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Turkey's Foreign Policy of the AKP Government to Syria and the Reasons behind its Shifting Policy during the Arab Spring

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Abstract

Being located at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa, connecting Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus along with its historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey plays an important role in the regional and global politics, and determines its foreign policy accordingly. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Erdogan with Islamic ideological background entered in Turkish politics in 2001, got victory in the elections of 2002, and since then hitherto ruled the country. The AKP government's foreign policy followed 'zero problem' and 'strategic depth' principles with Turkish vicinity. Turkish-Syrian interactions had begun in the 8th century under Umayyad caliphate. The Turks gradually occupied higher ranks in Umayyad state and settled down on the territories today called-Syria. During Seljuk time, Turks captured Syria which it replaced with Mamluks. The Ottomans regained sovereignty in Syria in the 16th century, which continued till the end of First World War. Then, Turkish-Syrian relations developed as mandate shaped by France. Since then, there have been some conflicting issues affecting Turkish-Syrian relations such as the Hatay (Sanjak) issue, water sharing issue. During Syria's independence in 1936, Turkey demanded Hatay's independence too, which was denied by France. On the eve of Second World War in 1939, Hatay was ceded to Turkey. Since then, it became an issue of conflict. The water sharing has also been another issue of debate. Concerning security issues, both countries are situated on opposite sides. Syria supported the PKK, which Ankara regarded as a terrorist group operating against Turkey. This hostile attitude gradually changed under AKP's soft foreign policy towards Syria. Potential Kurdish state risk after the Iraq war and common security perceptions after 9/11 compelled both countries to adopt collective security measures. Assad's visit to Turkey and Erdogan's visit to Damascus in 2004 was a milestone for the prospect of Turkish-Syrian relations. Syria cancelled support to the PKK and recognized Hatay as an integral part of Turkey. The economic relations also bloomed as the trade volume reached $1.844 billion in 2010. Regional and military cooperation agreements were signed. Bilateral relations entered into a new phase with the removal of visa requirements between the countries in 2009. All these positive developments were challenged with the mass protest against Assad regime with the emergence

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of the Arab Spring. Turkey, from the beginning warned Assad to stop violence and undertake democratic reforms and tried to negotiate between the Assad regime and the opposition. But Syria responded negatively rather blaming Turkey for interfering with Syria's internal affairs. Consequently, Turkey criticized Syria publicly and finally gave its support to the opposition and thus the AKP government's foreign policy towards Syria got a shift. Indeed, several geo-political-strategic-economic and regional-international perspectives and perceptions have driven Turkey to shift its policy towards Syria. This article is exclusively aimed at discovering the factors which prompted Turkey to shift its policy towards Syria during the crises caused by the Arab Spring. It will also include the nature and historical developments of Turkish-Syrian relations with a view to understanding the driving factors behind this shifting policy.

Keywords: Turkish-Syrian relations, foreign policy, AKP, Arab Spring.

Introduction:

Being located at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa, connecting trouble zones of the Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus, with a predominantly Muslim population and as a bridge between the West and Islam (Bagci & Kardas 2003), Turkey occupies an important geopolitical and geostrategic position in global politics, which plays a vital role in determining its foreign policy. As the inheritor of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey plays a dominant role in the regional politics. Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi-AKP) was formed in 2001 with Islamic ideological background under the leadership of *Recep Tayyip Erdogan* and swept victory in the general elections of 2002, while major political parties that ruled the country for decades failed to secure 10% of the vote (Carkoglu 2002). Since then, the AKP hitherto rules the country with an increasing vote percentage. Turkey's AKP government has initiated diversified foreign policy prioritizing its Ottoman legacy and geostrategic importance, which contradicts traditional *Kemalist*[1] policy. Proposing 'zero problem'[2] principle with Turkish vicinity, it developed close ties with neighboring countries including the Middle East, Eurasia, Balkans and

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1   Kemalist refers to following the Kemalism adopted by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of modern Turkey. It was characterized by sweeping political-social-cultural-religious reforms to dissociate Turkey from its Ottoman heritage and embrace westernized lifestyle. The six fundamentals of Kemalism are Republicanism, Populism, Secularism, Nationalism, Reformism and Statism. 'Peace at Home, Peace in the World' was the motto of Kemalist foreign policy. Retrieved from http://www.allaboutturkey.com/ata_prensip.htm.

2   The discourse of "zero problem with neighbors" is a slogan summarizing Turkey's expectations with regards to its relations with neighboring countries. Turkey wants to eliminate all the problems from its relations with neighbors or at least to minimize them as much as possible. *Policy of Zero Problems with our Neighbours*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey. Retrieved from http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa.

Caucasus regions, contrary to the secluded structure of *Kemalist* foreign policy tendency (Aras, 2009). It called for an activist engagement with all of the regions in Turkey's neighborhood, specifically with Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf states (Davutoglu 2001). The policy emphasized the importance of economic interdependency and the need to build strong economic linkages with all regional states and to eliminate all the problems from the relationships with its neighbors.

Turkish-Syrian interactions had begun in the 8th century AD under the *Umayyad* caliphate. The Turks gradually occupied higher ranks in the *Umayyad* state and settled down in the territories today called Syria. During *Seljuk* time, Turks captured Syria which replaced with *Mamluks*. The Ottomans regained sovereignty in Syria in the 16th century which continued till the end of the 1st World War. Then, Turkish-Syrian relations developed as mandate shaped by France. Since then, some conflicting issues have been affecting Turkish-Syrian relations such as the *Hatay* province of Turkey (Former *Sanjak* of Alexandretta, Syria) issue, water sharing and security issues etc. During the recognition of Syria's independence by France in 1936, Turkey demanded *Hatay*'s independence, which was denied by France. But on the eve of the 2nd World War in 1939, *Hatay* was ceded to Turkey. Since then, it became an issue of conflict between Turkey and Syria. The water sharing has also been another issue of debate. Concerning security issues, the two countries are on opposite sides. Syria provided support to PKK, which Turkey regarded as a terrorist group operating against it. This hostile attitude gradually changed under AKP's soft policy towards Syria. After the Iraq war, potential Kurdish state risk and post 9/11 security perceptions created common threats which compelled to adopt collective security measures. *Assad*'s visit to Turkey and *Erdogan*'s visit to Syria in 2004 was a milestone for the prospect of Turkish-Syrian relations. Syria cancelled supports to PKK and recognized *Hatay* as an integral part of Turkey. The economic relations also bloomed. Regional Cooperation Program was created and military cooperation agreement was signed. Bilateral relations entered into a new phase with the removal of the visa requirements between the countries in 2009.

All these positive developments were challenged due to the mass upsurge against the *Assad* regime with the emergence of the Arab Spring. Ankara from the beginning warned *Assad* to undertake democratic reforms and consistently called upon to stop violence. Turkey tried to negotiate between the *Assad* government and the opposition, but Damascus ignored all the steps, rather expressing its determination to continue harsh crackdown. Realizing the perspectives, Turkey started to shift its policy criticizing Syria publicly. Finally, Turkey gave full support to the opposition and demanded for regime change in Syria. Indeed, several geo-political-strategic-economic and regional-international perspectives and perceptions have driven Turkey to shift its policy towards Syria. This article is exclusively aimed at discovering the factors which prompted Turkey to shift

its policy towards Syria during the Arab Spring. It also includes the nature and historical developments of Turkish-Syrian relations with a view to understanding the driving factors behind this shifting policy.

Geopolitical and Strategic Importance of Turkey

The geopolitical and geostrategic position of any country like Turkey plays a key role in determining its foreign policy and relations. It can open many opportunities, while it can also pose threats for the country. Turkey possesses a highly important geostrategic location in the global geography. It is located at the crossroads of three major continents – Asia, Europe and Africa, connecting the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus regions. Turkey's territories rest on Asia and Europe, while bordering with the Middle East and post-Soviet states. It is surrounded on three sides by the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea that makes it a natural passage between Europe and Asia. Having a predominantly Muslim population, it has culturally been considered as a connecting bone between the West and Islam. Threat perceptions from the complex structures of the Middle East, Caucuses and Balkans pushed Turkey to seek allies to balance geopolitical disadvantages. Another geostrategic importance of Turkey is its Straits,[1] which constitute a highly important place in terms of defense regarding air and sea attacks (Aydin 2003: 315). Thus, it can certainly be said that Turkey occupies a highly significant geopolitical and geostrategic position in world politics, which has been playing an influential role in terms of shaping its foreign policy.

Historical Legacies of Turkish Foreign Policy

Turkey developed its foreign policy concept based on its identity and ideology inherited from internal dynamics and historical legacies. The Ottoman heritage and Empire,[2] which ruled the land for centuries left immense influences on its foreign policy principles. As one

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1   For details about the Turkish Straits see: Nihan Unlu, *The Legal Regime of the Turkish Straits*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Kluwer Law International, Hague, Netherlands, 2002.
2   The Ottoman Empire, an empire created by Turkish tribes in Anatolia. One of the most powerful states in the world during the 15th and 16th centuries, it spanned more than 600 years and came to an end only in 1922, when it was replaced by the Turkish Republic. At its height the empire included most of southeastern Europe to the gates of Vienna, including modern Hungary, the Balkan region, Greece and parts of Ukraine; Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Egypt; North Africa as far west as Algeria; and most of the Arabian Peninsula. The term Ottoman is a dynastic appellation derived from Osman (Arabic: Uthmān), the nomadic Turkmen chief who founded both the dynasty and the empire. Retrieved from http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/434996/Ottoman-Empire.

of the most powerful empires of the world, the Ottomans applied an imperial and influential foreign policy on a vast territory. The 1st World War ended the Ottoman Empire giving birth to the various nation states. *Mustafa Kemal Ataturk*,[1] the founder of modern Turkey, adopted west-oriented foreign policy to separate it from Ottoman's tradition. It represented a break with the past aiming at renunciation of three strains which had been important during Ottoman times: the imperial Ottomanism, Pan-Islamism, and Pan-Turanism (Aydin 2003: 318). Unlike Ottoman's imperialistic policy, Ataturk followed strict nationalization process within Turkey. Although experiences of the Ottoman past, together with its geostrategic importance influenced the subsequent foreign relations of Turkey, Ataturk's theory and practice has been the most important factor in shaping Turkey's foreign policy (Aydin 2004: 30). With westernization, Turkey initialized positive relations with its neighbors and signed a non-aggression treaty called *Sadabad* pact in Tehran in 1937 with Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq (Zurcher 2004). Turkey viewed the Arab regimes with suspicion mainly because of the Arab support for dismembering the Ottoman Empire during the 1st World War (Lapidus 2002) and of Turkey's revolutionary secular ideas. Instead of drawing benefits from their shared culture, history, and religion, *Kemalist* Turkey chose a different path. During the 2nd World War, initially Turkey followed an 'active neutral' policy (Deringil 2004), but towards the end of the war, approaching post-war conjecture, it declared war against Berlin and Tokyo (Aslan & Selcuk, 2014: 139). After the 2nd World War, the international system developed a bipolar structure clustering around the USA and USSR, with which the Cold War begun. During the Cold War, Turkey developed close ties with the West, particularly with the USA and became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952 (Aslan & Selcuk 2014: 149). The dissolution of USSR in 1991 set an end to the Cold War and the global political system developed in a unipolar structure centering the US. In this unipolar structure, Turkey developed close ties with the US (Muftuler-Bac 1997). It developed strict ties with the newly independent states of Central Asia providing long term credits, military reconstruction support, scholarships for students and investments in many other spheres in order to enforce its existence in the region and brought alternative dimensions to its foreign policy outlook (Fuller, 1992). On the other hand, Turkey faced serious challenges with its neighborhood because of increasing 'Kurdistan Workers' Party' (PKK)[2] terror activities. Thus, Turkey had experienced dramatic shifts and transformations in its foreign policy and structure.

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1   Kemal Ataturk: (Turkish: "Kemal, Father of Turks"), original name Mustafa Kemal, also called Mustafa Kemal Paşa (1881-1938), soldier, statesman, and reformer who was the founder and first president (1923–38) of the Republic of Turkey. He modernized the country's legal and educational systems and encouraged the adoption of a European way of life. Retrieved from http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/40411/Kemal-Ataturk.

