

PROXY WARS IN SYRIA AND A NEW BALANCE OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EASTAsst. Prof. Hanefi YAZICI * **ABSTRACT**

This article aims to analyze the proxy wars in Syria to find out whether these proxy wars create a New Balance of Power in the Middle East or not. The US, Russia, Turkey and Iran are trying to focus on their interests in the region. The Russian-American war appeared as proxy war in Syria and both sides use the Cold War methods. Iran and Russia support the Assad regime and they provide heavy weapons. The article is a product of a review of the literature on the Syrian crisis and a number of books are analyzed throughout the process of the article. The main part of this article constitutes the analyses from these books therefore the Internet has been of great use in accessing the related topics. In this context, the article has been prepared by an inductive method from the specific to the general. Thus, a holistic study has been conducted through an eclectic method. The aim of this study is to contribute to the literature by bringing up this issue to the agenda.

Key Words: Terrorism, Global Powers, Regional Powers, Proxy War, Syrian Civil War.

Jel Classifications: F5, F50, F52, F59.

SURİYE'DE VEKALET SAVAŞLARI VE ORTADOĞU'DA YENİ GÜÇ DENGESİ**ÖZET**

Bu makalenin amacı, Suriye'deki vekâlet savaşlarının Ortadoğu'da yeni bir güç dengesi yaratıp yaratmadığını analiz etmektir. ABD, Rusya, Türkiye ve İran bölgedeki çıkarlarına odaklanmaya çalışmaktadır. Rus-Amerikan savaşı Suriye'de vekâlet savaşı olarak ortaya çıktı ve her iki taraf da Soğuk Savaş yöntemlerini kullanmaktadır. İran ve Rusya, Esad rejimini desteklerken, özellikle Rusya, farklı dönemlerde Suriye rejimine ağır silah desteği sağlayarak rejim muhaliflerini havadan bombalamaktadır. Makale sürecinde, Suriye krizi ile ilgili literatür taraması yapılmış ve bir dizi İngilizce ve Türkçe kitap analiz edilmiştir. Çalışma özelden genele tümevarımsal bir yöntem ile hazırlanmıştır. Bu bağlamda eklektik bir metotla örneklemeler üzerinden bütüncül bir çalışma oluşturulmuştur. Çalışma bu konuyu gündeme taşıyarak literatüre katkı sunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye Krizi, Vekâlet Savaşları, Küresel Güçler, Bölgesel Güçler, Türkiye.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Syria has been ruled for over forty years by the Assad Family, who control the Baath Party, who attempted to be in closed terms with the West in the aftermath of the Cold War (Şen, 1993: 269). As a matter of fact, Bashar Assad at first gave signs of hope for Syria to act in cooperation with the international community. Nevertheless, after the President Bush declared the country as an axis of evil, Syria became isolated from the international community. In truth, Syria managed to keep in touch with the international community over Turkey until the Arab Spring because the Arab Spring brought out negative impacts on Syria's relations with Turkey.

Clashes between Syrian opposition and Baath administration are still on in spite of the Annan Plan. The international community has failed to show the willpower of solution as regards to the issue of Syria. In fact, the global and regional powers have different political anticipations concerning the solution of the Syrian crisis. Although the Arab Spring suddenly arose in the Middle East and began to threaten the Arab (authoritarian) regimes, Assad promised to cover demands for reforms and changes in the region in his interview with the Wall Street Journal in 2011. He later tried to suppress through violence the protestors when demonstrations for reforms broke out in Syria. Then, seeing that mass demonstrations increased, the security forces besieged a lot of cities with heavy arms and massacred a large number of civilians.

Even though the regime blames Sunni extremists as a major subject for the chaos, it has not yet been proved and Salman Shaikh, the director of the Brookings Doha Center, claims that the Alawi deep state succeeded in assimilating most of Sunnis (Shaikh, 2011: pp. 230–240). He also comments that the regime has to share power due to its demographic situation and the marriage of Assad and Asma symbolizes an Alawi-Sunni partnership. However, the Arab Spring threatens the Sunni-Alawi partnership in some cities such as Hama and Dara' a. Shaikh analyzes that in Syria, it was the first time an opposition appeared through social network and the regime cannot oppress civil society by threatening. He categorizes that the opposition network appeared from below, covers across the country, and its complexion is Sunni. These attributes might be considered as a threat to the regime since the new opposition network threatens the Alawi deep state.

