



Temporarily Aligned Interest: Cooperation Between Turkey and The United States in The Syrian Civil War

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Abstract

The Syrian Civil War, starting from 2011 and still ongoing, is one of the largest conflicts in the region which highly affected the overall stability of the region and has involved several parties. With multiple factions fighting each other inside the territory of Syria and sometimes clashing through the border regions of neighbouring countries, it is inevitable for Syria's neighbours such as Turkey to react. With the decreasing regional stability of the Middle East, a region which has caught the interests of many other powers such as The United States due to its abundance of resources (primarily oil), western nations too eventually take action towards the civil war. Condemning the Syrian Government under President Bashar Al Assad for alleged human rights violations towards their own citizens, the United States along with Turkey sided with anti-government rebellions and actively supported them by supplying weapons and munitions, along with providing military training. However, despite having mutual interest on supporting anti-government rebels and later countering ISIS offensives, the Interests of Turkey and US are not always in-line with each other.

Keywords: *United States, Turkey, Syria, Foreign Policy*

1. Introduction

Eversince the end of the second world war, the Middle East region has been littered with conflicts. Rebellions, coups, and riots escalated within countries in the Middle East during the 1950s, such as in Cyprus, Iraq, and Lebanon. Furthermore, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 has led to general disapproval by Arab nations, leading to several wars such as Arab-Israeli war of 1948, involving multiple Arab nations such as Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt; Six-day war of 1967, and Yom-Kippur War of 1973. Additionally, the middle east is a region which is rich in oil, one of the most important natural resources in the modern age. Their abundance of natural resources naturally led nations from other regions, especially western nations, to take interest in it.



The prominence of this region in oil trade too has escalated gradually during the 20th century, and has led to further conflicts. In 1956, Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal cooperation, temporarily blocking its use for shipping towards western nations and Israel. The British and French, as the primary stakeholder of the Suez cooperation, was angered by this action and issued ultimatums towards Egypt to reopen the Suez canal, which eventually leads to military Intervention by the British and French, along with a direct invasion by the Israelis. In another case, over disputes regarding oil field drillings and lobbying of oil price, Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, occupying their capital city and annihilating Kuwait's armed forces until they are pushed back by the US-led coalition force in early 1991 during Operation Desert Storm.

In 2001, the infamous 9/11 terrorist attack happened in the United States which was allegedly committed by Al-Qaeda terrorist group stationed in the Middle East. As part of their vital national interest to protect themselves from terrorist threat, the US under George W. Bush administration launched the Global war on Terror in late 2001, starting from invading Afghanistan, whos government under the Taliban Regime was accused of harbouring Al Qaeda. Later in 2003, The US again lead a coalition force to invade Iraq for the second time, to topple Saddam Hussein's regime which was determined as a threat for US national security and global stability for allegedly possessing WMDs (Weapons of Mass Destruction). The fall of Hussein's regime opens the door for multinational cooperations to take over Iraq's oil fields, as the US and coalition allies attempt to rebuild Iraq into a democratic western-align nation.

The US and coalition forces stayed in Iraq for years as occupational forces attempting to maintain security in the nation. However, they faced heavy resistance from armed groups and suffered significant amount of casualties which leads to the public opinion of the US people shifting negatively towards the war in Iraq. Eventually, under the Obama administration, the US completely withdraw their troops from Iraq in late 2011. Earlier in the same year however, propelled by the Tunisian revolution taking down an authoritarian regime, mass protests and uprisings agaisnt corruption and authoritarian governments begin all over the Middle East, labelled as "Arab Spring". These protests generally met with hostilities by each of their governments, with Syria having the worst case as it leads to a civil war which is still on-going as of 2021.

Towards Syria, The US and Turkey both condemned the government regarding their treatment of the protestors, and thus they both share a common interest in supporting anti-government factions in Syria. Tensions between Syria and Turkey gradually



increased as conflict spreads to the border regions, with refugees from Syria entering Turkey en-masse. Eventually, in 2013 The infamous Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) started to emerge as a recognisable force and has gained worldwide attention by 2014 as they managed to capture cities in Iraq and Syria while brutally slaughtering anyone opposing them in the process. With Iraq's US-trained Security Forces not being able to hold out against ISIS offensive on their own, The US once again redeployed troops to the Middle east starting from Iraq, and eventually participating to fight ISIS in Syria along with their allies (Syrian anti-government forces such as Syrian Democratic Front and Free Syrian Army). (PAUST 2013)

