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The Syrian Civil War and Turkey-Syria-Iran Relations

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After the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) advent to power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy underwent changes which were significant enough to raise question marks with its Western allies' regarding whether Turkey has ceased to be a part of the West and international society. Turkish foreign policy makers started to change the Cold War mentality, which urged Turkey to have a '*faith*' in the West without questioning its norms, values, policies and conduct. This change of style and substance in Turkish foreign policy became most evident with the improving of relations with Syria and Iran who had uneasy or hostile relations with the West. However, with the outburst of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, Turkey was caught off guard and the mass demonstrations on the Arab streets forced Ankara to reshape its foreign policy calculations in the Arab world. Put differently, the Arab spring became a litmus test for Ankara's policies of playing to the Arab streets as well as its relations with Syria and Iran. While it lent quick support for popular movements in Tunisia and Egypt, where Turkish investments were relatively limited, Ankara's first reaction to the uprising in Syria, where Turkish economic and political investments were both substantial, was more cautious and it prioritised stability and gradual reform. However, Ankara gradually reversed its policy and ended up calling for Asad's overthrow; moreover, as against its early distancing of Turkey from the West, Ankara now sought to enlist the West in dealing with the Syrian regime. Apprehensions of Turkey's ambitions vis-à-vis Syria's civil war increased significantly because of its policy of activism which lent support to Muslim Brotherhood which dominated the Syrian National Council, the opposition coalition against the Asad regime. Turkey was seen or portrayed as a country following pro Sunni policies especially by the West.

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After a brief survey of improving relations with Syria and Iran, this article sets out to examine the triangle of Turkey-Syria-Iran relations after the outburst of Syria's civil war, focusing on the following questions: What were the reasons for Turkey's move to cooperate with the West in dealing with the Syrian crisis in spite of it sacrificing, in the process, its good neighborhood relations with both Syria and Iran? What is the impact of the Syrian crisis on Turkey-Iran relations? What were the priorities and the miscalculations of Ankara in dealing with problems stemming from Syria's civil war? In addition, the article will discuss the duality and ambivalence of Turkey-Iran relations which increasingly become evident after the significant changes taking place in the region such as the advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Iraq's Western provinces and Turkey becoming the biggest ally of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), breaking in this respect not only from Iran and Iraq but also the United States. The reasons why Turkey and Iran maintain cordial relations in the aftermath of the Syrian crisis despite so many divergences of interests will also be among the concerns of the study.

Ups and Downs in Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran

In parallel with Turkey's post 2002 tilting towards regional alliances as an alternative to relations with global actors, principally the United States and the European Union, Turkey adopted a bridge country role between East and West so as to balance its relations between the West/Israel on one hand and Syria/Iran on the other. However, with the renewed hostilities in Gaza at the end of 2008, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan who felt a 'sense of betrayal' by Israel after his mediating efforts between Israel and Syria employed very harsh rhetoric towards Israel. This marked a new era in Turkish foreign policy because Ankara, made it evident that it dropped its previous balancing policy between the East and the West. Instead, it would prioritise "zero-problems" with its regional neighbours.

Deepening Economic Relations with Syria and Iran

Ankara had signed 51 protocols with Syria by March 2010.¹ This was a groundbreaking development in bilateral relations because those protocols, which are

¹ With the September 16, 2009 Treaty, visa requirements were lifted and the first ministerial meeting of the Turkey-Syria High Level Strategic Cooperation Council which was held with the participation

based on the slogan of “common destiny, history and future,” (“*Al-qadar al-mushtarak, Ettarikh al-mushtarak, Al-mustaqbal al-mushtarak*”) aimed at economic integration and at the same time inflamed a hot debate concerning Turkey’s shift of axis. Erdoğan, “referring to the ongoing debates as to whether Turkey was shifting its axis in foreign policy, said: “the focus is not shifting but rather the focus of Turkish foreign policy is normalizing.” (Tur 2010) Turkish officials emphasised that it was trade, rather than politics, which determined the new contours of Turkish foreign policy. For example, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu commented that the lifting of visas with Syria as “the first step of turning economic cooperation into economic unity” (Gürcanlı 2009). In a similar vein, Turkey tried to create a common free trade area by negotiating High Level Strategic Cooperation Councils with Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon as well as Syria. In parallel with increasing efforts to enhance trade relations with Syria, Ankara also increased its trade volume with Iran to \$ 10 billion annually.

Not only did Turkey’s exports to Iran double, but also Turkey became quite dependent on Iranian oil and gas² (Associated Press 2009). Exports to Iran rose more than seven-fold, from \$300 million to \$2 billion, between 2002-2009 (TSIDICG 2010, 6). Turkey’s efforts, together with Brazil, to prevent the application of UN sanctions on Iran in 2010, should be read against this background. Ankara’s increasing trade relations with Iran has become completely incompatible with the US policy of bringing Iran to heel. The mutual distrust between Ankara and Washington became more evident as the US pressured Turkey to put sanctions into effect. Washington was increasingly uneasy about the probability that Turkey could emerge as a new safety net for Iranian business as the Turkish government insisted that it would abide by UN sanctions but not the more sweeping restrictions imposed on Tehran by the US and the European Union (Khalaf and Strauss 2010). Ankara’s reluctance to apply the sanctions of individual countries and Turkish official circles’ suspicions concerning the application of sanctions by EU and American companies manifest Turkey’s distrust of the West and its enthusiasm to be an independent regional actor.

of ten ministers on October 13, 2009 aimed exchange on trade, development and education (Ayhan 2009, 30; Turkish NY 2009).

