

From the guest editors

This issue of *Uluslararası İlişkiler/ International Relations* deals with the way the crisis in Syria influenced Turkey's relations with a number of actors and agencies. The crisis in Syria, almost since it broke out, brought about a sea change in the Middle East. Being the fulcrum of the Arab-Israeli military equation since the conclusion of the Camp David Accords, any change pertaining to Syria would obviously be of some importance in any geopolitical calculation in the Levant. Therefore, the dynamics released by the crisis either enthused or dragged agencies to scramble for Syria in order to exert influence over the course of events. Many anticipated that the uprisings in Syria would lead to a situation reminiscent of what had occurred in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, yet to their surprise, the events evolved into a perennial war of the proxies, eventually morphing into a muddle. Soon after the uprisings broke out, the crisis turned into a quagmire even for those who had envisaged that they would be able to steer the course of events. Furthermore, as the crisis persisted, it became increasingly clear that the turmoil incited by the uprisings would not remain confined to Syria. Fomenting chain reactions beyond the Middle East, the crisis evolved into one of international magnitude.

The first shockwaves of the crisis were felt in Turkey. Coping with increasing pressure from all sides in mid-2012, the Syrian military resorted to a strategy of survival. This entailed the abandonment of large territories in the north and east of Syria for a more effective defense of the western part of the country where major cities are located. The deliberate decision of the Syrian regime precipitated two major consequences, both to the detriment of Turkey. Retreating from the northern parts of the country, Damascus handed the control of three large chunks of territory to the PKK, its former proxy and Turkey's archenemy. Therefore, the foundation of three Kurdish cantons, dubbed *Rojava*, alongside the Turkish-Syrian border marked the beginning of a new phase in how Turkey dealt with the situation in Syria. Mesmerized by the backlash from Damascus, Ankara gradually shifted its proactive policy supporting regime change in Syria to a reactive one, devised to inhibit the consolidation of Kurdish cantons into a breakaway statelet in northern Syria.

The meteoric rise of the Islamic State [ISIS] can partly be attributed to the retreat of the Syrian military from the eastern part of the country. Taking advantage of the retreat, the organization could seize large territories in Iraq and Syria much more easily. Changing the power configuration on the ground, the rise of the ISIS set the new dynamics in motion. Throughout the two years between early 2014 and late September 2015, the theatre of war was dominated by the events pertaining to the activities of the ISIS. Its rise compelled major powers to forge new alignments or develop *modus operandis* with agencies that they would not have otherwise cooperated. Most notably, when the ISIS laid a siege on Kobane in late 2014, the US and several European countries started to support the PKK—an organization they officially qualified as terrorist. The US later began to refer to the Syrian branch of the PKK as its local ally and reinforced its support to the organization, further complicating Ankara's relations with Washington.

After the balancing of the ISIS, the following phase of the crisis is discernible by the new dynamics unleashed by the massive Russian military intervention. There was a shift in the power configuration on the ground as Russia neutralized groups which were gaining ground near the Jordanian border in the

South, as well as in areas around Aleppo, and set new circumstances favorable for the Syrian Army. Due to the new circumstances, Russian diplomacy began to hold the reins in Syria, thereby compelling Turkey to acquiesce in the new peace initiative dubbed the Astana Process.

While Turkey's involvement gained traction through several trajectories, the detrimental fallouts the crisis brought about on Turkey ran the gamut of problems. Instigated by the brutal suppression of demonstrations in Syria, Turkey immediately became one of the destinations of mass migration from Syria. The refugee flow triggered by the crisis returned into a reflexive security issue for Turkey and other neighboring countries. In Turkey, the massive immigration reached a degree that had never been experienced before. Furthermore, the refugee crisis extended beyond the region, as it ended up becoming the most decisive factor in Turkey's relations with Germany and Greece in particular and the European Union in general. In Europe, the refugee flow from Syria escalated the migration problem and gave momentum to the rise of populism, Islamophobia, xenophobia of all kinds and far right, eventually changing the political complexion across the continent.

For obvious reasons, Turkey became one of the first countries, which was involved in the crisis after demonstrations in Syria evolved into an armed conflict between the military and the opposition. Caught by surprise, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) leadership faced a dilemma concerning its relations with Syria. The JDP leadership had made every effort to improve relations with Syria throughout its first two terms. Until the very day the uprisings engulfed Syria, relations with Damascus were presented as an embodiment of the JDP's foreign policy motto: "Zero Problem with Neighbours". The rapprochement between the two countries was illustrated as one of the success stories of the JDP's policies in the Middle East. Seen as Turkey's gateway to the region, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had once depicted the state of relations with Syria as "Common history, common future, common fate". Therefore, when the uprisings broke out in Syria, the JDP leadership's initial position *vis-à-vis* the situation was, to say the least, hesitant. However, with the course of events the JDP's hesitancy receded as its leadership saw a window of opportunity in the situation and felt compelled to get involved in the crisis.

Although much ink was spilled over the way different state and non-state actors were involved in the crisis, the literature addressing the question as to how the crisis influenced those agencies in return remained limited. It is interesting to note that as the crisis persisted, its fallouts began to be more extensive. It is already obvious that the impact of the crisis instigated on Turkey will remain in place for decades to come.

