

# The Evolution of Turkey's Syria Policy

by Francesco D'Alema

## ABSTRACT

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power at the end of 2002, Turkey has increased its interactions with the Middle East. Syria has been the testing ground of this new, "neo-Ottoman" policy aimed at improving trade and political relations with all the country's neighbours. Analyzing the evolution of Turkey's policy towards Syria under AKP rule, we can distinguish three phases. The first phase was characterized by the coherent adoption of the "zero problems with neighbours" policy, which led to a general improvement of relations. The second phase started with outbreak of the Syrian civil war, which led the Turkish Government to set aside the "zero problems with neighbours" policy and pursue regime change. However, not only was Turkey unable to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime but its strategy also created tensions with Iran and Russia, and led to a deterioration in the country's geopolitical situation. Moreover, its inadequate response to the rise of jihadist groups and deterioration on the Kurdish issue have negatively affected its security. A final phase, begun in 2016, is characterized by a more pragmatic approach. Today, it is clear that the ambitious "zero problems" project created by Ahmet Davutoğlu has, at least temporarily, collapsed.

*Turkey's foreign policy | Syrian conflict | Kurdish question*

keywords

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### Introduction

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey at the end of 2002, Turkish foreign policy has experienced a paradigm shift, moving from its traditional defensive and Western-oriented stance to a new approach known as "Neo-Ottomanism" or "Strategic Depth" doctrine. Since then, Turkey has increased its interactions with the Middle East, sharpening its profile as a regional power. The main architect of this new course in Turkish foreign policy was Ahmet Davutoğlu, a former professor of international relations, former special advisor to prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's minister of foreign affairs from 2009 to 2014 and its prime minister from August 2014 to May 2016 (after Erdoğan was elected as president). Under Erdoğan's leadership and Davutoğlu's guidance, Turkey has broadened its strategic horizons, reaching beyond its relations with the United States and the European Union and adopting a multidimensional foreign policy. This strategy was consistent with Davutoğlu's idea of Turkey as a country with multiple regional identities. He expressed this vision in his 2001 book *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth),<sup>1</sup> as well as in various articles.<sup>2</sup> In these works, Davutoğlu asserted a new set of foreign-policy principles – that is, the "Strategic Depth" doctrine, – which aimed to combine Turkey's geopolitical position with the heritage of the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>1</sup> See Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik. Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* [Strategic Depth. Turkey's International Position], İstanbul, Küre, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı" [Turkey Should Be a Pivotal Country], in *Radikal*, 26 February 2004, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/yorum/turkiye-merkez-ulke-olmalı-702116>; Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring", in *SAM Vision Papers*, No. 3 (April 2012), <http://sam.gov.tr/?p=2666>; Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", in *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2008), p. 77-96, [http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/insight\\_turkey\\_vol\\_10\\_no\\_1\\_2008\\_davutoglu.pdf](http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/insight_turkey_vol_10_no_1_2008_davutoglu.pdf).

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Indeed, historical and cultural aspects, as well as its enviable geographical position, were used by Turkey's current establishment in order to develop this new geopolitical strategy. According to Davutoğlu – and, therefore, to Erdoğan as well – Turkey is, at the same time, a “Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country”.<sup>3</sup> This assessment was the starting point for a new role for Turkey on the global chessboard. As Davutoğlu states, “[g]iven this picture, Turkey should make its role of a peripheral country part of its past and appropriate a new position: one of providing security and stability not only for itself, but also for its neighboring regions”.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important features of the Strategic Depth doctrine was the “zero-problems with neighbours” policy. This was an approach built on the notion that “Turkey needs to improve its relations with all its neighbours by rescuing itself from the belief that it is constantly surrounded by enemies and the defensive reflex developing thereof.”<sup>5</sup> This represented an authentic revolution in Turkish foreign policy, considering that, before the rise to power of the AKP, Turkey's relations with neighbouring countries were rather cold. Murat Yeşiltaş and Ali Balcı affirm that the “zero problems with neighbours” policy rested on six pillars: “i) equal security for all, ii) economic integration, iii) the coexistence of different cultures in a respectful manner, iv) high-level political co-operation, v) a high-level of regional consciousness, and vi) understanding the relationship between security and stability and development”.<sup>6</sup> According to these two scholars, the main purpose of this strategy was to create an area of stability around Turkey.

