

Reasoning Turkey's Syrian Shift: A New Track with Iran?

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Abstract

After five years of collision over Syria, Turkey and Iran are collaborating, albeit with differing priorities and goals, aiming at a political settlement in Syria. A main reason for this change has been Turkey's shifting Syria policy. But why has Turkey's Syria policy shifted and how does it affect the dynamics of Iranian – Turkish relations. My argument is that Russia's military role in Syria and its stance against Turkey after the fighter jet incident of November 2015, along with the insecurity spilling over of the Syrian crisis started into Turkey, made Ankara to go beyond its anti-Assad zero-sum-game. This triggered the shifts in Turkey's Syria policy, which in turn brought about new dynamics into Syria and to the Iranian – Turkish relations as well. The article is focused on the years following Russia's military involvement in Syria with some references to the beginning of the Syrian crisis.

Keywords: Iran - Turkey Relations, Syrian Crisis, Syrian Peace Talks, Kurdish Question.

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Introduction

Iranian-Turkish bilateral ties grew unprecedentedly during the 2000s. Economic cooperation was on the rise. The prospect was so bright that a regional spill over seemed at hand owing to negotiations on establishing a joint visa region, Shamgen, to include Syria and Iraq. However, with the Arab Spring onset, new challenges surrounded the rising ambitions on Turkish-Iranian regional cooperation.

The Syrian crisis placed the two states at opposing sides. Ankara was soon to abandon its newly found close ties with Damascus embarking on the route of supporting her armed opposition. In fact the Arab Spring unleashed a long awaited aspiration for a regional role in Turkey. Therefore, Ankara's hunt for a leading role to head the regional movement of the Muslim Brotherhood brought it to patron the Syrian opposition. Beyond Turkey's reasons, the aforementioned shift from Davut Oglu's "zero problems" policy put Turkish-Iranian relations in jeopardy.

While the Syrian crisis invoked a regional opportunity in Turkish AKP government's worldview and urged Ankara's shift, it exhibited a regional disaster in Tehran's eyes and brought it to Damascus' aid. Therefore Turkey's regional opportunity came at odds with Iran's regional position. Tehran harbored the vision that the challenges facing the Syrian government illustrated efforts to belittle Iran's regional heft. Thus while Iran's support of the Syrian government was interpreted as being of a defensive nature, Ankara's policy was seen as mere opportunism.

Therefore, the Syrian crisis damaged the political dimension of

Turkish - Iranian ties, putting Turkey's position in contrast with that of Iran. Yet there was an unwritten rule both parties kept committing to: decoupling economic cooperation from regional collision. This rule worked effectively, and despite some ups and downs, the overall economic cooperation kept flourishing. Still there was the Syrian effect disturbing the very essence of any sort of bilateral cooperation on a regional scale.

Now with Turkey shifting its zero-sum-game aimed at toppling Assad into a more collaborative approach, the dynamics of Iranian-Turkish relations have changed. As such, Ankara started working along with Russia and Iran to bring an end to the Syrian war. This article is aimed at answering the following questions: why have Turkey's Syrian policy shifted and how does it affect the dynamics of Iranian-Turkish relations. The hypothetical answer is that Russia's military role in Syria and its stance against Turkey after the fighter jet incident on November 2015, along with the insecurity caused by the Syrian crisis and its spilled over into Turkey, brought Ankara to go beyond its anti-Assad zero-sum-game. This triggered the shifts in Turkey's Syria policy, which in turn brought about new dynamics into Syria and to the Iranian - Turkish relations as well.

In order to explore the aforementioned answer, I first discuss the Syrian effect on Iranian-Turkish relations. Then I address the root causes of Turkey's shift toward Syria and explore new dynamics stemming from the Turkish shift and old dynamics affected by it. The last part will scrutinize the possible way ahead in terms of Turkish shift and its relations with Iran: how Turkey's shift will pay off regionally and bilaterally. The article is summed up with a conclusion.

I. The Syrian Effect

During the 1980s and 1990s, diplomatic relations between Iran and Turkey were tense. (Habibi, 2012: 2) Nevertheless, the 2000s witnessed a different pattern of cooperation between the two nations. Prior to the Syrian crisis, Iran-Turkey cooperation were rising to an

extent (See Aras & Polat, 2008; Habibi, 2012; Synkaya, 2012) that the two states agreed along with Syria and Iraq on issuing joint visa called Shamgen (Aslan, 2011); this did not come out of the blue.