This paper attempts to capture how the US and Turkey cooperate with each other in pursuing each of their national interests in Syria, and how from time to time their interests may not always align with each other's. Directly bordering Syria to the north, Turkey is highly affected by the civil war as their border regions are threatened by an ongoing war which may spread to Turkish territories when uncontrolled. Furthermore, their support for anti-government militias means increasing tension towards Syrian government which may lead to larger conflict. The US on the other hand does not have the same urgency towards Syria like Turkey does however, the US tends to remain on alert regarding Syria as they may pose a threat to their closest ally in the middle east, Israel¹. It was only when ISIS came into prominence that the US see the need to directly intervene, in order to protect their assets and allies in the region. In this paper both the interests of US and Turkey in Syria will be described, and one will see how they may not always be in line with each other despite having common interest at a glance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Back to Enmity: Turkey-Syria Relations Since the Syrian Uprising (2015) by Prof. Dr. Raymond Hinnebusch

This journal primarily analyzes the relations between Turkey and Syria ever since the start of the Civil war in 2011. In this journal, a lot of the internal domestic factors of Turkey which led to the formation of their foreign policies towards their neighbouring country. One of the main argument in this article is within Turkey, there are identity politics

¹ Syria was known to support the Hezbollah insurgent group in Lebanon, who often harrasses Israeli military operations. Their support of Hezbollah establishes Syria as an indirect threat to the US and their allies. (Dralonge 2008)



embedded with their agenda towards Syria, as they seek to bring down Assad's regime and replace them with a more Sunni-aligned faction, which at one point included ISIS.

2.2. U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria (2015) by Kadir Ustun

Using the 2014-2015 siege of Kobani as a case study, this journal explains the obstacles faced by Turkey and US as they tried to lift off the siege of Kobani by ISIS militias. This journal shows Turkey's domestic view towards the smaller factions in Syria, such as Free Syrian Army, and Kurdish YPG and PYD groups, and how they distrust Kurdish groups due to historical hostilities even though the US tries to support them as they are also acting as an anti-Assad-Government rebel group. Ustun concluded that The US and Turkey is struggling to cooperate as they still do not know how to best handle the civil war situation.

2.3. Economics and Geopolitics of the Middle East (2008) by Richard N Dralonge.

This book provides a comprehensive outlook of the geopolitical condition of the Middle East up to 2008. Even though this book was written prior to the Syrian Civil War, the information presented here is very useful in helping understand backgrounds of multiple ongoing events, and also provides a clear outlook to relations within nations before they are changed by the civil war, such as Iraq and Syria.

3. Research Methods

This paper is to be written through Qualitative research method, with academic journals and books regarding theories and case studies used as the main references. The previous literatures in this subject such as one written by Kadir Ustun and Prof. Dr. Raymond Hinnenbusch provides a detailed case study of certain aspects of the case. In this paper those researches will be used to combine multiple perspective to create a comprehensive big picture regarding the foreign policy of Turkey and United States towards Syria. Other sources related to the topic too will be used to provide additional perspective surrounding the subject.

In this case foreign policies will be analyzed using a realist point of view, in a sense that all actions of a nation-state are done in order to pursue each of their own national interest. The opposing liberal point of view would see that nations would cooperate in order to maintain peace and reduce conflict. In the realist point of view however, conflict reduction is needed in order for a nation to be able to pursue their own national interest. When nations cooperate it means they share a common national interest to some extent. However every nation has different needs, shaped by a lot of factors such as their economical condition and their geographical situation. Between Turkey and The US,



when they share a national interest, there likely will be a larger set of different interests behind it which may clash and complicate their cooperation. In this research national interests of Turkey and The US would each be described to see which forms the similarities.

4. Discussion

4.1. Turkey and Syria

Prior to the civil war, Turkey and Syria has a very friendly relationship compared to what they are now. These neighbouring countries has their borders open to each other (de-securitisation), with people from across the nations being able to roam around the borders back and forth freely like they did with domestic travels. In 2004 Turkey and Syria agreed to open free trade among each other, with Turkish Prime minister Erdogan signing the agreement in Damascus. This trade agreement led to ongoing cooperation ranging from investments to joint water supply management. Along with Iran, Syria and Turkey aligned together to maintain security against ongoing Kurdish insurgency and also attempting to maintain regional stability following the 2003 American-led Invasion of Iraq which highly destabilised the region. Starting from 2008, Turkey acted as a mediator in negotiations regarding conflict within Syria and Israel, which includes dispute over Golan heights territory and Syria's continuous support over Lebanese Hezbollah militia. Other cooperations between Syria and Turkey included military exercises in their border regions in 2009. (Dralonge 2008)