Following the introduction of this policy, the AKP governments from 2002 to 2011 adopted a “liberal” approach towards Turkey's eastern neighbourhood. This approach was based on open-border policies (exemplified by visa liberalization), joint ministry meetings, cultural dialogue and civil-society dialogue.

Within this framework, the development of relations with Syria was an interesting case. Before the rise of the AKP, the Turkish–Syrian relationship was affected by concerns regarding Turkish security issues. Indeed, during the Cold War, relations between Ankara and Damascus were anything but friendly. Bones of contention included disputes over Syrian territorial claims on Hatay province; Turkish infrastructural projects on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers; and, more broadly speaking, their divergent positions in the bipolar international system, with Turkey firmly anchored in the Western camp and Syria orbiting towards the Soviet Union. Moreover, Syria supported the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which fights for the autonomy of Turkey's Kurdish regions, allowing PKK militants to use Syrian

<sup>3</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007”, cit., p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu (2004), quoted in Murat Yeşiltaş and Ali Balcı, “A Dictionary of Turkish Foreign Policy in the AK Party Era: A Conceptual Map”, in *SAM Papers*, No. 7 (May 2013), p. 14, <https://sam.gov.tr/?p=3523>.

<sup>6</sup> Ardan Zentürk (2010), quoted in *ibid.*, p. 15.

territory as a logistic base from which to launch attacks against Turkey. Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader, resided in Damascus for years.<sup>7</sup>

In 1998, Turkey threatened to use military force to secure the expulsion of Öcalan. Eventually Syria's then-president, Hafez al-Assad, acquiesced. On 20 October 1998, an Egyptian-brokered agreement between the two countries, the Adana Accords, put an end to Syrian support for the PKK and forced Öcalan to leave the country.

The "zero-problems with neighbours" policy brought Turkish–Syrian relations to another level. Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat describe the early AKP approach to Damascus as a process of "desecuritization", understood as "the broadening of the boundaries of normal politics".<sup>8</sup> In other words, desecuritization is the process of moving "issues off the 'security' agenda and back into the realm of public political discourse and 'normal' political dispute and accommodation".<sup>9</sup> The two scholars link this change to a reversal in the balance of power between the country's political elite and military elite, which occurred during the AKP administration.

Indeed, the political influence of Turkey's army has experienced a decline with the rise to power of the AKP. The ruling AKP has always held the submission of the country's military to its civilian authorities as a central part of its agenda. This point was a central issue in the EU accession process and an inevitable step towards a complete democratization of the country. However, the Islamist credentials of many members of the AKP (including Erdoğan himself) has always fuelled the suspicious of secularist Turks in the army, as well as in the country's civil society, about the real intentions of the party. Many accused the AKP of having a secret agenda for the Islamization of Turkey, and the reduction of the role of the military (historically, the "guardians of secularism" in Turkey) was considered an initial step in this direction. The tension between the AKP and the army led to harsh confrontations in 2007, when Erdoğan imposed his party fellow, Abdullah Gül as President of the Republic. The prestige of the army was later undermined by legal scandals, such as the Ergenekon case.<sup>10</sup> This allowed Erdoğan and the AKP to occupy key positions in the state and military bureaucracy; a notable example was the appointment of Hakan Fidan as chief of the National Intelligence Organization (*Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı*, MİT). Finally, the constitutional reform approved in a

<sup>7</sup> For further information, see Robert Olson, "Turkey-Syria Relations since the Gulf War: Kurds and Water", in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (May 1997), p. 168-193.

<sup>8</sup> Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat, "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran", in *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (October 2008), p. 498.

<sup>9</sup> Michael C. Williams (2003: 523), quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Ergenekon was the name of an alleged secret organization formed by military, journalists and intellectuals accused of plotting a series of politically motivated attacks to sow chaos and facilitate a coup against the Erdogan government. The investigation was officially launched in 2007. During the trial, the defendants were 275, including the Chief of the General Staff of Turkey, İlker Başbuğ. The guilty judgments were pronounced in August 2013. However, this sentence was overturned in April 2016.



referendum in 2010 decisively reduced the power of the army.

Although the new course of Turkish foreign policy had begun before the 2010 referendum, it is relevant to note that the increasing prestige of the new political elite, due to economic growth and the initial pro-democratic reformism, certainly strengthened Erdoğan's position in internal politics, giving him more space in which to define Turkish foreign policy. Therefore, there is no doubt that the country's new approach towards the Middle East was dictated by the AKP's ideology, and that improvement of relations with Syria was part of this framework.