The crisis' ramifications on Turkey's foreign affairs were conspicuous. On some occasions, as was the case with the US, the crisis seemed to have played a catalyzing role in marring Ankara's relations with Washington, which had already deteriorated due to a number of other factors. In other cases, like the Turkish-Russian relations, the crisis led the JDP leadership to grave miscalculations, such as shooting down the Russian SU-24M fighter in an attempt to curb Moscow's military intervention, which led to an unprecedented crisis in the bilateral relations since the end of the World War II. The crisis also added another layer to the problems of Kurdish separatism that Turkey has been fighting to suppress for decades. In July 2012, as mentioned above, the PKK's rapprochement with the regime forced Turkey to reprioritize its strategy in Syria. The PKK's alignment with the US during the battle of Kobane in 2014 further complicated policies pursued by Turkey in Syria and Iraq. Eventually, Turkey had to engage with the increasing fallouts of the crisis, such as the spill over in Iraq, and finally decided to deploy combat troops in Syria. While Turkey had to

shoulder the burden of almost 4 million refugees, the massive waves of migration to Europe also changed the perception of Turkey in the eyes of European countries that were affected the most by the refugee crisis. Turkey has thus become a bulwark country to stop the flow of refugees.

The special issue starts with Behlül Özkan's article, which provides an historical background for Turkey's relations with the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. Since the Syrian branch of Muslim Brotherhood appeared to be the major organization that Ankara supported during the initial phase of the crisis, *modus operandi* that the JDP government developed with the organization was considered to be a contingency get together. This perception led to many to overlook the close relations that Ankara has already cultivated with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood before the Cold War. Questioning such premises, Özkan's article put the relationship into a wider historical perspective to see how various governments in Ankara established different mechanisms to take benefit of complex web of tangled relations among Turkish Islamists and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

Given the magnitude of impact that the crisis had on Turkey's relations with the US, the second article of the issue deals with the way in which the crisis influenced Ankara's relations with Washington. Burcu Sarı focuses on the dynamics that lead to a strategic discrepancy between positions taken by the two allies and shows how they abandoned each other in Syria. Sarı highlights that the regional power vacuum created by the absence and/or failure of joint Turkish-US stance in Syria, which paved the way to the involvement of other actors such as Russia and Iran with their competing interests in the conflict.

Çiğdem Nas's article deals with the question as to how the ramifications of the Syrian crisis influenced Turkey's relations with the EU. Nas focuses on two important ramifications of the Syrian crisis, which became contentious in terms of Turkey-EU cooperation with regard to the situation: firstly the increase in terrorist activity bred by chaos in the region and secondly the movement of Syrians out of the country in pursuit of refuge in neighboring countries and Europe. Nas points out that while these two issues necessitated close cooperation with Turkey, they also created a tension in bilateral relations due to differences of views over the crisis.

In their analysis of Turkish-Russian relations during the Syrian crisis, Mitat Çelikpala and İnan Rüma argue that their ambitions of getting great power status in the Middle East were major motivations behind policies that the two neighbors pursued in Syria. Although initially remained at loggerheads with each other, unexpected dynamics set in motion by the crisis compelled Turkey to go through a reprioritization in its strategies, which eventually led to a rapprochement with Russia. The article disentangles all the factors that may have caused Turkey's nimble *volta-face* in late 2016 and Russia's ability to entice Turkey to join the Astana Process it initiated.

Birol Başkan's article raises questions as to how and why Turkey's bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar have taken serpentine trajectories since the uprisings broke out in Syria and depicts the magnitude of impact the crisis in Syria has had on the bilateral relations. However, the article put Turkey's relations with both Gulf countries in a wider perspective claiming that dynamics, which informed Ankara's relations with those countries were already working, and the Syrian Crisis delayed the inevitable deterioration.

Salih Bıçakçı's article examines the emergence of DAESH (aka ISIS) in Syria and its effects in the region as well as networks of the organization in Turkey. The rapid formation and brisk expansion of Daesh in Syrian and Iraqi territory has traumatized the international audience and paralyzed the international reactions for

a while. Ankara has perceived Syria problem at first an opportunity to establish its domination over Syria by assisting armed opposition groups. Later, all these alliances put Turkey turned into an inextricable situation. Bıçakçı also depicts the process by focusing on Turkey's interactions with Daesh and development of this mutual relations by the land operations, the suicide attacks and radicalization of the Islamist networks in Turkey

Murat Ülgül's article sheds light on the fact that Syria has always been a decisive ingredient in shaping Turkey's relations with Israel. After an historical overview of the triangle relationship, the article underscores how the crisis changed complexion of what the Syrian factor means for Turkey. Highlighting Hobbesian mechanisms of the crisis, Ülgül underlines Syria as one of the major actors of the politics that Turkey and Israel had shared for years. He also tries to understand how lacking of such actor, since the outbreak of the crisis, affected the two countries in the way to cope with shifting dynamics and undermining possibilities of normalization.