

Using Civil War to Build an Authoritarian Regime: Turkey's Policy towards Syria

Written by Burak Bilgehan Özpek

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BURAK BILGEHAN ÖZPEK, JUN 30 2016

According to scholars studying on the drama of ancient Greek civilization, incongruity, which refers to the gap between what a person expects and what s/he faces, is a necessary condition for a conflict to occur. Therefore, such an illusion helps an ordinary story to turn into a drama. It would not be wrong to argue that Turkish foreign policy has experienced a similar dissonance between the illusion and reality since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The revolution has evolved into a civil war, transformed into a stalemate, become internationalized and Turkey has experienced the limitations of realpolitik, it has kept its outspoken stance against Assad government. Furthermore, Turkey's relations with the United States and Russia have strained due to its policy towards Syria and it became the target of terrorist attacks claimed by the ISIS and the PKK. Not least, millions of refugees escaping from the ongoing war in Syria have entered Turkey. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the problems that Turkey faced in last five years, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, which has been ruling the country since 2002, has inflexibly pursued its agenda in Syria.

According to İbrahim Kalın, the presidential spokesperson, Turkey's isolation could be defined as "precious loneliness". Accordingly, Turkey has been left alone because of its foreign policy based on moral principles such as supporting the opposition groups in Syria against a bloody dictator in Syria. On the other hand, Kalın's statement was a confession admitting that Turkey failed to reach its goals formulated in 2011. Therefore one can ask the question of whether Turkey keeps its stance towards Syria for the sake of its commitment to the moral values or there are other factors explaining the insistence of Turkey albeit the emerging challenges threatening its alliances, security and order.

Correlation or Causation?

It would not be wrong to argue that the AKP governments had followed a reformist agenda that can be labelled as conservative globalism, which refers to a synthesis of liberal ideas based on democratization, a free market, membership to the European Union, and defense of traditional values that appeal to large segments of voters.[1] In other words, AKP appeared as a venue on which interests of diverse segments of the society who have suffered from the secularist and nation-state based regime of Turkey converged. This de facto coalition was comprised of conservatives, pro-EU circles, liberal intellectuals, business associations and some prominent figures of the Kurdish political movement. Therefore, the AKP's attempts to solve the problems stemming from the Kemalist mindset were required to fulfil the expectations and to expand the rights of its coalition partners.

It is safe to argue that the coalition around the AKP has gradually dissolved and skepticism towards its intentions gained ground in light of increasingly apparent authoritarian tendencies of Erdoğan. Dağı posits that "the moment the AKP secured its power within the state, it started to act like the old Kemalist state" and used state apparatus in order to construct its own "imagined society". To him, the AKP rolled back the democratic reforms and as such this process could be called "de-democratization". As a result of the AKP's authoritarian shift, most of the liberal intellectuals, pro-EU circles, Istanbul-based business associations and conservative Gulen Movement members withdrew their consent from the coalition led by the AKP.

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It is safe to argue that the authoritarian shift of the AKP coincided with the Turkey's involvement in the Syrian civil war in 2011. In order to explain the rising authoritarian tone of the AKP, many scholars have underscored the absence of "checks and balances" mechanisms. Accordingly, the AKP has gradually consolidated its power after pushing the military out of the political system. Nevertheless, this argument leaves almost no room for the non-state actors and assumes that a government could be limited only by the help of the bureaucratic mechanisms. Actually, in accordance with the democratic principles, a government is not supposed to be checked by armed forces. Individuals, civil society organizations, trade unions, business circles and media are expected to contain the aggression of the government. Thus, absence of the military's shadow over the political space does not suffice to explain the authoritarianization process alone. In other words, the question of why non-state actors could not resist to the AKP's attempts to monopolize the power should be explored.

The answer of this question might reveal that simultaneous occurrence of the authoritarianism and assertive policy towards Syria refers to a causal connection rather than a correlation. This idea stems from the assumption that the Arab Spring has shaped Turkey's Middle East policy. Accordingly, the AKP elite witnessed the replacement of the dictators by political Islamist parties. This paved the way for the AKP to exert influence beyond the borders of Turkey by the help of its Islamist roots. Although international society was inclined to see Turkey as a "model country", which managed to bridge Islam and democracy, the AKP aimed to convert this role into realpolitik gains. In other words, the AKP elite viewed the Arab Spring as a window of opportunity in order to make progress in foreign policy realm. On the other hand, this would help the AKP to bolster its popularity in domestic politics as well. Therefore, the AKP elite was tempted by the idea that Turkey would have a sphere of influence over the revolutionized countries when the Arab Spring reached Syria.

