

# Why Turkey should Disengage from the Regime-Change Game in Syria?

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## Introduction

In this essay, I will be examining Turkey's involvement in the current regime-change war in Syria, analysing it in light of the knowledge acquired from the *Challenges in Global Affairs* MOOC specialization course; in particular, the modules related to IR theories, conflict resolution and global (geo)political economy.

The research question to be answered in the essay is stated explicitly in its title. Most of the background knowledge and related information in this essay is a result of my lifelong intimate interest in the region, and day-to-day follow-up of war chronicles from various reliable sources.

## Turkish-Syrian relations up until 2011

Turkey and Syria share a border of more than 900 km, centuries of common history when they belonged to the same empires (Hittite, Assyrian, Persian, Byzantine and Ottoman) and unmistakable cultural affinity and living, cross-border family and ethnic ties.

However, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relations between the two countries were at odds with these favourable factors; the countries even faced off in some dangerous confrontations such as those of 1957 and 1998. The major reasons for these tensions included: a) the bitterness of their mutually contradicting narratives of the historic circumstances of their separation as a result of the Ottoman Empire's disintegration in WWI, b) mutually exclusive identity constructs, c) opposite entrenchment during the Cold War, d) dispute over Hatay-Alexandretta province, e) water apportionment, f) the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) cross-border guerrilla activities, and g) Turkey's rapprochement with Israel.

Turkey's foreign policy, and its worldview in general, was strongly influenced by its epic struggle for survival between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—firstly as the declining Ottoman Empire (the Sick Man of Europe) and, later on, as the newborn Republic of Turkey, fighting against multinational invaders to protect its territorial integrity infringed by the terms of the Sèvres treaty (1920). This survival paranoia, a.k.a. "Sèvres Syndrome", produced a very wary and cynical character that perceives all the surrounding nations as enemies. <sup>(1)</sup><sup>(2)</sup> In such a cognitive construct, "There is an imagined threshold that Turkish foreign policy behaviour turns to be very responsive and even dares to undertake a high degree of risk. This dare to take risks also comes from the masculine nature of Turkish politics". <sup>(3)</sup>

Therefore, it would not be easy to understand the Turkish foreign policy in terms of neorealism or neoliberalism, where the foreign policy of a particular state could be

explained as the result of rational actions to follow its national interest. Alternatively, Turkish foreign policy could be best explained using constructivism, where foreign policy is formulated based on social constructs, ideas, norms and identities of the self and the other.

However, the emergence of Neo Ottomanism early this century launched a new dynamism in Turkey's foreign policy, especially with regard to its former Ottoman territories in the Middle East. Using its soft power, Neo Ottomanism aspired to play more proactive and leading role within the sphere of the former Ottoman Empire which was relabelled by its theorist (former Foreign Minister and current PM) Ahmet Davutoğlu as the "strategic depth" of Turkey. Neo Ottomanism was initially promoted as a peaceful "zero problems with neighbours" policy, and was practiced as such; yet, since the beginning of the so called Arab Spring early this decade, it turned out extremely aggressive, interventionist and even expansionist.

The Turkish-Syrian honeymoon period began in late 2004 when the then Prime Minister (now the President) of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Damascus to sign a free trade agreement followed by more than 20 memorandums of understanding and protocols, thus inaugurating a new era of extremely cooperative and warm relations. The personal relationship between the PM Erdoğan's and the Syrian President Bashar al Assad rapidly developed into full friendship; joint cabinet meetings were held and the two leaders with their families even vacationed together.

During this period, bilateral trade between the two countries skyrocketed to unprecedented levels; Turkish exports to Syria almost tripled from \$609m in 2006 to \$1.85bn in 2010, while Syria's exports to Turkey more than tripled from \$187m to \$662m in the same period. Thanks to abolishing entry visas in 2009, Syrian visitors to Turkey increased more than sevenfold between 2002 and 2011, from 126,323 to 899,494 a year, whereas the numbers of Turkish visitors to Syria increased from 467,648 to 1,664,209 (864,988 excluding daily visits). This extensive cooperation was led by the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council that was formed in 2009 along with many other specialized institutions. <sup>(4)</sup>

Nevertheless, the free trade agreement was not equally beneficial for the two countries; their bilateral trade balance that was historically in favour of Syria began to lean toward Turkey's side, from \$361m in favour of Syria in the year 2000 to \$1bn in favour of Turkey in 2010. Many Syrian businesses went bankrupt due to unfair competition imposed by the free trade agreement with Turkey, resulting in increased unemployment and poverty. Nonetheless, Damascus was still satisfied with its flourishing relations with Ankara because, at the time, it was desperate to mitigate its isolation and the threats imposed by the American occupation in neighbouring Iraq and the hostile attitudes of most pro-western Arab states that were outraged by its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah.

