



Temporarily Aligned Interest: Cooperation Between Turkey and The United States in The Syrian Civil War – A Foreign Policy Perspective

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ABSTRAK

Perang Saudara Suriah, yang dimulai sejak tahun 2011 dan masih berlangsung, merupakan salah satu konflik terbesar di kawasan tersebut yang sangat memengaruhi stabilitas kawasan secara keseluruhan dan melibatkan banyak pihak. Amerika Serikat bersama dengan Turki memihak pemberontakan anti-pemerintah dan secara aktif mendukung mereka dengan memasok senjata dan amunisi, serta memberikan pelatihan militer. Namun, meskipun memiliki kepentingan bersama untuk mendukung pemberontak anti-pemerintah dan kemudian melawan serangan ISIS, Kepentingan Turki dan AS tidak selalu sejalan satu sama lain. Menggunakan teori realisme hubungan internasional, artikel ini mejabarkan situasi dimana kerjasama antar-negara cenderung dijalankan berdasarkan kepentingan nasional negara masing-masing, melainkan satu-sama-lain. Secara akademis, artikel ini berkontribusi menambah perspektif realisme dalam menganalisis konflik di Suriah.

ABSTRACT

The Syrian Civil War, starting from 2011 and still ongoing, is one of the largest conflicts in the region which highly affected the overall stability of the region and has involved several parties. The United States along with Turkey sided with anti-government rebellions and actively supported them by supplying weapons and munitions, along with military training. However, despite having mutual interest on supporting rebels and later countering ISIS offensives, the Interests of Turkey and US are not always in-line with each other. Using the perspective of realism theory of international relations, this research attempts to highlight a case where cooperations between countries tend to prioritise the benefit of their own countries over their partners. Academically, this paper also contributes on adding an analysis based off realist perspective in relation to the Syrian conflict.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the end of the second world war, the Middle East region has been littered with conflicts. Rebellions, coups, and riots escalated within countries in the Middle East during the 1950s, such as in Cyprus, Iraq, and Lebanon. Furthermore, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 has led to general disapproval by Arab nations, leading to several wars such as Arab-Israeli war of 1948, involving multiple Arab nations such as Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt; Six-day war of 1967, and Yom-Kippur War of 1973. Additionally, the middle east is a region which is rich in oil, one of the most important natural resources in the modern age. Their abundance of natural resources naturally led nations from other regions, especially western nations, to take interest in it.

In 2001, the infamous 9/11 terrorist attack happened in the United States which was allegedly committed by Al-Qaeda terrorist group stationed in the Middle East. As part of their vital national interest to protect themselves from terrorist threat, the US under George W. Bush administration launched the Global war on Terror in late 2001, starting from invading Afghanistan, whos government under the Taliban Regime was accused of harbouring Al

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Qaeda. Later in 2003, The US again lead a coalition force to invade Iraq for the second time, to topple Saddam Hussein's regime which was determined as a threat for US national security and global stability for allegedly possessing WMDs (Weapons of Mass Destruction). The fall of Hussein's regime opens the door for multinational cooperations to take over Iraq's oil fields, as the US and coalition allies attempt to rebuild Iraq into a democratic western-align nation.

The US and coalition forces stayed in Iraq for years as occupational forces attempting to maintain security in the nation. However, they faced heavy resistance from armed groups and suffered significant number of casualties which leads to the public opinion of the US people shifting negatively towards the war in Iraq. Eventually, under the Obama administration, the US completely withdraw their troops from Iraq in late 2011. Earlier in the same year however, propelled by the Tunisian revolution taking down an authoritarian regime, mass protests and uprisings against corruption and authoritarian governments begin all over the Middle East, labelled as "Arab Spring". These protests generally met with hostilities by each of their governments, with Syria having the worst case as it leads to a civil war which is still on-going as of 2021.

