

Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post-Arab Spring Period: A Case Study of Syria

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Abstract

With the AKP (Adalet Ve Kalkınma Partisi) party in power in 2002, Turkey embarked on the journey of establishing and maintaining peaceful relationships with the neighbouring Middle Eastern states. The goal of peace and regional harmony was to be achieved by forging economic, cultural and trade relationships and by achieving regional security. Following this vision, Turkish foreign policy resolved long-standing issues with Syria. But the advent of the Arab Spring in 2011 changed the entire situation. Turkey, which had successfully followed “zero problems” with neighbours, was confronted with the circumstances that it had to eventually intervene in Syria in order to not only preserve the democratic values of the region but also keep its own sovereignty intact. Turkey decided to side with the supporters of democracy. Second, when the US, Russia and Iran intruded in Syria with an aim to protect their interests, Turkey stood alone with its resolve that only strong democratic values and their continuity could assure long term peace in Syria. Since Turkey has always been a supporter and promoter of a sustained democracy, and a peaceful neighbourhood, it intervened in Syria by extending support to those fighting to espouse democratic traditions and democratic rule. The article makes use of role theory in order to estimate Turkey’s policy of engagement in Syria to restore peace, democracy and stability.

Keywords

Democracy, Foreign Policy, Turkey, Middle East

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Introduction

The broader parameters of Turkey's foreign policy are being shaped by its volatile neighbourhood. Ankara had to bring major changes in its foreign policy priorities after enunciation of Arab Spring, which caused a drastic transformation in the politics of its immediate neighbourhood. The civil turmoil that started in Tunisia wrapped up many neighbouring countries, and Syria was impacted most dramatically. The act of Hassan Ali Akleh of setting himself on fire laid the basis of the Syrian uprising in January 2011. The outbreak of uprising in Syria produced the opportunities of external actors to shape the conflict's outcome (Martini et al., 2013). The Assad regime, which used force to combat civilians or opponents, gave a good excuse to international actors to interfere in the region. Since Turkey shares the longest border with Syria, it was directly affected by the Syrian war. In this situation, Turkey was supposed to endure the major responsibility of handling problems arising from a dire political scenario of its neighbouring state with the refugee crisis and the security of the state as the leading challenges. Apart from Turkey, Russia was also amongst the intervening forces.

The Middle East regional landscape is dotted by the presence of autocratic and mostly pro-Western regimes in power. Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) which came to power in 2002 saw Arab Spring as an opportunity to rid the Middle East of the long-standing decadent regimes in power. Moreover, the AKP embraced the Islamists who had emerged as the strongest opposition in the Arab world. Providing the support for emerging Islamist fostered AKP's popularity at the domestic as well as international levels (Torelli, 2018).

When Arab Spring began to affect Syria and turned into a relentless conflict, it also impacted greatly on Turkish foreign policy. The leaders of AKP expected that Bashar al Assad would step down quickly and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood would gather support from the public to form a democratic government. However, it didn't happen. Turkey left its longstanding peaceful posture in foreign policy and adapted an aggressive posture.

The civil war in Syria created many challenges for the Turkish government; the revival of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)

negatively affected Turkey's security. The terrorist activities of so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) further increased the cost of the Syrian crisis.

Theoretical Framework

The notions of the Arab Spring revolution were based on equality, liberty, and democratization in the region. But the region was hit by instability as a consequence of these uprisings. The process still contains hopes because it has sowed the seeds of change and transformation. Many actors had to reconsider their positions according to the unfolding situation in Middle Eastern politics. Many countries had to change their foreign policy orientation. As an outcome, an evaluation of the situation in the Middle East began by scholars through the prism of actors' changing orientations (Keyman, 2013). The uprisings affected Turkish foreign policy and consequently led to a paradigm shift in its foreign policy. Before Arab Spring, Turkey had successfully knotted beneficial economic ties with the countries of the Middle East, using foreign investment, cross border trade and social and cultural apparatus (Barkley, 2011). However, the uprisings impacted Turkey's growing role in the Middle East in an interesting direction.

The central tenets of role theory explain changes in actors' foreign policy behaviours. The theory presumes that the concept of 'Role Conception' has become a dominant factor for formulating state foreign policy (Ozdamar et al., 2014). Role conceptions are, the, "policymakers own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules, and actions suitable to their states and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate systems" (Wish, 1980). This concept, however, does not rule out the presence of variables that constrain foreign policy actors, their preferences and explanations for specific behaviours (Ozdamar et al., 2014).

Foreign Policy Analysis through Role Theory

The analysis of foreign policy serves as a sub-discipline of international relations, and its development to the current stage is extended over the last fifty years. Foreign policy analysis (FPA)

emphasizes an actor-specific focus. FPA highlights the procedures of the decisions taken to formulate foreign policy and also involves the study of the components taking part in it. FPA contributes to developing a hypothetical criterion which can be applied as a practical means to analyse the whole process of foreign policy making (Hudson, 2005). Holsti (1970) Emphasizes state actors' role orientations in global politics. He suggests that foreign policy actors are not merely classified in 'non-aligned', 'bloc leaders', 'balancers' and 'satellites', they should be looked beyond the existing rough classifications.

