Arab Spring and the "Regionalization" of the Kurdish Problem: Possible Outcomes for Turkey and the GCC*

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Introduction

The uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the so-called Arab Spring, which started in 2010 have been one of the most significant issues in world politics for the last four years. Widespread protests – first in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, then in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria – caused regional and global powers to reconsider their policies in view of this new and highly unclear atmosphere. Would the uprisings expand and change the current regimes in the region one after the other? Would some countries in the region face the danger of being divided? What would be the best way to take up this challenge? Among the countries which tried to find the possible answers to these questions, Turkey, especially with its vulnerable Kurdish problem, was deeply affected by the impact of the new regional circumstances.

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The Justice and Development Party (JDP) which has been in power for more than a decade, aims to turn Turkey into a rising regional power.\(^1\) It has set a target of 2023 for Turkey to rank among the world’s top ten economies with a GDP per capita of $25,000 and $500 billion worth of exports.\(^2\) However, the most important challenge before JDP’s 2023 vision, which relies on the idea of enlarging Turkey’s regional and global capacity, is the continuing Kurdish problem and the existing tension with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Since clashes started with the PKK in 1984, more than 35,000 people have lost their lives;\(^3\) and in its fight against terrorism, Turkey has spent $400 billion in the last 30 years.\(^4\) Despite this heavy casualty and excessive financial cost, Turkey’s national unity and territorial integrity are still a matter of discussion and have only gotten much more complicated in the Arab Spring era.

Taking these into consideration, this chapter posits that Turkey’s chronic Kurdish problem has turned into the “Achilles’ heel” of the ruling JDP, especially because of the “regionalization”\(^5\) of the issue by the traumatic effects of the Arab uprisings, primarily in Syria. With the recent inclusion of the Syrian Kurds in the already complex Kurdish problem, Turkey has to consider an additional front in its years-long fight with the PKK. As the clashes between the Bashar Al-Assad regime and the opposition forces turned into a bloody civil war in Syria, the Syrian Kurds found themselves in the position of having to make a choice between the regime and the dispersed opponents. As a matter of fact, this turned into an element that has prevented Ankara from monopolizing, contrary to what happened in the past.

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1. In his visit to Japan in January 2014, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan surprisingly claimed that Turkey does not have any intention of being a regional or global power. However, just six months before that, he was claiming that Turkey was firmly advancing to become a global and regional power. See Serkan Demirtaş, “Turkey Has No Goal of Becoming a Regional or Global Power: Erdoğan,” Hurriyet Daily News, January 8, 2014. Whether Erdoğan’s latest statement really dismissed the JDP’s objective of becoming a regional and global power is not yet clear. However, this can certainly be considered as a sign of fatigue in Turkish foreign policy which has been going through a difficult period especially in the Arab Spring era. The rest of this chapter will shed light on some of these difficulties.


5. Turkish daily Radikal’s columnist Cevdet Aşkın was the first to mention the “regionalization” of the Kurdish problem in the Arab Spring era. See Cevdet Aşkın, “Kürt Sorunun Bölgeselleşiyor,” Radikal, January 2, 2012. Also see: Kadri Güresel, “The Third Front in Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Problem’,” Al-Monitor, January 2, 2013.
As a result of the Syrian uprising in the last four years, the fate of Turkey’s Kurdish problem has become much more linked now with the fate of the same problem in Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Both Kurds and the rulers of the countries where they live are aware that the possible side effects of the Arab Spring might finally cause a changing of the maps in the Middle East. However, neither the countries where Kurds live and the regional players such as the GCC states (namely Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Oman) that usually favor the status quo, nor the global powers such as the US and Russia are ready for such a radical change. For this reason, the recent negotiation process between the Turkish state and the PKK can actually be considered as an extension of this new and complex situation, where the Turkish government is making an effort not to lose the control on the vitally important Kurdish issue. In fact, the continuing negotiation process between the Turkish state and the PKK cannot be fully understood without taking into account the latest developments in Syria. Apart from revealing the JDP government’s excessive regional ambitions and inability to overthrow the Assad regime, the Syrian civil war has shown Turkey its limits in manipulating the Syrian Kurds, namely the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is considered to be a part of the PKK in northern Syria. The PYD, which declared autonomous rule in Syria’s Rojava region (also referred to as Western Kurdistan), is often accused of not taking a clear anti-Assad attitude as it has dangerous rivals such as the al-Nusra Front and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which are allegedly parts of the radical Islamic Al-Qaeda organization in Syria. Such actions increase Turkey’s concerns about the PYD and create a lack of trust between the two sides.

Together with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government), Turkey has even been accused of supporting the previously mentioned jihadist groups to minimize the PYD’s influence in Syria.⁶ But is there really such a consensus between these countries on which opposition group to support? Unfortunately, the situation in Syria points to a divergence in opinion between Saudi Arabia and Turkey-Qatar regarding which opposition group to favor.⁷ Many claim that Saudi Arabia favors radical Islamic groups like al-Nusra much more than Turkey and Qatar, which seem to be closer to the moderate Syrian opposition groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood that Riyadh dislikes.

⁶ Gürsel, “The Third Front in Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Problem’.”
Relations with Iran, another influential regional player that has a significant Kurdish population as well, are already tense due to the strategic commitments Ankara made to the West. Installations of NATO radar systems in Eastern Anatolia and Patriot missiles at the Turkish-Syria border by 2012-13 alarmed Iran, in whose hands the Kurdistan problem might easily turn into a card against Turkey. Developments related to the escalation of the Arab uprisings in Turkey’s neighborhood have actually necessitated Ankara to solve its Kurdish problem as soon as possible. Examining the challenge that Turkey has faced with the Arab Spring and the impact of that on its relations with the GCC states, this chapter claims that if Turkey fails to resolve its Kurdish problem, the highly regionalized character of this issue might actually cause new clashes that might go beyond the country’s borders. For this reason, not only Ankara, but also many other capitals, including those in the Gulf, are carefully watching the critical negotiation process between the Turkish state and the PKK as well as the situation in Syria. These two issues will determine not only the direction of the Kurdish problem but also the possible future map of the Middle East.

With this perspective, the first part of the chapter analyzes Ankara’s reaction to the Arab Spring, which promises some risks along with benefits. One of the concerns is whether Turkey should stay neutral in the Arab Spring and be a mere spectator or present a strong model for the Arab world through an active foreign policy. As the Syria case has shown, the bitter memories of the past might actually be stronger than Ankara presumes and the attempts of the JDP government to present Turkey as a model for the Middle East might eventually face a defeat. Instead, regional rivalries, sectarian divisions, and the fear of neo-Ottomanism might come forward and unite the Arab leaders, if not the masses, against Turkey and prevent Ankara’s desire for regional leadership. As the chapter also points out, the Arab Spring era is full of such ups and downs.

After focusing on Turkey’s way of handling the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the chapter examines Ankara’s reaction to the Syria crisis in detail as the issue contains great risks that might affect the existing relations in the Middle

9. A 2013 report of TESEV shows that the sympathy felt for Turkey in the Middle East has declined by 19 percent in the last three years. Similarly, there is an increasing perception (39 percent) in the region that Turkey is pursuing a sectarian-based foreign policy. Still, 60 percent of the people in the Middle East want Turkey to play a bigger role in the region. For details, see Mensur Akgün and Sabihə Senyücel Gündoğar, " Ortadoğuda Türkiye Algısı 2013," TESEV, November 2013, http://www.tesev.org.tr/assets/publications/file/03122013120651.pdf (accessed January 5, 2014).
East. Comparing Syria with the previous cases, the chapter presents the impact of the Syrian civil war on Turkey’s foreign policy, which has been mainly shaped by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s ideas. Claiming that identity politics are excessively risky for a multi-cultural country like Turkey, the chapter then deals with one of the most significant impacts of the Arab Spring, that is the “regionalization of Turkey’s Kurdish problem,” which might in fact endanger the national unity and territorial integrity of not only Turkey but also various other countries in the region.

