Political geography of Turkey’s intervention in Syria: underlying causes and consequences (2011-2016)

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Abstract

Purpose – What are the causes and consequences of Turkey’s intervention in Syria? The purpose of this paper is to explore this question by focusing on the time frame from 2011 to 2016, i.e. prior to Turkey’s strategic U-turn from uncompromising enmity toward Russia and Iran.

Design/methodology/approach – Process tracing is used as the main methodological guideline.

Findings – Turkey’s intervention in Syria has been driven by a mutually reinforcing interaction of geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-cultural factors. Turkey’s neo-Ottomanist geo-strategy has been militarized in the context of the Arab Spring, perceived decline of US hegemony, increasing Kurdish autonomy and Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi’s (AKP) electoral setbacks. Second, Turkey’s intervention has been triggered by the converging motivations for energy security, easily gained profits from the black energy market and economic integration with Arab-Gulf countries in the face of a stagnating Western capitalism. A third set of factors speaks to the AKP’s instrumental use of Sunni sectarianism and Kurdish ethnopolitics.

Originality/value – The research aim is to provide a systematic and multi-causal explanation of Turkey’s involvement in Syria.

Keywords Energy security, Geo-culture, Geo-economy, Geopolitics, Neo-Ottomanism, Sectarianism

Paper type Research paper

The ongoing civil conflict in Syria has triggered one of the worst humanitarian crises and the largest refugee crisis in the post-Second World War era (Otero and Gürcan, 2016). Certainly, Turkey has been a key actor in this conflict by resorting to diplomatic and economic sanctions, encouraging military intervention and fueling the proxy warfare (Phillips, 2017; Okyay, 2017; Daoudy, 2016). Turkey’s active role in the Syrian conflict, thus, arouses widespread curiosity about the political-geographical causes of Turkey’s intervention in Syria. In exploring these causes, the present paper aims to provide a systematic and multi-causal explanation of Turkey’s involvement in Syria.

In this paper, foreign intervention refers to “the threat or use of force across state borders by a state (or group of states) […] without the permission of the state within whose territory force is applied” (as adapted from Holzgrefe, 2003, p. 18). In Turkey’s case, its Syrian intervention entails a mix of direct and indirect methods, that is, cross-border military and intelligence operations as well as cooperation with Turkey-aligned opposition groups in Syria. Given the centrality of territorial rivalries in the Syrian conflict, my analysis of Turkey’s intervention employs a political geography approach, understood as an approach that is invested in investigating the interaction of territories and borders with political power and resistance (Agnew et al., 2003). Within this framework, I identify three sets of mutually reinforcing factors that may have encouraged Turkey’s intervention in the Syrian conflict: geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-cultural factors. Accordingly, this paper is divided into three sections that address each of the mediating factors in their order. In these sections, I focus on the time frame from 2011 up to 2016, i.e. prior to Turkey’s strategic U-turn from uncompromising enmity toward Russia and Iran (Phillips, 2017, pp. 44-5).
Process tracing is used as the main methodological guideline. This method heavily relies on logical reasoning and evidence gathering. Therefore, the research process is structured just as in detective work, which consists of piecing the clues together with reference to suspects’ means, motives, preferences, perception and opportunity to have committed the murder in question (Vennesson, 2008; Bennett, 2010). Hypothesis confirmation in process tracing is strongest when the given hypothesis passes the smoking gun and doubly decisive tests. The smoking gun test provides the researcher with implicating and conclusive evidence, as in the case of a detective that catches a person of interest with the murder weapon. In turn, the doubly decisive test involves several conclusive results that eliminate all of the alternative explanations. This test is analogous to a detective who catches the person of interest with the murder weapon and acquires the video footage of the murder, simultaneously (Collier, 2011). Indeed, the “interpretivist” mode of process tracing (Vennesson, 2008) allows for a more flexible narrative structure without compromising its empirical robustness. This interpretivist mode is of great convenience for strategic analysis, which is also interested in understanding the preferences, goals, values and perceptions of global actors.