² “Turkey receives 18 million cubic meters per day from Iran, making Iran the second largest supplier of gas to Turkey after Russia” (Associated Press 2009).

Setbacks to Turkey's Zero-Problems Policy

Towards the end of 2010, however, two developments clarified the limits of Turkey's capability of continuing its good neighborhood policy and being an independent actor in the international system dominated by the United States. One was the deployment of the missile defense system under NATO's command on Turkish territory and of the early warning radar system in Malatya Kürecik on the 19-20 November 2010.³ Turkey's consent to participate in a defense mechanism that was believed by many to be against Iran, was perceived as an example of the JDP Government's difficulty of following good neighborhood relations at the expense of its relations with the global actors, especially the United States (Özalp 2010). Although Ankara declared that the system did not target Iranian nuclear sites, the US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's statement that the purpose of the US radar system to be installed in eastern Turkey was to defend against Iranian missiles, inflicted collateral damage on Turkey-Iran relations.⁴ In addition, the arguments concerning the sharing of intelligence between Turkey and Israel from the US radar system in Turkey, which is similar to the one in Israel's Negev Desert, further strained Iranian-Turkish relations.⁵ The Iranian Chief of the General Staff's threatening words⁶ manifested the damage done to relations with Iran.

The second development that crystallised the unsustainability of Turkey's policy of balancing between its Western alliance and its good neighbor policy was the outburst of the Arab spring. Especially the Libyan rebellion became a litmus test for Turkey's institutional relations with the West. At first, Turkey, a NATO member, objected to military interference in Libya, mainly because it would jeopardise lucrative construction contracts in Libya and its large investments in the country. Turkish president Gül openly stated Ankara's suspicions concerning the hidden

³ Gürsel, K. (2010, November 21). AKP Dış Politikası Lizbon'da İflas Etti. *Milliyet*.

⁴ China Daily, "Panetta to Visit Turkey Over Shield Plan," 14 Aralık 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2011-12/14/content_14266117.htm Kadri Gürsel, "Füze Kalkanının Eğrisi Doğrusu," *Milliyet*, October 9, 2011.

⁵ Metin Münir, İran'ın Erdoğan'a Sunduğu Fırsat, *Milliyet*, 18 Ekim 2012.

⁶ "Turkey will be next in line for violence after Syria if it continues to work on behalf of Western interests," İran "Genel Kurmay Başkanı Hasan Firuzabadi: Sıra Türkiye'ye gelir," *Star*, August 28, 2012.

agenda of the coalition forces whose main partners were the United States and EU.⁷ However, in the face of the increasing support given to the Libyan rebels by the Western countries, Ankara recalled its ambassador from Tripoli and recognised the rebel Transnational National Council.⁸

The Syrian Civil War and Turkey

With the outbreak of Syrian uprisings and the Asad regime's indifference to Turkey's warnings to stop its crackdown on opposition protests, Ankara took care not to make a mistake similar to that in the Libyan case, (of following the same anti western policy). Ankara officially declared that it would interfere in what was happening in Syria, a dramatic shift from its traditional principle of non-interference in internal affairs of a neighboring country. Erdoğan openly stated that what was happening in Syria was an internal Turkish matter and he had run out of patience (Bugün 2011).

There were three motives behind Ankara's shift from its non-interference policy after the outburst of the Syrian uprisings: first, was to show that Ankara was no longer out of the orbit of the West; second, on the assumption that the West would rapidly depose Asad as it had done Qaddafi, to assure itself a place at the table that would negotiate the new regional order in the post-Asad period, and third, and most important of all, because the Syrian civil war would lead to a flood of Syrian refugees so as to endanger Turkish-Syrian borders, and would make them a backdoor for Kurdish terrorism.

Ankara firmly believed that a political transition from the Asad regime was essential to resolving the conflict. Turkey, hoping to bring the regime to the negotiating table, empowered Syrian opposition elements, allowing them to organise and convene in Turkey, as well as hosting defectors from the Syrian military and

⁷ Turkish president Abdullah Gül stated on a TV channel: "some coalition governments have ulterior motives and Libya could be "looted" as Iraq had been. Because the aim (of coalition forces) is not the liberation of the Libyan people. There are hidden agendas and differing interests", 2011, *TV 24*. 23 March. *Gül: Libya'yla ilgili bazı ülkeler fırsatçılık içinde*. Retrieved May 14, 2011, from TV 24: viewed 22 December 2012, <<http://www.yirmidort.tv/dunya/gul-libya-yla-ilgili-bazi-ulkeler-firsatcilik-icinde-haber-27719.htm>>

⁸ Habibi N. & W. Walker, J. 2011, 'Turkey's Grand Miscalculation on Libya', 6 March, *Boston.com*, viewed 18 December 2012,

<http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/blogs/the_angle/2011/03/turkeys_grand_m.html>

reportedly allowing the Free Syrian Army to set up their headquarters in the south east of the country.⁹ In addition, Ankara, aiming to strangle Syria's economy and severely diminish the power of the Asad government, decided to freeze assets of officials involved in the government's crackdown on the uprising, suspended its ties with the nation's central bank and banned all military sales.¹⁰ Turkey also helped forge an international "Friends of Syria" coalition to secure regime change. All these efforts, however, were ineffective and moreover deepened Turkey's mistrust of its Western allies, the EU and the United States who followed low profile policies towards Syria.