Capitalizing on its dramatic success in advancing its relations with Syria and its "zero problems with neighbours" angelic mood, Turkey went further to do the same with other Arab countries, even with its traditional geopolitical rival Iran and its historic enemies Armenia, Greece and Bulgaria.

All in all, for an innocent neoliberal institutionalist observer, by the end of 2010, it looked like Turkey was leading the Middle East to become a utopian commonwealth; yet for a skeptical neorealist it was nothing but "too good to be true", or only the calm before the storm.

## The Middle East grand chessboard

The geostrategic importance of Syria on the eastern end of the Mediterranean and the crossroads between the three continents of the Old World is not something new. Yet, by the turn of the decade, this importance reached new heights due to certain scheduled geopolitical milestones and competing strategic energy projects. This triggered a geopolitical shock wave in the region igniting struggle for power redistribution amongst major global and regional players.

In February 2009, President Obama confirmed his administration's intent to complete the withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq by the end of 2011. Later on, in December 2010 he announced that the United States will start to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan too, in July 2011 and that the draw-down will conclude in 2014. Obviously, these announcements came as statements of defeat in two major wars that were initially intended to be just the beginning of a larger campaign that would "take out 7 countries in 5 years: Iraq [done], Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan & Iran" as General Wesley Clark the former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO during the 1999 War on Yugoslavia revealed in 2007. <sup>(5)</sup>

Nonetheless, it seemed that the failure of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq did not mean the cancellation of the original plan, but rather pursuing the same objectives using smart power (fourth generation warfare) as Hillary Clinton suggested during her Senate confirmation hearing for the position of Secretary of State in January 2009. <sup>(6)</sup>

The fact that Iran was to be the main candidate to fill up the power vacuum resulting from the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq meant that Iran's influence would then extend contiguously from Central Asia to the Mediterranean—a geopolitical nightmare for the West and Israel indeed. Therefore, it made sense for Western allies to try to break this chain (self-proclaimed as the Axis of Resistance) in Syria this time.

Likewise, Turkey always thought that she is more entitled than Iran or anybody else, to have special influence in Syria. Thus, she thought that it was the time to topple the Assad's secular regime and install a proxy pro-Islamist one instead. This Turkish intent apparently was a part of a larger covert deal between the Islamist AKP government of Turkey, the Emir of Qatar and the international organization of the Muslim Brotherhood on one side and the U.S. on the other, to facilitate power transfer in some key Arab countries (including Syria) to Muslim Brotherhood branches (at the time labelled as moderate Islamists) under the leadership of AKP to contain Sunni Islamic extremism and counterbalance expanding Iranian/Shiite influence.

Moreover, Turkey had the ambition of becoming the major oil & gas pipeline hub in the region. Capitalizing on its geostrategic position on the south eastern gate of Europe, Turkey is the ideal passage for natural gas from Central Asia, the Caspian basin, Iraq and the Persian Gulf to Europe.

Turkey and Qatar had a plan to lay a major gas pipeline to transport Qatari natural gas to Europe via Syria and Turkey. Obviously, such a project would be greatly welcomed by EU because it would reduce its dependency on Russian gas that could potentially impede its political will in any future confrontations with Russia (such as the current one on Ukraine). Yet, reportedly, Syria rejected the Qatari proposal in order to protect its Russian ally's interests. <sup>(7)</sup>

Some analysts believe that Qatar's involvement in the regime-change effort in Syria is partially motivated by its interest to lay a gas pipeline to Europe through Syria:

"The discovery in 2009 of a new gas field near Israel, Lebanon, Cyprus, and Syria opened new possibilities to bypass the Saudi Barrier and to secure a new source of income. Pipelines are in place already in Turkey to receive the gas. Only Al-Assad is in the way. Qatar along with the Turks would like to remove Al-Assad and install the Syrian chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is the best organized political movement in the chaotic society and can block Saudi Arabia's efforts to install a more fanatical Wahhabi based regime. Once the Brotherhood is in power, the Emir's broad connections with Brotherhood groups throughout the region should make it easy for him to find a friendly ear and an open hand in Damascus". <sup>(8)</sup> In fact, Turkey shared all these interests and concerns with Qatar.



Figure 1: A map showing major natural gas pipelines throughout Turkey; dotted lines represent planned, yet not confirmed projects.