2   Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK): A militant Kurdish nationalist organization founded by Abdullah Ocalan in the late 1970s. Although the group initially espoused demands for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, its stated aims were later tempered to calls for greater Kurdish autonomy. Retrieved from http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/325238/Kurdistan-Workers-Party-PKK.

Turkey's AKP Government and its Foreign Policy Principles

With the dissolution of the Caliphate in 1924, *Ataturk* implemented a strict secularization process in Turkey with harsh crackdown and banning of the activities of Islamists. In spite of this shock therapy (Gellner 1995), the Islamists continued their struggle advocating for an Islamic state. As a result, 'National Vision Movement' (Milli Gorus Hareketi) was initialized by *Necmettin Erbakan*, which founded 'National Order Party' (Milli Nizam Partisi) in 1970 as the first Islamist political party in Turkey (Baran 2010: 33). The party was immediately banned and *Erbakan* established another political party – National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi) in 1972 (Baran 2010: 34). Following the 1980 military coup, all political parties of Turkey were banned. After restoration of political parties in 1983, *Erbakan* established the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) (Baran 2010: 35), with which Political Islam got a real rise in Turkey. It won Istanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities in 1994 and got majority in the national elections of 1995 as the first Islamist political party in Turkish history (Baran 2010: 41), formed coalition government with True Path Party (Dogru Yol Partisi). Because of some symbolic initiatives by Prime Minister *Erbakan*, Turkish Military forced the government to resign and the Welfare Party was banned. A new-Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi) was formed, but had a similar destiny and dissolved (Baran 2010: 44). Due to continuous hostility between political Islam and secular elites, 'an intense internal debate and rethinking within the Islamic movement about the movement's future political strategy and agenda, and a growing philosophical and political rift emerged within the movement between two different groups' (Rabasa & Larrabee 2008). The Traditionalists centering *Erbakan* opposed any serious changes, while the reformists, led by *Recep Tayyip Erdogan*, argued that the party needed to rethink its approach.[1] This rift finally resulted in the formation of a new political party – Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001 (Baran 2010: 44). The AKP participated in 2002 general elections and achieved a dramatic victory in the National Parliament, securing 34.3% of general polls (Baran 2010: 50). It formed the government led by *Abdullah Gul* as *Erdogan* was banned from politics due to 1998 conviction. With the removal of his political ban in 2002, a new government was formed headed by *Erdogan* in 2003. Vote percentage of the AKP gradually increased in 2007 to 46.6% which increased by almost 50% in 2011 elections (Carkoglu 2011: 48). AKP recorded in the history of Europe as a political party being elected three times consecutively with an in-

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1   Recep Tayyip Erdogan, (b.1954) Turkish politician, who served as prime minister (2003–14) and president (2014–) of Turkey. Erdogan graduated from Marmara University, where he became active in parties led by Erbakan. In 1994 he was elected mayor of Istanbul on the ticket of the Welfare Party. Erdogan proved to be a competent and canny manager. In 1998 he was convicted for inciting religious hatred after reciting a poem, sentenced to 10 months in prison. Erdogan resigned as mayor. Retrieved from http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/913988/Recep-Tayyip-Erdogan.

creasing vote percentage (Carkoglu 2011: 44). Since then hitherto the AKP government has been ruling the country.

Turkey's AKP government developed multi-dimensional concepts in its foreign policy principle. The concepts of 'strategic depth' and 'zero problem' principles theorized by *Ahmet Davutoglu*[1] constituted the spine of AKP's foreign policy. Stressing the historical legacy and geopolitical importance of Turkey, Strategic Depth theory proposes that as a secular and democratic nation-state with Muslim majority, Turkey is capable of playing a crucial role in Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Balkans and Central Asia applying a versatile, multiregional foreign policy which may turn Turkey to be regional and gradually to be a global power (Walker 2010). Turkey needs to create a multi-dimensional and multi-directional proactive foreign policy in order to strengthen its position as a regional and global power. Strategic Depth emphasizes Turkey's potential role within the Muslim world, given that Istanbul was the last seat of the Caliphate (Walker 2010). The 'zero problem' principle proposes a peaceful relationship with its neighborhood intending to develop possible maximum economic relations with Turkish periphery (Davutoglu 2010). The theory is based on three methodological and five operational principles. The methodological principles are: 'visionary' approach to the issues instead of the 'crisis-oriented' attitudes, to base on a 'consistent and systematic' framework around the world, and the adoption of a new discourse and diplomatic style. The five operational principles are: the equilibrium between security and democracy, zero problems towards neighbors, proactive and pre-emptive peace diplomacy, adherence to a multi-dimensional foreign policy and rhythmic diplomacy (Davutoglu 2010).

AKP advocated the continuation of Turkey's strategic relations with the West, the US and developing constructive relations with the Middle East, Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Balkans and with the emerging global powers (AKP, n.d.). According to the AKP, 'Turkey must redefine its foreign policy priorities and create a balance between the global changes and its national interests' (AKP, n.d.). Turkey shall be more active in promoting regional security, collaboration and good relationship on mutual understanding with all neighboring countries. The AKP will carry relationship with the newly independent states of Central Asia to the strongest level (AKP, n.d.). Thus, Turkey's AKP government developed multi-dimensional foreign policy concepts based on its geopolitical importance, historical past and global realities to maintain peaceful relationships with the major world securing national interest aiming at developing Turkey as a regional and global power.

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[1]   Ahmet Davutoglu (b. 1959), is a Turkish diplomat and politician who has been the 26th Prime Minister of Turkey since 28 August 2014 and the leader of the AKP since 27 August 2014. He previously served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2009 to 2014. He is also a political scientist, an academic. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmet_Davuto%C4%9Flu.

Historical Developments of Turkish-Syrian Relationships

Turkish-Syrian interactions had begun shortly after the spread of Islam under the *Umayyad*[1] caliphate at the beginning of 8th century, when Damascus became its capital and Turks were brought there as slaves (Burns 2005). The Turks gradually occupied higher ranks in the *Umayyad* state and settled down at the territories today called-Syria. With the fall of *Umayyad*'s in 750, the glory of Syria resumed as Baghdad became the new capital of *Abbasid's*. But the Turkish influence continued in the *Abbasid's* administration, even sometimes 'this (Turks) corps became too powerful for the caliph and at times held him in abject submission to its will' (Hitti 1959: 160). During *Seljuk* time, Turks captured Syria. 'Turkish generals penetrated as far as the Hellespont…. For the first time, Turks gained a foothold in that land a foothold that was never lost' (Hitti 1959: 174-175). Aftermaths, Turkish sovereignty in Syria was replaced with the *Mamluks*.[2] The Ottomans regained sovereignty in Syria in the 16th century (Hitti 1959: 221). 'Beginning modestly about 1300 as a petty Turkish state in western Asia Minor, the Ottomans had gradually taken over all Anatolia from the other heirs of the *Seljuks*' (Hitti 1959: 213). This Ottoman rule continued till the 1st World War with some political confusion. With the end of war, Turkish-Syrian relations developed as mandate shaped by France, but the relation was never warm. *Ataturk's* Modern Turkey developed strong relations with the West rather than with its former Ottoman territories, while Syria projected the Ottomans as its historical enemy. Arab nationalism also fueled the anti-Turkish sentiment throughout Syria. 'The late 1930's were marked with even greater resentment because France, in violation of the terms of the mandate…, granted Turkey privileges in the *Sanjaq* (Hatay) of Alexandretta and finally ceded it in June 1939 to become incorporated in the Turkish Republic' (Hitti 1959: 244). The *Hatay* (Sanjaq) issue since then has been affecting Turkey-Syria relations until present day. *Hatay* was a part of Syria under French Mandate, which was refused by Turkey claiming it as 'a Turkish homeland for 40 centuries' (History of Hatay, n.d.). During the recognition of Syria's independence in 1936, Turkey demanded *Hatay's* independence, but France denied it stating that it would jeopardize Syria's unity. Turkey raised the issue at the League of Nations, which approved the new status for *Hatay* in 1937 declaring it 'distinct but not separated from Syria on the diplomatic level, sovereign in internal affairs, linked to both France and Turkey for defence matters' (League of Nations 1938). On the eve of the 2nd World War, in 1939, France ceded *Hatay* to Turkey. Since then, *Hatay* became an issue of conflict between Turkey and Syria. The

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1   Ummayyad Dynasty: great Muslim dynasty to rule the Muslim Caliphate from 661 to 750 A.D.
2   Mamluk, a member of the armies of slaves that won political control of several Muslim states during the Middle Ages. Mamluks established a dynasty that ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517. Retrieved from http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/360799/Mamluk.

loss of *Hatay* prompted Syrian calls for a 'Ba'ath' or resurrection of Arab nationalism, which eventually led to the formation of 'Ba'ath' party that has been ruling Syria since 1963. Since then, the regime maintained its grievances with Turkey.

Apart from *Hatay* issue, the water sharing has been another conflicting issue in Turkey-Syria relation. An agreement was signed to share water between two states in 1921. But when Turkey initialized constructing dams on the Tigris and Euphrates, controlling water flow to Syria for the development of eastern Turkey, Syria complained it would cripple its agriculture.[1] Regarding security issues, the two countries are on opposite sides. Syria sided with the Eastern bloc, while Turkey allied with the US. Turkey became a member of NATO while Syria received the most Russian military aid in the Middle East. Syria backed Lebanese *Hejbullah* against Israel, while Turkey maintained ties with Israel. Syria provided support to PKK, which Turkey considered a terrorist group. Syria opened its territories for many terrorist groups like ASALA,[2] which committed many attacks against Turkish diplomats. Terror bargains brought both states to a war level in 1998 (Aykan 1999). The tension was calmed down with signing the 'Adana Accords' due to diplomatic efforts of Iran and Egypt. Syria cancelled all aids to PKK, closed its camps within Syria and even conducted several military operations against PKK (Milliyet 2003, July 4). These positive developments marked the beginning of an unexpected new chapter in the previously antagonistic relations between the two neighbours.

▌ AKP's Foreign Policy towards Syria and Turkey-Syria Relations before the Arab Spring

Rising to power in 2002, at a critical juncture of international politics – the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks, the AKP initiated to redesign the policy based on *Davutoglu*'s 'strategic depth' and 'zero problems' principles. It developed closer ties with neighboring countries, especially the former Ottoman territories. The AKP envisioned a leading role for Turkey particularly within the greater Middle East context adopting the soft power instruments such as finance, trade, culture, ethnic and religious kinship, and diplomatic activities (Aras 2012: 44), which has been dubbed as 'neo-Ottomanism' (Mcdonald 2012). This approach resulted in the dramatic progress of Turkish-Syrian relations. The

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1   For details about Tyrkey-Syria water conflict, see Fathi Zereini & Wolfgang Jaeschke, *Water in the Middle East and North Africa*, Springer, New York, 2004, pp. 319-345.

2   ASALA (Armenian Secret Army to Liberate Armenia), a Marxist-Leninist group formed in 1975 to force the Turkish government to acknowledge the Armenian massacres of 1915 and pay reparations. Its activities, which have included acts of terrorism, have been directed against Turkish government officials and institutions. Retrieved from http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1365040/ASALA.

post 9/11 developments, increasing regional instability after Iraq war and potential Kurdish state risk created common security perceptions for both the countries. The US policy of isolation towards Syria prompted it to develop relations with Turkey, while Turkey needed Syrian support to protect from security threats of Kurdish nationalists. Changing different regional and international circumstances also prompted Turkey to have closer ties with Syria as a gate opening towards the Middle East. Thus there was an eagerness on both sides to develop relations.