I conceptualize geopolitics as an approach invested in studying the politics of power in a geographical frame (Steinmetz, 2012, p. 2). As regards geopolitics, I restrict my focus on how Turkey’s overall geo-strategic parameters are configured by its geopolitical location and strategic developments in neighboring regions. In turn, geo-economic factors speak to “the relationship between economic policy and changes in national power and geopolitics” (Baru, 2012, p. 47). I posit that the primary geo-economic factors in Turkey’s intervention in Syria are energy politics and Arab-Gulf capitalism. By geo-culture, finally, I understand the ways in which “a state might utilize its cultural bonds – such as religious, historical, linguistic or ethnic ties – with other countries” (Dogan and Yuvaci, 2012, p. 10) in pursuit of strategic interests. Geo-cultural parameters in Turkey’s intervention in Syria are configured by the Sunni sectarian and ethnopolitical thrust of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP)) government. In the particular context of this paper, sectarianism is understood as the politics of creating “religious divisions in society according to denominational boundaries” (Hogan, 1984, p. 85). Ethnopolitics is used to denote the politics of “mobilising ethnicity […] into political leverage” (Rothschild, 1981, pp. 2-3), and examined here in the context of Kurdish politics.

Geopolitics of neo-Ottomanism, the Arab Spring and the AKP’s foreign policy

Until former PM Ahmet Davutoğlu’s resignation in 2016 and Turkey’s early rapprochement with Russia, the AKP’s foreign policy has hinged on what came to be called the “neo-Ottomanist” doctrine. Davutoğlu argued that Turkey sits at the main power corridors and energy routes in the Black Sea and Mediterranean. Therefore, according to him, Turkey must assume its pivotal status by redeploying its Ottoman legacy (Davutoğlu, 2001). The ultimate geo-strategic objective in the long term consisted of transforming Turkey from a regional into a global power. Meanwhile, Turkey’s expansion was to start from the closest basin, especially the Middle Eastern region (Davutoğlu, 2001). Not surprisingly, Davutoğlu attributed a strategic importance to Syria, not only because Turkey shares its longest common border with Syria, but also in terms of dominating the wider Mediterranean geopolitics (Davutoğlu, 2001).

From 2002 to the onset of the Syrian conflict, the AKP’s foreign policy had started to carry into effect the neo-Ottomanist project with strong emphasis on the policy of what Davutoğlu called “zero problems with neighboring countries” (ZPNC). Special efforts were devoted to avoid direct confrontation and instead, pursuing mutual economic interests in the region (Davutoğlu, 2001). Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, its hijacking by Islamist movements and Western military interventions (Otero and Gürcan, 2016; Keyman and Gumuscu, 2014), however, the AKP’s new-Ottomanism seems to have shifted its priorities from conflict avoidance and diplomatic mediation toward direct confrontation and interventionism. The increasing autonomy of regional Kurds following the US interventions and rise of the so-called Islamic State have further fostered Turkey’s interventionism (Khan, 2015; Taspınar, 2012).

In process tracing, declared intentions by political leaders and state officials can only provide hoop test evidence, which is still inconclusive and requires further investigation (Bennett, 2010). The strategic
developments since the outbreak of the Arab Spring provide smoking gun evidence on the evolution of neo-Ottomanist expansionism and the geopolitical aspects of Turkey’s involvement in Syria. The electoral success of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia’s Ennahda Party in the Arab Spring conjuncture “rendered an opportunity for Turkey to create a belt of moderate Islamist governments in the region” (Khan, 2015, p. 46). In Libya, Turkey took the lead in coordinating anti-Qaddafi foreign mercenaries and jihadists in lieu of the West’s determination in overthrowing Qaddafi’s regime. This deviation from conflict avoidance made Turkey explore emerging opportunities to re-activate its neo-Ottomanist strategy by taking advantage of civil conflicts in the Islamic world. Motivated by the Libyan experience, the AKP’s policy makers believed that Assad’s regime could easily be overthrown in line with the neo-Ottoman project of creating a belt of moderate Islamist governments in the region. The militarization of Turkey’s neo-Ottomanism toward interventionism is perhaps best exemplified in Turkey’s active role in hosting jihadist meetings, funding Libyan and other mercenaries, providing them with medical assistance and leisure opportunities, shipping arms to Syria, and sending mercenaries and equipment to Syria (e.g. Abouzeid, 2013).

