THE EFFECT OF SYRIA CRISIS
ON THE TRANSFORMATION AND INTEGRATION
OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Suriye Krizinin Orta Doğu'daki Dönüşüm Ve Bütünleşme Dinamiklerine Etkisi

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Abstract:

The Arab spring could be seen as an integral part of a world in transformation. The technology and information revolutions and interconnectedness between cultures make it impossible for tyrants to rule for lifetime while subjugating the people to servitude with no chance for their freedom. Despite the unique characteristics of each country, the common theme of the protests in the Arab world has been largely shaped by the continuing economic inequality and rising social injustices. The Arab youth charge the authoritarian governments as the main source of their socioeconomic problems, lack of freedoms, and injustices and, desire change in the current political systems. Syria has a central position connecting the Arab states to Turkey. As a pioneering state, Turkey needs a democratic Syria to contribute to the transformation of the Arab world. It could be said that the fall of Assad regime and the establishment of a democratic government in Syria can contribute to Turkey's initiatives for the transformation and regional integration in the Middle East.

Keywords: Demonstration, Syria crisis, transformation, democracy, integration

Öz:

Arap baharı, dönüşüm içinde olan dünyanın bütünleyici bir parçası olarak görülebilir. Teknoloji ve bilgi devrimleri ve kültürler arası bağlılık, halka özgürlükleri için şans tanımayan yöneticilerin ömür boyu iktidarda kalmalarını imkânsız kılmaktadır. Her ülkenin durumu kendine has özellikler taşımasına rağmen, Arap dünyasındaki protestoların ortak teması, büyük oranda süregelen ekonomik eşitsizlik ve artan sosyal adaletsizliklerle ilgilidir. Arap gençliği, süregelen ekonomik eşitsizliğin, sosyoekonomik problemlerin, özgürlüklerin yetersizliğinin ve adaletsizliklerin temel nedeni olarak baskıcı yönetimleri sorumlu tutmakta ve mevcut iktidarların değiştirilmesini istemektedir. Suriye, Arap devletlerini Türkiye'ye bağlayan merkezi bir konuma sahiptir. Öncü bir ülke olarak Türkiye'nin, Arap dünyasındaki dönüşüme katkıda bulunabilmesi için demokratik bir Suriye'ye ihtiyacı vardır. Esed rejiminin devrilmesi ve Suriye'de demokratik bir yönetimin tesisinin, Orta Doğu'da dönüşüm ve bölgesel bütünleşme için Türkiye'nin girişimlerine katkı sağlayabileceği ifade edilebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Protesto gösterileri, Suriye krizi, dönüşüm, demokrasi, bütünleşme

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INTRODUCTION

Arab Spring in the streets of the Middle East indicated that the dreams of democratic openings, competitive elections, the rule of law and wider political freedoms have affected the majorities in the Arab world.

The uprisings in most of the Arab countries have been organized with the help of social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Al-Jazeera news channel has gained popularity and credibility among the Arab people in the last decade, due to its impartiality. Attempts by the regimes to cut off their populations from the rest of the world by shutting down telephone and internet services remained ineffective. Knowledge transfer can occur through many transfer channels including human mobility, communication and information technology, training, foreign direct investment, patent, licensing, academic links, and producer-consumer knowledge transfer.

For many years, Arab countries have remained behind the developed and the developing countries in terms of capacity to create knowledge. Arab Spring is hoped to provide new opportunities for the transfer of knowledge in the Arab region, to commence positive trends. The new spirit of positivity in Arab societies has the potential to promote a new social culture to improve awareness and commitment to the knowledge transfer.[1]

2011 Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya showed how the globalization of the norms of civic engagement shaped the protesters' aspirations. The fall of the Egyptian, Tunisian and Libyan regimes has created a domino effect throughout the Middle East.

Syrians have long struggled with many challenges, including high unemployment, high inflation, limited upward mobility, rampant corruption, lack of political freedoms, and repressive security forces. These factors have fueled opposition to Syria's authoritarian government, which has been dominated by the Assad family since 1970. It could be said that the great majority of Syrian people are sharing the hope of being free of Assad regime. They are aware of the fact that the only way to benefit from the resources of the country is to establish a democratic government.

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[1] Samia S. O. M. Nour, "Arab Spring: Will More Freedom Boost Knowledge Transfer?" UN University Webpage, June 14, 2011, http://unu.edu/publications/articles/knowledge-transfer-in-arab-world.html.

1. THE DIFFICULTIES FOR THE TRANSFORMATION IN SYRIA

The regime in Syria has always used oppressive methods to sustain the system. The army, police, and the intelligence were the main pillars of this totalitarian regime. Since the beginning of the uprising against the Assad regime, it is estimated that more than 70,000 people have been killed. Thousands of the regime's opponents are in jail. Many Syrian opposition figures have left the country. The uprising against the regime in Syria has turned into a civil war between government forces and the armed elements of the opposition movement. There is also the possibility of an overall conflict between Sunni majority and the Alawite community which the Assad family comes from.

Syrian population includes different ethnic and religious groups. Under the Assad regime strict political controls have prevented these differences from playing a divisive role in political or social life. The majority of Syrians, about 90% of the population, are ethnic Arabs. The country also contains small ethnic minorities, notably Kurds. In Syria, there are also religious sectarian differences. In addition to Sunni majority, Syria contains some Muslim sectarian minorities, such as Alawites, Druze, Ismailis and several Christian denominations.

