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and the Egyptian Coup:
In Search of a "Reset" for
Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East**

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His opinion pieces, published in the Greek and Turkish press, can be found in his personal blogs <http://epifyllides.blogspot.com/> (Greek) and <http://siyasiyorumlar.blogspot.com/> (Turkish).

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Summary

Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East met in 2013 unprecedented challenges which lowered previously heightened ambitions and raised the question of readjusting strategy and tactics. The consolidation of a stalemate in the Syrian civil war and the outbreak of clashes between rebel groups, the Kurdish issue in its regional dimension, the July 2013 military coup in Egypt and domestic developments have brought Turkish foreign policy in front of new challenges and limited its "soft power" potential in the Middle East. The need for a "reset" of Turkish foreign policy has been widely discussed among pundits, pointing towards a more realistic appraisal of the existing state of affairs and reengagement with other regional actors. Meanwhile the weight of domestic politics has been heavier than usual. Developments in Turkey's own Kurdish question, the Gezi events, the 17 December 2013 graft investigation, and most importantly the upcoming elections in 2014, all set a framework which calls for increased caution and reappraisal of strategies and policies.

Key Words

Turkey, foreign policy, Syria, Egypt, reset, Kurdish question, soft power

Between the Syrian Stalemate and the Egyptian Coup: In Search of a "Reset" for Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East

2013 was anything but a fabulous year for Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. Many in Turkey had seen the "Arab Spring" as a historic opportunity for the consolidation of Turkey's leading position in the region. Regime change in the Arab world was expected to bring forward the Turkish economic and political model as the most suitable and applicable in the transition states. Developments however, refuted most of this hype. A set of concurrent developments within Turkey and the region underlined the limits of Turkey's ability to shape Middle Eastern politics, and also the need for a realignment of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's relations with most of the Middle Eastern states have deteriorated in the course of the "Arab Spring." The course of the Syrian conflict and the rise of jihadist groups within the rebel ranks refuted official Turkish predictions about a quick collapse of the Assad regime and democratic transition, raising greater concerns in the West about the spread of Islamist terrorism in Syria. The Kurdish question gained importance on a regional level. In Egypt, the military coup against the Morsi government following large popular demonstrations dashed hopes about democratization and deprived Turkey of one of its most loyal regional partners. The rise of tension at the domestic level, the Gezi events in June 2013 and the graft investigation crisis in December 2013, severely limited Turkey's "soft power", in other words its ability to pose as a "role model" in the region, and put its relations with the United States and the West under additional strain. A "reset" of Turkish foreign policy, however necessary it may look, may be impeded though by a highly volatile domestic political agenda in 2014.

The Syrian Stalemate and its Repercussions on the Kurdish Issue

Syria has remained the Achilles heel of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. Misjudging the capacity of the Assad regime to rally popular support and mobilize regional and global actors for its survival proved to be a grave error on the side of Turkish foreign policy planning. Even growing cooperation between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the Syrian crisis failed to deliver tangible results. Saudi Arabia's vehement opposition to al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups in Syria did not overlap with Turkey's more flexible approach towards them. Opposition groups also proved unable to coordinate their efforts and often clashed with each other. The transformation of Syria into a hotbed of instability and a training ground of global jihadist terrorism has had a spillover effect throughout the Middle East. Beyond the heavy economic costs incurred to Turkish economy, due to the shutdown of lucrative trade opportunities and routes, Turkey became exposed to an ever growing refugee wave. Its border provinces with Syria were heavily affected by the influx of hundreds of thousands of destitute Syrians, who were also infiltrated by war combatants and

terrorists. A bomb attack in the Turkish border town of Reyhanlı on 11 May 2013 claimed more than fifty lives and underscored how vulnerable Turkey remained to terrorism, and that Turkey's security remained indexed to the Syrian civil war.

The course of the civil war in the adjacent to Turkey Syrian provinces proved to be another formidable challenge for Turkish foreign policy. The early tactical withdrawal of the Assad forces from the Kurdish-inhabited northeastern provinces of Syria did not only aim at reallocating military forces to the vital for the survival of the regime Damascus-Homs-Hama-Aleppo axis. It also envisioned the reinforcement of the Kurdish autonomist movement alongside the Turkish border with Syria. This was likely to cause splits within the various Syrian opposition groups and also raise concerns in Turkey. The establishment of a Kurdish autonomous administration along the Turkish border that could turn into a base for the Kurdish Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*-PKK) was definitely not welcomed in Ankara. On the other hand, the alternative to a Syrian Kurdish entity appeared to be neither secular nor moderate Sunni, but jihadist. Northeastern Syria became one of the key battlegrounds for the jihadist groups that became established in the country. The Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front and "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged as the two leading jihadist groups that occupied and administered substantial parts of Syrian territory in the north and northeast. The outbreak of clashes between the forces of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (PYD) and the jihadist groups put Turkey in front of hard decisions. A military victory of the PYD would lead to the consolidation of a *de facto* Kurdish entity in northern Syria, while a victory of the jihadist forces could turn northern Syria into a hotbed of global terrorism and a threat for Turkish security. The prospect of Syria turning into an terrorist haven across the globe led several Western governments to reconsider their position on the Syrian civil war.

