

# TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY SHIFTS TOWARDS SYRIA

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## **Abstract**

*Being located at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa, connecting Middle East, Balkan and Caucasus alongwith its historical legacy of Ottoman Empire, Turkey plays an important role in the regional and global politics as well as determines its foreign policy accordingly. Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Erdogan with Islamic ideological background entering to Turkish politics in 2001, got victory in the elections of 2002, since then hitherto ruling the country. 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 at the territories today called Syria. During Seljuk time, Turks captured Syria which replaced with Mamluks. The Ottomans regained sovereignty in Syria at the 16<sup>th</sup> century which continued till the end of First World War. Then, Turkish-Syrian relations developed as mandate shaped by France. Since then, some conflicting issues affecting Turkish-Syrian relations such as the Hatay (Sanjak) issue, water sharing issues. 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 situated at opposite sites. Syria supported PKK, which Ankara regarded as terrorist group operating against Turkey. This hostile attitude gradually changed under AKP's soft foreign policy towards Syria. Potential Kurdish state risk after Iraq war, common security perceptions after 9/11, compelled both the countries to adopt collective security measures. This article is exclusively aimed at discovering the factors which prompted Turkey to shift its policy towards Syria during the crises caused by Arab Spring. It will also include the nature and historical developments of Turkish-Syrian relations with a view to understanding the driving factors behind shifting policy.*

## **Keywords**

Turkish-Syrian Relations, Foreign Policy, AKP, Arab Spring, Policy Shifts, Hatay, Strategic Depth, Bilateral Relations.

## **Introduction**

Being located at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa, connecting trouble zones of Balkan, Middle East and Caucasus, with a predominant 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 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* which swept victory in the general elections of 2002, while major political parties that ruled the country for decades failed to secure 10% 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*<sup>1</sup> policy. Proposing 'zero problem'<sup>2</sup> principle with Turkish vicinity, it developed close ties with neighboring countries including the Middle East, Eurasia, Balkans and 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 on the importance of economic interdependency and need to build strong economic linkages with all regional states and to eliminate all the problems from her neighbor's relationships.

Turkish-Syrian interactions had begun in the 8<sup>th</sup> century under the *Umayyad* caliphate. The Turks gradually occupied higher ranks in the *Umayyad* state and settled down at the territories today called-Syria. During *Seljuk* time, Turks captured Syria which replaced with *Mamluks*. The Ottomans regained sovereignty in Syria in the 16<sup>th</sup> century which continued till the end of 1<sup>st</sup> 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 denied by France. But on the eve of 2<sup>nd</sup> 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, both the countries situated at opposite sites. Syria provided support to PKK, which Turkey regarded as terrorist group operating against it. This hostile attitude gradually changed under AKP's soft policy towards Syria. After Iraq war, potential Kurdish state risk, 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 *Assad* regime with the emergence of Arab Spring. Ankara, from the beginning warned *Assad* to undertake democratic reforms and consistently called upon to stop violence. Turkey tried to negotiate between *Assad* government and the opposition, but Damascus ignored all the steps, rather expressed her determination to continue harsh crackdown. Realizing the perspectives, Turkey started to shift her policy criticizing Syria publicly. Finally, Turkey gave her 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 Arab Spring. It also includes the nature and historical developments of Turkish-Syrian relations with a view to understanding the driving factors behind shifting policy.

### **Geopolitical and Strategic Importance of Turkey**

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 Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus regions. Turkey's territories rest on Asia and Europe, while it borders with the Middle East and post-Soviet states. It is surrounded on three sides by the Black Sea, Aegean Sea and Mediterranean Sea that makes it a natural passage between Europe and Asia. Having predominant Muslim population, it has culturally been considered as a connecting bone between West and Islam. Threat perceptions from the complex structures of Middle East, Caucasus and Balkans pushed Turkey seeking allies to balance geopolitical disadvantage. Another geostrategic importance of Turkey is her Straits,<sup>3</sup> which constitute a highly important place in terms of defense regarding air and sea attacks (Aydin, 2003, p. 315). Thus, it certainly be said that Turkey occupied 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 her identity and ideology that inherited from internal dynamics and historical legacies. Ottoman heritage and empire,<sup>4</sup> which ruled the land for centuries left immense influences on its foreign policy principles. As one of the most powerful empires of the world, Ottoman's applied an imperial and influential foreign policy on a vast territory. The World War 1<sup>st</sup> ended the Ottoman Empire giving birth to the various nation