First of all, Ankara understood that Washington was not willing to shoulder responsibility for the Syrian crisis and take bold initiatives such as setting up a "buffer zone" inside Syria to protect refugees fleeing President Bashar al-Asad's forces, which would have entailed direct intervention in the year-long revolt.¹¹

Second, that the UN and Washington would not favor a military solution became evident towards the end of the first anniversary of the Syrian uprising. Turkey was disappointed by "the negligent U.S. attitude toward the Syrian regime, and the fact that Washington has not offered diplomatic, political, financial, or logistical support to the revolution in equal measure to what Russia has given the Syrian regime."¹²

Thus, a hot debate was inflamed in Turkish media whether Turkey was left alone by international society in its struggle against the Syrian regime, which had committed crimes against civilians.¹³ The lack of international consensus¹⁴ and Russia's standing by Asad "to rebuff what it sees as Western plots to induce regime

⁹ Nuh Yılmaz, Syria: The View from Turkey, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 19, 2013, http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_syria_the_view_from_turkey139

¹¹ Asli Aydintasbas, "Davutoglu'ndan ABD'ye: Humus Sarajevo Olmasin", *Milliyet*, February 13, 2012.

¹² Zagros Osman, "Syrian revolution and Washington's Miscalculations", *Fıkra Forum*, May 17, 2012, accessible at <http://fikraforum.org/?p=2241>

¹³ Semih Idiz, "Türkiye Suriye'de Yalnız Kalmamalı", *Milliyet*, March 31, 2012. "Türkiye Stratejisinde Yollar Ayrılıyor, Türkiye'nin Planına Veto", *Milliyet*, March 25, 2012.

¹⁴ "Ankara accused the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) of indirectly supporting the oppression of the Syrian people by failing to unite on Syria." Semih Idiz, "Ankara BM'nin Suriye Surecine Karsi Soguk", *Milliyet*, March 26, 2012.

change in countries friendly to Russia had a negative impact on Turkey's efforts to realise regime change in Syria."¹⁵ Partly due to the increasing critiques in the Turkish media that Turkey was left alone and that it had pushed for a military intervention by the United States against Syria,¹⁶ top Turkish officials declared at the beginning of the second year of the Uprising that Turkey would not interfere in the Syrian uprising militarily; instead, they would seek a solution based on diplomacy that would include Iran, China and Russia.¹⁷ Thus, in parallel with its increasing disappointment regarding Washington's passive role towards Syria, NATO's inactivity¹⁸ and Moscow's blocking of United Nations moves, Ankara made serious modifications of its Syria policy and initiated the "triple negotiation system"¹⁹ which would bring together Turkey, Egypt and Iran; Turkey, Russia and Iran; and Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to work separately toward a solution in Syria. The involvement of Russia and Iran not only made it clear that Asad's regime, if not Asad, would have a place at the negotiating table but also made it evident that Turkey was seeking alliances alternative to the Western one to find a diplomatic solution to the war. This change in Ankara's policy was owing, not only to the realization that the West would not intervene, but also that a unilateral Turkish military intervention in Syria would be costly since Asad had dual Russo-Iranian support. Instead, Ankara sought agreements with Russia and Iran to be able to ensure its border security in the face of

¹⁵ Erol Cebeci and Kadir Üstün, "The Syrian Quagmire: What is Holding Turkey Back?", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 14, No.2, 2012, p. 20.

¹⁶ Can Dunder, "Sam Amca Seni Iteliyor", *Milliyet*, April 12, 2012. For example, Hillary Clinton declared 'we expect the regime change process in Syria will be realised without violence under the leadership of the Arab League and Turkey' (Hürriyet 20 November 2011).

¹⁷ "For example, Turkish President, Gul stated that Turkey favored a solution based on diplomacy and opposed any foreign intervention to Syria," "BM'nin Son Kararını Tasvip Etmiyoruz", *Hürriyet*, March 25, 2012 and Semih İdiz, "Ankara'nın Kafası Suriye Konusunda Karışık Görünüyor", *Milliyet*, March 10, 2012.

¹⁸ "Rasmussen said the Western alliance had no intention of intervening in Syria even in the event of a U.N. mandate to protect civilians, and urged Middle East countries to find a way to end the spiraling violence." Reuters, NATO to Stay out of Syria Even If UN Mandate Emerges, February 17, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/17/us-syria-nato-idUSTRE81G0ZF20120217> accessed 12 Oct. 2013

¹⁹ Semih İdiz, Turkey's New Strategy could Broker Force, Almonitor, October 20, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/contents/articles/politics/2012/10/vision-and-imagination-required-over-syria.html> accessed 12 October 2013.

increasing border violations. Last but not least, Ankara became aware that military intervention could lead to internationalization of Turkey's Kurdish issue.²⁰

However, Turkey, whose ultimate aim was to ensure border stability as well as toppling the regime, found that it could not control the spillover of the Syrian conflict. As the border violations and explosions on its borders such as those in Ceylanpınar, Akçakale and Reyhanlı increased in number and severity. Ankara took further measures and declared new engagements rules. According to those rules, "any military instruments or troops approaching to the Turkish borders from the Syrian side in the form of a threat would be perceived as military threats" and would be militarily countered..."²¹ Moreover, Ankara found, over time that it had new unwelcome neighbours along its 900 km border with Syria. One was the Jihadist groups such as Al Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and the other was the Democratic Union Party "Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat", (PYD), the Syrian branch of the PKK.