Towards Syria, The US and Turkey both condemned the government regarding their treatment of the protestors, and thus they both share a common interest in supporting anti-government factions in Syria. Tensions between Syria and Turkey gradually increased as conflict spreads to the border regions, with refugees from Syria entering Turkey en-masse. Eventually, in 2013 The infamous Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) started to emerge as a recognisable force and has gained worldwide attention by 2014 as they managed to capture cities in Iraq and Syria while brutally slaughtering anyone opposing them in the process. With Iraq's US-trained Security Forces not being able to hold out against ISIS offensive on their own, The US once again redeployed troops to the Middle east starting from Iraq, and eventually participating to fight ISIS in Syria along with their allies (Syrian anti-government forces such as Syrian Democratic Front and Free Syrian Army) (Paust, 2012).

This paper attempts to capture how the US and Turkey cooperate with each other in pursuing each of their national interests in Syria, and how from time to time their interests may not always align with each other's. Directly bordering Syria to the north, Turkey is highly affected by the civil war as their border regions are threatened by an ongoing war which may spread to Turkish territories when uncontrolled. Furthermore, their support for anti-government militias means increasing tension towards Syrian government which may lead to larger conflict. The US on the other hand does not have the same urgency towards Syria like Turkey does however, the US tends to remain on alert regarding Syria as they may pose a threat to their closest ally in the middle east, Israel. It was only when ISIS came into prominence that the US see the need to directly intervene, in order to protect their assets and allies in the region.

The title of this paper, "Temporarily Aligned Interests" thus refers to temporary nature of cooperations, where alignments only happen when each nation has similar interests. With all these backgrounds in mind, few research questions will be scrutinized in this research: 1) What are the interests of Turkey and the US each towards Syria? 2) How do these interests align yet also contradict each other? 3) How do these nations operate to secure each of their interests without damaging relations with one another?.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several articles have covered the subject of Syrian conflict, which also talks about the involvement of Turkey and the United States. However, these articles mostly focus on elaborating the relations between nations and not focusing on the aligning and mis-aligning interests between the US and Turkey in the region specifically. Furthermore, the usage of realism theory as a perspective to analyse the interests of the involved countries in this article

adds a further difference compared to existing researches. The following are some of the relevant researches which covered similar topics:

Back to Enmity: Turkey-Syria Relations Since the Syrian Uprising (2015) by Prof. Dr. Raymond Hinnebusch

This journal primarily analyses the relations between Turkey and Syria ever since the start of the Civil war in 2011. In this journal, a lot of the internal domestic factors of Turkey which led to the formation of their foreign policies towards their neighbouring country. One of the main arguments in this article is within Turkey, there are identity politics

U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria (2015) by Kadir Ustun

Using the 2014-2015 siege of Kobani as a case study, this journal explains the obstacles faced by Turkey and US as they tried to lift off the siege of Kobani by ISIS militias. This journal shows Turkey's domestic view towards the smaller factions in Syria, such as Free Syrian Army, and Kurdish YPG and PYD groups, and how they distrust Kurdish groups due to historical hostilities even though the US tries to support them as they are also acting as an anti-Assad-Government rebel group. Ustun concluded that The US and Turkey is struggling to cooperate as they still do not know how to best handle the civil war situation.

Economics and Geopolitics of the Middle East (2008) by Richard N Dralongo.

This book provides a comprehensive outlook of the geopolitical condition of the Middle East up to 2008. Even though this book was written prior to the Syrian Civil War, the information presented here is very useful in helping understand backgrounds of multiple ongoing events, and also provides a clear outlook to relations within nations before they are changed by the civil war, such as Iraq and Syria.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper is to be written through Qualitative research method with a narrative-descriptive approach, with academic journals and books regarding theories and case studies used as the main references. The previous literatures in this subject such as one written by Kadir Ustun and Prof. Dr. Raymond Hinnenbusch provides a detailed case study of certain aspects of the case. In this paper those researches will be used to combine multiple perspective to create a comprehensive big picture regarding the foreign policy of Turkey and United States towards Syria. These sources are selected due to their relevance to the topic, and also evaluated using a method of triangulation where they are compared to other academic literatures and also news articles that are related to the event. Other sources related to the topic too will be used to provide additional perspective surrounding the subject.