Moreover, it is highly probable that this geo-strategic transformation has been facilitated by recent developments in domestic politics since 2012. Turkey’s recourse to military interventionism may have been accelerated by the breakdown of the hegemonic alliance of President Erdoğan’s AKP with the left-wing liberal bloc that was used to mobilize non-devout AKP supporters, and more importantly with the AKP’s so-called “moderate” and “pro-Western” wing including key figures such as Fethullah Gülen, Bülent Arınç and Abdullah Gül (Türkiye, 2016, pp. 2, 7-10, 14-17). In this regard, the Gezi Park protests – the anti-government civil unrest that erupted on 28 May 2013 – (Gürkan and Peker, 2014, 2015a, b) and the general elections of June 2015 in which the AKP lost its parliamentary majority may have played a crucial role in increasing the military overtones of neo-Ottomanism. Eventually, in the face of its eroding legitimacy in domestic policy, it seems that the AKP started to increasingly rely on coercive measures and consolidate its core voter base via the militarization of Turkey’s Syrian policy and the expansion of the military conflict toward Syrian and Anatolian Kurds.

An auxiliary factor that may have further encouraged the militarization of Turkey’s neo-Ottomanism concerns the “perceived” decline of US hegemony in the Middle East. According to Christopher Phillips, “the failures of the 2003-11 occupation of Iraq, the decreasing importance of Gulf oil, the economic and military retrenchment following the 2008 financial crisis, and the election of Barack Obama, a critic of his predecessor’s military adventures, all prompted reluctance in Washington to continue an active hegemony (Phillips, 2017, p. 36).” Accordingly, Phillips maintains that the perceived decline of US hegemony provided an encouraging environment for Turkey—along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar—to extend its own regional influence and proactively oppose Iran’s increased activism in the region (Phillips, 2017, p. 37).

Finally, the overall implications of the militarization of Turkey’s neo-Ottomanism are worth exploring in the context of the Syrian conflict. Under rising authoritarianism in domestic politics and militarization, neo-Ottomanism has lost much of its appeal and credibility by undermining its underlying principles of ZPNCo, “humanitarianism” and “global justice and democracy” (Özkececi-Taner, 2017; Ayata, 2015; Aras, 2014). This loss of credibility has also consigned Turkey to political isolation from the international community and, especially, the USA, who is displeased by Turkey’s overconfidence and adventurism. In particular, the above-mentioned trends and implications have found their sharpest expression in Turkey’s Syrian intervention, because not only was Syria seen as the “poster-child” or the “most successful application” of Turkey’s ZPNCo doctrine (Ayata, 2015, p. 102; Phillips, 2012, p. 13; Coşkun, 2015, p. 192), but also “Turkey has been more actively engaged in Syria than any other Arab country in the context of the […] Arab revolutions” (Öniş, 2014, pp. 209-10). The Syrian conflict has marked Turkey’s abandonment of its “value-based foreign policy” (Ayata, 2015, pp. 106-07) toward military interventionism at the price of multiplying regional security threats, domestic instability and political isolation.

Geo-economics of Turkey’s intervention in Syria: energy politics and the Gulf connection

Turkey’s energy-related geo-economic involvement in Syria is greatly attributable to pipeline politics. In fact, “the entire Turkish energy security relies on gas from Russia and Iran”
Turkey, thus, aspires to diversify its energy sources, relieve its excessive dependence on Russian and Iranian energy and eventually become an energy hub that connects Eastern energy to Europe. As Igor Delanoë reveals, “Ankara’s deep anti-Assad stance partly illustrates how strategic is its objective to become a key energy hub” (2014, p. 5). In this context, one could argue that Turkey sees Syria as a great rival that shares the same aspiration of becoming a regional energy hub (Ipek, 2015; Winrow, 2016; Delanoë, 2014).

