

The Underlying Causes of the Post-1998 Turkish-Syrian Strategic Partnership

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Turkish-Syrian relations have remarkably improved since the signing of the Adana Accords in 1998. This rapprochement is frequently attributed to regime type, namely the religious orientation of Turkey's "Justice and Development Party" (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi - AKP), and the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's deviation from the foreign policy approach of his father, Hafiz al-Assad. This approach ignores more significant systemic factors that are independent of sub-state phenomena. The new strategic partnership between Turkey and Syria can only be explained by geopolitical considerations and alliance shifts that have triggered a convergence of interests. These geopolitical factors include Syria's increasing strategic isolation in the post-Cold War global order, which has weakened its power projection capabilities and limited its foreign policy options. The United States' stance vis-à-vis both Turkey and Syria has inadvertently triggered alliance shifts that have further brought the two nations closer. The most notable mutual interest that has consolidated the partnership is the potential establishment of an independent Kurdistan in the aftermath of the March 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Realist explanations for Turkish-Syrian relations prove continually applicable. Although this paper will focus on the aforementioned factors that have led Syria to inch closer to its northern neighbor since 1998, the continued relevance of historical legacies necessitates a brief overview of key events and trends.

HISTORICAL LEGACIES

Turkey's 1939 attainment of Alexandretta (Hatay) became the largest source of contention between the two nations pre-Cold War milieu. The establishment of Israel in 1948 overshadowed and demoted this foreign policy concern, which has nevertheless continued to shape Syrian perceptions of Turkey as complicit in a Western imperial design for the region.¹ Although

a confrontation is unlikely, there are two significant factors that keep the question of Alexandretta alive according to Muhammad Muslih: Syrian patriotism and territorial integrity, and the symbolically significant question of demographics.²

Bilateral relations between the two countries have been largely shaped by the Cold War, during which the two countries aligned with opposite camps. Turkey's NATO membership was viewed as serving its own interests and that of the Western bloc at the expense of the Arab cause.³ In other words, mutual suspicion shaped both sides. Turkey held strong anticommunist sentiments and believed that the Soviet Union had aspirations for regional expansion, which was coupled with Syria's belief that Turkey was an instrument of American imperialism in the Middle East.⁴

Another equally important source of historical contention between the two countries is the water of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, which originate in Turkey and flow down to Iraq and Syria. The issue of water initially emerged as a point of continuous tension in the 1960s but crystallized in the 1980s with the development of the "Southeast Anatolian Project," (Güneydogu Anadolu Projesi - GAP).⁵ GAP is a multipurpose project with the primary aim of generating revenue to develop the economically destitute Southeast. The project consists of the giant Ataturk dam, 22 smaller dams, and 19 hydroelectric stations on the Tigris and Euphrates, including two tunnels to carry water for irrigation.⁶ Faced with the prospect of water shortages, Syria under Hafiz al-Assad resorted to balancing acts that were not exclusively confined to providing sanctuary and funding to the PKK (Partiya Kerkaran Kurdistan/Workers Party of Kurdistan), but also included exploiting other internal cleavages that threatened the cohesion of the Turkish state, such as ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) and the radical Turkish leftist group Dev-Sol.⁷ However, as Turkey's Kurdish minority constitutes an estimated 20 percent of its population, Assad's pragmatism allowed him to recognize that supporting the PKK and granting refuge to its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was a most useful tool. When Syrian support for the PKK became intolerable for Turkey, and after diplomatic and rhetorical tactics had been exhausted, Turkey amassed 10,000 additional troops on the border and threatened to attack in 1998.⁸ Even though the 1980s and the early 1990s was an era in which Syria could project influence beyond its aggregate power,⁹ when confronted with the real prospect of going to war with its more powerful neighbor, Assad quickly capitulated, demonstrating full awareness of the limitations of Syrian power.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR AND STRATEGIC REORIENTATION

The end of the Cold War necessitated a strategic reorientation of the regional balance of power in the Middle East, yet the prism of bipolarity through which Turkey and Syria had become accustomed to viewing each other did not disappear overnight. In fact, the end of a bipolar world order initially further locked Syria and Turkey into a security dilemma which amplified the rift between the two nations by exposing issues of security and water. Confronted with the disappearance of its benefactor, the Soviet Union, Syria initially secured arms from the Eastern bloc and sought alternatives in China and North Korea, but quickly realized that a gradual reestablishment of relations with Western Europe and the United States was a more effective means to widen its room to maneuver.¹⁰ Although Western Europe replaced the Soviet Union as its main trading partner and economic source of aid in the post-bipolar era, Syria remained intent on preserving relations with an increasingly powerful, yet isolated, Iran.¹¹

Although Turkey was on the side of the victorious camp, the immediate post-Cold War era amplified its internal and external security challenges, further exposing the questionability of its Western orientation.¹² In the post-bipolar world, Turkey's primary role in the Middle East was immediately relegated from an indispensable agent of Soviet containment, to one of dual containment, in which it was expected to act as a loyal buffer between Iran and Iraq as well as a counterweight to Islamic fundamentalism. Syria's suspicion of this new role was grounded in that it not only translated to the diminution of the Arab one, but also because of the indispensability of Iran as an asset to counterbalance Iraq and Israel.¹³

Although the Gulf crisis of 1990 occurred against the backdrop of extremely tense relations between Turkey and Syria, that both countries joined the Gulf coalition in varying capacities highlighted the desirability of a common outcome: a stable, yet weakened Iraq. For Syria, the use of the Gulf War of 1990 to reposition itself in the regional balance of power is a testament to the Syrian regime's remarkable adaptability.

