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The Changing Geo-strategy of Turkey's Foreign Policy Along its Southern Border

From Aspirations for
Regional Integration to the need
for Crisis Management

OSMAN BAHADIR DINÇER

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About this paper

This report is part of a four-part series that examines the threats posed to Turkey by regional instability, terrorism and extremism, and how the Turkish government has sought to manage or challenge these threats. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue is grateful to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for supporting the publication of this series.

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1 Introduction

The southern border of Turkey is of pronounced geostrategic importance as it constitutes the country's gateway to the Middle East through Syria and Iraq, two countries which represent an extension of Turkey's own human and physical geography. In the early 2000s, this geographical sphere was once seen as a site of opportunity, particularly in terms of its potential for economic and cultural integration with the rest of the region. However, following the Arab uprisings, it has, in time, transformed into an ongoing source of challenges that is characterized by unprecedented instability and turmoil and which have created severe disturbances for Turkey on various fronts. Most recently, the Ankara bombing on 17th February 2016 has once again shown the direct repercussions of the crisis that is occurring along Turkey's southern flank.

Turkey is now ensnared in myriad entanglements, extrication from which will require a new generation of crisis management systems that address: **i)** the mounting human tragedy unfolding south of its borders and the resultant migratory pressures that are profoundly felt in adjacent countries and, now, Europe; **ii)** the increasing number of non-state actors (terrorist organizations) that threaten not only regional but also international security; **iii)** the fierce power battle among numerous regional and international actors, including Iran, Saudi Arabia and Russia, among

others, that is now raging within this sub-region for the first time in its recent history. Certainly, this final point is tantamount to the escalation of un-constructive involvement that has added to existing dilemmas rather than solving any of them. Indeed, in a region in which non-state actors are gaining strength in such a dramatic fashion, regional and global rivalries are swiftly intensifying on the basis of vastly varied interests, and unconstructiveness has become a widespread norm. The recent high-pitched intervention of Russia and the polarization between Tehran and Riyadh, as well as Turkey's efforts to salvage its tarnished image as an integral part of the relevant geopolitical network, have come to confirm that the regional crises will drag on. Turkey, having fallen into the throes of "crisis fatigue" as it tries to survive within this chaotic environment, is now facing geopolitical realities that it has not witnessed for a generation.

Previously governed by unilateral initiatives and bilateral arrangements, the sub-region now requires greater international and multilateral cooperative action, particularly with its Western partners, which Turkey must both lead and be a part of. It seems that the dismal happenings in Syria have all but shattered the image of not only the Arab Uprisings but also that of Turkey. Once called the "honest broker without a hidden agenda" in the Middle East, Turkey has now assumed the position of an isolated actor facing allegations that it is fueling the civil conflict and extending reckless support to questionable opposition groups in Syria; all this despite the fact that Turkey is an actor that is shouldering one of the greatest burdens of the humanitarian tragedy taking place in Syria. Even though Turkey's failing foreign policy in Syria has been recorded as a disgrace up until now, its potential to develop innovative peace building initiatives coupled with its desire to assume regional responsibility can work to reverse this downward course – at least in terms of how it is perceived.

2 Migratory pressure and associated costs

Beyond the thousands of deaths and injuries, unbridled waves of migration have become another major result of the warfare sweeping across Syria and, to a lesser extent, Iraq. According to UN estimates and local observers, the continuing crisis has caused the displacement of more than half of Syria's population. Beginning from September 2015, the displacement re-escalated with Russia's intervention, in a way shifting the balance in favour of the Assad regime. The most striking outcome of this was observed when tens of thousands of Syrians mobilized towards the border of Turkey as the regime launched operations to retake Aleppo's northern towns from opposition forces in collaboration with Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and PYD/YPG forces.¹ However, this is not a recent or ephemeral phenomenon as millions of Syrians have been fleeing the conflict-ridden country in a systematic fashion since the onset of the conflict in 2011.²