Describing the developments such as the declaration of autonomy by the Syrian Kurds10 and their continuing fight against the jihadist groups, the chapter also aims to highlight the converging and diverging approaches of Turkey and the GCC states towards the Arab uprisings, primarily the Syrian crisis. It focuses on the outcomes of a possible division of Syria due to the continuing clashes between the opposition groups themselves and with the Bashar Al-Assad regime. It then underlines that the diverging policies of Turkey and the GCC specifically on which opposition group to support can itself contribute to such a division in Syria. Pointing out that, if repeated, the disagreements between the Iraqi federal government and the Iraqi Kurds on oil sharing and the already existing sectarian tensions might also end with Iraq breaking into pieces, the chapter claims that both Turkey and the GCC states might have to make new (and possibly micro-level) regional alliances to counterbalance Iran to protect their values and maximize their interests under these new circumstances.

Turkey’s “Arab Spring” Test and Relations with the GCC

The Arab Spring, which caught the world by surprise, triggered reactions both regionally and globally. After some hesitation and a “wait and see” period, Turkey started with a prudent approach towards these uprisings, although it often underlined the significance of Arab peoples’ democratic demands. However, the escalation of protests first in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, then in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, forced Turkey to reconsider its foreign policy strategies to deal with the possible side effects.

To what extent will Ankara be successful in adapting itself to these new circumstances? To answer that, we need to examine in detail four significant cases, namely that of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, which suffered from the transformative character of the uprisings. In fact, the Arab Spring, which, at first

sight, seemed to be a great opportunity for Ankara to present itself as a regional model—combining Islamic identity with secular democracy, gradually turned into an issue that could threaten not only Turkey’s new foreign policy vision, but also its national unity and territorial integrity. The tension between the JDP government and the Bashar Al-Assad regime in Syria put Turkey, which was once considered to be one of the biggest possible beneficiaries of the Arab Spring, face-to-face with significant risks rather than opportunities. Due to the clashes at the Turkish-Syrian border, the two countries almost came to war. The following parts of the chapter explain Ankara’s and the GCC countries’ reactions against the Arab uprisings, while trying to analyze why specifically Egypt, Libya and Syria cases jeopardized JDP’s future regional plans. However, to be able to do that, first, the Tunisian uprising will be examined briefly as it was the very first incident that challenged the existing foreign policies of the regional actors.

**Turkey-GCC and the Tunisian Uprising**

During the very first incidents of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, which started with anti-government demonstrations in December 2010, Turkey opted for a distant diplomatic tone underlining the need for the Tunisian administration to lend an ear to the democratic demands of its people. Due to its relatively long distance from Turkey, the Tunisian uprisings had a limited impact on Turkey. However, Ankara was still wondering about the possible route of the uprisings, to what extent they might escalate and whether they might put Turkey’s relations with the other Arab regimes into danger.

Fortunately, the Tunisians went through a relatively peaceful transition of power in January 2011 following the so-called “Jasmine Revolution,” and Turkey felt encouraged to raise its voice to benefit from this new atmosphere and to present itself as a successful regional model. As a result of mutual efforts, Turkey and post-revolutionary Tunisia developed their relations both politically and economically. Turkey already was popular in Tunisia and could use this popularity to develop its relations with the new Tunisian government chosen by free elections in October 2011. During this period, the biggest partner in the current coalition government, the al-Nahda party, often underlined its similarities with Turkey’s ruling JDP. Both al-Nahda and the JDP claim to defend a peaceful combination of Islam and democracy.11 There are significant similarities between the secular institutional

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contexts of the administrative structures of Turkey and Tunisia, and the economic systems of these countries are solid enough to support political and institutional stability. However, whether the Turkish model can be replicated in Tunisia is questionable. In an article, where he compares the JDP with al-Nahda, Stefano Maria Torelli claims that rather than being “a model for the democratization processes” in the Arab world, the JDP can actually be perceived as “an actor trying to expand its influence in the new context following the Arab Spring.” He also adds that al-Nahda itself, can actually be regarded as an alternative model to the JDP for the Arab countries, particularly in North Africa. Nuh Yılmaz and Burhanettin Duran, too, have an interesting study on the problem of being a model in the Middle East in the context of the new balance of power following the Arab Spring. They point out the competing models presented not only by Turkey, but also by Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, and claim that the rivalry between these models in the Arab Spring era is a reflection of the four countries’ distinct style of politics in their quest for regional leadership.

The Tunisian uprising was one of the platforms that presented the distinct approaches of these countries to the Middle East. While Turkey was looking at the uprising as a matter of human rights and democracy, countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia perceived the incidents as a result of the deteriorating economic conditions, namely poverty and unemployment. The first reaction of the Arab League to the Tunisian uprising was to announce a $2 billion worth aid package to boost the faltering economy of the region, and thus to prevent the masses from pouring on to the streets. Besides, it was Saudi Arabia, which gave asylum to Tunisia’s overthrown leader Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and his family, allegedly in support of the security and stability of Tunisia. Looking at these reactions, it is easy to understand why Turkey acted prudently at the beginning of the Tunisian uprisings and did not want to damage its relations with the rest of the Arab world. In fact, this can also be perceived as an outcome of Turkey’s changing regional role.

12. The writer also claims that the so-called “Turkish model” is not easily replicable in Tunisia despite strong similarities between the two countries and assumes that, if this is the case, it would be more difficult for the other Arab countries to take Turkey as a model. See Stefano Maria Torelli, “The AKP Model and Tunisia’s al-Nahda: From Convergence to Competition,” Insight Turkey 14, no.3 (2012): 66–67.
Compared to the past, in the JDP era, Turkey has been pursuing a positive engagement not only with its neighbors but also with the countries that are geographically and politically remote. For that reason, Ankara has to stay informed about the concerns of every single country in the region, including the GCC states with whom it has achieved a significant level of cooperation in the last decade. As a result of its relatively distant and prudent approach, it is possible to see that the new situation in Tunisia did not cause any trouble for Ankara either with Tunisia itself or with the rest of the Arab world. It rather gave Turkey the opportunity to improve the level of cooperation with Tunisia, which had been limited during the Ben Ali regime. By 2012, Tunisia was the seventh largest trade partner of Turkey in Africa, and from 2012 to 2013, the trade volume between the two countries has increased by $150 million. In Egypt, however, things have been much more complicated for Ankara.

**Turkey-GCC and the Egyptian Uprising**

Despite their rivalry for the leadership of the Sunnis Muslim world, Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt and the JDP-ruled Turkey usually had a good relationship. By the second half of the last decade, in particular, relations between the two countries improved further based on various agreements. As a result, the trade volume between the two countries reached around $5 billion. However, as the uprisings spread from Tunisia to Egypt, the Turkish government had to make a quick choice and it sided with the Egyptians instead of the Mubarak regime. Despite the existing economic ties between the two countries, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reminded Mubarak of the “life after death” and told him to listen to his people’s outcry for change. With this address, Erdoğan was actually giving a message to the Arab masses rather than Mubarak himself.