The relations started to be improved with the Adana Accord in 1998 and got a new dimension with AKP's rising to power. Turkey congratulated *Bashar al-Assad*'s presidency and *Assad* made his historic trip to Ankara in 2004 as the first Syrian president since the end of the Ottoman Empire, which worked as a milestone for the prospect of Turkish-Syrian relations (*BBC News* 2004). In July 2004, Turkish Prime Minister *Erdogan* met Syrian Prime Minister *Naji Otri*, refusing to meet Israeli Prime Minister *Ehud Olmert* who visited Ankara on the same day (Hurriyet 2004). *Erdogan*'s visit to Damascus in 2004 introduced consultations over the water-sharing issue and led to the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Syria and Turkey (*Turkish Weekly* 2004). During the height of the crisis caused by the assassination of Lebanese Prime-minister *Hariri* in 2005, Turkish president *Sezar* visited Damascus defying US opposition (Moubayed 2005). *Assad* signed on documents recognizing Turkey's borders, with which Syria officially affirmed *Hatay* as an integral part of Turkey (Milliyet 2004, January, 6). Turkey-US relations sometimes got tensed on the Syrian issue as Turkey argued the US should support reforms in Syria rather isolation, while the US criticized Turkey calling its policy 'unacceptable' for harming international efforts to force Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon (Milliyet 2005, June, 9). Turkey played important role in breaking Syria's international isolation and mediated in Syria-Israel indirect peace talks in 2007-8 (Phillips 2011: 37). *Erdogan* accompanied *Assad* in August 2008 to meet French president *Sarkozy* and Qatar's *Amir Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani* in Damascus to discuss about the peace process (Moubayed 2008). After the series of bombings in the Green Zone of Baghdad in August 2009, Syria was blamed by Iraq and Turkey mediated to resolve the crisis. These Turkish efforts helped soften Syria's international image. The EU ended the diplomatic boycott of Syria in 2008, which helped the *Obama* administration to end the boycott, though some Bush-era sanctions remained (Phillips 2011: 37). Turkey also benefited from its ties with Syria. It opened the gateway of the Arab world for Turkey and the anti-Ottoman sentiment among Arabs gradually softened, which helped Turkey to boost its regional influence and economic ties with the region.

The relationship also progressed in the economic field. Turkey considered Syria as an entrance into the wider Arab markets, while Syria considered Turkey as a source of

investments. A Joint Economic Committee was formed that sponsored trade agreements and events such as the industrial exhibition in Damascus in January 2004 where 300 Turkish companies received $250 million worth of Syrian contracts (Tur 2010: 164-171). 'Turkish-Syrian Regional Cooperation Program' was created to develop technical, economic, cultural and scientific cooperation (Tur 2010: 167-168). With FTA, both countries agreed to reduce customs taxes until gradually they would disappear (Ministry of Economy, Turkey 2011). Syria's exports to Turkey rose from $187m in 2006 to $630m in 2010. Turkish exports rose from $608m in 2006 to $1.64bn in 2010 with a trade volume of $1.84 billion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey 2011). In 2011 alone, Turkish companies invested a total of $223m in different Syrian industries. The number of Syrian tourists visiting Turkey considerably increased from 154,000 in 2003 to 500,000 in 2010 (*Today's Zaman October 03, 2011*). Both countries signed a historic agreement for lifting visa restrictions on October 13, 2009. *Davutoglu* addressed Syrian people: 'Turkey is your second country and Turkish people are waiting for you with open arms without a visa' (*Today's Zaman* September 17, 2009). It was also decided that the ministers of Foreign Affairs, Energy, Trade, Public Works, Defense, Interior Affairs and Transportation would meet at least twice every year to make a common action plan that would be executed under the leadership of two Prime Ministers (Tur 2010: 168). These steps introduced a new phase in the bilateral relations.

Turkish-Syrian military cooperation was also developed. A three-day long joint military exercise was held in April 2009 (Tur 2010: 174). The two countries signed a technical military cooperation agreement to deepen collaboration between their defense industries, ignoring Israeli concern (Tur 2010: 166). The water issue was commenced to be viewed as a technical detail between the parts (Tur 2010: 164-171). During *Erdogan*'s visit, Syrian Prime Minister *Otri* stated that 'Turkey and Syria were leaving the traditional water problem back' in the press conference, and *Erdogan* responded: 'We are aiming development and cooperation, other issues are forgotten' (Tur 2010: 169). Cultural cooperation was also remarkably developed. Turkish music, movies, and other television series have won popularity in Arab societies. Many Turkish soap operas have been broadcast in the Arab world and the finale of the Turkish TV series *Noor* was watched by approximately eighty-five million Arabs in 2008 and *Sanawat-al-Dayaa* was watched by sixty-eight million Arabian viewers (Balli and Cebeci 2013). Syrian production companies have dubbed the Turkish dramas into Arabic for export to Arab satellite channels, which worked as the gateway for Turkish culture into the wider Arab cultural sphere.

Thus, Turkey-Syria relations have remarkably developed from enmity to close friendship with AKP's policy. Islamic ideological origins of AKP, the realistic approach of Turkey, 'zero problems' and 'strategic depth' principles, Turkey's regional influence and

a boosting economy are the principal factors behind this development. For Syria, the friendship helped to face US-led international isolation and to avoid any conflict with Israel. For Turkey, it opened a gateway into the Arab world diplomatically, economically and culturally. *Davutoglu* remarked, 'We are lifting the borders which were artificially put and becoming the people of one hinterland. We are turning the economic cooperation to an economic unity' (Tur 2010: 173). *Erdogan* openly addressed Syrians as brothers and sisters, (Tur 2010: 164) while *Assad* described Turkey as Syria's best friend (Phillips 2011: 34). The relations seemed extremely rosy until the outbreak of the Arab spring in 2011.

AKP's Foreign Policy towards Syria during and after the Arab Spring

The positive developments of Turkey-Syria relationships were seriously challenged by the social unrests against *Assad* upon the emergence of 'Arab Spring'. This widespread uprising against totalitarian regimes turned into one of the most important transformational forces in the Arab World, which created new dilemmas for Turkey's foreign policy-whether to back up authoritarian regimes or to hear the demands for change of the society. From the very beginning of the 'Arab Spring' commenced in Tunisia in 2011, Turkey warned *Assad* to undertake democratic reforms to prevent similar incidents in Syria (Ilgit and Davis 2013). Because of its strong friendship with Syria, Turkey initially believed that it would be able to exert a positive impact on Syria's behavior. Though international community severely criticized *Assad* for the harsh crackdown against civilians, Turkey expressed cautious and restrained concerns and urged Syria to take reform initiatives. Turkey had hoped to maintain its ties with Syria, while promoting reform and dialogue between the opposition and the *Assad* regime that might help to resolve the crisis. Turkey tried to influence the Syrian government positively to stop the harsh crackdown against civilians. *Erdogan* called on *Assad* to stop brutality and *Davutoglu* met him in August 2011 to convey Turkey's final message warning him to end military operations and enact democratic reforms (*Aljazeera* August 20, 2011). In August 2011, *Erdogan* warned that 'we reached at the end of our patience' (*World Bulleti* August 07, 2011) and even threatened for military intervention if the regime continues its brutal crackdown (Ilgit and Davis 2013). *Assad* didn't response to the Turkish calls and all the Turkish initiatives failed to stop *Assad*'s brutality. Turkey realized that the Syrian government was unwilling to resolve the problems through reforms and would continue to use force against civilians. With this realization, Turkey's AKP government gradually followed a shifting policy towards Syria and the decade-long good relationship between Turkey and Syria has come to an end. Ankara started to criticize the Syrian government publicly. President *Abdullah*

Gul proclaimed that 'our trust for the Syrian government has vanished' (*Presidency of the Republic of Turkey* August 28, 2011). *Erdogan* declared his endorsement for the Syrian opposition in November 2011 (*The New York Times* November 22, 2011), with which Turkey openly sided. Thousands of refugees were leaving Syria for Turkey including hundreds of military defectors (*Al Arabiya News* July 03, 2012), who called themselves the 'Free Syrian Army'. The AKP government simultaneously hospitalized the refugees and pressured Syria to stop violence against civilians. Ankara initiated to impose sanctions against Damascus, which might include a buffer zone on the Syrian territory (*The Tripoli Post* November 30, 2011). A part of the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed in Istanbul in August 2011.[1] The Syrian opposition seems to have found a welcoming haven in Turkey. In early 2012, Turkey tried to forge an international "Friends of Syria" coalition to secure regime change. However, it failed to gain the agreement of key players to any form of intervention, including the no-fly zone idea. The summit recognized the SNC as the 'legitimate representative' of all Syrians (*Aljazeera* December 12, 2012). The relationship turned into complete enmity, when a Turkish F-4 jet was shot down by Syria in June 2012 (*The Daily Telegraph* June 22, 2012). In reaction, Turkey called for an emergency NATO meeting, during which Ankara intended to invoke Article IV of the alliance's charter and seek western backing for its response (*The Daily Telegraph* June 24, 2012). Turkish army prepared emergency action plans to create a military buffer zone and no-fly zone over Syria (*Hurriyet* June 28, 2012). Turkey deployed anti-aircraft guns and trucks carrying multiple rocket launchers on the Syrian borders (*The Daily Telegraph* June 28, 2012). Turkey openly demanded the removal of *Assad*. *Erdogan* said "Syria's president must step down over the country's crackdown on dissent" (*The World Post* January 22, 2012). Turkey-Syria relation has clearly ended up. Thus, Turkey obviously shifted its policy of friendship towards Syria to grievance on the emergence of the 'Arab Spring'.

The Reasons behind AKP's Shifting Policy towards Syria during and After Arab Spring

No doubt, several geo-political-strategic-economic and regional-international factors and perceptions persuaded Turkey to follow the shifting of policy towards Syria on the emergence of the 'Arab Spring'. Turkey's shifting policy has also been driven by domestic political needs merging with the values of the AKP and Turkish national interests. The principal factors and perceptions are described below:

1. Sense of Prestige and National Dignity: From the inception of 'Arab Spring' in

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1   For details see http://www.syriancouncil.org.

Tunisia, Turkey, as a good friend, requested Syria to be aware of the fact and to take reform initiatives to avoid the possible similar unrest in Syria. Turkey strongly desired a peaceful end of the Syrian crisis without harming improved bilateral relations. With this belief, the Turkish government repeatedly called on *Assad* to initiate comprehensive political reforms accommodating the demands of the opposition. Despite strong international criticism of Syria for civilian crackdown, Ankara expressed its concern cautiously prioritizing reforms and regional stability. Turkey tried to negotiate between *Assad* and the opposition with several initiatives. But, *Assad* adamantly ignored all the requests and warnings of the Turkish government, and continued to use violence instead of reforms. *Assad's* unresponsiveness to *Erdogan's* calls made Ankara angry. Moreover, in Turkey's view, by any means politically-diplomatically or economically, Syria needs Turkey far more than Turkey needs Syria. So, the Syrian attitude was considered by the Turkish leadership as dishonoring to their long-nourished friendship and Turkish national-international dignity. This led to a dramatic shift in Ankara's soft attitude and *Erdogan* declared that Turkey cannot continue to support Syria (Cornell 2012). As *Assad* has refused to take steps towards liberalization, Ankara has not only become harsher in its tone but also initiated a regime change in Syria to dethrone *Assad*. Thus, the sense of national dignity and self-respect prompted Turkey to shift its policy towards Syria evolving from sole pressure, negotiating between *Assad* and the opposition, to promoting international sanctions against Syria and finally changing the regime.

2. Massacre of the Civilians: The AKP government with all its kinds of views and principles could not support the massacre of the civilians or remain silent wherever it happens in the world. From the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Turkey tried to resolve the crisis by convincing *Assad* to undertake reforms and stop brutality. But, *Assad* refused the possibility of reforms and rather expressed his determination to continue fighting against the opposition. The use of chemicals against civilians at the *Halabaja* massacre (CNN September 17, 2013) indicated the determination of *Assad* in using massive force against opposition. As it became clear that *Assad* was determined to resolve the conflict through harsh security crackdown instead of negotiation, Turkey decided to shift its policy towards Syria following its rational principle of peace. The 'Virtuous Power' policy introduced by *Abdullah Gul* (*Today's Zaman* May 03, 2012) has become one of Turkey's foreign policy doctrines, which focuses on Virtue, being respected around the world. Thus, Turkey, from its ideological viewpoint of opposing massacre, stood against the *Assad* administration.

