

TURKISH POLICY TOWARDS WAR IN SYRIA

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Abstract: Turkey is an important actor of the war in Syria. After the first months of the conflict the Syrian neighbour began supporting the opposition forces in the war and took a very critical approach to Bashar al-Assad's regime, based on the assumption that the Syrian president must definitely resign from the office. It was a substantial change of the Turkish policy towards Syria in comparison to the first decade of the 21st century. The main goal of this article is an in-depth analysis of Turkey's policy towards the war in Syria in order to identify the reasons for a specific, inflexible Turkish position. The author verifies positively a hypothesis that the Turkish policy towards Syria and the war there is a result of the interplay of many domestic and foreign policy factors in Turkey as well as the regional and international situation. The inflexible Turkish position is in this context a consequence of the more sectarian policy of the AKP government (reflecting the departure from the "strategic depth doctrine") connected with the ideological factor as well as the negative consequences of the Assad regime's actions for Turkish security and the increasingly complex Kurdish issue.

Keywords: Turkey, Syria, Al-Assad regime, Kurds, Islamic State.

The conflict in Syria between government forces and various opposition groups began in 2011. It has had an increasing impact on its neighbours' domestic and foreign policies. The Republic of Turkey, a country whose border with Syria is more than 800 km long, is one of them. The Syrian war has become one of main priorities of the Turkish government's policy in addition to being a major topic of debates as well as critical publications¹ and election campaigns (starting from the 2011 parliamentary elections).

Turkey began supporting the opposition forces in the Syrian war and took a very critical approach to Bashar al-Assad's regime, based on the assumption that the Syrian president must definitely resign from office. This reflects a quite

¹ See e.g. H. Yiğit, *AKP'nin Süriye Savaşı. Erdoğan'ın Yıkılan Hayalleri*, Tekin Yayınevi, İstanbul 2014.

substantial change in Turkish policy towards Syria compared to the first decade of the 21st century. At that time Syria became an important partner for Turkey and al-Assad a close friend of the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The main goal of this article is an in-depth analysis of Turkey's policy towards the war in Syria in order to identify the reasons for a specific, inflexible Turkish position. It is worth analysing this issue because it provides an opportunity to show the complexity of the Middle Eastern politics and allows for a better explanation of some unclear aspects of Turkish policy towards the conflict, e.g. why the Turkish leaders have a kind of obsession with the al-Assad regime, leading as a consequence to the isolation of Turkey in the region--called by the Turkish authorities "precious loneliness" (at least until June 2016, when an improvement of relations with Israel and Russia began²); why Turkey was for a long time reluctant to be directly involved militarily in Syria and why it did not take a critical approach towards the so called Islamic State (ISIS) from the very beginning.

The author would like to verify a hypothesis that Turkish policy towards Syria and the war there is a result of the interplay of many domestic and foreign policy factors in Turkey including perceptions of elites and societies in Turkey and Syria as well as the regional and international situation. These can change over time, i.e., they can be more or less favourable for the development of the Turkish-Syrian relations in different periods, influencing Turkish policy towards events in Syria, including the war there. The aforementioned factors are at the same time the determinants of the whole Middle East policy of Turkey.

The author will use a methodological approach suitable for the main research goal. It will be a mix of qualitative methods, i.e., historical and process tracing analysis to show how the analysed determinants influenced Turkish policy towards Syria in different periods and the decision method to investigate the decision-making process of Turkish authorities with reference to the Syrian conflict.

The article consists of four main sections. The first chapter will present the determinants of Turkish policy towards the Middle East in general and Syria in particular. The second section will include the historical outline of Turkish policy towards Syria, including the factors determining this policy. The last two parts will be about Turkish policy towards Syria and the Syrian conflict since 2011 and an explanation of the reasons for its critical and inflexible position toward al-Assad's regime.

² S. Demirtaş, "New Turkish foreign policy less ideological, more pragmatic," *Hurriyet Daily News* of 29 June 2016, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/new-turkish-foreign-policy-less-ideological-more-pragmatic.aspx?pageID=449&nID=101015&NewsCatID=429

DETERMINANTS OF THE TURKISH POLICY TOWARDS
MIDDLE EAST AND SYRIA

There are many factors which jointly decide the Turkish position and policy towards the Middle East and the events taking place there. These apply to its Syrian neighbour and currently the war in this country.

Most of these factors are at the same time the general determinants of the Turkish foreign policy, e.g., its geostrategic location and geopolitical situation, historical experiences, cultural-ideological factors, state capacities as well as current affairs regarding foreign and domestic policy.³ In the first case an important factor in the Middle Eastern context is the geographical location of Turkey between “the West and the East” which can be an asset with reference to its role in the Middle Eastern region (Turkey as a gate to the European continent for Arab countries, including Syria, in the political and economic dimension) but also a kind of dilemma when it comes to the regional identity and external perception (both by Arabs and Europeans). The global geopolitical situation, especially the security dimension, also has a significant impact on Turkey’s regional policy. The difference between the Cold War period and the decades afterwards is the best example in this context.

Historical experiences shape Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East as well. It can be both about the positive and negative issues concerning different time periods. Examples of the former are the Ottoman Empire heritage with reference to the position of the state, role of the military (also in foreign policy) or close contacts with neighbouring regions being parts of the Empire as well as the processes of Westernization and integration with the Euro-Atlantic structures. The negative issues usually concern bad relationships with countries in the past – conflicts, wars, border disputes, massacres, etc. The experiences connected with the Ottoman Empire times and World War I play a significant role for Turkish policy towards all neighbours. They have created a long lasting fear of threat for Turkish security and sovereignty, the so called Sevres syndrome. The Ottoman times and events during World War I led to animosities, particularly between Turkey and its Arab neighbours that had been parts of the Empire. On the one hand, Turkey did not forget the alliance between Arab countries and Allied forces. On the other hand, the Arabic states remember “Ottoman imperialism,” which they perceive as a reason for their underdevelopment, as well as Turkish actions against the Arab nationalists. The feeling of victimization on the Arab side is particularly strong in the case of Syria because of the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay), which was “stolen by Turks.”⁴

³ For more, see: M. Aydın, “The Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy, and Turkey’s European Vocation,” in G. Nonneman (ed.), *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies And the Relationship with Europe*, Routledge, London, New York 2005, pp. 197–216.

⁴ M. B. Altunışık and Ö. Tür, “From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian–Turkish Relations,” *Security Dialogue* 2006, vol. 37, no. 2, p. 231.