19. “Türk-Mısır İş Konseyi,” *DEİK*, 2013, http://www.deik.org.tr/Konsey/19/T%C3%BCrk%C4%B0rk_M%C4%ABr%E6%BCr_k-M% C4%B1s%C4%B1r1r.html (accessed December 20, 2013).
In the first decade of the 21st century, both Erdoğan and Davutoğlu enjoyed great popularity among the Arab masses as they strongly defended the symbolically important Arab causes such as Palestine. Erdoğan’s severe criticism at the 2009 Davos Summit of Israel’s attitude towards the Palestinians and the bloody Israeli raid on May 2010 against the Mavi Marmara flotilla, which weighed anchor from Istanbul to carry international aid to Gaza, played a significant role in Turkey’s rising popularity in the Middle East. This popularity was also consolidated by various other elements shaped by the new foreign policy principles of the JDP era. First of all, there was a visible effort to balance Turkey’s longstanding pro-Western agenda with a new strategy to improve relations with the neighboring Middle East. Presenting itself as a “center,” rather than a “bridge” between the East and the West, and formulating a pro-active foreign policy relying on “soft power,” Ankara aims to become an influential regional power that balances Europe with Asia. Feeling betrayed by the EU following the approval of (Southern) Cyprus as full member in 2004, the JDP government has now turned more towards the Middle East. For some, this was the beginning of the “Middle Easternization” of Turkish foreign policy.21

Under these circumstances, the JDP government did not hesitate too much to show a “red card” to Egypt’s Mubarak and continued to receive the sympathy of the Arab masses. The Turkish Prime Minister’s office welcomed the resignation of Mubarak on February 11, 2011, stating that Turkey had been supporting the legitimate demands of the Egyptians for democracy and freedom since the very beginning of the demonstrations, and wished a peaceful transition to a constitutional democracy soon.22 The so-called “Tahrir Revolution” in Egypt once again brought up the point whether Turkey could be a model for the Arab world with its Islamic but also democratic character that had come forward in the JDP period. Having been elected to a third term, Erdoğan was keen to back the idea of “being a model for the Arab world.” His so-called “Arab Spring tour” to the Middle East nourished neo-Ottoman sentiments while strengthening the idea of the “Turkish model.”23

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21. See Tanık Oğuzlu, “Middle Easternization of Turkey’s Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?” Turkish Studies 9, Iss. 1, (2008): 3-20; Şaban Kardaş, “Turkey: Redrawing the Middle East Map or Building Sand Castles?” Middle East Policy XVII, no. 1, (Spring 2010): 115.
While events in Egypt seemed to consolidate Turkey’s rising regional role, subsequent developments once again tested Turkey. On July 3, 2013, Egypt’s first democratically elected President, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, was toppled by the Egyptian army. Once again Turkey had to decide whom it was going to side with. Ankara’s choice was revealed by Erdoğan’s strong support for Morsi, to whom he allegedly gave a significant amount of financial support during his tenure. Erdoğan’s reaction against the toppling of Morsi was severe. “We do not respect those who do not respect the people’s will,” he said, reminding the big price they - as conservatives - had paid in the past, due to various military coups and coup attempts in Turkey.

With the huge support he provided Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, the Turkish Prime Minister was left standing almost alone in the international arena. The Egyptian coup did not elicit any strong reaction from the West and the neighboring Arab states. On the other hand, Saudi King Abdullah was the first leader who congratulated the Egyptian army. Frightened by the Arab uprisings and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait allegedly gave $12 billion to support a post-Morsi government. There was a clear divergence between Ankara and the GCC states on this issue. However, though it was the only regional country that condemned the Egyptian coup, Turkey did not show any strong reaction against these three GCC States’ anti-Muslim Brotherhood approach, but rather condemned Israel for being behind Morsi’s overthrow.

All this, in turn, increased the opposition to the JDP government both inside and outside the country. The Erdoğan government was already being accused of assuming a majoritarian attitude in Turkey by relying on the JDP’s power at the ballot box. Similarly, Morsi was criticized in Egypt for allegedly backing the Muslim Brotherhood in every possible way, while ignoring the relatively small number of secular groups who also played a significant role in ending the Mubarak regime. As columnist Mohammad Parvaz Bilgrami points out, the Egyptian coup

24. The Turkish government’s support for the newly elected Morsi government was about $2 billion, which was given as various loans and business deals. Scott Peterson, “Egypt’s Coup Shakes Brotherhood’s Islamic Partners in Turkey,” Christian Science Monitor, July 10, 2013.
25. Ibid.
27. Peterson, “Egypt’s Coup Shakes Brotherhood’s Islamic Partners in Turkey.”
can be considered as the end of the highly promoted Turkish model that believed in the harmony of Islam and democracy.\textsuperscript{29} For Bilgrami, this was a major setback for Turkey’s future regional plans, where the Muslim Brotherhood too would play a supportive role.\textsuperscript{30}

**Turkey-GCC and the Libyan Uprising**

Regarding the uprisings in the Middle East, the conflict in Libya also posed problems for Turkey. Libya had long been one of the prominent Arab countries, with which Turkey had developed significant financial ties. Turkey’s biggest investment in the construction sector in the Middle East and North Africa region has long been in Libya. Before the uprising that began on February 17, 2011, 200 Turkish companies were working in the construction sector in Libya, which was worth $15 billion, and the total trade volume between Turkey and Libya was worth $18 billion.\textsuperscript{31} Moreover, there were around 30,000 Turkish workers in Libya. Compared to the trade volume with Tunisia (worth $2.2 billion) and Egypt ($5.4 billion),\textsuperscript{32} it was apparent that Turkey’s deeper economic relations with Libya required careful handling. Therefore, Ankara took care not to adopt a stance against Muammar Gaddafî when the uprising began. Instead, it preferred to “wait and see” how the situation developed and what kind of attitude the international community would take.

Turkish authorities were aware that, compared to Tunisia or Egypt, the price that Turkey would pay in Libya would be bigger if the existing political and economic system of Gaddafî collapsed. Their allegedly weak stance against Gaddafî was criticized, both inside and outside the country. Ankara was accused of standing as a “mere spectator” rather than supporting the Libyans’ demands for democracy. In a statement to the Voice of America, Waheed Burshan, a member of the Libyan National Transitional Council, openly expressed his bewilderment about Turkey’s hesitation to take sides during the early days of the Libyan uprising and added that they were “expecting Ankara to be a better partner of free Libya.”\textsuperscript{33} Being worried about Gaddafî’s ability to repress the uprising, Libyan opposition forces had even


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} “İşyam Coğrafyası ve Ekonomik İlişkiler,” CNNTurk, February 24, 2011.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33} “Libya Muhalefeti Türkiye’nin Tutumunu Eleştirdi,” Voice of America, May 13, 2011.
claimed that it was Turkey which slowed down the materialization of the NATO bombardment they had expected.34 Despite these allegations, Turkey soon made up its mind and took sides with the Libyan opposition, though it was also true that Ankara openly opposed a military intervention in Libya in the early days of the uprising.