3. To Secure Turkey from Security Threats: Turkey shares 877 km. of land border with Syria. The Kurdish people mainly reside in the Syria-Turkey border region. PKK, a Kurdish rebellion group in Turkey, for many years has been committing terror attacks

inside Turkey. Until the *Adana* accord in 1998, Syria was PKK's heaven. *Abdullah Ocalan* – the founder of PKK received asylum in Syria. The unrest in Syria again brought the PKK challenge in front of Turkey. It has become very difficult for Turkey to prevent the PKK militants from entering Turkey along with hundreds of Syrian refugees. Turkey fears it may convert the region again into a backdoor for PKK. Syria's reported support to PKK as retaliation to Ankara's sheltering the Free Syrian Army made the challenge even more crucial for Turkey. In October 2011, the Syrian government warned that it would consider supporting PKK if it perceived that Turkey was supporting the Syrian opposition. *Assad* stated that 'Turkey could fall into a state similar to ours if it opposed Damascus' (*Today's Zaman* March 21, 2012). Besides the Kurdish threat, Turkey fears the sectarian conflict may cross the boundary if it continues for long time. Syria's attacking two Turkish military planes persuades Turkey to consider Syria itself as a threat. Turkey also fears the unrest would gradually lead to a proxy war between Russia-Iran axis and the US. The regional countries would also get into conflict on a sectarian basis. In sum, Turkey, as a frontier country, currently seems to have fallen into serious security threats. With increasing radicalization on its border, Turkey does not want to have difficulties in the Syrian crisis similar to those that were experienced on the Iraqi borders for years. The failure of the opposition in Syria to found a united front has also increased the possibility of spreading unrest into Turkey. Thus, the Syrian crisis has presented challenging security threats for Turkey. To avoid these threats, Turkey openly sided with the opponents and followed cautious steps keeping all the options such as a 'safe-zone, buffer-zone, no-fly-zone, no-drive-zone, or humanitarian corridor' open rather than the militarization of the crisis.

4. *Assad***'s Reported Relationship with the Kurds and the PKK:** There is news that the Syrian government has rebuilt its relationship with the Kurds granting some citizenship (*Los Angeles Times* April 10, 2011), permitting to open Kurdish schools, and allowing their entrance to Syria from Iraq, in return for their support. There are also claims that Syria has been trying to contact PKK as a way to find new ally inside Syria and as retaliation against Turkey. There have also been rumors that Syrian support caused the PKK's attacks costing 24 Turkish soldiers (*Today's Zaman* August 06, 2012). Although no direct evidence was found against Syria, *Davutoglu* warned that 'recalling the past, Syria should not even think of playing the PKK card' (*Today's Zaman* August 30, 2011). Syria's ceding control of key towns in northern Syria, such as *Afrin*, *Kobani*, and *Rasulayn* to the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD) emerged the long-term security threat for Turkey (Yilmaz 2013). It may create a territorial base for the PKK. Thus, the Syrian rekindled relationship with the PKK would pose serious threats to Turkish national security, simultaneously when the Kurdish people are inspired by the successful model of Kurdish

autonomy in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq (*Guardian Weekly* 2012). The KRG provided training to Syrian Kurdish forces defying the strong opposition of Turkey (*Today's Zaman* July 30, 2012). The efforts for unification of Iraqi-Syrian Kurdish regions may lead to the secession of Turkish Kurdish regions from Turkey and the formation of a sovereign Kurdistan consisting of all Kurdish territories. By supporting the Syrian opposition forces, Turkey wants to secure the unity of the Turkish state.

5. Turkey's Political intention in Syria: Though Turkey has been developing relationship with *Assad* politically and economically, ideologically the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), which has been banned in Syria, is closer to the AKP than the secular *Ba'ath* party of *Assad*. Because of shared ideology and politics, Turkey desires to see the SMB come to power, or at least share power with *Assad* regime. *Davutoglu*, during his meeting with *Assad* in August 2011, proposed Turkey would support *Assad* if the SMB, as an outgrowth of Syria's majority *Sunni* community, was given four ministries with approving their return to Syria, after decades of exile. The idea was rejected by *Assad* on the ground that the SMB, as an Islamist party, was incompatible with Syria's secular character (Aras 2012: 48). The SMB held a conference in April 2011 in Istanbul, where it denounced the *Assad* regime. In June, the SMB members and other opposition groups signed a declaration in Turkey, which called for 'freedom of belief, expression, and practice of religion under a civil state' (Zalewski 2011). Four Muslim Brotherhood members and six independent Islamists were selected among the nineteen members of the General Secretariat whose names were published by the Syrian revolutionary committee (Spyer 2011). Even the SMB leader *Muhammad Riad al-Shaqfa* declared that Syrians would accept Turkish military intervention rather than the West for protection against *Assad's* security forces (*Reuters* November 17, 2011). Thus, the Arab Spring brought a golden opportunity for Turkey to establish an ideological ally and a more friendly government in Syria led by the SMB. From this perception, Turkey supported the SMB-led opposition against *Assad*.

6. Respect for Democracy: AKP's Turkey has been developing very powerful democratic norms and values in the country. It has set an example in the democratic history of Europe being elected for three times consecutively with an increasing vote percentage. Turkey, where the military elite had a very powerful political role, now has turned into a fully democratic country under the AKP. As a democracy-prone country, Turkey always respects democratic sentiments wherever and whenever it is. On the contrary, Syria has developed as an authoritarian regime suppressing democratic values. Although Turkey developed economic and regional ties with Syria, it has been cultivating the intention to develop democracy compatible with the Turkish foreign policy views of promoting democracy. The Arab Spring provides Turkey the unique opportunity to promote democratic regimes in Syria and thereby other Arab countries (Paul and Seyrek 2011). Though

it suffered considerable economic loss in Syria, Turkey views it as a long overdue correction in the region to secure its ideological position with the democracy and thereby with the majority of people of the land. Turkey judged the Arab Spring was inevitable, and therefore gave its support to those who were demanding democratization despite short-run economic costs.

7. To Establish Turkey as a 'Role Model' for Islamization of Democracy: Turkey under AKP has been developing a 'role model' image for successfully combining political Islam with modern democracy. Following the success of AKP, the political Islamist movements across the world started to view Turkey as a 'role model'. Even prior to the Arab Spring Islamists in Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia viewed the Turkish AKP as a model for Islamization (Taspinar 2012). Many Islamist movements of the world started to adopt their policy following AKP such as Tunisia's *An-nahda* party adopted the policies following AKP's thinking (Torelli 2012). The AKP also wants the Muslim world, particularly the Arab world, to follow Turkey's 'role model' democratic system. Taking the credit of 'Arab Spring', *Erdogan* claimed that the inspiration for popular uprisings in the Arab world was Turkey and its "advanced democracy" (*Today's Zaman* May 18, 2011). During the protests in Egypt, *Erdogan* was among the first who called on *Hosni Mubarak* to resign (*Today's Zaman* February 2, 2011). *An-nahda's* leader *Rashid Ghannusi*, stated that he was interested in the 'Turkish model', which allowed for an Islamic government to operate in a secular society (*Democracy Digest* 2014). He stressed that the best model for Tunisia is Turkey and the AKP was a sample coinciding democracy within an Islam majority population (Cagaptay and Pollock 2013). The electoral victory of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties, such as *An-nahda* in Tunisia and the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt, provided Turkey with an opportunity of creating a belt of moderate Islamist regimes in the region following the 'Turkish model'. This 'role model' image of Turkey has also been fueled by its growing economic power and international prestige. In the course of the Arab Spring, Turkey tried to influence the newly established Arab regimes to follow 'Turkish model' as a Muslim predominant country that combines Islam with democracy, even keeping good relationship with the West, particularly the US. In the Syrian case, though Turkey at the beginning was in a dilemma, it finally supported the movement against *Assad's* autocracy as the promoter of democracy and as a 'role model' of Islamization of democracy.

8. Learning from Libyan Case: The AKP government also learned from the Libyan case. Like Syria, Turkey had very strong economic-strategic ties with *Gaddafi*'s Libya. It was a lucrative market for Turkey, while Turkish companies invested multi-million dollars in Libya. Until 2011 Turkish firms held 525 projects in Libya with a total value of $26.3 billion (Ministry of Economy, Turkey, 2013). The trade volume between the two

countries was $2.36 billion in 2010 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey, 2010). *Erdogan* was awarded *Gaddafi* International Prize for Human Rights in November 2010 (*Today's Zaman* December 1, 2010). When the uprising hit Libya, Turkey supported *Gaddafi* considering its economic interests and insisted on solving the crisis through negotiations. Turkey opposed international intervention and encouraged *Gaddafi* to initiate reforms. While several states closed their diplomatic representations in *Tripoli* and *Benghazi*, Turkey continued to run its diplomatic missions. Only when NATO involved in the crisis in March 2011, *Erdogan* declared that Turkey "wishes to see Libya's leader step down immediately" (Cook 2011). *Davutoglu* visited Libya and declared the opposition's National Transitional Council (NTC) as 'the legitimate representative of Libyan people' (*Today's Zaman* July 4, 2011). Realizing the situation that *Gaddafi* regime would fall, Turkey decided to withdraw support from *Gaddafi* and began supporting the NTC. In this case, Turkey's policy has undergone several dilemmas and it took long-time for final decision. Unlike the Libyan case, in Syria Turkey appears to be anticipating the fall of Assad immediately with a view to secure its maximum interests and to establish a positive government in Syria, upon which it can expand its influence.

9. To Reduce Influence of Iran in the Middle East: Though Turkey and Iran have some common grounds for cooperation in the Middle East, they also have opposing interests there. In Iraq, they compete to establish their influential control after geopolitical vacuum created by the gulf war. Iran supports Shiite groups, while Turkey supports the secular movements (Duman 2012). Iran and Turkey compete for regional hegemony and leadership in the Muslim world. Iran, as the leader of Shiite community, has successfully been increasing its influence on the *Shi'a*-dominated governments in the Middle East and Syria has been the most influential ally of Iran there. The Iranian and Syrian governments have shared anti-western and anti-Israeli positions, and both have been under international sanctions. But Syria is ruled by a *Shi'a* leader, while its majority (59-60%) population is *Sunni* and only 13% is *Shi'a*. It also neighbors Lebanon and Iran's long-time enemy Israel. It is therefore a crucial ally for Iran. A *Sunni* resurgence in Syria could inhibit Iran's ideological and political expansion in the Middle East. On the other hand, SMB's coming to power in Syria could be a political gain for Turkey against its regional rival Iran. During the uprising in Syria, Iran has continued to back *Assad* regime, while Turkey provided support to Syria's opposition groups. The signs of strained Turkish-Iranian relations were already manifested in September 2011 when Turkey agreed to install NATO radar systems (Kabalan 2012) which was criticized by Iran. The SMB's willingness to adopt Turkish model in governance system also dissatisfied Iran. Thus, the Turkey-Iran competition over regional leadership is demonstrated through the ongoing uprising in Syria.

