

Changing Policies of Turkey and the EU to the Syrian Conflict

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Abstract: This paper analyses the reaction of the EU and Turkey to the Syrian crisis. Firstly, the paper starts its analyses with the limitations of institutional-legal structure of the EU in developing effective external relations. In this context, it analyses the coherence among the member states in terms of policy priorities and strategies in approaching Syrian conflict by making particular reference to the restrictions aroused from regional setting. Secondly, Turkey's changing policy priorities and strategies in the course of the Syrian conflict are analysed. Lastly, similarities and differences in the approaches of Turkey and the EU are evaluated.

Keywords: Turkey-EU Relations, Syrian Conflict, Common Foreign and Security Policy

Türkiye ve AB'nin Suriye İç Savaşına Yönelik Değişen Politikaları

Öz: Avrupa Birliği ve Türkiye Suriye savaşı sırasında değişen stratejiler geliştirerek, politika önceliklerini yeniden tanımladılar. Bu bağlamda makalenin temel amacı Türkiye ve Avrupa Birliği'nin Suriye iç savaşına yönelik değişen politika biçimlerini tartışmaktır. Bu makale, Türkiye ve Avrupa Birliği'nin Suriye krizine tepkilerindeki farklılık ve benzerlikleri analiz etmeyi hedeflemektedir. Makaleki analizler, AB ve Türkiye'nin dış ilişkilerinde kurumsal yapının sınırlılıkları, üye devletler arasındaki politika öncelikleri ve stratejileri açısından tutarlılığa referans verilerek yapılacaktır. Böylece, makale Türkiye ve AB'nin Suriye savaşındaki pozisyonlarındaki benzerlik ve farklılıkları analiz etmeye çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye-AB ilişkileri, Suriye Krizi, Ortak Dış ve Güvenlik Politikası

I. Introduction

The Arab Uprising, which started in Tunisia in December 2010, triggered a series of political and social movements against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North African countries. For a very short time, the governments were removed from power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and lastly Syria. The protest movement in Syria started in March 2011 in the southern city of Daraa after the arrests of 15 children for painting anti-government graffiti on the walls of a school. The arrest and mistreatment of the children, the government's brutal and violent reactions to the demands of the community and the people's resistance to the activities of the security forces gave rise to the local demonstrations, which spread to the other regions of Syria.

Different from the countries experiencing Arab uprising, the unrest in Syria took place in a very violent format. The movement first turned into a civil war following brutal crackdown of oppositional forces by the Assad regime and then it became transnational proxy war through the involvement of different

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countries, including the USA, the EU, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The rise of non-state violent actors, such as Islamic State and Al-Nusra in the territories of Syria and Iraq altered it into a transnational terrorist movement as well. After eight years of civil war, the Assad government is still in power and controls western part of Syria. The rest is under the control of the Islamic State, Kurdish forces and the Free Syrian Army.

In terms of its implications, the Syrian civil war placed the turmoil and conflict at the doorstep of the EU and Turkey. These actors are the ones bearing the most humanitarian, security and political burden of the Syrian war in the form of security threats, such as illegal migration, foreign fighters, radicalism, terror attacks and so on. Regardless of their capacity as a state or a supra national organization, those implications are detrimental to the survival of these actors. Accordingly, both Turkey and the EU have developed strategies and determined policy priorities, which vary in the course of the Syrian civil war. In this respect, the main objective of this paper is to analyse changing responses of Turkey and the EU to the Syrian crisis and to explore similarities and differences in their approach.

This paper consists of three parts. In the first part, the EU's evolving responses to the Syrian crisis are analysed. Having explored the institutional-legal constraints in the external relations of the EU, coherence among the member states in terms of policy priorities is determined. In the second part, Turkey's changing policy priorities and strategies in the course of the Syrian conflict are analysed. In the last part, similarities and differences in the approaches of Turkey and the EU are explored.

II. The EU's Response to Syrian Conflict

A. The Position of the EU to the Syrian Crisis in between 2011 and 2014

The EU and Syria relations go back to a period before the Arab uprising. The EU signed Cooperation Agreement¹ with Syria in 1977, which formed the legal basis of the relations. That agreement had an economic character, anticipating cooperation in the areas of economic, technical and financial cooperation. Until the adoption of the Barcelona Process in 1995, the agreement was the main source of funding the activities of the European Union in the field of development cooperation in Syria. Later, the EU negotiated EU-Syrian Association Agreement,² which anticipates the participation of Syria to the European Neighbourhood Policy. The agreement is one of the Association Agreements that have been concluded with all Euro-Mediterranean partner countries and covers three political relations, economy, and trade relations and cooperation. However, it was never signed or ratified by the Syrian government.