However, the situation has changed since the 2011 uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime. In this article, I illustrate the evolution of Turkish policy towards Syria in the AKP era, divided into three phases. A first phase was characterized by the adoption of the "zero problems with neighbours" policy (2002–11). A second phase commenced after the beginning of the Syrian uprising, and was characterized by a regime-change policy (2011–16). Finally, a third phase has just begun: its starting points were the resignation of Davutoğlu as prime minister – or, rather, his "dismissal" by Erdoğan (May 2016) – and the 15 July 2016 *coup d'état* attempt. This last phase seems to be more pragmatic and centred on domestic political priorities.

### 1. Zero problems with neighbours (2002–11)

During the first part of the AKP era, Turkey–Syria relations improved significantly. Turkey adopted a trade-oriented and open-border approach. A Joint Economic Committee was established that facilitated trade agreements and sponsored events such as the industrial exhibition in Damascus in January 2004, from which 300 Turkish manufacturers returned home with 250 million dollars' worth of Syrian contracts. By January 2007, a bilateral free-trade agreement had come into force. In September 2009, Turkey's Foreign Minister Davutoğlu and his Syrian counterpart, Walid Muallem, signed an accord that ended visa requirements between the two states. Turkish exports saw a threefold increase between 2006 and 2010, rising to 1.85 billion dollars and making Syria Turkey's seventh-largest market in the Middle East and North Africa. Syria's exports to Turkey rose from 187 million dollars in 2006 to 662 million dollars in 2010.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Turkey promoted several joint infrastructural projects. For instance, in 2011, it started to work on a "friendship dam" on the Orontes River in its southern Hatay province, which was to irrigate both Turkish and Syrian land.

For Turkey, Syria represented a gateway to the Arab world, both economically and politically. The visa liberalization was thus instrumental for a more ambitious project: the creation of a free-trade zone between Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and

<sup>11</sup> See Christopher Phillips, "Turkey and Syria", in Nicholas Kitchen (ed.), *Turkey's Global Strategy*, LSE IDEAS Special Report, May 2011, p. 38, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/43498>.

Jordan.<sup>12</sup> This would have been the most important regional initiative in Turkey's republican history. It would probably have started a process of economic integration in the Middle East under the aegis of Turkey. For Syria, improving relations with Turkey was not only advantageous from an economic point of view. It was also crucial in order to break the growing diplomatic isolation that followed allegations that Syria had been involved in the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, on 14 February 2005. Moreover, good ties with Turkey could help Syria to improve its relations with the West.

Ankara also used the new momentum in its relations with Damascus to promote itself as a facilitator in the talks between Syria and Israel over control of the Golan Heights, which the latter had seized from the former in 1967. Both the Syrians and the Israelis showed interest in possible Turkish mediation. During the first summit in January 2004 between Erdoğan and Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, Israel used the good offices of the Turkish prime minister to pass a conciliatory message to the Syrian leader.<sup>13</sup> After the visit, Erdoğan met the Israeli ambassador to Ankara, Pinhas Avivi, and relayed the fact that "Assad was serious about wanting peace talks with Israel, and that the Syrian president 'intends to take all necessary steps to attain arrangements of peace in the Middle East'".<sup>14</sup> However, when Turkey's efforts began to show some progress, the situation changed with the Israeli decision to commence "Operation Cast Lead" in the Gaza Strip on 27 December 2008. This invasion of Gaza caused the immediate end of Turkey's mediation attempts, and created enormous frustration in Ankara.

## 2. Regime change (2011–16)

The "Arab Spring" led Turkey to reconsider its regional approach. This did not mean a total revision of the Strategic Depth doctrine, however. Some of its principles, especially the "zero problems with neighbours" policy, were set aside in order to fulfil a more ambitious strategy. Turkey explicitly claimed leadership of the democratization process in the Mediterranean and Middle East. The country's political establishment believed that the "Turkish model" of democratization and modernization would spread across the region and make the Middle East more stable, secure and peaceful. However, on this point, Ankara had overestimated its capabilities.

<sup>12</sup> AFP, "Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria OK a free zone", in *Al Arabiya*, 10 June 2010, <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/06/10/111004.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy", in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (November 2006), p. 958.

<sup>14</sup> Aluf Benn, "Report: Damascus Asking U.S. to Help Renew Talks with Israel", in *Haaretz*, 9 January 2004, <https://www.haaretz.com/news/report-damascus-asking-u-s-to-help-renew-talks-with-israel-1.61427>.

