

## Turning ‘Risk’ into ‘Opportunity’: Turkey’s Approach towards Syria, a Western/European Actor in the Middle East

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### Abstract

This article discusses the effects of the latest people uprising in Syria on Turkey’s ‘zero problems with neighbors’ foreign policy approach. In this regard, the main argument is that while the developments in Syria have posed strong challenges to Turkey’s decade-long transformative foreign policy understanding, mainly associated with Turkey’s energetic foreign Minister Ahmet Davutođlu, they equally offer Turkey the opportunity to adopt a more humanitarian and democratic foreign policy stance in this context. The years ahead will increasingly see Turkey putting concerns over democracy and human rights at the center of its foreign policy engagements. This will not only contribute to the improvement of Turkey’s deteriorating relations with the western actors, most notably the European Union, but also be in conformity with the ongoing liberal democratic transformation process underway at home.

**Key Words:** Turkey, Syria, ‘Zero Problems with Neighbors’ Policy, Democracy, Human Rights

### Özet

Bu makale Suriye’de yaşanan halk hareketlerinin Türkiye’nin ‘komşularla sıfır sorun’ politikası üzerine olan etkilerini tartışmaktadır. Bu bağlamda ileri sürülen ana argüman Suriye’deki olayların bir yandan Dışişleri Bakanı Ahmet Davutođlu ile özdeşleştirilen Türkiye’nin dönüşüm odaklı dış politikası üzerinde olumsuzluklar ortaya çıkardığı ama diğer yandan da bu durumun önümüzdeki yıllarda Türk dış politikasının daha fazla demokrasi ve insan hakları odaklı gelişmesini hızlandıracağıdır. Türk dış politikasında demokrasi ve insan hakları vurgusunun önümüzdeki zaman diliminde artacağı ileri sürülmektedir. Böyle bir gelişme sadece Türkiye’nin Batılı aktörlerle, başta Avrupa Birliği olmak üzere, son zamanlarda kötüleşen ilişkilerinin düzelmesine yardımcı olmayacak ama aynı zamanda ülke içerisinde devam etmekte olan liberal-demokrasi eksenli dönüşüm sürecinin genel karakteri ile de uyumlu olacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye, Suriye, Komşularla Sıfır Sorun Politikası, Demokrasi, İnsan Hakları

Turkish foreign policy towards Syria has come under strong challenges in recent months, as many commentators rushed to the conclusion that Turkey’s ‘zero problems with neighbors’ policy, mainly attributed to Turkey’s energetic foreign minister Ahmet Davutođlu<sup>1</sup>, would be impossible to continue with Assad’s rule in Syria being irreparably eroded. The question of how Turkey’s transformative foreign policy understanding would be affected by the tumultuous changes in the region appears to have already occupied many analysts. This article aims at tackling this particular question from the perspective that besides offering challenges and risks the recent upheavals, particularly in Syria, also offer Turkey the opportunity to elevate its transformative foreign policy understanding to a much higher level in which normative questions and humanitarian considerations will become more salient in the up coming years. Put another way, the years ahead will likely witness a democratic touch in Turkish foreign policy practices in line with the liberal democratization process underway at home. This new turn in Turkish foreign policy will not only add up to Turkey’s ability to play an ‘order-creator’ role in the Middle East, particularly in the wake of the latest uprisings, but also help lessen concerns over whether

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<sup>1</sup> For Davutođlu’s views about Foreign Policy: Ahmet Davutođlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, Küre Yayınları, 34.Basım, İstanbul 2009.

Turkey has been turning its face away from the West. The Western/European character of Turkish foreign policy will likely be strengthened.