In the beginning of March 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan called the idea of a NATO intervention as “absurd and unthinkable.”35 The JDP government also reminded allies that NATO did not have a mission of taking sides in a civil war and asked them to narrow the no-fly zone to prevent the death of more civilians.36 Ankara would rather prefer to persuade Gaddafi to lend an ear to the Libyans and allow free elections. However, within a couple of weeks, Turkey found itself in a position of supporting the coalition forces led-NATO bombardment of Libya. As the reason of that policy change, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu showed the Arab League’s support for a no-fly zone and the UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which called for an intervention if ceasefire was not declared.37

Turkey also approved participation in a possible NATO intervention not by its ground forces but by its sea and air forces.38 However Ankara’s tension with France regarding former French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s objections to Turkey’s EU membership and his continuing support for the Armenians on their “genocide” claims also played a part in this U-turn as Turkey did not desire to leave the leadership role to France in the Libya case. Compared to Turkey, the GCC states were much quicker to take an anti-Gaddafi position in the Libyan uprising. Qatar was the first Arab country that engaged in the action over Libya. In an article written together with British Prime Minister David Cameron, Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani underlined that “it must be for the Libyan people to choose the future they want, and that the international community must do everything that is possible to help them.”39 The Gaddafi regime lost its legitimacy for the rest of the GCC members as well. In March 2011, the GCC called on the Arab League to take

34. “Libyali İyanslar Bu Kez Türkiye’yi Eleştirdi,” BBC Türkçe, April 7, 2011.
37. Ibid.
action to stop the bloodshed. It also urged the UN Security Council to shoulder the responsibility of protecting Libyan civilians and went so far as to call for an end to Gaddafi's rule. Remembering the traditional tension between Gaddafi and the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia, these reactions were not surprising.

In a couple of months, Turkey came closer to the GCC's position and took a clear side with the Libyan people rather than the regime. On August 25, 2011, Ankara recognized the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the “only representative of the Libyan people and state” and became the first country that sent an ambassador to Tripoli on September 2, 2011. Once again, Turkey presented its traditional foreign policy reflex of adapting itself to new circumstances. Seeing the Western decisiveness regarding ending the Gaddafi regime in Libya, Ankara chose to fulfill its commitments as a NATO member. In this way, it aimed to have a say in the new Middle East, while looking for other ways to protect its economic interests in Libya. Economy has always been one of the most important parameters of the JDP government and Turkey is often mentioned as a “trading state” especially in the last decade. During the JDP era, Turkey has become the 16th largest economy of the world and a part of the G-20. As mentioned before, the JDP's 2023 vision, marking the centenary of the Turkish Republic, aims to place Turkey among the top ten economies of the world. Various other issues, such as diversifying the energy sources to meet the needs of a large economy and increasing the birth rate to achieve a population of 82 million people—with a wider and younger labor force—are also included in the JDP’s 2023 vision.

The new foreign policy approach of the Davutoğlu era is also in harmony with the “trading state” mentality and aims to help Ankara to achieve the aforementioned targets by improving its economic links, especially with the countries in Turkey's near neighborhood. In this respect, the Middle East and North Africa region occupies an important place in Turkey's future plans, as it is believed that the cultural similarities would enable an increase in trade volumes. In a way, the “idealist side” of Turkish foreign policy, which puts much emphasis on democracy and human rights in its near neighborhood, is expected to go hand in hand with its traditional

"realist reflexes" that prioritizes Turkey's material interests. Although its relatively stable and strong economy was an influential factor in JDP's rising popularity in the region, the "idealist" side of its policy attracted the attention of the Arab people most. The attempts by Erdoğan and Davutoğlu's to present Turkey as a "promoter of democracy" and a "mediator for regional conflicts" often received support from the Arab masses and encouraged Turkey to play a much more influential role. For that reason, despite its initial hesitation in the Libyan case, Turkey soon adapted itself to the demands of the Arab street and fulfilled the necessities of its NATO membership and pro-democracy role, although this might have risked its existing economic ties with Libya.44

These were the circumstances under which Erdoğan undertook his "Arab Spring tour," expressing his belief in the so-called "Turkish model" and conveying that Turkey was a clear example to show Islam and democracy were compatible.45 This tour encouraged the discussions both in the region and in other parts of the world on whether Turkey can really be a model for the Middle East that has been going through a period of change due to the Arab uprisings. Will Turkey be able to "export its regime"46 to the region? The Syria case showed that this was not an easy task.

Turkey-GCC and the Syrian Uprising

In less than a couple of years under the impact of the Arab Spring, Turkey's relations with Bashar Al-Assad's Syria went through a complete U-turn and moved from a "strategic partnership" to the chronic prejudices and enmities of the past. After the long 1990s, which were marked by the tension caused by the former Syrian President Hafez Assad's support for Turkey's number one threat, the PKK, by providing it a safe haven, Syria turned into a reliable neighbor with which Turkey established almost a perfect relationship especially in the second half of the last decade. The JDP administration's close ties with Bashar Assad went beyond official levels. Erdogan and Bashar Assad's personal relationship was such that they could even spend their holidays together.47

46. Ibid.
Having a 910 kilometre-long common border, both Ankara and Damascus aimed to achieve strategically important benefits while improving their mutual relations. In this respect, for example, the historic railway between Turkey and Syria, which dates back to the Ottoman era, was renovated in December 2009 to improve cultural and economic ties. In addition, the two countries’ trade volume, which was around $500 million by the end of the 1990s, increased up to $1.8 billion in 2009.48 Ankara and Damascus even held common cabinet meetings, in which the fight against terrorism was among the basic policy targets. Through this new and smooth relationship with Damascus, Ankara was aiming to strengthen itself in its fight against the PKK. And contrary to his father’s era, Bashar Assad increased his pressure on PKK elements in Syria. During this visibly positive era, the “common fate, common history and common future” rhetoric of Davutoğlu dominated almost all of the official statements in Turkey. During his visit to Damascus in December 2009, for example, Erdoğan called Bashar Assad his “brother” and described Damascus as his “second home.”49 Similarly, the then Turkish Minister of Transport and Communication, Binali Yıldırım underlined that “the happiness and the sadness of Syrians and Turks were the same and they [as the Turkish side] were not perceiving Damascus as somewhere different from Istanbul.”50

The spread of the Arab Spring to Syria in 2011, however, has caused serious concern in Ankara. Once again, Ankara was obliged to make a choice between its ideals and commitments. In other words, the Erdoğan government had to decide whether it should go for the ideals such as democracy, human rights and freedom, abandoning Bashar Assad, or whether it should take sides with the Syrian leader, relying on their mutually strong relationship? For a while, Ankara tried both. As JDP officials often underline, during this stressful period, Ankara warned Assad several times and tried to persuade him to make the necessary reforms that his opponents asked for.51 However, Damascus’ failed promises to carry out these reforms and the escalation of state violence against the opposition gradually drew

50. Ibid. For the details of this rapid transformation in Turkey-Syria relations, see Özden Zeynep Oktav, “Türkiye-Suriye İlişkilerinde Ekim Kriziniden Ortak Kader Anlayışına Geçiş Sürecinin Bir Analizi,” in Türkiye’nin Değişen Dış Politikası, eds. Ertan Efeğil and Cüneyt Yenigün (Ankara:Nobel Kitabevi, 2010).
Ankara away from its "brother" Assad and placed it in a position in which it has become one of the strongest supporters of the Syrian opposition. Bashar Assad’s answer to Turkey’s demands for reform was not soft at all. Finding the insistent reform demands quite odd, Assad asked "Is Erdoğan the Sultan and am I the Syria governor [under his rule]?"52 In fact, the two countries’ geographical proximity, their historical and cultural ties and economic interdependence obliged Turkey to keep a watch on the Syrian crisis which was defined by Erdoğan as a "domestic problem".53

As a matter of fact, Turkey supported the Syrian opposition parties and opened its territory to make them come together against the Assad regime, while welcoming more than a half million Syrian refugees.54 Ankara has asked the international community, including the UN and NATO, to intervene in Syria to end the bloodshed but received no concrete outcome. Despite the lack of sufficient international interest, bringing down the Assad regime in Damascus remained a strong cause for the JDP government. The crash of a Turkish military jet after being hit allegedly by a Syrian missile in June 2012 and the devastating Reyhanlı bomb blast in southern Turkey on May 11, 2013, which killed 51 Turkish citizens, greatly increased the tension between Ankara and Damascus. In March 2014, a Syrian jet was shot down by the Turkish military as it violated Turkish airspace aggravating the problematic relations between the two countries.