This issue reveals an additional factor which is particularly important for Turkish policy towards the Arab states, including Syria. Mutual perceptions of leaders, state elites and societies are crucial for the relations between Turkey and other Middle East countries. Some scholars even claim that these perceptions and the images based on them are the most important factor explaining relations.⁵ Generally speaking, while the aforementioned historical experiences are an unfavourable factor, contemporary developments changed the image of Turkey and Arab countries respectively for the better. In the Turkish case these include the strengthened “demonstrative effect”⁶ connected with the role of Turkish culture (film, music, sport, tourism, etc.), economic development and business contacts, domestic politics connected with the ruling of Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) as well as foreign policy undertakings such as integration with the EU or an increasingly critical approach to Israel (softened a little after the agreement in June 2016⁷).

The influence of Kemalism, particularly the principles of nationalism (*milliyetçilik*), independence and sovereignty, have had an impact on Turkey’s relations with its Arab neighbours and their citizens (including minorities, such as Kurds). The role of religion cannot be neglected either. The Sunni Islam (Hanafi school) which dominates in Turkey determines the development of Turkish contacts with other Muslim countries and organizations, particularly in recent years when a kind of sectarian politics of the government is to be observed.

A classical determinant of Turkish foreign and Middle Eastern policy is the issue of Turkish capacities, first of all when it comes to the human and economic/financial resources as well military strength. It is important for all countries in the Middle East region that Turkey is a country with about 79 million people, is a member of the G20 and has the second largest army in NATO. Of course, Turkish capacities are limited, particularly by some domestic and international developments.

Here appears another important factor determining the Middle Eastern policy of Turkey, i.e., both systemic and short-term domestic and external developments. The policy towards the Middle East countries, including Syria, depends on the economic situation of the country, the character of the political system (including the issue of democratization), the Kurdish issue – both a domestic and regional problem – the doctrine of Turkish foreign policy as well as the state of relations between Turkey and the Middle East, western countries and Russia.

⁵ For more, see: B. Aras and H. Köni, “Turkish-Syrian Relations Revisited,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 2002, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 47–60.

⁶ For more, see: K. Kirişçi, “Turkey’s ‘Demonstrative Effect’ and the Transformation of the Middle East,” *Insight Turkey* 2011, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 33–55.

⁷ “Turkey, Israel sign deal to normalize ties,” *Hürriyet Daily News* of 28 June 2016, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-israel-sign-deal-to-normalize-ties.aspx?pageID=238&nid=100997

TURKISH-SYRIAN RELATIONS UNTIL 2011

In order to explain the Turkish position on the conflict in Syria, relations between Turkey and its neighbour before 2011 should be outlined. This mainly historical part will serve as a reference point for further analysis, revealing the role of the aforementioned determinants in shaping Turkish policy towards Syria. It will help to understand what is behind the Turkish policy towards the conflict in the neighbouring country.

The reality of the Cold War limited the possibility of the development of contacts between Turkey and Syria. While the former became a part of the Western security system, a member of the Euro-Atlantic structures and a close partner of the USA and Israel, the latter remained within the Soviet sphere of influence. Turkey was perceived by Syria as a promoter of Western interests at the expense of Arab needs and interests. Syria's instability and Arab nationalism were in turn treated by Turkey as factors providing an opportunity for Soviet influence in the region.⁸

In the 1960s the first long-term problem in bilateral relations emerged (apart from the Hatay territorial question, which lost its priority for Syria for a while due to the dispute with Israel), i.e., the issue of waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris. At this time both countries began to work on projects damming the two rivers. The problem intensified in the 1980s when Turkey planned to implement a development project in South-Eastern Anatolia. From the Syrian point of view the Turkish undertakings concerning the waters was a reflection of sovereignty claims over the rivers. Since for Syria this issue was not only a technical question but also a matter of full independence and self-sufficiency, it decided in the 1970s to host the militants of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) as well as the members of Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia and representatives of the Turkish radical left. This phenomenon intensified in the 1980s. Tensions increased at this time because of Turkey's hosting of members of the opposition Muslim Brotherhood. The water and security problems did not lead to an open conflict but limited the development of political and economic relations between Turkey and Syria during the Cold War.⁹

However, the aforementioned problems led to even more tensions in the 1990s. As Berna Süer put it, "the Cold war structure was a kind of insurance against the threats of the each country against another (...) Thus the disappearance of the bipolar rift uncovered the conflicts between the two countries."¹⁰

The end of Cold War forced Turkey and Syria to redefine their foreign policy priorities. More activity in Middle East policy could already be observed during

⁸ M. B. Altunışık, Ö.Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners?...," *op. cit.*, p. 232.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁰ B. Süer, "Syria" in M. Kibaroglu (ed.), *Turkey's Neighborhood*, Foreign Policy Institute, Ankara 2008, pp. 198–199.

the Turgut Özal's era, e.g., the 1987 signing of protocols between Turkey and Syria concerning the waters issue. In the 1990s Turkey kept its traditional foreign policy doctrine based on priority of the Western direction, priority given to national security, *status quo* and reactive approach as well as readiness to use hard power tools if necessary.¹¹ The priority given to the national security dogma – in accordance with Kemalist ideology – was also present in domestic policy due to the escalation of the conflict between the Turkish army and PKK militants. Syria at this time used the PKK card to pressure Turkey about the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Syria supported the PKK militarily, financially and logistically, hosting its headquarters and training camps (perceived by Syrians as an opportunity to suppress the aspirations of its own Kurdish community). On the international arena Syria developed relations with Armenia, Iran and Greece while Turkey enhanced relations with Israel, signing a military agreement in 1996.¹²

These issues did not favour improved bilateral relations between the two countries. Tensions became more intense in the period of 1993–1995 and at the beginning of 1996, led Turkey to issue a memorandum in which it charged Syria with the engaging in *de facto* aggression because of its support for the PKK, calling for the end of its support for militants and turning over the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Because Syria did not meet these expectations, Turkey suspended all official contacts in early 1996. A diplomatic dialogue launched afterwards did not have any effect and 1998 saw the biggest crisis in bilateral relations. There was a real possibility of military conflict between the two states. Turkey had at this time sufficient capabilities and was not limited by the previous domestic and international problems (changing coalition governments and losing the credibility of the government as well as worsening relations with the EU, missile crisis in Cyprus and the agreement between the Kurdish leaders about the independence of the Kurdish state in Northern Iraq). However, thanks to Iranian and Egyptian mediation efforts Turkey and Syria concluded an agreement (the so called Adana agreement) in October 1998. Concessions were mainly on the Syrian side – it agreed to view the PKK as a terrorist organization and agreed to stop any support for it. Even before signing the agreement Syria began arresting PKK militants and later expelled Öcalan. It seemed that Syria realistically assessed developments at this time – it did not have capabilities comparable to Turkey, besides it had to concentrate on regime security and survival (the succession of Bashar al-Assad).¹³