However as the civil war starts, tensions begin to rise between the two states. Turkey condemns the government's treatment of protestors, and they too start receiving large amounts of refugees from Syria. Turkey proceeds to suspend trade agreements with Syria as a measure to show their disapproval towards Syrian government regarding the civil war. Firefights emerged from time to time in border regions, in some cases having stray rounds killing Turkish people on Turkish territories, which leads Turkey to mobilize cross-border military operations in order to ensure tighter security. Utilisation of combat aircrafts of both sides has also caused tension, as in 2012 Syria shot down an F4 Phantom recon aircraft of the Turkish Air Force for allegedly entering Syrian airspace. Later in 2014 Turkey did something similar as Turkish Air Force F16s shot down a Syrian aircraft, which claimed to be tracking movements of hostile insurgents, reportedly entered Turkish Airspace.



As of 2020 Turkey hosts the largest amount of refugees from Syria, with around 3.6 million Syrians residing within Turkish territory. Initially, Turkish people are sympathetic towards the refugees. Considering the state of their relations towards Syria, they are initially welcomed, as it is seen that they are suffering from the harshness of their authoritarian regime. They are mostly not put in internment camp and are allowed to reside in cities and may obtain work permit. However as years go by the increasing influx of refugees prove to be problematic along with the generally decreasing economic condition of the nation. Eventually, Turkey needs to enact more restrictions towards refugees, with large numbers (approximately 87 thousand) deported back to Syria between 2016 and 2020. They also attempted to open their borders with Greece in order to allow these refugees to get across into Europe but this too has caused problems with Greek government which is reluctant to accept the sudden large influx of refugees. (Sinem Adar 2020)

Turkish stance against Syrian government led to their support of anti-government militia organisation. Turkey provided safe haven for anti-government rebels and also provided training and military equipment. With the support of Turkish agents, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was created which later was also supported by The United States with additional weapons, equipment, and training by US Special Forces. With common interest of supporting the Syrian rebels, Turkey repeatedly negotiated with the US for additional support and protection. However the US, especially reluctant to get directly involved with military matters following their withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, denies lending their direct support.

However, things rapidly change with the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in late 2013-2014. The seemingly sudden appearance of this powerful group, aligned neither to Syrian Government nor opposition forces had changed the dynamics of The Syrian Civil War and the entire Middle Eastern region. With this new threat, Turkey reacts by mobilizing their forces even more, and this also led to tighter cooperation with the US. The rise of ISIS also led to the appearance of other insurgent groups, such as the reemerging of Kurdish PKK group in Turkish and Northern Iraq territories, which prompted the Turkish Armed Forces to open a two-front war against these two factions. From Turkey's perspective, The Syrian Government under Bashar Al Assad has paved the way for ISIS and PKK to appear, by inciting the civil war at the first place in 2011. (Ustun 2015)



Being a part of NATO and also trying to become a full member of EU, thus it is within the interest of Turkey to promote democratic values by ceasing support towards Assad regime and encouraging a more democratic opposition to take over the government. Some sources however stated that Turkey initially supported ISIS along with Al-Nusra Front which had ties to Al-Qaeda during the start of the Syrian civil war. This was due to the fact that they are regarded as the most effective fighters that can take down the Assad regime. During the initial years ISIS fighters were allowed safe haven in Turkey, and they too, like the case with FSA, received supplies of armaments and equipments to be used against The Syrian Government. Other than that, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has an agenda to promote Sunni-muslim factions to take over Syria's government. ISIS, being a sunni muslim radical organisation is seen as one of the potential allies in achieving this agenda. (Hinnebusch 2015)

4.2. Rise of ISIS

In 2014, The world was taken by surprise by the seemingly sudden appearance of the commonly defined as a terrorist group that is ISIS, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Or also known as Islamic State of Iraq and The Levant, ISIL). ISIS at first glance appeared similar to other insurgent groups, but they had military power that was able to drive the heavily armed Iraqi Security Forces, which was trained and equipped by the United States, out of a lot of key cities in Western Iraq region, and also Syria. Not only did they manage to drive the Iraqi army, but in the process they committed massacres towards anyone who did not comply to their beliefs and actively shows and publish their atrocities. Not only did they eliminate people who believes anything other than their cause, but they also intentionally destroy cities of historical significance, such as Palmyra and Mosul (Curry 2015).