2. PROXY WAR IN SYRIA

In 2003 democratization was a very popular concept in the Middle East and George Bush used this term as a key tool to intervene in Iraq. Is it sensible to consider that the protest movements were manipulated by the US and EU to control the Arab world? To think like that is just unfairness for the people of Arabs as if they are unable to achieve to obtain fair, freedom and individual rights by themselves. Furthermore, the people on the Arab streets proved that they have a power to overthrow

dictators without using weapons.

The USA approaches the Syrian issue with uttermost prudence. As a matter of fact, Obama, who opposed the USA invasion in Iraq before he was elected, opines that Americans elected him because he prefers peaceful methods to belligerent ones. It is true that the USA has been pursuing an extremely cautious foreign policy during Obama's administration in the use of military force. As the use of military force affected the credibility of the USA negatively around the world, particularly during the administration of Bush, Obama did not advocate any military intervention without the decision of the Security Council of the United Nations, as was the case in Libya: It could be thought that the USA, with the administration of Obama, followed a policy of self-restraint (Akgün, 2012: 12). In place of the Neo Con foreign policy of the former Bush administration that opted for military intervention, Obama administration supported the countries in the region so that they could take active role in the Syrian issue and that priority should be given to diplomatic efforts (Sanger and Shanker, 2011).

Although thousands of people have died in clashes, the US has declared that there will be no military intervention against Assad's regime without a resolution of the United Nations. At the press conference on 6 March, 2012 Obama emphasized on the Syrian issue that it would be wrong that the USA arrange a unilateral military operation. As seen, although Obama did not oppose that the violations of human rights in Syria necessitate a military operation, he tried to remain loyal to the principles of his own doctrine. He withdrew soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan, but abstained from any choices of new adventurous military interventions (Akgün, 2012: 14). When Trump came to power, the US policy in Syria never changed and the US continued giving weapons to the Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG) although Turkey accuses the YPG of being an extension of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The conflict in Syria is now more than just a civil war since it turned into a brutal proxy war between the regional and global powers. Iran and Russia have always supported the Alawite-led government of Assad. While Iran has spent billions of dollars subsidizing weapons to reinforce Assad, Russia has dropped bombs against Assad's opponents. The Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon have also enjoyed providing support Assad regime in the battles for a few years. It is also known that Turkey and Qatar including Saudi Arabia supported the Sunni opponents. The civil war in Syria has lasted so long just because of the external powers such as the US and Russia. Instigating sectarianism, the military and financial support of the US for Kurdish groups has really contributed continuation of the civil war in Syria.

The US has conducted air strikes on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) many times particularly just after the chemical attack of the Assad regime. To fight against ISIS, the US uses Kurdish groups, but Turkey is always complaining about this strange relation since for Turkey both ISIS and YPG are terrorist groups. That's why in August 2016, through Operation Euphrates Shield in Al Bab,

Turkey taking the border town of Jarablus on the Euphrates River pushed ISIS militants away from Turkish border and stopped the advance of local Kurdish fighters. The YPG is regarded by Turkey as a terrorist organization and an extension of the PKK.

In spite of the fact that the incidents turned into a kind of turmoil in the region, Russia was able to create some opportunities for its national interest. Surely, from the realist point of view, the characteristic of Russia's foreign policy has always been pragmatist and opportunist so far as well as other great powers. Russia, to preserve its own regime tries to repress the opposition groups as the Arab Spring has a potential that can provoke Russians. That is one of the most significant reasons that Putin stand behind the Arab rulers and object to the mass protests on the streets as he does not wish to dream the same incidents in his country. Putin might fear that these Western-backed revolts against the authoritarian governments of the Middle East might encourage similar resistance among his own people. It is clear that revolutions naturally cause unpredictable situations, however the Arab spring has good results on the side of Russia up to now. When it is compared in the Middle East, America's ally Mubarak fell from power, but Russia's ally, Assad is still ruling the country. However, the Egypt had a military coup after Mubarek and Obama declared for the US assistance to Egypt without using the word coup and suggested that the military had better end a political crisis due to economic difficulties (Gordon, Landler, 2013). As obvious the US never cares about democracy in other countries due to its national interest.

When the military took over, John Kerry speculated that Egypt's military was restoring democracy and was asked to intervene by millions of people who were afraid of chaos and violence. As obvious, the US government rejected to describe removal of Morsi as a coup not to cut off its annual aid to Egypt. Officials at the White House and State Department refused to characterize incidents in Egypt as a military coup. Officials would not say the word coup, which has an important legal consequence for the aid to Egypt every year. White House Press Secretary Jay Carney told that they try to determine how to label the issue (Hudson, 2013). According to the law Section 508 of the Foreign Assistance Act, the US must cut aid to a country that has had a coup. Apparently lawyers told Obama to ignore the law by not asking whether Egypt had a coup or not. According to this law to aid a foreign country such as Egypt is not possible.