Before the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, Syria was considered a major success in Turkish foreign policy. Therefore, when the rebellion began, Turkey found itself in an awkward situation. On the one hand, it wanted to maintain the economic and political gains obtained in previous years with the "zero problems with neighbours" policy. On the other hand, appearing too supportive of a clearly authoritarian regime would affect the country's prestige vis-à-vis Arab public opinion.

Turkey's early reaction to the crisis was to try to persuade Damascus to meet people's demands. As a matter of fact, "Erdoğan announced that he had spoken with Assad and counseled quick implementation of social, economic, and political reforms, while offering Turkish help to achieve the changes."<sup>15</sup> This approach was based on the assumption that the relations (including even the personal ones) that Erdoğan had developed with Assad over the years would give Ankara influence over Damascus. Moreover, the Turkish leadership believed that Assad had some liberal instincts and that he would be willing to implement reforms in order to steer Syria out of the crisis through a gradual process of democratization. However, as events unfolded, it became clear that these assumptions were wrong and "that Assad was surrounded by more hawkish figures than himself who would dare risking everything to ensure the continuation of Baath rule in the country".<sup>16</sup>

As Syrian state repression against protesters increased, Turkey changed its approach dramatically. Its government began hosting and arming members of the Syrian opposition – in particular, the Muslim Brotherhood – breaking ties with Damascus and calling for regime change. This strategic turnaround was a painful, though tacit, admission that Turkey's assumption that it had any influence over Assad had been seriously misplaced. Ankara now thought it best to side with the opposition, relying on the assumption that the Ba'athist regime would soon collapse. Turkey moved closer to Sunni countries in the region (Saudi Arabia and Qatar) and to the most active Western countries (the United States, France and the United Kingdom), but in the process it alienated Iran and Russia, which supported the Syrian regime.

Turkey's gamble has evidently not paid off. Far from collapsing, thanks to Iran and Russia's support the Assad regime has regained parts of the territory previously lost to the rebels. The civil war has in the meantime taken its toll on Syria's state, which is now a fragile entity held together by Iranian and Russian arms. The war has been even more devastating for Syria's population, which has suffered enormously, with hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced. The conflict continues to pose a number of serious risks for Turkey. When Syria downed a Turkish Air Force jet in summer 2012, Ankara called on NATO for military assistance – a decision that worsened relations with its neighbours. Commenting on Turkey's request for

<sup>15</sup> Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria", in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer 2012), p. 137, <http://brook.gs/2bvMPs>.

<sup>16</sup> Tanık Oğuzlu, "The 'Arab Spring' and the Rise of the 2.0 Version of Turkey's 'Zero Problems with Neighbors' Policy", in *SAM Papers*, No. 1 (February 2012), p. 6, <https://sam.gov.tr/?p=2494>.

NATO Patriot missiles, the Iranian armed forces chief of staff, Hassan Firouzabadi, warned that the missile system's deployment in Turkey might trigger a new world war.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to border clashes, other factors have contributed to damage Turkey's interests. First, the rise of jihadist groups in the region, and particularly of Islamic State (ISIS), which was initially able to take control over large swathes of territory in both Syria and Iraq. Turkey has failed to provide an adequate response to this crisis, eventually becoming a transit point for the so-called "foreign fighters" – namely, militants who went to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. This has negatively affected Ankara's reputation, not only in the eyes of its Western allies but also in Arab public opinion. Indeed, Turkey's strategy, which has also included support for fringe elements of the diverse anti-Assad opposition such as the al-Qaeda's Syrian branch (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra), has led many to label Ankara "irresponsible" and to wonder what exactly its political objective is in the Syrian civil war.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, when ISIS shocked the world by seizing Mosul, Turkey's opaque relations with extremist groups came in for greater scrutiny. Ankara was accused of providing ISIS with weapons and training; allowing free movement across its borders to jihadists, giving them control of two critical crossing points (later closed after strong pressure from Washington); permitting recruitment in Turkey; and allowing them to sell Syrian crude oil via its territory, with about 100 million dollars estimated to be hidden in Turkish banks.<sup>19</sup>

A second factor, the strengthening of Syria's Kurdish militias (People's Protection Units, or YPG), constitutes another strategic disaster for Turkey as the YPG are affiliated to the PKK. They also enjoy support from the US, as they have proved to be the most competent ground force fighting ISIS in Syria.