At the beginning of the new century factors affecting Turkish-Syrian relations changed substantially. Turkey already at the turn of the 20th and 21st century began to change its foreign policy doctrine. Bülent Ecevit's government decided

¹¹ For more, see A. Szymański, "Turkish Foreign Policy in 2007–2009: Continuity or Change?", *SInAN Working Paper* (Center for European Studies, METU) 2009, no. 3, pp. 3–5.

¹² B. Süer, "Syria", *op. cit.*, pp. 198–199.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 200–203. For more about the Turkish-Syrian crisis in 1998, see M. B. Aykan, "The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October 1998: A Turkish View," *Middle East Policy* 1999, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 174–191.

to pursue a regionally based foreign policy, which meant the development of contacts with all neighbouring regions independent from the Western direction. After 2002, when the AKP came to power, the “strategic depth” doctrine began to be implemented, which was the continuation of the previous policy of development of contacts with neighbouring regions, using the geostrategic position of Turkey and the historical experience of the Ottoman Empire era. Turkish foreign policy became more active, which also meant contributing to the resolution of regional conflicts. It was based more on soft power tools, including diplomacy and trade contacts. National security remained the priority but at the same time there were other important goals, like democracy promotion.¹⁴

The Turkish authorities began to pursue the policy which is more independent from any influence, including America’s. The first clear example was the war in Iraq in 2003 when the Turkish deputies did not agree to open a second front. It was important for Syria, which was in a difficult situation after 2001, having poor relations with Israel and the USA, to try to find some partners in the Middle East, for example Iran, Iraq and Egypt and later Jordan and Turkey. Syrian elites were willing to develop the relations with Turkey for strategic reasons but also because Turkey could be a gateway for Syria to improve economic relations with the European countries. The Turkish army was satisfied with the improvement of military contacts (chiefs of staff concluded a military cooperation agreement in 2002) and wanted to continue the cooperation. An important factor was also the beginning of AKP rule, i.e., a party with Islamic roots. Their approach to the implementation of the principles of Kemalism in foreign policy differed from the previous government’s attitude. The contacts with the Muslim countries and organizations became more significant. Syria was also important for Turkey for economic reasons – its close relations with other Arab countries and Iran could be used by Turkey to increase its share in Middle Eastern markets.¹⁵ Both Turkish and Syrian authorities were also aware of the common threat to the territorial integrity of their states coming from aspirations of the Kurdish population.¹⁶

Turkey developed close relations with Syria from the very beginning of the 21st century. In the 2000–2002 period it began with the symbolic but important attendance by the Turkish president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, at Hafız al-Assad’s funeral, followed by the security protocol in 2001 and the aforementioned military cooperation agreement in 2002.¹⁷ The real breakthrough came after 2002. It began with the normalization of bilateral relations reflected in the following developments: the signing of many bilateral agreements within the framework of the Sixth Turkish-Syrian Protocol in July 2003, the visit of Turkish parlia-

¹⁴ For more about the strategic depth doctrine, see e.g. A. Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 2008, vol. 42, no. 6, pp. 945–964.

¹⁵ B. Sürer, “Syria”, *op. cit.*, pp. 214–215; D. Aras, “The Syrian Uprising: Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill,” *Middle East Quarterly* 2012, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 43–44.

¹⁶ M. B. Altunışık, Ö.Tür, “From Distant Neighbors to Partners?...,” *op. cit.*, p. 241.

¹⁷ D. Aras, “The Syrian Uprising...,” *op. cit.*, p. 43.

mentarians to Syria in December 2003 in order to initiate a dialogue about the settlement of the dispute concerning the province of Hatay and terrorism as well as a very important visit by Syria's president Al-Assad to Ankara in January 2004 (the first visit by a Syrian head of state in 57 years) and the return visit to Damascus by Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan in December 2004. These events led to the development of trade relations (a free trade agreement was signed), the recognition by the Syrian authorities of international law for the acceptance of Turkey's boundaries, the decision to work together in the exploitation of the water resources of the Tigris and Asi rivers and an understanding on the maintenance of Iraq's territorial integrity in the face of and Kurdish aspirations contrary to the Turkish and Syrian interests.¹⁸

The AKP government formed after the 2007 elections continued to develop relations with Syria. President al-Assad supported Turkey's intervention in Northern Iraq and signed a Memorandum of Cooperation and Action for Peace in the Middle East while on a visit to Ankara in October 2007. Turkey and Syria carried out or planned to pursue economic projects in industry (the construction of an industrial park in Syria), transport (the extension of the rail connections between the two countries) and energy; they also cooperated in the dismantling of mines in border areas. Already in the first few months of 2008, trade between the two countries rose by 70% and in April 2008 the Turkish-Syrian Partnership Council signed a protocol calling for the inclusion of agricultural products in the agreement on free trade, simplifying bureaucratic procedures for commercial activity, modernizing border crossings and building a logistics centre in Syria.¹⁹ The last years before the beginning of the Syrian conflict Syria were marked by the development of a strategic partnership between both countries, tightening of economic relations through a visa free regime and the consolidation of a good personal relationship between Erdoğan and al-Assad.²⁰

WAR IN SYRIA AND THE U-TURN IN TURKISH-SYRIAN RELATIONS

The Arab Spring and the escalation of conflict in Syria significantly changed the contacts between Syria and Turkey. Previously good friends, the main state authorities became enemies. It was even reflected in changing the pronunciation

¹⁸ A.J. Al-Sarraj, Ç. E. Tarım, "Suriye-Türkiye İlişkileri: Gerçekler ve Görüşler," in A. Yorkan, U. Tepebaş, E. Osmanov, and A. Sandıklı (eds.), *Türkiye ve Asya Ülkeleri. Siyasi ve Ekonomik İlişkileri*, Tasam Yayınları, İstanbul 2006, pp. 199–207.