Some newspapers in the US claim that ISIS militants are being treated in Turkey, for instance, there was a picture in the New York Times newspaper showing the President of Turkey leaving a mosque where the ISIS terrorists were being supported. Later on, the newspaper declared that the picture, which showed President Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu leaving a mosque in August, was published in error. The newspaper also wrote that neither that mosque nor the president's visit were related to the recruiting of ISIS fighters described in the article. It is clear that some media organizations try to manipulate the news wishing Turkey to enter Syria and Iraq. Sure it is incredible for Turkey to attack any Arab and Muslim country since the conflict areas like Kobani are included in the Arab lands.

3. POPULAR UPRISINGS IN SYRIA

Since Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey, a new foreign policy, zero problems with neighboring countries such as Iran, Iraq and Syria, has been followed and it has recently met some unexpected challenges caused by the Arab Spring. For example, before Arab Spring for Turkey, Syria was considered as an important country for the Arab market in the Middle East. Turkey established a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council between Syria for free-trade zone. September 2009 was a milestone in Turkish Syrian relations as they signed High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) (Phillips, 2009).

After a short time, Syria and Turkey officially signed the agreement of visa. Syrian Foreign Minister Moallem said it was a historic event and Davutoglu called that day as a festival for both countries. Davutoglu said that the Syrian-Turkish Strategic Cooperation Council cooperation was strategic and it would help develop Turkey's relations with the Arab world. He went on saying that they were to sign different agreements in the near future to give a message to the region to achieve the cultural and economic integrity to develop the relations with the Middle East and neighboring countries. Davutoglu also reminded that if Turkey joins the EU, Syria will be a neighbor of the EU, and that will grow relations between Turkey and the region (Phillips, 2009).

It seems to be the first question as soon as Turkey signs a strategic agreement with a country in the Middle East: Is Turkey shifting its axis? Turkey's zero-problems policy has been considered as a shift of axis especially by some capitals in Europe concluding that Turkey is turning from the West to the East. Bernard Lewis thinks that in Turkey due to the agenda of the AKP government, the movement is toward re-Islamization (Weiss, 2011). Moreover, Thomas Friedman wrote in the New York Times that in the past while Turkey was modern and secular, at present the Islamist government focused on joining the Arab League instead the European Union (2010).

What is the reason of that negative image for Turkey in the West, although the Turkish government helps and accommodates millions of refugees without caring their identities whether they are Yazidis, Kurds or Armenians? Receiving the people in need with open arms only for humanity will be remembered in the future as Jewish people still cannot forget the same generous behavior of Ottomans in 1492. Therefore, it is also possible to infer that Turkey might bring peace and tolerance of the Ottomans back to the Middle East hundred years later as a continuing state of the Ottoman Empire.

As seen, whenever Turkey develops its relations with the countries in the Middle East, some commentators announce that Turkey's axis is shifting. That seems a kind of Cold War reflex dictating Turkish authorities to keep the distance between Turkey and the Middle Eastern countries. According to Davutoglu, Turkey is not turning its face to the East or West, and it is just a Cold War relic for him to consider taking sides in foreign affairs (Traub, 2011). *Turkey could determine its interests separately from the West, that is, Turkey could not react as it was requested to do in the past. The Arab Spring*

dramatically changed the ideas of the West complaining about the Islamist axis shift in Turkish foreign policy (Taşpınar, 2011). In addition, the Western columnists began arguing about how Turkey could be a model for the new Arab countries as a democratic and secular Muslim country.

Just few decades ago Turkish foreign policy with Syria was based on security threat due to PKK problem which was to lead Turkey to the brink of war. After AKP came to power in Turkey, as a result of zero problems with neighbors' policy Turkey not only improved its political and economic relations with Syria but also helped Syria not to be isolated from international community. While the American government opposed Israeli-Syrian negotiations as the United States was seeking to isolate Syria for its backing of Hezbollah, Turkey mediated between Israel and Syria (Bronner, 2011).

For Davutoglu, Turkey developed ties with these regimes only when they were not at war with their own people and when they suppressed the demands of their citizens, Turkey supported these people. Davutoglu states that Turkey will not tolerate regimes that treat their people without considering universal values and fundamental human rights. He also says that Turkey advised the leaders to listen to their people and establish the balance between freedom and security urging them to provide maximum freedom without risking security and maximum security without limiting freedoms.