It is important to note that the centrality of the unity and territorial integrity of Iraq as a crucial common objective for both countries predates the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq. This was a principle highlighted in the Assad-Demirel meeting in 1993, shortly before relations reached an all-time low.¹⁴ This episode demonstrates that both Syria and Turkey perceived Iraq as a focal point of convergence.

Despite this central mutual interest, there are two primary reasons that

the aftermath of the Gulf War did not translate into closer Turkish-Syrian relations. First of all, Turkey's use of water and Syria's support of the PKK had not reached the point of exhaustion. Secondly, that Saddam Hussein's regime was weakened yet remained territorially unified was indeed the preferred outcome for both nations and rendered cooperation obsolete. Indeed, had the aftermath of the Gulf War been detrimental enough for both nations, it is likely that they would have been quicker to abandon the tools they were using to amplify one another's security concerns. As noted above, it was only after Syria decided that the continued use of manipulating internal cleavages was not worth the cost of going to war with a militarily advanced Turkey that it embarked on a course to mend bilateral relations.

INITIAL SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT AND THE ROLE OF SUBSTATE PHENOMENA

The Turkish-Syrian rapprochement is often mistakenly attributed to the Islamic orientation of the AKP, elected in November 2002. For example, Meliha Benli Altunisik and Ozlem Tur claim that the AKP's alternate vision of the Middle East and its Islamist roots have underlined "the similarities between Syria and Turkey" and have given "an additional meaning to the current relationship."¹⁵ Even in their assessment of determinants of trade

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links between Turkey and Middle Eastern states, Mustafa Aydin and Damla Aras cite the "possible effects of the recent emergence of the proto-Islamist AKP governing in Turkey."¹⁶ This interpretation overlooks the steps that the AKP has also taken to integrate Turkey into the European political community.¹⁷ More importantly, to attribute relaxation of tensions to the religious leanings of the current Turkish regime fails to address why bilateral relations

hit an all-time low in 1996 and 1997 under the premiership of the avowedly Islamist Necmettin Erbakan and disregards the threat that political Islam poses to the secular Alawite minority governing in Damascus.

Similarly, Soner Cagaptay, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, cites the ascendance of the AKP as an important source of rapprochement by erroneously citing its "deep cultural and religious

empathy toward the Muslim Middle East” as the source of its resistance to the war in Iraq.¹⁸ This explanation overlooks far more crucial mutual security concerns regarding Iraq that will be addressed in this paper. Bashar al-Assad and the AKP’s ascendance in Syria and Turkey have only coincidentally coincided with the emergence of an era in which the strategic environment was ripe for the strengthening of bilateral relations. This strengthening, however, has not been shaped nor consolidated by the nature of those regimes.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that the groundwork for this relationship was already effectively laid out by their predecessors. A variety of initiatives to deepen bilateral relations immediately followed the signing of the Adana Accords in October 1998, which led to the immediate extradition of Ocalan, the closure of PKK training camps and the termination of logistical support.¹⁹

The head of the Turkish Parliament and then-acting President, Hikmet Cetin, for example, highlighted the emergence of a new era in Syrian-Turkish relations in 1999 by calling it a “bright period starting between the two countries.”²⁰ A 1999 visit by a delegation headed by an aide to Syrian Prime Minister Salim Yassin led to the reactivation of the Joint Economic Commission, which had been defunct since 1988.²¹ These efforts were soon reflected in the economic field, as the trade volume between the two countries reached \$724.7 million in 2000, up from \$539.2 million in 1999, making Turkey the fourth largest trading partner of Syria.²²

In 2000, Turkey sought to further consolidate ties with Syria through a “Declaration of Principles,” which included provisions such as Damascus’ abandonment of its claims over Hatay.²³ Syria indicated that it would rather establish solid relations first and gradually solve outstanding political problems, a reaction that Turkey found acceptable.²⁴ In the beginning of 2002, the Turkish National Security Council (NSC), an organ of the secular establishment, declared its desire to further consolidate and develop relations with neighboring countries through trade, as “external relations develop along with the improved trade ties,” which mirrored then Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit’s desire to improve political relations with its neighbors to the South.²⁵ A military agreement which included mutual exchange of military personnel and training was signed in June 2002 during the Syrian Chief of Staff General Assan al-Turkomani’s visit to Turkey.²⁶ This concrete move to consolidate the new partnership taken by the secular military establishment of both nations further undermines the interpretation that regime type is a contributory factor.