Ankara's initial relatively soft treatment of the Al-Nusra Front and ISIS raised concerns among Western governments about the possibility that Ankara preferred the consolidation of jihadist rule instead of a Kurdish entity in northern Syria. As repeated reports in international media pointed that jihadist forces were receiving direct or indirect support from Turkish groups, it appeared as if Turkey had made its choice on the side of the jihadist forces. Mounting international pressure led to a reconfiguration of the Turkish stance. Soon jihadist forces clashed not only with Kurdish groups, but with Syrian Islamist and moderate groups throughout the northern Syrian front, highlighting the complexity of the Syrian crisis.

The Kurdish Dimension

Developments in Syria inevitably had their bearing on Turkey's own Kurdish issue. Turkey's policy towards Iran, Iraq and Syria where millions of Kurds live has had inevitable repercussions among its own Kurdish population. The Erdogan government has repeatedly claimed that the resolution of Turkey's Kurdish issue remains among his government's foremost priorities. The announcement of an agreement between the Turkish government and the PKK in spring 2013 and the beginning of the withdrawal of PKK forces from Turkish territory was a milestone event that implied courageous

steps by the Turkish government towards the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question. Yet what was announced as "democratization package" in September 2013 fell behind expectations. Maintaining the "peace process" alive was also in line with the domestic political calculations of the AKP government, as municipal and presidential elections were looming in 2014, and the Kurdish vote appeared to be of critical importance. In light of this, the rapprochement between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq gained more significance. While the prospect of exporting the hydrocarbon wealth of northern Iraq through Turkey promised a very lucrative cooperation,¹ there were more than common economic interests. Turkey hoped that the KRG leadership could help its efforts to resolve its own Kurdish problem and also strengthen Turkey's influence on Syrian Kurds. Hence the KRG became an unexpected partner of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. In light of these, Prime Minister Erdogan met in November 2013 the President of the KRG Massoud Barzani in Diyarbakir in a rare visit aiming to highlight a new era in bilateral relations.

Yet beyond public relations, it was far from certain that close relations with the KRG could play a catalytic role in Turkey's own Kurdish issue and Syria. Barzani's visit was not welcomed by the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*-BDP), while his appeal to the Kurdish voter remained questionable. Regarding Syria, Turkey's concerns about the emergence of a *de facto* Kurdish entity in northern Syria were hard to address by another Kurdish entity that had faced similar challenges some years before. Absent a strong economic incentive, old stereotypes of Turkish diplomacy proved hard to break.

The Egyptian Coup and its Repercussions

Developments in Egypt in 2013 arguably posed the most formidable challenge to Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East. Due to its size and strategic weight, Egypt was seen as a bellwether about the course of the "Arab Spring." The toppling of the Mubarak regime in 2011 and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood administration in Egypt raised hopes in Ankara that this could comprise a milestone regarding the question of reconciling Islam and democracy in the Middle East. There was a clear comparison with the first term of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government which had raised hopes that political Islam could become a reformist political force and a catalyst in promoting democracy in the Middle East. While optimism about Turkey started dissipating following 2006, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt appeared to provide a chance to Egyptian democracy. In the views of the AKP government, Egypt had the potential of emulating Turkey's "success story" of the past decade and also becoming a strategic partner, a pillar of Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East. In his 2011 Cairo visit, Prime Minister Erdoğan had

¹ These steps threatened to derail relations between the Turkish and the Iraqi governments, as Baghdad vehemently objected to its bypassing by the KRG.

surprised many, when he recommended a secular constitution for post-revolutionary Egypt. This move disappointed many Egyptian Islamists, but increased Turkey's appeals among the other segments of Egyptian society and underscored the role that the AKP government could play in the democratic consolidation process of "Arab Spring" states.

Yet following the June 2012 presidential elections that led to the election of Mohammed Morsi with a narrow majority, Turkish foreign policy seemed to increasingly identify with the Egyptian administration and abstain from any constructive criticism. Generous support towards the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and beyond led to accusations about a "sectarian shift".. As the Morsi administration failed to meet expectations about democracy-building and followed an increasingly majoritarian line, the AKP government avoided taking a critical stance and repeating the points Prime Minister Erdogan himself had made in 2011. Instead, it opted for the development of ever closer cooperation at the diplomatic and economic level. In September 2012, it was announced that Turkey would provide Egypt with a 2 billion USD loan. As the Morsi government was becoming increasingly insensitive to democratization calls from inside and outside Egypt, Turkey was slowly emerging as its most important regional ally. Steps towards the Islamization of Egyptian civil legislation that led to expected reactions by secular Egyptians and the Coptic minority were similarly ignored. While the collection of millions of signatures for the resignation of the Morsi government and the participation of millions of Egyptians in the anti-government demonstrations of June 2013 highlighted that the Morsi administration was failing to embrace all of Egyptian society and remained focused on its Islamist clientele, this had no bearing on Turkey's full support.