10. *Shi'a-Sunni* conflict in the Middle East and the stand of Turkey: Middle Eastern countries are almost divided into *Sunni-Shi'a* belt. Iran, *Shi'a*-led Iraq, Syria, Lebanese *Hezbollah* together formed *Shi'a* alliance, while Saudi Arabia, Gulf States, Turkey, Egypt and parts of North Africa are the *Sunni*-dominated states. *Sunni*-dominated states are almost maintaining friendly ties with the West, while *Shi'a*-dominated states having almost enmity with them. In Iraq, *Saddam*'s *Sunni* regime was ousted by the US, a *Shi'a* regime was installed and Iran is now believed to influence much of the Iraqi events. In Syria, *Assad* family has been ruling the country since 1970's favoring *Shi'a* minority and repressing the Sunni majority, which created a widespread dissatisfaction among the *Sunni* majority. Encouraged by the Arab Spring, Syrian *Sunni* majority people revolted against *Assad*, which was encountered with harsh crackdown by the regime. The conflict gradually turned into armed struggle between the *Shi'a* dictator *Assad* and growing *Sunni*-led insurgence which was eventually characterized as *Shi'a-Sunni* conflict. Many foreigners also joined the conflict, *Sunni* people to fight against *Assad* and *Shi'a* people in support of *Assad*. The *Shi'a*-led countries like Iran backed *Assad*, while *Sunni*-led countries like Saudi Arabia reportedly supplied the opposition with arms. *Sunni* Islamists blamed Iran for supporting *Assad*'s brutal crackdown on *Sunni* population, while, Iran and Syria felt betrayed by *Sunni* groups such as *Hamas*, which they had aided for many years. In that conflict, Turkey, as a moderate Islamic state with *Sunni* majority, was forced to choose either its long-days *Shi'a* ally *Assad* or its fellow *Sunni* Islamists in Syria. After a period of indecision, Turkey and all of the regional *Sunni* actors turned against the *Assad* regime to reduce the rise of *Shi'a* influence in the region. The *Sunni* states consider Iraq as lost to the *Shi'a* belt and turning Syria to a *Sunni* one would be the best alternative to balance the loss. Thus, the Syrian case brought the *Shi'a-Sunni* conflict in front and Turkey as a *Sunni* majority country expressed its support for *Sunni* fellows in Syria thinking that the downfall of *Assad*'s Shia regime could help to create a Turkish-influenced *Sunni* belt of states in the region.

11. To Secure Turkish National Interests and Establish Regional Leading Role: Securing national interests has always been given priority in the foreign policy of every country, so no exception for Turkey. The 'zero problem' and Strategic Depth' principles are also highly motivated by securing Turkish economic, strategic, national interests with its vicinity. Since the AKP came to power, Turkish foreign policy aimed at establishing Turkey as a regional leader and gradually securing a leading role in the global politics. Having Ottoman legacy, Turkey hoped to revive the regional leading role. Turkey's policies towards Arab Spring also goaled to secure its maximum economic-strategic-national interests together with establishing its leading role. In the Tunisian case it applied the 'wait and see' policy (Kujawa 2011), while in Egypt it followed more a decisive stand call-

ing *Hosni Mubarek* to step down. As for Libya, initially Turkey preferred to stay neutral. But under the changed circumstances, it changed its position supporting the opposition against *Gaddafi*. In the Syrian case, Turkey stepped more cautiously, prioritizing stability in Syria, where Turkish economic-strategic interests were substantial. The driving motive behind these cautious steps was to secure Turkish interests. But when Turkey realized that *Assad* would not take any reform initiatives and would fall within short, while the international community stood against *Assad*, only then did Turkey change its position to secure its regional leading role at the minimum trading cost. It didn't want to be isolated in this case, which may hamper its national interest and regional leading role. So, for the future security of Turkish investments in Syria and to establish its emerging regional leadership role, Turkey shifted its policy.

12. Development of International Image: *Assad's* harsh crackdown to the civilian severely hampered Syria's international image, while it has increasingly been isolated by the international society. Damaged democracy, violations of human rights and poor governance in Syria also fueled the dissatisfaction of international community. It became evident when the UN General Assembly voted condemning Syria's repression to the civilians (122 in favor, 13 against, 41 abstentions, including China and Russia in 2011, and 137 in favor, 12 against, 17 Abstentions in 2012) (UN press release 2012). Many countries, such as Australia, France, Germany, Britain, Italy, Spain, Canada and the US, either deported Syria's ambassadors or declared them as unwanted person. Under these circumstances, Turkey wanted to be with the international community, cutting off its relationship with the *Assad* regime to develop its international image as a nation honoring democratic sentiments and disfavoring human rights violation. Turkey also hosted thousands of Syrian refugees as a humanitarian responsibility, which was also appreciated by the international community. Though the crisis disturbed Turkey's relations with Iran and Russia – Turkey's largest suppliers of oil and natural gas, it tried to minimize the cost by balancing its ties with Iran and Russia. Russian President *Putin's* visit to Turkey on December 3, 2012 indicated that Russia valued its economic ties with Turkey. Turkey's relations with the Gulf States have improved as a result of its distancing from *Assad*. It has also contributed to strengthening Turkey's ties with the post-revolution governments in Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, as well as with civil society activists pressing for democratic changes in the Arab countries. Though Turkey and Saudi Arabia differ over which Syrian opposition should be supported, both are commonly united to oppose *Assad*. The NATO deployment of Patriot missile batteries in Turkey underscores the improvement of Turkish position in the West. Thus, Turkey's policy shifting towards Syria manifested its institutionalized and improved relations with the international society very well.

Conclusion:

Located in an important geopolitical-strategic position, Turkey has been playing a vital role in regional politics. After the foundation of modern Turkey in 1924, *Kemalist* paradigm has become the official doctrine of Turkey's foreign policy. Coming to power in 2002, the AKP adopted new foreign policy concepts sharply different from the *Kemalism*, based on 'zero problem' and 'strategic depth' theories of *Davutuglu*. Turkey developed good relationships with the neighboring countries, while it became a natural ally of the West as a NATO member. As the inheritor of the Ottoman Empire, the AKP tried to expand its influence in the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Balkans and Central Asia. As a result of AKP's good neighborhood foreign policy, the Turkish-Syrian relations improved remarkably. While two countries were at the edge of war in 1998, a decade later they turned into close friends. Different regional and global developments such as the Iraq war, sectarian dynamics, post-9/11 perspectives contributed to the warming of mutual relations. Syria's recognition of *Hatay* as a sovereign part of Turkey, cancelling support to the PKK, increasing trade volume, lifting visa requirements are the remarkable achievements of this friendly relationships. Cooperation also developed in cultural, economic, diplomatic and military affairs. Turkey became the first NATO member to have joint military exercises with Syria. All these positive developments lost its momentum on the emergence of the Arab Spring. From its inception in Tunisia, Turkey warned *Assad* to initiate democratic reforms to avoid the similar unrest in Syria. When it ultimately hit Syria in 2011, Turkey repeatedly called on taking reform initiatives and stop violence against civilians. Turkey's negotiation initiatives between *Assad* and the opposition also failed. It applied all methods against Syria to resolve the crisis keeping its friendly ties. But Syria responded negatively and continued the harsh treatment to the opposition. Rather Syria blamed Turkey for intervening in the internal affairs of Syria. Realizing the perspectives, Turkey turned its support from *Assad* to the opposition groups. With this shifting policy, the golden era of Turkish-Syrian mutual relations ended up.

Indeed, there are several factors, perspectives and perceptions behind Turkey's shifting policy towards Syria. Turkish requests for reforms and negotiation were repeatedly ignored by Syria, which Turkey's leadership didn't take positively. It has been perceived as disrespectful to Turkish dignity. The AKP, with an Islamic religious background and humanitarian stand cannot support harsh crackdown to the civilian or cannot remain silent to see the massacre, which *Assad* is doing in Syria. Turkey shares longest land border with Syria, while PKK – the biggest security threat for Turkey, is also based in this border region. Mass influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey increased the possibility of PKK militants entering together, which will pose serious security threat for Turkey. The news of

Assad's rekindled relationship with the PKK fueled the Turkish threat perceptions. The AKP has always supported the political Islamic movements across the world. Though Turkey has been developing relationships with *Assad's Ba'athist* Syria, ideologically the AKP was closer to the SMB, which has been banned by the *Assad* regime. Turkey desires the SMB to come to power in Syria. The *Shi'a-Sunni* rivalry also worked as a driving factor behind Turkey's shifting policy. The Middle Eastern countries are almost divided into *Shi'a-Sunni* groups. Turkey is a *Sunni*-dominated country, while Syria is ruled by a *Shi'a* authority with its *Sunni* majority population. The opposition groups in Syria are mainly *Sunni*. So the social unrest created an opportunity for Turkey to establish a friendly *Sunni* government in Syria. Turkey has been characterized as a 'role model' for Islamized democracy. It recorded successive victory in the elections with increasing vote percentage. So the democratic values have always been honored by the AKP government. During the Arab Spring, all the movements are mainly motivated by democratic spirit against authoritarian regimes. Turkey, from its rational point of view sided with the democratic demands of the Uprisings rather than autocratic rulers, despite short-run economic costs. Turkey, as Ottoman inherent, always tries to establish an influential role in the region, where Iran has emerged as a rival keeping Syria as its most important ally in the Middle East. The fall of *Assad* would be a great loss for Iran, and thus Iran's influence in the region will reduce and that of Turkey will increase naturally. Turkey believed that the *Assad* government would fall within short. The future security of Turkish interests and investments in Syria would be not in the hand of *Assad* but in the hand of the following government. So it has openly sided with the SNC to reap the future material and ideological benefits. Following the Libyan case, Turkey doesn't want to walk on the wrong side of history again. To become a regional leader, Turkey also understood the limits of only using soft power or simply acting as mediator rather using hard-power elements alongside soft power. It now wants to be a center of influence using hard and soft-power altogether. With its fast-growing economy, Turkey desires to play a more significant role in dealing with regional issues. All major global communities strongly condemned Syria's actions. So the standing beside *Assad* would reduce Turkish international image, while its support for opposition in favor of democracy and against human rights violation would increase its international image. Turkey hopes to see an inclusive democratic Syria emerge from the Arab Spring, which would be its natural ally. Turkey wants to speed up its role as an economic and political actor in the emerging new Middle East through the Arab Spring. All these factors, perceptions and perspectives prompted Turkey to shift its policy towards Syria on the emergence of the Arab Spring.

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Hungary and
the Migrant Crisis

Pallukács HAJNAL [*]

Abstract

The current article aims to provide an overview of the Hungarian Government's reaction to the European migrant crisis, which came to a head in 2015. It is an attempt to highlight the moments which were more relevant, along with other officials' comments on Hungary's actions. It follows events up until the end of the year 2015.

Keywords: Hungary, migrant crisis, refugee, Viktor Orbán, Péter Szijjártó.

THE 'HUNGARIAN ISSUE' regarding the migrant crisis is one of the matters which received much attention from the media. It is an issue which is most controversial, an which, at the same time, allowed for the Hungarian Prime Minister's fan base to grow on an international level and made Hungary out to be the black sheep in the eyes of many others. Is Hungary overreacting or is it's Government right to take a stand against European Union decisions? Does protecting the citizens of Hungary and the EU outweigh offering protection to those in need? These are the questions that will be attempted to be answered in the following article.

It is well known, that Hungary's Prime Minister is no stranger to controversy, especially when it comes to matters of the European Union. The situation is the same in the current context of the European migrant crisis. Viktor Orbán, in an effort to defend and uphold Europe's common values – among which the main pillar in his vision is Christianity – has set off on the war path against allowing migrants into his country or the EU. Seeing as Hungary is currently on the outer edge of the Schengen area, the country's officials have taken it upon themselves to play the role of gatekeepers of Christianity, channeling their medieval forefathers, even though Judeo-Christian values have been removed as constitutional basis for the Union.

However, it is also true, that Hungary has been reluctant to receive outsiders in past years, regardless of where they came from. The situation is more than somewhat ironic, as EU laws allow for easy travel, be it in touristic or work purposes, inside the Schengen area. This standpoint has been properly reinforced by the banners that popped up all

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throughout the country, seemingly overnight. The purpose of these banners, which bare Hungary's coat-of-arms, was to warn immigrants about the rules one has to play by once one finds oneself inside the country's borders. Texts such as "*If you come to Hungary you cannot take the Hungarians` jobs*" stand proof of a profoundly antagonistic viewpoint. They also fuel the 'fear-campaign' relied upon by many a politician during the course of history. The fear-campaign would of course not be complete (nor very effective for that matter) without the hate speech and antagonizing of alterity, employed with such finesse by the leading politicians in Hungary.

The anti-migrant propaganda in Hungary was set in high gear from 2014 onward, not even the official website of the Hungarian Government was exempt. The mentioned site, as many such sites do, has a news stream which serves as official communication between the Government and the public. Articles and communiqués are uploaded constantly regarding any matter of state, be it internal or external. Between September and December there was an abundance uploaded material that had to do with the migrant crisis, refugees and/or Hungary and other EU states' debates on the matter. At the same time, in seemingly every other material, there was a reference to the aforementioned subjects, be it even a hidden apropos in a sentence.