¹⁹ "Syria, business organization agree to build joint industrial park," *Turkish Daily News* of 4 January 2008, www.turkishdailynews.com.tr; "Turkey, Syria further cooperation," *Turkish Daily News* of 28 April 2008, www.turkishdailynews.com.tr

²⁰ For more, see: N. Yeşilyurt, "Orta Doğu'yla İlişkileri", in B. Oran (ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası. Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne. Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, Cilt III: 2001–2012, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul 2013, pp. 413–423.

of the Syria leader's name by the AKP politicians and state media from "Esad" to "Esed".²¹

The key role was again played by the changing network of determinants. The time of the Arab Spring coincided with the problem of implementation of the Turkish foreign policy doctrine. It was difficult for Turkey to implement the doctrine of "zero problems with neighbours" and use only soft power tools, having conflicts and disputes with many neighbouring countries (surprisingly apart from Northern Iraq regional Kurdish authorities). It enhanced (again) the role of the security factor in the Turkish foreign policy. Moreover, its previous relatively neutral position towards regional conflicts was transformed into a kind of sectarian policy and support for one side in inter- and intrastate conflicts. Turkey's support for the Sunni Muslim community was more and more noticeable, e.g., in the case of Iraq. The Arab Spring created further problems for the implementation of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey had established good relations with the Middle Eastern regimes, but after the beginning of the "Arab Spring", it had a dilemma – whether to keep up the developed economic and political ties with the governments (which was in accordance with the strategic depth doctrine) or start to support the people in their protests (democracy promotion was also among the Turkish foreign policy principles). Due to this dilemma Turkey's moderate criticism of violent acts against opposition groups could be seen. Later on Turkey took the "people side" more clearly and tried to do so consistently. Nevertheless, the reactionary and *ad-hoc* policy came back in Turkey – the fact reflected in the Libyan case, among others.²²

When the Syrian conflict erupted, Turkish leaders tried to convince al-Assad that he should carry out democratic reforms and change his domestic policy based on violence. One of the most active persons in this regard was Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, whose long meeting with Al-Assad in August 2011 was later broadly discussed in many publications on the Turkish Middle Eastern policy.²³ Turkey insisted first of all on a more pluralistic approach which in the opinion of many observers was a call for the inclusion of Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (whose representatives should have some ministries in the government).²⁴ However, although the Syrian government promised reforms, it did not keep the promise. Instead, more violent acts against the opposition could be observed.

The Turkish government then began to support the opposition forces in Syria (particularly after the endorsement of the Syrian rebels by Erdoğan in November

²¹ B. Demirtaş, "Turkish-Syrian Relations: From Friend 'Esad' to Enemy 'Esed'," *Middle East Policy* 2013, vol. XX, no. 1, p. 118.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²³ See e.g. G. Zengin, *Kavga. Arap Baharı'nda Türk Dış Politikası 2010–2013*, İnkilap, İstanbul 2013, pp. 112–119.

²⁴ Note from interview with Erhan Kelesoğlu from the Istanbul University, Istanbul, 28 May 2015. Cf. D. Aras, "The Syrian Uprising...", *op. cit.*, p. 48.

2011) and called for the Syrian president's resignation from office, which meant the end of friendship with al-Assad and strategic partnership relations between Turkey and Syria. The Turkish authorities decided to stand on the side of "the Syrian people" oppressed by the al-Assad regime. At the same time the contacts with USA regarding Syria improved. Turkey began to build camps for refugees in Antakya. One of these camps hosted defecting military officials who contributed later to the establishment of the "Free Syrian Army" to fight with the Syrian regime. Turkey also began to support civilian groups – the Syrian National Council, which was reshaped to the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. Their representatives were hosted by Turkey and organized their meetings there (the first one was held in Antalya in May 2011²⁵). Many commentators claimed that it was not only about the political and economic/logistical support but also military and training aid, although the Turkish government denied it.²⁶

Relations between Turkey and Syria continued to deteriorate due to the fact that clashes in Syria near the border with Turkey often resulted in the situations in which Turkish citizens became victims. In October 2012 shelling on Turkish territory killed five people. The shelling was repeated a few times and was always followed by a Turkish response against the Syrian military. The tension had grown even before the (June 2012) shooting down of a Turkish reconnaissance plane by the Syrian anti-aircraft defence. In March 2013 a car bomb exploded at the border crossing point near Cilvegözü and Bab al-Hawa. There were 13 victims, including three Turkish citizens. A tragic event occurred in May 2013, when two car bombs exploded in Reyhanlı in the Turkish border province of Hatay, killing 43 people.²⁷ This last event opened even a debate in the media in Turkey and abroad over whether it could intervene militarily in Syrian territory. Without doubt, all these incidents consolidated Turkey's negative position towards the Syrian regime.

Turkey did not change its position towards al-Assad's regime substantially even after the rise in the complexity of the situation caused by the development of activities on Syrian territory of the so called Islamic State and clashes between its militants (later also al-Nusra Front) with Kurdish groups, particularly the Democratic Union Party (PYD, *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) connected with the PKK and its military wing People's Protection Units (YPG, *Yekîneyên Paraêstina Gel*).²⁸ There was more and more talk about a kind of Turkish obsession with the Assad regime which, according to Turkey, was responsible for thousands of deaths of Syrian people. For most countries in the region as well as the USA and its western allies, ISIS became the number one enemy for security reasons. Its militants' activities in Syria, very often near the border with Turkey, were a threat to Turkish security. It

²⁵ For more, see G. Zengin, *Kavga...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–112.

²⁶ B. Demirtaş, "Turkish-Syrian Relations..." *op. cit.*, pp. 116–117; D. Aras, "The Syrian Uprising..." *op. cit.*, pp. 47–48.

²⁷ "The Impact of the Syrian conflict on neighbouring states", *NEWS24* of 27 August 2013, www.news24.com/MyNews24/The-impact-of-the-Syrian-conflict-on-neighbouring-states-20130827

²⁸ G. Zengin, *Kavga...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 138–139.

strengthened the previous fear among many Turks that Islamist groups from Syria will spread their activity to Turkish territory (later this fear appeared to be justified). Because of this about 60% of Turks in September 2014 shared the opinion that ISIS was a threat to their country (29% had the opposite opinion).²⁹ The aforementioned scenario could not be excluded at this time (particularly when the deficits of border control were taken into consideration), although the risk was much lower than in the case of some of Syria's other neighbours, e.g., Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq.