As part of Turkey’s energy aspirations, the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline was initiated in March 2015. Its successful construction would open up a gas corridor from Azerbaijan through Georgia and Turkey to Europe (Nader, 2013). According to Delanoë (2014), this project was interfered by the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline project, which also presented a direct competition to the Qatar-Turkey pipeline project. The Qatar-Turkey project was to connect Qatar’s natural gas over Turkey via Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria. Syria rejected this project in 2009 to protect the interests of Russia – Syria’s main economic partner – which is pointed as being one of the main reasons for Qatar’s active involvement in the Syrian conflict (Nader, 2013).

In addition, there is more to the story than energy politics. The AKP years have seen a spectacular increase in the circulation of unregistered currency in the Turkish economy since the Syrian conflict. This is believed to be a result of the government’s encouragement for the expansion of a “black economy” in partnership with oil rich Gulf states and jihadists. Net errors and omission (NEO) are used as an indicator to assess the illegal movements of financial funds (Cypher and Dietz, 2005, p. 469, f. 9). The World Bank data depict the changing NEO trends in the period between 2005 and 2014 (BoP, current US$). A positive NEO value represents the statistically unrecorded capital inflows or exports, whereas a negative NEO value represents the statistically unrecorded capital outflows or imports. It is striking to observe that Turkey’s NEO value peaks in 2011 with the onset of the Syrian conflict with a value of over $8 milliards as compared to the 2005 level of over $1,4 milliards. This being said, the 2002 NEO levels were only -$758 million (World Bank, 2016).

The AKP government is known to have pursued a deliberate policy of attracting Arab capitalists to Turkey. Undoubtedly, ideological and religious sentiments have played a crucial role in the AKP’s active policy of attracting Arab investment. By the same token, Arab investment is seen as an opportunity to stabilize the Turkish economy in the face of stagnating Western economies. Eventually, the convergence of ideological affinities and the need to maintain economic stability facilitated foreign policy partnership, as observed in the former Saudi, Qatari and Turkish alliance to take down Assad.

From a geo-economic perspective, the increasing integration of the Turkish economy with Arab-Gulf capitalism is clearly visible in foreign trade and investment. Between 2002 and 2015, Turkey’s export levels to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and United Arab Emirates increased by more than 526, 2,617 and 923 percent. Similar levels have been recorded as to imports from the same countries in the same period, namely, over 1,652, 3,286 and 1,892 percent (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2016a). A dramatic hike was observed in inward FDI flows from Gulf-Arabian countries, from $47 million in 2004 to 1.5 milliards in 2013. Concerning the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, the available OECD data suggest that the amount of inward financial FDI to Turkey in liabilities is not at a level that can be ignored, having risen from $210 and $223 million in 2013 to $207.35 and $323 million in 2014, respectively (OECD, 2016).

Aside from foreign trade and investment, another key area that grows in relevance with Turkey’s relationships to the Arab-Gulf capitalism is the real estate market and tourism. The real estate sector is important, because it can easily stimulate the economy without even engaging in productive activity. Similarly, the importance of the tourism sector in Turkey lies in its status as a crucial revenue source, which generated over $34 milliards (4.3 percent of GDP) in 2014 alone (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2016b; TURSAB, 2015). According to the available official data in 2015, Iraqi, Saudi and Kuwaiti nationals occupied the first three ranks in total real estate sales by foreigners, with 4,228, 2,704 and 2,130 real estate transactions, respectively (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2016c). In 2015, half of total real estate sales to foreigners were made by buyers of Arab nationalities (CNN Turk, 2016). Finally, it is worthwhile to take a glance at the number of arriving foreign citizens and citizens from Arab-Gulf countries, which offers a broader picture of how Turkey’s tourism, cultural interactions and business cooperation have been developing with
these countries. The number of arriving foreign citizens and citizens from Qatar and Saudi Arabia has soared by 4,248 and 1,656 percent between 2002 and 2015, from 824 and 25,656 to 35,832 and 450,674, respectively (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2016b). In sum, given that converging economic interests and concerns about mutual welfare gains have a propensity to generate harmonious foreign policy behavior between countries by also increasing the opportunity cost of uncooperativeness (Kleinberg and Fordham, 2013), one could conclude that Turkey’s increasing dependence on Arab-Gulf capitalism in order to maintain economic stability in the face of a stagnating Western capitalism seems to have facilitated the formation of an alliance against the Assad regime.