## Turkey's involvement in the war in Syria

Turkey has been the earliest and the most involved country in all aspects of the regime-change game in Syria—probably except for the financing aspect where Qatar and Saudi, with their abundant petrodollars, have been the front bankers. Taking advantage of its long border with Syria and its significant diplomatic, military and intelligence capabilities, Turkey did not spare any means to destabilize Syria in the quest for regime change. With probably only one exception of a large-scale declared war, these means included escalating violence and human crises, manufacturing and

fuelling ethnic and sectarian hostilities, inciting and facilitating the destruction and looting of Syria's economic and cultural assets, facilitating illegal oil export for the benefit of ISIL terrorists and enabling tens of thousands of foreign terrorists to join rebels in the Syrian war, meanwhile rallying the NATO and the international community for direct military intervention.

Here is what the U.S. Vice President Joe Biden had to say in this regard in a truth-telling moment while speaking at Harvard University on Oct. 2, 2014: "what my constant cry was that our biggest problem is our allies – our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. The Turks were great friends – and I have the greatest relationship with Erdoğan, which I just spent a lot of time with – the Saudis, the Emiratis, etc. What were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except that the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world. Now you think I'm exaggerating – take a look. Where did all of this go? So now what's happening? All of a sudden everybody's awakened because this outfit called ISIL which was Al Qaeda in Iraq, which when they were essentially thrown out of Iraq, found open space in territory in eastern Syria, work with Al Nusra who we declared a terrorist group early on and we could not convince our colleagues to stop supplying them. So what happened? Now all of a sudden – I don't want to be too facetious – but they had seen the Lord. Now we have – the President's been able to put together a coalition of our Sunni neighbors, because America can't once again go into a Muslim nation and be seen as the aggressor – it has to be led by Sunnis to go and attack a Sunni organization. So what do we have for the first time?"<sup>(9)</sup>

## The repercussions of Erdoğan's Syrian gamble on Turkey

As the war in Syria approaches the end of its fourth year, its impact so far on Turkey's emerging economy is staggering. The Turkish economic growth that was showing strong recovery signs after the 2008 global financial crisis, shooting up to 9.2% in 2010 dropped to almost 3% in 2014.<sup>(10)</sup> Since the beginning of the war, the Turkish Lira has lost more than 38% of its value vs. US Dollar, from \$0.66 in early 2011 to \$0.41 in February 2015.<sup>(11)</sup>