¹ Official Journal of the European Communities, Cooperation Agreement between the European Economic Community and the Syrian Arab Republic, L 269/2, 27.09.1978.

² Council of the European Union, EU-Syria Association Agreement, Brussels, 17.08.2018.

Before Syrian crisis, the European Union had set the direction of its relations with Syria by “Syria: Country Strategy Paper (CSP) (2007-2013)” drafted under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument and National Indicative Programme (2007-2010),³ which was adopted in 2007. Those documents state strategic framework for co-operation with Syria over the period of 2007-2013. The CSP identifies three priority areas for action. These are supporting a) political and administrative reform, b) economic reform for preparing the Association Agreement and World Trade Organization, c) social reform for human resources development and economic transition process. The main objective of the strategic framework is to prepare Syria for the European Neighbourhood Policy in the medium term. In order to do so, the EU would take the advantage of financial instruments at its disposals to stimulate political reforms, which promote good governance, separation of powers, and protection of human rights and democracy in Syria. In fact, however, the EU did not give particular importance to the situation of human rights in Syria-EU relations before the Syrian crisis (Turkmani & Haid, 2016 p:7) The EU was able to develop economic and trade relations with Syria without taking into the account authoritarian character of the regime.

1. Declaratory Condemnation and Call for Reform

At the beginning of the Syrian conflict in March 2011, the EU did not take concrete steps towards the Assad regime. Instead, it issued several declarations and expressed “its profound concern and strongly condemns the violent repression” of the Syrian government and called on “Syrian authorities to refrain from using violence” and “respect its international commitments to human rights and fundamental freedoms.” and urged “the authorities to exercise the utmost restraint across the country and to meet the legitimate demands and aspirations of the people with dialogue and urgent political and socio-economic reforms.”⁴ The EU attempted to address Syrian crisis within the framework of the democratic transition of Syrian people, as it had done in other cases of Arab uprising such as Libya and Egypt. Such a position of the EU was in line with its “new” Neighbourhood Policy whose principals were drawn by Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity,⁵ and “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood.”⁶ In these documents, the EU declares that it will support the transition of neighbourhood countries to “deep democracy,” which is based on

³ European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument, Syrian Arab Republic Strategy Paper 2007 – 2013 and National Indicative Program (2007-2010), Brussels.

⁴ European Union, “Declaration By High Representative, Catherine Ashton, On Behalf Of The EU On The Violent Crackdown On Peaceful Demonstrators In Syria,” Brussels, 22 March 2011

⁵ Joint Communication to the European Council, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, 08.03.2011, Brussels.

⁶ European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Region, A new response to a Changing Neighborhood, Brussels, 25.05.2011.

free and fair elections, freedom of association, expression, and assembly and rule of law (Teti, Thompson, & Noble, 2013; Tömmel, 2013; Wouters & Duquet, 2013).

2. Assad should go

Assumed mistakenly that Assad would go in a very short time, the EU adopted a concrete stance and advocated the position of “Assad should go,” when the conflict turned into a civil war in between oppositional forces and Assad regime. The EU stated very clearly in its Joint Communication on “Delivering on a New European Neighbourhood Policy that “the EU has called on President Assad to step aside and allow a peaceful and democratic transition.”⁷ In order to facilitate toppling down Assad regime quickly, the regime supported oppositional groups, such as National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces—which is also known as the Syrian National Coalition and accepted it as the political representative of the Syrian people.⁸

3. Sanctions

In line with this perspective, the EU cut its diplomatic ties with Syria and delegitimized Assad regime for violent repression of its citizens. In between 2011-2013, the EU started to impose sanctions mechanisms on Syria in order to stop the brutal violence of the regime and pit Syrian people and political and economic elites against Assad regime (Seeberg, 2015 p: 23). In this respect, the EU froze the draft Association Agreement and suspended cooperation agreement within the framework of European Neighbourhood Policy in May 2011.⁹

The EU also introduced restrictive measures against the Assad regime and individuals who are responsible for the violent repression of the civilian population. Its first action was to introduce arms embargo, which prohibits the sale, supply, and export of all arms and related material that can be used against internal repression by the regime in Syria on 9 May 2011.¹⁰ The EU also provided the blacklist of persons and entities responsible for the repression of the civilian population in Syria and having specific relations with the Assad regime. Then it froze their funds and economic resources. By adding new entities and persons to the list through different Council Implementing Regulation,¹¹ the EU widened

⁷ Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Delivering on a New European Neighborhood Policy, 2012.