Although it seems that the Alawites and Christians are supporting the Assad government and Sunni Arabs and Kurds are against the regime, it is quite difficult to classify the ethnic and sectarian groups as pro- or anti-regime in a precise way. The borders between the fractions which emerged along the lines of ethnicity or sectarian identity have not been fairly explicit. There have also been changes in the attitudes of some groups towards the regime as the armed conflict between the government forces and the Free Syrian Army proved to prolong. However for simplification the Alawites and the Christians are given under the section of the supporters of the regime while the Sunni Arabs and Kurds are given as opposition groups.

1.1. The Supporters of the Syrian Regime

1.1.1. The Alawites

Despite the secular nature of the ruling Baath party, religious sects are important as the symbols of group identity and determinants of political orientation. The Assad family comes from the minority Alawite sect which is a branch of Shiite Islam. They comprise about 12% of the population.

Alawites are the key supporters of the Baath party while there have also been some Alawi families at odds with the Assad regime. By and large the Alawi community is the most likely group to remain loyal to the regime in Syria. The security forces are led by Alawites. Almost all Alawi families have at least one member in the se-

curity forces as well as additional members working in civilian ministries, such as education or agriculture. The Alawites assume that they will suffer if the opposition wins. Most of the Alawites fear of the collective punishment for the offenses of the Assad regime and they believe that the opposition may try to get revenge as the regime collapses. They see their community's fate tied to that of the Assad regime. Nevertheless, some Alawite groups support the opposition groups with the hope of a democratic change and better governance in Syria.

1.1.2. The Christian Community

Syria's Christian communities fear that they could be subjected to violent repression, just as the extremist groups have targeted Iraqi Christians following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Syria's Christians are primarily of Greek Orthodox along with some smaller sects. They comprise approximately 10% of the Syrian population.

Most Syrian Christians speak Arabic and traditionally are identified as Arab nationalists. Like other Christians in the Middle East, many Syrian Christians feel some affinity for Europe and the United States on religious and cultural grounds. Christians have been well represented in Syrian government organizations under the Assad regime. At present, Christians appear to follow a cautious approach to the uprising. While some have remained supportive of the Assad regime, some other groups have been assisting the opposition movement, including local armed elements and the Free Syrian Army.[2]

The opposition movement has also taken steps for the representation of Syrian Christians. In Doha meeting in November, 2012, George Sabra was elected as the new chairman of the Syrian National Council which became one of main bodies under the new umbrella organization, the Syrian National Coalition, of the opposition.

1.2. The Opposition Groups to the Syrian Regime

1.2.1. Sunni Muslim Majority

Sunni Muslims comprise over 70% of the population. The Sunni Muslim majority has been at the forefront of the protest movement and armed opposition to the Alawite-led regime. Actually, the Sunni majority has always been against the regime but remained silent because of the fear of being killed by the regime forces. The Alawite leadership of the Syrian government thus perceives the Sunni Arabs as the main threat to the Assad regime.

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[2] Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, "Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response," *CRS Report for Congress*, August 21, 2012, http://fpc.state.gov/documents/ organization/195385.pdf.

Economic class dynamics have also affected the choices of Syrians about the uprising. Many rural and less advantaged Sunni Syrians have supported the opposition movement, while urban and wealthier Sunni Syrians appear to have more loyalties. Though some radical elements see the conflict as a means to assert their community's dominance over others most of the Sunni Arabs defend Syria's unity and support an inclusive transition period.

The most numerous and the best-organized component of the opposition is represented by the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Western states had suspicions about the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood thanks to Israel's long-lasting negative propaganda and Assad regime's disinformation campaign against this group during Syria crisis. Muslim Brotherhood is in favor of preserving the unity of Syria in the post-Assad period contrary to the radical objectives of newcomer Salafis.

1.2.2. The Kurds

Syria's Kurds are the largest distinct ethnic minority in Syria (7 % of e population) and inhabit agriculturally rich areas, including Syria's most valuable oil and natural gas fields. In order to curb Kurdish demands for autonomy, Syrian governments have periodically arrested Kurdish political leaders. They also confiscated some Kurdish land and redistributed to Syrian Arabs to ''Arabize'' Kurdish regions.

Kurdish areas in northeastern Syria have remained relatively quiet during the uprising. Though the Kurds are against the Assad regime they have also been wary of supporting a potential Sunni Arab resistance movement. They assume that they may not be less hostile to Kurdish aspirations than the Alawite-led Assad government.

In Syria many Kurds have viewed the conflict as an opportunity to achieve autonomy in the north of the country. The Syrian-Kurdish National Council (KNC), as an umbrella organization consisting of several Kurdish political parties, has called for the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region within a federated Syria. However, KNC has come into conflict with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) as the Assad regime began to support PYD (and PKK) both against the Free Syrian Army and to Turkey's detriment. PYD is in line with the PKK terrorist organization and linked to the PKK's state-like structure KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union), which aims to establish an independent confederative Kurdistan over the territories of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria.