In this case foreign policies will be analysed using a realist point of view, in a sense that all actions of a nation-state are done in order to pursue each of their own national interest. The opposing liberal point of view would see that nations would cooperate in order to maintain peace and reduce conflict. In the realist point of view however, conflict reduction is needed in order for a nation to be able to pursue their own national interest. When nations cooperate, it means they share a common national interest to some extent. However, every nation has different needs, shaped by a lot of factors such as their economic condition and their geographical situation. Between Turkey and the US, when they share a national interest, there likely will be a larger set of different interests behind it which may clash and complicate their cooperation. In this research national interests of Turkey and The US would each be described to see which forms the similarities.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section will discuss the involvements of the nations and how they interact with each other starting with Turkey and Syria. Later sections will discuss the increasing involvement from the United States and the factors involving the rise of these relations.

Turkey and Syria

Prior to the civil war, Turkey and Syria has a very friendly relationship compared to what they are now. These neighbouring countries has their borders open to each other (de-securitisation), with people from across the nations being able to roam around the borders back and forth freely like they did with domestic travels. In 2004 Turkey and Syria agreed to open free trade among each other, with Turkish Prime minister Erdogan signing the agreement in Damascus. This trade agreement led to ongoing cooperation ranging from investments to joint water supply management. Along with Iran, Syria and Turkey aligned together to maintain security against ongoing Kurdish insurgency and also attempting to maintain regional stability following the 2003 American-led Invasion of Iraq which highly destabilised the region. Starting from 2008, Turkey acted as a mediator in negotiations regarding conflict within Syria and Israel, which includes dispute over Golan heights territory and Syria's continuous support over Lebanese Hezbollah militia. Other cooperations between Syria and Turkey included military exercises in their border regions in 2009 (Dralonge, 2008).

However, as the civil war starts, tensions begin to rise between the two states. Turkey condemns the government's treatment of protestors, and they too start receiving large amounts of refugees from Syria. Turkey proceeds to suspend trade agreements with Syria as a measure to show their disapproval towards Syrian government regarding the civil war. Firefights emerged from time to time in border regions, in some cases having stray rounds killing Turkish people on Turkish territories, which leads Turkey to mobilize cross-border military operations in order to ensure tighter security. Utilisation of combat aircrafts of both sides has also caused tension, as in 2012 Syria shot down an F4 Phantom recon aircraft of the Turkish Air Force for allegedly entering Syrian airspace. Later in 2014 Turkey did something similar as Turkish Air Force F16s shot down a Syrian aircraft, which claimed to be tracking movements of hostile insurgents, reportedly entered Turkish Airspace.

As of 2020 Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees from Syria, with around 3.6 million Syrians residing within Turkish territory. Initially, Turkish people are sympathetic towards the refugees. Considering the state of their relations towards Syria, they are initially welcomed, as it is seen that they are suffering from the harshness of their authoritarian regime. They are mostly not put in internment camp and are allowed to reside in cities and may obtain work permit. However, as years go by the increasing influx of refugees prove to be problematic along with the generally decreasing economic condition of the nation. Eventually, Turkey needs to enact more restrictions towards refugees, with large numbers (approximately 87 thousand) deported back to Syria between 2016 and 2020. They also attempted to open their borders with Greece in order to allow these refugees to get across into Europe but this too has caused problems with Greek government which is reluctant to accept the sudden large influx of refugees (Adar et al., 2020).

Diverging Relations between Turkey and Syria

Turkish stance against Syrian government led to their support of anti-government militia organization. Turkey provided safe haven for anti-government rebels and also provided training and military equipment. With the support of Turkish agents, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was created which later was also supported by The United States with additional weapons, equipment, and training by US Special Forces. With common interest of supporting the Syrian

rebels, Turkey repeatedly negotiated with the US for additional support and protection. However, the US, especially reluctant to get directly involved with military matters following their withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, denies lending their direct support.