However, al-Assad's regime remained the number one enemy for Turkey. It was one of many causes for the absence of immediate condemnation of ISIS activities and a passive approach to fights between Kurds and Islamists, for instance in Kobane near the border with Turkey at the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015. Other reasons for the lack of Turkish activism were initially the capture of its Mosul consulate staff by the Islamist militants, a conviction about the ISIS threat to Turkish workers in Iraq as well as the opinion that more Turkish activism (participation in the coalition against ISIS) would not change the situation and would only bring costs, lead to more instability in the region and make Turkish territory an ISIS target (the last issue actually became true afterwards). In the case of Kobane, the obvious reason for the passive approach was fear about Syrian Kurds' autonomy aspirations, revealed at the end of 2013, as well as impact of the spread of an idea for an independence referendum in 2014 in Northern Iraq.³⁰

Later this passive approach gradually changed – due to international pressure (USA, EU, some Middle East countries, including the Northern Iraq's regional authorities) as well as some domestic factors such as the expectations of Turkish society, the majority of which majority (52%³¹) wanted Turkey's participation in the international coalition against ISIS – an important factor in 2014–2015 elections period, and the so called peace process regarding the Kurdish issue (talks with the PKK leader Öcalan until mid-2015). The critical position of the Turkish government towards ISIS became more noticeable. It reflected a tiny change in the uncritical position towards opposition forces in Syria. Moreover, Turkey started to help Kurds in the fight with the Islamist militants at the end of 2014, providing medical and humanitarian aid and allowing Kurdish *peshmerga* from the Northern Iraq to cross Turkish territory.³²

²⁹ Data: *Türkiye'nin Nabzı. Eylül 2014. Türkiye'nin İŞİD Algısı: İslam, Şiddet ve Hükümet Politikası*, MetroPOLL, Stratejik ve Sosyal Araştırmalar, Ankara 2014, www.metropoll.com.tr/upload/content/files/1772-turkiyenin-nabzi-eylul-2014.pdf

³⁰ Cf. Ö. Z. Oktav, H. S. Ertem, "Suriye İç Savaşı'nın Türkiye-Iran-Syria İlişkileri Üzerindeki Etkileri," in Ö. Z. Oktav, H. S. Ertem (eds.), *2000'li Yıllarda Türk Dış Politikası. Fırsatlar, Riskler ve Krizler*. Nobel, İstanbul 2015, pp. 282–283; "Turkey's Davutoğlu: PYD should make clear who it sides with", *Sunday's Zaman* of 14 November 2013, www.todayszaman.com/news-331478-turkeys-davutoglu-pyd-should-make-clear-who-it-sides-with.html

³¹ Data: *Türkiye'nin Nabzı. Eylül 2014...*, *op. cit.*

³² S. Erkuş, "Turkey lets Kurdish fighters cross into Kobane," *Hurriyet Daily News* of 20 October 2014, www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-lets-kurdish-fighters-cross-into-kobane.aspx?pageID=238&nID=73218&NewsCatID=338

This friendly attitude towards the Kurds in Syria changed in the second half of 2015 together with the escalation of the conflict with the PKK. Turkey began to treat the PYD and YPG as terrorists on an equal footing with ISIS and PKK. The Syrian Kurds were accused of ethnic cleansing against Turkmens and Arabs in the territories under their control (in order to create a “Kurdish corridor” and then claim sovereign rights along the Turkish-Syrian border).³³ This issue made Turkey-USA relations with reference to Syria difficult. Syrian Kurds are very important for the Americans because they fight effectively against ISIS. At the beginning of 2016 it had some consequences for the effectiveness of the international talks on the future of Syria: Turkey opposed the participation of PYD/YPG in the Geneva talks and they did not attend them.³⁴

At the same time, Turkey’s approach towards ISIS changed significantly in 2015. A crucial factor was the bomb attacks in Turkey organized by people connected with ISIS – first in Suruç in July 2015, Ankara in October 2015, and Istanbul – in January, March and June 2016.³⁵ The more active approach included indirect as well as direct actions. Indirect actions included support for the international coalition’s airstrikes against ISIS positions in Syria and Iraq (including consent in July 2015 for the Americans to use the Incirlik air base). The direct undertakings included first shelling ISIS positions in Syria from Turkish territory and arresting people suspected of links with ISIS.³⁶

However, the increasing ISIS threat as well as taking up more territories by the aforementioned Syrian Kurdish forces (within the Syrian Democratic Forces) as a result of fights against ISIS led to the direct intervention of the Turkish army on the Syrian territory. The Operation Euphrates Shield began on 24 August 2016 as the cross-border operation by the Turkish military aimed at helping the opposition Sunni Arab groups and coalition organizing airstrikes in the fight against ISIS. However, the aim of the operation was not only to create the ISIS-free zone in the northern part of Syria but also to prevent the Syrian Kurdish forces from building a corridor connecting the territories under their control.³⁷ All these

³³ D. Zeyrek, “Ankara warns PYD over ‘demographic change’ in northern Syria,” *Hurriyet Daily News* of 22 June 2015, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-warns-pyd-over-demographic-change-in-northern-syria.aspx?pageID=238&nID=84296&NewsCatID=510

³⁴ “Turkey against PYD in Syria talks, not Kurds: PM,” *Hurriyet Daily News* of 26 January 2016, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-against-pyd-in-syria-talks-not-kurds-pm.aspx?pageID=238&nID=94356&NewsCatID=338

³⁵ “More than 250 people killed in major bombings in Turkey over just one year,” *Hurriyet Daily News* of 29 June 2016, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/more-than-250-people-killed-in-major-bombings-in-turkey-over-just-one-year.aspx?pageID=238&nID=101060&NewsCatID=341

³⁶ S. Erkmen, “İŞİD Türkiye’de neyi hedefliyor?” *Al Jazeera Turk* of 26 April 2016, www.aljazeera.com.tr/gorus/isis-turkiyede-neyi-hedefliyor