states. *Mustafa Kemal Atatürk*,<sup>5</sup> the founder of modern Turkey, adopted west-oriented foreign policy to cede 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, p. 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, p. 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 Arab support for dismembering the Ottoman Empire during the World War 1<sup>st</sup> (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 World War 2<sup>nd</sup>, initially Turkey followed an 'active neutral' policy (Deringil, 2004), but towards the end of war, approaching post war conjecture, it declared war against Berlin and Tokyo (Aslan & Selcuk, 2014, p. 139). After 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, international system developed through bipolar structure clustering around the USA and USSR, with which Cold War begun. During Cold War, Turkey developed close ties with the West, particularly with the USA and became a member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952 (Aslan & Selcuk, 2014, p. 149). The dissolution of USSR in 1991 set an end to Cold War and the global political system developed through unipolar structure centering the US. In the 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 supports, scholarships for the 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)<sup>6</sup> terror activities. Thus, Turkey had experienced dramatic shifts and transformations in its foreign policy and structure.

### **Turkey's AKP Government and its Foreign Policy Principles**

With the dissolution of Caliphate in 1924, *Ataturk* implemented strict secularization process in Turkey with harsh crackdown and banning 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, p. 33). The party was immediately banned and *Erbakan* established another political party- National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi) in 1972 (Baran, 2010, p. 34). Following the 1980 military coup, all political parties of Turkey were banned. After restoration of political parties in 1983, *Erbakan* established Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) (Baran, 2010, p. 35), with which Political Islam got a real rise in Turkey. It won Istanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities in 1994 and getting majority in the national elections of 1995 as the first Islamist political party in Turkish history (Baran, 2010, p. 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 Welfare Party was banned. A new-Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi) was formed, but destined similar and dissolved (Baran, 2010, p. 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 argued that the party needed to rethink its approach led by *Recep Tayyip Erdogan*.<sup>7</sup> This rift finally resulted in the formation of a new political party- Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001 (Baran, 2010, p. 44). AKP participated in 2002 general elections and achieved a dramatic victory in the National Parliament securing 34.3% of general polls (Baran, 2010, p. 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, new government was formed headed by *Erdogan* in 2003. Vote percentage of AKP gradually increased in 2007 46.6% which increased almost 50% in 2011 elections (Carkoglu, 2011, p. 48). AKP recorded in the history of Europe as a political party being elected three times consecutively with an increasing vote percentage (Carkoglu, 2011, p. 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*<sup>8</sup> constituted the spine of AKP’s foreign policy. Stressing on 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 crucial role in Europe, Middle East, Caucasus, 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 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. Five operational principles are: the equilibrium between security and democracy, zero problems towards neighbors, proactive and preemptive 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, Caucasus, Central Asia, Balkans and with the emerging global powers (AKP, n.d.).

### **Historical Developments of Turkish-Syrian Relationships**

Turkish-Syrian interactions had begun shortly after the spread of Islam under the *Umayyad*<sup>9</sup> caliphate at the beginning of 8<sup>th</sup> 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, p. 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, pp. 174-175). Aftermaths, Turkish sovereignty in Syria replaced with the *Mamluks*.<sup>10</sup> The Ottomans regained sovereignty in Syria in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Hitti, 1959, p. 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, p. 213). This Ottoman rule continued till the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 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, p. 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 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 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 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, in 1939, France ceded *Hatay* to Turkey. Since then, *Hatay* became an issue of conflict between Turkey and Syria. The 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 her agriculture.<sup>11</sup> Regarding security issues, both the countries situated at opposite sites. 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 her territories for many terrorist groups like ASALA,<sup>12</sup> which committed many attacks against Turkish diplomats. Terror bargains brought both the states to a war level in 1998 (Aykan, 1999). The tension was calmed down with signing ‘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 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 specially 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

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(Aras, 2012, p. 44), which has been dubbed as 'neo-Ottomanism' (McDonald, 2012). This approach resulted in the dramatic progress of Turkish-Syrian relations. The 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 induced it to develop relations with Turkey, while Turkey needed Syrian support to protect 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 Middle East. Thus there was an eagerness at both sides to develop relations.