In this context, countries in close proximity to the conflicts of the region are forced to shoulder a majority of the burden resulting from Syrians' quests for security, with many transforming into veritable open-air refugee camps. Turkey, which is affected most by the challenge of managing the huge waves of refugees, currently hosts almost 3 million Syrians, only 10% of whom are living in camps³ while the rest find respite in urban areas across the country void of a well-planned monitoring mechanism. Although the refugee issue should be ideally assessed through the humanitarian prism first

and foremost, given both the current scope of the issue and its own political and economic difficulties, Turkey is faced with a phenomenon that can no longer be deemed as a temporary situation.⁴ The issue must instead be treated as a catastrophic disaster with all its political, economic, societal, and legislative dimensions in order to reduce the likelihood of confrontation not only within the refugee community but also between Syrians and Turks.

Among the priorities, a proper answer must be found to the question of how will the integration of Syrians into Turkish society be ensured? Yet, the presence of refugees in Turkey will continue to present severe political risks no matter how they are integrated or provided citizenship. Security-related (crime or involvement with the PKK, ISIS, and other terrorist groups) and socio-cultural risks (societal tension, lack of access to education, or questionable marital practices such as child marriage and polygamy), both of which increase with each passing day, have become a sad fact. 53% of the refugees in Turkey are under the age of 18⁵, and the radicalization of these vulnerable and desperate youth has become a reality, as has been illustrated in multiple cases where the refugee population has been approached by various radical groups including ISIS. Moreover, the refugee issue is open to exploitation by many others, as seen in the fact that the perpetrators of the recent terrorist attacks in both Ankara and Istanbul were both carrying refugee identity cards, no matter whether authentic or forged.⁶

It is not acceptable to bar entrance to those fleeing to Turkey. At the same time, however, it must be realized that most urban refugees move across the country without being submitted to proper state regulatory measures and that some refugees have been misled into the lap of criminal groups such as human-smugglers or traffickers largely as a direct result of their desperation and hopelessness.⁷ Moreover, authorities have, to a large extent, turned a blind eye to the very real possibility that societal tension could be incited by the ever growing presence of refugees; in other words, the authorities have underestimated the size of the problem for an extended period of time.⁸ All in all, despite all of the genuine efforts on the part of Turkey, the current multifaceted crisis is far from what Turkey is currently capable of effectively handling. Moreover, those familiar with the nature of migration know well that refugees do not always regard the countries in which they first arrive as their final destination, but instead

generally use them as a temporary transit site or route from which to pass on to the countries they believe to be more prosperous. Such a reality is evidenced by increasing waves of refugees continually moving to and across Europe's borders. It can also be argued that the dynamics laid out above are being exploited by Russia and the Assad regime in what may be termed a 'demographic chaos strategy', the aim of which is to place pressure on Turkey and Europe so as to paralyze their will or ability to act in terms of contributing to the political solution to the Syrian conflict.

3 Growing number of non-state actors: an era of 'statelessness' and radicalization

Another acute problem along Turkey's southern border region is the growing number of non-state actors that have exploited the collapse of state authority and prevailing insecurity in Iraq and Syria, thereby spreading and fanning the flames of radicalization. This process in fact began its evolution in 2003 with the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent unsuccessful attempts to install a new Iraqi state. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the conflict in Syria later added to this as the country came to host and attract a great number of terrorist organizations. Such a dynamic fuelled a geopolitical shift that facilitated popular radicalization as these two countries were transformed into safe havens for various radical non-state actors and foreign fighters.⁹ Currently, the most attention-grabbing of these groups seem to be organizations such as ISIS and Al-Nursa. Yet, organizations like Northern Syria's PYD (The Democratic Union Party), which is seen by Turkey as an extension of the PKK, have also come onto the radar, employing coercion both "in the classical sense of terrorist activities" and "in the name of conquering physical territory".¹⁰ For instance, since the start of the war, the PYD, with the help of the Assad regime and the PKK, has steadily increased its control over a large swathe of territory (encompassing 9% of Syrian territory in 2012 to 14% in 2016), though not united, stretching from Aleppo to Qamishli.¹¹ Over time, it has come to establish a monopoly of sorts, proclaiming itself as the sole

advocate of the Kurdish cause by intimidating or convincing other Kurdish and Arab groups through the employment of different means, including by assassinating influential leaders, just as the PKK had done in Turkey, and eventually by silencing all oppositional voices.¹²