Despite this continuing tension, the situation of the Syrian opponents is still unclear and the Assad regime is far from being toppled. Moreover, due to other crises such as Ukraine-Crimea, the international community has a lack of interest in the Syria crisis. Under these circumstances, the new foreign policy vision of the JDP era is being questioned more than ever. Ankara often finds itself in the position of having to explain to the Turkish public whether its active stance in the Syrian civil war has really been in Turkey’s interest. The government defends itself by claiming that it pursues not an interest-based, but a value-based policy in the Middle East.55 However, the rising concerns regarding Turkish democracy especially after the June

2013 Gezi Park protests, the corruption claims against the government, and the rising worries on the freedom of Turkish media and judiciary, jeopardize Turkey’s popularity in the region.

Another significant issue that raises concern is Ankara’s alleged ties with radical Islamic groups in Syria. This issue came to the fore after the January 2014 seizure of seven Turkish trucks that were allegedly carrying weapons to Syrian opposition groups. Government spokesman Hüseyin Çelik’s statement saying “what these trucks were carrying and whom they were going to is no one else’s business” did not satisfy public opinion which has long been questioning the level of Turkish intervention in the Syrian civil war. Can Turkey find itself being sued in the international courts because of the military aid that it allegedly sends to the Syrian opponents? Did Ankara really “overestimate its strength and become a victim of its imperial overreach in Syria”?

These are some of the questions that are being asked both inside and outside of Turkey.

Turkey is often accused of pursuing a sectarian policy in the MENA region, thus getting closer to the Sunni Arab groups in the Syrian opposition. Erdoğan often uses Bashar Assad’s Alawite identity to defame the Syrian regime and this offends the Alawite minority in Turkey. Together with the GCC states, Ankara is believed to be a part of an attempt to nullify Iran’s chances of establishing a “Shia Crescent” in the Middle East, which will include Iraq, Syria and a Hizbollah controlled Lebanon. According to this view, Turkey’s ancient rivalry with Iran has coincided with the chronic threat perception of the Sunni GCC regimes towards Shia Tehran and influenced Ankara’s current alliance formation in the region. Despite these arguments, Ankara keeps denying that it pursues a sectarian foreign policy. However, its strong support of the erstwhile Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt and its distant relations with the previous government in Iraq make it difficult for Turkey to counter the charges that it pursues a sectarian foreign policy in the Middle East.

Regarding Turkey-GCC relations, the issue of a sectarian foreign policy is not a problem at all, as the two sides are lined up on the Sunni bloc. Instead, the main

59. Yılmaz, “Syria: The View from Turkey.”
concern of the parties is regarding which Sunni opposition group to support in Syria. In fact, this is a major reason for the current divergence of opinion within the GCC, especially between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which affects their relations with Turkey as well. Saudi Arabia was one of the first Arab countries to condemn the Bashar Al-Assad regime over its reaction to the uprising. Although Riyadh favored a harsh response against the protestors in the Gulf countries, such as Bahrain and Yemen, in order to prevent the spread of the protests and to protect the existing regimes, it took a position right beside the Syrian opposition regarding the historic problems the Saudis had with Damascus. One of the main motivations was to outmaneuver its arch rival Iran. The Saudi regime considered the protests in the Gulf region as an Iranian effort to provoke the Shia populations. For that reason, oppressing them with military and economic means was a part of the Saudi effort to contain Iran.

The Syrian uprising, however, required an opposite reaction. For Riyadh, supporting the Assad regime and opposing the protestors would mean taking sides with Iran, as Tehran and Damascus have a close relationship. It is worth noting here that Turkey did not intervene in the protests in Yemen and Bahrain as much as it did in Egypt or Syria. This was mainly because of the fact that it has always attached significance to its relations with Saudi Arabia, a critical actor in Middle Eastern affairs. It knew that taking sides with the protestors in the Gulf would mean challenging the Saudi influence in the region and strengthening Iran's role. As in Libya, however, the two countries developed a similar approach in the Syrian uprisings. Their divergence has not been about whether they should support the Syrian opposition but about which group they should support most.

In the continuing uprising against the Assad regime in Syria, Saudi Arabia is alleged to be supporting the Salafi groups, which are believed to be part of the radical Islamic movements in the Middle East. Pointing out Turkey's Sunni Muslim preferences in the region, Hugh Pope of the International Crisis Group claims that Turkey has gradually come closer to Qatar—not Saudi Arabia—while supporting the Sunni Muslim opposition groups in Syria.

63. Yılmaz, "Syria: The View from Turkey."
64. Pope, "Turkey's Tangled Syria Policy."
For that reason, among the GCC states, Qatar is believed to act in better harmony with Turkey as the two countries allegedly support the groups allied to the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudi opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, is a well-known fact in the Middle East and clearly showed up in Riyadh’s support to the Egyptian coup that overthrew Morsi. This visible divergence in the regional actors’ relations with the Syrian opposition exacerbates the chaotic atmosphere in Syria and prolongs the civil war. In the end, this may contribute to Syria’s dissolution or the continuation of Assad in power. None of these two cases are desirable for Turkey and the GCC. As is evident in the Syrian case, constructing Turkey’s Middle East policy primarily on an identity basis, such as “being Muslim,” can easily become insufficient to embrace the whole region and push forward a “Turkey model.” In fact, such a policy can easily fall into the trap of minor ethnic and sectarian divisions that continue to play a significant role in regional politics. There are also the risks of pursuing an “identity-based” foreign policy in countries such as Turkey, which already contains various ethnic and sectarian fault lines. The impact of the Syrian uprisings on Turkey’s chronic Kurdish problem is a clear example of that.

“Regionalization” of Turkey’s Kurdish Problem in the Arab Spring Era

The Turkish authorities have long tried to present their fight against the PKK as an attempt to end an illegal uprising targeting the sovereignty and territorial unity of Turkey. They often deny the fact that the Kurdish problem might actually be rooted in the chronic wrongdoing against 23-30 million Kurds in the Middle East. 65 Turkey has sought to tackle the problem by isolating the PKK and using mainly military means to eliminate it. The gradual autonomy of the Iraqi Kurds by the beginning of the 1990s became the first important challenge against Turkey’s efforts to keep this problem inside its own borders and label it “domestic.” During the 1990s and in the beginning of the 2000s, along with the PKK, the Kurdish political establishment in northern Iraq had been perceived by Ankara as the “number one” threat against Turkey’s security. During this period, the Turkish military conducted several air and ground operations in the north of Iraq to minimize the PKK’s political and military presence there and to intimidate the Iraqi Kurds who might have thought of an “independent Kurdistan.”