³⁷ “As it happened: Turkish military, coalition forces launch ‘Euphrates Shield’ operation in Jarablus,” *Hurriyet Daily News* of 24 August 2016, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/as-it-happened-turkish-military-coalition-forces-launch-euphrates-shield-operation-in-jarablus.aspx?PageID=238&NID=103175&NewsCatID=352

events again did not mean the end of Turkey's negative position towards the al-Assad regime. The Turkish government constantly repeated (including 2016) the number of Syrian victims of regime violence (about 450 000), and it emphasised its responsibility for the displacement of millions of its citizens and turning the country into ruins.³⁸ The official Turkish position was that there is a need for a complex solution to the problem. It means fighting with ISIS but also with the Syrian regime. The Turkish government believes that solely beating ISIS would not change the situation; the Syrian regime has to be changed as well (some AKP politicians even shared the opinion about cooperation between ISIS and Al-As-sad). There must be a transitional period within which a new political framework will be developed under the control of the international community, including the adoption of a new constitution and foundation of new parties after closure of the "bloody-handed" Baath Party.³⁹

It must be added that in accordance with Turkey's position in 2013–2014 it was willing to be more involved in Syria (including participation in ground operation) if the international community established safe havens and a no-fly zone in the northern part of the country. This Turkish proposal served the state's interests. The safe havens would act against Kurdish efforts to enhance their autonomy (Syrian Kurds would not be able to be present in the zones). Moreover, the stability of Turkey in its border regions would be improved and the refugee problem would be solved, at least partially (see below). This proposal was not supported by any key international actors at this time. In 2015 Turkey and the USA began to talk about the establishment of a zone free of ISIS militants situated between the Mare-Jarablus line. However, it was not established due to disagreements between them. Turkey still wanted the no-fly zone (it insisted on it also at the beginning of 2016 to provide a safe haven for the Syrian refugees after increasing activity by Russian aircraft in Syria) and the presence of Syrian opposition forces in the safe zone, while the USA opposed the former and was sceptical about the presence of the Syrian opposition forces because of the possible inclusion of radical elements. Moreover, the USA was for the establishment of an "ISIS-free zone", while Turkey saw it also as the undertaking against the Syrian regime as well as the PYD-free area.⁴⁰

Something similar to the safe haven idea (i.e., the humanitarian zone for the Syrian refugees) also appeared at this time during the talks with the EU on the ref-

³⁸ M. Yetkin, "Syria with or without Al-Assad," *Hurriyet Daily News* of 15 July 2016, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syria-with-or-without-al-Assad.aspx?pageID=449&nID=101615&NewsCatID=409

³⁹ "Rapprochement with Russia will help resolve Syrian unrest: Ankara," *Hurriyet Daily News* of 15 July 2016, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/rapprochement-with-russia-will-help-resolve-syrian-unrest-ankara-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=101627&NewsCatID=510

⁴⁰ "US and Turkey agree to forge 'ISIL-free zone' in Syria, official confirms," *Hurriyet Daily News* of 27 July 2015, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-and-turkey-agree-to-forge-isil-free-zone-in-syria-official-confirms.aspx?pageID=238&nID=86010&NewsCatID=510

ugee deal.⁴¹ This idea was reflected in the April 2016 words of German Chancellor Angela Merkel who supported a safe haven for refugees in Syria. She explained later that it should be based on the results of the Geneva talks and cannot be the “classical” safe zone, which was opposed by the USA as well as the UN and aid agencies due to the lack of safety guarantees for the refugees.⁴²

It seems that after the beginning of Operation Euphrates Shield the idea of the ISIS-free zone is being slowly implemented. However, Turkey’s willingness to make it also PYD/YPG-free area and the undertaking against the Syrian regime makes the whole situation troublesome, particularly with reference to the Turkish-American cooperation in Syria and Turkish-Russian relations. The picture is even more complex when we add to it that a negative Turkish position towards the al-Assad regime was confirmed not only by the plans for the safe haven/zone but also the training of opposition forces. Americans had in mind the use of these forces against ISIS, Turkey against Assad’s regime, too.⁴³

EXPLANATION OF TURKEY’S INFLEXIBLE POSITION

The Turkish one-track approach towards the Syrian conflict (the demise of al-Assad’s regime) proved the weakness of its Middle Eastern policy. It showed again that Turkey actually had no long-term strategy for the region but acts a little chaotically and reacts to regional developments. The Syrian conflict exposed the aforementioned failure of Turkish ambitions to have “zero problems with neighbours” and to be the regional power that strives for the stabilization of neighbouring regions and participates actively and effectively in the resolution of regional conflicts, trying to be neutral towards parties to the conflict and to play a role of as mediator or at least facilitator. What could be observed instead in the reaction to the Syrian conflict was a policy that created a problem in relations with a very important neighbour in the region – Iran as well as with major international partners – to a certain extent the USA but first of all Russia, whose approach towards the Syrian conflict is completely different from the Turkish one and is characterised by support for the Syrian government. The different approach of the two states towards the Syrian regime became a real problem when Russia began to participate actively in the conflict on the side of al-Assad (second half of 2015), taking military measures more frequently against Syrian opposition forces (also Turkmens – which was particularly problematic for Turkey) than ISIS. Russian aircraft often flew near the Turkish-Syrian border. One of these flights led to a very

⁴¹ For more, see EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18-eu-turkey-statement/

⁴² G. Gotev, “Merkel warms up to ‘safe zones’ in Syria,” *EurActiv* of 25 April 2016, www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/merkel-warms-up-to-turkish-idea-of-safe-zones-in-syria/

⁴³ A. Szymański, “Turcja a Państwo Islamskie – niespiskowy punkt widzenia,” [Turkey and Islamic State – non-conspiracy perspective] *Znak* 2015, no. 718, pp. 53–57.

serious crisis in the Turkish-Russian relations in November 2015. A Russian Su-24 was shot down by the Turkish Air Force after repeated Turkish warnings about violating its airspace. The negative consequences went beyond the deterioration of Turkish-Russian relations. It also increased NATO-Russia tensions and for Turkey it meant no opportunity to use its aircraft in Syria. The situation began to normalize in June 2016 after Erdoğan's letter to Vladimir Putin in which the Turkish President expressed regret for the downing of the Russian military jet.⁴⁴

Turkey's policy of uncritically supporting different opposition forces in 2011–2013 also led to the destabilization of the region. It contributed in this way to the chaos in Syria and the development of different extremist groups, including ISIS (the allegations of assistance to its militants were not then questionable) and the al-Nusra Front. It was at the same time a policy that kept Turkey out of the major international initiatives, including the Geneva II conference (it changed a little in 2015 but Turkey was still not the major actor in the international talks on the future of Syria). Turkey's stance isolated it in the international arena – a fact later presented as “precious loneliness” by Turkish authorities.⁴⁵

The crucial question is why Turkey has maintained its inflexible position towards the conflict in Syria, which brought negative consequences for its regional and international position. It can be explained only to a certain extent by the issues mentioned above, i.e., the consistent support for the “oppressed people”, e.g., Syrian citizens, who revolted against the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East (the argument lost its significance when Turkey began to have its own problems with democratization) as well as security threats to the Turkish state. In addition to these issues, al-Assad's concessions to Syrian Kurds (including PYD connected with the PKK) could consolidate the Turkish stance.⁴⁶

However, this did not explain fully a kind of obsession of the Turkish authorities, first of all Erdoğan's, with al-Assad's regime. The clearer picture appears when, again, the existing determinants are taken more carefully into consideration. Two major issues concern Turkish foreign policy doctrine and domestic reality, respectively.