The geo-cultural aspects of Turkey’s intervention in Syria: the AKP’s instrumental use of sectarianism and ethnopolitics

Turkey’s geo-cultural engagements have been a major determinant in its interventionism against Syria. However, this determinant warrants caution, since it only partially explains Turkey’s interventionism in Syria. For example, ethnoreligious ties cannot account for the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement in the period 2002-2011 (Akbaba and Özdamar, 2016). What Erdoğan originally wanted in post-2011 Syria was to replace Assad’s regime with a friendly, Sunni leadership (Phillips, 2012, p. 9). This was one of his chief motivations in supporting the revolt against Assad who belongs to and has instrumentalized the Alawite sect against the Sunni dominated insurgency. In practice, however, the AKP has relied on an “instrumental” use of Sunni sectarianism and Kurdish ethnopolitics (Hinnebusch, 2016; Farha, 2016), that is, a pragmatic attempt at politicizing religion and ethnicity characterized by inconsistent appropriation of the Sunni tradition and enmity with the Kurds. Capitalizing on ethnoreligious ties and supporting Sunni Syrians have certainly helped the AKP government to mobilize its own constituency at the home front (Akbaba and Özdamar, 2016).

Regarding the instrumentalist aspect of sectarianism, Turkey’s inconsistencies find their sharpest expression in its abandonment of “Sunni” eastern Aleppo in December 2016, its inaction against deadly Russian airstrikes in “[Sunni] Idlib several times, and Turkey’s closing of Idlib’s “Khirbet ah-Joz” humanitarian border crossing in July 2017. Yet, one cannot deny the sectarian “Islamization of Turkey’s foreign policy” since 2009 given Erdoğan’s references to Quran in justifying his foreign policy stance, rupture with Israel, offering of asylum to Sunni ex-Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, rifts with Iraq’s Shiite ex-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, unconditional support for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and support for the Free Syrian Army alongside Sunni Syrian and Iraqi Kurds (Özkececi-Taner, 2017, pp. 205-06; Coşkun, 2015, p. 194; Öniş, 2014; Özpek and Demirağ, 2014, pp. 343-4). Meanwhile, the use of sectarianism has been extremely convenient in motivating the pro-Turkish Sunni opposition in Syria and consolidating anti-Assadism with the aim of expanding Turkey’s area of influence. Based on this evidence, Ziya Öniş (2014, pp. 207-13) points to unresolved tensions between Turkey’s growing sectarianism and pragmatic priorities. Yet, in the final analysis, “Turkey can [...] be viewed as having narrowed its Middle East understanding into Sunni groups” (Özpek and Demirağ, 2014, p. 344).

As part of the doubly decisive evidence for Turkey’s implication in the Syrian conflict, the immediate reflection of the AKP’s Sunni sectarianism in the Syrian conflict can be found in its policies toward Turkmen communities. A portion of Syrian Turkmen has been one of Turkey’s most important policy instruments for its intervention in Syria. The Turkmen population in Syria is estimated at between 750,000 and 800,000 (Ödemiş, 2015). Turkmen are known to have fought against the so-called Islamic State under the roof of the Turkey-led Euphrates Shield (ES) in August 2016. However, Sunni Turkmen allied with al-Nusra Front and Chechen terrorists have also been supported by Turkey in attacking the Assad regime’s Şabanî military station and massacring Alevi villages in the region. These Turkmen were organized in small armed gangs, such as the Sultan Selim Brigade, Sultan Abdüllahamit Brigade, Sultan Murat Brigade, Fatih/Feth Army and Bayır Bucak Army (Ödemiş, 2015). During the conflict in El Lazkiye with regime forces in 24 November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian jet with the pretext of protecting Turkmen forces. However, the AKP government did not exhibit the same kind of sensibility when 700 Shiite Turkmen were massacred by jihadists in the Northern Iraqi village of Beshir between 11 and 12 July 2015, among many other reported and unreported incidents (Ödemiş, 2015).
No major sectarian rifts were evidenced among Turkmen communities until the US wars in Iraq and Turkey’s interventions in Iraq and Syria since the 1990s (Erdemol, 2015; Yıldırım, 2016). However, their political fragmentation and concomitant vulnerability to jihadist attacks are mostly a result of Turkey’s intervention (Erdemol, 2015). Regarding Syrian Turkmen, the majority of whom are Sunni, they were not politicized and organized prior to the Syrian conflict and Turkey’s intervention (Taştekin, 2015). It is reported that most Syrian Shiite Turkmens sided with the Assad regime or took refuge in Turkey, contrary to Sunni Turkmens who are associated with pro-Turkish jihadism (İdiz, 2015). In turn, Shiite Turkmens who took refuge in Turkey following the AKP-supported al-Nusra attacks to Alevi villages, joined Turkey’s homeless populations, whereas Sunni refugees from Syria were provided with better conditions and settled in refugee camps (e.g. Sol Daily News, 2013).