The new circumstances in postwar Iraq surprisingly forced Turkey to make a dramatic change in its traditional perception of the Iraqi Kurds as a "threat" and improve its relations with Irbil to a great extent. The emergence of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as an important energy producer has been one of the key factors that pushed the two sides towards each other. Iraqi Kurds currently have 12 billion barrels of oil and 22 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. As a growing economy desperately in need of new energy resources, Iraqi Kurdish oil and natural gas are of vital importance for Turkey. At the same time, for the KRG, which usually has a tense relationship both with Baghdad and with the rest of its neighbors, Turkey is the best route to gain access to Europe. The JDP government preferred to improve its ties with this "rising market" and reach a "win-win" situation. Both Ankara and Irbil, and the US as the leading international power, saw advantages in a rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG, which began to gain strength especially after 2005. Despite the resistance of the Turkish military up until 2007, Ankara continued to look for ways to open a new page in its relationship with the Iraqi Kurds. Since then, diplomatic and economic relations have improved and stronger ties with Irbil have helped Ankara to soften its threatening tone against the Iraqi Kurds and increased the level of interdependence between the two sides.

This has also provided a more advantageous environment for Turkey in its efforts to isolate and eliminate the PKK. However, the Kurdish problem covers an area much wider than Ankara presumed, and regional countries such as Iran and Syria are as significant as Iraq in deciding the fate of the Kurdish problem. The regionalization of the Kurdish problem following the Arab Spring added new parameters to the issue and increased the involvement of Iran and Syria, while Turkey was already engaged in an effort to solve this problem with its own initiative and with the certain level of support it receives from the KRG. After the Turkey and Iraq fronts, it is now Syria that has appeared as a third, but quite significant front in the solution of the Kurdish problem. Iran is not out of this equation either. In fact, Syria has long been a subject of rivalry between Turkey and Iran and the emergence of the Syrian Kurds onstage seems to have increased this rivalry and turned the Kurdish card into a political tool in the hands of all parties.

68. Idrees Mohammed, "Turkey and Iran Rivalry on Syria," Alternatives: Turkish Journal of Inter-
**PYD: A New Factor in the Kurdish Problem**

The regionalization of Turkey's Kurdish problem is one of the most critical outcomes of the Syrian uprising for Turkey. With the spread of the Arab Spring to its neighborhood, Turkey has been forced to re-evaluate its Kurdish problem and relations with the PKK within a broader regional perspective as the current regional balances might soon alter due to the new conditions. In this respect, similar to Iraq, postwar Syria too might adopt a federal system in which the Syrian Kurds will be autonomous (they have already declared this autonomy unilaterally) and play a much more significant role in the future of the country. This might encourage the PKK to push for an autonomous Kurdish administration in southeast Anatolia.

After the March 2014 local elections, the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), which continues its existence under the roof of a larger pro-Kurdish leftist alliance, HDP, has consolidated its autonomy plans. Diyarbakır mayor and BDP member Gülten Kışanak asked for the Kurdish share in the oil revenue received from the region and the first autonomous practices have begun in Hakkari and Şırnak. These recent moves seem to be in harmony with developments in the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan where the KRG is trying hard to expand its rights on the rising oil revenue of northern Iraq. Baghdad is strongly against KRG’s direct sale of Iraqi Kurdistan oil to countries such as Turkey. Meanwhile, to satisfy its rising energy needs and strengthen its ties with the Iraqi Kurds, Ankara takes a pro-Irbil attitude and could jeopardize its relations with Baghdad. However, Turkey’s good relations with the Iraqi Kurds do not guarantee the same with the Syrian Kurds.

The Syrian pro-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) is one of the most significant actors in the regionalization of the Kurdish problem in the Arab Spring era. Although Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Syria (7 percent of the mainly Arab population), the nationalist movement of the Syrian Kurds had little visibility compared to those in neighboring Turkey and Iraq. This was mainly because of the fragmentation among the Syrian Kurdish groups and the relatively stronger
attempts to assimilate them. In the past, the Syrian state had arrested Kurdish political leaders periodically in order to prevent Kurdish demands for autonomy. It also confiscated some of the Kurdish territories and redistributed them to Syrian Arabs to “Arabize” the Kurdish regions. The spread of the Arab Spring has put the Syrian Kurds in a dilemma. Should they continue resisting the Assad regime to gain more rights? Or should they choose to stay silent as the uprising was mainly led by Sunni Arabs? Therefore, they preferred to wait and see the direction of the crisis. They remained relatively quiet before taking a stance against the regime, as they were afraid of a situation where the Sunni Arabs would oppose the Kurdish demands as strongly as the Syrian regime.

Amidst this confusion and with the pressure they felt in choosing between the Arab-led Syrian opposition and the regime, the Syrian Kurds’ main expectation from the uprising became autonomous rule in northern Syria. The Syrian-Kurdish National Council (KNC), which is an umbrella organization containing various Kurdish political parties, has called for the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region within a federated Syria. However, the KNC soon had a problem with the PYD as the Assad regime allegedly began to support the PYD against the Sunni Arab-led Free Syrian Army (FSA) and against Turkey which called for a new regime in Syria. PYD is regarded to be the best organized opposition party in Syria. However, as it is considered to be the Syrian branch of the PKK, it has another significant meaning for Ankara.

PYD’s autonomy attempts in Syria have set off alarm bells in Turkey. Whether the foundations of a greater Kurdish state are being laid in Syria or whether a “Kurdish Spring” is also possible are among the issues that are being discussed in Ankara now. Turkey’s relations with the PYD are closely related to its relations with the PKK. For that reason, if the negotiations between the PKK and the Turkish government fail, the PYD challenge might present a game-changing risk for Turkey’s Syria policy. Besides, if Turkey cannot fix its chronic Kurdish problem, the materialization of the Turkish model in the Middle East could also be

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72. Urrutia and Villegas, “Reopening the Kurdish Question: States, Communities and Proxies in a Time of Turmoil,” 6-7.
73. Fehmi Ağca, “The Effect of Syria Crisis on the Transformation and Integration of the Middle East,” Bilge Strateji 5, no.8 (Spring 2013):99.
74. Ibid., 99.
75. Yılmaz, “Syria: The View from Turkey.”
endangered.76 Turkey seems far from making a direct military intervention in Syria’s Kurdish region, though it built a highly criticized wall at the border to prevent cross-passing.77 However, there are rising allegations that Turkey has close ties with the radical Islamist groups in Syria to eliminate opposition groups such as the PYD.

Many believe that these groups have actually turned into a tool in Turkey’s hands to keep the Syrian Kurds under control. Saleh Muslim, the co-chair of the PYD, for example, accused Turkey of waging a “proxy war” against his organization by supporting the jihadist groups in Syria, such as the al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).78 Muslim, who visited Ankara in July and August 2013, held a dialogue with the Turkish government. However, this dialogue could not end all the divergences between the two sides based on long-held mistrust. Muslim still believes that Turkey wants to weaken the Syrian Kurds, especially the PYD.79 He wants Ankara to end its alleged support to the jihadists in Syria and points to the easy passage of the jihadist groups from Turkish territories to northern Syria. However, Turkey is not the only country that is accused of providing the jihadist groups in Syria with support.

Alongside Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Iraqi Kurdistan are accused of giving support to the Al-Nusra Front, which allegedly has links with al-Qaeda and is blacklisted by US President Barack Obama.80 Nuh Yılmaz underlines how disappointed Turkey was when the Obama administration added Al-Nusra to the list of international terror organizations.81 The Al-Nusra Front was believed to be the most effective rebel fighting force against the Assad regime. Frustrated with the lack of US support, “Turkey began to operate more independently on the ground in support of the rebellion, notably in concert with Qatar.” While there is convergence between Turkey and Qatar, there seem to be a divergence in approach between Turkey and Saudi Arabia regarding the Syrian opposition forces. As Yılmaz points out, instead of groups like the Al-Nusra Front, Turkey and Qatar are believed to be much closer to the FSA and Syrian National Council (SNC) and this seems to be the reason that sets them apart from Saudi Arabia which has a rather hostile approach towards the Muslim Brotherhood-led organizations such as the FSA and

79. Ibid.
80. Gürsel, “The Third Front in Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Problem’.”
81. Yılmaz, “Syria: The View from Turkey.”
SNC. This divergence seems to be the main reason behind Riyadh’s willingness to support, even militarily, a wider range of opposition groups in Syria, including the Salafi organizations such as Al-Nusra.

