Relations between Turkey and Syria were particularly tense in the late 1950s, almost moving towards full-scale war. The tension was not however, because of disputes impacting their national security, but disagreements over aspects of their alliance in the Cold War era. It is therefore not correct to argue that the securitized issues between Turkey and Syria were not defined during the Cold War. Aras and Polat argue that “until the end of the 1990s, official Turkish policy toward Syria could be defined as one of conscious alienation and controlled tension.”

The two major hurdles in their bilateral relations, which continued up until the Gulf War were, the status of Hatay and the distribution of the Euphrates. Syria’s decision to provide sanctuary to PKK’s leader Öcalan, led to a third dispute between the two countries.

Köni and Aras further assert that closer ties between Turkey and Israel might have attracted Syrian antagonism. The alliance between Israel and Turkey in the 1990s alarmed Syria, which was worried that it was being encircled by unfriendly states.

As a result, there are reasonable grounds to assert that Turkey has securitized some issues in relations with Syria since the 1990s. Aras and Karakaya note that during this period, the securitization of Turkey’s relations with Iran and Syria were largely due to domestic factors. They contend that foreign policymakers, “externalized the sources of political Islam and Kurdish separatism.” In a similar vein, they stress that the dramatic change in Turkey’s approach vis-à-vis these two neighbors could also be attributed to a changing domestic political environment in during the 2000s, when political discussions and activism were mostly centered on the EU accession process and steps towards democratization.

6 Aras and Polat, “From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey’s Relations Syria and Iran,” p.495.
There are three separate sets of water issues in the Middle East region, each with different players and different concerns. The first two involve the Jordan and Yarmuk River systems and the Nile region whereas the second includes the Tigris and Euphrates River systems, with Syria, Turkey and Iraq playing the key roles.7 The water issue occupies a central place in Syrian policy behavior. Its relations with Israel are at least partially affected by it; and therefore, unsurprisingly, Turkish-Syrian relations were taken hostage by the dispute. What aggravates the problem is the scarcity of potable water in the entire region, affecting not only Syria, but also Israel, Jordan and others.8

Whilst Syria promotes an equal share of the watercourses, Turkey claims that it releases sufficient amount of water for both Syria and Iraq.9 These conflicting views have never been reconciled. Turkey has remained unresponsive to Syrian demands, while Syria has decided to rely on risky options including the launch of military offensives on Turkish dams.10 However, instead of taking such direct measures, Syria decided to respond by a more comprehensive strategy. Olson argues that Syria’s support for Kurdish separatism could be explained by its strategy to use this as a tramp card in the river dispute with Turkey, which implies that for Syria, the real issue is the water dispute.11 It is therefore generally argued, that the resolution of the water dispute is “connected to the Syrian-PKK relationship.”12 Syria’s official position was that “there were sound reasons to support the PKK” since the “building of dozens of dams across one of the great rivers in the region” is “not only illegal” but “restricts flow into Syria.”13 In a reciprocal move, the Syrian regime wanted to use “the PKK militants as a tool to weaken Turkey and as a counter-balancing bargaining chip against her water weapon.”14

Syrian support for the PKK was particularly unwelcome on the Turkish side, which developed a fairly security-laden discourse against its neighboring country. One of the major security concerns of Turkey in the post-Cold War era has been the terrorism issue, in particular the struggle with the separatist PKK, as it was seen as a major threat to territorial integrity and national unity. What made this threat even more challenging was the support it attracted from regional actors such as Syria. Dealing with the external support afforded to the PKK was viewed as a substantial issue by the makers of Turkish foreign policy. To this end, Syria was a primary target, as it was believed to have extended substantial support to the separatist pro-Kurdish movement and the PKK in the 1990s. Syria had hosted the PKK leader Öcalan since 1979 and provided logistical, military and financial support to its militants in Turkish territory.15

Aras and Köni argue that Turkey’s Syria policy in the 1990s was driven mainly by “the worldview of the governing elite”, which failed to address the dramatic changes in the region. They further argue that ideological factors have played a determinative role in Turkey’s foreign policy orientation, which had an impact on relations with Syria. This approach was mainly shaped by the “Kemalist ideology”, which the military and civilian elites promoted, serving as a major reason for the lack of warm ties with Turkey’s neighboring country.16 In the case of Turkish-Syrian relations during 1990s, it is also the case that “micro level variables, such as institutionalized elite preferences, and macro level variables, such as Syria’s foreign policy, appear to have a causal relationship with Turkey’s foreign policies.”17 Perception of the security threat and definition of these threats were mainly affected in both countries by domestic concerns and issues.18

