[33] "Davutoğlu: Suriye'de kimyasal silah saldırısı olduğu ortada," *Hürriyet,* 22 August 2013.
[34] "Davutoğlu, Esad'ı durdurmak için 'Srebrenitsa formülü'nü önerdi," *Hürriyet,* 23 August 2013.

NATO intervened in Bosnia-Herzegovina without UN Security Council authorization to preclude the killing of Bosnians at the hands of Serbian forces.

Convinced that the Syrian regime had crossed the pre-declared "red line" in its use of chemical weapons against the opposition, Washington announced that it would take limited military action against Damascus, but was aware that this would not lead to a regime change in Syria.[35] A limited military intervention in Syria was not enough for Turkey, which favoured an intervention in Syria on the scale of Kosovo that would take a long time and force the Syrian regime from power.[36] The US plan to intervene militarily in Syria did not materialize, being precluded by a Russian proposal to place the Syrian chemical weapons under international control. According to the plan, all chemical weapons in Syria would be destroyed by mid-2014 and all production facilities would be demolished. Washington's acceptance of the proposal by Moscow, which gained support also in European and Arab states, was yet another disappointment for Ankara, which maintained that Damascus would use this move to buy time, and would give a green light to the Assad administration to commit further atrocities.[37]

Apart from the Assad regime-related risks to its security, the prolongation of the Syrian turmoil has exposed Turkey to security risks related to the Kurdish issue, and the increasing threat to Turkey's security from the Syrian crisis have again compelled Turkish officials to seek an end to the civil war in Syria through military means, and then to bring a Turkey- and Western-friendly government into office in Syria.

Without a doubt, a rise in PKK attacks has been one of the most important implications of the Syrian crisis on Turkey's security. Deeply annoyed by Turkey's support of the rebels, Syria once more allowed the PKK to operate from its territory, granting several concessions to the PKK. These included the granting of a permit allowing Salih Muslim, the head of the PKK in Syria, to return to the country, and permission for the free operation of the PYD. In return, the PKK would agree to remain neutral in the Syrian conflict.[38] Iran seemed to be backing PKK activities against Turkey, and it was reported that Tehran sought to convince the PKK not to withdraw its troops from

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[35] Kathleen Hennessey and Michael A. Memoli, "Obama calls for congressional approval for military strike on Syria," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 August 2013.
[36] "Erdoğan: Sınırlı operasyon bizi tatmin etmez," *Akşam*, 30 August 2013.
[37] "Davutoğlu'ndan çok çarpıcı Suriye yorumu," *Akşam*, 9 September 2013.
[38] Gönül Tol, "The Kurdish Dimension to Turkey's Syria policy," *Middle East Institute*, 11 April 2012.

Turkey as part of the peace plan.[39] Bolstered by this outside support, in 2012 Murat Karayılan from the PKK leadership announced a change in strategy for the organization, from one of guerrilla warfare to one of territorial gain. This resulted in an unprecedented level of PKK violence that had not been seen in Turkey since 1999 when Abdullah Öcalan, the head of the PKK, was captured by Turkish forces. As part of the new strategy to seize territory, the PKK attempted to take control of the Şemdinli district in southeastern Turkey in June and August 2012. This led to bloody clashes between PKK militants and Turkish security forces that left 223 PKK militants and 64 security personnel dead.[40] The increasing PKK violence in Turkey and the rising PKK/PYD influence in the Kurdish-populated areas of Syria, among others, finally prompted Ankara to start peace talks with Öcalan in the summer of 2012, culminating in a ceasefire and the withdrawal of PKK fighters from Turkish soil.[41]