The relations started to be improved with 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 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 Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Syria and Turkey (Turkish Weekly, 2004). During the height of Lebanese *Hariri* assassination crisis 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 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, p. 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 bombing 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, p. 37). Turkey also benefited from its ties with Syria. It opened the gateway of Arab world for Turkey and anti-Ottoman sentiment among Arabians gradually soften, which helped Turkey to boost its regional influence and economic ties with the region.

The relationship was also progressed in the economic field. Turkey

considered Syria as an entrance into wider Arab markets, while Syria considered Turkey as a source of investments. 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, pp. 164-171). 'Turkish-Syrian Regional Cooperation Program' was created to develop technical, economic, cultural and scientific cooperation (Tur, 2010, pp. 167-168). With FTA, both the 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 the 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 will meet at least twice every year to make a common action plan that will be executed under the leadership of two Prime Ministers (Tur, 2010, p. 168). These steps introduced a new phase in the bilateral relations.

Turkish-Syrian military cooperation was also developed. Three day long joint military exercise was held in April 2009 (Tur, 2010, p. 174). Two countries signed a technical military cooperation agreement to deepen collaboration between their defense industries, ignoring Israeli concern (Tur, 2010, p. 166). The water issue was commenced to be viewed as a technical detail between the parts (Tur, 2010, pp. 164-171). During *Erdogan's* visit, Syrian Prime Minister *Otri* stated 'Turkey and Syria were leaving the traditional water problem back' in the press conference, *Erdogan* responded, 'We are aiming development and cooperation, other issues are forgotten' (Tur, 2010, p. 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 Arabians in 2008 and *Sanawat-al-Dayaa* was watched by sixty-eight million Arabian viewers (Balli & 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, realistic

approach of Turkey, 'zero problems' and 'strategic depth' principles, Turkey's regional influence and 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, p. 173). *Erdogan* openly addressed Syrians as brothers and sisters, (Tur, 2010, p. 164) while *Assad* described Turkey as Syria's best friend (Phillips, 2011, p. 34). The relations seemed extremely rosy until the outbreak of the Arab spring in 2011.

### **AKP's Foreign Policy Towards Syria During and after Arab Spring**

The positive developments of Turkey-Syria relationships were seriously challenged with 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 it back up authoritarian regimes or hear the demands of the society for change. From the very beginning of 'Arab Spring' commenced in Tunisia in 2011, Turkey warned *Assad* to undertake democratic reforms to prevent similar incidents in Syria (Ilgit & Davis, 2013). Because of her 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 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 *Assad* regime that might help to resolve the crisis. Turkey tried to influence Syrian government positively to stop harsh crackdown against civilians. *Erdogan* several times 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 & Davis, 2013). *Assad* didn't response to the Turkish calls and all the Turkish initiatives were 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 decade-long good relationship between Turkey and Syria has come to an end. Ankara started to criticize 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 oppositions in November 2011 (The New York Times, November 22, 2011), with which Turkey openly sided with the oppositions. 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 Syrian territory (The Tripoli Post, November 30, 2011). A part of the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed in Istanbul in August 2011.<sup>13</sup> The Syrian oppositions seem 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 clearly shifted her policy of friendship towards Syria to grievance on the emergence of 'Arab Spring'.