After years of Turkish adherence to a “zero problems” policy toward its neighborhood (See Davutoglu, 2010), Ankara found Iran, Iraq, and Syria a block with which it shares lots of common interests in terms of economic cooperation as well as regional stability. It served Ankara's interests as a huge market and as its route to expand ties with the entire Middle East. Therefore, Turkey became increasingly able and willing to play an assertive role in the management of security and economic affairs on its periphery. (Kardaş, 2010: 115) Iran's calculations were more of strategic essence. Besides economic benefits, expanding regional ties with Turkey would have given Iran an upper hand in its rivalries with Saudi Arabia in Iraq and particularly Lebanon. Syria and Iraq were to benefit being a part of a regional block including two of its major powers. Therefore, aspirations were so high before the Arab Spring hit the region.

So far as the wave toppled Ben-Ali of Tunisia and Mubarak of Egypt, Iran and Turkey expressed, albeit with differing rhetoric, enthusiastic readings. The Syrian crisis however brought a challenging variable into those readings. For Turkey, the Syrian crisis was a continuation of what it was seen a Brotherhood rise all over the region. Therefore it was an opportunity to be seized by the AKP government. Iran however harbored a different view stressing that the Syrian crisis was a struggle to belittle its regional role and influence and worse, to offer its regional rivals an opportunity to overcome the strategic disequilibrium debilitating them through the Arab Spring in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and Yemen.

What galled the Iranians was how Turkish leaders have seized upon the Arab Spring, and in particular the crisis in neighboring Syria, to establish Turkey as a regional power. (LaFranchi, 2012) Therefore, Turkey's Syria policy has also raised new tensions in relations that had

been steadily improving, with neighbors such as Iran, Iraq, and Russia. (Yilmaz, 2013: 70)

Turkey calculations were totally different from the usual way it has done business in the Middle East, underlying economic cooperation. Economic lenses were replaced with a power game perspective in which AKP government saw Turkey the natural winner. Turkey's new approach was based on three main arguments.

The first suggested the regional rise of the Brotherhood at the expense of the traditional dictatorships around the Middle East as the main result of the Arab Spring. So long as the Brotherhood was the main political movement offering a viable alternative to collapsing regimes, this argument was robust. Still it did not take into account three main actors soon to sweep the political scene all over the region: the deep state, the armies and the Jihadists. Faced with those actors, Turkey's ambitious drive to become a Middle East power by influencing the region's Muslim Brotherhood-inspired parties appears to have been upended. (Cagaptay, 2013)

Building on the first argument, the second articulated Turkey's aspirations to lead a regional block suggesting that AKP's Turkey, a consolidated democracy, is the regional model for the Brotherhood's ascending power to build legitimate alternatives through democratic mechanisms. Turkey, being the model, would be the legitimate leader of the rising axis. Erdogan's Cairo speech addressing Egyptians illustrated Turkey's regional aspirations (See Kirkpatrick, 2011; Shenker, 2011). This argument however failed to see and acknowledge the internal and regional resisting powers offering different alternatives to the changing status quo.

The third argument was built on the assumption that the Syrian crisis was a continuation of the Arab Spring which will see the Syrian Brotherhood ascending power as the main alternative to the Syrian ruling party on the one hand and that the Syrian ruling party will collapse in the short-term on the other. The emergence of ISIS and its sister organizations refuted the ascendance of the Syrian

Brotherhood as the alternative, and the remaining of the ruling party supported by its social base and regional support came at odds with the short-term-collapse assumption.

Basing its policy on those arguments, Turkey gave up its close ties with Damascus to pursue a zero-sum-game. Therefore, beginning late 2011, Turkey shifted to a policy of regime change (Yilmaz, 2013: 68). In contrast to Turkey's offensive strategy to direct the Syrian crisis to its benefit, Iran's policy was of a defensive nature, sticking to the status quo in a fluid moment. As the Syrian crisis continued into 2012 it increasingly assumed both a regional and international dimension, firmly cementing Tehran's support for Assad (Goodarzi, 2013, 26). Therefore, Tehran was faced with a regional scramble to topple its main ally, launching simultaneously an anti-Arab Spring campaign in Bahrain, and after a while in Yemen and Egypt. The Iranian debate on the Syrian crisis however concentrated on two different arguments.