⁸ Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on Syria, 3199,th Foreign Affairs Meeting, Brussels, 19 November 2012.

⁹ European External Action Service, “EU-Syria Relations, Factsheets, 14.07.2016. Last accessed on 04.03.2018.

¹⁰ Official Journal of the European Union, Council 9 May 2011 Regulation No442/2011 of May 2011 Concerning Restrictive Measures in view of the situation in Syria.

¹¹ Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No.266/2012 of 23 March 2012 Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No 611/2011 of 23 June 2011. Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No 755/2011 of 1 August 2011 implementing Regulation (EU) No 442/2011. Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No 843/2011 of 23 August 2011.

the network of people who involve, directly or indirectly violent repression of Syrian people or who provides financial and institutional support to the Assad regime. On 2 September 2011, the Council amended Regulation (EU) No 442/2011 to extend the measures against Syria and prohibited import or transportation of crude oil from Syria and investment in the crude oil sector. It also prohibited the payment and disbursement of the European Investment Bank and terminated technical assistance provided to the projects in Syria.¹² Throughout 2012, the EU deepened the sanctions imposed on Assad regime. It banned the trade of equipment and software intended for the use of internet and telephone communications by the Syrian regime and prohibited supplying grants, loans, technical assistance and of equipment for internal repression to Syria.¹³ The EU also introduced a ban on the export of luxury goods, including gold, precious metals, and diamonds, froze the assets of the Syrian Central Bank and prohibited Cargo flights operated by the Syrian carriers.¹⁴

In the first two years of the Syrian Civil War, the EU relied on sanctions as the main foreign policy instrument. These sanctions are generally in the format of trade embargoes, freezing assets of the individuals and bodies supporting directly or indirectly Assad regime, ban on technology and cash transfer and travel ban. By employing restrictive measures, the EU coerced Assad regime to change its behaviour. In other words, the EU forced Assad regime to stop not only violent crackdown of the civilians, but also to mobilize Syrian people and elites against Assad regime and its inner circle (Seeberg, 2012 p:1). As Seeberg (2015, p: 26), puts it correctly, the EU intended to change both “the behaviour of the regime” and “the regime itself” up until 2013. Briefly, the primary aim of the EU in imposing sanctions was to protect human rights and to undermine historically hostile regime, which has connections with Iran and Hezbollah. As such, normatively driven approach was especially visible in the early phases of the conflict (Boogaerts, Portela, & Drieskens, 2016 p: 14).

The arms embargo did not produce the expected consequences. The regime created alternative sources of arms trade from other countries, (Giumell & Ivan, 2013). It can supply weapons from Russia, Iran, Belarus and North Korea (Leanders, 2014 p:13; Portela, 2012a p:3). Thanks to the arms embargo, moderate opposition forces in Syria could not get sufficient military assistance from the EU. This situation has unintentionally promoted resilience of the Assad regime, weakened oppositional forces and thereby prolonged civil war in Syria. Assad regime could eliminate the negative impact of sanctions by diverting its trade to other countries such as Lebanon and Iraq.

Given limited effect of the sanctions for conflict resolution in Syria, the EU member states altered sanction policy and loosened oil and arms embargo on

¹² Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No: 1150/2011

¹³ Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No: 36/2012

¹⁴ Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No: 168/2012

opposition forces.¹⁵ Particularly, after the allegations that Assad used chemical weapons against the civilian in 2013, the EU member states appeared to diverge in their views for supplying militaristic equipment to the rebels. Foreign ministers of the EU failed to reach an agreement on a ban on arming Syrian opposition forces.¹⁶ Accordingly, arm embargo on Syrian opposition was lifted thanks to the pressure of France and Britain and despite the objection of Germany, concerning that arming rebel groups would prolong the war and spread the war to the other regions of the Middle East. As Leanders (2012, p: 9) puts it, the EU confronted with the internal and external challenges with regards to its sanction policy against Syria, which are “insufficient solidarity combined with divergent Member states interest, tensions between realist and idealist needs, uncooperative international actors.”