Davutoglu also claims that Turkey does not want to see structures like Cold War in the region to prevent divisions across sectarian lines such as Shiite versus Sunni. That's why Turkey made several efforts to propose a peaceful transition in Syria. Assad first promised to deliver reforms, but later on he continued to use force against civilian protestors and unfortunately the people of Syria are now experiencing a humanitarian tragedy. First, Turkey initiated bilateral engagement with the regime to introduce reforms but had to break off the relation with the Baath regime as the administration did not stop the violence and was not convinced to implement reforms. Then, Turkey supported all plans of the Arab League and as soon as the Arab League initiative failed to solve the problem, Turkey tried to play a key role in international stage. Davutoglu states that Turkey will continue to support the Syrian people's democratic struggle in international platforms. According to Davutoglu the efforts for a diplomatic solution carried out by the regional and global actors have been ignored in Syria. (Tisdall, 2012).

In this context, it is vital for Turkey to act very carefully for regional and international issues considering Ottoman period experiences with the Middle East region. It is known that political coalitions in this region might change easily and quickly, friends might become hostile towards soon. It is obvious that the Arab Spring particularly in Syria has caused some crucial problems for Turkey. Before the Arab spring Turkey had really good relations with Syria, however it might be considered as a milestone for Turkey's zero-problems policy since the honeymoon was over as soon as the street demonstrations appeared in Syria. Because of the refugees Turkey had to change its zero-problems policy with Syria to force the regime accepting transition into a democratic state. It is also a dilemma

for Turkey trying to transform Syria regime into a democratic state within a few months even though Turkey has not been able to be a democratic state for about hundred years.

4. THE DILEMMA OF MOSLEM POPULATED COUNTRIES IN SYRIA

As the state structures in the Balkanized Moslem populated countries could be classified as kingdoms and republics from the aspect of the regime, they may also be categorized as democracies and authoritative regimes (Uysal, 2012: 36). Although this patchy structure in the Islamic geography was shaped during the period of exploitation, it could not be avoided during the age of independence, either. The countries in the Middle East bear these qualities. In fact, this different and patchy structure prevents the Islamic countries from developing a common attitude in face of any problem, for the patchy structure not only engrosses the countries with their domestic problems but also hinders them from dealing with their problems. This is actually the reason why no clear and common attitude can be developed against the Syrian Crisis by the Islamic nations.

The fact that authoritarian regimes are common in the Moslem populated countries also causes anxiety from the aspect that although people lean towards the revolutions that emerge with the demand for democracy the governments thereof are oppressive and do not set good examples for their own people. It is natural for Turkey, which has a unique place among the Islamic countries in the Syrian Crisis because it is a democratic country, to determine foreign policy outputs with the demand for democracy for the Syrian people. As Turkey is a democratic country, it can support democratic revolutions; however, the farther away Iran falls from democracy, it becomes ever more difficult for this country to offer support to democratic movements. In fact, Iran has - if not ideological but denominational - proximity to the Syrian regime and it is known that it is on the side of not the democracy but the Baath regime in Syria for the sake of its own national interests.

Gulf countries have kept the distance between the popular uprisings in Arab countries due to their status quo policies. While they remained silent to popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, they condemned the extreme violence against civilians and approved NATO intervention in Libya. Saudi Arabia made an air attack on Yemen in 2015 and even though tens of civilians were killed, they did not even condemn Saudi Arabia and what is worse, this attack was supported by USA and Israel. Therefore, these states lose reputation because of the contradictory statements about human rights. For example, few Islamic states condemned chemical attacks in Idlib vehemently, but, is it possible to pass such inhumane treatment off by a motion of censure?

The first reason why the Moslem populated countries follows ineffective policy against the Arab Spring is the conflict of interest between these states. For instance, while Iran and Gulf Countries are worried that the uprisings might spread to their own countries, Turkey is concerned with the democratization process in these countries (Kışlakçı, 2011). Therefore, the problems of democratization in the Arab states lead to ineffective policies. Another development that negatively affected the Arab

states in the international arena is that they did not give strong reaction to the military coup in Egypt against elected president, Muhammad Mursi. They showed a passive attitude and were not able to take a common attitude against the coup.

A majority of people in the West associate Islam with terrorism so it is crucial for the Moslem populated countries to remind the world that Islam is a religion of peace and mercy. Since the Western organizations like NATO can never get a handle on Muslim problems, as in Syria, Muslims themselves had better find a solution to their own problems (Ramadan, 2012). In this regard, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg stated that NATO will not send troops to Syria because most of the victims are Muslims and they will not be able to fight for Muslims. Therefore, the Moslem populated countries have to establish a military organization like NATO, otherwise, danger of civil war or sectarian conflicts will always be possible in the Moslem populated countries.