As already mentioned, Turkey had begun to pursue a kind of sectarian policy in the Middle East. This was reflected in support given to the Sunni Muslim community in Iraq, later to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt – the fact that contributed to deterioration of relations between Turkey and some Gulf countries as well as Egypt after the change of its regime. The same policy was observed in the Syrian case. The author of this article has mentioned Davutoğlu's call for the inclusion of Sunni Muslim representatives, i.e., members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

⁴⁴ H. Özdal, *Turkey-Russia Relations: Towards Normalization?*, USAK Expert Analysis, 1.07.2016, www.usak.org.tr/en/expert-analysis/turkey-russia-relations-towards-normalization

⁴⁵ Ö. Z. Oktav, H. S. Ertem, “Suriye İç Savaşı'nın Türkiye-Iran-Syria İlişkileri Üzerindeki Etkileri, *op. cit.*, pp. 281–284.

⁴⁶ D. Aras, “The Syrian Uprising...”, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

into the government dominated by the Alawites to which the Al-Assad family belongs. The members of the Muslim Brotherhood were hosted in Turkey in 2011 and signed, in Istanbul together with other opposition groups, a declaration about protecting human rights in Syria, including the freedom of expression and freedom of religion. They were also present in the General Secretariat of the Syrian National Council together with other Islamists. Turkey supported opposition forces of this type in order to increase its influence in the Middle East.⁴⁷ Later on, the Turkish government's critical and inflexible position towards the Syrian regime was a consequence of the sectarian policy pursued with reference to Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. The Sunni Muslim community (of Hanafi school) – clearly privileged in the domestic politics first of all in comparison with the large Alevi community – was supported abroad in confrontation with Alawites (Syria) or Shia groups (Iraq, later Yemen). When it comes to the last issue, it seems that Turkey regarded the support for Sunni opposition in Syria as a way of limiting Iranian influence, observed first of all in Iraq.

The second crucial issue seems to be the increasingly important refugee problem perceived in Turkey first of all as a consequence of the violent actions of the Syrian regime towards its people. The Syrian conflict led to the influx of refugees to many Middle Eastern countries, including Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. The number of Syrian refugees sheltering in Turkey approached 1,5 million in January 2015; in June 2016 it was more than 2.7 million registered people.⁴⁸ They are living in the provinces close to the Syrian border (first of all in Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Kilis) in special camps (only about 10% of all refugees) or outside them. Many refugees chose to go to other parts of Turkey, including the biggest cities such as Istanbul or Ankara.

The flow of Syrian refugees – easier thanks to the “open-door” policy of the Turkish government – has a negative impact on Turkey in many areas. The problems connected with the refugee influx concerns first of all the people outside the camps and to a lesser extent the refugees in the camps. Problems can be divided into formal-institutional, socio-economic, security and cultural-ethnic problems.

Turkey has been facing the general problem of refugees (e.g. from Iraq or Afghanistan) for many years. However, the formal-institutional framework has not yet been adjusted to the current situation. First in 2014 Turkey adopted regulations on the temporary protection of people coming from Syria and other countries. This means in practice that they have the status of “guests” who are permitted to stay on Turkish territory only for some time. They have a limited right to work (although the Turkish government recently adopted regulations making their access to the Turkish labor market easier), likewise access to education, health care, etc. The adjustment of Turkish law with international and EU law in this field is still work

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴⁸ Data: 2015 UNHCR country operations profile – Turkey, www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html; Syrian Regional Refugee Response, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>

in progress. Government plans from mid-2016 to give the Turkish citizenship to well qualified Syrians who are not a threat to the security of the country will not solve the problem.⁴⁹

However, the biggest refugee problems for Turkey are in the other aforementioned areas. It is true that we can often observe a sense of brotherhood among Turks who help Syrian refugees, treating them as *mujahir* – persecuted or forced to flee like the prophet Muhammad and people from Mecca. It is also correct that the establishment of camps for Syrian refugees brought some benefits for Turks, particularly in certain regions. They have been employed as administrative staff of camps or employees of the facilities organized for Syrians, e.g., grocery shops, laundry rooms, health and educational centres, etc. On the other hand, the costs of maintaining the camps and their facilities as well as for aid to the refugees are constantly growing. Moreover, there are a lot of social and economic problems leading to tensions and conflicts (sometimes clashes) between Turkish citizens and Syrians. The competition between the Syrians working illegally for very low wages and Turkish legal wage earners has been developed – to the disadvantage of the latter. The appearance of an increasing number of people also results in the rising cost of living and prices of houses – with regard to both renting and purchasing. In Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Kilis, property prices doubled and rents increased threefold already in 2014.⁵⁰

Moreover, some Turkish institutions such as schools and hospitals are under strain. The former are not able to guarantee the education services for all Syrian children (particularly outside the camps), including in special courses such as the Turkish language. Hospitals have difficulties to admit an increased number of patients suffering from diseases that sometimes spread in the refugee camps due to the lack of proper medication. Turkish residents of towns complain that they have to share water supplies, sewage systems or green areas with Syrian refugees. In their opinion it causes problems because they often dump much more garbage or consume much more water than Turks.⁵¹

The aforementioned problem of disease represents another group of negative consequences connected with the refugee influx. Refugees also create dangers for the safety of the Turkish and Syrian people living in the regions near the border

⁴⁹ A. İcduygu, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey. The Long Road Ahead*, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, April 2015, www.migrationpolicy.org/research/syrian-refugees-turkey-long-road-ahead; "Suriyeliler'e 'vatandaşlık hakkının' detayları ortaya çıktı," *Hürriyet* of 9 July 2016, www.hurriyet.com.tr/suriyelilerin-vatandas-olma-detaylari-ortaya-cikti-40137829

