

TURKISH AND IRANIAN POSITIONS ON  
SYRIAN CONFLICT:  
CONVERGENT AND DIVERGENT ASPECTS

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*Introduction*

Both Turkey and Iran are key states of the modern Middle East. Their authorities have big ambitions and intend to secure power status in the region. Occasionally, such attitudes lead to political rivalry or even open confrontations between them. Undoubtedly, the Syrian war is one of such cases. Since 2011 a bloody civil war has torn the country apart. Undoubtedly, Turkey and Iran have done a lot to fuel the conflict. Yet their visions of Syria are completely divergent, especially as the future of President Bashar al-Assad is concerned.

It began as a political tension between President Assad's regime and various opposition groups. The President did not want to end up like dictators in other Arab states, for instance, in Egypt and Libya, and decided to use force in order to defend his power. As a result, the internal situation had aggravated and had modulated into a full-fledged conflict which was internationalized. Some countries including the Russian Federation and Iran backed Bashar al-Assad while Turkey, most Western states, and Arab monarchs gave their support to various opposition groups. Among them was not only the Free Syrian Army, but also such radical movements as Jabhat al-Nusra – a Sunni

Islamist militia. Its leadership cooperates with jihadist groups and is linked to al-Qaeda.

The main aim of this chapter is to compare positions of Iran and Turkey on the Syrian conflict in order to specify the convergent as well as the divergent aspects. The study is based on selected monographs and academic articles. As Martin Beck claims, “there are several Middle Eastern states that have more or less outspoken ambitions to act as a regional power”, including Turkey and Iran<sup>1</sup>.

### *The Turkish Position on the Syrian Conflict*

After World War II, Turkish-Syrian relations were strained, especially for Syria’s support and shelter for PKK fighters, whose main target was to attack and destabilize Turkey. It was a part of Damascus’ regional strategy. With a clear support from Moscow, Syria intended to weaken the main U.S. ally in the Middle East after Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had been overthrown in Iran in 1979. “Over a period of decades, and with a wide outcome ranging from full success (Lebanon), through success at constraining (Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and the Palestinians) to ultimate failure (Turkey), Syria tried to destabilize all its neighbors and conducted what amounted to a permanent covert war against them”<sup>2</sup>.

The tensions between Syria and Turkey posed a serious threat not only to their bilateral relations, but also to regional security. “It was only in 1998 that the two countries were on the brink of war. Ankara accused Damascus of supporting Kurdish rebels in Turkey, and Syria reproached its neighbor for withholding precious water from the Euphrates River. Syria gave in at the last minute and expelled Abdullah Ocalan, former leader of the separatist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK)”<sup>3</sup>. Yet a real breakthrough took place in 2004 during the Assad’s official visit to Turkey. Later both countries signed an agreement on free trade and opened a new chapter in their bilateral relations.

The Turkish-Syrian rapprochement was an element of the new foreign policy of Turkey. This new policy was introduced under the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rule. The concept, widely known as *strategic depth*, was introduced by Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and current Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey. The concept was based on a few key elements including elimination of problems with neighboring countries, namely *zero problems with neighbors policy*. Although it seemed efficient and rational, the idea became irrelevant due to significant political and geopolitical changes in the Arab World in 2011. This was explicitly notice-able in case of a previous rapprochement with Syria. Yet it should be emphasized that until 2011 no prerequisites had indicated any potential political tensions or rivalry between Ankara and Damascus. On the contrary, both states maintained close diplomatic relations, developed bilateral trade and waived visas for their citizens. Moreover, Prime Minister RecepTayyipErdoğan kept in with President of Syria Bashar al-Assad<sup>4</sup>. He even addressed Assad as 'My brother'. No wonder, then, that the United States, the European Union and some Arab countries from the Persian Gulf region also counted on Turkish intermediation in the framework of their bilateral relations with Syria<sup>5</sup>. Yet all political initiatives ended up with the beginning of massive protests which were stamped out by the Syrian regime in a very brutal way. One could say that if there had been no protests in Syria, the Turkish-Syrian relations would have probably flourished till today.

At the very beginning of political confrontation the Turkish authorities tried to persuade Bashar al-Assad to refrain from using force and begin negotiations with the opposition<sup>6</sup>. When Ahmet Davutoğlu met him in August 2011, both politicians accepted a 14-point plan which aimed to stabilize the political situation in Syria<sup>7</sup>. Unfortunately, it has never been implemented. As a consequence, Turkey

decided to condemn actions undertaken by Assad and demanded his resignation. Since then the bilateral relations have deteriorated and two allies have become enemies.