BASHAR'S NEW APPROACH IN THE WAKE OF PARADIGM SHIFTS

Bashar al-Assad's accession to power in 2000 coincided with a drastic alteration of the strategic environment. Syrian foreign policy towards Turkey cannot be understood without examining attempts to form alliances and foster existing relations with other states within this context. Bashar's policies in the early stages of his rule were in effect a continuation of those of his father: prudent maneuvering between "East" and "West."²⁷ The increased polarization of the global environment and its division into the two arbitrary categories of East and West began to crystallize in the context of the breakdown of the Syrian track of the Middle East peace process in 2000 and the outbreak of the Intifada shortly thereafter.

The September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States resulted in a paradigm shift that significantly complicated Syria's attempts to secure a middle ground in the international arena.²⁸ This shift refers to the foreign policy approach that gained predominance in Washington, which holds that compromise with regimes that support radical groups or employ anti-American rhetoric for the sake of regional stability is in effect inimical to US interests and should be replaced with a strategy focused on regime reform or replacement.²⁹ Syria is the only country identified by the US as a state-sponsor of terrorism with which the US also enjoys diplomatic relations.³⁰ Despite this reality, one US official stated that Syria's intelligence support regarding al-Qaeda members "has been substantial and has helped save American lives."³¹ This cooperation clearly did not compensate for its support for other terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad, that have allowed Syria to project and consolidate its power in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories.

In September 2002, members of US Congress pressed the administration to support the "Syria Accountability Act," which would have imposed additional sanctions on Syria.³² Although the Executive Branch was not quick to embrace the congressional approach, the Bush Administration felt pressured to increase anti-Syrian rhetoric. These developments contributed to the isolation of the Syrian regime, a scenario that Assad distinctly sought to avoid and which may have even influenced his decision to resolutely oppose the war in Iraq.

In response to these diverse pressures, Bashar al-Assad, like his father, resorted to relying on balancing through strengthening ties with several countries, which were often at odds with one another. Damascus continued to foster relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well as Iran.³³ On the other hand, it continued to mend fences with Jordan, Turkey, and even Saddam

Hussein's Iraq, a process that had already been initiated by Hafiz al-Assad.³⁴ Even more controversial was Bashar al-Assad's attempt to reignite the failed peace process with Israel, which looked even less likely after the election of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2000.³⁵ Assad called for a resumption of talks in a *New York Times* interview published on December 1, 2003, in which he stated, "You cannot just keep talking about this vision, you have to put a mechanism in order to achieve that vision."³⁶ In hopes to test its new strategy aimed at "cautious integration into the world system," Syria continued to embrace traditional realpolitik strategies, such as counterbalancing the US by continuing to develop its ties with the EU.³⁷

In short, Bashar al-Assad adopted a more conciliatory stance towards Western powers while cautiously avoiding the development of an unhealthy reliance, especially in wake of the United States' reluctance to embrace Syria's new orientation. Although speculative, consolidating links with countries such as Turkey, which not only has institutional ties to the United States and the EU but has often characterized itself as constituting part of the Western sphere, was a logical choice which could allow Syria to potentially enter into a more constructive dialogue with those actors.³⁸ In other words, Turkey's Western orientation, previously a source of suspicion and tension, became a positive attribute in wake of Assad's realization for Syria's need to cautiously reorient itself.

THE TERRITORIAL UNITY OF IRAQ AS A MUTUAL INTEREST

The US-led invasion of Iraq has crystallized and confirmed, but is not entirely responsible for, the geopolitical and alliance shifts that have led to the emergence of mutual interests between Turkey and Syria. In order to fully understand the *raison d'être* of the partnership, it is important to briefly examine the reasons for which the potential dissolution of Iraq's borders is harmful to both Syria and Turkey for distinct, yet related reasons.

Albeit in varying degrees, decades of both Turkey's and Syria's suspicions about Iraq had been smoothed to a certain extent by increased levels of economic cooperation. During Saddam Hussein's rule, Turkey had more institutional barriers than Syria in establishing relations with Iraq. Regardless, on the economic front, Iraq and Turkey's bilateral trade almost reached pre-1991 Gulf War levels in April 2000, mostly under the terms of the UN-supervised oil-for-food program, coupled with the continuation of illegal cross border trade.³⁹ Even as late as 2003, well after the US had publicly threatened invasion, Ankara continued its agenda to solidify relations with Iraq.⁴⁰

Unlike Turkey, Syria is not accountable to the United States, and can increase economic cooperation with Iraq at its own volition. Although a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, it suffices to state that Syria and Iraq have traditionally coexisted in an environment of hostility and suspicion, vying for predominance in Arab affairs, tainted by an ideological and personal rivalry between the two branches of the Ba'ath Party.⁴¹ Syria's relative warming of tensions with Iraq began towards the end of Hafiz al-Assad's rule, motivated primarily by economic isolation and its dependence on external revenues.⁴² Their mutual border, closed for seventeen years, was discreetly opened in 1997, resulting in the acquisition by a Syrian delegation of businessmen of contracts valued at \$70 million.⁴³ Bashar al-Assad continued his father's approach, by seeking to end Iraqi diplomatic isolation and more importantly, the embargo. Syria ignored the embargo on Iraqi oil starting in November 2000 and netted an annual profit of an estimated \$1 billion by re-exporting Iraqi oil, a pattern that lasted until the US-led invasion.⁴⁴