Before the Syrian crisis, the AKP had adopted a conciliatory approach towards Kurdish demands for greater autonomy, including granting linguistic rights. It had also sought to negotiate a durable peace with the PKK. A ceasefire was eventually achieved and a peace process commenced in 2013.

During the initial phase of the Syrian crisis, Turkey consequently adopted a moderate stance towards the Democratic Union Party (PYD), Syria's Kurdish party, from which the YPG militias would originate. Ankara allowed the PYD leader and members to operate on Turkish soil, and maintained a dialogue with the group.

<sup>17</sup> "Patriot Missiles in Turkey Threaten 'World War:' Iran Army Chief", in *Reuters*, 15 December 2012, <http://reut.rs/UOMkSA>. See also Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Yelda Demirağ, "Turkish Foreign Policy after the 'Arab Spring': From Agenda-Setter State to Agenda-Entrepreneur State", in *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2014, p. 329, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2014.922806>.

<sup>18</sup> See Jean-Loup Samaan, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Turkish Model' in the Arab World", in *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Fall 2013, p. 66, <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/647/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-turkish-model-in-the-arab-world-fall-2013>.

<sup>19</sup> See Raymond Hinnebusch, "Back to Enmity. Turkey-Syria Relations since the Syrian Uprising", in *Orient*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2015, p. 18, <http://hdl.handle.net/10023/6068>.



At the same time, Erdoğan used his personal bond with Masoud Barzani, the president of the northern Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), to prevent the PYD from gaining full control of north-eastern Syria. Ankara endorsed first the foundation of the Kurdistan National Council (KNC) as a rival to the PYD and an affiliate to Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and then supported efforts by Barzani himself to negotiate a power-sharing agreement between the KNC and PYD in July 2012.

However, the negotiations collapsed when the PYD, along with several pro-federal Kurdish parties, accused the KNC of allying with Syrian rebels who were attacking Kurdish cities. This changed the Turkish approach towards Syria's Kurdish region, known as Rojava. Tensions peaked when the PYD accused the Turkish Government of backing ISIS during the latter's siege of the Kurdish town of Kobane on the Syrian–Turkish border.<sup>20</sup> Then came the Suruç bombing (20 July 2015), in which dozens of Turkish activists who were calling for more support for Kobane were killed. The attack led to an escalation of violence.

All this happened just after the June 2015 general election, at which the AKP experienced a dramatic decline. It lost its absolute majority of seats in parliament while the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) fared better than expected, with 13.1 per cent of the vote and 80 seats. It was the first time that a Kurdish party had succeeded in overcoming the country's 10 per cent election threshold.

The outcome of the elections had a huge impact on Erdoğan's attitude towards the Kurds. He had hoped that the peace process with the PKK would have brought the Kurdish vote to the AKP and would have eventually paved the way for the approval of his favoured constitutional reform, aiming to transform Turkey in a presidential republic. After the elections, Erdoğan changed strategy. He exploited the latest escalation of violence in order to shut down the peace process. Moreover, he used his influence to prevent the formation of a coalition government and he called for new elections. In the subsequent electoral campaign, Erdoğan made incessant use of anti-Kurdish rhetoric, trying to delegitimize the HDP and its leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, and to attract the nationalist constituency within the Turkish electorate. Even though this strategy exacerbated tensions, it proved to be effective. Indeed, in the November 2015 elections, the AKP recovered its absolute majority of parliamentary seats.

Turkey's position *vis-à-vis* the PKK/YPG worsened further after the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on 10 October 2015. Officially, the SDF is a multi-ethnic and multi-faith alliance originating in northern Syria and supported by the US to fight Islamic State. However, the prominence of Kurdish militias in the

<sup>20</sup> Richard Spencer, "Turkey Accused of Allowing Islamic State Fighters to Cross Its Border in Kobane Attack", in *The Telegraph*, 25 June 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11699969/Turkey-accused-of-allowing-Islamic-State-fighters-to-cross-its-border-in-Kobane-attack.html>.

group's ranks has always worried Ankara, which considers the SDF to be essentially a subsidiary of the PKK/YPG.