Another part of Turkey's perceived security threats was related to the status of the Syrian Kurds following the onset of the Syrian crisis. In mid-July 2012, Ankara was put on high alert when Syrian Kurds, who had remained to a large extent impartial in the Syrian conflict, took control of a number of Kurdish-populated areas, such as Amouda, Qabani and Ayn al-Arab, along the Syrian-Turkish border, hoisting Kurdish flags over the state institutions there.[42] Ankara's unease was based on the fact that the declaration of an autonomous region by the Syrian Kurds, who had taken advantage of the turmoil in Syria, would pave the way for the creation of a Greater Kurdistan, based on the unification of this region with the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Turkey. Besides, the PKK/PYD dominance in the Kurdish-populated areas in Syria could provide the terrorist organization with a launch pad for attacks against Turkey. The uneasiness regarding Kurdish domination in Northern Syria was expressed at the highest political level in Turkey, with Erdoğan maintaining that the formation in Northern Syria belonged to the PYD-PKK terror organization, and

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[39] "İran'dan PKK'ye 'çekilmeyin' önerisi," *NTVMSNBC*, 29 April 2013, http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25438712/, Accessed on: 15 August 2015.

[40] Alexander Jackson, "FPC Briefing: The Battle for Şemdinli- An Analysis of Turkey's Latest Violence," The Foreign Policy Center, http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/1486.pdf, p. 6, Accessed on: 15 August 2015.

[41] During the 2000s, Turkey sought to bring a peaceful end to the Kurdish conflict through various initiatives, but with only partial success. For an evaluation of the peace negotiations that started between the Turkish government and the Kurds in 2012, see Michael Günter, "Reopening Turkey's Closed Kurdish Opening," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2013, pp. 88-98.

[42] "Hepsini birleştirdi," *Hürriyet*, 23 July 2012.

as such would not be allowed by Turkey, and that it was Turkey's natural right to intervene in the area.[43]

The capture of Ras al-Ain along the Syrian border by PYD forces from the FSA in mid-July 2013, and the replacement of the FSA flags with those of the PYD, once more fuelled Ankara's fears regarding the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. On the first anniversary of PYD's seizure of the administration in Northern Syria, it was reported that the Syrian Kurds were likely to declare autonomy and adopt a constitution that would then be put to a referendum.[44] Ankara raised its objections, maintaining that it would not accept the establishment of a *de facto* entity in the region until the Syrian political system had taken final shape.[45] To allay Ankara's fears, Muslim stated that the establishment of an autonomous administration was not something that was on the PYD agenda, nor the adoption of a constitution. Rather, what they were seeking in the region was the application of some regulations for practical needs and to take on a temporary status until a new Syria could be established.[46] He added that the provisional council would comprise 40–50 representatives and would be pluralist in nature, including not only Kurds but also Turcomans, Assyrians and Arabs. After appeasing Ankara, the Syrian Kurds declared democratic autonomy in January 2014 in three Kurdish cantons, Cizire, Afrin and Kobani, modelled on the Swiss federal system.

Turkey's Policy Towards the Syrian Unrest After the Rise of ISIS

The rise of ISIS in 2014 marked a new period in Turkey's policy towards the Syria crisis. Diverting the attention of the international community from the fight against the Assad regime, defeating ISIS became the number one priority, and in this environment, Turkey's policy to overthrow Assad was put on the back burner, leading to policy divergence between Ankara and Washington. The entry of ISIS into the Syria equation has also increased the security costs and prolonged the life of the Assad regime, much to Turkey's displeasure.

Entering into 2014, the rise of radical Islamist rebel groups in the Syrian civil war started to ring alarm bells in Turkey. After seizing control of Mosul in mid-June 2014, ISIS militants raided the Turkish consulate in the city, taking hostage 49 staff members, including diplomatic personnel. With

[43] "Erdoğan: Müdahale hakkımız var," *Radikal,* 25 July 2012.
[44] "Suriye Kürtleri özerklik yolunda," *Hürriyet*, 19 July 2013.
[45] "Davutoğlu'ndan de facto bölge açıklaması," *Hürriyet*, 23 July 2013.
[46] "PYD Başkanı Müslim konuştu," *Hürriyet,* 27 July 2013.