PYD has been accused of acting as an enforcer for the Assad regime in the Kurdish populated regions in the north and northeast of the country. With the influ-

ence of PYD backed by the regime against the Free Syrian Army, Kurdish people didn't give support to the Syrian opposition groups, as a whole. However, following a meeting of Kurdish opposition groups in Irbil the PYD joined with the Kurdish National Council to form the Kurdish Supreme Committee. Later, KNC has agreed to join the Syrian National Coalition, the new umbrella of opposition forces against President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

1.3. The Main Opposition Formations:

1.3.1. The Syrian National Council (SNC)

The SNC was formally organized in Turkey in October 2011 and brings together a range of mostly external activists, consisting of members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, secular elites and intellectuals. Abdulbaset Sieda replaced Burhan Ghalioun as chairman of the SNC in mid-2012. The "Friends of Syria" conference February 2012 in Tunis referred to the SNC, a legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful democratic change.

Unlike other opposition coalitions, the SNC has openly called for international military intervention in the crisis. Thus, some Syrians have alleged that the SNC is a tool of regional powers, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Although the SNC had resisted calls to turn the protest movement into an armed struggle, it has endorsed the imposition of a no-fly zone, the establishment of humanitarian safe corridors and buffer zones, and an organized and speedy operation to arm the Free Syrian Army.[3]

The international community has been frustrated by infighting within the SNC, its inability to attract more members of Syrian minority communities (especially Christians, Kurds and Alawites). In March 2012, several activists resigned from the SNC to protest its decision making and the lack of effectiveness.

1.3.2. National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces

The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition was founded in Doha, Qatar, in November 2012. The coalition has a council with about 63 seats, of which 22 are Syrian National Council members. The main aims of the National Coalition are replacing the Bashar al-Assad government and its symbols and pillars of support, dismantling the security services, unifying and supporting the Free Syrian Army, refusing dialogue and negotiation with the al-Assad government and holding accountable those responsible for killing and displacing Syrians.[4]

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[3] Syrian National Council's Website, http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/structure/executive-commitee.html.

[4] Wikipedia, "National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Coalition_for_Syrian_Revolutionary_and_Opposition_Forces

Following the election of the Coalition's president, several media outlets have signaled their approvals for the formation of the new revolution bloc under the leadership of Sheikh Moaz Al-Khatib. On 12 November 2012, National Coalition was recognized by the member states of the GCC, as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Later, the Arab League (with the exception of Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon) recognized the coalition as the legitimate representative and main interlocutor with the Arab League.

National Coalition is supported by NATO countries France, United States, United Kingdom, and Turkey. On 15 November 2012, Turkey recognized the National Coalition as the sole representative of the Syrian people. On 19 November 2012, the EU recognized the National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

1.3.3. The National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB)

The NCB was formed in the summer of 2011. It is a Syria-based alliance of leftist groups, including Kurdish activists and individuals associated with the 2005 Damascus Declaration on political reform. The NCB has stated a willingness to negotiate with the Assad regime and opposes foreign intervention. The SNC has criticized the NCB for these positions. Thus, the attempts of SNC to merge with NCB have failed.

1.3.4. The Free Syrian Army (FSA)

The FSA consists of lightly armed, dissident military personnel and officers who have defected from the army as the uprising began. FSA also represents a broader coalition of locally organized volunteer fighting groups who seek to affiliate themselves with the national opposition movement but lack integrated command structure, logistics, and intelligence. FSA has moved its military base from Turkey's Hatay province to Syria in September 2012 and several Syrian general staff officers are now playing a leadership role in the armed campaign against the Syrian government. It remains unclear whether FSA commanders outside Syria are able to maintain the loyalty of the local resistance groups.

FSA's equipment has been mostly locally financed with fighters buying small arms and ammunition on the black market, and local supporters selling household valuables to raise money for the rebellion.[5] Some observers believe that if the FSA fighters were trained and equipped with more sophisticated equipment, such as portable and guided anti-tank rockets and stinger missiles, they would be more successful against heavily equipped government forces.

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[5] Derek Henry Flood, "Inside the Free Syrian Army," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, 12, no.3 (March 1, 2012).

The armed resistance and the political opposition have had an ambiguous relationship to date. The SNC has established a Military Bureau to coordinate different armed groups. However, some armed groups resisted accepting political leadership from some members of the political opposition. This uncertainty complicates the efforts by third parties to identify potential partners and to plan operations in future.

2. THE POLICIES OF THE EXTERNAL POWERS

2.1. The US Policy

For Washington, the Gulf monarchies have a high strategic value and they should not fall under the control of Tehran regime. GCC was actually founded as a result of the fear of Iran. If the current crisis in Syria is not quickly resolved, it is possible that the Iranian threat would become a reality. A change of leadership in Syria would mean a political defeat for Iran and loss of influence on the shores of the Gulf and the Levant.