However, civil protests has evolved into a civil war due to the robustness of the regime in Syria. This picture has dragged Turkey to a more complex situation. Unlike its policy towards Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the AKP government wholeheartedly stood by the opposition groups and harshly criticized the Assad regime. This has not only undermined the ongoing close relations between Turkey and Syria but has also become the foreign policy priority for the AKP. As the armed conflict mounted between the Assad regime and the opposition groups, the AKP government's support for the anti-Assad campaign went beyond discourse. According to Fehim Taştekin, Turkey has become a terminal for the armed groups fighting against the Assad regime. That is to say, the AKP government has intervened into the civil war in Syria by sending weapons and providing a safe haven inside Turkey's territory. In the final analysis, the more Assad regime has endured the more aggressively Turkey has been involved in the Syrian civil war.

As a result of the active engagement policy, the AKP has faced criticisms in domestic level. For example, the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), argued that the AKP is responsible for the escalation of the civil war in Syria. According to CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the AKP government helped to equip terrorist groups with weapons and infiltrate into Syria. While the AKP's support for the Islamist groups drew the reaction of the secular section of the Turkish society, the sectarian character of the Syrian civil war and the AKP's support for the Sunni insurgents created a discontent in the Alawite community in Turkey. For example, the platform of Alawite foundations ABF (Federation of Alawite and Bektashi) defined the AKP's Syria policy as sectarian and accused the AKP of having relations with the jihadist groups.

Upon the culmination of the criticisms coming from domestic opposition, the AKP increased its authoritarian tone. That is to say, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the leader of the AKP, aimed to divert the attention of the domestic opponents away from Syria. In doing so, Erdogan deliberately threatened the life styles of the secular circles by bringing certain issues into question. For example, Erdogan publicly criticized abortion, urged women to give birth to at least three children and posited that "we will raise a religious generation" in a public speech. Furthermore, Erdogan defined Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Republic of Turkey, and his deputy İsmet İnönü as "two drunkards" and the AKP proposed a bill to restrict the sale and consumption of alcohol. In the final analysis, it could be argued that Erdogan's attempts to intervene in the lifestyles of secular individuals aimed to avert their critical stance against the government's Syria policy. In other words, Erdogan wanted to hide the AKP government's support for the opposition groups in Syria by compelling his opponents to defend their lifestyles instead of offending the AKP government. It is not uncommon to assume that Gezi Park protests in June 2013 were the product this authoritarian tone.

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The AKP's assertive Syria policy became another domestic issue in January 2014, when the trucks belonging to the National Intelligence Organization were stopped and searched by gendarmerie, on suspicion of carrying weapons to the opposition groups in Syria. According to the AKP government, an international plot was implemented at the hands of Gulen Movement members, which also initiated a graft probe in December 2013. Upon the scandal, broadcasting of this issue was banned and journalists, Can Dündar and Erdem Gül, were jailed because Cumhuriyet Newspaper revealed that the trucks were full of weapons. Furthermore, the AKP government directly intervened into the judiciary in order to suspend the truck case. At the end of the day, the AKP government's involvement in Syria, which has no legal base in domestic law, undermined the separation of powers principle and paved the way for more authoritarian regime.

Its unorthodox approach towards the Kurdish question, which started in 2013 and called "solution process", remained as the only sign indicating that the AKP still had a reformist agenda. Accordingly, the AKP maintained the "solution process" that aimed to end the armed conflict between TAF (Turkish Armed Forces) and PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan) despite its authoritarian tone increasingly disturbed the other segments of the society. However, the AKP's commitment to the "solution process" suddenly disappeared, when the President Erdoğan opposed the memorandum of understanding, setting the conceptual and methodological framework of the "solution process", concluded and declared by the AKP government and the HDP deputies on February 28, 2015. Then the contradiction deepened when the HDP launched an aggressive election campaign based on criticizing the authoritarian tendencies of Erdoğan. In addition to that, the increasing popularity of the HDP among voters also alarmed the AKP elite on the grounds that the HDP should not have crossed the 10% election threshold for the AKP to maintain their single party rule. Thus, the AKP's negative campaigns against the HDP branded its stamp on the election process.