The first beheld that Syria was plotted against because it was Iran's ally. According to this assumption, the Syrian crisis illustrates an anti-Iran struggle carried out by its rivals that hijacked a reformist movement and turned it into an armed strife against the Syrian government, and therefore, Syria fell a victim of its alliance with Iran and the 'resistance axis' referring to a regional anti-Israeli coalition including Syria and Iran. Therefore, Iran gradually came to view the situation in Syria as a zero-sum game, fearing that the ouster of President Assad could pave the way for the emergence of a new regime and regional order intrinsically hostile towards Tehran (Goodarzi, 2013: 27). The argument highlighted Saudi Arabia's demands from Syria to break up its ties with Iran to benefit from Riyadh's support.

The second Iranian argument suggested that Syria, had it fallen, would have turned into the first launching ground against Iran, thus, to be followed by an anti-Iran campaign in Iraq and Lebanon and even Iran itself. The GCC state's policy to steer Damascus away from

Tehran to bolster their regional standing (Hassan, 2013: 17) strengthened Tehran's reasoning. This argument stems its rationale from a debate correlating regional developments to Iran's national security and even its territorial integrity. "If Iran did not fight in Syria against the enemy, it would have had to face it on its own soil" according to the Iranian Supreme Leader (khamenei.ir, 2016).

Therefore while Iran went on to back its ally, the Syrian government, Turkey provided the anti-Assad campaign with the main logistical routes, standing starkly at odds with Iran. And although the short-term removal of Assad turned into a long-term politically costly, regionally destabilizing policy, still abandoning it was not an option for Ankara for it would have harmed its regional credibility and relevance. Tehran on the other hand kept on backing Damascus. These conflicting policies created an environment in which ideology bulged. As much as politicized and sectarianized identities amplified ISIS and its sister organizations, it hampered Iran–Turkey political dealings, leaving their economic cooperation to go without a political parallel.

Therefore the Syrian effect placed Iran and Turkey on the contrary. Nevertheless, both countries held a practical agreement not to let their economic cooperation be affected by regional differences. This has proved effective giving the two countries a common language amid heightened regional tension. Nevertheless, it was not the economic connection that brought them into conciliation over Syria.

II. Turkey's Shift

On March 2016, after five years of collision over Syria, former Prime Minister of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoglu, spoke to his Iranian hosts about their, namely Iran and Turkey, common grounds in Syria (Daily Sabah, 2016). It was the beginning of Turkey's shift from its regime change policy in Syria. Besides the shift from regime change, Turkey sought rapprochement with Iran and Russia on the one hand and

formed a coalition, later to be known as Euphrates Shield, to counter the Kurdish rise aiming at unifying Rojava -the Syrian Kurdish-majority provinces- on the other. There have been different arguments reasoning the logic of Turkey's shift, on top of which come Russia's role in Syria and its effect on the Syrian regional equation and the Kurdish rise in Syria.

“Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis generated huge shifts in the course of events in the country as it did transform regional calculations around the Syrian crisis. Russia's direct intervention may be seen as a reaction to the battlefield advances of anti-Assad forces trained and supplied by Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia as well as the stated intent of Turkey and the United States to establish a no-fly zone between Aleppo and the Turkish border” (Rogers and Reeve, 2015: 3).

“The initial stage of the Russian political strategy succeeded with the de facto acceptance of Assad in power for the short-term” (Locus, 2015: 10). Therefore, stopping the anti-Assad advances, the Russian engagement brought Ankara to reevaluate its Syria position. Turkey's shift from a zero-sum-game in Syria began right after the downing of a Russian fighter jet on 24 November 2015. It is obvious now that the latter was surrounded by miscalculations.