Within this context, to evaluate national role conceptions and its responses to incidents which occur in global politics, it appears as a chief constituent in determining the behaviour of foreign policy. Holsti (1970) adopts the research technique characterized with the analysis of content in which he analyses the speeches of the leaders from every country spanning from January 1965 to December 1967 and concludes some foreign policy roles which are 17 in number: 'Bastion of revolution-liberator'; 'Regional leader'; 'Regional Protector'; 'Active Independent'; 'Liberation Supporter'; 'Anti-Imperialist Agent'; 'Defender Of The Faith'; 'Mediator-Integrator'; 'Regional-Subsystem Collaborator'; 'Developer'; 'Faithful Ally'; 'Independent'; 'Bridge'; 'Example'; 'Internal Development'; 'Isolate'; and "Protective". He is of the view that all such significant, role players of international politics and foreign relations can be evaluated against these roles and which help political scientists to make calculated assessments of any specific actor's future foreign policy choices towards countries, regions and even issues.

A leader's self-manifestation is taken as the concept of role in Holsti's framework. Holsti highlights that in different circumstances states have to initiate many roles at one time which result in "Inter-role Conflict." It may be possible that those with more than one role may end up creating strain among different roles. For instance, Barnett's arguments are based upon the clash of roles amongst those who are in support of self-supremacy and the ones in favour of Pan-Arabism in Middle East before 1967. In case of conflict among roles the actors' choice of specific role would affect their conception of that role as well as the way it would affect his foreign policy conception (Barnett, 1993).

Role theory framework can be summed up in four broad points. First, it gives a very specific theoretical framework which is helpful in specific foreign policy option analysis. Second, it also enables the comprehension of multiple roles which are played or adopted by a specific actor or a country. Third, by incorporating role conflict concept, it highlights different roles adopted by any actor and interplay of those different roles. Finally, it also gives social context, a prominent relevance in the analysis of foreign policy options.

Roles in Turkish Foreign Policy

The key determinants of a country's foreign policy are economic, political and geostrategic variables that are analysed by role theory through an estimation of the states' intellectual parameters and ideological values. A lot of study has been conducted on the foreign policy of Turkey perspective of its political preferences, the status of the nation, cultural vistas, geographic placement, strategic/military considerations, and economic material factors, but limited studies refer to role theory (Aras & Gorener, 2010). The references to Turkish foreign policy role conceptions are still possible to observe in studies which focus on the post-Cold War era. These studies highlight the role conceptions of Turkey; Turkey played the role of a “bridge between continents” (Europe and Asia), of a “bridge between civilizations” (Muslim and Christian), and of a “trading state” (that aims at decreasing its trade dependence on Europe and increasing its economic ties with the Middle East and Africa), and above all the role of a “liberal-democratic model” for Islamic countries (Özdamar et al., 2014).

Role Conception

This section describes the roles adopted by Turkish leadership in their foreign policy from the year 2002 to 2007 and 2007 to 2011. This period identifies or concludes eleven different roles which were adopted by Turkey. These roles are further divided into two sections or groups, one group comprises six roles, and these roles can be attributed to the pre-Arab spring era. During this period these roles, though based on different elements of foreign policy or different components of foreign policy, in general, are based on soft power elements or an instrument of

foreign policy. Once, the turmoil or the chaos triggered by Arab Spring spread in the country, the paradigm shifted from soft power instruments into hard power instruments, and five roles were adopted by Turkey in this phase. These are based on hard power instruments or hard power capabilities.

This means that the role conception conceived and adopted by Turkish leadership can be generally divided into two groups. The first group is to the pre-uprisings era, and the second group covers the post-uprising era. The first six were based on soft power determinants or instruments which mean Turkish conception of its role or the conception of a Turkish leadership role was a pacifist one embedded in accommodation and connectivity. However, post-Arab spring their role (based on hard power determinants or capabilities) manifested an approach immersed in intangible material competence evoking an aggressive, assertive and dominated role adopted by the Turkish leadership.

During the first period, six roles have been enumerated as under “mediator”, “defender of regional peace and stability”, “regional subsystem collaborator”, “good neighbour”, “bridge across civilizations” and “trading state.” (Ozdamar et al., 2014). Holsti’s “mediator-integrator” role idea that is about leaders’ “perceptions of a continuing task to help adversaries reconcile their differences” provides the base for the mediator role (Holsti, 1970). It means that a country has abilities to perform a role as a mediator between adversaries. The ‘defender of regional peace and stability role’ highlights the responsibility of a country which has capabilities to defend such a situation in the region. Holsti puts that the notion of this role “seemingly offer a widespread commitment to oppose any aggression or threat to peace, no matter what the locale.” This specific role is reflected in the speeches of the Turkish leadership, for instance, the Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs emphasized in his speech which he delivered at the United Nation in September 2004 that Turkey’s paramount objective is to maintain peace, harmony and stability in the region and beyond (Ozdamar et al., 2014).