Prior to this instance, ISIS started as one of the small insurgent groups which participated in fighting against the US-led coalition forces occupying Iraq since 2003. Most of their efforts were unsuccessful as they were wiped out almost entirely by US-led offensive operations. Occuring roughly at the same time as the start of The Syrian Civil War, The US under Obama Administration had all military personel withdrawn from Iraq by 2011, thus ending Operation Iraqi Freedom after 8 years. With the absence of a major military power in Iraq, ISIS, under the leadership of Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi, sees this as an opportunity to expand their influence, starting from regaining territories which was previously lost to offensives by U.S-led troops, to



raiding prisons in order to free prisoners which were previously insurgent fighters. With the outbreak of civil war in Syria, ISIS also saw this as an opportunity to gain ground which led them to open a new front in Syria, gradually expanding their troops and territory. By 2013, ISIS becomes one of the most powerful militia groups in Iraq and Syria, and starts committing offensive campaigns against government forces of both Iraq and Syria, gaining major successes by 2014.

Aside from Iraq, ISIS vows to establish an Islamic caliphate starting from the Middle East, but also spreads its influences all over the world. Under the banner of establishing a Holy State and fighting against infidels, ISIS attracted the attention of many radicals and actively tried to convert people to join their cause all over the world, including in Europe and South East Asia region. Muslim-dominant states such as Malaysia and Indonesia, as the nation with the highest population of Muslims, proved to be prone to this issue. There are Indonesian, Malaysian, and citizens of multiple other nations who end up joining their cause and went abroad to join the fight in the Middle East. In other countries, ISIS claimed responsibility for several terrorist attacks since 2015 – 2017, such as terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, bombing in Brussels in 2016, and bombing in Saint Petersburg in 2017.

4.3. United States Involvement

The appearance of ISIS as a major insurgent power with capabilities of disrupting stabilities not only in the Middle East region but also on a global scale (as seen by the terrorist attacks outside of Iraq and Syria) establishes themselves as a threat to western nations, especially the US. The image of ISIS as a very brutal and powerful terrorist organisation with influences all over the world, and also openly claiming to be responsible of deadly terrorist attacks, has spread universal fear. This universal fear leads to the justification of direct intervention in order to remove this threat.

The US thus sees it as part of their national interest to help eliminate the threat of ISIS, in order to protect their homeland from potential threats, their assets in the Middle East and also their allies (in this case Israel and Iraq). By 2014, Obama has authorised the redeployment of the US military to the Middle East region with Iraq being its initial property. The initial troops deployed included ground troops to assist and advise the Iraqi Security Forces in fighting ISIS troops on the ground additional ground troops for security of US bases, Air force and navy air controller deployed among ground troops to direct air attacks, air crews to fly close air support and their mechanics to maintain their aircrafts and other equipment.



In Syria, US provided additional airstrikes and deployed Special Forces operatives to assist the anti-government forces such as Syrian Democratic Front (SDF) and Free Syrian Army (FSA) since the start of the civil war in 2011. Similar to the case of facing Libya's Gaddafi regime during the same year, it is within the interest of the United States to take down authoritarian regimes in order to promote democracy. Mutual support for these militias, support for democracy over authoritarian, along with the need to eliminate ISIS threat in Syria led to tighter military cooperation with Turkey. The US would cooperate with Turkey in order to create ISIS-free zone, starting with Turkey giving permission for the US to utilise Incirlik Airbase to station additional troops and combat aircrafts. This cooperation has led to increased effectiveness in US operations against ISIS, from airstrikes to faster deployment of Special Force operatives in assisting Syrian rebels. (PAUST 2013)

In late 2014, the city of Kobani, located in Syria near the Turkish border, came under siege by ISIS militants. The city had a significant Kurdish population and thus was defended by Kurdish militias, like Syrian Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) and YPG (Kurdish People's Defence Units). Being an anti-government militia, the US supported these Kurdish factions. Turkey however, was very reluctant in trusting the Kurds due to their previous encounters with Kurdish PKK insurgency. Lacking manpower, the Turk-supported FSA cannot single handedly drive ISIS off the city, therefore cooperation is deemed a necessity. The US also dispatched additional reinforcements from Peshmerga forces, Iraqi Security Force's Kurdish branch, to assist in lifting the siege. For this occasion, Peshmerga was allowed to stay in Turkish territory for staging area. Eventually with the combined forces of YPG, PYD, Peshmerga, and FSA, Kobani was liberated in 2015 and this strengthened the ties between FSA and Kurdish militias as fellow anti-government factions. (Ustun 2015)