The Obama Administration has pursued the following policies toward Syria since the uprising against the Assad regime began in March 2011.[6]

a. Demanding a Political Transition: On August 18, 2011, President Obama called for the resignation of Syrian President Bashar al Assad, stating "We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way."

b. International Diplomacy: The US officials have advocated for UN Security Council action to condemn the Syrian government and end the bloodshed. They supported the efforts to improve international policy coordination to help Syrian people, such as the efforts of the Friends of Syria forum. US officials also supported the Annan Plan at the UN Security Council. Obama Administration has blamed Russia and China because of vetoing the draft resolutions in the Security Council against the Assad regime.

c. Non-lethal Aid: In 2012, Obama Administration officials have acknowledged that the US is providing peaceful elements of the Syrian opposition with non-lethal assistance, such as medical supplies, night-vision goggles and communications equipment.

d. Intelligence Coordination: US intelligence officers are helping to coordinate

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[6] Sharp and Blanchard, "Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response," *CRS Report for Congress*.

the delivery of lethal aid to the elements of the armed Syrian opposition not affiliated with terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda. US intelligence officers, in conjunction with foreign governments, also may be helping the opposition develop logistical routes for moving supplies into Syria.

e. Disruption of Arms Shipments to Syria: The US, in conjunction with regional partners, has been attempting to disrupt the resupply of Assad's forces.
f. Contingency Planning: Such planning includes implementing a no-fly zone and protecting proliferation-sensitive sites should Syrian forces protecting them dissipate.

g. Preparing for a Transition: The US Administration is supporting preparation for a political transition in Syria even as fighting continues on the ground. This involves bringing opposition groups together, including representatives of the Alawite community.

As of October 2012, U.S. policy toward Syria is focused on diplomatic and economic pressure on the Assad regime as well as providing non-lethal and humanitarian aid to opposition forces. The major concern of the US government is the possibility that Al Qaeda could take advantage from a possible regime change. As a Sunni organization, Al Qaeda has the advantage to hide its elements within the opposition groups. The Obama administration has repeatedly voiced concerns that funneling heavy weapons to the opposition forces could result in their spread to the extremists. This possibility could be seen as the main reason for the unwillingness of the US and other western powers to help the opposition forces, as they did in Libya and Mali. However, some media report that CIA personnel operating in southern Turkey are coordinating arms shipments to rebels in concert with US allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

On the other side, the Pentagon refuses a military solution and does not accept any military adventure decided upon by the political administration in the White House. Pentagon believes that, besides human losses, anti-American sentiment in the world would increase.[7]

2.2. The EU and NATO Policies
The European Union has passed more than a dozen rounds of sanctions on the Assad regime since the March 2011 uprising. Significant sanctions include:
- Asset freezes and travel bans imposed on top members of the Syrian military and government, including Assad and his family

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[7] Eric Schmitt, "CIA Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2012 http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

- Establishment of an arms embargo

- Sanction on the Syrian central bank

- Bans on the import of Syrian oil and the export of equipment for the petro industry.

As a Euro-Atlantic security organization, NATO has expressed that it will neither contribute to a military intervention in Syria nor maintain the assets to deliver humanitarian or medical assistance. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in February 2012, "Syria is ethnically, politically, religiously much more complicated than Libya."[8]

It could be estimated that any military intervention in Syria may cause great damages to the NATO or American forces, which is not comparable in Libya or Mali. Continuing political support by Russia and China and direct military support of Iran to the Syrian regime is another factor preventing the international intervention.

2.3. Iran's Policy

The Iranian-Syrian alliance started with Hafez al-Assad, who built a strong alliance with Imam Khomeini. This alliance had given Iran a significant access to the Arab Middle East and granted Iran a strategic position on the Mediterranean.

In 2006, Syria and Iran signed a mutual defense pact and formalized the establishment of a joint Iranian-Syrian Supreme Defense Commission to institutionalize long-term military cooperation. Tehran and Damascus, under increasing international pressure, tried to revive their alliance formed during the 1980s. According to the media reports, Iran had promised to supply Syria with shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles, Shehab-3 missiles with a range of 1,350 kilometers, Russian-made T-72 tanks, and short-range SCUD missiles. Iran also agreed to finance future Syrian military deals with Russia, China and Ukraine.[9]

The power distribution, created by the Iraqi invasion in favor of Iran, might be reversed through a regime change in Syria. The new Syria would be preferred to join the Sunni countries camp which has been in a close relationship with the West.

Tehran has always closely monitored the developments in the Syria. It could be said that Iran would make every effort to save the Assad regime, which is the only pro-Iranian Arab regime in the Middle East. Iran actually did its best to support

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[8] Jonathan Masters, "Syria's Crisis and the Global Response", *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 29, 2012 http://www.cfr.org/syria/syrias-crisis-global-response/p28402.

[9] Bilal Y. Saab, "Syria and Iran Revive an Old Ghost with Defense Pact," *Brookings Institution*, July 4, 2006 http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2006/07/04middleeast-saab.

the Assad regime, by supplying weapon and ammunition and giving training and personnel support. Even, they sent some fighting troops to give support to the Assad forces. For the Iranians, the downfall of the Syrian regime would mean the collapse of Iran's basic strategy in the Middle East and Arab world. Iran has a leverage to implement pressures on Israel through the Shiite groups in Lebanon, particularly Hezbollah and the Assad regime has an essential position for Iran's support to these groups. A regime change in Syria would cause to the collapse of the Shiite bloc among Tehran, Bagdad, Damascus and Hizbullah in Lebanon. Consequently, Iran's influence and political weight would dramatically lessen in the region.