In light of this, the coup of 3 July 2013 caught the Turkish government by surprise. As the Egyptian military was delivering the *coup de grace* against the Egyptian democratization process, Turkish foreign policy emerged as one of the biggest losers. As the AKP administration had put all of its eggs in the basket of the Muslim Brotherhood and envisioned an Ankara-Cairo axis, its regional policy suffered a heavy blow. Turkey's post-coup reaction only deteriorated this situation. While other countries in the Middle East took a more circumspect position if not even outright supporting the coup of General Abdelfattah al-Sissi, the Turkish government refused to recognize the new, post-coup government, insisting that Mohammed Morsi remained the legitimate President of Egypt. This put Turkey's cooperation with regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar into difficulty. In a series of statements, Prime Minister Erdogan repeatedly scorned the new Egyptian regime arguing that any cooperation with it would be betraying Turkey's own democratic values. This eventually led to a diplomatic crisis, the withdrawal of the Egyptian and the Turkish ambassadors from Ankara and Cairo respectively and the minimization of Turkey's influence on Egyptian transition. The AKP administration's claimed moral high ground and principled character of its opposition to the new Egyptian regime was questioned by many, due to the fact that the Turkish government had shown no similar sensitivities or concerns in building close relations with other authoritarian states in the Middle East and beyond, such as Sudan and Azerbaijan, even after the outbreak of the "Arab Spring." Moreover, the Turkish Prime Minister repeatedly voiced his wish in 2013 that Turkey joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This definitely did not fit the image of a country putting democratic credentials as a permissive condition of its foreign policy planning. As the July

2013 coup deprived Turkey of its strongest and most reliable ally, Turkey's closest partners in the Levant remained the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip and the KRG government in northern Iraq. This could by no means be considered a success for the foreign policy of a country that aspired to lead developments in the region.

Domestic Developments and Declining “Soft Power”

While regional developments were putting Turkey into a difficult position in 2013, so did the decline of Turkey's "soft power." Turkey's "success story" in terms of democratization reform and economic growth had attracted considerable interest and praise across the Middle East throughout the past decade. Prime Minister Erdogan enjoyed high popularity rates in several Arab countries, while Turkey appeared as a model for all Arab reformist movements. This changed with the outbreak of the "Arab Spring." Turkey's gradual involvement in the emerging conflict led to accusations about a rising sectarian bias. Through its involvement in Syria, Egypt and Iraq, Turkish foreign policy was accused of taking a pro-Sunni bias in its approach of regional conflicts in the Middle East. Its cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the Syrian crisis appeared to fit this pattern and met with heavy criticism.² Yet the common understanding between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar could not outlive the Egyptian coup. Turkey's committed support for the Morsi government was not seconded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which were quick in recognizing the military regime of General Sissi and also provide critical financial aid.

Meanwhile, domestic developments led to the further erosion of Turkey's "soft power". In June 2013, a local protest against the construction of a shopping mall at Gezi Park, one of Istanbul's few remaining green spaces, led to large demonstrations throughout the country and brutal police repression claiming the lives of five demonstrators. The outbreak of large demonstrations in June 2013 highlighted not only the growing rifts within Turkish society but also a rather dire picture of respect for the rule of law and democratic rights. Similar was the effect of the government reaction against a large graft investigation launched on 17 December 2013 involving four ministers of the AKP governments. Instead of facilitating the work of judicial authorities, Prime Minister Erdogan called them "a part of a conspiracy within the state," and removed prosecutors and police officers involved in the case, causing turbulence in Turkey's financial markets, not seen since 2001. Regardless of the outcome of this confrontation, it was certain that the image of Turkey as a democratic state under the rule of law was battered. As a result, Turkey's "role model" claim has become hard to sustain.

² This allowed the Assad regime to frame the Syrian conflict not as a democratic uprising but as a sectarian civil war and thus reinforce its support among the secular and non-Sunni segments of Syrian society.

Conclusions

The need for reconfiguration of Turkish foreign policy along the new regional realities appears to be common ground among pundits. Taking a more nuanced stance in the Syrian crisis, delivering promises regarding Turkey's Kurdish question, reaching a *modus vivendi* with the new Egyptian regime and fixing the reasons for the decline of Turkey's "soft power" are all substantial elements of a "reset" of Turkish foreign policy. However necessary it may look, however, this "reset" may be impeded by a highly volatile domestic political agenda in 2014. Critical municipal elections will be held in late March 2014, while the country's first presidential election is scheduled in August 2014. Meanwhile, the ongoing domestic political crisis might lead to early parliamentary elections. Domestic political preoccupations are likely to have a strong impact on the course of Turkish foreign policy in 2014.

Useful Studies on the Topic

Morton I. Abramowitz and Eric S. Edelman, *From Rhetoric to Reality: Reframing U.S. Turkey Policy* (Washington DC: Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC), 2013)

Meliha Altunisik, *Turkey after the Arab Uprisings: Difficulties of Hanging on in There [ISPI Analysis No. 223]* (Rome: ISPI, 2013)

Şaban Kardaş, *Apocalyptic Death of Turkish Foreign Policy in 2013?* (Washington DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2014)

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