These economic considerations were clearly more central for Syria than for Turkey. Turkey's primary contention revolves around the perceived implications of the establishment of a Kurdish entity in northern Iraq, which it sees as having the potential to compromise the cohesion of the Turkish nation. Turkey perceives the emergence of a Kurdish entity along its southeastern border as a potential inspiration and sanctuary or training ground for its own Kurdish population. Hence, it is impossible to separate Turkey's Kurdish problem from its foreign policy approach towards the Middle East, and particularly towards Iraq. Turkey's absolute inflexibility to concede land is grounded in historical legacies that date back to the 1920 Treaty of Sevres. These fears were arguably further intensified by the PKK's violent campaign from the mid-1980s to the late-1990s to carve out an independent Kurdish state. It is generally accepted that the influx of Iraqi Kurds to Turkey during the Gulf War, coupled with shrinking trade levels, which exacerbated the dire economic conditions of the Kurdish-dominated Southeast region, aggravated violence and helped mobilize support for the PKK.⁴⁵ Similarly, Turkey attributes the PKK's decision in 2004 to end the 1999 ceasefire to the chaos in neighboring Iraq and the establishment of a *de facto* Kurdish state.⁴⁶

Indeed, the establishment of an independent Kurdistan is inimical for both Syrian and Turkish interests, but in varying degrees. Syria's Kurdish minority constitutes an estimated 1.7 million, or nine percent of its population.⁴⁷ Riots in March 2004 in Kurdish populated areas in Syria further aggravated fears.⁴⁸ Indeed, an independent Kurdish state also poses a threat to Syria's ally, Iran, which has its own Kurdish population of about 5 million.⁴⁹ Kurds

in Turkey, on the other hand, not only constitute an estimated 20 percent of its population, but are more politicized and vocal in their call for self-determination than the Kurds in Syria or Iran.

Syria and Turkey's mutual concern about the implications of the US-led invasion of Iraq was highlighted in the early stages of the war, in numerous statements by high level officials who frequently referred to the common 'red line' policy. A federated or independent Kurdish entity in the north constituted these 'red lines,' the establishment or 'crossing' of which would necessitate a direct intervention.⁵⁰ This 'red line' policy has since been adjusted, but did constitute an important component of Syrian-Turkish cooperation, primarily in the two years succeeding the invasion. In a December 2004 interview with the Turkish newspaper, *Zaman*, Prime Minister Mohammad Naji al-Otari of Syria referred to the establishment of a Kurdish entity as a source of cooperation between Turkey and Syria:

We mentioned factors that caused us to be closer... There are situations within these factors that provide an open threat to both countries... this is Turkey's "red line". We say this is a "red line" for Syria, too. Both countries are dealing with the same situation.⁵¹

Statements underlining the importance of these mutual concerns further highlight the absence of regime type as an explanation of increased cooperation. After several postponements, on January 6, 2004, Bashar al-Assad became the first Syrian president ever to visit Turkey.⁵² During his visit, Assad underlined these common threats and also stated that a Kurdish state in Iraq would be a "red line, not only as far as Syria and Turkey, but for all the countries in the region."⁵³ Discussion of these mutual concerns was accompanied by the establishment of an economic relations framework, subsequently manifested in a free trade agreement, signed during a visit to Damascus by Prime Minister Erdogan and his Syrian counterpart in December 2004.⁵⁴

Ahmet Necdet Sezer, the resolutely secular President of Turkey, also visited Damascus in April 2005, despite the US administration's public stance against it. This highlighted the increasing independence of Turkey vis-à-vis the United States.⁵⁵ Sezer maintained that Syria and Turkey "share the same views on the protection of Iraq's territorial integrity and of its national unity" and "as two countries of the region that neighbor Iraq, [we] are determined to effectively watch over these goals."⁵⁶ Sezer further emphasized that the developments in Iraq necessitated improved relations: "no time can be lost in replacing the atmosphere of enmity, distrust and stability which unfortunately prevails in our region with one of peace, stability and prosperity."⁵⁷ Bashar al-Assad mirrored these statements

by claiming that, “we condemn all approaches that pose a threat to Iraq’s territorial integrity,”⁵⁸ and “we have moved together from an atmosphere of distrust to one of trust.”⁵⁹ Although clearly symbolic, statements conveying mutual trust were unprecedented in Turkish-Syrian relations. Furthermore, the context within which this diplomatic dialogue was utilized underlines that Iraq was clearly the main source of this newfound “trust.”

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF IRAQ AS A REGIONAL POWER

The implications of the establishment of an independent Kurdistan is arguably Syria and Turkey’s primary convergent interest, but certainly not the only one. The containment of Iraqi power in the Saddam era was integral for both Turkey and Syria. Concomitantly, however, a stable and centralized regime in Baghdad allowed Iraq to effectively balance Syria and Turkey’s respective regional adversaries. The regional power vacuum that has resulted from the disappearance of the Iraqi pole is a tacit source of cooperation for the two nations, unlike the threat posed by a separate Kurdish entity, a mutual concern that is publicly acknowledged.

