

UNDERSTANDING SYRIA AND TURKEYS ROLE

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Understanding Syria and Turkey's role

After the uprising started, which was regarded as the continuation of Arab revolts in the Middle East, Syria turned into a platform on which international relations have been defined and where regional and global balance of power is settled. Syria in a way became the hunting ground for big powers.

During the first days of the uprising the Western-supported opposition against Bashar al-Assad's regime faced the resistance of Russia and Iran. A group of countries led by France, the U.S. and Turkey supported the opposition groups strongly.

But this support was mainly rhetoric and it was not reflected to the actual fighting in the field. On the other hand, Russian and Iranian support to Assad was more concrete. Both countries took the initiative in the field and supported the regime militarily.

The U.S., on the other hand, after watching silently for years, has tried to establish a garrison statelet in the north recently. As a result Syria has been effectively divided into two, if not on paper.

Now in the West we have Russia and its allies, and in the east of Euphrates, there is the U.S. and its allies. Between these two, Turkey is playing the role of a balancer (stabilizer).

How did we come to this point? To understand Syria now we should look at the 2000s. Syria cannot be understood without considering the energy security issue of Europe at that time, without remembering the efforts to bypass Russia in the energy game.

In the winter of 2006, Russia's decision to cut off gas delivery to Ukraine left Europe in the cold. Putin's policy of using energy as a political weapon forced European countries to look for alternative sources and transportation routes. Qatar, Turkmenistan and Iran were alternatives.

Iran was the weakest option due to the political problems and U.S. objections. In the 2000s, the Nabucco Project, carrying Turkmen gas to the West via Turkey, was being discussed for long.

But Putin was quick enough to kill the project, convincing Turkmenistan to direct its gas to Russia. The Nagorno-Karabakh issue occluded the Azeri-Armenian route. The Nabucco Project was dead by 2013.

At that time carrying the gas and oil from the Gulf to the eastern Mediterranean was also on the agenda. Obviously leaving the valves in the mercy of Israeli hands was not an option for Arabs, and the Jordan-Israel route was out of the agenda.

Terror and instability in the Sinai Peninsula and in Iraq's Sunni areas put these two routes out either. Lebanon, having Hezbollah in government, could not be an alternative.

The shortest and safest route on paper could be Syria under a pro-Western government, via Iraq's Kurdish-controlled area. For this reason the uprisings against Assad was supported by Western governments.

By doing this the pro-Russia Assad would be removed, therefore Moscow could be bypassed and its role in the market could be diminished.

But Putin proved that he was aware of the situation and experienced enough to change the course. First he blocked Georgia's and Ukraine's bids to join NATO by using military force.

He strengthened his air defense system by deploying missiles and forming A2AD area beyond Russian borders. He supported the Assad regime unconditionally

and nullified diplomatic efforts at the U.N. Security Council.

He increased operational capacity of his navy by annexing Crimea in 2014. Russia could not establish an air-bridge to Syria over Turkey during the war, because Turkey was against the Assad regime.

The opening of a sea route to Syria was critical in this regard. Russia was able to start its military campaign on Sept. 30, 2015.

The official goal was to defeat ISIL, but Russia actually focused its air strikes on the country's west, against the opposition forces.

In a short time, Russia was able to control the coast of the Mediterranean, developed its air and naval bases and killed the potential gas pipeline route which could bypass Russia.

Western countries responded to Putin's moves by forcing a corridor in the north by using PKK-PYD elements despite resentment from Turkey, which named it a "terror corridor."

Had the independence referendum in the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government succeeded and the PKK-PYD were able to control the corridor until the coast, Turkey and Russia would have been bypassed.

Turkey's ties with the Arab world would be cut off and Turkey would be out of energy games, plus Russia's military campaign would fail eventually.

The PKK, PYD and YPG have been used as a tool and ISIL provided the pretext for the West. Turkey's operation in Afrin last year uncovered a concentration of ammunition and weapons next to its borders, revealing maybe a plan of occupation of its cities.

For these reasons Turkey made fighting against the PKK-PYD and its affiliates in Syria (Iraq and Turkey) a priority for its national security and territorial integrity. Russia and Turkey, for different reasons, came together to spoil the plans of establishing a corridor.

But Turkey never gave up its policy of removing Assad from power.

When it comes to the future of Assad, Turkey is working together with Western countries. But in keeping Syria's territorial integrity and defeating the corridor, Turkey and Russia are on the same page.

Apart from global power rivalry, Syria has also turned to a ground on which regional balances are being determined. Syria plays an important role in the Saudi-Iranian competition, too.

Saudis feel the Iranian pressure at Hormuz and Bab Al-Mandab in their oil trade. Fighting in Yemen and forming an anti-Iranian axis in the Gulf are related to this.

These two issues are forcing the Saudis to direct their oil trade to the east of the Mediterranean. That's why the Saudis are strongly supporting the Sisi government in Egypt.

They want to limit the influence of Iran in Syria and Lebanon. The Saudis are trying to work with the U.S. and other Western powers to counterbalance Iran.

Turkey is also playing a balancing role between the Saudis and Iranians. Saudi Arabia and some Gulf nations are trying to put pressure on Turkey. But Turkey caught the Saudis red-handed in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

This made Saudi-oriented policies more difficult for the U.S. Trump's decision of withdrawal from Syria can be the sign of a different course of action in the region.