However, things rapidly change with the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in late 2013-2014. The seemingly sudden appearance of this powerful group, aligned neither to Syrian Government nor opposition forces had changed the dynamics of The Syrian Civil War and the entire Middle Eastern region. With this new threat, Turkey reacts by mobilizing their forces even more, and this also led to tighter cooperation with the US. The rise of ISIS also led to the appearance of other insurgent groups, such as the reemerging of Kurdish PKK group in Turkish and Northern Iraq territories, which prompted the Turkish Armed Forces to open a two-front war against these two factions. From Turkey's perspective, The Syrian Government under Bashar Al Assad has paved the way for ISIS and PKK to appear, by inciting the civil war at the first place in 2011 (Kanat & Ustun, 2015).

Being a part of NATO and also trying to become a full member of EU, thus it is within the interest of Turkey to promote democratic values by ceasing support towards Assad regime and encouraging a more democratic opposition to take over the government. Some sources however stated that Turkey initially supported ISIS along with Al-Nusra Front which had ties to Al-Qaeda during the start of the Syrian civil war. (Bekdil, 2015) This was due to the fact that they are regarded as the most effective fighters that can take down the Assad regime. During the initial years ISIS fighters were allowed safe haven in Turkey, and they too, like the case with FSA, received supplies of armaments and equipment to be used against The Syrian Government. Other than that, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has an agenda to promote Sunni-Muslim factions to take over Syria's government. ISIS, being a Sunni Muslim radical organization is seen as one of the potential allies in achieving this agenda (Hinnebusch, 2015).

Rise of ISIS

In 2014, The world was taken by surprise by the seemingly sudden appearance of the commonly defined as a terrorist group that is ISIS, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Or also known as Islamic State of Iraq and The Levant, ISIL). ISIS at first glance appeared similar to other insurgent groups, but they had military power that was able to drive the heavily armed Iraqi Security Forces, which was trained and equipped by the United States, out of a lot of key cities in Western Iraq region, and also Syria. Not only did they manage to drive the Iraqi army, but in the process, they committed massacres towards anyone who did not comply to their beliefs and actively shows and publish their atrocities. Not only did they eliminate people who believes anything other than their cause, but they also intentionally destroy cities of historical significance, such as Palmyra and Mosul (Curry, 2015).

Prior to this instance, ISIS started as one of the small insurgent groups which participated in fighting against the US-led coalition forces occupying Iraq since 2003. Most of their efforts were unsuccessful as they were wiped out almost entirely by US- led offensive operations. Occurring roughly at the same time as the start of The Syrian Civil War, The US under Obama Administration had all military personnel withdrawn from Iraq by 2011, thus ending Operation Iraqi Freedom after 8 years. With the absence of a major military power in Iraq, ISIS, under the leadership of Abu Bakar Al- Baghdadi, sees this as an opportunity to expand their influence, starting from regaining territories which was previously lost to offensives by U.S-led troops, to raiding prisons in order to free prisoners which were previously insurgent fighters. With the outbreak of civil war in Syria, ISIS also saw this as an opportunity to gain ground which led them to open a new front in Syria, gradually expanding their troops and territory. By 2013, ISIS becomes one of the most powerful militia groups in Iraq and Syria, and starts committing

offensive campaigns against government forces of both Iraq and Syria, gaining major successes by 2014.

Aside from Iraq, ISIS vows to establish an Islamic caliphate starting from the Middle East, but also spreads its influences all over the world. Under the banner of establishing a Holy State and fighting against infidels, ISIS attracted the attention of many radicals and actively tried to convert people to join their cause all over the world, including in Europe and South East Asia region. Muslim-dominant states such as Malaysia and Indonesia, as the nation with the highest population of Muslims, proved to be prone to this issue. There are Indonesian, Malaysian, and citizens of multiple other nations who end up joining their cause and went abroad to join the fight in the middle east. In other countries, ISIS claimed responsibility for several terrorist attacks since 2015 – 2017, such as terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, bombing in Brussels in 2016, and bombing in Saint Petersburg in 2017.

