

# **Turkish Policy in the Syrian Conflict: imperial legacy or national interests**

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## **Abstract**

Continued failure of Syrian authorities to resolve the ongoing domestic crisis required interference from Western European countries, Russia, the USA, and the Turkish Republic whose foreign politics in Syria is often accounted for by the scientific paradigm of “Neo-Ottomanism”. Prevailing perspective on this politics considers actions by Turkey as irrational tries to regain influence on the territories which constituted the Ottoman Empire. Thorough examination reveals that Turkish involvement in Syrian conflict is explained through national interests to protect its territory from outer threats. This concept of national interests dispels the negative image of Neo-Ottomanism which actually provides historical continuity and reconceptualizes the national identity. However, recent developments in Syria, namely beginning of military actions 9 October 2019, showcase that Turkey’s foreign politics goes beyond its national interests entering a brand-new phase of relationship with Syria.

**Key words:** national interests, Neo-Ottomanism, the Ottoman Empire, Turkey, foreign policy

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> the political landscape in the Middle East underwent significant changes: the Ottoman Empire encompassing territories of Asia, Europe, and Africa ceased to exist. Its place on the international stage was taken by the Turkish Republic, a successor-state, which was established 29 October 1923.

During the previous century Turkish regional politics wasn’t active: Empire’s participation in the First World War and the following intervention of the Entente Powers exhausted potential of the country. With regard to the contemporary circumstances Turkish leaders gave a priority to nation-building. Entering the

NATO, Turkey enlarged its presence and involvement in the region. The country showed an interest towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, facilitated the NATO mission in Afghanistan, assisted the UN troops in Lebanon, with playing a leading role in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (now Organization of Islamic Cooperation). Such policy received mixed reviews. On the one hand, this is a shift from pro-Western orientation and a restoration of religion's political role which was abandoned by M.Kemal in order to develop a new Turkish identity amongst polarized society thus deserving a wide range of criticism from Kemalists. On the other hand, it was the current authorities that was the most successful in terms of integration in the European political space: the evidence is the beginning of negotiations between the Turkish Republic and the EU in 2005. Thus, Ankara's foreign policy is a dilemma for scientific assessments. Striving to reinforce the country's presence in the Middle East through cooperation with Iran, military interference in the Syrian conflict and confrontation with the Arab League is often referred to the Ottoman legacy.

The concept of national interests is a key term of realism school which states that a foreign policy is based solely on objective principals of policy-making (Morgenthau, 2005). This will help to conclude whether Turkish actions in Syria can be explained by the paradigm of imperialism along with whether these two terms are mutually exclusive.

### **National Interests**

The term national interest in its current definition was formed more recently, namely after the French Revolution, which radically change the definition of nation earlier reduced to community with similar racial and language characteristics (Carr, 1968). Nation was identified with a certain person, that's why international relations resembled ones among member of royal dynasties. National interests therefore were associated with a monarch's will. This has its roots in the words attributed to Louis 14 "I am the state" (Burchill, 2015).

In the XVIII century such interpretation significantly changed owing to the intellectual legacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Burchill, 2015). It was him that described the nation as a numerous community which has a right for statehood and political independence. However, the nation was represented only by the most influential groups. Only in the XX century with regard to expansion of universal suffrage public opinion embraced interests of groups which were previously marginalized. Sovereignty was consequently submitted to a representative body. This along with intensification of international economic relations underpinned a modern understanding of the national interest.

Despite the fact that there is no general definition of this term, several characteristics of the national interests can be put forward. Firstly, there are vital interests shared by all members of society recognizing a need to protect state sovereignty and territorial integrity from external threats. Secondly, certain national interests have permanent importance. For example, states are sustainably interested in safeguarding their strategic and economic resources, which has its reflection in national security doctrines and structure of defensive capabilities. Thirdly, the government has a monopoly of articulation and interpretation of the national interest thus minimizing risks of alternatives of its definition (Burchill, 2015).

According to the renowned political scientist James N. Rosenau, after the Second World War the national interest was viewed only as an instrument to pursue foreign politics (Rosenau, 1964). Such conceptualization relates to scientific school of objectivism whose specialists used this term to describe needs of the state with no regard to circumstances in which the government set its priorities. Considering incompleteness of this understanding, Rosenau suggests that national interests should be viewed as ultimate points in foreign policy which becomes qualitative as soon as these “points” are determined and agreed.

Summarizing all the above mentioned, the national interest is consistent with a one of the individual, the society, and the state.

## **Neo-Ottomanism**

It's sensible to consider major milestones in the development of the concept Neo-Ottomanism in order to define what underpins its current understanding by the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP).