Prime Minister Erdoğan openly criticized Assad and Turkey officially recognized the Syrian National Council as the legitimized representative of the Syrian Nation. Although some members of the Council accused Turkish authorities that they favored members of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey's support for a part of Syrian opposition was a significant fact. And what's more, its headquarters was located in Istanbul. Obviously such decisions only fuelled rivalry between Syria and Turkey. A few times both countries were even on the brink of war, especially during mortar attacks on a few border towns in Turkey as well as during the bomb attack in Rey-hanli of May 12, 2013<sup>8</sup>. As far as the second of these incidents is concerned, the Turkish government officially blamed Assad's followers; however, the Syrian authorities denied any links to the attack<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, Turkey still supports moderate opposition groups, especially the Free Syrian Army. As a result, Turks have become rivals not only for Assad but also for his political allies, including the Russian Federation, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah. Yet the most unsettling element of the Turkish attitude towards the Syrian conflict is connected with its links with Da'esh, i.e. the so-called Islamic State (ISIS).

After the successful military campaign of ISIS in 2014, some analysts accused Turkish authorities that they indirectly support this radical Sunni organization, for example, letting its fighters enter and leave Syria through Turkey or smuggle and sell stolen Iraqi oil<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, some sources quoted the Head of Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT), Hakan Fidan, who openly suggested that ISIS could establish a diplomatic mission in Ankara and that Turkey's partners should accept *fait accompli*, namely the will of Muslims living in the areas controlled by Da'esh, and of-

ficially recognize 'the Islamic State'<sup>11</sup>. By the way, the first doubts concerning Turkey's relations with Da'esh appeared soon after its members released a Turkish consul as well as other Turkish citizens who had been held hostage since the capture of Mosul in Iraq. There were suspicions that, contrary to prisoners of other nationalities, these hostages were treated in a civilized way on the basis of a secret agreement<sup>12</sup>.

Such accusations became a serious diplomatic challenge to Turkish authorities as their main allies like the United States or France were clearly against Da'esh and did not accept any form of cooperation with the radical organization. At the same time analysts were pointing out that the ISIS existence was advantageous to Turkey, because its actions weakened Kurdish organizations both in Syria and Iraq, and, last but not least, were aimed at weakening the Assad regime. For these reasons Turkey focused rather on attacks on the PKK positions and its troops finally entered northern Iraq in December 2015. The situation was even more complicated since the United States initiated surveillance missions against the so-called Islamic State in Syria in September 2014. Allies expected Turkey to join the air strikes; however, Ankara was reluctant to make such a decision due to security risks. If Turkey joined anti-ISIS coalition forces, it would be more prone to attacks conducted by its fighters. Turkey borders areas under the control of Da'esh and has to take this significant factor into consideration<sup>13</sup>.

Although Turkey had been a member of the anti-ISIS coalition since September 2014, until July 2015 it attacked Da'esh positions in Syria only once. That was the moment when Turkey decided to conduct air strikes against ISIS and make its airbases in İnçirlik and Diyarbakir accessible to US air force for offensive purposes<sup>14</sup>. The shift within the Turkish foreign policy was caused by internal factors as well as external aspects. The most symbolic was the Suruç

bomb attack of July 20, 2015, which left 33 people dead<sup>15</sup>. The attack proved that the then Turkish tactics was wrong-headed and did not protect Turkey from terrorist threats. What is more, it appeared that the bomber was a Turkish citizen<sup>16</sup>.

No sooner had Turkey initiated attacks on the ISIS positions than the country was staggered by another deadly attack. This time terrorists attacked a political rally of Kurdish organizations in An-kara. More than 100 participants lost their lives and therefore the AKP government was forced to respond, especially that the attack took place just a month before crucial parliamentary elections. The authorities arrested many people who were convicted of preparing the attack and President Er-dogan pointed to Da'esh as the organization responsible for it. At the same time AKP politicians kept emphasizing that their party is the only political force capable of providing Turkish citizens with maximum security against terrorist groups. Undoubtedly, it was a clear allusion to the political situation in Turkey after the June elections. AKP did not manage to secure absolute majority and was forced to look for a coalition. Yet coalition negotiations were unsuccessful and left Turkey with no government. As a consequence, Turkish citizens were to vote once again in general election in November. The final result only proved that security topped citizens' expectations. On this basis one could even say that the Ankara attack indirectly helped AKP to secure absolute majority in the parliament and form another government.