A third factor affecting Turkey's security is the refugee influx from Syria. This issue represents one of the most tragic consequences of the Syrian civil war, with about 5,262,000 refugees registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (the UN's refugee agency; the UNHCR) as of 30 September 2017.<sup>21</sup> Turkey, as Syria's largest neighbour, has been particularly affected by the influx, with over 3 million refugees registered on its territory. This crisis has not just challenged Turkey's financial capabilities but has also negatively affected its security and created a difficult social situation in the south-eastern regions of the country, where sporadic episodes of violence have occurred.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the direct involvement of Russia in the conflict since October 2015 has exacerbated tensions with Moscow. In November 2015, a Turkish F-16 fighter jet shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M fighter aircraft near the Syria–Turkey border. This led to a sharp confrontation between President Erdoğan and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. In response to these events, Moscow imposed sanctions on Ankara, including the suspension of visa-free travel to Russia for Turkish citizens and limits on Turkish imports.

In conclusion, Turkey's regime-change strategy in Syria failed. In fact, the policy might even have contributed to turning Syria into a failed state – thus creating a power vacuum, which was immediately filled by ISIS and other non-state actors. At the beginning of 2016, Turkey was in an awkward position, and it was clear that the only way out of it was to adopt a new strategy.

### 3. Recent developments (2016–present)

In spring 2016, as the refugee crisis showed no sign of abating, the then-prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, negotiated a border-management deal with EU leaders. This agreement bound Turkey to take back migrants who entered Greece but allowed it to send legal refugees stranded in Turkey to the EU. In return, the EU Heads of State and Government agreed to give Turkey 6 billion euros (3 billion immediately, and a further 3 billion after some time), and pledged to lifting the visa requirements for Turkish citizens at the latest by the end of June 2016.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See UNHCR website: *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

<sup>22</sup> See Semih Idiz, "Attacks on Syrians in Turkey Increasing", in *Al-Monitor*, 20 May 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/turkey-attack-on-syrians-in-country-on-the-rise.html>.

<sup>23</sup> See Council of the European Union, *EU-Turkey Statement*, 18 March 2016, <http://europa.eu/!Uv88TM>.

The agreement *per se* was not a problem for President Erdoğan (even though the lifting of visa restrictions implied reform of Turkey's anti-terrorism legislation, a step that he was not prepared to take). However, the fact that it was presented as Davutoğlu's success and that the prime minister appeared to be the real representative of Turkey, exacerbated pre-existing tensions between president and prime minister. Indeed, during Davutoğlu's premiership an internal struggle emerged within the party between a pro-Erdoğan wing, supportive of the leader's plan to transform Turkey into a presidential republic, and a more moderate wing, to which Davutoğlu was reportedly close, wary of further concentration of power in Erdoğan's hands.

The dispute ended with Erdoğan's total victory. In late April 2016, the AKP Central Executive Decision Committee (MKYK) voted to strip the party leader (formally, Davutoğlu) of the power to appoint provincial and district party executives. This led the government to a deadlock. After a meeting between Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, it was announced that the AKP would hold an extraordinary congress in late May and that Davutoğlu would not stand as a candidate for party leader. Later, Davutoğlu delivered his resignation as both party leader and prime minister. Through his removal, Erdoğan sent a clear message to the West as well as to his possible internal rivals. That message was: the President of the Republic is the main player in Turkish politics. Unsurprisingly, Erdoğan was able to impose his own choice, Binali Yıldırım, as new "party leader" and prime minister.

This was the backdrop against which Turkey's 15 July 2016 *coup d'état* attempt took place. The perpetrator was a faction within the Turkish armed forces that called itself the "Peace at Home Council". The coup failed after an impressive number of AKP supporters, police and the greater part of the army intervened against the rebels. Also critical was the fact that two main opposition parties, the Kemalist CHP and the nationalist MHP, denounced the coup as illegal.

The failure of the *coup d'état* produced three relevant consequences. First, Erdoğan accused Fethullah Gülen and his movement of masterminding the revolt. Gülen, a Turkish cleric residing in the US who advocates a liberal-leaning Islamic agenda, had initially been an ally of Erdoğan, who could count on his vast network of followers within Turkey's state and civil society. After they fell out with each other in 2013, however, Erdoğan and Gülen became bitter enemies. Consequently, Erdoğan's next move was to commence massive purges of Gülenists – whom the government dubbed participants in a "parallel structure" (or "parallel state") – from the country's administration, judiciary, police, military and academia. Finally, Erdoğan seized the opportunity to push for the constitutional overhaul that would transform Turkey into a presidential republic. This reform was eventually approved in a controversial constitutional referendum on 16 April 2017, the results of which were contested by the opposition.