### **Major Reasons Behind AKP's Shifting Policy Towards Syria**

No doubt, several geo-political-strategic-economic and regional-international factors and perceptions persuaded Turkey to follow the shifting policy towards Syria on the emergence of '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:

#### ***Sense of Prestige and National Dignity***

From the inception of 'Arab Spring' in 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 Syrian crisis without harming improved bilateral relations. With this belief,

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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 her concern cautiously prioritizing reforms and regional stability. Turkey tried to negotiate between *Assad* and opposition with several initiatives. But, *Assad* adamantly ignored all the requests and warnings of Turkish government, and continued to use violence instead of reforms. *Assad's* unresponsiveness to *Erdogan's* calls made Ankara angry. Moreover, Turkey views, by any means politically-diplomatically or economically, Syria needs Turkey far more than Turkey needs Syria. So, the Syrian attitude was considered to the Turkish leadership as a dishonor to 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 tune but also initiated a regime change in Syria to dethrone *Assad*. Thus, the sense of national dignity and self-respect prompted Turkey to shift her policy towards Syria evolving from sole pressure, negotiating between *Assad* and the opposition, promoting international sanctions against Syria and finally changing regime.

### ***Massacre to the Civilians***

The AKP government with its all kinds of views and principles could either not support massacre to the civilians or remain silent wherever it happens in the world. From the beginning of Syrian uprising, Turkey tried to resolve the crisis convincing *Assad* to undertake reforms and stop brutality. But, *Assad* refused the possibility of reforms 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* determined to resolve the conflict through harsh security crackdown instead of negotiation, Turkey decided to shift her policy towards Syria following her rational principle of peace. The 'Virtuous Power' policy introduced by *Abdullah Gul* (Today's Zaman, May 03, 2012), has become one of the Turkish foreign policy doctrines, which focuses on Virtue is being respected around the world. Thus, Turkey, from her ideological viewpoint of opposing massacre, stood against *Assad* administration.

### ***To Secure Turkey from Security Threats***

Turkey shares 877 km. land border with Syria. Kurdish people mainly reside in Syria-Turkey border region. PKK, a Kurdish rebellion group in Turkey, for many years has been committing terror attacks inside Turkey. Until *Adana* accord in 1998, Syria was PKK's heaven. *Abdullah Ocalan* -the founder of PKK received asylum in Syria. The unrest in Syria again brought the PKK

challenge in front of Turkey. It has been becoming very difficult for Turkey to prevent 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 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 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 sectarian basis. In sum, Turkey, as a frontier country, currently seems to be 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 in Iraqi borders for years. The failure of the oppositions 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.

### ***Assad's Reported Relationship with the Kurds and 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 recent 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 PKK. Thus, the Syrian rekindled relationship with 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

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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 unitary of Turkish state.

### ***Turkey's Political Intention in Syria***

Though Turkey has been developing relationship with *Assad* politically and economically, but ideologically Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), which has been banned in Syria, is closer to 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, p. 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, SMB leader *Muhammad Riad al-Shaqfa* declared that Syrians would accept Turkish military intervention rather than the West for protection from *Assad's* security forces (Reuters, November 17, 2011). Thus, Arab Spring brought a golden opportunity for Turkey to establish an ideological ally and more friendly government in Syria led by SMB. From this perception, Turkey supported SMB-led oppositions against *Assad*.

### ***Respect Towards 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 military elite had a very powerful political role, now has turned into a fully democratic country under 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. Though Turkey developed economic and regional ties with Syria, but 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 & Seyrek, 2011).

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

### ***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). 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 'Turkish model', which allowed for an Islamic government to operate in a secular society (Democracy Digest, 2014). He stressed that the best model coinciding to Tunisia is Turkey and AKP as a sample coinciding democracy within an Islam majority population (Cagaptay & 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 'Turkish model'. This 'role model' image of Turkey has also been fuelled by her growing economic power and international prestige. In the courses of 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 Syrian case, though Turkey at the beginning was in a dilemma, but finally supported the movement against *Assad's* autocracy as the promoter of democracy and as a 'role model' of Islamization of democracy.

### ***Learning from Libyan Case***

The AKP government also learned from 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 and are holding 525 projects in Libya

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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 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 Syrian upon which it can expand its influence.

### ***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 supports 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 criticized by Iran. The SMB's willingness to adopt Turkish model in governance system also dissatisfied Iran.

Thus, Turkey-Iran competition demonstrated through the ongoing uprising in Syria over regional leadership.

### ***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 reacted with harsh crackdown by the regime. The conflict gradually turned into armed struggle between the *Shi'a* dictator *Assad* and growing *Sunni*-led insurgency 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 her fellow *Sunni* Islamists in Syria. After a period of indecision, Turkey and all of the regional *Sunni* actors turned against *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.