#### *The Iranian Position on the Conflict in Syria*

It is a well-known fact that Iran and Syria have cooperated for many years. Yet reasons for this cooperation are matters for scholars. Their relations are of strategic, political, and economic nature<sup>17</sup>. Some analysts point to the

fact that their alliance began in the 80s, namely after the Iranian revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to Jubin M. Goodarzi, this alliance has been purely defensive since the very beginning. Moreover, in this way Syria and Iran responded to aggressive actions undertaken by Iraq in 1980 and Israel in 1982<sup>18</sup>. Nowadays both countries still have common foes like the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

President Bashar al-Assad continues the policy of his father, Hafez, and tries to secure dominance of the Alawi minority in Syria. No doubt it is one of the reasons why Tehran perceives him as the closest ally not only in the Arab world, but also in the whole region. As a consequence, any threat to his rule in Syria is interpreted in Iran as a direct threat to its national security.

For the above reasons, Iran is keenly interested in the current political and military developments in Syria. In the opinion of Sam Razavi, most of Iranian policymakers believe that the Syrian conflict is a direct consequence of the Western interference in the Syria's internal affairs. Such action is believed to be a part of a bigger plan to weaken the Syria-Iran alliance. Yet it should be emphasized that during the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presidency, there was a significant dissent on how to react to the war in Syria. While Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was advocating an unconditioned support for Bashar al-Assad, the president suggested a kind of compromise with the Syrian opposition which would enable Iran to maintain its influence in Syria in case of any political solution<sup>19</sup>. Ahmadinejad's tactics was quite simply and its main aim was clear. Whoever wins the Syrian conflict will need to cooperate with Iran and thanks to that Tehran will be able to secure *status quo* in the Middle East.

It should be underlined that the Syrian conflict has also become a kind of proxy war between Sunnis and Shia Muslims in general and between Iran and Saudi Arabia

in particular. For this reason various sides in Syria have received support either from Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah or from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf and Turkey<sup>20</sup>.

Officially Iran supports peace initiatives concerning Syria like many other states, including Turkey. Yet Iran and Turkey have divergent and exclusive interests there<sup>21</sup>. Iran not only opposes any political change inspired by the Western powers or their allies, but also backs Bashar al-Assad and his allies in a very quantifiable way. According to Jean Pierre Filiu, the Iranian authorities do that without any clear conditions or requirements<sup>22</sup>. At the same time it is noticeable that this support is of political and military nature. Moreover, Iran provides the Syrian regime with intelligence information.

In 2012, Chief Commander of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, Ali Jafari, confirmed that al-Quds troops were engaged in various operations on the Syrian territory. This support proved to be crucial during the 2013 counter-offensive, when the regime forces managed to regain some territory thanks to Shia fighters from Iraq and Lebanon. All of them were recruited, paid, armed, and trained by Iran.

Al-Quds officers helped Syrians to create the National Defence Forces (NDF) in 2012. This military group is organized similarly to the Basij formations in Iran and consists of over 50 thousand volunteers<sup>23</sup>. Although Iranian authorities denied any interference in the Syria's internal situation except for political support for Assad, unofficially they were not hiding the fact that the Western and Turkish engagement in the conflict forced Iran to react. Moreover, a new threat appeared in the Syrian political vacuum. The establishment of Da'esh, a radical Sunni organization, was dangerous to all Shia Muslims in general and to Iran in particular<sup>24</sup>. The so-called Islamic State has posed a deadly threat to Iran especially since its successful military campaign in Iraq of 2014. The seizure of Mosul,



the second biggest Iraqi city, was a clear warning for Iran. For this reason the Iranian authorities have no choice but to deter and fight against the ISIS jihadists. If there had been no military support for Iraqi forces from Iran and Shia paramilitary groups, the radical Sunnis might have seized Baghdad<sup>25</sup>. Last but not least, the Da'esh existence is the main reason for Iran to lose its land connection with Syria. As long as ISIS controls areas nearby the Iraqi-Syrian borders, Iran will not be able to take part in any large scale military operations in Syria. By the way, Iran was one of the reasons behind a split between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The Da'esh leader disavowed Zawahiri and accused him of being compliant to Iran<sup>26</sup>. It is a fact that Shia militias cooperated once with Sunni radicals in Iraq and fought against US forces; however, this cooperation was very pragmatic and short-lived<sup>27</sup>. Later Iran fought against Sunni organizations by all means<sup>28</sup>.

Undoubtedly, as long as Bashar al-Assad is the head of the Syrian state, Iranian strategic interests are more or less secured. Syria plays an important role in a political formation which Mah-joub Zweiri calls "the Shia dimension"<sup>29</sup>. This dimension is formed by Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Hezbollah, which is the controlled part of Lebanon. The number of Iran's regional allies is very limited, so if Syria changed its political orientation and began cooperating with, for instance, some Arab states from the Persian Gulf, it would undermine Iran's policy in the Middle East. For this reason Iran accepted even the growth of Russian influence and Russia's military presence in Syria. The stronger Bashar al-Assad, the better for Iran. Yet Russian – Iranian relations are not as good as one may assume. Quite the opposite: they can be distinguished by a relatively high level of mistrust. What's more, whereas Russian air force attacks the positions of various opposition groups, Iran assists the governmental army in ground attacks.