For Iran, the possibility of losing Syria, at a time when the west was attempting to siege Iran, meant that Washington and its allies could increase pressure on Tehran to destabilize its regime. Tehran expressed its opposition to any foreign intervention in Syria and objected to western accusations that Iran was assisting Syrian security forces in suppressing the demonstrations.[10]

2.4. Russia's Policy

Russia is the second supporter to al-Assad regime. The calls for changing the Syrian regime would also mean that Moscow would lose an important ally in the Middle East. Russia's relationship with Damascus is the cornerstone of the Russian strategy in the region since the early 1950s. Russia has an important naval base on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

Prior to the escalation in Syria, Russia had expressed its resentment against the NATO which pushed for an international resolution to protect the civilians in Libya. Moscow had favorable relations with Tripoli, and the fall of Gaddafi was considered a severe blow to its vital interests in the Mediterranean. In order to prevent the repetition of the Libyan case, Russia severely voiced its intent to oppose any international resolution against Syria. It told the Syrian opposition groups that had visited Moscow that Russia would oppose any international intervention and any destabilization of the regime while encouraging the opposition to start talks with the Syrian regime. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, conveyed Russia's staunch opposition to prevent the condemnation of the Syrian regime in the UN Security Council.

Losing Syria totally to the west means that the Middle East would be closed to the Russians. Russia's final goal is probably not to protect the Assad regime. Russia has been striving to impose that Russia's vital interests should be taken into

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[10] Daoud Rammal, "Iran, Turkey and Gulf Countries Reassess Their Policies", *Journal of Al Monitor*, September 26, 2012, http://m.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/09/iran-turkey-gulf-reassess-syria-strategy.html.

consideration if there is going to be a change in Syria. If Russia's defense industry agreements are to continue, the interests of Syrian Orthodox people are to be protected, its investments in the country are not negatively affected, and if it believes that no chaos will take place in Syria, then it would give green light to Assad's leaving the power. Therefore, the resistance of Russia could be broken only through the assurance that Moscow's strategic interests will be protected in the post-Assad period. This requires a major bargain among the global actors.

Thus, Russia gives the message that; "If Assad leaves, I will be one of the major actors shaping the new structuring. Change is possible only through my approval, and I will be one of the powerful actors on the table while determining the new structure." Along with the Syria crisis, Russia sees the limits of its power both in global scale and in the Middle East. Russia knows it will no more be effective in its Middle East policy if it loses Syria. In addition, Russia exports approximately 10% of its defense industry to Syria. In a potential regime change in Syria, Russia views that Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis might be effective in the new ruling governments and these elements might affect its own Muslim minorities.[11]

2.5. China's Policy

China is another big power supporting the Assad regime. It has opposed any international intervention against the Syrian current regime. China establishes the ideological link between the insurgency groups in its Uyghur autonomous region and the armed groups fighting to establish an Islamic state in the Middle East. China views that the success of the opposition groups in Syria may have negative consequences inside China. Therefore, China along with Russia using its veto right has blocked the efforts in the UN Security Council to condemn the Syria regime.

2.6. The Policies of the Arab States

Many Arabs, especially the Gulf states, argue that Syria turned into a new ground for conflict between the Arabs and Iran's expansionist policy in the region. They believe that if Tehran is able to help the Assad regime survive the crisis, it would achieve a strategic victory against the Arab Gulf countries. Therefore, Arab Gulf countries broke their silence on the Syria crisis.

The GCC appear to consider all options before becoming involved in the crisis, from regime change to maintaining the Syrian political order. They also try to contribute to redefining the future strategic balance in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait seem to be advocating regime change in Syria, by

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[11] Ekaterina Stepanova, "The Syria Crisis and the Making of Russia's Foreign Policy," IMEMO, Russian Academy of Sciences, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 199, June 2012, http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pepm199.pdf.

using economic means. UAE, Qatar and Oman are also using economic tools to exercise pressure, but not with the aim of ridding of the al-Assad regime. On 7 August 2011, the GCC condemned the crackdown and called on the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, to adopt serious reforms, guaranteeing full civil rights and the dignity of the Syrian people.[12]

On 26th of November 2011, the Arab League decided to start economic sanctions against the Syrian and to cut the relationships with the regime while the Assad regime announced that it will not accept the pressures of the Arab League. The Arab states agreed on that Syria would withdraw its army and security forces from the streets, open dialogue with the opposition and allow media and monitors into the country.

Protesters have hoped that the League's decision would spark further international pressure on the regime, and called for international protection and a safe zone for defectors. But the Western states have not been willing to intervene in the region without Arab support like in NATO mission in Libya. On the other side, Syria has tried to retain support among regional Arab governments by insisting it is fighting against the terrorists.

The new Quartet Contact Group on Syria, including Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, met to discuss the ways of resolving the Syria crisis and reaching consensus on an initiative that would end the violence and maintain Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The group also aimed to show its support for UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi's mission in Syria. Although the meeting failed to achieve tangible results regarding a resolution of the Syria crisis, Iran's participation could be regarded as a positive sign. [13]

2.7. Turkey's Policy

After coming to power, AKP government improved economic relations with Syria. The two countries set up a higher council for strategic cooperation and lifted visa restrictions. Turkey in this period regarded Syria as a gateway to the Arab world. Ankara played a key role in bringing Assad out from the international isolation after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri in 2005, by increasing economic, cultural, and diplomatic relations with Damascus as Erdogan established a close personal relationship with the Syrian president Bashar Assad. Turkey also played a crucial role in 2007 and 2008 with its mediation efforts between Israel and Syria.

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[12] Richard Rousseau, "The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Syrian Crisis," *Europe's World*, November 21, 2011 http://www.europesworld.org/NewEnglish/Home_old/PartnerPosts/tabid/671/PostID/2796/language/en-US/Default.aspx.