These internal developments have had a great impact on Turkish foreign policy for at least three reasons. First, with the resignation of Davutoğlu, the main architect of the "zero problems with neighbours" approach, Turkish foreign policy has

definitely lost its idealistic impetus. Second, the growth of Erdoğan's power has fuelled Turkey's recently adopted anti-Kurdish stances. Indeed, according to recent sources (including the mysterious Turkish blog known as the "Pelican files"),<sup>24</sup> policy towards the Kurdish issue had been one of the main friction points between Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, with the latter in favour of the resumption of peace talks with the PKK, which the former staunchly opposed.<sup>25</sup> Finally, international reactions following the failed coup have affected Turkey's relations with other states, especially with those in the West.

External factors – most notably, the strengthening of the PYD in northern Syria and the dramatic increase of ISIS attacks on Turkish territory – have added to these largely internal developments to bring about change in Turkey's foreign policy. It is also important to consider the wider geopolitical scenario in Syria. Russia's direct involvement in that conflict has resulted in a reversal of the balance of power, back in favour of the pro-Assad front (which also includes Iran). Assad also took advantage of US President Barack Obama's reluctance to further involve the US in the Middle East and of divisions within Sunni Arab countries. Indeed, after the *coup d'état* led by General al-Sisi in Egypt, which overthrew the democratically elected Mohamed Morsi, the latter's supporters, Turkey and Qatar, have found themselves involved in a bitter confrontation with the new Egyptian Government, which is strongly supported by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The rift between Ankara/Doha and Riyadh/Abu Dhabi/Cairo has had significant consequences for the regional scenario (one pertinent example has been the recent blockade of Qatar). In Syria, this has further undermined the capacity of opposition forces to create a united front against the regime. Moreover, the Sisi government seems to be supportive of Assad given the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood amongst opposition ranks in Syria.

In this context, Turkey has found itself isolated. Erdoğan has tried to steer the country's approach to the Syrian conflict towards a position of greater pragmatism, setting aside the idea of removing Assad. Accordingly, Ankara has stopped using regime-change rhetoric, is more involved in the fight against ISIS and Kurdish militias, and has agreed to participate in talks with Russia and Iran to find a solution to the conflict. In other words, Turkey has revised its strategic priorities, acknowledging that the removal of Assad should not be considered a major objective in a context in which ISIS represents a serious threat (as attested by the wave of terrorist attacks that has occurred in Turkish territory in the last two years) and the strengthening of the PYD in northern Syria is seen as a menace to Turkey's territorial integrity, since it is considered a branch of the PKK. Of course, Erdoğan sees Kurdish separatism as the priority. However, he acknowledges that Turkey's passive behaviour regarding the rise of ISIS has strengthened the PYD's

<sup>24</sup> See Mustafa Akyol, "How Mysterious New Turkish Blog Exposed Erdogan-Davutoglu Rift", in *Al-Monitor*, 3 May 2016, <http://almon.co/2nhi>.

<sup>25</sup> See Constanze Letsch, "Turkish PM Davutoğlu Resigns as President Erdoğan Tightens Grip", in *The Guardian*, 5 May 2016, <https://gu.com/p/4tpqf>.



position in Syria. Therefore, a stronger stance towards ISIS is needed in order to reduce PYD influence.

Turkey has taken the necessary steps to improve its relations with key external players. It has continued the process of normalization with Israel,<sup>26</sup> downgraded tensions with Iran and apologized to Russia for the shooting down of the Sukhoi Su-24.

While relations with these countries have improved recently, those with Europe have deteriorated. The European Commission has been reluctant to allow visa-free travel for Turkish citizens, pointing out that Turkey does not fulfil the necessary requirements. As a response, Turkey threatened the European Union that it would scrap the migrant deal signed in the spring 2016 if Brussels does not keep its promises (nevertheless, the deal still stands). Turkish–European relations also plummeted after the failed coup attempt of July 2016. Erdoğan accused Europe of not showing enough support for the legitimate government of Turkey, hinting that it had sided with the participants of the coup.

Erdoğan has also made serious accusations against the United States. Indeed, in a speech on 29 July 2016, the Turkish president accused US Central Command Chief Joseph Votel of supporting the coup plotters.<sup>27</sup> Another issue that concerns Turkish–US relations is Ankara's request for the extradition of Gülen, who is a resident of the US state of Pennsylvania. Washington has refused to concede, requesting that Turkey first produce evidence that the cleric is connected with the coup. This has produced tensions between the two countries; however, the biggest problem for Turkey remains US support for the PYD in Syria.