Viktor Orbán has a keen sense, when it comes to public speaking. His oratorical and debate style is mostly confrontational. He relies heavily on influencing his public by use of emotional cues. He has held his position on the migrant crisis and has developed a rhetoric that reveals a 'savior-complex' and an unwavering negative attitude towards alterity coupled with the firm belief that that he and his Government are the only ones treating the matter appropriately and lawfully.

He has taken many opportunities to express that Hungary is protecting its own borders and by doing so the European Union's border. In a speech given in Parliament in the second half of the month of September, he stated that "the migrants are not only pounding on the door, but they are breaking the door down on us" (Kormany.hu 1). The manner of expression does not only display the above mentioned negative attitude towards alterity, but also criminalizes it, by use of terminology that denotes aggression, invasion of privacy and a criminal act, fueling the fear-campaign. In the same speech, he compared the measures taken by the government to those of a person protecting their family. (Kormany.hu 1). The statement directly contrasts with that above and evokes feelings of which the human brain's primal region is responsible, those of danger and survival. To the same effect, he also described the migrant crisis as a "brutal threat" (Kormany.hu 1). After the Paris attacks on the 13th November 2015, his position and rhetoric in the migrant crisis began to gain more and more ground. Orbán held an extraordinary speech at the Hungarian Parliament on the 16th November in which he sought to make his position

on the matter clear once again, which began with the phrase `Europe has been attacked!`, and through which he summarized all that Hungary had done and all reactions to it. (Kormany.hu 2).

The Asylum Information Database's Country Report on Hungary, issued in November 2015, a document bearing the logo of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and edited by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles provides for a clearer understanding of what it takes to be considered eligible for asylum in Hungary. It contains an overwhelming amount of information, the essence of which is that there are gaping holes and inconsistencies in the country's asylum procedure. Some of the issues seem solvable. Others, however seem to have been tailor made so as to prevent positive responses on asylum claims. Such is the case with what is known in EU law as 'safe third country' rule. In July 2015, the Hungarian government, amending the relevant legislation regarding asylum, created two lists: one of countries of origin, another of third countries deemed to be safe. In both instances EU candidate countries, with the exception of Turkey, are considered safe. This category includes Serbia. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) set forth recommendations against considering Serbia a safe third country in 2012, on the basis of its lack of "a functioning asylum system" (AIDA 2015, 45), a viewpoint which it still maintains, and is strengthened by the opinion of Amnesty International (Amnesty International 2015: 78). The amendment to the Hungarian Asylum Act entered into force on the 1st of August. Seeing as the overwhelming majority of asylum seekers entered into the country by means of the Hungarian-Serbian border, the fact that the latter mentioned country is silently acknowledged as a safe third country means that the totality of asylum claims issued by these people have been or will be rejected. (AIDA 2015: 44-45). Furthermore, failing to take into consideration the UNHCR's position in the aspect of safe third countries and, as such, applying the concept in an improper manner constitutes a violation of Hungary's obligations as per EU laws. (HHC 2015: 7)

Once the Hungarian Asylum Act was amended, measures started being taken in order to slow down the constant influx of migrants, which had seemingly become the sole focus of the government. The building of physical barriers, i.e. barbed wire fences at the Hungarian-Serbian border, at first and the Croatian-Hungarian border after was defended by the government, who chose to argue the need to register each and every person who claims refugee status, in order to be in accordance with EU law. (Kormany.hu 3) Compliance was impossible beforehand because of the fact that most migrants crossed the border into Hungary on the sidelines, and not at the official check-points. Thus, by means of the fences, the government could ensure the necessary conditions for the law to be enforced. In addition, Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, defended these actions by stating the need to protect 'the European lifestyle', a choice of words which aga-

in constitutes an argument against alterity. He utilized the same frame of thought early in 2015, in January, after the attacks in Paris, France, related to the Charlie Hebdo publication, by being one of the first voices to blame migration for the onset of terrorism. In this instance, he described migration as a threat to the European way of life. (EUObserver) The act of setting a physical boundary is that more disconcerting, seeing as it is, and always has been widely known, that most of whom the fence is meant to keep out do not plan to reside in Hungary, but to move on to other, wealthier countries in Western and Northern Europe, most of which have consented to allowing them in. As they are sure to be aware of this, Hungarian officials seem not only to have taken it upon themselves to be the gatekeepers of Europe, against dangers from the outside, but seem determined to save the EU from itself.

The second list, the one listing safe countries of origin, is again viewed as another breach of international legislation, in the sense that it provides for people seeking asylum to be discriminated against on the basis of their nationality, of where they come from. People fleeing countries marked as "safe" will have a much harder task in explaining why their particular situation in that country or upon their return to that country would constitute basis for being awarded refugee status in Hungary.

The fences, mentioned earlier in the present article, went up beginning with the month of July, regarding Serbia, and September, regarding Croatia. The migrants, who up until the summer of 2015 were viewed as a severe inconvenience, now became a severe threat to the nation's sovereignty, terminology widely utilized in propaganda articles and Hungarian officials' speeches. Even more measures were taken, which might be described as drastic. After erecting the fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border, on the 15th of September officials amended the legislation in a way which meant anyone crossing the border irregularly would be committing a crime and as such, face legal action and be arrested. The government also thought of a way to further lessen the numbers of people crossing into Hungary, passing amendments which allow police and army personnel to use specific, non-lethal weapons, such as rubber bullets and tear gas. (Amnesty International 2015: 76) Official international reactions followed, as expected. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, made a statement regarding the matter in which he expressed his views and accused Hungarian officials of violating international law:

> "The package of measures brought in overnight between Monday to Tuesday is incompatible with the human rights commitments binding on Hungary, (…) This is an entirely unacceptable infringement of the human rights of refugees and migrants. Seeking asylum is not a crime, and neither is entering a country irregularly." (OHCHR 2015)

In his statement, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also referred to the aforementioned poster campaign run in Hungary in 2014 and earlier in 2015, which provided another reason for Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein to consider the Hungarian government's actions to be xenophobic and anti-Muslim. (OHCHR 2015)

When faced with criticism, being it of any kind and coming from any direction, Hungarian high officials uphold a strong front, defending the measures taken. Szijjártó Péter, the Minister of Foreign Affairs expressed disappointment regarding the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' critique, stating that Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein does not judge the fact that the Hungarian policemen stationed at the border were victims of prolonged assault at the hands of aggressive migrants who threw rocks and pieces of concrete at them. (Kormany.hu 4). In an interview for the Austrian *Der Standard* in early September, Szijjártó replied to criticism received from the Austrian chancellor on the issue of the fence being built on the Hungarian-Serbian border. Szijjártó stated that the chancellor's position is confusing, seeing as he had urged Hungary to register migrants and not to let them pass into Austria beforehand, and is at this point criticizing the Hungarian-Serbian fence, which was meant to do just that. (Kormany.hu 5)

Although there were conflicts between Hungarian and Austrian officials, in late September, Austria recognized the need for a border control system on the Hungarian-Croatian border. (Kormany.hu 6) Furthermore, by late October it became clear that even Austria was considering the idea of building their own physical barrier on the border. (EUObserver)

In order to assure cooperation between Hungary and Serbia, Szijjártó and his Serbian counterpart, Ivica Dacic, held talks in Belgrade, on the 18th September. The Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that Hungary has not one, but three suggestions with regard to the migrant crisis: (a) the creation of a force within the EU which would be equipped to protect the Greek borders; (b) the EU should take over the financing of the existing refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon and also build new ones; (c) the EU should offer monetary support to the countries on the transit path of the migrants, Macedonia and Serbia (Kormany.hu 7). Moreover, he stated that in these instances, Hungary would be willing to accept some sort of quota agreement, seeing as the burden should be shared by all 28 Member States. (Kormany.hu 7)

At the same time, conflicts with Croatian officials came to a head, when Croatia began sending unregistered migrants to the Croatian-Hungarian border, without notifying Hungarian officials, who viewed the incident as a border violation and one that is under suspicion of multiple criminal offences. (Kormany.hu 8). Szijjártó was quick to point out that while Zoran Milanovic, Croatian Prime Minister judged Hungary on the way they treated migrants, the Croatian immigration system cracked under pressure in less than two days. (Kormany.hu 9). The outcome of the conflict was the fence set up on the border.

The lack of diplomatic rhetoric is an all too obvious characteristic of the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs with regard to the refugee crisis. Referring to a statement made by the Greek Minister of Interior and Administrative Reconstruction about the fact that Greece protects its borders, Szijjártó responded in a press release by blatantly affirming that the Greek Government believes that the European people are stupid. Translating the actual quote in one of the news articles on the Hungarian Government's website, it would sound somewhat as follows:

> "(…) it would be beneficial, if the Greek Government would stop considering the European people stupid, but would proceed to take meaningful steps in order to protect its borders and register the immigrants." (Kormany.hu 10)

When prompted by a journalist at a press conference on the 19th September regarding his harsh statements, Szijjártó explained that in this case, there is no room for diplomatic finesse. (Kormany.hu 11)

However, Szijjártó's Romanian counterpart, Bogdan Aurescu, cannot be accused of having a well thought out diplomatic rhetoric either in his criticism regarding the physical barriers built on the Hungarian borders. The Romanian Minister for External Affaires at the time, stated that the erection of fences is an "autistic and unacceptable gesture" (AGERPRESS 2015). The statement is of course offensive to many and unbecoming of a state official, especially due to the fact that he used a term describing a disorder in a way for it to mean abnormal, colloquially stupid. However, Szijjártó was, again, quick to respond, saying that he had hoped for more humility from a minister under a Prime Minister who is facing criminal charges. (Kormany.hu 12) The outcome was similar to that of the conflict with Croatia, though not as drastic: the continuing of the Hungarian-Serbian fence onto the Hungarian-Romanian border was decided, however, no action was taken.

In October at the mini-summit on Western Balkan migration, Orbán reiterated that the measures taken by Hungary had the purpose of complying with Dublin and Schengen asylum and border security rules. (EUObserver, https://euobserver.com/political/130892) This is the same reason for which when word came of a possible mini-Schengen area, where some Western states might have reintroduced mandatory border control (a measure similar to which they had so vehemently criticized Hungary for undertaking) and Hungary would have been left out of it, Orbán voiced the following opinion:

> "[It would be unacceptable for Hungary to be pushed out of Schengen] because we were the only ones out of the Member States, who truly protected the Schengen's, that is the free movement area's outer borders." (Kormany.hu 13)

His statement came after the four states of the Visegrad Group (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia), at their summit in Prague, on the 3rd December reached an agreement to form a common front against the idea of restricting freedom of movement between states already part of the Schengen area, arguing that the proposal diverts political attention without targeting the core problem. At the same time, they announced the forming of a group they named 'Friends of Schengen', which they intend to be a forum for discussion on the matter. (Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group Countries 2015: 2) Hungary's Prime Minister also voiced his view on border control, stating that it is a "question of sovereignty" and "national responsibility". (Kormany.hu 14).

After multiple negative reactions to the measures taken by them, Hungary still does not seem willing to compromise in any aspect regarding the migrant crisis, including the matter of the system of quotas. Hanging on to the firm belief that the system of quotas will not solve the main issue of the crisis, in late September the countries of the Visegrad Group decided to reject the system of quotas suggested by Brussels. (Kormany.hu 15). The Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that debating a system of quotas is a waste of time. (Kormany.hu 16). In stead, the reaction of the Hungarian Prime Minister and his cabinet was to ask for "a world-scale answer to a world-scale problem" (Kormany. hu 17), so they suggested to the UN that the quota system should be a burden beard by all states, not only in Europe.

