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Turkey's Role in Syria: A Prototype of its Regional Policy in the Middle East

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SHAIMAA MAGUED, SEP 21 2021

Turkish policy toward Syria has gone through different phases since the declaration of the Turkish Republic in 1924. Yet, Syria has always been the main sphere of Turkey's regional role in the Middle East. Geographical proximity, shared history, and common security issues have shaped the evolution of bilateral relations and Turkish regional conduct toward either conciliation and rapprochement or tension and military encroachment. By sharing common borders of nearly 900 km, Turkey and Syria have engaged in permanent interactions that influenced the balance of power in bilateral relations and the security dilemma in the Middle East.

Historical Background on Turkish-Syrian Relations

Not only had Turkey the balance of power in its favor throughout the Cold War period and the 1990s but also regional dynamics were dominated by power politics, notably antagonist military alliances involving Western countries and Israel vis-à-vis Arab countries. Although the Turkish-Syrian difference was instigated by bilateral conflicts over the region of Hatay/Iskenderun, the repartition of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and the Kurdish issue, Arab countries expressed solidarity toward Syria on the bilateral level and within regional instances such as the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Conference. Egypt alongside Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Gulf countries have always condemned Turkish policy toward Syria and limited cooperation with Turkey to the economic level.

During the 1970s and 80s, Turkish economic ties were limited to three Arab countries, namely the United Arab Emirates, Libya, and Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Turkish initiatives of economic cooperation involving Arab countries and Israel were conditioned by the positive development of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Aykan, 1993; Mouawad, 2001). In light of Turkey's regional projects within its alliance with the US, Arab countries have rejected to take part in some, notably the water pipeline projects that involved Israel, unless the latter would reach a positive agreement on Palestinian rights with the PLO.

Mistrust has dominated the perception of the Turkish regional role in the region as a result of its antagonistic conduct toward Syria. The Syrian support for the PKK fighters as a pressure card for getting a better agreement over water rights was met with Turkish engagements into military and strategic alliances with the US and Israel in the region. The 1980s and the 1990s witnessed Turkish alignment with the US policy in the Middle East, notably vis-à-vis Iran and Iraq in addition to its conclusion of a series of military agreements with Israel in 1996 and 1997. Turkey's comparative advantage in military capacities vis-à-vis Arab countries has culminated with the mobilization of military troops on common borders with Syria in 1998 which prompted the al-Assad regime to stop its support for the PKK fighters thanks to an Egyptian mediation that facilitated the conclusion of subsequent bilateral agreements on the security and political levels.

Turkish policy toward Syria under the JDP Rule (2002–2010)

Although Turkish rapprochement with Syria was initiated by the military establishment and supported by the secular ruling elite at the time, the inauguration of the Justice and Development Party to power in November 2002 has paved the way for the start of a new chapter in bilateral relations. Turkish policy toward Syria continued to incarnate a

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prototype of a new Turkish regional policy in the Middle East. In line with the JDP's regional vision based on economic rapprochement, zero problems with neighbors, multidimensionality, and proactivity, Turkey initiated an active policy toward Syria. Frequent official visits have introduced multiple agreements toward political, economic, security, and technical cooperation through the High Council for Strategic Cooperation that was then emulated with Turkey's neighboring countries. Both countries agreed to develop areas of common interests, multiply trade relations, notably across borders through the creation of twin cities and the increase of investments in vital Syrian industries, and to adopt a cooperative approach in the management of the Kurdish and water issues.

The increase of bilateral trade with Syria following the elimination of visa requirements between both countries as a medium for overcoming bilateral tension was replicated throughout the region with Arab and Caucasian countries. Claims over the Hatay/Iskenderun region, disagreement over water repartition, and mutual mistrust over the Kurdish issue have no longer been dominant factors in shaping bilateral relations since they were bypassed by several areas for cooperation on the economic, political, technical, and strategic levels such as the elimination of visa requirements with Syria, technical cooperation over the management of the Tigris and Euphrates' water, and the Free Trade Agreement in 2004 (Aras, 2009; Magued, 2019).