New Neighbours, New Threat Perceptions

With the emergence of the PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK, and al-Qaeda-inspired fighters who took advantage of the power vacuum to fight for control of key northern Syrian towns, Ankara was exposed to new threats and new accusations. It was alleged that Ankara was providing members of radical Islamist groups with medical care in Turkish hospitals and supplying them with arms and ammunition, because those groups had been fighting against the PYD²² whom Assad promised to give autonomy in an area covering six districts in the region, including Haseki, Ras al-Ain, Afrin, Darbasiyya, Ainal-Arband, and Kamishli.²³ From Ankara's perspective, at a time when Turkey has been in an effort to make peace with its own

²⁰ Unver, H. A. 2012, 'Turkey's Syria Calculations: Kurdish Dimension', *Foreign Policy Association*, 22 March.

²¹ Kareem Fahim and Sebnem Arsu, Turkey Says It Shot Down Syrian Military Helicopter Flying in Its Airspace, *The New York Times*, September 16, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/17/world/europe/turkey-syria.html?_r=0 accessed October 13, 2013.

²² Amberin Zaman, Syrian Kurdish Leader Urges Turkey To End Support for Salafists, *Al Monitor*, October 9, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/syrian-kurdish-leader-calls-turkey-shut-down-salafists.html> accessed October 13, 2013.

²³ Today's Zaman, Turkey warns Syrian PYD against seeking autonomy, July 19, 2013.

Kurds in Turkey, the PYD's aspirations to gain autonomy, aiming at a probable independent Kurdish state which would have access to the Mediterranean, was unacceptable. In a region under PYD control, the PKK would have the ability to establish a strong foothold and lead to a serious border security issue for Turkey.

In this context, Ankara was accused of turning a blind eye to the presence of jihadist groups on Turkish territory and using those groups to suppress the Syrian Kurds' aspirations and not only by the PYD but also by Washington. While the Obama administration had encouraged a broad Syrian opposition coalition, in which the influence of Islamists would be circumscribed, from Washington's perspective, the Turkish government continued to throw its weight behind the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood dominated the Syrian National Council, which was headquartered in Istanbul, and succeeded in eclipsing other groups within the new opposition coalition, effectively thwarting the American effort to empower non-Islamists.²⁴

In a nutshell, the war in Syria assumed a totally different dimension, no longer one against a brutal dictator for the sake of democracy, but over whether Syria would be an Islamic or secular state.²⁵ Most important of all, Asad was successful in giving the impression that he has been standing against the radical groups in the region. The arrival of Jihadists not only strengthened Asad's hand in international platforms but also has provided one of the incentives for Washington and Tehran to start searching for common ground. Tehran was concerned about al-Qaida-affiliated groups in Syria as much as the United States is.

Ankara's approach to international politics in the Middle East was increasingly isolating Turkey in international platforms. This was most evident when Erdoğan reacted furiously against both the West and the Arab states over the military coup that ousted Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, in early July 2013.²⁶ According to some analysts, because Turkish foreign policy is a "purely

²⁴ Halil M. Karaveli, Turkey, the Unhelpful Ally, February 27, 2013, The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/opinion/turkey-the-unhelpful-ally.html?_r=0 accessed 14 Oct.

²⁵ Semih Idiz, "Jihadists Alter the Syrian Equation, October 3, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/jihadists-alter-the-syrian-equation.aspx?pageID=449&nID=55566&NewsCatID=416>

²⁶ Erdoğan was puzzled at Saudi officials' support for the Egyptian coup and said: "How could a country claiming to uphold Islam and Sharia support the overthrow of an elected Islamist president who came to power after fair elections?" Al-Rasheed, M. 2013, 'Saudi Arabia and Turkey Falter Over

ethics-based” rather than an “the interest based” one, it should be defined as a “precious loneliness/worthy solitude.” This precious loneliness²⁷ of Turkey became yet more visible when the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry reached an agreement to secure and eliminate Syria's chemical weapons, although Obama had clearly declared that the United States would apply force if chemical weapons were used in the Syrian conflict, thereby averting an attack on Syria that Turkey had anticipated.²⁸ Turkey welcomed the UNSC resolution adopted in New York and the US-Russian agreement on the destruction of chemical weapons, but it came as a shock for Ankara that Assad was not obliged to quit his position immediately although approximately 1300 Syrian people were gassed in August 2013.²⁹ Thus, Bashar al-Asad not only managed to stay in power but also averted a US attack with the help of Russian inspired diplomatic efforts.