At the end of the day, an unwelcome *fait accompli* has developed beyond Turkey's southern borders, forcing the country to neighbour undesirable actors (such as ISIS and the PYD). The Syrian crisis, particularly due to the weaknesses of border monitoring and its own domestic vulnerabilities, has made Turkey more open to the threat posed by terrorist groups. The war between ISIS and the PYD has now enlarged to include Turkey. What happened in Diyarbakir in 2014, just after the events at Kobani, is a clear indication of how vulnerable Turkey is to developments in Syria.¹³ Moreover, the Suruç, Istanbul, and Ankara bombings in 2015 cannot be assessed without considering the turmoil in Syria and Turkey's failing Syria policy. This situation has manifested itself in a set of geopolitical circumstances to which Turkey is not accustomed, as it is normally used to working with states in stable environments. In this context, Turkey's apparent confusion about how to develop and implement policies against non-state actors such as ISIS and the PYD has been subject to criticism from abroad. For instance, with regard to the PYD/YPG, Turkey is faced with a Janus-faced dilemma: although the PYD is recognized by Ankara as a terrorist organization, it is acknowledged by many states as a 'legitimate' interlocutor on the ground as the most credible and effective ground force in the fight against ISIS.

Secondly, since 2011 the PYD is emphatically expanding its domination on the ground, and more recently, Turkey, which lost the advantage of open access to Syrian airspace after it downed a Russian jet, has been unable to halt the progress of the YPG. Moreover, because it is considered that Turkey's military and political struggle against the PYD will inherently help ISIS's regional ambitions, international actors have increasingly come to see Ankara's fight against ISIS as insincere. Therefore, recent developments¹⁴ north of Aleppo during February 2016, as well as the negative perspectives of Turkey that are held by global actors, raise serious questions concerning whether or not Turkey's regional Kurdish policy is sustainable. In this sense, it can be expected that Ankara will face tougher problems with respect to the Kurdish issue, particularly in Syria, as long as the US and Russia's

attitudes and the reality on the ground remain unchanged. Overall, recent happenings in Syria and Turkey compel Turkish authorities to clarify their policies toward the PYD which have been only loosely handled since 2011.

On the other hand, although different actors, especially the US, have taken a number of immediate measures by declaring that ISIS is a 'global threat', ISIS is also a great problem for Turkey particularly due to its close proximity to both Syria and Iraq. The main trouble for Western countries relates to the fact that their citizens who left to join ISIS may eventually return and potentially wreak havoc. Nonetheless, no one has a comprehensive and functioning road map on how to resolve the problems at the local level in Syria and Iraq, meaning that Turkey will continue to face this immediate threat to a much higher degree than most others. Beyond the lack of a strategy that takes political and sociological dimensions into account, the fight against ISIS has been carried out at the hands of the wrong actors and with the wrong methods. The increasing legitimacy of the PKK and PYD, which have even come to garner military support from Turkey's allies, will likely turn into a problem for Turkey, not the West, in the short and medium term. Being a latecomer to the coalition against ISIS and perceived of as not taking all the necessary measures to fight the group domestically, Turkey and its motives are now being questioned by many. In short, the situation of the PYD and ISIS, within the general context of the Syrian crisis, has created implicit and explicit tensions between Ankara and other global capitals.

4 External involvement

What renders Syria a site of turmoil is not only the numerous terrorist organizations or other non-state entities operating within its borders but also the increasingly unconstructive involvement of regional and international actors. Such intervention adds to the instability in the region as it is generally engaged in on an ad hoc basis that can be counterproductive. In addition to failing to resolve the core issues of the conflict, these operations significantly limit Ankara's room for maneuver. The challenge created here essentially stems from the exacerbation of two central dilemmas for Turkey, namely migratory pressure on the one hand and growing radicalization and the proliferation of terrorist organizations on the other.