Writings have shed light on structural and normative transformations in Turkish policy toward Syria as a manifestation of a real change in Turkish regional role and policy toward neighbors on the discursive and practical levels (Magued, 2019; Mahfuz, 2012; Aras, 2004; Davutoğlu, 2010). Turkish openness toward Syria highlighted an official shift toward the adoption of a friendly and positive discourse toward Syria and Arab countries with a focus on areas of common interests rather than issues of disagreement. This change in Turkish attitude has unlocked the regional security dilemma that persisted until the end of the 1990s. With the JDP's incarnation of a political and economic role model for Arab and Muslim countries, it has been orientated toward the multiplication of business ties and political coordination among neighbors and between the latter and superpowers, notably the US and the EU. This security shift in Turkish regional policy from material threats to areas of complementarity and cooperation among neighbors came in response to the Turkish adoption of European harmonization packages at the beginning of the 2000s as a condition for starting membership negotiations.

Additionally, Turkish rapprochement toward Syria presented an unprecedented channel of communication between the al-Assad regime and its allies (Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah) from one side and the West (notably the US and the EU) from the other. Turkish-Syrian relations introduced the first step toward the sociopolitical and economic normalization of the Middle East and its normative integration into the global order. This step was concretized through mediation between resilient authoritarian leaders like al-Assad and the Iranian regimes from one side and Israel and the European Troika from the other, the improvement of the Syrian economic infrastructure, and the reconciliation of its political worldview with Western powers on various issues, notably the progress in peace negotiations and the alleviation of the Syrian resistance stance *vis-à-vis* the West.

The Shift in Turkish Policy toward Syria and Its Repercussions on its Regional Role in the Middle East

Although the JDP has initiated a successful rapprochement toward Syria, the Arab uprising, notably the protests that erupted in Deraa in March 2011 and prompted security concerns to come to the fore in bilateral relations and disturb regional dynamics. The reemergence of the threatening nature of the Kurdish factor has alarmed Turkey of domestic political developments in Syria. Breaking with the personal friendship that developed between al-Assad and Erdoğan, the JDP's call for immediate political reforms in Syria has increased tension in bilateral relations and propelled Turkish military intervention in bordering regions since 2012. Starting from 2011, the Turkish hard power approach toward Syria presented a prototype of the JDP's role in the region. Turkey's policy was marked by a series of military operations in Syrian and Iraqi cities in its fight against the PKK elements that were empowered by the emergence of a Syrian Kurdish Front and the Kurdish government in Northern Iraq.

The adoption of a confrontational and nationalist line in Turkish policy toward Syria that focuses on the limitation of the PKK infiltration across borders and its political-strategic empowerment in Syria and Iraq has tainted Turkey's regional role and relations with neighbors into a Hobbesian outlook. Turkey's former economic partners in Gulf countries have expressed their opposition to Turkey's policy in Syria and supported the current Egyptian regime

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following the ousting of the Muslim Brothers' post-revolutionary government. Also, the Kurdish government in Northern Iraq expressed its opposition to the presence of Turkish officials and troops in Iraq and Syria. Similarly, Egypt alongside Gulf countries perceived Turkish intervention in Libya in support of Fayed al-Sarrag's government as an issue of national security that would disturb its Western borders' stability and order. In response to Turkey's military presence in northern Syria, notably Idlib in coordination with Russia, Egypt has excluded Turkey from the East Mediterranean Gas Forum initiative that overlooked Turkish strategic interests in maritime borders' demarcation with Greece and Cyprus (al-monitor, 2020; emgf.org).

Conclusion

Syria has always been geostrategically important for Turkey in the formulation of its regional policy and role toward neighbors. The nature of bilateral relations has depended on the management of common issues of contention that constituted an impediment toward rapprochement in the 1980s and 1990s and tainted the Turkish regional role with a hard power approach in the Middle East. The JDP's success in the introduction of a conciliatory diplomatic framework based on the development of areas of common interests with Syria has enabled its diffusion among neighbors. However, the eruption of the Arab uprisings has interrupted the conciliatory course of bilateral relations and disturbed the normative framework of Turkish diplomacy in the region.

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