From geopolitical point of view the worst scenario for Iran is connected with potential success of ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Although it seems unlikely that Da'esh could take control of Afghanistan, the Iranian authorities have to take such possibility into consideration. ISIS is the main enemy and Iran will cooperate with all sides that aim at destroying this radical terrorist organization. As Olivier Hanne and Thomas Flichy de La Neuville point out, Iranians believe that Da'esh was created by takfirism and armed by the United States through Saudi Arabia in order to destabilize the Assad regime, divide Iraq, and take control over its oil<sup>30</sup>. Unfortunately, they also link Turkey to ISIS' actions in Syria and Iraq, which can only worsen the current state of Turkish-Iranian affairs.

### *Conclusions*

Undoubtedly, the above analysis of the most important factors prove that Iran and Turkey contend for political influence in Syria. There are more divergent aspects than convergent ones.

The only convergent aspect of Turkish-Iranian relations with regard to the current turmoil in Syria could be Iran and Turkey's attitude toward Da'esh. Yet it seems that the so-called Islamic State is far more dangerous to Iran, while Turkey is playing a double game in Syria. On the one hand, it is a member of the anti-ISIS coalition. On the other hand, Turkish authorities do not want to engage in a large scale conflict and intervention in Syria. Moreover, some Iranian sources suggest that Turkey is interested in indirect support for ISIS in order to counterbalance the Iranian policy towards Syria and weaken Kurdish organizations in the region. In the opinion of Hossein Bozorgmanesh, "Turkish officials are apparently angry with emphasis that some Iranian media put on Ankara's support for Da'esh terrorist group and believe that such allegations can damage bilateral relations between the two countries"<sup>31</sup>.

Interestingly, although Iran fights against ISIS in Iraq, it is not as active in Syria. Assad's attitude toward this organization is not clear. Mohammad Ali Dastmali points out that the recent decision "to allow Da'esh force move toward Raqqa is a sign of the difficult situation of the Syrian Government and the weakness of Da'esh. (...) This decision shows that Damascus and Moscow and even their other allies and supporters have probably accepted that a special de facto status and position must be given to Da'esh in Raqqa, so that this group will have nothing to do with other parts of the country"<sup>32</sup>. Obviously, if such claim is true, then it is bad news both for Iran and Turkey. At the same time, however, it gives them an opportunity for cooperation. Yet it is unlikely that Iran would cooperate with Turkey against Da'esh and sacrifice its long-term ally, namely Bashar al-Asad, only for this reason.

Last but not least, the lifting of sanctions against Iran may encourage its authorities to increase its political, economic as well as military presence in Syria and present a less flexible position, for instance, during any peace talks involving Turkey. The United States and the European Union may prefer to build mutual trust rather than confront Iran and unconditionally support Turkey especially given its complex and hostile relations with the Russian Federation. Obviously, such scenario would be detrimental to Syria, because it is clear that Turkey would not give up on its political ambitions and would not leave Syrian Turkmen without assistance. The only chance is that both Iran and Turkey would agree to cooperate and find a mutually acceptable solution, for example, in the framework of an international peace conference. The better Turkish-Iranian relations, the better for Syria.

## NOTES

1. M. Beck, *The Concept of Regional Power*, in: *Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations after the Arab Revolts*, H. Fürtig (ed.), Basingstoke 2014, p. 5.
2. B. Rubin, *The Truth about Syria*, Basingstoke 2008, p. 262-263.
3. C. Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring*, Oklahoma 2012, p. 485-486.
4. R. Hinnebusch, "Introduction: the Study of Turkey-Iran Relations", in: *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, R. Hinnebusch, Ö. Tür (ed.), Farnham 2013, p. 2-3.
5. E. Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, Abingdon 2013, p. 106-107.
6. Frederic Pichon points out that there is a myth concerning spontaneous protests which were cracked down by the Syrian regime. Although it is true that Assad often used the army against demonstrators, it is not true that none of them was armed. He even suggests that most of these people were inspired by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. The Baniyas massacre could serve as the best example. First rebels had killed seven pro-government militants and then the army entered the city. On this basis the author seems to justify the regime steps. See: F. Pichon, *Syria. Porażka strategii Zachodu*, Warszawa 2015, p. 37-43. Yet one should bear in mind that such claims, like Pichon's, are very controversial and do not have much in common with documented facts. In Baniyas, the pro-regime fighters and the army killed more than 100 civilians, including women and children.
7. M.B. Altunışık, "Turkey's Return to the Middle East", in: *Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations After the Arab Revolts*, H. Fürtig (ed.), New York 2014, p. 136.
8. *Syria denies links to Turkey car bombs*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/05/2013511121047931174.html> [3.07.2013].
9. W. Young, D. Stebbins, B.A. Frederick, O. Al-Shahery, *Spillover from the Conflict in Syria: An Assessment of the Factors that Aid and Impede the Spread of Violence*, Santa Monica 2014, p. 16.
10. Among these analysts were, for instance, Brad Power, Benjamin Hall, and Erick Stakelbeck. See: B. Power, *ISIS: The Sultan's Empire: The Sultan's Empire- How Erdogan supports jihadi networks in Middle East*, 2014, Kindle edition; B. Hall B., *ISIS Państwo Islamskie. Brutalne początki armii terrorystów*, Warszawa