In addition, the lack of any reference in the UN resolution to refugees or the humanitarian situation in the neighboring countries deepened Turkey's existing uneasiness about the negligent attitude of the international community towards Turkey's refugee problem.³⁰ As the number of Syrian refugees which Turkey hosted in 21 refugee camps and the cost of those refugees as a result of Turkey's open door policy increased with each passing day, Ankara demanded that the international community – and especially the European Union and the United States – be much

Egypt', *Al-Monitor*, 20 August, viewed 14 September 2013, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/saudi-arabia-turkey-strained-relations.html>>

²⁷ Adilgazi, L. 2013, 'Zero Problems' Policy Supplanted by 'Precious Loneliness' Approach', *Today's Zaman*, 25 August, viewed 14 September 2013, <<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-324415-zero-problems-policy-supplanted-by-precious-loneliness-approach.html>>

²⁸ Chris Good, President Obama's Red Line; What He Actually Said about Syria and Chemical Weapons, ABC News, August 26, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/08/president-obamas-red-line-what-he-actually-said-about-syria-and-chemical-weapons/> accessed 15 Oct. 2013.

²⁹ Dominic Evans and Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Syria Gas Kills Hundreds Security Council Meets, Reuters, August 21, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/21/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE97K0EL20130821> accessed 15 Oct 2013.

³⁰ Today's Zaman, Davutoğlu Disappointed by UN Security Council Resolution, September 30, 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-327814-davutoglu-disappointed-by-un-security-council-resolution.html> accessed 19 Oct 2013.

more forthcoming in funding humanitarian assistance programs and live up to pledges made in the context of the UN's Syria Regional Response Plan.³¹

In sum, Ankara made a lot of miscalculations in formulating its policies towards Syria by putting all its chips on a 'non-Asad scenario'. For example, Turkey did not foresee that Washington would not favor a more Islamised Syria and would not consent to Asad's replacement by the Muslim Brotherhood; especially after Mohammed Morsi came to power in Egypt this would have sandwiched Israel between two Ikhwan ruled countries, Egypt and Syria. Asad's fall and his replacement by Islamist rule would not only endanger the security of Israel but also lead to radical groups' control of chemical weapons existing in Syria. In addition, in the post Iraqi war period, the Obama Administration did not want to get into another Middle East quagmire while struggling with its own economic problems in domestic politics. Another important miscalculation of Turkey concerned the power of anti Ikhwan regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and United Arab Emirates. Erdogan, while voicing allegations that it was Israel that organised and supported the military coup in Egypt, publically disregarded the fact that Saudi Arabia also supported the army against the Ikhwan.³²

Lastly, Ankara did not take into account that Russia would not give up supporting Syria, for several reasons. First, Syria is the only country where Moscow enjoys a naval outlet on the Mediterranean. Russia currently has a naval installation in Tartus, which is strategically important and Russia's last foreign military base outside the former Soviet Union. Second, the Syrian uprising has clearly shown that Russia still acts in accordance with a Cold War mentality in seeking to prevent Syria from falling under Western control. Most important of all, Ankara did not foresee that Iran would prove so tenacious in supporting the Asad regime in Syria in an attempt to protect the "Shiite crescent," to support a valuable ally in the Arab world, and as a convenient conduit to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The divergence between Turkey and Iran over Syria acquired a sectarian dimension: Tehran viewed the rebellion against the Asad regime as a Sunni uprising against minority Alawites, an outlier sect of Shi'ism, whereas Ankara backed a Sunni party, the Muslim Brotherhood. However, Ankara

³¹ Kemal Kirişçi, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Limits of an Open Door Policy*, Brookings, June 27, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/06/27-syrian-refugees-in-turkey-kirischi> accessed 19 oct. 2013.

³² Serpil Çevikcan, *Suriye, Mısır, Görünen Köy*, Milliyet, August 24, 2013.

and Tehran are nevertheless both pragmatic enough to manage their relationship and avoid falling into enmity over the crisis in Syria.

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Continuing amity in Turkey-Iran relations has rested on deepened interdependence on the basis of trade, security and politics to some extent mainly rooted in the expansion of relations throughout the 2000s. Erdoğan and Iranian President Ahmed-i Nejad, being reluctant to damage these relations, stated, in an October 2012 meeting in Azerbaijan, that they would seek ways of cooperation over the Syrian issue. While Tehran asked that Ankara broker negotiations between moderates from the opposition groups and the Asad regime,³³ Ankara wanted Iran to take a place in two different negotiating groups, one involving Turkey, Egypt and Iran, and one involving Turkey, Russia and Iran. Erdoğan openly stated his positive view about Iran's cooperation in finding a solution to the Syrian issue.³⁴

From Tehran's perspective, the fear of encirclement by hostile neighboring countries is the main motive behind its policy of maintaining relations with Ankara and thus to secure its frontier with Turkey. Apart from the patriot missiles deployed on Turkish territories, Washington's deployment of missiles in Qatar set alarm bells ringing in Tehran. Not only did the expanded American military presence in the Gulf exacerbate Iranian security concerns, but developments such as bilateral visits between the Turkish and Saudi Chiefs of Staff in November 2012 and the signing of a military agreement between Turkey and Qatar in July 2012 also made Tehran fear that a new Sunni axis was being formed against it by neighboring countries.³⁵ To avert this, Tehran wanted not only to maintain a cordial relationship with Turkey but also to mend relations with Egypt under Morsi; Ahmed-i Nejad became the first Iranian president to visit Egypt, an important US ally, since the Islamic revolution.³⁶

³³ "İran: Suriye Konusunda Türkiye'yle Uyumluyuz," *Milliyet*, 8 Ocak 2013.