B. The Response of the EU to the Syrian Conflict in between 2014-2018

The rise of Islamic State in 2014 altered the EU’s approach to the Syrian crisis. In June 2014, Islamic State took control of the major cities in Iraq and Syria and carried out terror activities in the capital cities of Europe. This situation gave rise to security considerations of the member states and shifted their attention from the removal of Assad regime and Syria’s democratic transition to fight against the IS. Indeed, the EU’s discourses based on democratic transition, peaceful demonstrations, regime change in between 2011-2014 gave their places to “combating with IS,” “struggling to terrorism” and “ensuring the security of European citizens,” and “migration crisis” and “security threat.” (Özcan, 2017 s: 13). Briefly, the EU’s normatively induced approach in between 2011-2014 has given its place to the security-centred approach.

It is possible to see the reflection of this policy on the joint declarations and communications of the European Council and the Council of the EU, which address Syrian crisis as an internal security issue starting from 2014 onwards. On 20 October 2014, the Council articulated that the EU would address “comprehensive and coordinated manner” towards Syrian crisis and the threat posed by the IS to the EU member states.¹⁷ In order to do so, the EU adopted a Joint Communication and determined the comprehensive regional strategy of the EU for dealing with the IS threat. This regional strategy mainly depends on three frameworks. These are a) countering the threat posed by the ISIS through supporting opposition groups b) fight against foreign fighters and terrorism, c) humanitarian assistance and international protection to refugees and internally displaced people so that they can keep them either in Syria or the countries hosting the refugees.¹⁸

¹⁵Independent, Syria arms Embargo lifted: Britain and France force the EU to relax ban on supplying weapons to rebels, 28 May 2013.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on the ISIS/Daesh crisis in Syria and Iraq, Foreign Affairs Council Meeting Luxembourg, 20 October 2014.

¹⁸ European Parliament, Conflict in Syria: Trigger Factors and the EU Response, January 2016.

1. Military Assistance to the Opposition Groups

The EU member states have a negative public attitude towards military involvement in foreign conflicts. The EU has also lack military power due to inter-governmental character of its Common Foreign and Security Policies. Accordingly, as a supra-national entity, the European Union has never carried out a military engagement in Syria directly. Instead, it has supported the US-led anti-ISIS forces at the member state level. Particularly, after the Paris attacks in 2015, it provided more financial and material support to different groups of the Syrian opposition. For example, France increased its military engagement and airstrikes under the umbrella of the US-led coalition. France has also invoked mutual defence clause of Article 42(7) of the Lisbon Treaty on 17 November 2017. After the Paris attack in 2015, it requested for assistance of all other member states, as the victim of terrorist attacks on its territory.¹⁹ The France and US were also supported by Germany, United Kingdom, Belgium, and Denmark through boots on the ground, naval support, and intelligence. In short, rather than direct military intervention, the EU fights against Islamic State by supporting and empowering anti-Islamic State forces in Syria.

In its fight against the IS, the EU gives particular importance to their relations with the YPG— (The People’s Protection Unit), which is an armed unit of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and sister party of the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK). The EU officially considers the PKK as a terrorist organization, but not categorizes the YPG alongside it. However, ideological and physical connection between the PKK and YPG has an impact on the degree of support granted to the YPG by the EU (O’Driscoll, 2015 p:1). The withdrawal of the Assad regime at the beginning of Arab uprising opened the way for de-facto autonomy in the Kurdish populated areas under the leadership of PYD/YPG in Northern Syria. The PYD/YPG has played an important role in fighting against the ISIS and turned into a key ally of the US-led anti-IS coalition as the sole secular force. It provided partial militaristic support and empowered the PYD/YPG against the IS. This enabled PYD/YPG to take control of three enclaves, namely Jazira, Kobani and Afrin along Syrian territories. Moreover, the YPG opened a corridor in between Jazira and Kobani cantons, when it had captured the control of Tel-Abyad from the ISIS in 2015.