In their opposition to the system of quotas, Hungarian officials endorsed a petition to gather signatures of citizens in order to further oppose it. Hungary even went as far as to proceed with legal action against the system of quotas at the Court of Justice of the European Union, the plaint's arrival at the aforementioned institution was announced on the 4th December on Hungarian national television. (Kormany.hu 18). This was the second such plaint to arrive at the Court of Justice, after Slovakia also handed in a similar document. It is interesting to observe that the Hungarian Minister of Justice seems to agree with a statement launched by one of the show's hosts, regarding the fact that the system of quotas is a measure that goes against the principles of the Geneva Convention. The question posed by the Minister of Justice was if the fact that they are denied a choice of where to settle is contrary to recognition of their human dignity. (Kormany.hu 18).

The Minister for Justice cited ten arguments against the system of quotas in the 25-page long plaint, which was delivered to the Court of Justice, amongst these, the fact that the decision regarding the system is considered to lack authorization, in view of EU rules and regulations. The fact that "transitional provisions on the quotas are stipulated for two or three years, whereas legal practice earlier only allowed six months for similar provisions" strengthens their case. (Kormany.hu 19). The argument according to which a unanimous decision making rule had been broken was added as well.

Hungary has been a thorn in the EU's side in many aspects over the time it has been a member. However, in this case, against all the negative responses and negative press it has received for the manner in which it's officials have chosen to deal with the migrant crisis, there are many, not necessarily in positions of power, but citizens of the EU, who stand by the actions taken by Hungary and who view it as a positive. The message boards of many related articles and that of the Hungarian Prime Minister's Facebook page stand testament. (Facebook 1) Of course, even more continue to oppose Hungary's position citing multiple treaty and convention related offences.

In any case, the debate becomes one of decoding a legal nebula in the EU framework, which provides for the existence of loopholes, which then can be exploited by anyone capable of perceiving them. Does the asylum seekers' right to benefit from international protection override the right of the state to protect its citizens and its borders, or is it the other way around? This question seemingly only has a moral answer, as in the moral obligation of states to ensure protection for people fleeing from an area in which war and conflict and insecurity are the norm, should these people ask for protection. The main fear of alterity, so profoundly exploited by politicians and media alike, in this case refers to the concern that, amongst the people who 'deserve' help (i.e. the people fleeing from conditions mentioned above), Islamic State fundamentalists are hiding, waiting for an opportunity to pounce. This idea in itself cannot be combated, because the likelihood of it is too great. In any case, European states should have been able to notice warning signs of what can only be described as a mass exodus coming their way. Theoretically, at least, they should have been able to produce an early warning system, which could recognize and assess potential terrorist threats, in an effort to stop them.

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European NGO's and the Refugee Crisis. Case studies of Serbia and Hungary

Gabriel UIFĂLEAN [*]

Abstract

A deeper understanding of what civil societies and NGO's are, and what they offer for the communities in which they are active, will help establish a starting point. Moving further we can attempt to identify the main ways in which they act to achieve their objectives and then apply our analysis to a few examples of NGO's involved in the refugee crisis at the moment.

In the context of a refugee crisis that puts pressure on local governments to act in managing a large influx of migrants pass through its borders, as is the case of countries such as Turkey, Serbia, Greece, Hungary or Austria, local NGO's can face an especially strong pressure to put together a proper response in due time.

Keywords: NGO's, Refugee Crisis, Serbia, Hungary

THE EVENTS IN Syria have provoked a grave humanitarian problem that affects not only the neighbouring countries of the war-torn state, but also the ones located on other continents where many victims seek escape from the conflict. Governments and international organizations have taken different stances on the matter, each underlining particular interests that they hold above everything else in their approach. Some have welcomed the displaced people and have sought to offer them safe haven, others have chosen to keep them in specially set up camps until they are able to return to their homeland, while others have closed their borders completely. Public opinion has also been sharply divided between those who wish to help these people by welcoming them as their neighbours and those who look at the masses with suspicion, dreading the potential dangers they see in letting so many people into their countries.

In this difficult context, several non-governmental organizations have risen to the challenge of responding to the crisis. Through the means available to them, many have attempted to help the people afflicted by the events. Working with other institutions

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and authorities, they represent actors that warrant more consideration and a more careful review of the role they play in supporting humanitarian causes worldwide. While it would be unrealistic to say that any and all such organizations are bound to act when faced with such situations, it is important to note that those that have become involved do provide some improvement to the situation, at the lowest levels. This chapter will attempt to offer a perspective on how civil society takes a stance on such an issue. As such, the focus will be on understanding these actors' standing on the international stage, on their objectives and interests, on their actions and their results.

A deeper understanding of what civil societies and NGO's are, and what they offer for the communities in which they are active, will help establish a starting point. Moving further we can attempt to identify the main ways in which they act to achieve their objectives and then apply our analysis to a few examples of NGO's involved in the refugee crisis at the moment. We will be looking for connections between such organizations and humanitarianism in modern society. The main questions that we seek to answer are:

1. What type of NGO's are involved in this crisis?

2. What are their objectives and their means of actions?

3. What is their impact in the broader perspective of a crisis that sparks intense debates on all levels of the international and national stage?

The last question in particular will be difficult to answer, seeing how the work of such organizations is often not as well documented and reported, both internally and externally, as that of an official governmental institution, for example. As such it can be difficult to determine the true implications that the actions of NGO's have in influencing the general problem. Not only that, but it can be difficult to analyse them as a united front, acting towards the same ends, seeing how even when their objectives are similar, they often act completely independent from one another. This could be considered a major detriment in achieving their full potential.

The cases studied in this chapter will view the general situation of some European countries affected by the crisis, where NGO's have made a mark. Thus we have the case of Serbia, where civil society is providing a rapid and effective response along with other important actors in the region. We also have the case of Hungary, where institutions have reacted defensively to the tide of refugees, yet organizations and citizens have tried to actively help them nonetheless. The humanitarian response has been visible in these countries and non-state actors have been at the forefront.

Defining NGO's and their place in international humanitarian aid

Non-governmental organizations have existed in various forms throughout modern history. Examples ranging from the associations advocating equal voting rights for all people, environmental protection organizations and charities have shown the ability to grow from local groups to transnational actors (Davies 2014). Their efforts are often recognized by both states and international institutions and they change the way in which certain issues are viewed and solved. Ever since the formation of the United Nations, NGO's have been valued as providers of expertise in their field of interest and partners in realizing projects aimed at helping communities at regional or international levels (Martens 2005).

In 1989 the World Bank released Operational Directive 14.70, which sets a framework for involving NGO's in its activities. This document offers us a useful summary of the main elements that define this type of organization. In essence, they represent private, non-profit, value-based associations that are unaffiliated to any government (World Bank 2008). Acting in specific areas of interest (ex. Environmental protection, humanitarianism or education) they carry out activities that promote certain values and bring about a change in a community that they see as being beneficial to the people that form the said community. They are largely funded by contributions from their members, donations or certain funds established by states or international bodies, with the entire budget invested in their activities. Through their constitution, the members of an NGO exercise the right to vote on the principal policies of the organization, including electing representatives and management. When acting on a national or international level, many NGO's develop an expertise in their field and are able to provide valuable information that can be used in drafting policies or policy recommendations by the proper authorities.

Often characterized as supporting charity and development at a societal level, NGO's take initiative on many humanitarian causes. The basic principles of humanitarianism, as established by the United Nations General Assembly, strongly resonate with the basic principles under which most organizations operate. The desire to protect life and respect for human beings (Humanity), to act in accordance only with the need of a person (Impartiality), without being influenced by outside factors of power (Independence) or being drawn to choose sides in conflict (Neutrality) (United Nations 1991), are paramount to an organizations' system of values. Thus we can understand that they will seek to direct their own resources towards specific groups of people in need.

It should be noted that organizations have as a defining feature their reliance on volunteering members and on the funding that they can receive through grants given by private or public institutions. It is therefore essential for an NGO to be able to offer com-

prehensive and feasible programs and projects to access the necessary funding and support from national or international authorities, as well as to have the capabilities to attract potential volunteers to help in their cause (Gibbs et al. 1999). One could argue that giving people the opportunity to volunteer is also an important step in fulfilling a group's goal. By bringing previously uninvolved members of the community in the campaigns, they learn the values of the organizations, become influenced by them and integrate them in their own way of thinking. This can create an ever larger base of supporters that will drive society towards a change of values, attitudes and practices.

In the context of a refugee crisis that puts pressure on local governments to act in managing a large influx of migrants pass through its borders, as is the case of countries such as Turkey, Serbia, Greece, Hungary or Austria, local NGO's can face an especially strong pressure to put together a proper response in due time. However, one could argue that it is in these situations that more people feel encouraged to volunteer and help in the unfolding situation. Associations that are able to put together an adequate structure to facilitate volunteering can attract many members of society who want to contribute, as they would feel safer in the group and gain confidence that collective effort will bring changes that individual sacrifice would not. Donations coming from concerned citizens could also be more easily attainable, as many are drawn to the humane and charitable nature of organizations that seek to help large groups in need of help.

The Operational Directive of the World Bank states some of the key factors in an NGO's success. These include partnerships with donors and institutions, a political environment where comprehensive laws regulate and encourage NGO activity, the ability to operate with limited resources in an efficient manner, to promote community involvement and to respond rapidly and effectively as soon as problems arise (World Bank 2008). These are elements that we will see to a certain degree in our case studies.

Case study: Serbia

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, over 485,000 had registered their intention to seek asylum in the year 2015, at the end of November (UNHRC Serbia). Even before the influx reached its peak in October, there were already large groups arriving in July-August. Many of those who wished to go further into the European continent would become stranded for long periods of time, especially after the neighbouring countries Hungary and Croatia closed their borders. Several camps were set up near Serbian border towns, while a large percentage remained near Belgrade waiting to be registered. Both national and international organizations have intervened to

help in managing the situation. The UN Serbian Country Team has allocated a total budget of 7.45 million dollars to offer basic necessities for the victims (UNHRC Serbia 2015).

NGO's cooperated with authorities and specialized agencies right from the beginning in order to cover the most important needs of the people arriving in the country: access to food, water, sanitation, housing and information. We can find examples of projects undertaken by organizations to start fundraising and donation campaigns, put in place regular supply deliveries, establish contact with major refugee groups, bring experts to offer them legal assistance, counselling and other forms of assistance.

Refugee Aid Serbia gives us an example of how local NGO's were able to create a common platform on which to act. It was formed as an umbrella group of 9 organizations, in order to pool their efforts to provide aid for the refugees stranded in Belgrade (Haines-Young 2015). These included local branches of international organizations such as Save the Children and ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency), as well as local organizations such as Giving Back Serbia, the Anna and Vlade Divac Foundation and the Belgrade Foreign Visitors Club. Most of them were concerned with different social problems than those posed by the influx of migrants in the capital, yet they were able to find common ground in the desire to offer better conditions for the refugees. With the help of their extensive network of contacts and related organizations, they were able to bring over 500 volunteers from over 50 countries to Belgrade to assist in their daily activities and have been continuously gathering donations since September 2015 (Refugee Aid Serbia 2015). They based their approach on the idea that intervention has to be swift and effective, in order to maintain a steady flow of aid for the refugees. As such, they partnered with local businesses, such as clothes manufacturers, food and water suppliers, transportation firms to deliver the supplies anywhere needed free of charge, telecom companies for Wifi and charging stations and individual donors who would offer to pay for accommodation in hotels for children or families (Haines-Young 2015). From the end of September until the present, Refugee Aid Serbia has been conducting its operations with increasing support from local and international communities.

The reports made by the UNHRC show how each of these organizations were also able to implement specific programs, as part of the broader efforts to assist refugees. Save the Children and SOS Children, for example, focused on offering housing, sanitation, psycho-social support and protection for children and their families in designated safe spaces (UNHCR Serbia 2015). Other specialized organization offered legal advice or translation in languages spoken by the displaced people. In the latter category we find the example of The Belgrade Centre of Human Rights, an organization concerned with the theory and practice of human rights.