The role termed as “regional subsystem collaborator” indicates the idea that a state plays in its role to develop and evolve a regional system

of cooperation and coordination. It refers to the role played by a coordinating country that synchronizes collaboration and cooperation of regional countries to promote harmony among all collaborating members. As Holsti (1970) describes, this role entails “far-reaching commitments to cooperative efforts with other states to build wider communities or to crosscutting subsystems”.

The “good neighbour” role conception is the key point of the foreign policy of Turkey. The ‘zero-problems’ with neighbours is a policy which shows a prominent indicator of this role. This policy emphasizes to solve existing conflicts with neighbouring countries. The “bridge across civilizations” role highlights the importance of Turkey’s geostrategic location where Turkey is located. It heightens the significance of Turkey’s role as a “bridge” between the Western states and the Eastern states or Islam. The “trading state” role conception refers to developing relations with other countries via economic engagements. It is an important factor of the foreign policy of Turkey since the AKP has been in power. To initiate business activities with other countries of the regions is taken as an indicator of this role.

With the outbreak of the uprisings, the roles’ conception in Turkish leadership underwent serious changes or modification. Consequently, there was a visible decline in the roles previously adopted as the role of mediator, a trading state, and good neighbours. All these roles were replaced by concepts like “central/pivotal country”, “active independent country”, “developer”, “protector of the oppressed” and “model/example country” (Ozdamar et al., 2014). These five roles were presumed by Turkish leadership, and these roles are based on hard power instruments. References to these roles have been very frequent in speeches or talks of the Turkish leadership, including the President, Prime Minister, and the Foreign Minister.

The “active independent” role refers to a country which actively engages in cooperative efforts, diplomatic affairs and trade dealings in order to defend its independence, and Holsti looks at it, “emphasizing to extend diplomatic and commercial relations to diverse areas of the world.” The role of “example/model country” can be substantiated by Holsti’s “example” role, which emphasizes that a state can gain influence

and prestige in the international system by promoting certain national policies (Holsti, 1970). It can also be evaluated keeping in view Turkey's identification as a secular state, a democracy and a country inhabited by a majority of Muslims. Judged by these paradigms, these distinctions place Turkey in a distinguished position to serve as an example or model for the countries of the Islamic World generally and in its own region especially.

The role of "protector of the oppressed" refers to a commitment and to a pledge to help all those who are being governed or ruled by oppressing regimes or oppressors. In the case of Syria, this role becomes relevant because the Syrian government or the ruling elite was taken as an oppressor, a non-representative, and a non-democratic entity by the Turkish leadership. Consequently, the Syrian people were viewed as those being ruled by the oppressed and the role of protecting the oppressed urged the Turkish leadership, or it put weight on the Turkish leadership to play this role and help the oppressed get rid of the oppressor.

Holsti (1970), explains the "developer role": "this national role conception indicates a special duty or obligation to assist underdeveloped countries." The "developer role" is to be played in developing countries to extend their support, influence and to help them to develop themselves, develop their economy, and strengthen their institutions. So, the developer role comes with active engagement in a developing country to bring about development and progress over there.

It is obvious now that in all these six roles, Turkey emerged as a connective, a pacifier and a country or leadership who played the significant role of promoting connectivity among states by using the tool of collaboration. Its role of a good neighbour rested on bridging the gaps with the neighbouring states and promoting economic and trade relations. Thus, overall, its role can be perceived as being rooted in harmony and accommodation and coordination with the states located around it.

However, as we come to the second phase of Arab spring Turkish foreign policy, the role conception visualized by Turkish leadership is fairly different from the role conceived and adopted in the first phase. We find a kind of relegation of the previously adopted role like a

mediator, a good neighbour, and a trading state. These roles were accommodating, but they were replaced by fairly assertive roles like “central/pivotal country”, “active independent country”, “developer”, “protector of the oppressed” and “model/example country.” With these five roles, we see the very visible conception of the role of an assertive, dominant country with an independent stance and approach towards regional and global affairs, particularly in the role such as protector of the oppressed which means engaging in a direct confrontation with those being labelled as oppressors. It is evident that these roles cannot be assumed, conceived or adopted by merely relying on soft power constituents or determinants. In order to play these roles, hard power components are essential, particularly while adopting roles like “protector of oppressed” or “central pivotal country (Özdamar et al., 2014).” It means a central role can only be played by an assertive and dominant role duly supplemented by hard power determinants.