- 2015, p. 252–259; E. Stakelbeck, *ISIS Exposed: Beheadings, Slavery, and the Hellish Reality of Radical Islam*, Washington D.C. 2015, p. 197.
11. *W Stambule powinien powstać konsulat „Państwa Islamskiego” – uważa szef tureckiego wywiadu*, <http://www.pch24.pl/w-stambule-powinien-powstac-konsulat-panstwa-islamskiego---uwa-za-szef-tureckiego-wywiadu,39572,i.html#ixzz3uBPjbqcf> [13.12.2015].
  12. I.O. Lesser, *Turkey at War?*, Washington D.C. 2015.
  13. More on Da’esh see: N. Henin, *Jihad Academy: The Rise of Islamic State*, New Delhi 2015.
  14. *Turkey carries out first air strikes as part of anti-Isis US coalition* (2015), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/29/turkey-air-strikes-anti-isis-us-coalition>, (23.10.2015).
  15. Most victims were young activists belonging to various leftist organizations. They arrived in Suruç to organize a press conference on reconstruction of Kobanî – a Kurdish town in Syria nearby its border with Turkey, which had become a symbol of the successful resistance to ISIS in 2014. As the Turkish government had done nothing to help Kurds and defend the town, this situation led to massive protests and political tensions in Turkey. Turkish Kurds as well as members of leftist parties clashed with the police in many cities.
  16. *Suruc massacre: ‘Turkish student’ was suicide bomber* (2015), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33619043> (22.07.2015); C.R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, London 2015, p. 370.
  17. See: N. von Maltzahn, *The Syria – Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*, London 2015.
  18. J.M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, London 2006, p. 3.
  19. S. Razavi, *Iran’s Levantine Ambitions*, in: *Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001: Alone in the World*, T. Juneau, S. Razavi (eds), Abingdon 2013, p. 133.
  20. J.V. Micallef, *Islamic State: Its History, Ideology & Challenge*, Vancouver 2015, p. 47.
  21. A. Stein, P.C. Bleek, “Turkish-Iranian Relations: From «Friends with Benefits» to «It’s Complicated»”, *Insight Turkey* 2012, Vol. 14, No. 4.
  22. J.P. Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: the Arab Counter-Revolution and Its Jihadi Legacy*, London 2015, p. 202.

23. M.R. Djalili, T. Kellner, "The Rise of Iran in the Middle East: Between Fiction and Reality", *Turkish Review* 2015, Vol. 5, No. 5, p. 386-387.
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27. P. Bennis, *Understanding ISIS and the New Global War on Terror*, Northampton 2015, p. 159; A. Hosken, *Empire of Fear: Inside the Islamic State*, London 2015, p. 191-193.
28. M. Weiss, H. Hassan, *ISIS. Wewnętrzny terror*, Warszawa 2015, p. 88-117.
29. M. Zweiri, "Arab-Iranian Relations: New Realities?", in: *Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad*, A. Ehteshami, M. Zweiri (eds), Reading 2011, p. 116.
30. O. Hanne, T. Flichy de La Neuville, *Państwo Islamskie. Geneza nowego kalifatu*, Warszawa 2015, p. 145.
31. H. Bozorgmanesh, *Opportunities and Challenges Facing Iran and Turkey in Syria and Iraq*, [www.iranreview.org/content/documents](http://www.iranreview.org/content/documents) (27.01.2016).
32. M.A. Dastmali, *Possible Scenarios Awaiting Syria in New Year*, [www.iranreview.org/content/documents/](http://www.iranreview.org/content/documents/) (19.01.2016).