³⁴ "Esad'a Karşı İran'ı İşbirliğine Çağırıldı," *Milliyet*, 17 Ekim 2012.

³⁵ Semih İdiz, "Turkey's Secterian War over Syria and Iraq," *Al-Monitor Turkey*, January 4, 2013

³⁶ "Mısır Dışişleri Bakanı Kemal Amr, ziyaret esnasında Körfez ülkelerinin güvenliği Mısır'ın kırmızı çizgisi olduğunu söyleyerek İran'la yakınlaşma olmadığı sinyalinin vermiştir." *İran Lideri İlk Kez Mısır'da*, *Milliyet*, 6 Şubat 2013.

Secondly, Iran could not afford to lose the Turkish gas market, which became increasingly important at a time when the Iranian economy was under the severest sanctions ever applied in its history. Because both sides developed relatively interdependent trade and energy relations throughout the 2000s, officials from Iran and Turkey were determined to sustain trade relations despite diverging interests in Syria and Iraq. For example, in October 2012, Erdoğan stated at a meeting with Iranian vice-president, Mohammed Reza Rahimi, that the volume of Iranian-Turkish trade would increase from 16.5 billion dollar to 30 billion dollar.³⁷ This statement is noteworthy with respect to understanding Ankara's uneasiness about the sanctions applied on Iran by the UN since 2010. The sanctions obstructed purchase of Iranian natural gas, which provided 20% of Turkey's natural gas needs. In addition, Turkish business circles were increasingly uneasy about the double standards applied by the United States, which they believed, bypassed the sanctions and covertly exported its goods to Iran.³⁸ "At the insistence of the Obama administration, in 2012 Turkey reduced its imports of oil from Iran; at the same time, however, it began selling gold to the country to circumvent the difficulties associated with payments in dollars."³⁹ The tension between Turkey and the United States was heightened with Obama's Executive order 13622 prohibiting the export of gold and "other precious metals" to the Islamic Republic.⁴⁰ However, currently, the Obama Administration has declined to issue any sanctions pursuant to the order in the face of growing tension between Turkey and the United States. Ankara is still Tehran's largest export market for natural gas."⁴¹

³⁷ Seda Kırdar, ABD'nin İran'a Uyguladığı Altın Yaptırımını ve Olası Sonuçları, Türkiye Ekonomi Politikaları Araştırma Vakfı (TEPAV), Nisan 2013, s. 2.

³⁸ Sabah, "Asıl ABD İran'la Ticareti Kessin," 1 Aralık 2012.

³⁹ In fact, Turkey's gold exports to Iran significantly reduced its balance of payments deficits in the first six months of 2012. See Guliyeva and Pak, 'What's Iran doing with Turkish Gold?'; and 'Gold Sales to Iran and Economic Slowdown Curb Turkey Trade Deficit', *The Daily Star*, 1 August 2012 in Barkey, p. 146.

⁴⁰ Serkan Demirtaş, Türkiye-ABD Arasında Altın Gerginliği, BBC Türkçe, 5 Aralık 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2012/12/121205_us_turkey_gold.shtml

⁴¹ Robert Zarate, Patrick Christy, FPI Bulletin, Obama and Congress must Max Out Iran Sanctions Now," The Foreign Policy Initiative, May 14, 2013, <http://www.foreignpolicy.org/content/fpi-bulletin-obama-and-congress-must-max-out-iran-sanctions%E2%80%94now> accessed 24 Oct.

From Turkey's perspective, a further important reason for maintaining the bilateral relations with Iran is its escalating security concerns from the spill over effect of the Syrian civil war, which became evident with the attacks on Akçakale, Cilvegözü ve Reyhanlı.⁴² Put differently, at a time when the NATO general secretary Rasmussen openly stated, "NATO can not act like the policeman of the world,"⁴³ Ankara, whose economy and border security were increasingly under threat because of the refugee flood and bomb attacks, could not depend on the West and needed diversified relations with its important Iranian neighbor. Despite occasional outbreaks of crisis, both sides quickly contained and ameliorated bilateral relations through diplomatic channels. For example, in the face of Iranian Chief of General Staff's threats concerning the patriots missiles deployed on Turkish territories, Davutoglu "reassured his Iranian counterpart, Ali-Akbar Salehi, during a joint news conference in Tehran in January 2012 that Turkey would never take any step that could negatively affect the relations with Iran and he said: "We will never accept any attack on any of our neighbors from our soil. We don't want such a perception of threat to exist, especially against Iran." In return, Salehi put the remarks of the IRGC general in context, underlining that "some people, knowingly or not, express views without much knowledge and by stepping beyond their responsibilities, and it causes misunderstandings."⁴⁴

None of this means that the Turkey-Iran bilateral relations are problem-free. On the contrary, leaving aside the proxy war in Syria, rivalry over filling the gap in Iraq after US withdrawal has affected Turkish-Iranian relations in a negative way. While Turkey's relations with Iraqi Kurdistan improved, especially on the basis of energy and trade, thereby strengthening Iraqi Kurdistan's capacity to act independently of Baghdad, Iran promoted its sphere of influence in Baghdad and especially in the South of Iraq. The Shiite-based central government is also of crucial importance for Iran to maintain its sphere of influence in Syria since Iranian arms flow to Syria take place via Iraq. In addition, the Iraqi government supports the Assad regime by hosting

⁴² Reyhanlı'da Katliam: 43 Ölü, Milliyet, 12 Mayıs 2013. Murat yetkin, Suriye Savaşı kapımıza Dayandı, Radikal, July 18, 2013.