Turkish Foreign Policy Activism under the Justice And Development Party (AKP)

Before the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power, the main objectives of Turkish foreign policy were based on the following principles: balance of power, Westernization and status quo. Turkey's relations with the Middle East were ambivalent and driven by insecurity (Hale, 2012). In early 1990, the Turkish policy makers gradually abandoned the ideology of Kamal that was rooted in Western approach and extrication from meddling in the Middle East matters (Makovsky, 1999). The real transformation and momentous decisions in foreign policy were taken by the AKP rule. In the era starting from 2000, the strategy of “zero problems with neighbours” was stipulated as the leading fundamental in Turkish foreign policy. The Turkish government took steps to create a conducive environment for dialogue and cooperation. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's advisor Ahmet Davutoğlu who also performed his role as a Foreign Minister between 2009 and 2014, established the framework of the new policy (Kardaş, 2012). Turkey emerged as a model that could be followed, to develop mutually beneficial and constructive connections with neighbours (Larrabee, 2010). The policy is aimed at bringing about a rapprochement with Syria.

The post-Arab Spring scenario, however, posed serious challenges to Turkey's activism in the Middle East. The most serious challenge was posed by the uprisings is the deterioration of the relationship with its important neighbour, Syria. The “zero problems-with-neighbours” policy was badly affected when the uprising reached Syria. Syrian crisis caused the decline of economic activities in the south-east and in increasing security risks (Noyan, 2014).

The First Phase, 2002-2007

In the first phase, the AKP manifested it a pro-active foreign policy that focused on a “bridge between civilizations” to initiate Turkey’s EU membership perspective (Holsti, 1970). The era of 2002-2007 was most important for AKP, in October 2005 the party aimed for achieving an important milestone to start official negotiations with the European Union (EU) for accession (Ahtisaari et al., 2009). The whole process to obtain EU membership was crucial for the AKP for various reasons. The AKP came into the power with the support of the mainstream Turkish Islamic movement (Milli Görüş). The movement challenged the Kemalist state structure and successfully became a legitimate political actor in the form of AKP (Torelli, 2018). The cadres of the party, were former members of the movement (Milli Görüş tradition) which caused serious scepticism about the agenda of the party (Toktaş & Kurt, 2010). In this phase, another event was the Iraq war, which escalated in 2003, and the US formally requested Turkey for using its territory against Saddam Hussain from the northern front. The Turkish parliament rejected the request to use its territory as a launch pad for an attack on Iraq. After this rejection, Turkey’s traditionally fixed Western-orientation was questioned. According to Öniş and Yılmaz, “While the March 1 decision not to allow US troops increased the interest towards Turkey in Arab states, at the same time, it harmed the relations between Turkey and the US” (Toktaş & Kurt, 2010). The March 2003 decision highlighted two major outcomes: first, Turkey has a capability to pursue an independent foreign policy agenda, but it did not mean that Turkey harboured intentions to break from the Western camp. Second, this decision set the limitations of Turkish foreign policy since the relations between both countries were affected.

In this period, a significant move was made in Turkish foreign policy to develop relations with the Middle East and North African regions (MENA). It began to establish its “central/pivotal country” role, which Öniş describes as, “Re-Discovering” neighbours” (Öniş, 2011). Davutoglu introduced four main principles of Turkey’s regional policy, “security for everyone”, “dialogue as a means of solving the crisis”, “economic interdependence” and “multicultural co-existence” (Grigoriadis, 2010). The relations were shaped via diplomatic, economic, and cultural inter-linkages with neighbouring states, including the convening of the Turkish Arab Economic Forum in Istanbul in 2005 (Ersoy & Ozyurek, 2017).

The Second Phase, 2007 to 2011

An active foreign policy role was carried by AKP with the same pace in its second term. This was the continuity of policies which were initiated by AKP in its first term in office. The two key individuals, Abdullah Gül and Ahmet Davutoglu played an important role in Turkey’s foreign policy initiatives. The focal points of Turkey’s diplomacy were the Europeanization drive and the greater Middle East. The term “Middle Easternization of Turkish foreign policy” was not only a very strong impetus throughout this period, but Turkey also developed bilateral relations with the Russian Federation as well as other key countries in the Caucasus and opened up to the African continent and Latin America (Oğuzlu, 2008).

In the second phase (2007 to 2011), certain ruptures were evident in the style of Turkish foreign policy activism. The long commitment to EU membership has been weakened, and a desire to act as an independent regional power was reflected in foreign policy discourse (Öniş, 2011). In the first years of AKP, the government played a “mediator” between Syrian-Israeli relations and pursued the Palestinian issue until 2009 when problems such as the Arab-Israeli conflict hurt mediation efforts (AKKAN, 2013). In 2009 at Davos, Prime Minister Erdogan used the World Economic Forum to argue with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres on the wrongs of the Gaza War (Koprulu, 2009). This incident not only resonated in Turkey but also on Arab streets. Muhammad Nur in Lebanon’s Al-Safir wrote, “Erdogan proved once again that he is more

Arab and human than most Arab rulers (BBC, 2009). Several events explained the intentions of the Turkish policy makers to formulate a more independent and assertive foreign policy in the post-2007 era. Leadership and ownership of foreign policy could be a natural starting point in post-2007 era. Ahmet Davutoğlu was a key figure who had become the person directly responsible for the formulation and implementation of Turkish foreign policy during the second phase. His “strategic depth” theory was interpreted as constituting central tenets of the foreign policy of Turkey (Öniş, 2011).