It has long been known that the Gulf countries, the US, Iran, and Russia have been extending support to various parties to the conflict in Syria. However, beyond this shipment of support from abroad, an increasingly visible phenomenon of late can be seen in the fact that some actors, once offering support from abroad, are now actively involved in the conflict in Syria. In time, the Assad regime's loss of control in Syria brought about further and more aggressive support from some of these actors (i.e. Iran and Hezbollah). Most recently, Russia has been added to the mix as an active military partner of the regime. This increase of external involvement in favour of the regime has served to worsen the already

tremendous humanitarian challenge in the country, leading to further deaths, more injuries, as well as both the internal and external displacement of a large portion of the Syrian population.¹⁴ To illustrate, as a result of the advance of the regime forces with the help of Russian air strikes in February 2016, many of the civilians still residing in Aleppo have been killed or injured, and thousands were forced to flee to the Turkish border to escape the violence.

Second, besides increasing the risk of further retaliatory involvement on the part of other actors, the unchecked involvement of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, which is primarily directed at the moderate Syrian opposition, suggests the emergence of a trend toward further radicalization. As there is a growing perception among Syrians that Western countries, including the US, have betrayed the Syrian opposition while the world just sits back and watches the brutality of the regime and its supporters, an increasing sense of *mazlumiyye*¹⁵ and desperation in the country have changed the perception of radical terrorist organizations into a palatable solution to counter the regime and its associated brutalities in the eyes of the Syrian public.¹⁶ Here, the loss of the moderate opposition on the ground benefits radical organizations the most as they are left as the only option to fight against the regime. The past record of the civil conflict already shows concrete evidence for this as the peaceful demonstrations requesting that Assad step down incrementally morphed into an armed conflict which then transformed into a fierce battle between the regime and the opposition. Such a context has facilitated radicalization as only radicals could survive, or alternately, moderates were compelled to radicalize to survive the increasing brutality of the conflict.¹⁷

The Turkish government views the growing use of proxies as a result of foreign involvement and, as such, something that aids the growth of belligerent non-state actors in the region. Specifically, the PYD/YPG, the Iraqi Shia militia, and other radical organizations and oppositional elements are being supported by regional and international actors for different purposes (for instance while the US extends support to PYD to fight against Deash, the same PYD is also being supported by Russia to weaken the Sunni Arab opposition). However, while there is an increasing tendency for actors to use proxies to change the power balances on the ground, this does not mean that they exert control over these proxies. What is worse, the situation

risks pro-opposition countries, including Turkey, also utilizing proxies in the name of offsetting pro-regime support or the spread of the PYD/YPG. In the long-term this points to an overall lose-lose situation that perpetuates the civil conflict and increases the number and strength of proxies that will endanger the future of Syria even if a peace initiative is entered into and implemented.

Of all the external interventions in Syria, the one that is most resented by Turkey is that of Russia, particularly after the jet downing incident in November 2015. Following this episode, Russia, as the most proactive external player in the conflict, strictly limited its interaction with Turkey, and the depth and breadth of Turkey's engagement in Syria, including its provision of humanitarian assistance to those in need, its potential role and position in the peace talks, and its participation in the anti-ISIS coalition, has been dramatically reduced. Russia continues to extend support to the PYD/YPG, and bombs Syrian Turkomans in the name of punishing Turkey. In operational terms, this sort of Russian involvement aims to punish Turkey, symbolically and strategically. Turkey views Turkomans as an extension of its human geography on the one hand, and PYD as an extension of the terrorist organization PKK on the other. Also, many commentators see the influence of Russia as having added to an 'anti-Turkey' campaign in the region. In the aftermath of the warplane crisis, there have erupted a series of diplomatic rapprochements (at least at the level of rhetoric) between Russia and a number of countries with which Turkey has strained relations, including Iraq, Egypt, and Southern Cyprus.

