

Turkey and the EU: A New Path toward a Shared Security Policy

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The Middle East is currently experiencing a period of crisis, which impacts severely on geopolitical order and security in the region and the adjacent areas. The collapse of state authority over particular areas in certain political contexts (e.g. Syria, Iraq), combined with the emergence of new proto-state entities (e.g. the so-called Islamic State [IS], Rojava), is deeply affecting the security environment from many aspects. This study will focus on three areas: the Kurdish entity in northern Syria, the Black Sea region, and the issue of energy diversification for reducing dependence on Russia. The object of this study is to explore the potential for cooperation between the European Union and Turkey in meeting challenges and achieving common goals in these areas.

Although a comprehensive document on the European security policy will be presented only in June 2016 and the priorities of single EU member states are often different, it is possible to identify some common European security goals¹, such as promoting a rule-based inclusive security environment supporting conflict resolutions and stability, preserving trade opportunities, securing the lines of interaction for energy supply (Biscop, 2015). Furthermore, it has become central for many EU countries to tackle the root causes of conflict to prevent mass migrations (Youngs & Gutman, 2015). As far as Turkey is concerned, its main priority is to keep the emergence of a Kurdish entity in the north of Syria from jeopardising its internal stability in the Kurdish-majority eastern regions. In addition, the Russian annexation of Crimea (2014) and the operations against Turkey-backed rebels in the area of Aleppo (2015-2016) are a source of great concern for Ankara, which depends on Moscow for much of its energy supplies. Furthermore, Turkey has been a target

¹ For more information see European Union. Foreign & Security Policy. Retrieved from http://europa.eu/pol/cfsp/index_en.htm

of terrorist attacks, allegedly carried out by IS and Kurdish separatist groups, and is now dealing with a flow of refugees from Syria, which reached 2.7 million in February 2016².

The starting point of the brief is that the European Union and Turkey could better address their security challenges and interests through closer cooperation. On the one hand, the EU lacks reliable local allies in dealing with current threats, since Brussels is still largely incapable of involving countries and new regional entities in achieving its regional goals. This is particularly problematic as many of the current security issues (refugee crisis, illegal migration, energy diversification, terrorism) have a supranational character. Despite the recent tensions and general distrust of the current leadership, Ankara is potentially the best candidate for becoming the main regional partner of the European Union on these issues, as it shares most of its security priorities with the EU and has the political capacity to be an essential constructive actor for stabilising the Middle East. Furthermore, Turkey could be a key security partner of Brussels in the Black Sea region as it controls the straits and is, together with Russia, the main maritime power in this area.

On the other hand, Ankara could benefit from a closer partnership with the EU to help restore its image of a constructive actor and regain influence in the Middle East. This could aid Turkey in securing stability in the Black Sea basin, and realise Turkey's ambition to become a source of political inspiration for the MENA countries by means of a combination of increasing economic penetration, a larger role in conflict mediation and an effective use of soft power, which has been largely frustrated since 2011. Turkey now has many problems with its neighbours (Barkey, 2016), being perceived as one of the main sponsors of Islamist-oriented opposition groups in the region (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere, Ahrar al-Sham in Syria) and among the main actors responsible for regional fragmentation. In addition, it could strategically gain from a greater involvement of the EU, together with NATO, in working for modernising and enhancing the military capability of the Black Sea littoral states for counterbalancing Russian activism (European Parliament, 2015).

The EU, Ankara and the Syrian Quagmire

Turkey has specific priorities in the Syrian conflict, as it considers the emergence of a Kurdish proto-state (Rojava) just beyond its border the main threat to its internal security. This is the reason why Ankara, which is involved in sustaining anti-Assad militias and

fighting the so-called Islamic State (IS), is also conducting military operations against Kurdish forces in northern Syria, where some parts of the territory are controlled by People Protection Units (YPG). The emergence of this militia as a key player in the Syrian crisis is seen as a major threat by Ankara, given that the armed group is de facto³ connected to the Democratic Union Party (PYD). This political organisation is ideologically linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), even though it denies being its Syrian branch (Romano & Gurses, 2014, p.231). Ankara and the PKK fought for 30 years in a conflict that caused thousands of deaths and it fears the potential spill over of the Syrian crisis to its Kurdish population. Many EU member states do not share the same concern, as they consider the PYD/YPG an essential ally for fighting IS.

However, this might be a strategic miscalculation as the emergence of a PYD-led Kurdish entity in northern Syria is potentially destabilising for the future of this country. Different reports and testimonies accuse members of the PYD-run police, known as the Asayish, of having committed human rights violations in recent years. According to Human Rights Watch, the Asayish appears to be responsible for the arbitrary detentions of opposition group members (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2014). Amnesty International collected evidence to suggest that YPG militias displaced a number of Arab civilians (Amnesty International, 2015) from their villages, mostly located in mixed areas (e.g. Tel Abyad) where the Syrian regime had been trying to change the ethnic balance in favour of Arabs for many years. Although these accusations are strongly denied by PYD and YPG members (Saaed, 2015), there is little doubt that the hegemony of this party could affect the ethnic balance in northern Syria and the political equilibrium in the Kurdish-majority areas in Syria and elsewhere. In particular, the hegemony of PYD in the Syrian context arouses concern in the rival Kurdish National Council (KNC), mostly formed by parties which have strong ties with the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP): the main political force in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). These political forces (e.g. the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria - KDPS) have a long history of rivalry with the PYD in competing for leadership among Kurds in northern Syria. Contrary to more radical Kurdish parties, the KNC-affiliated groups advocate a federal solution for the Kurdish region within a prospected Syrian republic, but lack a broad political constituency in this area and recently boycotted the local Rojava elections (Ford & Yassir, 2015).