Since 1995, The Belgrade Centre of Human Rights have formed a team of profession-

als in fields concerning social/political sciences, economics and law, in order to both study and promote human rights nationally (Belgrade Center for Human Rights 2015). Their usual activities include publishing, researching and reporting the state of human rights in the country, informing the public and putting forwards suggestions for laws and reforms of state institutions. More recently they have focused intensely on providing legal assistance to asylum seekers and humanitarian assistance. Together with the UNHCR they conducted a 12-month project, starting in January 2015, to bring legal advisors to the asylum seekers entering the country. Their stated objectives are to help people understand the rights granted to them by national and international law, so that they may be able to apply for asylum respecting the necessary procedures (Belgrade Center for Human Rights 2015). The contact they establish with the refugees also helps in signaling potential human rights abuses they may have been subjected to. As recently as November 2015 a report was issued by the organization regarding the inadequate treatment they received from the Bulgarian police, as they were passing through the country to reach Serbia. The Centre has gone so far as to submit recommendations for the Bulgarian authorities on how to better handle the flow of refugees and migrants and how to prevent abuses. These focused not only on the way in which the Bulgarian authorities instruct and monitor their agents, but also on allowing civil society and outside institutions (the Ombudsman, the National Preventive Mechanism against Torture) to assist in managing the situation, to ease tensions that may occur between the arriving people and the police (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2015).

We can observe from their example that an NGO can use their influence to interact with state institutions, to implement new policies and procedures to resolve matters. By encouraging debate over the policies regarding the granting of asylum or migration policies, for example, long term legislative solutions may be obtained. To date it is difficult to accurately ascertain the true extent to which their contribution has influenced local institutions to change regulations and practices, however the fact that they bring these topics into discussion is important for the democratic process and decision making cycle, nonetheless.

Case study: Hungary

The Hungarian government has come under criticism from media, international institutions and advocacy groups for the decisions they made regarding the problem of the asylum seekers. The national Parliament brought a series of amendments to the country's legislation that allows authorities to declare a state of crisis in certain areas on the ba-

sis of trouble caused by "mass immigration", authorizes the use of military personnel to help in managing the situation, criminalizes illegal border crossing, as well as damaging barriers (Human Rights Watch 2015). The borders were closed, fences and rows of razor wire were put in place and both police forces and soldiers on guard had authorization to use their weapons in defense against unarmed refugees. Several people were convicted of illegal border crossing and placed in detention camps, where sometimes asylum seekers were also housed until they received response on their applications. Many others were sent back to Serbia, Greece or Macedonia, which were declared "safe areas" for them (Népszabadság Zrt. 2015). Riots were documented between the groups of people seeking to enter or pass through the country and the authorities keeping them in place. Civil society groups have generally declared their dissatisfaction with the fact that they were not allowed in the transit zones along the Hungarian Serbian border, where many of these altercations took place. As a result of these new legislative measures, over 1,100 people were being detained for illegal border crossing in October (though the number has steadily decreased), the number of people arriving the country, asylum applications and asylum statuses granted all fell drastically (UNHCR 2015).

Hungary has taken a firm stance against the plan to redistribute asylum seekers in various EU countries by varying quotas and it has been reported that they launched media campaigns meant to deter others from coming to Europe. Excessive use of force in dealing with protesting migrants, unsuitable conditions in the detention and reception camps, slow response to asylum requests and hostile language used by local politicians to describe them has been reported (Amnesty International 2015). In this situation local NGO's faced difficulties due to a general reluctance of the governing bodies and a majority of the population to assist the asylum seekers and welcome them into the country. They attempted not only to directly help these people, but also to urge local authorities to reconsider their stance.

One example is a joint statement released in September 2015, with over 40 signatories, in which the government is called upon to improve its efforts in managing the situation at Roszke, cooperate with the proper international bodies and ensure that they act with "due respect for human rights" (Greenpeace Hungary 2015). In the small town neighbouring the Serbian border, hundreds of people were forced to a halt on their way into the EU, and kept outside by officers assigned to control the flow of people arriving into the country (Field 2015). On 16th of September there was an altercation that received international attention, as police armed in full riot gear pushed back the refugees trying to get past a crossing gate. A UNHCR representative commented that they had the necessary logistics to help the authorities manage the situation, yet their offers were rejected. (Field 2015)

What some national news outlets saw as a violent act committed by asylum seekers

angered at the border patrols, others saw as a failure of the government to adequately handle the refugee situation, leaving organizations, independent groups and international organs to attempt to improve the situation. Similar to our previous case study, we see a variety of different organizations stand behind this initiative, in spite of their different missions: Amnesty International Hungary, Chance for Children Foundation (concerned with helping and educating disadvantaged children), Clean Air Action Group, Green Academy, Greenpeace Hungary (ecologically oriented), European Network Against Racism Hungary, Hungarian LGBT Association, Rainbow Mission Foundation (concerned with gay, bisexual and transgender rights) (Greenpeace Hungary 2015). The fact that they all gathered around this initiative shows that civil society is capable of operating in an informal network, in order to show support for a common cause.

While these groups are attempting to bring different problems to the forefront of public discussion, they are often seen in the same light: as countercultural, opposed to the current status quo, attempting to right a certain wrong in society, in line with norms that transcend national consciousness and become transnationally relevant. It's important to note that this solidarity could be enhanced by the recent actions the government has taken in regards to NGO's that deal in divisive social, political or cultural issues. After several politicians accused members of being political activists attempting to 'enforce foreign interests' in the country (Hungarian Spectrum 2015), several audits were ordered on some of these organizations (especially those who accessed foreign funding, such as the EEA grants), going so far as to lead to legal prosecution for suspicion of engaging in illegal activities (Amnesty International 2015). This attitude has been called hostile by delegates of the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2014, who see it as an attempt to silence or discourage NGO's who are critical of the government and support causes that it does not agree with (Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2015).

One of the most remarkable movements created during this period is Migration Aid. Originally established by the Entrepreneurs Club Association in Budapest in June 2015 (The Budapest Sentinel 2015) to distribute supplies for the asylum seekers and help them reach the camps they were assigned to (Migration Aid 2015), they soon attracted numerous followers and branched out to become a semi-structured organism capable of acting somewhat independently. Communicating mainly through social media, they acted as a platform where willing citizens could become ad hoc volunteers and later as a group that has an effective internal functioning mechanism. They recruited full time coordinators to manage teams and meetings in the main areas and established communication mechanism to help groups cooperate, thus giving somewhat of a formal hierarchy and functionality within their organization (The Budapest Sentinel 2015). Although many financial donations have been sent to them, they have avoided them so as not to attract criticism

or scrutiny from financial monitoring institutions. Similarly to the NGO mentioned in the previous case study, they send messages through all communication means regarding the kind of materials most needed by refugees, so that the public may choose to donate the respective items. In an interview given by the spokesperson of the group for the Budapest Sentinel, she has stated that this form of support comes as a form of 'quiet protest' of many people who disagree with the negative view the media and the government hold against the asylum seekers, that many do not share these views and would rather see humanitarian action taken to help them (The Budapest Sentinel 2015).

At the same time it could be said that such a structure is unstable to a certain degree and the movement could disband as quickly as it was formed, if it does not serve a purpose. Even in the interview the representative of the group said that their plans were not for the long term and they were uncertain of how long their organization could last. With the closure of the borders and the halt of transit in October 2015, it seemed as if Migration Aid would have little to contribute to. It is remarkable in this sense that they were able to refocus their efforts on areas still confronted with large groups of immigrants and go beyond the borders of their country to achieve their goals.

With the help of volunteers inspired by their story, an organization was registered in the UK by the name of Migration Aid International, to carry out their activities in any country affected by the crisis (Migration Aid International 2015). Their teams are present throughout the Balkans, helping asylum seekers along the main migration routes. What's more, they continuously advertise efforts made by other organizations and use their large following on their website and social media pages to inform people on the most recent developments in the refugee crisis. It is impressive to see a shift from urgent improvised humanitarian intervention at a national level, to a more long-term transnational organization, acting out public awareness campaigns and sending autonomous volunteer teams in critical areas. This shows that in spite of restrictions placed by local policy, civil society is capable of finding the means to carry out their stated mission, even if this means internationalizing their concept and organization.

A similar concept, but with differing means of action, can be seen in the case of the Migrant Solidarity Group of Hungary, an activist group formed by both natives and refugees in 2012, in order to lobby for refugee rights (Migszol - Migrant Solidariy Group 2015). Their history shows that they have used methods often associated with NGO's engaged in controversial topics. The have spoken out against laws and regulation that seem biased and unfair towards the target group (ex. A law criminalizing homelessness passed in 2013) and unfair condition in which they are treated (Migszol - Migrant Solidariy Group 2015). They go further by organizing demonstrations against such laws: protests, meetings, circles of silence against them. They also engage the asylum seekers in their camps,

so as to assess the state in which they are being kept and discover their needs, motivations and opinions. While this organization has attempted to assist refugees through direct charitable acts, their main focus seemed to be activism aimed at encouraging people to demand a solution at a national level. As such they concentrated on informing the public regarding the plight of asylum seekers, protested against the legislative measures taken by the state to meet the problem and encouraged all EU citizens to contact their MEP's, with a standard email asking them to pressure the Hungarian government to renounce some of the measures it has adopted (No-racism.net 2015). While these actions have attracted the support of many citizens and have drawn participation in their gatherings, these groups were largely ignored by authorities. To date they have not communicated any intent to discuss the situation with the protesters, nor acknowledge their requests.

As a conclusion we can say that in Hungary both grassroots movements and established organizations have found common ground in trying to offer short and long-term solutions for the crisis at hand. They have been able to gather groups of volunteers and donations on a continual basis, without monitoring membership strictly or keeping strict logs of resources made available to them. It would seem that this was enough to deal with the initial large waves of asylum seekers, however they did become more structured and formal when the flow was reduced and more focused action was needed. Well established organizations continued to protest against the treatment they received from the authorities and called for more adequate action in the refugee crisis. It would seem that the recent problems have become a milestone in their struggle to encourage certain values in the public space and increase their legitimacy in the face of the government and of the Hungarian people.

Conclusions

The recent troubles caused by the large number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe in 2015 has brought about an impressive response from civil society. In a relatively short period of time they have managed to establish a somewhat continuous flow of supplies and services for the people in need, thus improving their condition and alleviating a part of the pressure put on local authorities.

As we have seen in the case studies, many different types of organizations have decided to respond to the cause of helping asylum seekers, linking it to their respective mission statements and objectives. Often what they share in common is an orientation towards charitable activities that help people in need, acting in favour of people that are in a way or another marginalized and vulnerable and the desire to improve society by fostering

compassion and civic participation. This has led to various associations joining in a unified effort either to offer direct intervention in areas of interest, or to bring awareness of the problem to society and encourage debate and constructive solutions for authorities. We cannot be certain to what extent their activism becomes noticed by governments, especially since it can be argued that certain states have little regard for voices coming from this sector of the population.

It is important to take note of the grassroots initiatives that have come up as well. With participants representing various subgroups of the local population, these groups have been successful in organizing large scale volunteer activities and donation campaigns to bring those willing to the heart of the situation. They have even proved themselves successful enough to formalize their structure and continue supporting their cause. This may show that even civic movements that arise from an urgent unforeseen need in society can have the ability to bring about a certain benefit to it, but also to demonstrate the capacity to establish themselves as fully-fledged legal entities and functioning organizations. It remains to be seen if these newly formed movements will continue to function even when the current problems will subside, or when the public support that propels them to act will start to wane. Considering that public opinion on refugees and those that help them may be swayed either towards support or aversion very quickly, depending on new controversies that arise, it could become very difficult for these organizations to be able to sustain themselves only through public support. Seeing as authorities in our case studies have either worked in parallel with these organizations, without seeking a partnership that would unite efforts as a whole, or that they may have even placed barriers and hindrances in their way, they may find it more and more difficult. Moreover, as governments in certain countries show hostility towards asylum seekers or are simply unwilling to use the full extent of their abilities to help them.

We can be certain that the work of these organizations and groups shows that at a national and international level there is a willingness to become involved coming from the general public. Their actions are noticed by international organizations such as the UNHCR, as they represent an integral part of a larger response to a crisis of a European scale. While they may face certain difficulties in their wake, and the true results and effect of their involvement is difficult to measure, they are certainly having an impact on the situation, one that deserves more attention and a detailed analysis in the future.

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