### **The old Turkish approach**

Turkey transformed its relations with Syria from being 'eternal animosity' back in the 1990s into 'pragmatic friendship' over the last decade under the stewardship of powerful rulers in Ankara and Damascus.<sup>2</sup> Turkey's desire to help bring into existence a stable and cooperative regional environment in the Middle East by forming interdependent relations with neighboring countries to the South combined with the changing security perspectives during the first two terms of the Justice and Development Party (Turkish acronym AKP) rule to have resulted in what many observers tend to define as the best period in Turkish-Syrian relations. Syria has long ceased to exist as a potential threat to Turkey's security, at least insofar as Syria's foreign policy behaviors are concerned. The end of Syrian support to Kurdistan Worker's Party (Kurdish acronym PKK) terrorist organization has been later followed by the signing of various agreements between the two countries, ranging from free trade to strategic and defense cooperation.

In addition, improving relations with Syria did not only relieve Ankara of the need to rely on security cooperation with Israel but also serve Ankara's general Middle Eastern strategy of helping replace the Hobbesian security environment in the region with a more Kantian one. From a principled point of view, the region becoming more Kantian would certainly bolster the prospects of Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU) by contributing to the strengthening of the de-securitization process at home.<sup>3</sup> Improving relations with Syria has become a quintessential part of the AKP-led foreign policy transformation, according to which if Turkey-skeptics inside the EU were no longer to point out to Turkey's geographical location as an obstacle before Turkey's prospective membership, the chaotic and instable security environment in the region should be transformed as soon as possible in the post 9/11 era.

In the early years of its changing approach towards Syria, Ankara took the Assad regime for granted and adopted a purely realist foreign policy mentality. The goal had never been defined as pushing for changes in the character of the Assad regime. It might have been hoped that Syria would likely go through an internal transformation process as Damascus improved relations with Turkey and gradually became reintegrated into the international system as a legitimate player. It was not a coincidence that Turkey's coming closer to Syria coincided with the softening of the American stance from the second term of the Bush presidency onwards. After he was elected to White House, Obama finally threw the 'axis of evil' approach towards Syria into the dustbin of history. Similar to Turkey, Obama has adopted the view that engaging Syria diplomatically would help lead the regime in Damascus to behave more responsible in the region that might in turn ease the way for the solution of the Arab-Israeli problem as well as lessen the costs of possible US withdrawal from Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Both Ankara and Washington seem to have presumed that

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<sup>2</sup> For the history of Turkish-Syrian relations until 2010 see: Kaan Gaytancıoğlu, "Dünden Bugüne Türkiye-Suriye İlişkileri", *Türk Dış Politikasında Güncel Paradigmalar*, Ed. Fahri Türk, Kriter Yayınları, İstanbul 2010: pp.55-81. For the actual events, reports and analyses about Turkey-Syrian Relations, look at: [www.orsam.org.tr](http://www.orsam.org.tr)

<sup>3</sup> Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat, "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Iran and Syria," *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2008: pp. 495-515.

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Jet, "U.S. Security Assistance in the Middle East: Helping Friends or Creating Enemies?," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2011: pp. 78-88.

given encouraging signals Assad would be able to transform Syria into a responsible stakeholder of the Middle Eastern peace process.

Despite the fact that Turkey has adopted a 'multi-actor' approach towards Syria, viz. improving relations with Assad have been equally supplemented by attempts at coming closer to various societal circles inside the country, it would not be an overestimation to argue that Turkish-Syrian rapprochement over the last decade has been first and foremost a strategic inter-state cooperation in essence. Its transnational character and societal dimension have been to a significant extent eclipsed by its traditional state-to-state dynamic. Syria's value in the eyes of Turkish decision makers seems to have emanated from its potential to contribute to the materialization of Turkey's foreign and security policy interests in the context of relations with Israel, Iraq and Iran. Simply stated the assumption on the part of Turkish rulers was that improving relations with Syria would likely help bolster Turkey's ability to deal with the PKK terrorism more efficiently, lessen Turkey's strategic dependence on Israel, contribute to Iraq's territorial integrity and finally wean Syria away from Iran. The internal character of the Assad regime, particularly the way how it responded to the increasing public demands for further political participation, has long been sidelined, if not totally overlooked.