In line with the US, the EU interacted with the YPG/PYD, despite the lack of coherence among member states and reluctance of some member states for developing official and open relations (Özer & Kaçar, 2018 p: 182). Engaging with the PYD/YPG presented an important dilemma for the EU member states. On the one hand, the EU member states had to rely on PYD/YPG in their fight against the IS, as an effective local force of the US-led anti-IS coalition on the ground. On the other hand, they have concerns that providing open militaristic

¹⁹ European Parliament, the EU’s Mutual Assistance Clause: First ever Activation of Article 42(7) TEU.

and logistical support to the YPG would undermine their relations with Turkey, which recognizes the PYD as a terrorist group. Moreover, they have concerns that the empowerment of the PYD/YPG would also risk territorial integrity of Syria and would trigger Turkey's intervention (Barnes-Dacey, 2017 p:3) Moreover, the PYD/YPG is still believed to have connection with the Assad regime and sole PYD/YPG dominance in Northern Syria would impair local dynamics and displease Arab population there (O'Driscoll, 2015 p:1). Consequently, the mainstream approach of the EU towards Syrian Kurds under the leadership of PYD/YPG is "protective but sceptical " (Yırcalı, 2017 p: 14). The EU opposes to independent Kurdish state that would damage territorial disintegration of Syria, but in the meantime, it supported implicitly Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, given the secular image of the PYD/YPG compare to the other opposition groups.

2. Foreign Fighters and Radicalization

The issue of foreign fighters and radicalization took its primary place in the agenda of the Council of the EU and the European Council. After the Paris attack in France, the EU set terrorism as one of the major threats to the internal security of the European Union.²⁰ It adopted several-counter terrorism and foreign fighters strategy and set several priority areas for action.²¹ Those measures were mainly on the application of the Schengen framework, Internet content promoting violent extremism or terrorism, trafficking of firearms and promoting cooperation with the UN.

3. Controlling the Flow of Refugees

The European Union is one the actor paying the highest price of Syrian conflict. According to the figures provided by the European Parliament, more than 2.3 million attempted to cross Europe, expelling the EU member states to address the influx of refugees to Europe since 2015. The flow of migrant generated an important division among member states in terms of sharing the economic and political burden of the migration crisis. The EU member states consider migration issue as a security challenge that rock ontological existence of the European integration project. As such, the EU provided humanitarian assistance amounted 9 million to Syrian refugees to prevent refugee flow to the European Union. These measures are generally considered as a way of keeping the Syrians refugees in the transit country or Syria itself.

C. Effectiveness of the EU's response to the Syrian crisis

1. Regional Limitations

The response of the EU to the Syrian crisis in the course of the Syrian civil war did not generate expected outcomes in terms of ending the conflict or

²⁰ Council of the European Union, Brussels, 2 February 2015, 5855

²¹ European Council, Council adopts EU counter-terrorism and foreign fighters strategy, 20 October 2014.

addressing the implications of the Syrian conflict effectively. There have been important considerations with regards to the actorness of the EU. The US and Russia became the key actors that have been determining the direction of the Syrian conflict through their militaristic and diplomatic engagement. The role assumed by the EU in this respect is either to support the US policies in the region, to adopt reactionary position towards Russian policies or act in line with the US-Russian rapprochement towards Syrian crisis. Indeed, apart from involving the US-led anti-ISIS coalition at member state level, the EU as a supra-national entity did not take a strong part in the diplomatic initiatives with respect to the Syrian crisis. This marginal diplomatic and military role in Syria gave rise to limited autonomous manoeuvring capacity of the EU—including big member states—in between Russia and the US. This situation presented an important dilemma for the EU. On the one hand, the EU as an actor bear heavily the consequences of the conflict in the form of refugee flows, security threats, radicalization, and terrorism. On the other hand, it could not act at a level parallel to the cost that it incurred during the conflict.

2. Institutional Limitations

The EU's institutional and legal arrangements on the external relations limited the capacity of the EU to act as an effective actor in the Syrian conflict. Traditionally, the EU member states have been reluctant to transfer their sovereignty in the field of foreign policy, despite the fact that the structures that coordinate external policies of the member states at the European level have recently been established. For example, the Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in 2011, empowered High Representative by entitling it as the Vice President of the Commission and the Chair of the Foreign Policy Meeting. It established European External Action Service, responsible for foreign and security policy of the EU. However, these institutional and legal regulations did not change the fundamental core of the European system in which member states still keep their sovereignty, reluctant to grant additional power to supra-national institutions in the field of foreign policy. That's why the Lisbon Treaty kept unanimity as the key voting mechanism and did not promote military capabilities to the EU.