“No matter what Ankara's reasons were, the net result was the defeat of Turkey's plans in Syria and a setback in its strategic ambition of acting as a regional power”, (Özel, 2016: 5) hence limiting Turkey's scope of maneuvering. As a result, Moscow began arming the PYD and providing it with air support against Turkey-supported rebels (Borshchevskaya, 2016: 49) making Russia the second international power, after the US, to back the Syrian Kurds. Therefore, support the PYD became one of the areas of common ground between Washington and Moscow since the Russian intervention in Syria (Özel, 2016: 5). “Besides providing some weapons, intelligence, and diplomatic support, Russia has been the only party calling for the PYD to be represented at the Geneva peace

talks” (Pollack, 2016: 8). This, for sure, hits a sensitive nerve in Ankara.

Therefore, with the Russian involvement and the downing of its fighter jet, the hard job of toppling Assad became an impossible mission. With Russia enforcing a harsh embargo on Turkish exports and curtailing tourism (Aydintasbas, 2016: 5), Turkey hastened the revising process of its Syria policy. The Kurdish scene’s developments prompted Turkey’s shifting pace even more.

Ankara’s Kurdish nightmare of Syria came true long ago at the Syrian town of Kobani where on the last season of 2014, divisions of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian offshoot of Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), forced ISIS fighters out of the city. The Kurdish public as well as international support of PYD’s militias (People’s Protection Units) have been daunting Turkey ever since. Turkey have taken its precautions by providing support to the Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNC or ENKS) which was formed on October 26, 2011, in Erbil, Iraq, under the sponsorship of Massoud Barzani (Bashar et. al., 2012). Turkey’s backing of the KNC, a coalition of twelve small Syrian Kurdish parties, came as a counterweight to the PYD (International Crisis Group, 2016: 5). Still, PYD’s Kobani legacy, boosting the Kurdish rise, warmed up Turkey’s anxiety toward the Syrian Kurds. PYD’s approach aiming at uniting the three Kurdish cantons of Rojava (or Syrian Kurdistan) Afrin, Jazira and Kobani, amplified Turkey’s uneasiness.

Therefore, AKP’s government was faced with parts of its Syria choices’ repercussions. And despite the Kurdish rising power, Turkey’s partners in the Anti-Assad campaign had nothing to do with Ankara’s ‘Kurdish threat’ perception. Even worse, the United States turned out to be the main international supporter of the Syrian Kurds. Despite Turkish objections, U.S. and other NATO member-state coordination with the Kurds has proceeded nonetheless (Pollack, 2016: 1). To the contrary, Iran, Syria, and Iraq seemed closer to Ankara’s ‘Kurdish threat’ perception. Therefore, the Kurdish threat

perception of Turkey hastened its shift. But there were two other reasons for the change.

Economic hardships come first. As a result of Russian sanctions, estimated annual revenues loss for Turkey would reach \$4.4 to \$7.3 bn (Demir, 2015: 3). Therefore, Turkey's dire situation after Russia's unilateral sanctions, created an urgent need to enhance economic relations with other nations including Iran. The theme of this argument is that Turkey and Iran had little in common in the past five years in terms of regional developments, yet the Russian embargo created an added incentive in Ankara to go beyond regional differences. While in Tehran, Turkish Premier, Ahmet Davutoglu, spoke about the two countries agreement to enhance bilateral trade to \$50 bn. This would turn Turkey to Iran's first trade partner.

This enthusiasm was based on a lasting model in Turkish-Iranian relations: 'decoupling the economic from the political.' Turkey economic relations with Iran have never been preconditioned to political prerequisites. This tells both nations that they can do their regional politics without jeopardizing economic relations. That is a big pro to back the economic enhancement. Additionally, the changing economic atmosphere in Iran and the opportunities it provide after the 'implementation day' of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action must have been another pro to enhance ties with Tehran.

The second variable is the operational hardships of the Syrian endeavor. It was obvious for all parties involved in the Syrian crisis that unilateral choices could not succeed on the ground. As for Syria, neither Turkey's choice to topple Assad nor Iran's choice to restore stability in a unified Syria could crystallize. Yet Iran's strategic investment proved successful in propping up President Assad. While Turkey's investment in aiding and abetting the opposition, did not lead to Assad's removal.