The US-led coalition military intervention led to the gradual setback of ISIS's advances. The Iraqi Security Forces slowly regained the grounds they lost and by 2017, almost all of Iraq was retaken. As the bulk of ISIS forces has been depleted, ISIS has been reduced to smaller scale insurgencies. However, this was still recognised as threat since they can still potentially regroup and form a more effective fighting force. Recognising this threat the US shifted more of their troops to Syria, actively engaging in larger scale ground combat along with the US-allied militia organisations. It is also in the interest of the US government to protect their assets which are in Iraq and Syria, such as private oil corporations. (Shaoul 2014)



Their involvement in Syria however, proves to be more problematic than with Iraq. The Assad Regime, backed strongly by Russia and Iran, does not approve the presence of US troops in Syrian territories. Repeatedly, Syrian Government issued warnings for the US to withdraw from Syria. By 2019, when most of ISIS conventional troops has been annihilated, US troops in Syria end up engaging skirmishes against Syrian Government Forces, sometimes backed by Russian Troops (Bishara 2015). Seeing how this has potential to escalate further conflict, especially towards Russia, By February 2019 Trump declared that ISIS has been mostly destroyed and they would reduce the amount of troops stationed in Syria (Haines-Young, 2019), mostly to be relocated to Iraq to continue guarding the border regions. The Russian Government has repeatedly criticised the US military presence in Syria, as they are regarded as “uninvited guests” (Bishara 2015).

Even with ISIS mostly destroyed they are still active as an insurgent groups and still actively fights government forces in a smaller scale. For this reason, and also to act as a balancer against the dominant Russian-Iran influence in Syria, the US still has limited military presence in Syria. The reluctance of the US to cause damage towards Syrian pro-government forces was not welcomed well to Turkey, as Turkey sees the current Syrian Assad regime as the threat that started the civil war, and thus should be neutralized. The US however maintained that their direct involvement is only to eliminate the threat of ISIS and not the Syrian Government. By 2019 when most of the US military presence has been decreased, Turkey still has to maintain security to their borders, and also still has to manage the large amount of refugees in Syria which they had to either provide asylum or deport.

5. Conclusion

The dynamically shifting situation in the Middle East has influenced the international community in a lot of ways. Alliances form and break as one conflict ends and a different one starts. In the case of Syrian Civil war, it has major impact from the beginning to Turkey as its bordering nation which was formerly very close to each other before the start of the civil war sometime in 2011. Syria's changing condition also shifted the change of other state's national interest towards Syria. In the case of Turkey, from close collaboration and open borders since 2003, now they have to secure their borders once more. They have to deal with increasingly dangerous security issue as war rages between anti government



militia with forces of Assad regime, leading to military mobilization across the border regions.

Turkey's view towards the Assad regime changed as they did not approve how The Syrian government treated the protestors with violence, which leads to the civil war at the first place. Thus, Turkey starts supporting anti-government militias by training and equipping them as in their view, Taking down Assad's regime and having them replaced by more democratic one will ensure a better stability. This was however further complicated by Turkey's distrust of Kurdish groups, and also having to deal with large influx of refugees from Syria which creates problems for Turkey in a domestic level.

The US views towards Syria too changed as the civil war starts. Similar to the case of Libya's Gaddafi regimes, it is part of US agenda to promote democracy. In this case, along with Turkey, the US starts supporting anti-government militias by delivering funds, weapons, equipment, extra training and having their combat aircrafts stand by to assist them in battle. Despite the initial lack of domestic support for direct US military deployment, as they have just withdrawn their military from Iraq in 2011, eventually the US redeployed their troops to Iraq and Syria in 2014 due to the emergence of ISIS.

However, cooperations with Turkey sometimes clashes due to their distrust of Kurdish groups and also the reluctance of the US to get involved in combat with Syrian governmental forces. With ISIS threat eliminated the US reduced its military presence in Syria, remaining only to provide aid towards allied militia factions and to serve as a balancer to Iran and Russia's influence. The US did not continue to assist Turkey in managing the security of their borders as the civil war rages on in Syria. Further research can be done more on how the domestic issues of the US leads to their intervention in Syria, and a more comprehensive reseach regarding how Syrian Government reacts and redevelop their policy as they face military intervention from both Turkey and The US would certainly be a welcome perspective for this topic.

6. Thank You Note

I would like to thank Prof. A.A. Banyu for encouraging me (and other students) to write this Journal, it may not be the best and still ridden with mistakes but I have learned a lot in the process and I too hope this journal can help provide additional insight to other readers.



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