Indeed, Turkey’s sectarianism in Syria is not confined to the micropolitics of Turkmens, and can be observed at a more general level as to its geo-economic confrontation with Iran and Hezbollah. Most importantly, Iran’s growing influence over Syria has fostered Turkey’s interventionism in the post-Arab Spring period, since “Syria was even more than before seen by Turkey as too important to be lost to Iran’s sphere of influence (Kalaban, 2016, p. 36).” In Turkey’s eyes, Syria had also emerged “as the weakest link in Iran’s ‘resistance axis’”, and thus provided “an opportunity for Turkey to stage a countermove against Tehran” (Kalaban, 2016, p. 36).

For Iran, sustained cooperation with the Assad regime offers guaranteed access to Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East along with an opportunity to expand its regional Shiite influence and constrain Israel’s regional power (Turkey, 2016, p. 13; Öniş, 2014, p. 211). As a straw-in-the-wind evidence, it must be more than a mere coincidence that the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline project was accepted in 2010 and formally announced in 2011 right before the onset of the Syrian conflict. This was a competing project with Turkey’s Nabucco and Qatar-Turkey pipeline projects (Ahmed, 2013; United Press International, 2011). Of geopolitical and geo-cultural relevance for Iran’s presence in Syria is its concerns about Assad’s possible departure, which could result in a Sunni government and concomitantly Iran’s regional isolation (Barfi, 2016). Indeed, Hezbollah – which has been present since the very beginning of the Syrian conflict and associated with Iran’s proxy war – would greatly suffer from such outcomes. From the standpoint of Turkey, finally, the consolidation of a Shiite axis in Syria would undermine Turkish regional hegemony and sectarian desires (Tremblay, 2016).

Kurdish ethnopolitics is of similar geo-cultural importance as Turkey’s sectarian policies. Kurdish groups have been taking advantage of the power vacuum created by the Syrian conflict. Against this backdrop, Turkey’s worries about a possible “Kurdish spillover effect” of autonomization toward its territories constitute a chief factor that fosters Turkish interventionism against Syria. Turkey has the world’s largest Kurdish population, which is estimated to account for at least 17 percent of its population, whereas Syria’s Kurdish population is estimated at about 10 percent of the Syrian population (Thornton, 2015; Lindenstrauss and Eran, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2014; Dal, 2016). Upon Turkey’s growing aggression toward Syria in 2012, the Assad regime decided to withdraw most of its authority from the Kurdish regions in northeastern territories bordering Turkey. Formerly exiled Kurdish leaders such as Salih Muslim Muhammed were invited back to Syria. These tactical decisions by Syria were aimed at not only diverting Turkey’s attention from anti-Assadism toward the Kurdish question but also concentrating all available resources on holding the Syrian position in the heartland of the country (Gunter, 2013; Phillips, 2012).