5 Laying out an alternative policy agenda

Although this study focuses on Turkey's challenges in its southern border regions, both the explanations and policy recommendations that are laid out below should be considered in their larger contexts. The need for such an approach essentially stems from two aspects of the current environment. Firstly, be it migratory pressure, terrorist operations, or unconstructive involvement, the challenges faced by Turkey are not confined to particular localities. In other words, they have far-reaching implications for both regional and international actors. Secondly, Turkey's capacity to deal with these challenges is limited. This situation therefore necessitates cooperative action to be taken on the part of the international community. By all accounts, what is at stake is great, and given this, the policy agenda set out here will assess how to achieve international cooperation characterized by certain win-sets in the name of addressing the challenges that are present throughout the region.

6 A game theory approach to the refugee crisis: the vital need for a win-win dialogue

The migration issue is perhaps the area that requires cooperative action the most, particularly in the framework of Turkey-EU collaboration. A game theory approach serves to best illustrate that the lack of cooperative action in the realm of migration is highly likely to result in a situation deleterious to both Turkey and the EU. Yet on the other side of the coin, the positive pay-offs of cooperative action are plentiful, which explains why both the EU and Turkey must foster collaborative mechanisms to deal with the inflow of Syrian refugees. Today, whether the EU and Turkey will be successful in achieving cooperation, and even if they do in fact succeed in the end, whether they will be able to sustain cooperative mechanisms is a matter of question even though the parties have declared their intentions to work together. For this reason, it might be insightful to debate the potential positive/negative payoffs of cooperative/uncooperative action within this framework.

In the case that Turkey or the EU eschew cooperation and instead opt to pursue unilateral action, they will in effect be shifting the burden onto the other. To illustrate, uneager to shoulder the associated humanitarian costs any longer and keen to alleviate the heavy duty of caring for the nearly 3 million Syrians already residing within its territories, Turkey can skirt the necessary precautions meant to prevent refugees from passing to EU territories and thereby facilitate their inflow into the EU. Considering that,

for most refugees, Turkey is only a transit country on the path to Europe and that the welfare system in the EU serves as a “strong magnet for poor migrants”,¹⁸ it is evident that Turkey would have no difficulty in indirectly promoting a life in Europe to Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Conversely, if the EU were to retaliate against Turkey, it would likely prevent the entrance of Syrian refugees into the EU and work to return those that made it across EU borders back to Turkey. Then, in such a scenario it is very likely that a lose-lose situation would ensue for both due to the highly evident negative pay-offs. In such a case, the potential human tragedy resultant of each side's refusal to host the destitute Syrians would definitely tarnish both Turkey and the EU's reputations, whether it be Europe's “welcoming culture” or Turkey's “Open-Door Policy”. This would benefit neither the EU nor Turkey nor the affected Syrians as the refugees would become dehumanized, treated as ping pong balls that would seesaw between the EU and Turkey. Furthermore, such a situation would further work against the interests of Turkey as its accession to the EU would most likely be placed in jeopardy and it would be deprived the yearly economic aid pledged by the EU to take care of the Syrian refugees within its territory (approximately 3 billion Euros).¹⁹ The EU on the other hand would also have to allocate more time and money to deal with various aspects of the mounting humanitarian tragedy (i.e. human smuggling, border control, settlement of illegal migrants, and caring for the injuries of thousands) considering the limited ability of the EU countries to stop the illegal arrival of the refugees and Turkey's patchy control over borders and coastal passages. The negative outcomes illustrated here show what kind of a common ground the EU and Turkey should agree upon so as to define the broadest mutual win-set. Such can be best achieved only by ensuring a plan and structure for the management of the Syrian refugee influx are agreed upon.

At this point, the nature of cooperation between Turkey and the EU is of crucial importance; in other words, the type of burden-sharing arrangement that the two parties agree upon will be decisive. Even though understanding the tit-for-tat nature of state behavior in a game theory framework is essential and useful in conveying why cooperation is needed with regard to the refugee issue, the refugee issue itself should not be turned into a matter of dirty politics and the relevant parties should not ignore their moral

responsibilities. Currently, Turkey hosts around 3 million Syrian refugees, whereas Europe is estimated to be hosting around 1 million.²⁰ While Turkey should do its best to prevent the Syrian refugees within its territory from traveling to the EU through illegal means, the EU should also put forth a stronger effort to host more Syrian refugees and to lighten the burden shouldered by Turkey in line with the two parties' capacities. An insightful analysis on this issue shows that the EU should host 3.5 times, 23 times, and 7 times as many Syrian refugees as Turkey based on its GDP per capita, overall GDP, and population respectively, when compared to the same figures of Turkey.²¹