That said, the erosion of Assad's power base in Syria in the midst of latest protests has initially casted doubts on the sustainability of the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement as described above.<sup>5</sup> One argument voiced in this regard was that Turkey would not be able to experience the same cordial relations with whoever replaces Assad in Damascus. Turkey has invested so much in Assad that many feared Turkey would lose what she has gained so far in its relations with Syria if Assad's departure from power culminates in internal chaos and anarchy. Besides, even if Assad remained in power, he would likely interpret Turkey's increasing involvement in Syrian politics, mainly owing to the influx of Syrian people to Turkey, negatively.

Given such concerns, Turkey's initial reaction to the internal crisis in Syria appears to have been 'prudent optimism'. Viz. wait and see. Similar to its initial response to the internal crisis in Libya, Turkey first preferred to give a chance to the incumbent regime in Syria. Turkey did not only view Assad as the legitimate ruler of the country, having the potential and capability of undertaking the reforms that majority of Syrians have longed for, but also let it be known that Ankara would not acquiesce in outside interventions in its doorsteps, however legitimate that might be cloaked in humanitarian concerns.

Likewise the US, many EU members and the majority of states across the Middle East, Turkey held onto some assumptions vis-à-vis Syria. First, Ankara thought that the Assad regime did not suffer from a legitimacy crisis at home despite the unbalanced nature of the relationship between the 'rulers' and the 'ruled'. That the minority Alawite sect has been ruling the country for three decades was never considered to be as licensing any Sunni-centered people' uprising against the regime. Similarly, when the region had been set ablaze in the early days of 2011, no one expected that Syria would be the next in line.

Second, Ankara held that Assad had some liberal instincts and by nature would be able to steer his country out of its authoritarian character alongside a long-term 'softening' process. That Assad lived in the West for long, married to a western-style woman and promised a better future for Syria when he became the president back in 2000 appear to have led Turkey to adopt a 'wait and see' stance as for the nature of the regime. Neither the

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<sup>5</sup> İlter Turan, The Going Gets Tough: Turkey tries to meet the Syrian Challenge. The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Analysis, On Turkey series, 16 May 2011.

'police-state' nature of the regime nor the fact that Assad had never become the true leader of the country as his father was given enough consideration.

Third, Turkish rulers seem also to have believed that the close personal ties developed with Assad and his entourage over the years would give Turkish statesmen a psychological advantage as they counsel Assad to set in motion a reform process to satisfy people's demands. The assumption that Assad would simply heed the advices and warnings of Turkish statesmen seems to have been partially informed by the rising popularity of Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan on the Arab streets, particularly after he adopted a more critical view of Israel's policies in the region.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Ankara's initial prudent low-key approach was also driven by the assumption that neither Israel nor its strategic patron the US would acquiesce in a radical power shift in Syria as the Middle East had already been engulfed by uprisings in other locations and the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute turned out to become more urgent than ever. Assad had been a part of the Middle East peace process for long and considered to be a rational actor with whom a consensus solution could be reached. At stake was the future of the peace process and Israel's territorial security. After losing Mubarak in Egypt, the ouster of Assad from power would have likely made life for Israel too difficult to bear.

### **Turkey's 'western' approach**

The 'partially prudent-partially pragmatic' approach on the part of Turkey has gradually given way to a more 'principled/normative/humanitarian' one, as numerous Syrians began to cross Turkish borders to seek refuge from the atrocious actions of the Syrian armed forces and Turkey's ongoing internal liberal-democratic transformation dictated a more liberal-assertive policy stance. As the crisis unfolded in Syria, Turkish leaders have made it clear that Turkey wants to see a more democratic, representative and plural political order emerge in its neighbor.<sup>7</sup> Only such a course, Turkish statesmen have argued, could satisfy the protesters and lend credence to the legitimacy of what would be left over from the Assad regime. The 'humanitarian' dimension of Turkey's new policy stance does not only pertain to Turkey's hospitality to the newcomers from Syria, - as of this writing approximately 12 thousand Syrians fled to Turkey -, but also concern the official position that Turkey would not ask the newcomers to return to Syria unless they wished to do so. So far, Turkey seems to have cared more about the well-being of the Syrian refugees than their sheer size. It is even speculated that Turkey would not object to the authorization of an UN-sanctioned humanitarian mission to help create a safe-haven either in Turkish or Syrian territory, if the number of people fleeing to Turkey grew in the days to come.