The results of the parliamentary election indicated the dissolution of the AKP-led coalition created a new political picture for Turkey. Accordingly, in comparison to the previous parliamentary elections, the AKP lost its majority in the parliament and the share of its votes decreased by about 9 percent, from 49.8% to 40.7%. The post-election surveys indicate that votes from the AKP were mainly transferred to the MHP and the HDP. According to Hasan Cemal, the AKP intentionally stalled the process and it did not take any concrete steps. In doing so, Erdoğan might have calculated to keep the loyalty of the Kurdish voters without offending the nationalist voters. Nevertheless, such ambiguous policy of Erdoğan and the AKP created question marks in the minds of the conservative Kurds and Turkish nationalists.

Following the elections, the AKP, under the strict control of President Erdoğan, did not make a serious offer to any of the other parties and Erdoğan did not mandate any other party to form a coalition. Instead, Erdoğan organized a new caretaker cabinet and declared snap elections to be held on November 1, 2015. During this period, the "solution process" collapsed and the AKP wholeheartedly adopted the nationalist agenda in order to attract the nationalist votes again. This story has also affected Turkey's policy towards the domestic actors of the Syrian civil war because the armed conflict between Turkey and the PKK recommenced due to the end of the solution process. This has inevitably changed Turkey's relations with the Kurds of Syria, which are mainly represented by the PKK's Syria branch, PYD. Therefore, struggle of the Syrian Kurds for the autonomy in the North of Syria has transformed into a national security question for Turkey. This situation has become more complex after the Russian forces deployed in Syria so as to support Assad regime and its allies. It is safe to argue that Turkey's involvement in Syria has been limited after downing of the Russian jet by Turkish Air Force on the border of Turkey and Syria and the furious response of the Russian President Putin in November 2015. Therefore, the Kurds of Syria has been able to protect themselves from the attacks of Turkey. On the other hand, the PYD has played a key role in the US-led military campaign against the Islamic States. This means that, the PYD has the political support of the US as well. In the final analysis, the AKP's policy shift based on attracting the nationalist voters to re-gain the majority in the parliament and effectuate Erdoğan's bid for presidential system has further complicated Turkey's Syria policy. As the PYD keeps its autonomy and influence in Syria, the Kurdish Question and the PKK will remain to occupy the agenda of Turkey. In other words, the AKP (and its absolute leader Erdoğan) will be able to use "nationalism" in order to consolidate its power.

Instruments and Goals

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The AKP government's policy towards Syria has not only produced repercussions that affect Turkey's international relations but also given rise to authoritarian tendencies in domestic realm. Turkey's active involvement strategy in Syria and the failure of this step have necessitated the AKP government to divert the attention of the public opinion. In doing so, the AKP has given utterance to a social engineering agenda, which has disturbed the secular sections of the society and caused Gezi Park protests to burst out. Following the Gezi Park protests, freedom of assembly has been restricted. Furthermore, such an involvement policy has inevitably raised difficulties with regard to domestic law. In order to overcome such problems the AKP government has violated the separation of powers principle and intervened into the judiciary bodies. Finally, the AKP government's steps to re-gain the majority in the parliament after the June 7 parliamentary elections has played a major role in the collapse of the solution process. The reluctance of the AKP in sharing the power with the other political parties and its nationalist turn have suspended the negotiations with the PKK. This has dramatically altered Turkey's relations with the Kurds of Syria and complicated Turkey's relations with the states, like Russia and the United States, sponsoring Kurds' struggle against the ISIS. Therefore, the safe haven of the PYD and its connections with the PKK will keep a national security threat alive and provide an opportunity for the AKP government to exploit it. In the final analysis, the AKP government's Syria policy seems to be an instrument in order to consolidate its power in the political system rather than a goal to be accomplished in foreign realm.

Note

[1] Ziya Öniş, "Conservative Globalism at the Crossroads: The Justice and Development Party and the Thorny Path to Democratic Consolidation in Turkey", *Mediterranean Politics*, 14:1 (2009), p 22.

About the author:

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