Mustafa Kemal, a father of Turkish nation, placed the highest premium on consolidation of heterogeneous imperial society in order to prevent instability caused by national elements and preserve the territories left after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Conservative essence of Kemalism aimed at maintaining achievements - this inevitably led to Turkey's stagnation with respect to both foreign and domestic policies. The crisis was overcome owing to renaissance of imperial legacy which became possible only in the 1980's during Turgut Ozal's presidency (Kudryashova, Matyuhin, 2013). By this time Turkish economy flourished contributing to the growth of middle class whose members ensured social stability and allowed to combine co-existence of traditional and modern values. Neo-Ottomanism manifested itself in two ways: a shift from pro-Western orientation, as Turkey was already part of European civilization, along with restoration of Islam's role. Ottoman Empire had its own historical way, and its successor, the Turkish Republic, should continue to move along this direction. What's more, T. Ozal put forward an idea that implementation of soft power in the Middle East would manage to solve regional conflicts.

Since the 1980's religion, as a key element of Neo-Ottomanism, appeared on the agenda in various forms, all of them highlighted its consolidative role. Former Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan (1996-1997) advocated an initiative to create an alliance of states with the same religious affiliation – the union of Turkey, Libya, Malaysia and Indonesia could serve as an alternative to the EU whose membership the republic sought since the 1950's.

Lack of regional activity caused by prevalent orientation for cooperation with Western countries and the USA was criticized by former Turkey's foreign minister

Ahmet Davutoglu in his book “Strategic Depth” (Ergin, Karakaza, 2017). According to him, pro-Western policy is a historical paradox, because at the beginning of the XX century Turkish nation fought the heroic War of Independence against the occupation forces of Entente.

A. Davutoglu reckons that national interests are based on static elements – geopolitics, history, and culture which necessitate promotion of Turkish interests in the Middle East considering these elements with respect to the country’s past and geographical location. The single Euro-Atlantic track of foreign policy deprives the Turkish Republic of so called “strategic foresightedness”. Membership in NATO, G-20, D-8, OIC, and ECO along with galvanization of regional actions within the Balkans, the Middle East and the Central Asia present the only rational direction in further policy-making. Restoration of imperial past is crucial in terms of national security and countering threat posed by waves of Arab nationalism. The Middle East possesses considerable potential of stability in the face of two “strategic triangles”: “Turkey-Egypt-Iran” (an internal triangle) and “Syria-Iraq-Saudi Arabia” (an external triangle). History reveals inability of the latter to provide resilience of the region because of a chronic conflict between Iraq and Western states. In these circumstances historical experience of Turkey will help to unite the Middle East as it did the Ottoman Empire during several centuries.

The following, a combination of the of the above-mentioned paradigms, are several generalizations about Neo-Ottoman policy pursued by JDP:

- reconsideration of Ottoman legacy and moving from the status quo in the Middle East region in order to restore national identity which Turkey used to have during its imperial past;
- reconceptualization of citizenship: within Neo-Ottomanism an idea of integrated society shifts towards multinationalism thus forming loyalty to Kurdish community along with recognition of diversity allowing them to express their identity (Taspinar, 2008);

— policy-making, which encompasses both Western and Eastern courses with respect to its geographical location in the place of the clash of the two respective civilizations (Taspinar, 2008).

### **Internal and external elements of the Syrian conflict**

It remains questionable whether developments in Syria can be equated with popular uprisings in Yemen, Tunis, Bahrein and other Arab Spring countries. Nevertheless, it's exactly clear, they were more than just a civil revolution. Its multifaceted character implies an ongoing domestic crisis and external interference, which are as follows.

Social tensions escalated into street demonstrations in March 2011, with claims ranging from resolution of chronic economic problems to ousting the authorities. The unrests were a natural outcome of ineffective efforts by Assad to respond to pressing domestic issues. President Assad ruling began with so called the Syrian “spring” aimed at introducing democratization values (Bebeshko, 2016). Among tangibles results were economic recovery, flow of foreign investments, GDP growth as well as higher civic engagement including members of the Muslim Brotherhood outlawed in Syria since 1982 (Dolgov,2018). The changes, however, didn't put an end to criticism of the regime which became even stronger due to growing economic disparity, hence the Bath party seized further reforms being afraid of possible internal destabilization.

Proceeding from the political situation in the Middle East, Syria has allied relations only with Shia Iran and Hezbollah, Lebanese political party and militant group (Ivanov, 2018). Other regional powers are opponents of the Assad regime for many reasons. Israel repeatedly accused the Syrian authorities of support of establishing an independent Palestinian State which Jerusalem considers as abetment to international terrorism (Dolgov, 2018). What's more, Assads's departure will cause decline of Iran anticipated by the USA, Qatar, the Emirates, and Israel.

Strategic interests of Turkey will be analyzed at length later. Here is a common vision of the country's participation in the Syrian civil war. According to the prevailing discourse, it is attributed to its Neo-Ottoman foreign policy whose pejorative definition consists in Turkey's ambition to restore its regional influence. However, thorough consideration of Turkish actions gives a far more painted picture – Ankara tries to suppress Kurdish secession. Opposite perspectives on Kurds are stumbling block in the relations between the two old allies, Turkey and the USA, the latter in its turn even organized the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) based on Kurdish elements and Sunni Arabs (Dolgov,2018). SDF are mostly made up of the People's Protection Units (YPG) linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party both of which Turkey considers terrorist groups. The majority of the above-mentioned external actors provided financial support to radical Islamic factions contributing therefore to the emergence of Islamic State (IS) whose militants controlled considerable parts of Syria and Iraq during several years and received money from a number of Middle East States, among them Turkey.