footholds in both Iraq and Syria, ISIS declared a caliphate and changed its name to the Islamic State at the end of June 2014. The growing ISIS threat and its brutal treatment of US citizens in captivity finally forced the United States to form a coalition of states to strike back against the group, although Turkey was compelled to take a passive role in the war against ISIS due to the ongoing hostage crisis. An important milestone in Turkey's shifting stance on ISIS was its success in negotiating the release of 49 Turkish hostages held by ISIS on September 20, 2014. Following their release, Turkey changed its position from silence to support in the fight against ISIS, backing US air strikes against ISIS targets; furthermore, President Erdoğan began indicating that Turkey could also extend military support to the fight.[47]

In the aftermath of the hostage crisis, Turkey was able to devise a detailed strategy to address both ISIS and Assad issues. Believing that air strikes would not be enough, Ankara proposed a two-stage plan for the settlement of the ISIS issue.[48] In the first stage, a no-fly and safe zone would need to be established in Syrian territory along the Turkish border to host the next waves of Syrian refugees, who would be provided with humanitarian aid within Syrian territory given the fact that there were already more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. Moreover, a no-fly safe zone would keep the Syrian air forces from targeting the FSA units that had been fighting against ISIS. Ankara proposed the creation of a no-fly safe zone covering the areas between the Turkish border and Aleppo in Syria, which were under attack from both ISIS and Assad's forces.[49] In the second stage, Assad had to be overthrown through domestic efforts. In Ankara's view, if Assad remained in power, he would continue to carry out air strikes on the FSA, and a weakened FSA would be unable to defeat ISIS. Turkey indicated further that it could send military forces to Syria if an "integrated strategy" that targeted both ISIS and Assad could be given the green light by the United States.[50] That meant that as long as the United States did not attach equal importance to the overthrow of the Assad regime and the fight against ISIS, Turkey would refrain from a deeper involvement in Syria and cooperate with the United States in a limited manner.

Another important element in Turkey's strategy was to implement a "train and equip" programme, in which moderate Syrian opposition forces would be trained and equipped with weaponry for their fight against ISIS

[47] "Erdoğan: ABD'nin IŞİD operasyonuna olumlu bakıyoruz," *Milliyet*, 23 September 2014.
[48] Fikret Bila, "Türkiye'nin çözüm önerisi," *Milliyet*, 25 September 2014.
[49] "Beş bölge için 'güven' istendi," *Milliyet*, 17 October 2014.
[50] "Davutoğlu Amanpour'a konuştu," *Radikal*, 7 October 2014.

forces. To this end, the United States and Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding on February 20, 2015, according to which six thousand people would be trained in Turkey over three years, and would be equipped with weaponry by the United States. Upon Turkey's insistence, the United States agreed that the trained forces would also fight against the Assad regime,[51] and that members of the PYD and PKK would not be included in the programme.

Notwithstanding this agreement, the priorities of the United States did not converge with those of Turkey, with Washington emphasizing the fight against ISIS, and Ankara prioritizing the fall of the Assad regime. Furthermore, for the top US security officials, the creation of a safe zone was not considered part of the current campaign against ISIS, although, they said, such a move could be considered as an option in future.[52] Most significantly, the United States did not side with Turkey, citing military, political and financial concerns, in that the establishment and implementation of a no-fly zone would require hundreds of military personnel and many fighter jets, costing the United States an estimated 1 billion dollars per month.[53]

The seven-month extension of the nuclear talks between Iran and the P5 + 1 countries (including the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) in November 2014 was yet another reason why the United States did not want to target Syria in the short term by going along with Turkey's no-fly zone proposal for Syria.[54] To Washington, denuclearizing Iran was more important than overthrowing Assad, and the Obama administration did not want weaken the position of moderate Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in nuclear talks against the hardliners in Iran by attacking Syria, Iran's closest ally in the region. Moreover, the rise of ISIS; the terrorist attacks against a French satirical magazine in Paris by Islamist terrorists in January 2015 in which 12 people were killed; and the increasing instability in the Middle East following the uprising of the Shiite Houthi minority against the Sunni government in Yemen reignited concerns in the United States about security and radical Islam.[55] This has led Washington to view Assad not as a source of instability, but as a key component in the stability of the region.