Evaluation of Turkish Response to Arab Uprisings

Turkey was taken by surprise over the uprising in Tunisia, as all the other countries were (Altunışık, 2013). Therefore, in the earlier phase of the uprising, Turkey undertook a cautious approach. After recovering from the state of surprise, Turkey officially expressed its opinion, signifying the connection between the chaos and “the lack of political freedoms in the country.” (Thenational, 2011). It also showed unity with the demonstrators in Tunisia. Ben Ali succumbed to the protest and fled from the country. The AKP announced that it would support the new government. Davutoglu optimized by predicting that Tunisia’s revolution could be a “positive example” and “a model for other countries” (Reuters. 2011). Therefore, Turkish policymakers were unequivocally in favour of the stepping down of Mubarak in Egypt when the turmoil reached the alarming stage. Erdoğan took the lead in asserting that Mubarak should step down immediately and let the people decide whom they want to elect as a ruler of the country (TurkishNews, 2011). Turkey had larger economic interests in Libya. These economic interests could be fulfilled only if the regime’s survival and stability were ensured. Turkey had concerns over regime change in Libya or any sort of intervention. Turkey had to play an active role as a member of NATO. When the NATO’s intervention became impossible to avoid, Turkey extended its support to the international coalition forces to depose Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi (Duman, 2011). Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was also cautioned by Erdogan on several occasions that he must learn lessons from the fate of Muammar Qaddafi who was ousted and later killed by the protesters (Logan, 2011).

The gauging of the feedback that Turkey received from the actions it performed had a consequential impact on the policy choices of the Turkish leadership. Davutoglu assessed that these cases could create opportunities for Turkish policymakers to formulate a policy for handling the situation in Syria. As Davutoglu evaluates, “when the popular movements began in Syria, it was much easier to predict their course given how events had turned out in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and even Yemen” (Demir, 2017). This statement revealed that the Turkish policymakers had strongly believed that the uprising in Syria would shape the same outcomes which were already evident in previous uprisings. Turkish policymakers concluded that previous revolts were indications of a regional transformation, and Syria will also undergo the same change. The outcomes from earlier uprisings were conceived by the Turkish policymakers as yardsticks to make self-evaluation and pin point the principles that form the basis of Turkey’s policy in Syria. For the prediction of correct outcomes, Davutoglu’s approach was characterized by self-serving attributes, on account of the prediction of correct outcomes. The Turkish leader claimed that the self-serving attribute was not just because of making accurate prediction of outcomes, but they also connected it with what happened in the uprising and what was experienced by them (Ayata, 2015). It was proclaimed elsewhere by Davutoğlu that, “We in Turkey and the Middle East replaced humility with dignity”(Davutoglu, 2011).

The Dynamics of Turkey-Syria Relations

Turkey’s protracted, intimate and turbulent relationship with Syria has had a pervasive impact on the country’s history. In 1970 the relationship gained animosity over new issues. When, on the Euphrates, Turkey started to build a web of dams, the Syrian agricultural sector got affected because the flow of water was obstructed from the other side. The relationship between both countries got hostile when Syria started supporting the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which Turkey had declared a terrorist organization. The PKK has fought against Turkey to separate the Kurds (Davutoglu, 2011). In 1998, the situation got more intense when Turkey started to mobilize its army against Syria and demanded from the Syrian government to extradite the PKK leader

Abdullah Ocalan. Turkey further demanded from Syria to entirely refrain from supporting PKK. Syria responded positively to Turkey's request but in return asked for the Euphrates waters (Aras, 2011).

The relationship between both the countries started to ameliorate after the accession of AKP into power. The Turkish government took some significant steps to improve relations with Syria which included an increase in trade (2006 to 2010 the export volume was quadruple), revoking of the visa requirement and the arrangement of joint cabinet meetings (Demir, 2017). Erdogan spent his holidays with Syrian President Bashar Assad (Phillips, 2011). This tremendous change in the relationships of both countries was defined as no less than a revolution. An era of rapprochement between Turkey and Syria began marked by serious endeavours to restore peace and cooperation (Phillips, 2011).