United States Involvement

The appearance of ISIS as a major insurgent power with capabilities of disrupting stabilities not only in the Middle East region but also on a global scale (as seen by the terrorist attacks outside of Iraq and Syria) establishes themselves as a threat to western nations, especially the US. The image of ISIS as a very brutal and powerful terrorist organization with influences all over the world, and also openly claiming to be responsible of deadly terrorist attacks, has spread universal fear. This universal fear leads to the justification of direct intervention in order to remove this threat.

The US thus sees it as part of their national interest to help eliminate the threat of ISIS, in order to protect their homeland from potential threats, their assets in the middle east and also their allies (in this case Israel and Iraq). By 2014, Obama has authorized the redeployment of the US military to the middle east region with Iraq being its initial property. The initial troops deployed included ground troops to assist and advice the Iraqi Security Forces in fighting ISIS troops on the ground additional ground troops for security of US bases, Air force and navy air controller deployed among ground troops to direct air attacks, air crews to fly close air support and their mechanics to maintain their aircrafts and other equipment.

In Syria, US provided additional airstrikes and deployed Special Forces operatives to assist the anti-government forces such as Syrian Democratic Front (SDF) and Free Syrian Army (FSA) since the start of the civil war in 2011. Similar to the case of facing Libya's Gaddafi regime during the same year, it is within the interest of the United States to take down authoritarian regimes in order to promote democracy. Mutual support for these militias, support for democracy over authoritarian, along with the need to eliminate ISIS threat in Syria led to tighter military cooperation with Turkey. The US would cooperate with Turkey in order to create ISIS-free zone, starting with Turkey giving permission for the US to utilize Incirlik Airbase to station additional troops and combat aircrafts. This cooperation has led to increased effectiveness in US operations against ISIS, from airstrikes to faster deployment of Special Force operatives in assisting Syrian rebels (Paust, 2012).

In late 2014, the city of Kobani, located in Syria near the Turkish border, came under siege by ISIS militias. The city had a significant Kurdish population and thus was defended by Kurdish militias, like Syrian Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) and YPG (Kurdish People's Defence Units). Being an anti-government militia, the US supported these Kurdish factions. Turkey however, was very reluctant in trusting the Kurds due to their previous encounters with Kurdish PKK insurgency. Lacking manpower, the Turk-supported FSA cannot single handedly drive ISIS off the city, therefore cooperation is deemed a necessity. The US also dispatched additional reinforcements from Peshmerga forces, Iraqi Security Force's Kurdish branch, to assist in lifting the siege. For this occasion, Peshmerga was allowed to stay in Turkish territory for staging area. Eventually with the combined forces of YPG, PYD,

Peshmerga, and FSA, Kobani was liberated in 2015 and this strengthened the ties between FSA and Kurdish militias as fellow anti-government factions (Kanat & Ustun, 2015).

Strategic Results of the US-involvement in Syria

The US-led coalition military intervention led to the gradual setback of ISIS's advances. The Iraqi Security Forces slowly regained the grounds they lost and by 2017, almost all of Iraq was retaken. As the bulk of ISIS forces has been depleted, ISIS has been reduced to smaller scale insurgencies. However, this was still recognised as threat since they can still potentially regroup and form a more effective fighting force. Recognising this threat the US shifted more of their troops to Syria, actively engaging in larger scale ground combat along with the US-allied militia organisations. It is also in the interest of the US government to protect their assets which are in Iraq and Syria, such as private oil corporations (Shaoul, 2014).

Their involvement in Syria however, proves to be more problematic than with Iraq. The Assad Regime, backed strongly by Russia and Iran, does not approve the presence of US troops in Syrian territories. Repeatedly, Syrian Government issued warnings for the US to withdraw from Syria. By 2019, when most of ISIS conventional troops has been annihilated, US troops in Syria end up engaging skirmishes against Syrian Government Forces, sometimes backed by Russian Troops (Bishara, 2022). Seeing how this has potential to escalate further conflict, especially towards Russia, By February 2019 Trump declared that ISIS has been mostly destroyed and they would reduce the amount of troops stationed in Syria (Haines-Young, 2019), mostly to be relocated to Iraq to continue guarding the border regions. The Russian Government has repeatedly criticised the US military presence in Syria, as they are regarded as "uninvited guests" (Bishara, 2022).