Moreover, the EU actions in the course of the Arab uprising depend on institutional structures drawn by the Lisbon Treaty. Lisbon Treaty created a balance in between EEAS and the Commission on the one hand and between Brussels and third countries on the other hand. Moreover, the Treaty established new institutional structures, such as EU Special Representative and a number of Task Forces for some of the member states. The increase in the number of the institutional actors resulted in the fragmentation and an opportunity to the member states not to comply with the EU decisions in the field of external action (Bicchi, 2014 p: 320).

3. Placing too Much Emphasis on Soft-Power Instruments

The fact that the EU has limited capacities and competence in foreign policy gives rise to the important role to the European Commission, having financial instruments at its disposals to act in the areas where it has competences in external relations of the European Union. These areas are humanitarian assistance, trade, cooperation and development, democratization, human rights, neighbourhood policy (Emerson, 2011). The activities of the Commission in these fields promoted the image of the EU as soft power, which acts through norms and values rather than traditional diplomatic means of the real politics. Two points can be underlined in this respect. Firstly, when there is a contradiction between norms and interests, the EU chooses “interests,” which is generally defined on the basis of realist terms. This is particularly relevant in the case of Syria where the EU adopts a normative approach, which stresses the need of the Assad government to reform, but later security considerations become dominant thanks to the massive uncontrolled migration and terrorist attacks of the ISIS. As such the EU’s Syrian policy points out explicitly the EU’s being “realist actor in normative clothing (Emerson, 2011 s: 56).” As Börzel and Hüllen (2014), put it, the EU has again faced “democratization-stability” dilemma. It encountered with the fact that democratic transition has the potential of destabilizing impact on non-democratic countries, as it generally necessitates a transition of power and often includes violent conflict (Börzel & van Hüllen, 2014 p: 1040) Secondly, the sole use of soft power instruments has not been effective in Syrian conflict where basic parameters of real politics dominates under the condition of proxy war, such as state survival, power struggle, security and regional balance of power. The lack of hard power capabilities, which complement the EU’s soft power, undermined the EU’s actorness in Syria compare to other actors, such as the US and Russia, who can resort military instruments where they consider necessary.

4. Different Policy Priorities among Member States

In addition to the lack of competence and military capacities for actively addressing the Syrian crisis, there is no common position with regards to Syrian conflict. This situation gives rise to the different policy priorities among member states. The big three EU member states, namely Germany, UK, and France have different policy priorities. Germany has historically been against military engagement and its general focus has been on addressing refugee problems. France supports military intervention and gives priority to the fight against terrorism. The UK was against military intervention and has been given very little attention to the refugee crisis. The absence of common stance in responding Syrian crisis undermines the EU’s leverage on the Syrian crisis.

III. Turkey’s Response to the Syrian Conflict

Turkey and the EU at the beginning of the Arab Uprising shared the same position. Both have the idea of bringing down the Bashar al-Assad regime and

replacing it with Sunni Islamist client state, which would satisfy regional and global aspirations of the US, Turkey and the EU member states. Turkey, however, has much more fine-tuned regional strategy. By bringing a Sunni regime to power, Turkey anticipated increasing its economic and political influence in Syria and consequently gaining grounds against its regional rivals, namely Shite Iran. Compare to the member states of the EU, Turkey has carried out very active position towards Syrian conflict. In addition to economic sanctions and suspending diplomatic relations after calling for the Assad regime to stop violence, Turkey started to take a very concrete position against the Syrian regime. It started to equip and train Syrian opposition since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011.

A. The Position of Turkey to the Syrian Crisis in Between 2011-2014

Between 2011-2013, Turkey and the EU have common position with regards to the Assad Regime. Both the AKP government and the EU shared the idea of bringing down Bashar al-Assad regime and replacing it with moderate-Sunni Islamist client state, which would satisfy regional and global aspirations of the US, Turkey and the EU. By bringing a Sunni regime to power, Turkey anticipated increasing its economic and political influence in Syria and consequently gaining grounds against its regional rivals, namely Shite Iran.

1. Declaratory Condemnation and Sanctions

In order to pursue this foreign policy objective, the AKP government attempted to convince the Assad regime to stop crackdown and to make reforms for satisfying the demands of the opponents. It endeavored to find a diplomatic solution to Syrian conflict by bringing it to the agenda of international and regional organizations, such as the Arab League and the United Nations. Turkey also imposed economic and militaristic sanctions on the Assad regime in line with the EU.