However, the model of Turkish-Syria relations was weakened by the protest movement in Syria. Turkey came up for a leading role in influence over Bashar al-Assad, the opposition, and many international entities involved. Turkey's approach to resolve the issue was preferably adopted by various actors in the international community (especially Turkey's NATO allies and the US). At the outset, Ankara attempted to persuade Assad through its diplomatic channels for the initiation of democratic reforms to overcome the situation (Editor, 2011). The Turkish government supported the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a transnational Islamic Sunni organization. The organization activities were banned in Syria. Turkey wanted the Assad regime to approach the Muslim Brotherhood by announcing amnesty for them and giving them an opportunity to have a share in power (Demir, 2017). By the end of July 2011, the Turkish government condemned the regime's tyrannical deeds against the demonstrators staging the protest and warned Syria that it would not escape the regime from the pressure of the world. When the disruption spiralled out, the conflict impacted Turkey domestically and posed a threat to Turkey's national stakes. Turkey took a hard stance against Assad when he continued to use violence and reneged on his promises (Cornell et al., 2012).

Erdogan berated Assad as the butcher of Damascus and an embodiment of moral bankruptcy and also accused him of being false

and atrocious (Burch, 2011). Such denigrating epithets aggravated the relations even further. Both the leaders Erdoğan and Davutoğlu began to persuade him to quit because they declared him a criminal and a ruler who had lost legitimacy. Turkey took practical steps to undermine the Assad regime and pursued a strategy which was more risk oriented. Turkey started to strength the opposition in Syria. The rebels against Assad were allowed to organize inside Turkey. The Turkish government paved for the establishment of the Syrian National Council (SNC) (Seibert, 2011). Turkey also facilitated the Syrian army defectors by opening its southern border. Erdogan severed all relationships with the Assad regime, and all the trade agreements across the border were terminated. He along with NATO allies imposed sanctions on Syria (Aljazeera, 2011).

The situation ratcheted up when the Syrian army downed the jet of the Turkish army in June 2012. Turkey altered its rule of engagement and warned the Syrian regime about the possibility of military action. The Syrian Army shelled Turkish territory. After this incident, the government formally tabled the issue in the parliament and obtained a mandate to carry out an operation against any looming threat from across the border (Arango & Saad, 2012). Being a member of NATO, Turkey approached NATO to call emergency meetings so that the alliance's strategic response on common defence could be invoked (Schmitt & Arsu, 2012). In all, Turkey's relations with Syria underwent a major transformation during the second phase typified by Arab Spring and the wave of opposition and reforms in the Middle East. Turkey, since the beginning of Arab Spring, has been powerfully positioning itself in the favour of democracy as the only hope for the establishment of peace in the region.

Turkey's Role during Syrian Crisis

Turkey's democratic achievement enabled it to establish itself as a strong democracy and a flourishing economy in the Middle East (Aktürk, 2016a). EU has always been reluctant in providing membership to Turkey on various pretexts, but Arab Spring provided an opportunity for Turkey to assert its progressive democratic role not only to the EU but to the whole world (Aktürk, 2017). The Justice and Democratic Party

(AKP) had always been a staunch supporter of democracy in the Middle Eastern states, as democratization carries prospects of welfare states coming into fruition. Turkey supported regime changes in Egypt and Syria with the hope that the democratization holds more promise for the masses as opposed to earlier regimes. However, the Western powers, including the US that earlier extended support to regime change, ultimately forsook Turkey amidst a neighbourhood infested with turmoil and crowded with non-democratic regional factions (Aktürk, 2016a).

Although Turkey was ambitious to dislodge authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Syria but as a matter of fact Turkey's material and ideational capabilities were not compatible with the goals set for this task and coupled with that the "Revolutionary People's War by the Kurdish socialist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) against Turkey in July 2015 came as a bolt from the blue, setting a bloodiest battle field for the Turkish armed forces and the PKK" (Aktürk, 2016b). In the wake of such an insurgency, the situation became gruesome when the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which was a Syrian ally of PKK was revealed to be receiving support from the US and thus playing as a proxy for the US (Ustun, 2016). This led to a terribly fissured Turkish –American relationship. In such an alarming situation, internal security concerns gained primacy over external conflicts. In the summer of 2016, Turkey reached for a rapprochement with Russia (Bershidsky, 2016). The unsuccessful military coup attempt of 15 July 2016 paved the way for an effective rapprochement between both the countries over the crisis of Syria (Bertrand, 2016). In August 2016, eventually, Turkey demonstrated its might in favour of FSA by hailing "Operation Euphrates Shield" (Shaheen, 2016).