The reluctance of the US to be directly involved in Syria also led to their failure to cause a regime change in Syria, which was their initial reasoning to support anti-government rebels in Syria. This objective was stated by then-president Barrack Obama in 2011, in which he stated that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside". Their reluctance is also a result of the limitations within the US foreign policy, as they are not planning to further damage their relations with Russia which supports the Assad Government (Mazza & Hilway, 2019).

Even with ISIS mostly destroyed they are still active as an insurgent group and still actively fights government forces in a smaller scale. For this reason, and also to act as a balancer against the dominant Russian-Iran influence in Syria, the US still has limited military presence in Syria. The reluctance of the US to cause damage towards Syrian pro-government forces was not welcomed well to Turkey, as Turkey sees the current Syrian Assad regime as the threat that started the civil war, and thus should be neutralized. The US however maintained that their direct involvement is only to eliminate the threat of ISIS and not the Syrian Government. By 2019 when most of the US military presence has been decreased, Turkey still has to maintain security to their borders, and also still has to manage the large number of refugees in Syria which they had to either provide asylum or deport.

5. CONCLUSION

The dynamically shifting situation in the Middle East has influenced the international community in a lot of ways. Alliances form and break as one conflict ends and a different one starts. In the case of Syrian Civil war, it has major impact from the beginning to Turkey as its bordering nation which was formerly very close to each other before the start of the civil war sometime in 2011. Syria's changing condition also shifted the change of other state's national interest towards Syria. In the case of Turkey, from close collaboration and open borders since 2003, now they have to secure their borders once more. They have to deal with increasingly

dangerous security issue as war rages between anti-government militia with forces of Assad regime, leading to military mobilization across the border regions.

Turkey's view towards the Assad regime changed as they did not approve how The Syrian government treated the protestors with violence, which leads to the civil war at the first place. Thus, Turkey starts supporting anti-government militias by training and equipping them as in their view, taking down Assad's regime and having them replaced by more democratic one will ensure a better stability. This was however further complicated by Turkey's distrust of Kurdish groups, and also having to deal with large influx of refugees from Syria which creates problems for Turkey in a domestic level.

The US views towards Syria too changed as the civil war starts. Similar to the case of Libya's Gaddafi regimes, it is part of US agenda to promote democracy. In this case, along with Turkey, the US starts supporting anti-government militias by delivering funds, weapons, equipment, extra training and having their combat aircrafts stand by to assist them in battle. Despite the initial lack of domestic support for direct US military deployment, as they have just withdrawn their military from Iraq in 2011, eventually the US redeployed their troops to Iraq and Syria in 2014 due to the emergence of ISIS.

However, cooperations with Turkey sometimes clashes due to their distrust of Kurdish groups and also the reluctance of the US to get involved in combat with Syrian governmental forces. With ISIS threat eliminated the US reduced its military presence in Syria, remaining only to provide aid towards allied militia factions and to serve as a balancer to Iran and Russia's influence. The US did not continue to assist Turkey in managing the security of their borders as the civil war rages on in Syria.

By the end of the US involvement, the situation in Syria seemingly return to a state similar to before the emergence of ISIS, where the country is still ravaged by civil war in a lot of areas between the government and anti-government forces. There is still further potential threat as this means borders around Syria such as Turkey and Iraq are still not safe, but the destruction of ISIS seems to result in a relative stability that the conflict in Syria does not spark well outside its borders.

Further research can be done more on how the domestic issues of the US leads to their intervention in Syria, and more comprehensive research regarding how Syrian Government reacts and redevelop their policy as they face military intervention from both Turkey and The US would certainly be a welcome perspective for this topic. Furthermore, it is also worth doing more comparative researches regarding alignment within NATO countries and how their interests may align or diverge between one another, despite being in the same alliance. For example, this can be seen with the case of France and how they refuse to participate in the war in Iraq unlike the US and Britain.

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