In the post-Cold War era, Syria and Iraq were among the few nations in the Middle East with which the US failed to establish stable relations. Hence, a neighboring Iraq somewhat abated Syria’s fears that it was being encircled by nations that served what it perceived as the US’ neo-imperialist interests, such as Turkey, Jordan, and Israel. Iraq’s ability to check Israeli power was impaired by geographic distance, but Baghdad’s aggregate power and geographic proximity did serve Syrian interests by effectively balancing neighboring Turkey and Jordan. As maintained earlier, the fact that Iraq also checked Iranian power was not necessarily inimical to Syrian interests. Syria realizes, then and now, that an Iran with increased aggregate power has the potential to compromise their strategic partnership and Syrian security.

For Turkey, the importance of Iraq as a regional pole lay in its ability to weaken its two other Eastern neighbors: Iran and Syria. The Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, during which Turkey declared neutrality and benefited economically, was a testament to Iraq’s ability to weaken and contain Iranian influence. The danger posed by Iran to Turkey lies not only in its aggregate power, but also in its ideological power. This ideological threat, which poses a direct threat to Turkey’s secular establishment, refers to Iran’s ability to spread and support the expansion of political Islam and provide an alternate model of governance. Faced with this shifting regional balance-of-power due to the immediate and intense weakening of an actor that was valuable in checking one another’s power projection abilities, Turkey and Syria

have been further pressed to revisit their perceptions of one another and accordingly reconstruct their foreign policy behavior.

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

It is equally important to account for the United States as an independent variable in influencing the Turkish-Syrian alliance. The US has been responsible for inadvertently strengthening the alliance, but also poses certain limitations on the partnership. The United States' evolving stance toward Syria and Turkey has pushed the two countries even closer. At the same time, there are limits to how far Turkey will develop its ties with Syria at the expense of its partnership with the United States.

Both Syria and Turkey opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq in varying capacities. For Turkey, the existence of multiple centers of decision-making complicated its ability to take a unified stance toward the war. On March 1, 2003, to the dismay of the Turkish government officials who prepared negotiations with the United States, the Turkish Parliament rejected the motion to allow American troops to use Turkish territory in the initial stages of the war.⁶⁰ Turkish-US relations have significantly deteriorated since this surprising show of independence vis-à-vis Turkey's most important ally. Moreover, Ankara's criticism of the Administration's handling of the occupation has not been well-received in Washington.⁶¹ Vocal sympathy by the AKP for the plight of the Palestinians and a diplomatic visit by a Hamas official in May 2006 has also led to a deterioration of the Turkish-Israeli alliance.⁶² Despite these tensions, the Turkish government has been by and large cooperative with the United States and Israel because of their continued importance to Turkish security and their shared interest in a stable Iraq.⁶³

The United States' evolving stance toward Syria and Turkey has pushed the two countries even closer.

Syria's attitude towards the US-led war in Iraq differed markedly from Turkey's, and virtually from that of every other Arab state. Bashar al-Assad's hostile rhetoric was manifested in the early stages of the war by granting refuge to Ba'athist leaders and turning a blind eye to the entrance of Iraqi

weapons to Syria.⁶⁴ Assad's decision to oppose the war, which considerably increased his popularity, is commonly attributed to his desire for legitimacy in light of popular sentiment and the mood of the Arab and Syrian public.⁶⁵ Assad's reaction could have also been provoked by the fear that the US' pre-

emptive war and regime change doctrine could be extended to Syria itself.⁶⁶ Although Stephen Zunes' claim that "the Bush administration has embarked on a concerted campaign to undermine and perhaps even overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria" is exaggerated, his study highlights increasing US inflexibility toward Syria.⁶⁷ Syria's immediate deprivation of cheap oil, a market for its exports, and what was evolving into a regional partner, and its replacement by 130,000 US troops on its Eastern flank has led Assad to adjust his stance to one of relative compliance.⁶⁸ Reflecting Syria's increasing strategic isolation, this shift has not been reciprocated by a diminishment of US pressure.⁶⁹

A clear disjuncture between Turkish and US policies towards Syria has developed since the September 11, 2001 attacks.⁷⁰ During most of the 1990s, Turkey advocated a tougher stance on Syria and even criticized the Clinton administration for being too accommodating.⁷¹ Under the Bush administration, however, it was Turkey that began to favor a constructive approach, and the US which adopted a tougher stance towards Syria.