[13] Daoud Rammal, "Iran, Turkey and Gulf Countries Reassess Their Policies", *Journal of Al Monitor*.

When the street protests began in Syria in March 2011, Erdogan announced that he had spoken with the President Assad and counseled quick implementation of social, economic and political reforms, while offering Turkish help to achieve the changes. These efforts of the Turkish government angered Syrian protestors as well as the public opinion in the Arab world, because Turkey seemed to support an Arab dictator against his own people. However, Erdogan's position soon changed due to that the government forces started firing at civilian protesters in Syria. Ankara's policy completely turned against the Assad regime as the number of Syrian refugees entering Turkey continued to increase in parallel with the intensifying violent crackdown and rising death toll in Syria. Bashar Assad also started to give support to the armed Kurdish group PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organization, by providing the group with weapons and ammunition. This policy of Assad regime was enough for Turkey to toughen its policy against Syrian regime.

The gradual change in Turkish attitudes toward Assad has upset the Iranian leadership, which fears the erosion of its influence in Syria. Because of these concerns, the Iranians have made their position clear to the Turks by saying that the fall of the Syrian regime is a red line for Iran. Because of the geopolitical importance of Syria, the country has become a rivalry arena between Ankara and Tehran. Since the inception of the uprising Iran has backed the regime while Turkey started to give support to the opposition movement as the Assad regime resorted to armed force to suppress the civilian protests. This affects the domestic situation in Syria negatively, by deepening social and religious differences between Alawites and Sunnis.

The conflict between Iran and Turkey over Syria could be seen as a delaying factor for the democratic change and ending of the insurgency. The delay of the successful transformation by the opposition groups in Syria and "jet crisis" made it possible for Turkey to see its limits in the foreign policy towards the region. This enabled Turkish foreign policy to have a more realistic ground.

3. THE POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE:

In an August 2012 report, the United Nations Human Rights Council commission of inquiry on Syria found:

> "…reasonable grounds to believe that Government forces and the *Shabbiha* had committed the crimes against humanity of murder and of torture, war crimes and gross violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, including unlawful killing, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention,

sexual violence, indiscriminate attack, pillaging and destruction of property. The commission found reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes, including murder, extrajudicial execution and torture, had been perpetrated by organized anti-Government armed groups, although didn't reach the frequency and scale of those committed by Government forces and the *Shabbiha*."[14]

Taking into account the developments in the past and the other conditions, the following scenarios seem likely to happen.[15]

3.1. Imminent Regime Defeat?

The July 18 (2012) bombing that killed four high-level regime figures, including the President's brother-in-law, may have psychologically changed the narrative of the conflict in favor of the opposition. However, ensuing round of clashes in Aleppo and continuing air attacks on rebel-held areas across the country indicated that the Assad regime has not been defeated.

3.2. An Enduring Conflict and State Collapse?

Both sides could remain locked in armed conflict, unable to prevail, and unwilling to negotiate over power sharing. This scenario could lead to tens of thousands more casualties and mass civilian displacement before exhaustion settles in and negotiation ensues.

Some observers have speculated that if conflict persists and state authority weakens further, Syria could disintegrate and split into Alawite, Sunni, Christian, and Kurdish enclaves, with mixed populations in urban areas divided by sectarian neighborhoods. The prospect of partial or total state collapse poses serious security risks. Syrian weapon stockpiles could proliferate and security vacuums could present opportunities for transnational violent extremist groups to take root.

3.3. Rebel versus Rebel?

If the opposition fails to unify politically around a civilian-led authority or a military-led council, rebel fighters may turn against each other prior to or after regime change. Should this occur, Syria's civil war could evolve into a multi-faceted conflict, with competing groups prolonging the violence.

3.4. A Military Coup?

The Assad regime has an intricate system of control over commanders in the mili-

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[14] UN Document A/HRC/21/50, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," August 15, 2012, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session21/Pages/ListReports.asp.

[15] Sharp and Blanchard, "Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response", *CRS Report for Congress*.

tary and intelligence apparatus, and many military leaders are linked by kinship ties. Up to now, no members of the core Alawite leadership of the Assad regime had defected. Thus, a military coup remains a remote possibility. However, when faced with mounting battlefield losses and the prospect of defeat, some military commanders, may calculate that a move against the Assad family could provide them with a chance at the negotiating table during a transition process.

3.5. Regional Spill-over?

The conflict in Syria has already created regional security risks that could grow more serious. Fighting among Syrians has spilled over into Lebanon in isolated incidents and tensions among Syrians are mirrored among Lebanon's sectarian communities. According to press reports, outside powers, such as the Arab Gulf states, Turkey and Iran are supporting proxies inside Syria. Syria's neighbors or other outside actors could choose more direct military intervention if they calculate that the conflict in Syria poses an unacceptable threat to their national security. For example, Israel, Jordan, or the US could intervene in Syria in order to secure or destroy stockpiles of Syrian chemical weapons or missiles. Turkey could intervene if PKK terrorists based there expand their operations against the Turkish military.

3.6. Breakup of Syria

In the breakup of Syria, the emergence of a mini-Alawite state along the coastline, where most of the Alawites live is an alternative option. Such a state will be protected by the Syrian army in its present composition. It is also possible that the Christian communities could participate in this state or establish an autonomous region between Sunni and Alawite states. There are talks also between some Kurdish activists and their compatriots from Northern Iraq for the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region on Syrian soil. Under such a scenario, most of Syria, including the capital of Damascus, will be a part of a Sunni dominated state.