⁴³ Reuters, "NATO to Stay out of Syria Even If UN Mandate Emerges", 17 Şubat 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/17/us-syria-nato-idUSTRE81G0ZF20120217>

⁴⁴ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, Turkey & Iran: Islamic Brotherhood or Regional Rivalry?, AlJazeera, June 4, 2013, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2013/05/20135139554264452.htm>.

visits by Syrian officials, signing pacts to expand business ties and offering political support to help the Asad regime to cope with its isolation from other Arab League members. Turkey was labeled as "a hostile state" and accused of interfering in the internal affairs of Iraq by the Maliki government. Turkey's rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurdistan was perceived as a Turkish plot against the unity of Iraq. For example, that Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan signed a pipeline agreement⁴⁵ which would transfer one million barrel crude oil via the Kirkuk-Yumurtalık pipeline came as a shock to the Baghdad government since this agreement was perceived by Maliki as Erbil's breaking away with the central government.⁴⁶

Another area of competition between Iran and Turkey also become more visible after the outburst of the Arab spring. For example, Erdoğan's growing popularity in the Arab street, and his travel to Egypt, Tunisia and Libya five days before the opening of Iran's Islamic Awakening Conference and his message of secular democracy were perceived by Tehran as an attempt to undermine Iran's regional soft power.⁴⁷ Erdoğan's message was harshly criticised by Tehran on the grounds that Turkey's model of "secular Islam" was a version of western liberal democracy and unacceptable for countries going through an "Islamic awakening."⁴⁸ From a different angle, Erdoğan's Arab tour and his words encouraging the Arab streets to be more democratised automatically touched the sensitive chords of Iranian political elite

⁴⁵ El Arabiya, "Iraqi Kurdistan Poised to Pipe Oil to World via Turkey," 17 Nisan 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/energy/2013/04/17/Iraqi-Kurdistan-poised-to-pipe-oil-to-world-via-Turkey.html>

⁴⁶ Denge Azad, Cengiz Çandar: Kürdistan petrolü, Türkiye, Ortadoğu jeopolitiği 24 Nisan 2013.

⁴⁷ Hürriyet Daily News, "Erdoğan Offers 'Arab Spring' neo-Laicism," September 15, 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=erdogan-offers-8216arab-spring8217-neo-laicism-2011-09-15> accessed 23 Oct.

⁴⁸ Henry J. Barkey, "Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 54, no.6, December 2012- January 2013, s. 154. Iran who was caught off guard with the outburst of the mass protests in Arab world, sought to find and develop commonalities between the *raison d'être* of the Iranian state and the protests, therefore described the mass protests as 'Islamic Awakening' (*Bidari-ye Eslami*)," Mahan Abedin, "Khamanei Throws the Gauntlet at the West," *Asia Times Online*, September 21, 2011. http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR011/FINAL_LSE_IDEAS_IranAndArabSpring_Rafati.pdf

whose survival had been endangered by big mass protests only a couple of years previously.⁴⁹

The beginning of Rouhani's moderate Iranian diplomacy, however, offered a good opportunity for a new beginning with Turkey so as to reduce the existing tension stemming from the Syria crisis. Indeed, it had already become apparent that Ankara could no longer afford, for various reasons, to continue its policy of putting all its chips on a non-Asad scenario. First of all, the possibility that the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and the ISIS could eventually grow too strong to control and threaten Turkey prompted Ankara to seek more cooperative relations with Iran. An internationalised sectarian conflict on its longest border might stoke a dangerous escalation on Turkey's domestic politics tensions, particularly the Sunni-Alevi divide. In a similar vein, Tehran, shared with Turkey perception of a threat from a probable emergence of de facto Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party, linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party along at least 400 km of the Turkish border.⁵⁰ In a nutshell, Turkey, wary of a "Pakistanisation" of its border provinces, and Tehran, pressurised on its nuclear efforts and its economy by the international community, had incentives to improve relations.

Two important developments in 2013-2014 seemed likely to further affect bilateral relations between the two countries. One was the interim nuclear deal signed in Geneva in November 2013 between Iran and the six world powers which mainly aimed to normalise Iran's relations with the outside world. First of all, the Geneva agreement gave international recognition to Iran's right to continue uranium enrichment for peaceful purposes and Iran's economy earned a relief of \$ 7 billion. While this was welcomed by Ankara, the de facto recognition of Iran's right to the full nuclear fuel cycle came at a time when Turkey's nuclear energy program was still in its early infancy. This will not only elevate Iran's international prestige but also lead to imbalance between the two countries on the energy and security levels.

⁴⁹ Today's Zaman, "Iran says Turkey's secular system not suitable for Arab Spring nations," December 13, 2011, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-265659-iran-says-turkeys-secular-system-not-suitable-for-arab-spring-nations.html> accessed 23 Oct, 2013.

⁵⁰ Fehim Taştekin, "Rouhani Offers Chance to Turkey, Too," Al Monitor, September 26, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/rouhani-turkey-opportunity-iran-relations.html> accessed 23 Oct.