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[51] "'Eğit-donat' için PKK ve PYD şartı," *Milliyet*, 21 Şubat 2015.
[52] "ABD'den Türkiye'nin o isteğine şok yanıt!" *Milliyet*, 27 September 2014.
[53] Bradley Klapper, "Despite demands, Syria no-fly zone a no-go for U.S.," *Navy Times*, 12 October 2014, http://www.navytimes.com/article/20141012/NEWS08/310120018/Despite-demands-Syria-no-fly-zone-no-go-U-S-, Accessed on: 16 August 2015.
[54] Gönül Tol, "Hagel'in istifası ve İran nükleer müzakerelerinin söyledikleri," *Radikal*, 26 November 2014.
[55] Gönül Tol, "Amerika Suriye politikasını değiştiriyor mu?" *Radikal*, 28 January 2015.

Another important point of contention between the United States and Turkey concerned the provision of aid and the opening of a corridor to the Kurds in Kobani, Northern Syria, in support of their fight against ISIS. Over the course of time, Kobani has taken on increased importance for the United States, which carried out intensive air strikes against ISIS targets in Kobani upon Turkey's request. The resistance put up by the YPG, the military wing of the PYD, has shown for the first time that ISIS, which had hitherto won all of its battles, could be beaten.[56] The PYD's struggle against ISIS increased its legitimacy as a new ally in the eyes of the United States, which was in search of ground troops that could combat ISIS, and led Washington to support the group militarily.[57]

Initially, unlike the United States, Turkey was reluctant to either supply military aid or open a corridor to Kobani[58] based on the organization's association with the PKK, demanding instead that the FSA be supported.[59] As an alternative, Turkey agreed that the Peshmerga, the military forces of the KRG in Northern Iraq, could be dispatched to Kobani.[60] It is important to note that Turkey's change of heart occurred after the United States had air-dropped small arms and medical aid to the PYD in Kobani in October 2014. Finally, in the framework of an agreement made between the United States and Turkey, a total of 355 troops from both the Peshmerga and FSA entered Kobani by land via Turkey[61], indicating a significant divergence of opinion between Washington and Ankara regarding the Syrian Kurds. The US supply of aid to the PYD and its opening of a corridor to Kobani signified that unlike Turkey, the United States viewed the PYD as different to the PKK, which had been placed on the official list of terrorist organizations.

The bombing attack by ISIS against a Kurdish youth organisation in Suruç, the attack on Turkish soldiers at a military checkpoint along the Turkish-Syrian border, and the growing U.S.-Syrian Kurdish cooperation, and thus the possibility of a Kurdish state in Northern Syria, finally led Turkey to agree to open the Incirlik airbase for the use of the anti-ISIS coalition in late-

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[56] Ruşen Çakır, "Beş soruda Kobani'ye askeri yardım," *Habertürk*, 21 October 2014, http://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/rusen-cakir-2302/1001614-bes-soruda-kobaniye-askeri-yardim, Accessed on: 16 August 2015.
[57] Editorial, "Why Kobani must be saved?" *New York Times*, 23 October 2014.
[58] "Yalçın Akdoğan: HDP başlattı, HDP bitirdi," *Radikal*, 11 October 2014.
[59] "Bakan Çavuşoğlu'ndan flaş açıklama," *Milliyet*, 21 October 2014.
[60] Serpil Çevikcan, "Çavuşoğlu: PYD peşmergeyi istemiyor," *Milliyet*, 22 October 2014.
[61] "Peşmerge'den önce kapıdan ÖSO girdi," *Milliyet,* 30 October 2014; "Peşmerge Kobani'ye girdi," *Hürriyet*, 1 November 2014.