Noteworthy in this regard is that this particular Turkish approach stands in direct opposition to the policies apparently adopted by some of the rising/emerging powers of the Middle East and Asia. Most notable in this regard are Iran, Russia and China. Unlike Turkey, these countries made it undoubtedly clear that they have full trust in Assad, that they value their strategic relations with the current regime in Damascus and that they would veto any United Nations Security Council resolution that might authorize an

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<sup>6</sup> Ufuk Ulutaş, Turkey-Israel: A Fluctuating Alliance. SETA Policy Brief, 42, January 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Cengiz Çandar, Sıfır Sorundan Halkçı Değişime. Radikal, 21 June 2011.

[http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalYazar&ArticleID=1053519&Yazar=CENG%DDZ%20%C7ANDAR&Date=06.07.2011&CategoryID=98,\(01.07.2011\)](http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalYazar&ArticleID=1053519&Yazar=CENG%DDZ%20%C7ANDAR&Date=06.07.2011&CategoryID=98,(01.07.2011)).

international military operation to help pave the way for the protestors to topple Assad and his henchmen. The differences between Turkey's and Iran's policies have been so noticeable that Assad's sympathizers organized protests in front of the Turkish embassy while Iran has been praised by various Syrian politicians for its unwavering support to the incumbent regime.<sup>8</sup>

Turkey also differs from these countries in that the latter seems to be totally at odds with the principle of 'responsibility to protect' since the time it has begun to occupy international political agenda. The idea that the legitimacy and sovereignty of rulers should emanate from their ability to meet the fundamental needs and demands of their people, rather than their sovereign status in the United Nations, strikes a more receptive chord with Turkey. Turkey seems to have already internalized the ideas that rulers should be accountable to their people and that in case rulers did not fulfill their obligations to their people and the latter suffer at the hands of the former the international community would be entitled to take on the 'responsibility to protect' those who suffer.

It is true that Turkey is not happy with the main features of the western-imposed regional order in the Middle East and that the principle of 'responsibility to protect' might be instrumentally used by western powers to masquerade their selfish policies in other locations. However, Turkey's call for a new regional order in the Middle East, which should be more just, inclusive, authentic and representative, is not in contradiction with the 'responsibility to protect' principle. Similar to other rising powers, Turkey wants to see that its growing power capabilities and broadening national interests are increasingly taken into account in existing international platforms. However, unlike the other rising powers, Turkey does not have an existential problem with the idea that the strengthening of representative liberal democracy in non-western locations would contribute to global peace and security. Similarly, Turkey has come a long way to accept that in today's world the lines between internal and external realms are extremely blurred and external actors could involve in others' internal affairs insofar as their national interests and ideational standings are at stake.

Moreover, as opposed the 'western-skeptic' and 'sovereignty sensitive' approach of these countries, Ankara has begun to act in such a particular manner that one could find similar to the decades-long 'constructive ambiguity' policy of the EU towards Turkey. The EU has long been saying that Turkey might one day join the EU and share the security and economic benefits of the EU integration process should she successfully fulfill the membership criteria. Stated somewhat differently, Turkey's 'happy ending' with the EU has irrevocably been tied to her liberal-democratic transformation at home and abroad.

This is not to say that this particular EU approach towards Turkey is purely normative and does not reflect any rational calculation on EU's part. However, that is to say that the EU has been asking Turkey to resemble any typical EU member in its internal and external configuration in order to share in the benefits of membership. Noteworthy here is that Turkey is now applying the same mentality vis-à-vis Syria. The particular discourse adopted by Turkish statesmen alongside the political turmoil in Syria suggests that Syria need to change in a liberal-democratic fashion, either with or without Assad, if he wants to earn Turkey's friendship and cooperation.