2. Supporting Opposition Groups

When the conflict turned into the civil war, the AKP government provided militaristic and logistic assistance and transit road to the opposition groups, such as Free Syrian Army in order to fight against Assad regime. Whether it is an intended strategy or an unintended consequence of backing opposition groups in general, this strategy rendered the AKP government a subject of accusations for giving a support to the radical groups in Syria.

3. Preventing the Empowerment of the PYD

From the beginning of the Syrian war, Turkey had a great concern that the Syrian central government would lose its control over Kurdish populated areas. For Turkey, such a power vacuum would carry the potential of enabling Syrian Kurds to form semi-independent structures in the form of an autonomy or self-rule controlled by the PKK or the PYD. Kurdish autonomy that would take place in the Northern Syria as in Iraqi Kurdistan was also believed to empower Kurdish nationalist aspirations in Turkey and to form Syrian pillar of a pan-Kurdish project. Turkey was also concerned with fact that Kurdish regions in

Syria would provide the PKK with an operational basis that would facilitate its cross borders attacks to Turkey. Hence, as soon as Syrian Kurds established its own canton administration, then Prime Minister, now President Erdoğan declared the “structure in northern Syria,” that was established by the PYD as “a structure of terror.”²² He emphasized that Turkey would not recognize the establishment of autonomous entities governed by the PYD and its affiliate PKK in northern Syria. Given these considerations, Turkey carried out the strategy of geographical containment of the Kurds. The containment policy centers on obstructing the PYD’s getting more territory, undermining the PYD’s control over the areas where it had already seized and decreasing capability of the PYD to get resources from Turkish borders.

B. The Position of Turkey to the Syrian Crisis in Between 2014-2018

The Assad’s hold on power and the empowerment of radical jihadists groups thanks to the power gap in Syria gave rise to the alteration of the stance of Turkey since 2014. The agendas, priorities, and policies of the AKP government and the EU appeared to diverge sharply. Both the EU and Turkey as actors could not maintain a common position and coordinated action that existed at the beginning of the Syrian conflict.

Firstly, the EU is no longer considered the removal of Assad regime from power and democratic transition as its priority. As it is mentioned above, it gives particular importance to the fight against the ISIS and concerns that the power vacuum might be filled by radical groups hostile to the Western norms and values after Assad’s removal. Nonetheless, Erdoğan government has maintained the policy of replacing Assad regime with a Sunni government up until military coup, which took place on 15 June 2016. This position pushed the AKP government towards a more autonomous policy in Syrian, which deteriorated Turkey’s relations with the EU and its wider regional neighbours.

Secondly, the EU and Turkey also diverged in terms of the groups that they rely on in its fight against the ISIS. Turkey opposes to any kind of militaristic operations led by the anti-IS coalition that empowers Kurdish groups in Turkey and Northern Syria (Rojava), where the Syrian Kurds established semi-autonomous cantons. In contrast, the US and hence the EU member states depend heavily on the Kurdish forces in northern Syria, particularly the PYD—which has an affiliation with the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK)—and de facto to the PKK in its fight against ISIS. The AKP did not consider extremist rebel groups as uncontrollable actors, yet, as a potential instrument to unwind the power of the Assad regime and Kurdish forces.

²² McClatchy Newspaper, Assad hands control of Syria’s Kurdish areas to PKK, sparking outrage in Turkey, 26 July 2012.

Thirdly, Turkey has supported the idea of establishing safe zone for the refugees in Syria. The US and the EU have not advocates this position. Even though Turkey claimed no-fly or safe zone for the humanitarian reason, its main intention was to prevent the emergence of Kurdish belt along Turkish-Syrian border. The EU and the US opposed to safe zone, as they don't want to provide ground forces for the safe-zone.

Fourthly, in line with the European Union, Turkey has provided an important humanitarian assistance to refugees from Syria. It has carried open door policy for the refugees. Turkey got important financial assistance from the EU for keeping the Syrian refugees in Turkey. This situation has generated strong criticism towards the EU, as the EU provides such assistance in a time when Turkey has been implementing one of the most repressive policies.

Particularly, starting from 2015 onwards, Ankara concerned with the empowerment of the Kurds regionally and domestically. At the regional level, the control of the YPG on three enclaves in Northern Syria and building a bridge in between Kobane and Telabyad rendered the position of Syrian Kurds powerful. At the domestic level, the success of pro-Kurdish People' Democratic Party (HDP) in passing election threshold of 10 percent in June 2015 election made the HDP the third biggest party in the parliament, which rendered it crucial actor for the presidential election, which changes parliamentary system to the presidential elections.