Geopolitical Realities and Turkey's Emergent Roles as a Central Country and Pivotal Country

Turkey established itself as a third faction in Syria whose agenda was different from both the US and Russia. The geostrategic location of Turkey, the religious bonding it has with the Middle East and the historical roots it has in this region make it much more relevant than extra regional powers. Before the advent of the AKP government, Turkish foreign policy stood on the pillars of "Westernization", "balance

of power”, and status quo. However, these principles were of little use to respond to the ambition and the needs of Turkey in the twenty-first century. Thus, “neo-Ottomanism” as termed by many scholars came as a hallmark of Turkish foreign policy adopted by AKP. The concept of neo-Ottomanism emerged from a perception that since the establishment of the modern Republic, since 1923, North African provinces of the former Ottoman Empire and Middle East were ignored. This ignorance led to poor political, economic and cultural relations with the states of the former Ottoman Empire. Neo-Ottomanism was the policy aimed at reviving strong cultural, economic and geo-strategic ties with the aforementioned polities. The “neo-Ottomanism” revolves around three objectives, led by the principle of “the indivisibility of security” which implies that a country’s safety is dispensed with a safe neighbourhood and because of that Turkish policy makers focused on promoting the concept of collective security either it was Iraq, Syria or the issue of Kurds. The second principle entails economic interdependence which, according to the policy makers, was a key factor for sustainable peace. Lastly, the third principle emphasizes cultural harmony, mutual dialogue and respect (İşiksal, 2018).

These principles indicate Turkey’s acceptance and respect for the political differences and preference of dialogue over any other option, in case of a problem. This ideology behind neo-Ottomanism reinforced the thinking that Turkey should play an effective role in the Middle East. These foreign policy guidelines signified the most important aspect of the neo-Ottomanism, that is, zero problem with neighbours. The foreign policy immersed in the ideology discussed above helped Turkey improve its relations with the neighbouring states and resolve long standing issues with Iran, Armenia, Iraq and Syria.

With Arab Spring and the crisis in Syria, there came a swift and dramatic shift in the relationships between both countries. Turkey, in accordance with its “zero problem with its neighbours” policy, urged Syria to avoid the use of perverse force against the opposition and also asserted the Assad regime’s ability to accelerate the democratic process which was entirely turned down by Bashar al Assad (Editor, 2011). The Syrian armed forces downed the Turkish F-4 aircraft which led to a

serious rift between the relationships of both the countries (Hearst, 2013). Turkish armed forces retaliated on an equal level, and thus Turkey became a staunch supporter of anti-Bashar-al-Assad forces, despite the fact that it was not Turkey's war exactly (İşiksal, 2018). Turkey's soft approach towards anti-Assad regime, thus, led to the perception that Assad's regime was actually an offshoot of an illegitimate attempt of suppressing the majority by the use of force.

The leading members of NATO, like France, the US and Turkey, all backed the revolutionary rising especially in Egypt and Syria. Gradually, they all, except Turkey, withdrew their support for the revolutionary factions (Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt/FSA in Syria) (Aktürk, 2017). Turkey faced opposition from Saudi Arabia (Hearst, 2013). Iran also extended support regime in Syria as it also had interests like Saudi Arabia. They used "sectarianism as a counter revolution" (Rasheed, 2011). Turkey was firm on its stance of democratization in the chaos stricken states of the Middle East, but it could not find a single polity from the Middle East to ally with. Egypt could have been such an entity, but that hope died down with the military coup of 2013 (Kotan, 2017).

Russia and Iran were adamant in their resolve to suppress the anti-authoritarian revolution in Syria. Russia and Iran provided material support to Assad at a time when there was no external help present in Syria (Bassam and Osborn, 2015). France and the US, strangely enough militarily with Syria until then. The policy of France and US became evident from their urge to maintain a good relationship with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt (Board, 2019). Turkey was left alone with its ambition of democratization in Egypt and Syria as Western Powers showed least yearning for democratic evolution in these countries. Thus, geopolitical realities tamed Ankara's democratic idealism, and eventually Turkey had to revise its goals in Egypt and Syria (Aktürk, 2017).

The attempted coup in Turkey on 15 July 2016 was an obvious warning against the process of democratization but the failure of this coup proved the strength of democratization in Turkey over authoritarianism (Filkins, 2016). This coup gave a sound reason to Turkey to side with Russia in Syria. The coup plotters were alleged to have an affiliation with Fethullah Gulen who was residing in the US

since 1990. The US refused to hand over Gullen or any of the officers involved in coup who escaped to the US. This paved the way for Turkey–Russia–rapprochement in Syria. The year 2016 was characterized by a great shift in Turkey’s policy regarding Syria (France-Presse, 2016).

Turkey’s policy reshuffle became strongly evident with the commencement of the Operation Euphrates Shield against ISIS. The operation was launched only one month after the failed military coup in Turkey. Although 43% of the generals were dismissed, yet, this did not affect the launch of this operation which actually testifies the strength of the army (Aktürk, 2017). Turkey’s frequent consultation with Russia prior to the operation created an impression that it was carried out with the implied consent of Russia (Tass, 2018). The US extended its support to the least against ISIS in this operation. It establishes the fact that Turkey entered Syria in order to support the FSA as a “third Force” while the US supports PYD, which is a Kurdish socialist, and Iran and Russia support Bashar al-Assad. Operation Euphrates Shield is in accordance with the material capability of Turkey, yet, it does not aim at regime change in Syria. Its major goal is also to create or establish safe spheres in the northern parts of Syria for the civilian escapers of Assad’s regime, the PYD and ISIL.