In addition, the Syrian crisis developments jeopardized Turkey's own security after it came at odds with ISIS which in turn led to unprecedented terrorist activities and bombings on Turkish soil. It

also led to the empowerment of Syrian PYD Kurds whom Ankara depicts as terrorists due to their affiliation to the Turkish PKK. That is to say, Turkish strategic choices in the Syrian crisis opened a Pandora box of insecurity and instability that spilled over to its own territory. Turkey's 2023 vision may have been able to integrate Turkey's foreign-policy discourse into its national discourse (Davutoglu, 2010), yet it couldn't divert that discourse's repercussions on its own security; the repercussions that finally urged Turkey to revise its Syria strategy.

In general, the Arab Spring, seen at the beginning as an "unprecedented opportunity" for Turkey to take the leadership role in the Middle East, soon proved the limits of Turkey's regional influence and its lack of capacity to provide stability and consistent foreign policy (Todorova, 2015: 108). Its dynamics turned the 'Turkish opportunity' which led its ruling elites to pursue a zero-sum-game, into a 'national security threat' both in terms of developments of the Kurdish scene on the one hand and Jihadists opening an 'internal Jihad' on its own territory on the other.

III. New Dynamics

The first file to absorb the outcomes of Turkey's shift was the Syrian crisis. Drawing a new set of rules in its dealings with Syria, Turkey abandoned its Arab blokes, partnering with Russia to dismantle what Ankara saw as a terrorist threat – which include Syrian Kurds according to Turkey's classification (Ensor, 2016). Being the main route of logistical support to the Syrian opposition (Shaheen et. al, 2015) Turkey bears a great deal of leverage over those organizations, making Saudi and Qatari leverage provisional. Counting on this, Turkey seemed eager to join the 'Moscow Troika' with Russia and Iran in pursuit of a political settlement to the Syrian crisis.

The troika created a new momentum by focusing on the main regional and international stakeholders and excluding potential spoilers (See Hubbard and Sancer, 2016). The door remained open

for other actors to join, yet they had to abide by the troika rules as the guarantor of this agreement according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (Sputnik, 2016). Tehran seemed quite satisfied with the new course of events stemming from its partnership with Turkey along with Russia. It can be the very first step toward peace in Syria according to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (Tehran Times, 2017). Zari's talks about the need to have a political settlement in Syria stem from the same logic: a settlement can bring a good part of the Syrian crisis' heft on Iran's shoulders into an end.

Second, Turkey's Shift has affected regional power game around Syria. While Iran, Iraq and their allies have been supporting the Syrian government, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been the regional backers of the Syrian opposition. Turkey's faring away from its partners and getting to grips with the new realities in Syria leaves Saudi Arabia and Qatar with little fortune to be taken seriously. With Egypt, Emirates and even Jordan starting to deal overtly with the Syrian Government, the Assad-must-go policy seems to have lost its realistic attraction.

To reap a more vivid picture of the regional mutation, one has to favor the international dimension of the regional change. While the US no-intervention policy has continued and is now boosted by President Trump's rhetoric, Russia has taken the lead – along with the responsibility – to settle the Syrian crisis politically (See Young, 2016; Itani and Abouzahr, 2016). This has weakened even more the Saudi and Qatari stance toward Syria.

In addition to propping up President Assad, Tehran has, ever since the onset of the Syrian crisis, been trying to stop its rivals to forge an anti-Iran alliance circling around Syria. That's why despite hardships, the Rouhani Administration tried to reach out to Arabs and even Saudis, It kept its mutual relations with Ankara away from their conflicting regional policies struggling not to force Turkey into the Saudi camp. With Ankara making its way out of the Assad-must-go camp, Iran was assured of the ineffectiveness of such an endeavor.

Beside these dynamics and more importantly comes the Kurdish variable. Of the core issues in Turkey's strategic calculations leading to its policy shift in terms of both goals and means is containing the 'Kurdish threat.' Since 2011, Ankara has tried several tactics to keep in check what it perceives as an emerging PYD/YPG threat (Salih, 2015: 5). In the midst of regional polarities around Syria, it was so unfortunate for AKP government to find its regional partners even further away from Turkish perceived Kurdish threat compared to its rivals. The nearest calculations toward the Kurdish rising power to Ankara have been resonating in Tehran and Baghdad not Riyadh and Doha. Things seemed way worse when it came to the international actors. The US as the main international depth of the anti-Assad campaign turned to be the Kurds' main vindicator.