Given above-mentioned regional and domestic developments, Turkey carried three strategies simultaneously towards Syria. It attempted to maintain its policies of overthrowing Assad regime and to prevent the establishment of autonomous Kurdish entities along Syria. In to order pursue those objectives; it backed radical groups, as moderate opposition groups had proved unsuccessful. It also carried out open door policy for the flow of refugees, which facilitate the transit of foreign fighters' from and to Europe through Turkish Syrian border and alleged to provide logistic-militaristic and training support to them. It also carried out airstrike to the Kurdish forces on the basis of hot pursuit. This position of Turkey generated strong tension with the EU.

IV. The Effectiveness of the EU and Turkey in responding Syrian conflict

From the beginning of the Syrian conflict, both the EU and Turkey attempted to contribute democratic transition in Syria. At the beginning of the conflict, their main concern was to stop human rights violations and brutal repression of the civilians. They intended to force the Assad regime to carry out democratization reforms in response to the demands of the Syrian people. On this basis, the EU and Turkey have used the instruments at their disposal in order to consolidate democracy and human rights. Both actors cut their diplomatic and economic relations and imposed sanctions on Assad regime. As the conflict deepened, they started to support the domestic opposition in Syria. Briefly, both Turkey and the EU acted as normative power at the beginning of the conflict.

In the course of the Syrian war, the priorities of the actors have shifted. The actors gave precedence to the stability and security over democracy and human rights. Yet, what they understand from security started to diverge. The EU considers the rise of the Islamic State as the main challenge to its security, but Turkey concerns from the empowerment of Syrian Kurds, which might pose a great threat to the territorial integrity of Turkey.

Compare to Turkey, the EU and member states lack concrete strategic perspectives and goals towards Syrian conflict. That is why the response of the EU can be characterised as hesitancy and ad hoc reactions. It ranges from negative conditionality, which centers on imposing economic and militaristic sanctions, supporting UN resolutions, which called Assad regime to step aside and giving support to the opposition. Turkey instead has a very clear foreign policy objective towards Syria. It wants to establish moderate Sunni regimes in its neighbourhood countries and thereby to construct its regional hegemony in the Middle East. That is why Turkey has adopted a proactive policy and resorted direct military means for achieving its foreign policy objectives. Both actors have incapacity to act autonomously, despite the fact that they are the one bearing the most humanitarian, political and social cost of the Syrian conflict. Both were only able to act within the constraints drawn by the US and Russia. But, the EU also faces institutional constraints coming from the institutional structure.

V. Conclusion

Turkey and the EU, which had developed good relations with Syria before the civil war, appeared to change their policies towards Assad regime and supported regime change and democratic transition in Syria. However, as the war escalated, the actors appeared to contemplate the Syrian crisis through the lenses of security. At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the EU addressed Syrian crisis as an issue of democratic transition of the Syrian people living for a long time under the brutal and violent administration of the Assad regime and addressed Syrian crisis within the framework of its “new” neighbourhood policy. The use of heavy weapons towards the civilian protestors by the Assad regime, the clashes in between regime forces and opposition groups; terrorism and massive influx of refugees gave rise to the shifts in the policies of the EU towards Syrian crisis. Particularly after the control of Islamic State (IS) on the territories in between Syria and Iraq in 2012 and IS terrorist attacks in Europe brought security dimension into the front in its regional and wider neighbourhood policies. The Syrian crisis come to the fore as a matter of security, since it has the parameters of conflict, terrorism, power struggle, proxy wars and redefinition of maps /boundaries in the post Arab uprising period.

Turkey would not be able to employ parallel strategies with the EU with ease— yet not completely abandoned it—thanks to the changing priorities, proxies, and strategies and competing interests among the actors. The regional and international aspirations that brought Turkey close to the EU have changed

to a great extent in the course of the Syrian conflict. Turkey appeared to reformulate its regional alliances, when Northern Syria was dominated by the PYD and Syrian Democratic Forces (SPD) and when the PYD crossed the west of the Euphrates in Syria, which Ankara considered it as “redline” of its national security threat. The empowerment of the Kurds in Syria shifted Turkey’s external relations in the Middle to a more defensive one.

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