In consideration of growing Syrian support for the PKK, Turkey issued a warning as regards the Syrian attitude in 1996, regarding it as an act of aggression, with its entitlement to measures of self-defense, as per article 51 of the UN Charter. In the memo, Turkey urged Syria to stop supporting the PKK and turn over Öcalan.19 As part of this rhetoric,

9 Aras and Köni, “Turkish-Syrian Relations Revisited,” p. 56.
Turkey made bold statements and subsequently deployed 10,000 troops on the border areas. This policy was referred to as a flexible response strategy, which entailed an escalation of pressure in case Syria failed to honor Turkey’s demands. Through this policy, Turkey did not employ direct military force, due to fears that this might exacerbate its ties with the Arab world. But the Turkish authorities, particularly the high-ranking military officers, publicly delivered strong messages indicating that in case Syria fails to withdraw its support from the PKK, Turkey would run out of patience. In addition to the deployment of military units to border areas, the chief of staff made a public statement wherein he argued that Turkey was engaged in “an undeclared war” with Syria.

This strong and decisive stance worked effectively, convincing the Syrian authorities that the Turks may not be actually bluffing. The longstanding row between Turkey and Syria culminated in an agreement on 20 October 1998. In this agreement, the Syrian government agreed to cease supporting the PKK, recognizing it as a terrorist organization for the first time. To that effect, the Assad regime indirectly informed the Turkish government of their operation to place the PKK militants under arrest. Syria also agreed to expel Abdullah Öcalan -who had enjoyed refuge since the 1980s-, ceased to supply arms and logistical support to the PKK and cooperate with Turkey in its fight against this organization. All these objectives were to be achieved via the establishment of certain mechanisms.

De-securitization in bilateral relations

Bilateral relations began to normalize from 1998. The Turkish Prime Minister paid an official visit to Syria in December 2004 and Syrian President Bashar Assad reciprocated in 2005, wherein the sides concluded a trade cooperation deal in Ankara. This was the first visit by a Syrian president to Turkey. This was followed by a visit by the Turkish President to Syria in the same year. Changes in the regional and international environment have always affected the content of relations between Syria and Turkey. In the 2000s, Syria decided to respond to regional security threats by expanding the sphere of its alliances. This strategy included a rapprochement with Turkey, who positively responded to Syria’s eagerness to improve ties. The change in Turkey’s approach vis-à-vis Syria in the 2000s, on the other hand, was “mostly as a result of the transformation of regional politics and changes in the domestic politics of Turkey.”

Since 2004, bilateral relations have been “deepened.” In this period, the scope of bilateral military cooperation was extended; the parties adopted a common approach vis-à-vis security problems in Iraq; with the Syrian President Assad agreeing with the Turkish view that the establishment of a Kurdish state in the region was unacceptable. Bilateral relations were further revived in 2009 when the parties agreed to the lifting of visas and held a joint cabinet meeting. This was described by the Turkish foreign minister as a historic occasion, arguing also that bilateral relations could be depicted as a “common destiny, common history, and common future.” Given the warm relations back in 2009, it would be safe to argue that Turkey’s decision and position as regards to any potential action against Syria by the international community would have been pretty clear. Amidst arguments and analyses suggesting that Syria might be the next after Iraq, Turkey would have stood firm to oppose such an action by the US in this period of a “model partnership”.

In December 2010, Turkey took the lead in creating a Levant Quartet with the participation of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. This was with the view that others in the region would by 2015, join to form “an EU of the Middle East”. All these initiatives and efforts were part of a broader vision on the Turkish side under the AKP rule. How should this major shift of policy and attitude be explained? Altunışık and Tür, note that “ideational factors are constantly redefined and re-evaluated” and that “this has been to some extent true for Syrian–Turkish relations. Where the actors, faced with a shifting regional and international systemic environment, revisited their perceptions of each other and reconstructed their foreign policy behavior,” arguing that “the sustainability of such a policy change…is a factor of both domestic and international environment.”