One of the greatest winners of Syria’s retreat has been the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is accused by Turkey of being affiliated with the outlawed and Turkey-based Workers’ Party of Kurdistan (PKK). Not only had the PKK built a relatively solid base in Syria thanks to this country’s active support in the 1990s, but also Turkey had introduced a reform package in 2009 in order to improve the rights and freedoms of its Kurdish population and disarm the PKK, which gave a free hand to the PKK for moving its troops to Syria (Thornton, 2015; Keyman and Sebnem, 2014). In this context, Turkish authorities have grown fearful of rising Kurdish autonomism in Syria and alleged Kurdish attempts at reengineering the regional demographics and triggering a pan-Kurdish awakening that could spread to the region. They fear that this situation could also further undermine Turkey’s hegemony in the Iraqi Kurdistan in the PKK’s favor and destabilize...
domestic politics in Turkey (Gunter, 2013; Dal, 2016; Thornton, 2015; Lindenstrauss and Oded, 2014; Nader et al., 2016; Plakoudas, 2017). Moreover, although the PYD still remains open to the prospects of cooperation with Russia and Iran, the consolidation of its partnership with the USA is a source of growing concern for Turkey, who feels alienated by the reluctance of the USA to resort to direct military intervention and its reliance on Kurdish proxies that could undermine Turkey’s national security (Gunter, 2016). Therefore, Turkey’s threat perceptions have further motivated its interventionism against Syria, which is perhaps best exemplified in its shelling of PYD targets in Syria and Operation ES in August 2016. Particularly, Turkey was widely criticized for using the Islamic State threat as a pretext to intervene in Syria in order to curb the PYD’s growing power (International Crisis Group, 2016, p. 5; Ayata, 2015, p. 108; Gunter, 2016, p. 82; Dal, 2016, p. 19; Plakoudas, 2017, pp. 107-12). With this aim, Turkey has also expanded its military activities following ES and started a new military operation in Idlib as this paper was going to press (Çoban, 2017; Tastekin, 2017).

Finally, as in the case of sectarianism, Turkey’s use of Kurdish ethnopolitics reflects an explicitly instrumentalist inclination that seeks to divide Syrian Kurds by pitting them against each other. In Syria, the Kurdish opposition is divided into two groups: the PYD-supported People’s Council and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) formed of 12-15 Kurdish parties. The KNC, however, is known to be backed by Turkey against the PYD’s hegemony, and is widely associated with the leadership of Massoud Barzani, an Iraqi conservative Sunni leader who has established closer economic and political ties with Turkey (Gunter, 2013, pp. 451-3; International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 37, 2016, p. 5).

Conclusion

Between 2011 and 2016, Turkey’s intervention in Syria has been driven by a mutually reinforcing interaction of geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-cultural factors. It is possible to argue that Turkey’s neo-Ottomanist geo-strategy in Syria has been militarized in the context of the Arab Spring marked by Islamist resurgence, Western interventionism, Turkey’s opportunistic moves away from conflict avoidance, and the AKP’s electoral setbacks. The perceived decline of US hegemony and increasing Kurdish autonomy thanks to US interventions may have further encouraged the transformation of Turkey’s geopolitics in a so-called “proactive” direction. Further militarization has been observed due to the converging motivations for pipeline projects, easily gained profits from the black energy market, foreign trade with Arab-Gulf countries, and real estate and tourism, all despite the global stagnation. These sources have been important in maintaining the political stability of the AKP regime to a certain extent, which however proved to be unsustainable after the Gezi Park protests and the 2016 military coup attempt. A third relevant factor has been Turkey’s efforts to prevent the consolidation of a Shiite “Iran-Iraq-Syria-Hezbollah axis” and pan-Kurdish nationalism as well as its devastating manifestations in Turkey’s Turkmen and Kurdish policies. Considering this picture, the research agenda ahead is to explore how the new configuration of political geography – characterized by the unexpected resilience of the Syrian regime, the advance of Russia and Iran in Syria and the dubious alienation of Turkey from the Western alliance – will affect Turkey’s geopolitical trajectory. It also remains to be seen whether Turkey’s strong sectarian and ethnopolitical legacy could impede the abandonment of its already bankrupt foreign policy model for the time the AKP remains in power.

References


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