Hence, the US has unintentionally strengthened the Turkish-Syrian alliance but can also potentially limit the extent to which the partnership is further consolidated. The Bush administration's open criticism of Turkey's reluctance to follow the US policy of isolation against the Syrian regime has left the Turkish government in a very difficult position. Indeed, the possible repercussions of further deepening bilateral relations are far greater for Turkey than for Syria. The US administration's vocal opposition to the aforementioned visit of Ahmet Necdet Sezer to Damascus in 2005, coincided with increasing levels of US pressure on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.⁷² The reemergence of the topic during Erdogan's visit to Washington in June 2005 has even led some in Turkey to frame Turkish-Syrian relations as a test case for Turkish-US relations.⁷³ This view is supported by Bush's statement during that visit that Turkey's relations with Syria were an obstacle to improving US-Turkish relations.⁷⁴

On the other hand, according to Kemal Kirisci, the Turkish government realizes that market liberalization in the Middle East will also serve its economic interests and therefore tacitly supports the US' agenda of regional reform.⁷⁵ The difference between Turkey and the US seems to be their different approaches towards reaching fundamentally similar goals.⁷⁶ The limitations of Turkey's support for Syria is demonstrated by support for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, its expectation to cooperate with the international community on the UN investigation of the assassination of Hariri and its support for gradual reform in Syria.⁷⁷ At the same time, the

existence of a stable Ba'athist regime in Syria contributes to regional security in the Middle East which is a fundamental determinant of Turkey's security. The Turkish government's stance against policies aiming to replace the minority Alawite-dominated Ba'athist regime is rooted in the destabilizing effects of regime transition. These effects are potentially similar to those that have been unleashed in Iraq, which have empowered two of Turkey's primary internal threats: Kurdish nationalism and political Islam. Therefore, Turkey advocates a process of gradual reform rather than the attempt to bring about change by intervention. This position is not shaped by concern for Syria, but it is another significant focal interest shared by the two nations.

The development of this divergence of interests between Turkey and the United States, coupled with its increasingly vocal criticism of Syria, has increased both states' strategic isolation in ways that have rendered their alliance more valuable. Syria, far more isolated than Turkey, has proven adept at exploiting Turkey's deteriorating relations with the US. Within this particular context, Turkey is a logical choice for Syria for three primary reasons. First of all, alliances temporarily eliminate threat, which is unaffordable to Syria at this juncture. Secondly, the partnership is partly grounded in Syria's threat perception of the US. Lastly, it is one of few alternatives. Stephen Walt's argument that geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive power are the main factors that affect states' threat perception are all relevant in explaining Syria's perception of the US and also of Turkey.⁷⁸

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The lack of alternatives has necessitated a readjustment of the Syrian and Turkish "red line" policy and has led to a tacit acceptance of a federated Kurdish entity in the north.⁷⁹ Since the partnership has largely been shaped by mutual concern over their common neighbor, the development of Iraq in ways that are desirable exclusively for Turkey, exclusively for Syria, or both, is likely to undermine their strategic partnership. On the other hand, if the situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate, Syria will further pursue efforts to get closer to Turkey. Iraq remains the primary intervening variable in determining the future of the Turkish-Syrian alliance, but it is not the only one.

If the United States continues its efforts to isolate and pressure the Syrian regime, contributing to its international isolation, Syria's partnership with Turkey will remain a valuable asset. The stalling of negotiations for Turkey's accession to the European Union has only slightly contributed to Turkey's strategic isolation, unlike the impact on Syria of its withdrawal from

Lebanon in 2006. The loss of an external source of revenue and an arena of power projection has tightened Syria's room for maneuver, and has not been reciprocated through accommodations by the international community. In light of these recent developments, bandwagoning with more powerful regional actors such as Turkey and Iran are likely to remain attractive foreign policy decisions for Syria. Furthermore, proponents of complex interdependence would claim that increased levels of economic integration between Turkey and Syria pose a significant deterrent to the deterioration of relations.⁸⁰ Although noteworthy, it is unlikely that current levels of economic integration between the two states is enough to overshadow potential security concerns.

Additionally, the Turkish-Syrian partnership is more important to Syria than Turkey. The asymmetric nature of the partnership, compounded and shaped by Turkey's relative aggregate power vis-à-vis Syria, threatens to allow for the reemergence of water and the PKK as a means to exploit one another. As Aysegul Kibaroglu points out in her study, new opportunities of realizing win-win situations regarding water are emerging, which is no longer tainted by issues of threat perception and sovereignty.⁸¹ In other words, the question of water is continuing to evolve from a political question to a technical one that could be resolved by study missions, technology exchanges and joint projects.⁸² Damascus' characterization of a PKK attack on a train in June 2005 as "a heinous terrorist act" also represents shifting attitudes.⁸³ Despite these advances, these attitudes are easily reversible, as the issue of water has not been fully resolved, but has been put on the backburner, much like the PKK has not fully fragmented or disarmed and remains a possible tool for Assad's regime to employ.