Unfortunately, Assad regime began to use excessive violence in Syria and the Arab states could not impose any sanctions. This tragic crisis that is suffered in the Islamic geography is really so grave that it cannot be evaded by sole condemnation and declarations. In truth the Syrian Crisis is a problem that is to be intervened, from all aspects, not only by the Moslem populated countries but also by International Community. Therefore, the Moslem populated countries can, at least, develop a dialogue ground between the parties and can show the Assad regime a way for secure exit as a non-political humanitarian mission.

On the other hand, the determination of the law that will be able to be applied as regards to the crisis in Syria is gaining significance. The significant thing here is what could be defined as a “non-international armed conflict”, for such clashes as are not defined in this manner are unlikely to either burden any liability on the state as regards to humanitarian law or to be the source of individual responsibility in respect to the International Criminal Law (Çakmak, 2012: 53). Is it really possible to intervene in Syria without the UN Security Council’s resolution? Carrying the Syria’s opposition to power overthrowing the Assad regime may not be the target of such an intervention. In fact, the objective, in any case, ought to be the protection of people, who are not protected by the state, the challenge of ensuring the balance as regards where with is apparent. Is there any chance justice will catch up to Assad? In summing up this part we can argue that **Assad obviously isn’t afraid of** being charged with crimes against humanity (Black, 2013). As obvious Assad knows that if he loses this struggle, he’s dead, so his priority is crushing the opposition that is threats of international charges will not frighten him as long as Russia supports him. Therefore, Russian factor cannot be ignored and it is impossible to charge Assad in ICC without Russian confirmation.

The *vox populi* of the world as well as of the Moslem populated countries withholds the sensitivity it showed in Libya in the Syrian Crisis. As the Assad regime has been accused of committing massacres and using excessive force against the rebels, the UN fails to set a course that will terminate the problem

and conflict. The extreme propositions, inclusive of military options, or compelling measures have been excluded from the agenda thus far because of political priorities and contemplations. It is obvious that the related mechanisms and regulations of the International Law are convenient to intervene with the humanitarian plight in Syria to take effective measures against the Assad regime. The determination of the law to be applied as regards to the crisis in Syria is gaining significance. The significant thing here is what could be defined as a non-international armed conflict (Çakmak, 2012: 54).

If it is possible to judge Assad of those offences he has committed against humankind, is it really possible to intervene in Syria without the UN Security Council's resolution? It was one of the latest shame of humanity when the chemical attack took place on 4 April 2017 in Idlib in Syria. Unsurprisingly the UN Security Council (UNSC) failed again to pass a resolution condemning chemical weapons attack that killed dozens of people in Idlib in Syria. The resolution was also going to call on the Assad regime to cooperate with an international investigation into the attack. As well known, if one of the permanent members of the UNSC vetoes a draft resolution, it automatically fails. Russia have used its veto several times to torpedo a UN draft resolution on Syria since the civil war began in 2011.

5. CONCLUSION

It is clear that achieving zero problems with all neighbors is not easy, especially in the Middle East since the regional conflicts have been usual. Turkey calls millions of refugees from Syria and welcomes them giving food and providing daily needs spending billions of money on behalf of humanity. It should not be forgotten that Turks and Arabs have many common interests that shape their current relations and their future also lies in the Middle East region. Turkey is not alone on the streets and even some peoples of the region respect Turkish leaders more than their leaders. As the period of dictatorships ends, it is the historical moment and it is high time the Arab people blamed the West for the manipulations. Consequently, they have a significant responsibility carrying out necessary democratic reforms to implement in the region, and Turkey is expected much to support this historical transformation.

As there is no concert in the Moslem populated countries, the situation of Syrian refugees gets worse. Since 2011 Turkey has followed an open door policy for Syrian refugees referring them as guests to deal with the large influx. The latest influx of Syrian refugee highlights that Turkey cannot stem the refugee inflow alone. As mentioned above, the West cannot find a solution for the problems of Muslims, therefore, it is crucial for the Moslem populated countries to establish a military organization soon. Turkey can lead and cooperate with Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to establish a regular professional army as NATO to prevent conflicts and civil wars in Moslem populated countries. If Turkey can find a way to establish such an organization it will also be very easy to deal with terrorist groups such as DAESH, PYD and YPG supported by the West particularly the US. Otherwise the terrorist groups

supported by the US-led coalition will occupy Syria and Muslims will only monitor the fait accompli policy of the US.

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