22 Ibid., pp. 174, 178.
systemic transformations.\textsuperscript{30}

The change can be more technically defined as a period of de-securitization, where it is conceptualized as the broadening of the boundaries of normal politics.\textsuperscript{31} In this new period, “Turkish politicians have begun to favor the idea that a constructive Syrian policy line in the Middle East would help alleviate suspicions directed at Syria. This is in addition to easing tensions in the region. Syria is now a potential ally and friend in the new regional rhetoric of Turkish policymakers.”\textsuperscript{32}

But the popular uprisings in Syria turned a new page in Turkish-Syrian relations. At the initial stage of the riots, Turkey tried to persuade the Assad regime to carry out further reforms. However, considering that the regime became even more brutal and bloodier, Turkish authorities hardened their stance, stressing that Assad must go.\textsuperscript{33} As part of this rhetoric, Turkey also extended full support to the opposition forces. It is argued that “since then, Turkey has been exposed to both soft and hard security threats.”\textsuperscript{34} As one observer notes, when the Syrian uprising began, Turkey found itself in the unenviable position of having a neighbor with a great number of problems—serious ones that would inevitably cross borders.\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, the crisis with Syria refers to some limitations in Turkey’s zero problem policy and relations between a democratic state and a dictatorial regime. As a result, “the overambitious Turkish foreign policy now has to cope with diplomatic and security crises with most of the neighbors.”\textsuperscript{36}

These threats include the inflow of asylum seekers fleeing Assad’s brutality and persecution, downing of a Turkish jet, “frequent instances of border violations and mortar shelling, and of course the terror attacks in Reyhanlı, all of which are a result of the Assad regime’s actions. The threats that Turkey now faces are the result of spillover effects from the ongoing Syrian civil war.”\textsuperscript{37} Turkey’s response to these security threats was reliance on a rhetoric urging Assad’s resignation. By this policy, Turkey stated that Syria should no longer be ruled by Assad, a view that was widely echoed by Western allies and the Gulf States.

This call was interpreted as Turkey’s inclination towards a sectarian approach in the Syrian crisis, which put Turkish foreign policy makers in a delicate position. The reign of the Alawites in Syria, in the form of a strong and repressive regime, also had an impact upon Turkish foreign policy decision making vis-à-vis the ongoing conflict in Syria. Turkey has never supported or promoted violent and extremist groups against the Assad regime, but the Islamist past of the ruling AKP and the growing Sunni sentiments in the country inevitably alienated Turkey’s Alawites despite visible differences with the Syrian Alawites. This was particularly caused by the fact that the Assad regime has been viewed by Syrian Sunni groups as a minority rule “which seized power by armed force, imposing harsh measures.”\textsuperscript{38}

Conclusion

It is safe to argue that Turkey has always been worried about its territorial integrity and national security due to an external threat perception. Sensitivity to these threats was evident in official statements by Turkish policy makers, who often securitized foreign policy issues. This applies to its relations with Syria as well. Terror was the main source of threat vis-à-vis Turkey’s security, and it was primarily associated with the porous nature of its borders with the neighboring countries including Syria. The bilateral issues between Turkey and Syria have included terror and border disputes, as well as the status of Hatay (Antioch) which joined Turkey in 1939 in a plebiscite.

Turkish-Syrian relations have remained securitized up until the 2000s when the AKP took office. The popular zero-problem policy, configured by Ahmet Davutoğlu, mainly aimed at de-securitizing relations with Turkey’s neighbors including Syria. Through a dramatic change of policy, Turkey sought to send a message that it is not posing any threats to Syria, implying that they should both be ready to further cooperation, particularly in the fields of economy and culture.

However, the popular uprising in Syria has significantly changed the course of bilateral relations between the two countries. Turkey extended strong support to the uprising

\textsuperscript{30} Altunışık and Tür, “From Distant Neighbors to Partners: Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations,” p. 246.


\textsuperscript{32} Aras and Polat, “From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey’s Relations Syria and Iran,” p. 510.

\textsuperscript{33} Coşkun, “Turkish-Syrian Relations: From Friend ‘Esad’ to Enemy ‘Esed’,” p. 116.


\textsuperscript{36} Coşkun, “Turkish-Syrian Relations: From Friend ‘Esad’ to Enemy ‘Esed’,” p. 118.


and regime change. Assad’s response was unfriendly. Both the Assad regime’s policy vis-à-vis Turkey and the repercussions of the civil war in Syria posed serious threats to Turkish national security. However, based on official statements by Turkish authorities during the crisis and the relevant economic data, it could be concluded that bilateral relations between the two have still remained de-securitized in some specific issue areas including the influx of refugees.

About BILGESAM

Established in 2008, the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM) is one of the leading think tanks in Turkey. As a non-profit, non-partisan organization BILGESAM operates under the guidance of a group of well-respected academics from different disciplines, retired military generals and diplomats; and aims to contribute regional and global peace and prosperity. Closely following the domestic and international developments, BILGESAM conducts research on Turkey’s domestic problems, foreign policy and security strategies, and the developments in the neighbouring regions to provide the Turkish decision-makers with practical policy recommendations and policy options.

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