On the other hand, it would be ironic for the EU and Turkey to fall out with one another due to a humanitarian tragedy that has been aggravated not by themselves but instead primarily by the Assad regime and its allies like Russia and Iran, as the latter's assaults, including those directly affecting the civilian population, have put pressure on Syrian inhabitants to flee their country. To illustrate, since the beginning of 2015 when Russia and Iran as well as Hezbollah increased their military involvement in Syria in favour of the regime the humanitarian tragedy in Syria has worsened. Throughout 2015, the number of refugees that Turkey claimed to be hosting skyrocketed, increasing from 1.5 million to 2.5 million. Moreover, by the end of 2015 the number of Syrians claimed asylum in the EU spiked to 897,000, whereas this number was only 235,000 at beginning of the same year.²² Again, the total number of Syrians arriving in Greece from Turkey via the Aegean Sea in 2015 jumped to more than 850,000.²³

Considering this, while continuing to cooperate to alleviate the refugee crisis, both the EU and Turkey should be mindful of how they are perceived to be handling the refugee crisis. Russia is arguably likely to have been using the refugee crisis as a "weapon" against the West considering that the country has strained relations with the EU and Turkey respectively after the former's enactment of sanctions on Russia following the Ukraine crisis and after the latter downed a Russian jet.²⁴ It is for this reason that, while dealing with the refugee crisis, both the EU and Turkey should not allow Russia to further exploit their accommodating policies while also working to prevent Moscow from turning the refugee crisis into a form of "punishment". This requires that both the EU and Turkey concentrate on the root cause of

the problem and put more political pressure on the regime and its allies to stop their military operations. In this sense, both parties, in coordination with the US, should consider options such as the establishment of a safe haven, the development of coordinated and complementary diplomatic rhetoric, and/or even the enactment of sanctions related to happenings in Syria. Given a pending peace process, the placement of political pressure should not morph into a full-fledged war against Russia and Iran, but should instead be kept on the agenda at least to convey the image that these options will remain on the table should any peace efforts be undermined by these actors. In this sense, it is unfortunate that Turkey and its Western partners have so far been very unsuccessful in fostering such political deterrence against the regime and its supporters. This issue in itself merits further in-depth study.

7 A security dialogue approach to growing terrorism: the vital need for mutual understanding

Another issue requiring cooperative action between Turkey and external actors is the growing number of non-state actors in the region. At this point, fighting ISIS and other like-minded terrorist organizations constitutes a central theme. However, the list of terrorist organizations engaging in the region is extensive, encompassing groups like the PYD/YPG and many other belligerent non-state actors.²⁵ Nonetheless, it is a great challenge to reach a consensus on which groups are and which groups are not considered radical or terrorist. The past record of the international coalition against ISIS already suggests that its own constituent countries, including Turkey, have not demonstrated a sincere commitment to the coalition. The core problem in this sense is that when the coalition partners are involved in military operations, they are guided by conflicting hierarchies of priorities and geopolitical interests. To illustrate the ineffectiveness of international coalitions in a broader sense, Russia's map of ISIS does not correspond to that observed by the US, and while making aerial campaigns, Russia generally exploits such discrepancies to weaken the moderate opposition forces vis-à-vis the Assad regime. In this vein, even Turkey has been accused of pursuing diverging interests, as the US has claimed that Turkey participates in coalition airstrikes to bomb PYD/PKK targets and not necessarily ISIS or other radical organizations.