Turkey's shift granted it more advantages to deal with its 'Kurdish threat.' The shift has been useful as to allow Turkey to intervene militarily in Syria (See Orton, 2016). Besides its costs, this could create troubles for Turkey in terms of managing its relations with differing Kurdish groups as much as it gave Ankara substantial leverage for that very reason, yet those troubles are far from balancing both the threats perceived and the leverage achieved.

Turkey's revision has also brought Ankara close to Tehran being the closest regional actor to its Kurdish threat perception albeit with different prioritizations. As for Tehran, Syrian Kurds are way down its list of priorities. A post-ISIS Iraq can also be more collaborative with Turkey on countering mutually perceived threats stemming from their Kurdish regions. Ankara has made it clear that a more cooperative Turkey in restoring Iraqi sovereignty over Bashiqa Camp, northern Iraq, can only crystallize once coupling Baghdad's cooperation against PKK (See Hadi, 2017).

Despite a closer attitude, Turkey's Kurdish choices came up with new differences challenging Iran-Turkey rapprochement. The first was Turkey's military presence in northern Iraq which was portrayed in Iran as an obvious occupation (See Rahim-Safavi, 2015)

Still, trying to keep its differences from harming the new tide in Ankara's approach, Iran gently criticized the deployment of Turkish troops into Iraq. The deployment challenged not only Baghdad's sovereignty, but also the Kurdish fragile balance in the KRG, which is the second disturbing issue.

Ankara's policy in the KRG could challenge Iran's security through damaging the very essence of stability in that region: i.e. the balance of power among the Kurds themselves. This has already backfired against Turkey by forcing the weakened party (*Patriotic Union of Kurdistan*, PUK) into partnering with the PKK against the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (DPK) and its backer, Ankara. In other words, the PUK, wary of the Turks and Barzani's dominance, has coordinated with the PKK to balance both Ankara and Erbil (Cook, 2016). Tehran could not turn a blind eye to Turkey's handling of its KRG policies, still, confronting Turkey explicitly could first blunt Turkey's shift and second risk escalation in the KRG.

In general, shifting regional equation forced regional actors to move beyond the self-help policies towards regional security. Those changes generated new dynamics in Iran–Turkey relations as much as they affected regional developments. The obvious effect spilled over into Syria. There remain challenges hunting the bilateral ties; nevertheless the open season of Syria is far from revival as a model.

IV. What to Expect

As two of the region's strongest non-Arab states, with similar geographic and demographic sizes and tradition of statehood, Turkey and Iran have not perceived one another as an existential threat (International Crisis Group, 2016: 3). Nevertheless, conflicting strategies have shrunk Iranian–Turkish ability to compromise in Syria over five years. At the same time, erratic alliances proved to come at odds with regional security. After five years of rivalries spreading instability all over the Middle East, both Iran and Turkey came to the conclusion that a military solution cannot work in Syria. The Russian

involvement was the final variable to set the scene for a compromise.

Therefore Turkey's new approach toward Syria came out of challenges emerging from the Syrian crisis. Scrambling to broaden the spectrum of its strategic choices, Ankara turned to Israel and Saudi Arabia. Yet it knew that there is no nation but Iran feeling Turkey's Strategic malaise with regards to the Kurds. That is why Turkey turned to Tehran and at the same time, accepted the Russian prerequisites for reestablishing normal relations. This led to the 'Moscow troika' announcement on December 2016 and to Astana Syrian Peace Talks on January 2017. Still it is worth asking if Turkey is to continue the same path or is it just a tactical shift aimed at strategic achievements that are almost the same as before.

Beyond, if the change has been strategic or tactical and even if Turkey's shift is to be assumed tactical – which turns problematic once seen in correspondence with its rhetorical as well as internal developments – still the new policy is to continue for three reasons:

The first is that even a tactical shift can bring about strategic outcomes, making any change/return impossible. Turkey's shift in Syria, have changed the equation and paved the way for a Russian–Turkish rapprochement and helped repair its regional cooperation with Iran. For the first time over six years, a political settlement in Syria seems close. Therefore, the outcome is significant and way more than to be trashed for the sake of an already failed policy.