All of the scenarios mentioned above have the possibility to come true. For the goodness and benefit for the Syrian people, the first one, "an imminent regime defeat" seems the best option. Otherwise, all the other options will occur more or less, and increase the negative consequences making the reconstruction of the state difficult after the regime change.

4. THE NECESSITY OF THE REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Since the end of Second World War, some attempts have been made to improve cooperation and integration among the regional states. The formation of the Arab League in 1945 was a loose federation between Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jor-

dan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. It helped to create a new common consciousness among the participants for economic and financial cooperation. But, the attempts for a political union, such as United Arab Republic (UAR) have failed. Today, Arab League comprises 21 states.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was formed in 1981 by six Arab Gulf states to promote co-operation and integration in economic, social, cultural affairs and foreign and security policies. The main motivation of the GCC was to develop a shield against the threat of the Iran-Iraq war. But, when that conflict was over, this attempt lost its direction and appeal.[16]

The lack of efforts for a regional integration building in the region may come partly from the reality of general insecurity, because of the unresolved issues of democratization and state-building. The region needs to be empowered by socio-economic change. But it takes time and money. The speed of globalization, transportation and communication techniques could help this process. Removal of trade barriers among the states can be a positive factor to raise the general standard of living, to make closer the peoples, and to develop a common sense of community. The peoples of the Middle East have no reason to clash each other and on the contrary they are even eager to speak and interact with one another.[17]

Following the Israel-Palestine conflict, the main obstacle to the regional integration seems to be the different religious and sectarian beliefs between Sunni and Shiite groups. Therefore, it would be more realistic to start an initiative for a regional integration, first among the Sunni nations, leaving Iran and Iraq outside for a while. By the time, it could be possible to expand the borders of the integration, to include Iraq, Iran and the states beyond it, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

It seems that; as long as the Syria crisis is not solved and ended with the victory of the opposition groups which represent the majority of the Syrian people, any attempt for a regional integration have no chance of success. In this respect, regional integration depends on the resolution of Syria crisis since Syria is located at the crucial geographic position connecting the main Arab states to Turkey. Without Syria, the minimum conditions of a regional integration in the Middle East could not be maintained. Integration in the Middle East requires extensive relations and advanced lines of communication among the peoples of the region and Syria crisis appears as the main obstacle. If the Assad regime changes, the necessary conditions could be met in a reasonable period and a new initiative for integration could be started. This initiative would also maintain and serve the goals aimed by the protest movements across the Arab world.

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[16] The Official Website of the GCC, http://www.gcc-sg.org/eng/index895b.html.

[17] Fehmi Agca, *Dynamics of Political Changes* (Skopje: Logos Publisher, 2011), 209.

5. THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF TURKEY FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE REGION

The political and economic success under the democratic leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan made Turkey a model for the Arab youth, by proving that a government with Islamic tendencies could be democratic, and adjust itself to compromise the religious and universal values. His leadership and charismatic personality contributed a lot to the motivation of the Arab people to successfully accomplish the democratic transformation.

Turkey's new foreign policy vision rejects the hostilities among nations and aims to solve all the conflicts in a peaceful way. The policy of zero problems with the neighbors became an effective step for Turkey to melt the ices with former enemies. With this new foreign policy approach, Turkey gained a great confidence and sympathy of the peoples in the region and therefore Turkey became one of the most trusted states in the region.

Many politicians in the Arab Spring countries are modeling themselves on the Turkish leader. Essam Erian, a top leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood states: "Erdogan wears a business suit, but he prays in the mosque. That is something we can identify with." There is also an obvious echo in the name of the Brotherhood's new political arm: Freedom and Justice Party. Abdelhamid Jlassi, a leader of Tunisia's Ennahda Party says: "Erdogan speaks our language. When he speaks, we listen."

For Arab Islamists, Turkey's success is a proof that they can modernize their countries without breaking away from their religious principles and values. On the other side, Erdogan's Western admirers see the success of Justice and Development Party (AKP) as a proof of modernity. If any evidence were needed that Erdogan's way leads to political success, the AKP won its third general election in June 2011, by winning the half of the total votes.[18]

It is interesting that the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, exactly the same with the name of ruling party of Turkey, won the last general elections, on 25th of November 2011. This could be seen as an evidence that how the current political system of Turkey has been a model for the Arab people.

Greater Middle East Project of the US argues the need for more human rights, democracy, liberalism, women rights and economic development in the region. As a matter of fact, many countries in the region including Turkey, share the similar ideas.

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[18] Bobby Ghosh, "Why Turkey's Leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan is Feted Across the Arab World?" *Time*, November 28, 2011, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2099674,00.html.

In the Middle East, Turkish authorities need to build regional integration corridors starting from Turkey: The first integration corridor could be Turkey-Syria-Lebanon-Jordan-Egypt. This corridor may be expanded to Israel and Palestine. The second corridor could be Turkey-Iraq-Basra Gulf line. From the north of Iraq to the south, a cooperation and integration project can be developed between Turkey and Gulf States. The third important corridor could be Turkey-Iran-Pakistan corridor, as the West-East line. The total population of these three countries is about 300 million, and they have the capacity to affect many other countries in the surrounding areas.[19]

Through these corridors, communication, finance and transportation lines such as electricity, internet, highways and banking should be integrated to improve cooperation and economic development. The process of industrial growth and transformation is inseparable from the process of regional integration and cooperation. Turkish industries have the flexibility and the capacity to outsource some of their operations, for the benefits of other regional states.