### ***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 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

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Arab Spring also goaled to secure its maximum economic-strategic-national interests together with establishing its leading role. In Tunisian case it applied wait and see policy (Kujawa, 2011), while in Egypt it followed more decisive stand calling *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 interest. 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 Turkey changed 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 her policy.

### ***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 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 either deported Syria's ambassadors or declared as unwanted person such as Australia, France, Germany, Britain, Italy, Spain, Canada and the US. Under these circumstances, Turkey wanted to be with the international community cutting off its relationship with *Assad* regime to develop its international image as a nation honoring democratic sentiment 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 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 strengthen 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 Arab countries. Though Turkey and Saudi Arabia differ over which Syrian opposition should be supported, but 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**

Having 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, AKP adopted new foreign policy concepts sharply different from the *Kemalism* based on 'zero problem' and 'strategic depth' theories of *Davutoglu*. Turkey developed good relationship with the neighboring countries, while it became natural ally of the West as a NATO member. As the inheritor of Ottoman Empire, AKP tried to expand its influence in the Middle East, Caucasus, Balkan and Central Asia. As a result of good neighborhood foreign policy of AKP, 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 PKK, increasing trade volume, lifting visa requirements are the remarkable achievements of 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 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 harsh treatment to the opposition. Rather Syria blamed Turkey to intervene 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 disrespect to Turkish dignity. AKP with an Islamic religious background and humanitarian stand can't support harsh crackdown to the civilian or can't 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 entering PKK militants together, which will pose serious security threat for Turkey. The news of *Assad's* rekindled relationship with PKK fueled the Turkish threat perceptions. AKP always supports the political Islamic movements across the world. Though Turkey has been developing relationship with *Assad's* *Ba'athist* Syria, but ideologically SMB was closer to AKP, which has been banned by *Assad* regime. Turkey desires SMB to come to power. 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 of *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 for successive victory in the elections with increasing vote percentage. So the democratic values have always been honored by the AKP government. During 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 it's 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 *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 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. Turkey also understood the limits of only using soft power or to simply act as mediator rather hard-power elements alongside soft power to be a regional leader. It now wants to be a center of influence using hard and soft-power together. Turkey with its fastest-growing economy, desires to play 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 oppositions 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 Arab Spring. All these factors, perceptions and perspectives prompted Turkey to shift its policy towards Syria on the emergence of Arab Spring.

## References & Notes

1. Kemalist refers to follow the Kemalism adopted by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey. It was characterized by sweeping political-social-cultural-religious reforms to disassociate 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](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 her relations with neighboring countries. Turkey wants to eliminate all the problems from her 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>.
3. For detailed about Turkish Straits see: Nihan Unlu, *The Legal Regime of the Turkish Straits*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Kluwer Law International, Hague, Netherlands, 2002.
4. Ottoman Empire, an empire created by Turkish tribes in Anatolia. One of the most powerful states in the world during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> 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, Serbia, Bosnia, Romania, Greece and 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>.
5. 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>.
6. Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK): A militant Kurdish nationalist organization founded by Abdullah Öcalan 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>.
7. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, (b.1954) Turkish politician, who served as prime minister (2003-14) and president (2014-) of Turkey. Erdoğan 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. Erdoğan 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. Erdoğan resigned as mayor. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/913988/Recep-Tayyip-Erdogan>.
8. Ahmet Davutoğlu (b. 1959), is a Turkish diplomat and politician who has been the 26<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of Turkey since 28 August 2014 and the leader of the

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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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmet_Davuto%C4%9Flu).

9. Ummayyad Dynasty: great Muslim dynasty to rule the Muslim Caliphate from 661 to 750 A.D.
10. Mamluk, a member of the armies of slaves that won political control of several Muslim states during 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>.
11. For details about Turkey-Syria water conflict, see Fathi Zereini & Wolfgang Jaeschke, *Water in the Middle East and North Africa*, Springer, New York, 2004, pp. 319-45.
12. 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>.
13. For details see <http://www.syriancouncil.org>.