

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

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, Caucasus 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

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 Atatürk*,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, Atatürk followed strict nationalization process within Turkey. Although experiences of the Ottoman past, together with its geostrategic importance influenced the subsequent foreign relations of Turkey, Atatürk'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.

1 Kemal Atatürk: (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-

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.

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

1 Umayyad 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 *Hezbollah* 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

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 Bulletin 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

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 Oc- alan* – 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 *Davutoglu*. 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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