⁵⁰ "Syrian refugee inflow doubles house prices in Turkish border cities," *Hurriyet Daily News* of 5 March 2014, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrian-refugee-inflow-doubles-house-prices-in-turkish-border-cities.aspx?pageID=238&nID=63204&NewsCatID=345; E.A. Cebeci, S. Judson, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey*, SETA Perspectives, 4 April 2014, p. 3, http://file.setadc.org/Files/Pdf/SETA_DC_Perspective_Syrian_Refugees_in_Turkey.pdf

⁵¹ G. Aydın, "Living with Syrian refugees in Turkey's Kilis," *Hurriyet Daily News* of 16 February 2016, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/living-with-syrian-refugees-in-turkeys-kilis.aspx?pageID=238&nID=95278&NewsCatID=341

with Syria as well as for the internal security of the Turkish state. There is a legal influx of refugees and hundreds have crossed the border illegally. They often became members of gangs smuggling petrol and other goods. The smugglers sometimes attacked border posts in the past. Moreover, a bad economic situation among refugees results in the development of petty crime and black market in the regions that neighbour on Syria.⁵²

Unrest is frequent in the camps. This is due to the lack of adequate resources for the refugees who are living in close proximity, enhancing their frustration, and high unemployment. There are also psychological problems connected with living far away from home, the lack of a purposeful life and doubts about opportunities for “self-realization” in Turkey. Other reasons for unrest resulted from the contacts of refugees with Syrian opposition fighters, who could quite easily cross the Syrian-Turkish border to recruit the camps residents. This issue concerned equally the ISIS militants.⁵³ The situation changed in this context after the sealing of the Turkish-Syrian border in 2015, but the cases of Syrians supporting ISIS or other radical Islamist groups cannot be excluded.

Another security problem concerns refugees who do not live in the camps. They do not always reside in houses or flats, but often live in ruins or even in the open air. This makes them vulnerable to all kind of abuse, something particularly true for women and children. There are reports, for example, of cases of sexual violence.⁵⁴ There are also ethnic and religious differences between the Syrian refugees (many of whom are Alawites and Shiite Muslims) and the local community (mostly Sunnis), which create tensions, particularly in situations where the number of refugees starts to exceed the number of local people (although there are exceptions like the town of Kilis).⁵⁵

It seems that the security threats resulting from the flow of refugees are taken very seriously by the Turkish government. An interesting issue in this context is the 2015 requirement that Turkish academics obtain permission from the Ministry of the Interior to do research on the issues concerning Syrian refugees residing in the camps.⁵⁶ According to the Turkish government, the only solution to this set of problems is the end of al-Assad’s regime after the implementation of the aforementioned Turkish plan.

⁵² N. Onishi, “Syria seen as Most Dire Refugee Crisis in a Generation,” *New York Times* of 23 November 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/world/middleeast/syria-seen-as-most-dire-refugee-crisis-in-a-generation.html?_r=0; “Smugglers from Syrian side attack Turkish border post,” *Hurriyet Daily News* of 19 May 2014, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/smugglers-from-syrian-side-attack-turkish-border-post.aspx?pageID=238&nID=66655&NewsCatID=341

⁵³ E. A. Cebeci, S. Judson, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁵⁴ *Turkey: Refugee Crisis*, ECHO Factsheet, March 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/turkey_syrian_crisis_en.pdf

⁵⁵ N. Onishi, “Syria seen as Most Dire Refugee Crisis...,” *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ Note from the interview with Özlem Altay Olcay from Koç University, Istanbul, 28 May 2015.

Turkey's 2015–2016 measures to control and manage the flow of the Syrian refugees, such as sealing the Turkish-Syrian border as well as the conclusion and implementation of the refugee deal between Turkey and the EU in March 2016 (including receiving financial resources from the EU side)⁵⁷ will only partially solve the refugee problems. It seems that the Turkey-EU undertaking serves more the improvement of their relations than the problems of the presence of millions of Syrians on the Turkish territory.

CONCLUSIONS

The article confirmed the hypothesis that Turkish policy towards Syria and the war there, is a result of the interplay of a large set of foreign and domestic factors, e.g., the perceptions of elites and societies as well as the regional and international situation. The history of Turkish-Syrian relations reveals critical junctures that led to substantial change in the impact of the aforementioned factors. The end of the Cold War “uncovered” the existing problems in bilateral relations: a lack of trust due to historical animosities, noticeable securitization of the domestic politics of Turkey due to the PKK problem, and the maintenance of the traditional foreign policy model led to the serious crisis in 1998. The Adana agreement, which ended the crisis, security arrangements between Turkey and Syria as well as the symbolic gesture of president Sezer visit to Hafez al-Assad's funeral began a chain of events creating favourable determinants for the development of Turkish-Syrian relations. These included a change of the foreign policy doctrine from the beginning of the AKP government, the Iraq war, a change of mutual perceptions due to the demonstration effect of Turkey and international developments such as its closer ties with the EU or tougher position on Israel. The Arab Spring and the beginning of conflict in Syria once again changed the situation substantially. They uncovered the weaknesses of the foreign policy doctrine which in some aspects returned to the traditional policy model at the cost of the relations between Turkey and the Syrian regime. One of these aspects, the more sectarian policy of the AKP government connected with the ideological factor as well as the negative consequences of the Assad regime's actions for Turkish security and the increasingly complex Kurdish issue led to an inflexible position towards the Syrian conflict at the cost of Turkey's regional and international position.

It is very difficult to predict the future developments in the Turkish position towards the war in Syria. The extrapolation method, i.e. the forecast based on the developments to date, is not a very useful tool in a dynamic situation with changing domestic, regional and international determinants. Such events as the development of ISIS activities (also in Europe) as well as changes concerning the conflict in Syria (e.g. successes of the Kurdish groups supported by the USA and its allies in fight-

⁵⁷ For more, see: EU-Turkey statement, *op. cit.*

ing with the ISIS militants) and international undertakings to resolve it (including USA-Russia talks), could modify Turkish policy in terms of more activeness. It was proved in August 2016 when the Operation Euphrates Shield began. However, it is difficult to predict the change of Turkey's one-track approach to the Syrian conflict (al-Assad regime) due to many question marks, including the unstable political situation in Turkey (particularly after attempted military coup on 15 July 2016, which has a negative impact on the Turkish activities in Syria) as well as a very dynamic Kurdish problem that can be an obstacle to more flexible approach.

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