Turkey, however, is believed to be supporting the FSA not to empower any other group that could threaten the regional security. For that reason, Turkey’s disappointment with the lack of US support for the Al-Nusra Front seems to have risen out of a general concern regarding the chances of the opposition to overthrow Bashar Assad. In fact, the FSA too has stated several times that, although they do not share the same beliefs as the al-Nusra Front, it is significant that they were fighting against the same enemy. This “common enemy” rhetoric can also explain us why the preferences of Turkey and the GCC states are still unclear. Turkey and Qatar may come closer to Saudi Arabia and support the opposition groups including Al-Nusra if they mainly concentrate on overthrowing Assad. However, when the subject of discussion comes to which group will lead the opposition forces and possibly post-Assad Syria, there appears to be a divergence in their approach, which pushes them to make a choice between the Al-Nusra Front and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The pro-Kurdish BDP is also confused with this situation. It too has concerns about Turkey’s alleged support for Al-Nusra and ISIS which might cause problems between Kurds and Sunni Arabs in northern Syria. According to the BDP, Turkey should have built better contacts with the PYD, as the two main aims of the Syrian Kurds, namely the protection of Syria’s integrity and democratization, are in harmony with Turkey’s approach towards the Arab Spring. In this context, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu approved Turkey’s distant approach to the PYD, but denied that this was because of the group’s Kurdish identity. According to Davutoğlu, Turkey’s problem with the PYD was regarding its cooperation with Damascus and its continuing links with terror. Davutoğlu asked the PYD to distance itself from the Syrian regime and asked for Irbil’s to increase pressure on the PYD.

PYD’s changing preferences between Damascus and the FSA have long been noted by the Iraqi Kurds. Keeping in line with Turkey’s suggestions to increase the pressure on PYD, KRG leader Masoud Barzani closed the Iraq-Syria border in

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82. Ibid.
84. Gürsel, “The Third Front in Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Problem’.”
86. Gürsel, “The Third Front in Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Problem’.”
May 2013 and asked the PYD leaders to obey the “Irbil Agreement” that aimed to unite the Syrian Kurds. He also noted that until there are free elections in Syria, they would not accept the power of anyone. Closing of the Iraqi-Syria border by the KRG caused serious shortages of food, fuel, and basic supplies in the Kurdish region of Syria. Due to KRG’s strained relationship with the Iraqi federal government in Baghdad, the Syrian Kurds tried to get support from Baghdad to bypass Irbil. In November 2013, the Iraqi cabinet approved the grant of $15 million worth of humanitarian assistance to the war-torn people of Syria. The PYD, which declared an interim government in Western Syria at the beginning of November 2013, is assumed to be one of the main groups that would receive this aid. While the KRG considered the interim government as an attempt to establish PYD’s power in Rojava without sharing it with other Kurdish groups, Turkey too objected to this step and put forward some conditions to normalize its relations with the PYD.

As per the conditions, the PYD has to take a clear position against the Syrian regime, participate in the Syrian opposition (namely the Istanbul-based SNC), and avoid any de facto action until an elected Syrian parliament determines the future of the Syrian people. Unclear about the outcome of the Arab Spring in Syria, Ankara does not want to come face to face with a PYD “fait accompli” that might eventually ruin Turkey’s future plans for the region. In fact, Ankara is trying to solve the Kurdish problem mainly on its own initiative and with the limited support it receives from the KRG. The PYD joins this equation as a new element that might affect the fate of the Kurdish problem not only in Turkey, but also in the Middle East in general.

All in all, the highly regionalized character of the Kurdish problem as a result of the Arab uprisings shows that this conflict is a multi-dimensional issue that has the potential to sabotage not only the ruling JDP’s dream of being a model for the Middle East, but also its relations with various other actors such as Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Thus it is essential for Ankara to put in extra effort to solve this chronic problem in order to minimize its negative side effects inside and outside. Compared to the previous eras, Turkey is considered to be much closer to achieving a solution of its Kurdish problem. Peace talks between the Turkish state and the PKK which started in 2009 with the covert meeting of the Turkish National Intelligence

89. Ibid.
90. Gürsel, “The Third Front in Turkey’s ‘Kurdish Problem’.”
Organization (MIT) with the PKK members in Oslo, Sweden, reached their peak point in the public reading of PKK’s imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan’s historic letter in the Diyarbakir Newroz celebrations on March 21, 2013. This surprising step pointed to a parallelism between Öcalan’s recent thoughts and the JDP’s future plans as well as signalling a possible end to the most painful era in Turkish history.

Turkey has no option but to solve this problem and end the bloody clashes with the PKK. In the end, the Kurdish problem continues to swing over regional security and stability like the Sword of Damocles and establishes a lien on many other issues, including Turkey’s regional leadership goals and 2023 targets.

Possible Outcomes of the Kurdish Problem for Turkey-GCC Relations

Similar to many other issues, relations between Turkey and the GCC states are dependent, to a large extent, on the changing regional circumstances. Both parties have mutual expectations from each other and the materialization of these expectations is dependent on regional peace and stability. The impact of the Arab uprisings, especially on Syria, creates a risk for the future of the region and requires regional and global actors to reconsider their policies. In fact, not only the Syrian civil war, but also the continuing Kurdish problem poses a risk for regional peace and stability. The regionalization of the Kurdish issue, which is one of the most significant problems of the Middle East, should persuade Turkey to solve this problem before it gets too late. New actors, such as the Syrian PYD, have been added to this problem. Today, Turkey is even more obliged to solve this problem as there is a danger of losing control in this critically important issue under the new circumstances of the Arab uprisings. For this reason, it is vitally important for Ankara to further develop its rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds, continue its peace talks with the PKK, and eliminate the risk that the Syrian PYD creates. However, looking from the GCC perspective, there is a different agenda.

The GCC states are not very happy about the surprising rapprochement between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds since they do not consider the Iraqi Kurds as independent political actors. Instead, they expect Turkey to respect Iraq’s sovereignty, as the opposite of that, it is feared, would trigger the disintegration of a significant Arab country. Iraqi Kurdistan has already begun supplying oil from northern Iraq to Turkey without the permission of the Iraqi federal government. Similar to Baghdad, Washington and the GCC states too do not favor Turkey developing independent economic and political relations with Irbil without Baghdad’s approval. Despite that, Turkey’s relations with the KRG continue to develop rapidly, raising the
possibility of Irbil officially breaking off from Baghdad. Contrary to the past, Turkey is now talking about an economic integration with Iraqi Kurdistan and trying to turn the improving relations into a win-win situation both for Ankara and Irbil. Building strong links with the Iraqi Kurds would give Turkey wider access to energy resources for its 2023 targets and better relations with its own Kurds.