July 2015. In line with these agreements Turkey and the United States started to carry out joint operations against ISIS. The Suruç attack elevated ISIS to be considered an important security threat by Turkey, and so in its policy towards the Syrian crisis, Turkey targeted not only the YPG/PYD, but also ISIS.

The seizure of Tel Abyad, located between the towns of Cizire and Kobane, from ISIS elements by the PYD in June 2015 rang alarm bells in Ankara, in that Turkey was deeply concerned that the move could facilitate the PYD in securing a corridor controlled entirely by Northern Syrian Kurds. This would cut off Turkey's connection to a significant part of the Syrian territory, and would result in the encirclement of Turkey by the YPG/PYD from the south. This led Turkey to hit YPG/PYD targets inside Syria on various occasions, with the red lines for Turkey becoming the passage of PYD-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the West of Euphrates and the unification of the Afrin and Kobane cantons by the PYD.

In September 2016, Turkey launched an operation in Jarablus codenamed "Shield of the Euphrates", aimed at clearing its borders of ISIS elements, stopping the influx of refugees and preventing the YPG/PYD from unifying territories along the Turkish border in Northern Syria. Once the operation was completed, a large area that included also the Azez-Cerablus line was cleared of ISIS.

Conclusion

Neither Turkey's initial policy of urging Syria along a democratic path, nor its subsequent efforts to overthrow the Assad regime through international sanctions and support of the Syrian opposition culminated in the desired result of ending the Syrian crisis. Turkey's sense of betrayal and deep frustration at the Assad regime prompted it to become the foremost advocate of regime change in Syria. Syria's downing of a Turkish jet in June 2012 and the car bomb attacks in Turkey in February and May 2013, believed to be connected to Syria and its allies set Turkey on an irrevocable path towards overthrowing the Assad regime through military means. As long as Assad remained in power, Turkey's assumed role as an order-instituting country in the region would be invalid. However, Turkey's efforts to mobilize the international community to engage in a military operation in Syria were fruitless, due especially to the estimated military and economic costs of such a plan.

By championing Assad's downfall, Turkey opened itself to security risks from Damascus and its allies. Turkey's sense of vulnerability to an attack from Syria was underlined with the deployment of Patriot missiles by NATO

along the Turkish-Syrian border. Turkish citizens had already been direct targets of the Syrian crisis with car bombings on Turkey's territory and the landing on Turkish soil of shells fired from Syria, and the unrest in the country rekindled Turkey's security concerns emanating not only from the Assad regime but also from radical Islamists and Kurds. With the prolongation of the Syrian crisis, the disintegration of Syria along ethnic and sectarian lines, which was the worst-case scenario for Turkey, seemed probable. The likelihood of Syria turning into a radical Sunni state with a Kurdish entity in the north and an Alewite state in the west no longer seemed a distant possibility. Turkey was particularly irritated by the efforts of the Kurds in Northern Syria to establish an autonomous administration, since such a development could embolden the Kurds in Turkey to follow a similar path. In the initial phase, the Syrian crisis also played a significant role in inducing Ankara to launch peace negotiations with the PKK, which, taking advantage of the turmoil in Syria, had increased dramatically its attacks against Turkish targets between the end of 2011 and the end of 2012. Furthermore, the rise of ISIS/IS in Syria and Iraq has surfaced as an additional security threat to Turkey, contributing to the prolongation of the Syrian turmoil, extending the life of the Assad regime, increasing the costs of the Syrian civil war and widening the rupture between Ankara and Washington on the strategy to be adopted to bring the Syrian turmoil to an end. As an additional not-so-small burden, Turkey has had to shoulder the humanitarian cost of the massive inflow of more than 2 million Syrian refugees into the country.

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