The second was the advance of ISIS to Mosul and Telafer and the accompanying exacerbation of the sectarian war in Iraq. Because, after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Ankara came to believe that an Iranian-led Shiite axis was forming to its South, extending from Iraq into Syria, it looked for allies to counter that axis, including the KRG some of the GCC states and Iraq's Sunni Arab population.⁵¹ While many analysts still accused Turkey of allowing its Syria border to become a two-way "jihadist highway" facilitating the passage of thousands of international Sunni jihadists to Syria⁵² Iran, after the ISIS advance, came to be seen by the US as a regional actor that could restore security in Iraq. At a time when a hot debate about probable US-Iranian cooperation in tackling advances by Sunni insurgents in Iraq started, Turkey's role in the fight against "terrorism" was sidelined despite its NATO membership and alliance with the West. This shows that Turkey's failure in Syria as well as Iraq is mainly due to its pro-Sunni policies which damaged not only its newly formulated good neighborhood relations but also provoked its own Sunni-Alawite divergence in domestic Turkish politics as evident during the Gezi protests. Iran's rising status as a counterbalancing power against Sunni radicalism and Washington-Tehran rapprochement over Iraq might come at the expense of Turkey's role in the region.

Conclusion

Syria had been the jewel in the crown of Davutoglu's policy of "zero problems with neighbors" and the accompanying ambition to substitute Turkish leadership for Western over-involvement in the Middle East;⁵³ as such the, Syrian civil war not only devastated Turkey's zero problem policy but also exposed its limited capability to act in the Middle East independently from the West, particularly, the United States.

Since the beginning of the new century, Turkey, assuming that the unipolar international system was being replaced by a multipolar one, had focused on regional policies and improved its relations with Syria and Iran in an unprecedented way.

⁵¹ Soner Cagatay, Tyler Evans, Turkey's Changing Relations with Iraq, Kurdistan Up, Baghdad Down, Policy Focus 122, October 2012, p.4.

⁵² Daniel Pipe, Turkish Support for ISIS, Middle East Forum, June 18, 2014 and Kadri Gürsel, Turkey Paying Price for Jihadist Highway on Border, Al-Monitor, June 12, 2014.

⁵³ Henri J. Barkey (2012) Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring, Survival: Global Politics and Strategy, 54:6, 151, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2012.749639

Ankara firmly believed that the *pax Americana* was ending with major changes in international order, such as the rise of China as a global power. In parallel with this, Turkey criticised and demanded the reform of the international order in many areas such as trade, finance, nonproliferation and human rights.⁵⁴ Turkey's growing alignment with what Washington deemed to be 'rogue states,' Syria and Iran, should be read against this background.

However, the Arab spring and Syrian revolt exposed Turkey's misreading of regional dynamics, its exaggeration of its own capacity to take a leadership role in the region and most important of all, Turkey's Achilles heels, Kurdish separatism and the Sunni-Alevi cleavage. Syria's civil war also brought the fragility of Turkish-Iranian relations to the surface. Despite the increasing trade and energy relations between the two countries, the transformation of the Syrian conflict from one initiated by the masses against a dictatorial rule into one between the Sunni jihadists and Alawites/secularists and its spread to Iraq especially after the advance of ISIS, upset the balance between the two countries. Both Iran and Turkey appeared to have carved out respective spheres of influence at opposite ends of Iraq. Tehran extended its influence throughout southern Iraq. Turkey, by contrast, has consolidated its economic and political influence in the Kurdish regions of the north at the expense of its relations with Baghdad and Tehran. Ankara even went further and remained silent when the Iraqi Kurdistan took control of Kirkuk in order to stop the advance of ISIS in the region although Kirkuk had traditionally been Turkey's red line regarding Kurdish aggrandizement in Iraq.

Only a couple of years ago, following the Arab spring, Turkey was seen as a successful country because it demonstrated that democracy and Islam could coexist. However the Syrian revolt and its aftermath destroyed Turkey's popularity in the Arab world mainly because of Turkey's abandoning of its previous policy of equidistance between the regions' sectarian poles by allowing passages of Sunni jihadist groups from Turkey to Syria. Owing to these policies of Ankara, Iran achieved a rising status as a counterweight to the spread of Sunni insurgency and Assad remained in power as a leader standing against the radical Jihadist groups in the eyes of the West.

⁵⁴ Murat Yeşiltaş, Global Swing and Turkey, *The New Turkey*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.thenewturkey.org/global-swing-and-turkey/new-turkey/205>

The Syrian crisis also crystallised the fragility of Turkey's relations with the West, especially the United States. For example, while conventional wisdom had it that the usage of chemical weapon would be a cause for US intervention in the region and Turkey was expecting it in Syria, US Secretary of State John Kerry praised Bashar Asad because he quickly started the process of destroying his regime's chemical weapons arsenal. Apart from this, Turkey was disappointed by the EU's and US' indifference to Turkey's struggle with the Syrian refugees whose numbers has exceeded over 1.000.000.

To sum up, the Syrian crisis and its aftermath have prompted Turkey to modify its previous overambitious policies so as to restore its deteriorating image and to deal with the consequences of the Syrian crisis, including a sectarian based war in its neighborhood, border security, economic problems stemming from a loss of Arab markets, deteriorating relations with Iraq and clashing interests with Iran. All these expose the negative impact of the Syrian civil war on Turkey.