This creates a point of divergence between Turkey and the GCC states, since they do not want Iraq, as an Arab country, to break into pieces while Syria too is facing such a danger. The relations between Saudi Arabia and the Maliki government in Baghdad had long been tense. Riyadh is often accused of giving support to radical Sunni groups in Iraq which put the Iraqi Shia high on their target list. Despite that, Iraq is still a symbolically important country for Saudi Arabia. The two sides have to take each other into consideration while determining their regional policies. Besides, there is the Iran factor which prevents Riyadh from taking up a completely hostile policy against Baghdad. For this reason, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq are considered to be between a rock and a hard place full of ups and downs. Regarding Turkey’s independent ties with Irbil, the GCC states know that a possible division of Iraq might open the path for a stronger Iran, or at least a chaotic atmosphere that might affect the whole region. As such, one can state that the leading Arab actors of the region will not be in favor of stronger ties between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds as this could increase the chances of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. Taking the enormous oil and natural gas resources of northern Iraq into consideration, it is easy to see that the Iraqi Kurdistan has the potential of being the “new Dubai” of the region. Materialization of an alternative energy hub in Turkey to transport Iraqi Kurdish oil and natural gas will possibly discomfit the GCC states. This might, in fact, push countries like Riyadh towards Baghdad despite their existing sectarian divisions.

Conclusion

Aiming to make Turkey a great power once again, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu favors a future vision in which Turkey will be a pioneer of change in the Middle East. The Arab Spring, however, has shaken this aim and shown the limits of Turkey’s new foreign policy, primarily based on soft power. It has moved the country back again to a security-driven agenda rather than a liberal one that

consolidated the JDP’s popularity in the region. This change owes itself to the recent crisis in Syria.\textsuperscript{95} The transformation of relations with Syria from a strategic partnership to clear enmity has brought into question the durability of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu’s idealist foreign policy aims. Assad’s failure to implement reforms escalated the uprising in Syria, and Turkey took sides with the opposition groups aiming to overthrow the regime. However, on the fourth anniversary of the Syrian rebellion, Bashar Assad seems to be secure in his seat. Ankara, which is excessively involved in the Syria crisis, is being accused of going over the limit in pro-activism and nullifying its “zero problems with neighbors” policy. Besides, there are increasing concerns that the Turkish government might be backing the Syrian opponents even with military aid.

As an independent sovereign country, Syria is not likely to tolerate this strong Turkish engagement in the civil war. Considering Ankara’s warnings as an intervention in its internal affairs, Assad often accuses the Turks of seeing Ottoman dreams.\textsuperscript{96} Ankara defends itself by saying that the only motivation it has is to improve the human rights and democracy in the region. While trying to deal with a giant refugee crisis, Turkey’s efforts to persuade the international community to stop the bloodshed in its southern neighbor have not brought any concrete outcome.\textsuperscript{97} Countries like Russia and Iran continue to back the Assad regime and this has been influential in determining the recent situation.

In fact, the Syria crisis is likely to end up with an increase in Iran’s influence in the region. Turkey and the GCC states are among the countries that are claimed to be in an informal alliance against such a development. Sunni Turkey, under the rule of the JDP government, appears to be a balancing factor against Shia Tehran that has long been perceived as an arch rival by the Gulf States.\textsuperscript{98} Countries such as Iraq, Egypt, and Syria face continuing turmoil. Despite its highly polarized

\textsuperscript{95} Duran and Yılmaz claim that Turkey’s unyielding attitude against the Syrian regime made it understand the limits of its soft power and turn towards “smart power” policies that combine the soft power policies with conventional hard power policies. Duran and Yılmaz, “Islam, Models and the Middle East,” 164. For an interesting discussion on Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East, see Meliha Benli Altunışık, “The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey’s Soft Power in the Middle East,” Insight Turkey 10, no.2 (2008): 41-54.

\textsuperscript{96} “Türkler Osmanlı Hayalı Kuruyor,” Milliyet, November 27, 2011.

\textsuperscript{97} For a detailed analysis of the reasons for the US inaction in Syria, see Helin San Ertem, “Assessing the U.S. Inaction in Syria: The Limits of ‘Leading From Behind’ in the Arab Spring,” Revue Française EurOrient, Syria Special Issue, no.41 (May 2013): 305-330.

political atmosphere, Turkey is still one of the countries that promise political and economic stability for the region and this is the main reason why the GCC states chose to develop a strategic partnership with Turkey especially in the last couple of years. And unlike Iran, Turkey has not got the burden of historic and geographic controversies with the GCC states and this made the desired cooperation much more possible. On the other hand, Turkey, too, needs the GCC states since it is seeking to increase its regional role by improving its political and economic ties with the Arab States especially to gain new markets for its growing economy. The support of the GCC states is vitally important for Turkey to achieve these targets as the countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE play a significant role in the politics and economy of the Middle East and have the necessary Western support. However, the Turkey-GCC rapprochement is closely linked with the changing global circumstances as well as the regional ones. The reaction of the global powers against the Syria crisis has the potential to affect the policies of the medium range regional powers such as Turkey and GCC states. The two sides are now aware of the significance of regional alliances regarding the regional crises that have direct impact on their territories and give Turkey-GCC relations a security dimension in addition to the economic one.  

The Geneva II Conference in January 2014, which brought together the Arab opponents and the Assad regime at the same table, while isolating the Syrian Kurds, did not have a positive result. The opposition was highly divided; Assad insisted on keeping his hold on power, and significant players, such as Russia and Iran, continued to back his regime. In addition, the West was increasingly concerned about a possible dominance of radical Islam in Syria. Both the Al-Nusra Front and ISIS raise Western fears about a new Al-Qaeda threat in the Middle East.

The divergence of opinion between those countries siding with the Syrian opposition regarding which group to support creates the risk of increasing the political turmoil in Syria and feeding the current unrest in the Middle East. Although Saudi Arabia, as the leading actor of the GCC, came closer to Turkey when Ankara distanced itself from the Assad regime, it is often noted that the two actors actually have different preferences in their relations with the Syrian rebel fighters. They have divergent approaches toward the Syrian civil war, which makes it harder to solve the problem and achieve stability in the region.

100. For a detailed analysis of Turkey’s early relations with the Syrian opposition groups, see Ayhan, Aşap Bahar: İyılanlar, Devrimler ve Değişim: 438-444.
Under these circumstances, it becomes a sine qua non for Turkey to solve its chronic Kurdish problem which has already been regionalized with the inclusion of the Syrian Kurds into the equation. Turkey’s continuing talks with the PKK have not yet brought any permanent peace, but just a temporary ceasefire. Inclusion of new political actors, such as the Syrian Kurds, into this process will require Turkey to pursue a more determined policy to solve the Kurdish problem, if it wants to achieve its target of being a leading regional and global power in the next ten years. At the moment, trying to get the PYD under its control by using the other Kurdish groups in Syria or in northern Iraq can only be a short-term solution that might, in fact, prolong the existing problems of the region. Before intervening in highly chaotic crises of the region, such as the Syrian civil war or the Egyptian coup, Turkey has to improve its own democratic standards and solve the Kurdish problem first. This would help Turkey to consolidate its future plans and take guard against the rising pressure of the “highly regionalized” and even “internationalized” character of the Kurdish impasse. Neither Turkey, nor the GCC states, is ready for the consequences of a divided Syria or Iraq.

This is the main reason why Turkey’s increasing support for the KRG to carry northern Iraqi oil out of the country even if without Baghdad’s approval is being watched carefully by the GCC states. The Arab Gulf States are generally against the building up of Turkey-KRG ties independent of the Iraqi federal government. They do not consider the Iraqi Kurds as independent political actors and expect Turkey to respect Iraq’s sovereignty rights, as the opposite of that could trigger the disintegration of Iraq, a significant Arab country. Similar to Syria, any possible division of Iraq too is considered by the majority of the GCC states as a threat against their security. For that reason, an excessive rapprochement between Ankara and Irbil will discomfort not only Baghdad but also the GCC states.
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