Among these integration corridors, the first one is vitally important. Through this corridor, it is possible to reach the great Arab and African markets. Syria is the gate from which Turkey could return to the Middle East. As long as the dictatorship continues in Damascus, the cost would be greater for Turkey. The efficient use of this corridor requires the overturn of Assad regime as earlier as possible.

Restoration of the region could also serve to the Turkish security. Therefore, Turkey should play a key role in the regional integration process of the Middle East. Turkey, with its democratic institutions, is capable of undertaking the responsibility to take the lead for the initiative of a regional integration. EU experience has provided Turkey with a great advantage in this direction.

For the transformation of the Middle East, Turkish efforts alone may not be sufficient. The issues such as Iraq, Palestine, security of the energy resources, terrorism, democratization and stability in the region require cooperation and support of all humanity. With the help of the regional and non-regional partners, Turkey can lead an integration process in the region. In this context, US-Turkey and EU-Turkey cooperation would be helpful. Besides, any progress in the Turkey-EU integration process could have a constructive contribution to the Christian West-Muslim East friendship.

In order to maintain a powerful momentum at the beginning of the integration process, three powers of the Middle East should take the lead. These countries are

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[19] Sedat Laçiner, "Turkey's New Middle Eastern Approach," *USAK Publications*, February 19, 2009, http://www.usak.org.tr/EN/makale.asp?id=890.

Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. If these states could have the consensus to start a new initiative for a regional economic integration, the chance of success would increase.[20]

In order to remove the wrong perceptions among the nations, Middle East needs to improve local communication and co-operation. In this respect, the cancellation of visa regimes between Turkey and some Middle Eastern states may contribute to develop a suitable environment for the construction of good relationships in the region. The strengthened regional co-operation could help to the disputing states to reduce the antagonism and to create a favorable environment or to provide institutions or mechanisms to settle their conflicts. But of course, this would be a further step following a clear solution for the Syria crisis.

In this sense, Turkish foreign policy should handle the key national security issues in a proactive way, taking into account ethnic, economic, territorial, cultural and historical grounds. By doing that, it is important to establish balance between the interests of the strategic partners, regional safety and democracy.

CONCLUSION

Nobody can tell where and how the Arab Spring will end. The victory of universal values is inevitable in the face of harsh brutality. It is a curious question, how the uprisings have been shaped around the countries. From nationalism to socialism, from neo-conservatism to communism, the recent political history of the Arab countries has been marked by fragmented experiments with imported ideologies. But the last movements in 2011 were not imported. They have risen largely from the bottom up, by a silenced majority. No opinion poll was able to predict that a change on this scale would come, not through the charismatic leaders, politicians, intellectuals or the West, but from young Arab men and women, inspired by the universal values.

A transitional period will be necessary for political and economic stabilization in the region. Commitment to the promotion of democracy and freedom are necessary factors but they are not sufficient for the creation and transfer of knowledge in the Arab region. New governments will need to confirm commitment to the institutional reforms. In this sense, the first lesson for Arab nations is to create new regional cooperation mechanisms.

The main challenge is related to establish the right balance for allocating government funds to different priorities. One policy option could be to shift allocation of the resources from defense and security issues towards the knowledge institutions and the creation of knowledge that benefit youth and the poor by enhancing their

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[20] Fehmi Agca, *Dynamics of Political Changes*, 208.

capabilities, upgrading their skills and offering them more education and employment opportunities.

A regional integration in the Middle East may create a new wave to increase the international trade and foster the economic development. There is a great amount of financial and economic potential in the region for the economic development. It could be possible to create one of the greatest markets of the world. This potential would also contribute to the global economic balance. The global central position of the Middle East region may provide a regulatory role for trade, communications, transportation and energy transfers, for the benefits of the all world.

Developed states should encourage and support the initiatives for regional integration, especially in the Middle East since peace and economic welfare in this region could contribute to the global peace and prosperity. A new regional economic initiative in the Middle East could also be very effective to contribute to the economic development of the African nations and to make easier their participation into the globalization process.[21]

Middle East can be accepted as the heart of the world. If the heart of the world becomes secure, the world could become more secure and peaceful. The security and peace in the Middle East could be best maintained through the development of an effective regional integration.

Many of the countries in the region are subject to the internal constraints which prevent them from implementing effective policies. Political fragmentation and conflicts have hampered the development of democratic institutions. Civil organizations, such as free and independent media and autonomous non-governmental entities, are weak and often co-opted by the governments. As a consequence of these factors, citizen participation and private sector initiative have remained constrained.

Arab Spring seems to foster the hopes for better governance in the region, together with the freedom and democratization reforms. For the goodness of the people in the region and for the interest of all the people of the world, Syria crisis should be finalized with the cooperation of all international actors, under the mandate of the United Nations. Then, the road will be opened for a strong regional integration which could have a great contribution to the world peace and economic development.

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[21] George T. Abed, "Unfulfilled Promise: Why the Middle East and North African Region Has Lagged in Growth and Globalization," *Finance and Development* 40, No.1, (2003) http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2003/03/abed.html.

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