CONCLUSION

A stable Iraq's importance as the primary convergent interest between Turkey and Syria lies in that developments there not only threaten to weaken both states, but could endanger their very survival. The United States' intervention in Iraq, coupled with increasing pressure and criticism of Syria, has fed into fears of similar attempts to unseat the Ba'athist regime and have exacerbated Syria's strategic isolation in the post Cold War-era. The immediate and intense weakening of Baghdad as a regional balance-of-power has contributed to Syria's regional vulnerability. In other words, mounting security concerns that threaten the stability of the Syrian state exist alongside concerns over the very survival of its regime. The same attributes that had previously been a source of suspicion for Syria, including

Turkey's institutional ties to the West, geographic proximity, and superior offensive capabilities, emerged as factors that rendered bandwagoning with Turkey a more attractive option. The alliance is less indispensable for Turkey, not only because of its military superiority and increased economic and political integration into the global arena, but also because it has been pushed closer to Syria by systemic factors that have affected the two states in varying degrees. Since regime type was not responsible in any capacity for the formation of the partnership or its consolidation, changes in regime type will not threaten bilateral relations either. Water and the PKK, traditionally cited as the primary basis of contention between the two countries, were never the source of conflict per se, but merely tools used by the Turkish and Syrian regimes to weaken one other. Hence, their tactical reemergence is only likely after the disappearance of common security concerns and only after the development of a divergence of interests.

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- 1 Meliha Banli Altunisik and Ozlem Tur, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations," *Security Dialogue* 37 (June 2006), 231.
- 2 Mohammad Muslih, "Syria and Turkey: Uneasy Relations," in *Reluctant Neighbor: Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, ed. Henry J. Barkey (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996), 115.
- 3 Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 232.
- 4 For Syria, the Baghdad Pact of 1955 and Turkey's disapproval of the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956 exacerbated Syria's fears and suspicions.
- 5 Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 232.
- 6 Muslih, "Syria and Turkey," 123.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 238.
- 9 Ibid., 234.
- 10 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policy of Syria," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 159.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 As noted by Altunisik and Tur, NATO's refusal to consider protecting Turkey from attack under Article 5 during the Gulf War and the EU's rejection of Turkish membership in 1997 created intense frustration (Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 234).
- 13 Muslih, "Syria and Turkey," 126. This does not mean, however, that Syria wishes to witness the expansion of Iranian power. For Syria, Iran needs to remain isolated enough to continue to seek a partnership with Syria, but stable enough to balance its adversaries.
- 14 Suleyman Demirel was President of Turkey from 1993 until 2000. See "Turkish Premier Visits Syria to Mend Old Fences," *New York Times*, 20 January 1993.
- 15 See Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 248.
- 16 Damla Aras and Mustafa Aydin, "Political Conditionality of Economic Relations Between Paternalist States: Turkey's Interaction with Iran, Iraq, and Syria," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 27 (Winter/Spring 2005): 23.
- 17 The motivations for the Party's unyielding resolve to make headway in European accession remains a matter of speculation and is frequently perceived, by the elite in particular, as rooted in steps to consolidate their power vis-à-vis the Turkish military. Regardless, it is a gross oversimplification to focus on the steps the AKP's has taken to mend relations with Middle Eastern states without addressing similar steps taken in the Western arena.
- 18 See Soner Cagaptay, "A Turkish Rapprochement with Middle East Rogue States?" PolicyWatch 825, 9 January 2004.
- 19 Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 238.
- 20 Meliha Banli Altunisik and Ozlem Tur, as quoted in "Cetin on 'Bright Period' in Relations with Syria," Ankara Anatolia in English, 23 March 1999.
- 21 Aras and Aydin, "Political Conditionality," 30.
- 22 Damla Aras and Mustafa Aydin, as quoted in "Suriye ile Ticari Iliskiler Isiniyor," NTV, June 15, 2001 and Istanbul Ticaret Odasi, Suriye Ulke Etudu (Istanbul, 2000).
- 23 "Turkey and Syria Agree to Bolster Relations," Turkish Daily News, 4 November, 2000.
- 24 Aras and Aydin, "Political Conditionality," 28.
- 25 Ibid., 30.
- 26 See Turkish Daily News, 18 April 2001.
- 27 Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 7, no. 2 (June 2003): 46.
- 28 See Stephen Zunes, "US Policy Towards Syria and the Triumph of Neoconservatism," *Middle East Policy* 11, no. 1 (2004): 52-69 and Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The Road to Damascus," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2004), for detailed analysis of the Syrian attempt at rapprochement with the West and the United States' subsequent approach.

29 For a detailed description, see The National Security Council, "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," September 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html> (accessed 6 September 2007).

30 International Crisis Group, "Syria Under Bashar: Foreign Policy Challenges," *Middle East Report 23* (Amman/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2004), 2.

31 See Stephen Kaufman, "Bush Administration Urges Postponement of Syria Accountability Act," The Washington File, 23 September 2002.

32 See "Syrian Accountability Act and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003," Public Law 108-175, 108th Cong., 1st sess. (April 12 2007).

33 Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 239.

34 Ibid.

35 International Crisis Group, "Syria Under Bashar," 10.

36 See "Syria Pressing for Israel Talks," *New York Times*, 1 December 2003.

37 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy Between Regional Conflict and European Partnership," *The Review of International Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2003): 190-208.

38 Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 244.

39 Aras and Aydin, "Political Conditionality," 28-29. See also *Turkish Daily News*, 19 April 2000.

40 Aras and Aydin, "Political Conditionality," 9.

41 In the past two decades, Damascus has had to choose sides three times during a war in which Iraq was a main player. Of the three, Damascus backed Baghdad in the one most likely to lead to the fall of the Ba'athist regime. (International Crisis Group, "Syria Under Bashar," 15).