Second is that even tactical changes, once proved gainful, can lead to strategic reevaluation and even reorientation. Thus, even if tactical at first, Turkish policy toward Syria and Iran is hardly to roll back, for it has proven gainful. That is why Tehran embraced Turkey's new approach and is expected to keep moving on the same track.

Third is the question of alternative. The lack of much-needed alternative forced Turkey to shift its Syria policy. In fact the only alternative Turkey had after the Russian involvement was to withdraw from the zero-sum-game of regime change. This brought Ankara into

cooperation with Russia and Iran. There is no any feasible alternative for Turkey. It should either go forward with the Moscow troika and try to figure out its interests within this framework, or get back to the regime change approach, a scenario completely doubtful taking into account Turkey's new priorities that drove her into that framework at the first place. Therefore, it is hard to expect Turkey's shift to shift once again. The reasons and goals for Turkey's shift as well as new choices the shift has brought to Ankara, illustrate no reason for yet another shift.

Prioritizing the Kurdish issue, Turkey made it clear that a regime change in Syrian is not a priority anymore, and thus the main driving force putting Iran and Turkey apart in Syria is out. Therefore, despite the remaining mistrust among Iran and Turkey, resulting in each viewing the other as seeking hegemony, if not to recapture lost glory, through violent proxies (International Crisis Group, 2016: 7), a new course seems evolving in their bilateral ties.

So far as an international alteration toward Syria is hard to imagine, Turkey's bet on the troika framework is to continue as it did in Astana Syrian Peace Talks, and so is the flagging role of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In its maximum, Turkey's regional shift is aimed at synergistic efforts towards the Kurds. The minimum is to stop regional backing of Syrian Kurds against Turkey's Syrian choices. So long as the latter is preserved through Turkey's new approach, Ankara is to cling to the troika framework.

Conclusion

From the tense relations of the 1980s and 1990s, Iran and Turkey moved to a rising cooperation during the 2000s. Their multi-dimensional cooperation reached unprecedented levels before hitting the Arab Spring's rocks. Syria turned out to be the challenging variable. Turkey was soon to give up its close ties with Damascus to pursue its regional aspirations brought to the surface by a regional rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. Iran however, clung to the status quo

against efforts to rip it of its main regional ally. Nonetheless, a prolonged crisis in Syria and its regional and international sophistications finally brought Turkey and Iran, albeit with completely different calculations, to cooperation once again.

The Russian involvement triggering huge repercussions, altered the internal and regional dynamics of the Syrian crisis. In addition to strengthening the Syrian government's position, it weakened its opposition's capacity and its patron's leverage in directing the course of events. The Syrian Kurds' rise on the other hand, altered the equation to an extent disturbing lots of regional calculations around Syria. Russia's military role in Syria and collide with Turkey's Syria vision and policy on the one hand and the insecurity Syrian crisis spilled over into Turkey on the other resulted in Ankara's policy shift.

Turkey's shift has raised its regional relevance. It turned Ankara into the main representative of the Syrian opposition in its dealings with Iran and Russia on a political settlement. It has also weakened the Saudi and Qatari positions and as such, created a momentum for a peaceful settlement launched from Moscow and continued in Astana. Yet the Kurdish Issue hits the most sensitive nerve in Ankara. Turkey's shift provided it with more leverage and maneuvering capacity on the Kurdish scene. As such Turkey was able to forge the Euphrates Shield and to deploy forces into Syria to confront the Syrian Kurds' rising power. So long as confronting the Kurdish rise comes a priority to Turkey, the more Ankara achieves against the Syrian Kurds' Rojava dream, the more it will be willing for a strategic cooperation with its rivals on the Syrian crisis.

As for Iran–Turkey relations, the Turkish shift has been welcomed in Tehran for two main reasons: the first is that it breaks down the anti-Iran camp Saudi Arabia tried to forge along with Turkey and some other Arab nations. Second it sets the scene for a political settlement which doesn't deprive Iran and its allies from their military successes, still leads to a compromise that eventually ease the Syrian crisis' burden on Tehran's shoulders. Turkey seemed pragmatic

in its new approach toward Iran as well. Working with Russia and Iran, Ankara can address its perceived 'Kurdish threat' more effectively on the one hand and it will not risk being outcasted from a settlement for the Syrian crisis. So long as those pragmatic calculations are delivering for both parties, the rapprochement is to continue.

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