Apparently, there are two particular motivating factors behind Turkey's more assertive and demanding policy towards Syria. One is more *realpolitik* and mainly concerns Turkey's increasing power capabilities in recent years and the concomitant

<sup>8</sup> "Esad Taraftarlarından Türkiye'ye Protesto", <http://www.dunyabulteni.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=163229> (01.07.2011).

assertiveness this dictates in its dealing with third countries. Similar to one of the basic laws of economics, that as income increases, expenditures tend to increase as well, growing power capabilities of states would lead them to broaden their strategic horizons as well as to act more boldly abroad. As Turkey has become more powerful and Turkey's continuing economic development and internal stability increasingly require improving relations with the neighboring countries, Ankara has simultaneously developed a strong interest in the internal developments of neighbors. The latest manifestation of this new approach has occurred during the third balcony speech of the Prime Minister Erdoğan that he delivered after his party won the parliamentary elections held on June 12, 2011.<sup>9</sup>

The other reason driving Turkey's new policy towards Syria is very much related with the nature of Turkey's internal transformation process. It seems that Turkish decision makers have come to the conclusion that the possibility of having friendly relations with neighbors would significantly increase if Turkey and its neighbors adopted similar political norms at home. This is not to say that Turkey has begun to see the projection of its values onto others from a security prism, as the Bush era American policies in the Middle East appear to have suggested. Rather, the point is that Turkish statesmen do now find it morally wrong to develop purely strategic relations with neighbors unless the latter transform themselves in the image of the rules, norms and principles that appear to have informed Turkey's internal transformation for a long period of time.

## Conclusion

This change in Turkey's approach towards Syria seems to augur well for Turkey's relations with the West as well. Unlike the someone who once argued that there was a serious 'shift of axis' in Turkish foreign policy, away from the west to the east, Turkey's emerging Syria policy should be seen as an indicator of Turkey's gradual Europeanization/westernization. This does not only concern Turkey's new foreign policy style, instruments and decision-making process but also the substance of the policies adopted vis-à-vis Syria. Turkey's current position on Syria is nearly identical with those of the United States, as announced by the President Obama on May 19, 2011, and the EU.<sup>10</sup>

Conceived of this way, the recent turmoil in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, provides Turkey with an opportunity rather than a risk in terms of its regional aspirations and relations with the western actors. If Turkey helps create a particular regional environment in which liberal democracy gradually takes root, this will both add up to her hard and soft power capabilities and offer an incentive to help ameliorate the tarnished relations with the West, most notably the European Union.

In this sense one can further argue that Turkey's soft power potential in the Middle East will first and foremost emanate from her success in combining the guiding principles of her domestic and foreign policies in a coherent manner. The most important challenge that Turkish rulers seem to face in this juncture is the growing need to find a lasting solution to internal problems in a liberal-democratic fashion. That is to say that unless Turkey gets rid of the decades-long 'Kurdish problem' and the 'Alawite-Sunni problem' in a satisfactory manner, the possibility of her messages to be received warmly would remain low.

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<sup>9</sup> For full text of Prime Minister Erdoğan's 3. Balcony Speech after June 2011 Elections: <http://www.t24.com.tr/74-milyonun-hukumeti-olacagiz/haber/150677.aspx> (01.07.2011).

<sup>10</sup> For Obama's Speech about Middle East: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/world/middleeast/20prexy-text.html> (01.07.2011).

To recap, Turkey seems now to have come to the point that she can no longer tolerate an unrepresentative authoritarian regime in her neighborhood. Remaining silent and continuing to bet on Assad, or any other dictator, would not only contradict the gist of Turkey's internal transformation process but also endanger her economic and security interests. Given this one should not feel surprised to see that the years ahead will witness Turkey's increasing attempts at 'regional order-creation' in her region in a western friendly manner.

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