However, a much more alarming situation, which in fact undermines the overall fight against terrorism, is the lack of security cooperation between actors such as the US, Turkey, and the EU which are generally thought to be partners. Such discord basically stems from the fact that the international and regional actors which should observe each other's security priorities fail to do so. The cases of the PYD/YPG and ISIS are quite telling in this regard in terms of illustrating the lack of security dialogue. Today, Turkey is at odds with the US and European stance, one that handles the PYD/YPG as a necessary ally in the fight against ISIS. On the other hand Turkey's Western allies are frustrated with Turkey's equivocal support in fighting radical terrorist organizations in the region. In other words, the actors' security engagements in the region are guided by subtly different priorities. There is an absolute need to amend these priorities to bring about a coherent policy versus ISIS. While Turkey should show more sincere effort to deal with growing radicalism and violence originating in Syria and Iraq (for example, by practicing tighter border control measures to prevent the movement of foreign fighters and terrorists), the US and EU should in turn be more sensitive to Turkey's concerns regarding the PYD/YPG (i.e. by halting their unchecked military support of these groups) and its discontent with the Western countries' formulation of foreign engagement towards the Syrian Kurds solely over PYD/YPG excluding other Kurdish groups bullied by the organization. In this way, only if a security dialogue based on mutual understanding among the partners is institutionalized can the fight against terrorism in the region be successful.

An ongoing problem is seen in the fact that in the absence of such a security dialogue the parties tend to establish cooperation with proxies on the ground rather than among themselves, a trend that further impedes high-quality security cooperation against terrorism in the first place. This situation points to the need for all sides to break the cycle and engage in qualified self-critique. For instance, while criticizing the US or Germany for supporting the PYD/YPG, Turkey should also question why the PYD/YPG has become a devoted partner on the ground to those fighting ISIS, and consider the possibility that its own ambiguous commitment to the fight against ISIS and other radical terrorist organizations might have further driven the US and its other Western allies to align with the

PYD/YPG. Conversely, the US and other Western countries should question why Turkey and its Gulf allies are more generous in granting support to Syrian opposition groups regardless of Western concerns, and consider that their own inclination to turn a blind eye to the weakening of the moderate opposition might have sparked resentment in Turkey and the Gulf and therefore paved the way for growing radicalism under the extreme oppression of the Assad regime. This does not necessarily mean that the West should adopt Turkey's stance toward the PYD/YPG and Syrian opposition groups, or vice versa. The point is that without being captive to their established fears, at least from this point on, the parties should work together in a constructive way and foster a common understanding that observes all parties' concerns and interests. At this point, it should be noted that security dialogue particularly between Turkey and the US has been amicable in the past, both in terms of fighting PKK terrorism in Iraq (i.e. the establishment of a Trilateral Mechanism between Turkey, Iraq, and the US in 2008)²⁶ and in supporting the opposition in Syria in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. Yet, this has not been the case since 2013. With the challenges in the region becoming all the more difficult to surmount, the parties should show renewed efforts to establish such mechanisms as they had in the past by drawing upon already existent areas of cooperation.

8 A de-escalation approach to unconstructive foreign involvement: the vital need for revision emphasizing the humanitarian dimension of the conflict

Another challenge occurring in the region south of Turkey's border can be seen in the increasing amount of unconstructive foreign involvement. Devoid of the required military capacity, Turkey does not have the power to deter this involvement – its military capacity does not match that of Russia's, and its ability to lead a proxy war does not match that of Iran. In any case, the conflict in Syria necessitates de-escalation rather than the provocation of reciprocal military involvement. Considering the efforts to endorse peace in Syria, such as the formulation and implementation of a ceasefire and political road map, Turkey should act as a constructive partner in realizing what is needed rather than that which should be avoided; namely, it should work towards de-militarization of the conflict. For this reason Turkey should avoid a possible intervention in Syria in coalition with Gulf States, even if pre-agreed with the US. At a time when it has strained relations with Russia, which means that it is more vulnerable than ever in Syria, Turkey should continue to employ

non-intervention as its dominant strategy. Considering that memories of recent foreign interventions still linger, Turkey should uphold the principle of non-intervention.