Figure 2: Turkey's GDP growth 2009 - 2014

## USD per 1 TRY

11 Feb 2010 00:00 UTC - 10 Feb 2015 01:47 UTC

TRY/USD close:0.40376 low:0.40060 high:0.71736

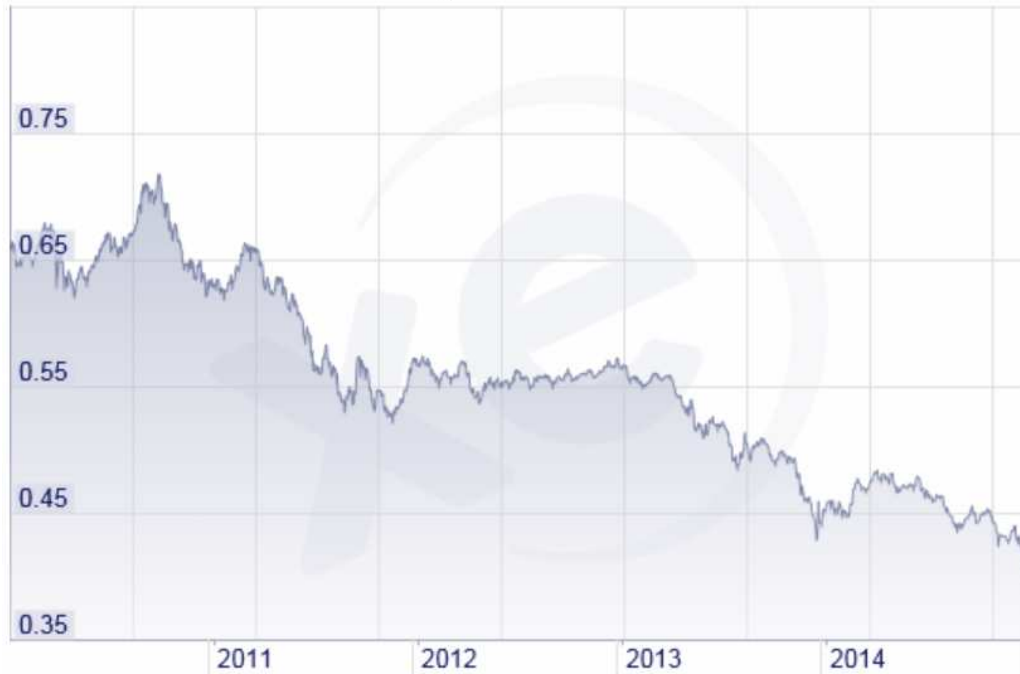


Figure 3: Turkish Lira exchange rate vs. US\$ 2011 -2015

In April 2014, Moody's credit rating agency downgraded Turkey's sovereign credit rating to its lowest investment grade, Baa3, with a negative outlook. <sup>(12)</sup> Since the country's economic growth depends heavily on foreign investments and loans, such poor rating is likely to further hurt its economy.

However, if economic deterioration is the price that Turkey had to pay due to the failure of its plan, the price of its "success" is likely to be much more exorbitant. Since success for Erdoğan means overthrowing the current Syrian regime, the most likely alternative would not be a proxy regime, but rather an Afghani style bloody self-destructing chaos in which Turkey will play the role of Pakistan, with its southern territories turning into another Peshawar and Waziristan.

Furthermore, any progress Syrian Kurds make toward an independent entity will enhance the position of the Kurdish PKK separatists in Turkey, since the leading Kurdish party in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), is nothing but the Syrian branch of the PKK. Likewise, if the Wahabbi Sunni extremists' aggressions against Syrian Alawites develop into a full-scale sectarian war, this could easily spread to Turkey. Given that the proportions of Kurds and Alawites in Turkey are much more significant than their siblings in Syria, the potential ethnic/sectarian explosion of Turkey could be far more tragic.

According to the official figures, there are 1,645,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey as of November 2014, unofficial numbers are estimated at around 2 million, 85% of them are living outside of refugee camps. <sup>(13)</sup> These figures are due to increase dramatically when the Syrian Army expands its offensive against rebels in northern

territories later this spring. The social, economic and security impact on Turkey will be enormous.

And last but not least, the image of Turkey in Western mainstream media and official circles has suffered enormously due to its reckless adventure in Syria; it is increasingly postured as a supporter of al Qaeda/ISIL terrorists. This will result in increased isolation and will further weaken its already slim chance to join EU.

## What is to be done? – An exit strategy

By now, Erdoğan should have realized that his four-year war in Syria is an unwinnable one, and that while he continues his involvement in this war, his choices are very limited—to lose more or to lose everything. Therefore, any rational thinking should lead him, sooner rather than later, not only to seek the best exit strategy, but also to be part of any post-war regional arrangements, before he is left alone high and dry on the shores of the Syrian quagmire. To this end, Turkey really needs to critically revise its foreign policy, renounce its masculine self-righteousness and pompous activism, and revert to its previous “zero problems with neighbours” policy, yet without the illusions and hegemonic hidden agenda of Neo Ottomanism.

Two powerful stakeholders will be more than happy not just to help him to climb down from the high tree he had climbed, but also to reward him generously for doing so; namely, President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President Hasan Rohani of Iran. Despite the fact that the two are the closest allies of President Assad of Syria, they were very careful to maintain good relations with Erdoğan over four years of the Syrian crisis and are very keen to see an end to it, and both have long-term trade and geostrategic interests in maintaining strong relations with Turkey. Thus, this would be a triple win formula for all three parties.

Despite his current hopeless situation, Erdoğan will not go empty-handed to such negotiations table. It is true that he lost the war, but he would be indispensable for making peace in Syria and in any regional post-war arrangements. As for the argument that he would “lose face”, the current Russian-sponsored internal Syrian dialogue and peaceful settlement could be arranged in a way so that it saves the face of most losers; in fact, that is all what it is all about—a face saver. After all, losing face is better than losing head, which was the fate of his predecessor Adnan Menderes (1899-1961), who was hanged by the military junta after the 1960 coup d'état, for much less significant (yet of the same type) adventures and deeds.

## Conclusion

After four years of its disastrous involvement in a multiparty, geopolitically motivated regime-change war in Syria, it's time for Turkey to quit the game as soon as possible, and to engage proactively in any post-war regional arrangements, in order to prevent further damage to its national interests as well as regional and global security and peace.

Any delay in taking such decision will result in further human tragedies; potentially turn Syria into a failed state and a safe haven for international terrorism and bring the Syrian fire closer to home.

A viable exit strategy for Turkey from the Syrian crisis is to work closely with Russia and Iran, where it could achieve other geopolitical and trade benefits.

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