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid. See, also, "Tuzmen'in Bagdat Cikarmasina ilgi Yogun," NTV, 8 January 2003.

44 Ibid., 16.

45 Kemal Kirisci, "Turkey's Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times," *Chaillot Paper* 92 (September 2006): 65.

46 Ibid.

47 Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 241.

48 See, "In Syria, Kurds Rise in Unrest," *New York Times*, 25 March 2004.

49 Muslih, "Syria and Turkey," 127.

50 Ibid., 66. For an early defense of the 'red line' policy, see Umit Ozdag, "Turkiye-PKK ve Kuzey Irak" (Ankara: Avrasya Dosyasi Yayini, 1999). For a criticism, see Mustafa Alp Bengi, "Ankara'nin Irak Hatalari," *Radikal*, 3 February, 2006.

51 See Zaman, 28 December 2004. The interview was conducted by Zaman's foreign news editor, Abdulhamit Bilici. After discussing these similar strategic concerns, Otari even went as far as to proclaim that "the Syrian and Turkish peoples are a single nation," representative of popular Syrian rhetoric of common nations and peoples.

52 See Hilal Koylu, "Tarihi Ziyaret Gunu," *Radikal*, 6 January 2004.

53 See Soner Cagaptay, "A Turkish Rapprochement With Middle East Rogue States?" 9 January 2004.

54 See K. Gajendra Singh, "A New Age for Turkey-Syria Relations," *Asia Times*, 14 April 2005.

55 Ibid.

56 Associated Press, 7 January, 2004.

57 K. Gajendra Singh, "A New Age for Turkey-Syria Relations," *Asia Times*, 14 April 2005.

58 See Associated Press, January 7 2004.

59 Ibid.

60 See "Meclis Savas'I Reddetti," *Radikal*, 2 March 2003.

61 Kirisci, "Turkey's Foreign Policy," 80. These developments are also independent of the religious leanings of the AKP. Ironically, the official military alliance with Israel was concluded under the premiership of Necmettin Erbakan, a staunch Islamist who was subsequently removed from office by the military in 1997, less than a year after the election of his Welfare Party.

62 See "Controversy Over Hamas' Turkey Visit Over, Says Ex-Mossad Chief," *Turkish Daily News*, 5 May 2006. (It is important to recognize that Syria as a mutual threat was an important determinant of the Turkish-Israeli alliance in 1996. Although the AKP's increasing criticism of Israel is similarly attributed to their Islamic orientation, the alliance is somewhat demoted by close Turkish-Syrian relations).

63 Kirisci, "Turkey's Foreign Policy," 80. In December 2005, Ankara succeeded in bringing together the Zalmay Khalizad, the US ambassador to Iraq, with Iraqi Sunni leaders. See Ozdem Sanberk, "15 Aralik Secimleri ve Aralik Istanbul Girisimi," *Radikal*, 9 December, 2005.

64 See Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, June 2003.

65 See Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Omni-Balancing Revisited," for a view of Syrian foreign policy as the regime leadership's ability to balance its external and internal threats.

66 International Crisis Group, "Syria Under Bashar," 18.

67 Zunes, "US Policy Towards Syria," 52.

68 Simon and Stevenson, "Road to Damascus."

69 Ibid.

70 Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 243.

71 Ibid. During the 1990s, high levels of military aid demonstrated the United States' approval for Turkey to launch a military campaign against the PKK.

72 US ambassador Eric Edelman was especially critical of the visit. (*Turkish Daily News*, 16 March 2005).

73 Altunisik and Tur, p. 243. These include Sami Kohen's "Stratejik Ne?," *Milliyet*, 10 June 2005, Derya Sazak's "Beyaz Saray Renkleri," *Milliyet*, 11 June 2005, and Cuneyt Ulsever's "Golge Etme Baska Ihsan Istemem," *Hurriyet*, 11 June 2005.

74 Kirisci, "Turkey's Foreign Policy," 77.

75 Ibid., 78. Indeed, Turkey has supported the US' "Broader Middle East and North Africa" project aimed at democratization of the Middle East.

76 Ibid.

- 77 Erdogan's visit to Beirut in June 2005 occurred shortly after an anti-Syrian parliament was elected for the first time in thirty years (Ibid., 79).
- 78 For a detailed analysis of Stephen Walt's refinement of neorealism, see Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1987).
- 79 Kirisci, "Turkey's Foreign Policy," 64-71.
- 80 Developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, complex interdependence refers to the role of transnational and interstate ties, usually economic, in deterring conflict. For more details, see Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (New York: Longman, 2000).
- 81 See Aysegul Kibaroglu, "Socioeconomic Development and Benefit Sharing in the Euphrates-Tigris River Basin", (presented at the second Israeli-Palestinian International Conference, Ankara, Turkey, 10-14 October 2004).
- 82 In August 2001, a joint protocol to increase the aforementioned areas of cooperation was signed (Altunisik and Tur, "Distant Neighbors," 242).
- 83 Middle East News Agency (MENA), 2 July 2005.