At this point, while excluding itself from Syria militarily, Turkey is in a position to generate and carry forward two policy initiatives:

- 1 it should revise its long-maintained regime-change strategy and
- 2 it should take the lead in emphasizing the humanitarian dimension of the conflict, particularly as that dimension steadily worsens

The first revision can be seen as a requirement prompted by the shifting stances of Turkey's Western allies. Here, in the face of growing radical terrorist organizations, both European countries and the US have come to soften their previous positions which stipulated that Assad must immediately step down in order to facilitate peace in Syria. Well beyond the need for Turkey to simply synchronize its foreign policy with that of its partners, it must realize that in the absence of a whole-hearted international commitment to depose Assad, any realistic peace plan should regard the regime as a party to the resolution, at least in the short-term. Also, in addition to the extensive military support that Assad is receiving from abroad, he is also receiving extensive political and diplomatic support, mostly in the form of Russia and China's veto power on the UN Security Council. This reality makes nearly any UN-endorsed peace initiatives that exclude Assad impossible. For these reasons, Turkey should synchronize itself with the new realities that inform the possibility of a Syrian peace plan. As a country which is no longer a bastion of regional stability, and amid rapidly proliferating conflict, Turkey should replace its long-held, self-defeating policy of gambling on regime change with the prioritization of stabilization and, ultimately, peace.

Along with de-militarization, another alternative policy option that Turkey should follow is emphasizing the humanitarian dimension of the conflict, as doing so would basically serve to offset the aforementioned perils of military escalation. As a party which desires not to be dragged into the conflict in Syria, an emphasis on the humanitarian dimension of the conflict would not only draw a new guiding framework for Turkey's engagement in the Syrian conflict, but also alleviate the perceptions

that Turkey will militarily intervene in Syria (something occasionally articulated by Russia, the Assad regime and Iran). In the absence of a sufficient deterrent to the Assad regime's external supporters, emphasizing the humanitarian dimension of the conflict remains a viable option. In this way, Turkey along with its partners could stabilize refugee flows ahead and after a peace plan is implemented. The international perception that portrays the Middle East as an anarchic jumble already impacts the behaviour of the international community, pushing it to conceive of the current conflict in Syria not as a humanitarian tragedy but as part and parcel of a convoluted quagmire from which it is better to exclude oneself.²⁷ This puts the fate of Syria into the hands of a select few actors who primarily act within the bounds of a self-oriented *Realpolitik*, and prevents the involvement of others who could otherwise be able to constructively facilitate the essential peace-building process in Syria.²⁸ By humanitarianizing the conflict rather than further militarizing it, Turkey can attempt to break the streak of international stagnation by mustering partners to undermine the sporadic and dangerous interventions of Russia and Iran in Syria. Russia may be targeting opposition groups in an effort to essentially buy time for Assad and provide him with a stronger foundation and bargaining position post-conflict.

9 Conclusion

In stark juxtaposition to the heyday of Turkish foreign policy in the region that was witnessed in the early 2000s, the geopolitics of Turkey's southern border now offers very little in terms of opportunity and positive pay-offs while offering an abundance in terms of challenges and negative spillovers. Turkey has entered an era in which various crisis management systems should be developed particularly in the context of:

- 1 migration
- 2 the growing number of terrorist organizations and
- 3 the proliferation of incendiary regional and international foreign involvement.

Turkey has never faced such complex phenomena in the Middle East – a set of challenges that require a sophisticated response. Even though the challenges cited here primarily seem to concern Turkey, in fact their broader contexts concern Turkey's Western allies as well. Turkey does not possess the capacity to face these challenges on its own, nor does it have the option to avoid the negative spill-overs originating beyond its southern border by simply disengaging itself from the Middle East as it had done up until the 1990s. Given the existing expectation-capability gap, Turkey can only overcome the present challenges by establishing and acting as a convener and focal point for the establishment of an effective alliance. In this respect,

a resolution to the tumult occurring south of Turkey's borders can best be found through: cooperation on the refugee crisis; promotion of a much-needed security dialogue; de-militarization and the humanitarianization of the power battle in Syria and Iraq; a deepening of Turkey's security cooperation with state-level counterparts rather than proxies; and each party's re-evaluation of the sensitive realities on the ground.

Endnotes

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