In 2018 the Syrian army dismantled Jabhat al-Nusra in Eastern Ghouta. Since then it's believed that the current situation with regard to terrorism is under control. However, Syrian offensives were undertaken nearby the Golan Heights which inevitably increased tensions between Damask and Jerusalem. Russia was a mediator in this confrontation – nowadays the issue of Syrian military presence in this region is settled. With terrorist groups defeated, one saw prospects for the further resolution of the conflict. On August 2, 2019 Astana Format countries (Russia, Iran, Turkey) held the 13<sup>th</sup> round of talks with representatives of the Syrian government and opposition forces which showed that the participants of continuing peace processes were still unlikely to produce a comprehensive settlement.

### **From “zero problems with neighbours” to “more friends than enemies”**

“Zero problem with neighbours” discourse was incorporated in a foreign policy course by Turkish former Minister of International Relations A. Davutoglu (Erol,

2014). For example, in 2008 Ankara was a facilitator in the conflict between Syria and Israel. However, the true extent of Turkish interests became clear only in 2011, when methods of soft power were replaced by military interference.

During the first years of Erdogan's presidency Damask and Ankara maintained friendly relations. Despite this, Turkish actions demonstrated double standards urging Assad to refrain from brutal measures towards rebellions and at the same time being a location for the Syrian opposition which formed first in Istanbul. In a speech in 2011 R. Erdogan characterized instability in Syria as a possible external threat to the Turkish Republic. In September of that year Ankara broke off diplomatic relations with Syria motivating this decision by intensifying oppression of opposition groups by the Syrian government forces (Kudryashova, 2012).

Such aggressive rhetoric was squared with Turkish commitment to act only with global community. When inability of the UN within the Syrian civil war became obvious, countries began to provide weapons and logistic support to the Syrian National Council-headed armed opposition. In order to cause transition of power in Syria Turkey went even further and started to finance also terrorist organizations. However, in 2014 the country had to join the US efforts to counter the increased threat posed IS, hence an important turning points came in Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria. As its main ally Washington chose the Democratic Union with YPG, a military wing of this party (Mira, Mohamed, 2018). This proved that Ankara no longer could rely on the USA, as the parties pursued opposites aims. Following terrorist attacks ascribed to PKK, a 2016 failed military coup, about three million refugees from Iraq and Syria along with regional and international isolation necessitated changes in the Syrian direction (Shepovalenko, 2016).

In 2016 Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım introduced a new concept "more friends than enemies" as a guiding line of Turkish foreign policy, which encompasses the following: deterrence of YPG forces, prevention of possible IS attacks on the southern borders, and restoration of credibility in the eyes of international community. Rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara since June 2016 opened

up for Turkey new options to maneuver in terms of its military tactics (Mira, Moahmmed, 2018).

On 26 August. 2016 Ankara launched the military operation Euphrates Shield in order to establish safe corridors from the Turkish border to the city of al-Bab for Syrian refugees to return to their homes and to fight against IS and Kurdish terrorists to whitewash the country's reputation considering its former ties with radical Islamist factions. A shift to a more rational and deliberate policy was evident: Turkey yielded Aleppo, a symbol of the Syrian revolution which two years earlier could lead to the ouster of President Assad, and demonstrated readiness to cooperate at the diplomatic level (Mira, Mohamed, 2018). The Republic along with Russia sponsored Astana peace negotiations, whose first round resulted in a ceasefire agreement. These Astana Format became a vehicle for Turkey to maintain its leading position within Syrian borders. Each round of talks includes three guarantor states, representative of Syria's authorities and opposition groups among which Ankara opted for Ahrar al-Sham. The majority of the radical opposition preferred a dialog with Russia, Iran, and Turkey to continuation of resistance proved to be ineffective. This contributed to polarization amongst numerous opposition groups.

Over the last three years Ankara's foreign policy towards Syria was moderate and rarely went beyond rounds of Astana negotiations. Nevertheless, a recent Turkish offensive code-named Operation Peace Spring demonstrates the country's determination not only to fight the SDF, but also to create a 30-km deep safety zone for almost four million Syrian refugees which literary means a claim to north-eastern Syrian territories with its possible loss in the future. It remains to be seen, whether this assumption will prove correct, but so far Turkey's actions resembles patterns from its Ottoman past.

## **Conclusion**

A thorough analyses of Turkish foreign policy in the Syrian conflict reveals that terms of national interests and Neo-Ottomanism are not mutually exclusive. Each state is interested in expansionism of influence both at regional and international levels. Turkey's main feature consists in a reach imperial legacy which is often used to account for its actions in the Middle East. However, the country's intentions become reasonable considering threats in the face of radical Islamists on its eastern border which undermines Turkish internal and external security along with a possible establishment of Kurdistan. Neo-Ottomanism is first and foremost reconciliation with the past which attributes to a new national sense of identity and provides continuity between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. Nevertheless, the recent operation Peace Spring doesn't completely fit in the logic of the previous developments thus giving reasons for future research.

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