Turkey’s military intervention in Syria unfolded covert threats oozing in its neighbourhood. For example, Turkey’s operation in Afrin revealed an accumulation of weapons next to its borders, uncovering may be a plan of occupation of its bordering cities. Thus prioritizing its national security and territorial integrity, Turkey had to advance its role in Syria ahead of mere rhetoric. Turkey is home to the largest number of Syrian refugees, almost 3.6 million roughly, that makes 64% of the Syrian refugees who are being sheltered in Turkey (Kirisci et al., 2018). Turkish leaders have been reported to have shown keen interest in the reconstruction of Aleppo, and this was one of the central points of discussions with their Russian counter parts.

Turkey’s Engagement in Syria and Growing Complexity

Turkey’s role in the next stages of the Syrian conflict will be highly relevant. There are still some areas where Turkey needs to ponder to

answer looming questions. First, how far would the territorial expanse of the operation Euphrates go? What will be the future of north western Syrian regions that are stronghold of the FSA? Another highly critical question relates to the huge number of Syrian refugees in Turkey and in other parts of the world. These refugees may despise Assad's regime, but the "right of return" is a principled and humanistic imperative, and all those driven away from their homes either by force or by circumstances should have a chance to return to their homes. Hosting approximately three million Syrian refugees, Turkey has become the largest refugee recipient state (Kirisci, 2018). Turkey's humane approach for war stricken refugees has saved three million human beings from the misery of war.

The Turkish public rejected the authoritarian approach by showing anti-sentiment against the attempted military coup of 2016. They have reflected their love for democratization and in accommodating the Syrian refugees. The Turkish public also implies their support and stand for the right of the majority to govern the country. Thus, Turkey's rapprochement with Russia or Iran does not mean that it would reverse the anti-authoritarian sentiment in favour of authoritarian dictators. The strong sentiment of the Turkish people for democracy motivated them to fight the coup of 2016 and termed as "the martyrs of democracy" (News24, 2016).

The Syrian conflict is about to enter the final stages, and all the actors present in Syria are likely to undergo a transformational role which depends on different variables. Is there an alliance possible between Russia and Turkey so as to put an end to Syrian regime? Turkey was drawn to Russia on a circumstantial pretext, and their differences on various regional issues still exist. They both have conflict of interests in Syria. So, such an alliance faces serious questions. On the contrary, if the US quits Syria, then Turkey's presence in Syria would gain more impetus.

Overall, Turkey and Syria seem to remain intertwined due to a host of geopolitical, economic, and social connections between them. Both sides will have plenty of opportunities to engage and benefit, and Turkey is likely to pace ahead for constructivism. A recent statement by the

Turkish President is a testimony to his resolve as he said that Turkey would help create a stabilization force featuring fighters from all parts of Syrian society (Erdogan, 2019). Only a diverse body can serve all Syrian citizens and bring law and order to various parts of the country.

Turkey's interest in Syrian reconstruction is evident from the fact that in the area captured during Operation Euphrates Shield (that is the corridor between Azaz and Jarabulus), huge infra-structure projects are underway, such as hospital a worth \$17 million in al-Bab and opening branches of Turkish universities. Similarly, a higher degree of rule of law and bureaucratic professionalism has been instilled. Another dominant venture that has been undertaken is the funding of a governing body which has 150 employees with 7000 trainee police force to patrol the corridor between Azaz –Jarabulus corridor (Gurini, 2019).

Conclusion

The Middle East has long been inflicted with authoritarian regimes which the masses tried to topple down with the initiation of the movement termed as Arab Spring. People were weary of these regimes, and they wanted democratic regimes instituted. In Syria's case, Bashar Al Assad had a legacy of authoritarian rule since the days of his father. Turkey had for long tried to maintain peaceful relations with neighbours by following "Zero Problem with Neighbours" which encouraged Turkey's neighbouring nations to settle bilateral issues through talks and negotiations. This policy was also adopted to stabilize the country's economy by forging trade relationships with neighbours. But the surge of restlessness and chaos affected Turkey, forcing it to rely on the role theory of conducting foreign relations. Eventually, there had to be an active fighting faction in Syria. Turkey's ultimate objective is to have a stable and peaceful neighbour. Turkey's approach towards Syria is immersed in the speculation that if after the demolition of ISIS, Syria is left on its own, all efforts to establish peace would go in vain as the left over warring factions would never be able to settle peacefully. So, a peaceful and stable Syria is more necessary for Turkey than any other state in the world. Turkey can stabilize domestically and internationally only when its neighbourhood is peaceful, secure and prosperous.

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