The rapprochement with Moscow and Tehran has allowed Ankara to deal with ISIS and the PYD at the same time. In August 2016, Turkey started a massive operation in northern Syria, in the region between the Euphrates River to the east and the area around Azaz to the west ("Operation Euphrates Shield"). The aim of this military intervention was to wipe out ISIS militants, but also to drive a wedge between Syria's Kurds, who were hoping to control the area in order to connect the cantons of Afrin and Kobane, ensuring in this way the territorial continuity of Rojava. Although Damascus, Moscow and Tehran have officially criticized the Turkish initiative, it is difficult to imagine that Ankara would have acted the way it did without a preliminary agreement with all three. As evidence of this, the Syrian Army and its allies have done nothing to stop Turkey. The operation was declared over on 29 March 2017, with mixed results. On the one hand, the Turkish Army and the Syrian rebels that supported the operation captured Jarabulus, al-Bab and

<sup>26</sup> Relations with Israel experienced a dramatic setback after the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident. The crisis was partially resolved only when Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to apologize to Erdoğan following pressures from Washington.

<sup>27</sup> See "Turkey's Erdogan to Drop Lawsuits against People Who Insulted Him", in *BBC News*, 30 July 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-36925723>.

several other villages, and Turkey prevented the connection of the Afrin canton with the rest of PYD-controlled territory. On the other hand, opposition from both Russia and the US forced Turkey to abandon its ambition of extending operations towards Manbij, thereby significantly reducing the scope of the Turkish offensive. Moreover, Washington still relies on Kurds to retake Raqqa, ISIS' "capital" in Syria.

Turkey, along with Iran and Russia, has co-sponsored negotiations between the Syrian regime and representatives of the opposition in Astana (Kazakhstan). As a result, a deal for monitoring and supporting a ceasefire has been reached in January 2017. However, further talks have failed to bring an agreement.

Turkey has also had to take account of the new US administration. At the beginning, newly elected US President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson clearly stated that the overthrow of Assad was not a priority. However, this position changed in the wake of a chemical attack ostensibly carried out by the Syrian regime in April 2017. In retaliation, Trump ordered the launch of 59 cruise missiles against the Shayrat Air Base, from which the Syrian airplanes that carried out the attack had taken off. Trump has also taken a tough stance against Iran's role in Syria and the wider region. The Turkish Government welcomed the strike, calling it a positive response to Assad's war crimes.<sup>28</sup>

However, it is clear that the "American return" to the Syrian "game" presents some complications. First of all, US intransigence towards Assad and Iran will inevitably lead to a slowdown in the "Astana process". Moreover, the US administration has approved direct weapons shipments to Syrian Kurdish fighters battling ISIS despite Turkish warnings. It is evident that Trump seeks to continue the Obama administration's strategy, consisting of relying on the Kurds to end ISIS rule in Syria.

### Conclusions

Turkey's policy towards Syria over the previous decade has undergone considerable evolution. Today, Turkey faces several challenges to its internal stability, while the geopolitical struggle fuelled by the Syrian war sees Turkey as one of the main actors but not the dominant one. Therefore, Turkey has been forced to reduce the scope of its medium-term objectives.

Ankara's primary concern is to prevent the rise of an autonomous Kurdistan in Syria under the aegis of the PYD. This new entity would indeed probably provide logistical support for the PKK's activities in Turkey. In order to achieve this aim, Ankara is ready to cooperate with Iran and even Damascus, both of which are also interested in preventing a bigger role for the PKK/PYD in the region. On this

<sup>28</sup> See "US Strike on Assad Regime a 'Positive Response': Erdogan Aide", in *Anadolu Agency*, 7 April 2017, <http://v.aa.com.tr/791216>.

issue, the recent referendum for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan may bring Turkey to reconsider its relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government. An independent Iraqi Kurdistan would be a threat to Turkey's interests even more than an independent Rojava would, since it would pave the way for Kurdish separatism across the entire region.

The threat represented by jihadism is also a concern for Ankara, and important initiatives have been undertaken in order to tackle this problem (the military intervention in northern Syria is the most relevant example). However, the active participation of the SDF in the anti-ISIS struggle is an obstacle for Ankara. Therefore, it is unlikely that Turkey will cooperate more actively in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition.

As far as Assad is concerned, Turkey no longer considers his removal a medium-term priority. In the long term, Ankara will probably exploit the fact that it *de facto* controls parts of northern Syria in order to have a say about the future of the country. However, for this to happen, Erdoğan is aware that he has to reach a compromise with Washington, Moscow and the regional powers.

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