As stated by Cale Salih, the EU could work towards making this Kurdish group “a constructive player that contributes to, rather than thwarts, European interests in Syria” (Salih, 2015, p. 8),

³ The armed militia is formally linked with the Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC), a self-proclaimed governing body formed by a member board that consists of an equal number of PYD and KNC members, now politically moribund.

conditioning military assistance and political support of its member states on building inclusive governance institutions and setting a limit to its expansion. This would greatly reassure Turkey, which fears the unification of the Afrin Canton with the areas of Jazira and Kobane. Furthermore, the EU could also act as mediator between different Kurdish parties. Brussels could also push to allow a significant number of Iraqi Peshmerga to be deployed in Syrian territory. This would also guarantee greater protection to parties that opposed the PYD, helping to strengthen political pluralism. Such a development would ultimately reassure Turkey, at least partially, that its internal security would not be jeopardised by the creation of a Kurdish entity in Syria. The KRG has, in fact, positive relations with Ankara and it shares with Turkey the strategic goal of limiting the influence of the PKK in the Kurdish political spectrum in the long term. In addition, such a deployment might be accepted by PYD, both on the basis of common efforts in the fight against IS, which already proved to be very productive in the battle of Kobane (2014) and Sinjar (2015), and in guaranteeing greater global recognition and legitimacy for the Kurdish cause. The presence of a consistent number of non-PYD forces would also reassure the international community that the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region could be included in the framework of a post-Assad federal Syria.

This acknowledgment of Turkish interests as legitimate and the inclusion of its priorities in a broader EU strategy for the region could convince Ankara to play a more constructive role in the security matters that most concern the European states, such as the flow of foreign fighters, human trafficking and the fight against IS. Furthermore, Turkey could also make a greater contribution to exchanging intelligence information and accommodating the entry of refugees from Syria. The recognition of Ankara as the main EU partner in the region could also potentially help in finding a long-term solution to the Syrian conflict, as Turkey has the leverage to make local militias in Syria engage in a constructive dialogue regarding the post-civil war scenario. The involvement of Turkey in the EU policy in the region might also be helpful in dealing with the current humanitarian crisis in Syria and neighbouring countries. Ankara could further benefit from the EU's help in dealing with the current humanitarian crisis. Such cooperation is already well underway following the recent EU-Turkey cooperation agreement (European Commission [EC], 2015), which pledges 3 billion euros to Ankara to help with the refugee crisis.

The EU, Turkey and the Black Sea Basin

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 generated serious concerns among EU members, especially regarding the security situation of the Black Sea basin. Ankara shares the same apprehensions, as its recent policy in the area has been to maintain the balance between the

different states of the Black Sea region to promote trade and economic cooperation (Barran, 2008). Within this context, Ankara signed numerous deals with Russia, such as the lifting of visa requirements and an agreement for fostering nuclear cooperation. However, the Russian war against Georgia (2008) and the annexation of Crimea (2014) marks an important change for the region. The military balance shifted in favour of Moscow following the takeover of a consistent part of the Ukrainian navy by Russian troops. This trend of Russian assertion of its military presence is likely to continue in the coming years, as the Russian navy is undergoing a process of radical modernisation (Office of Naval Intelligence, 2015) and will have 86 new vessels in the Black Sea by 2020 (Soldatkin, 2014). These changes have a deep impact on the European Union strategy for maintaining stability and avoiding conflicts in the region, as Brussels is increasingly considering its own interests as opposed to Russia. The EU recently affirmed the need to protect the transit of energy supplies in the region and guarantee the security of oil and gas exploitation, potentially mobilising European naval and airspace assets to protect member states' interests (European Parliament, 2015). In addition, the EU is supporting Black Sea littoral states in enhancing their defence capabilities and called on Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova to increase their cooperation in the military field by considering the creation of a multinational force.

Although there are few possibilities that the current tensions in the Black Sea will escalate in an open conflict, it is important for both Ankara and the European Union to balance their military capability in the area as a deterrent for preventing conflicts in future. Within this context, Turkey can play a leading role in the process of containing Moscow's ambitions as it represents the main regional naval power in the Black Sea basin. Furthermore, Turkey holds the key to the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, which is the only way for the Russian warships to reach the Mediterranean. The transit of military craft is still regulated by the Montreux Convention (1936⁴), which limits access for the warships of Black Sea countries, but sets size, type and tonnage restrictions and timing for non-Black Sea war vessels. Any revision of this treaty is not envisaged in the short term, and regional stability could be better achieved by stronger military cooperation between the EU member states and Ankara, under NATO auspices. Such a long-term process would be matched with a diplomatic effort to engage the other countries in the area. The EU already signed association agreements with both Georgia⁵ and Ukraine⁶ and is committed to supporting their territorial integrity. Turkey also has positive relations with these states and could be included in a general effort towards greater assertiveness in limiting Russian ambitions.

4 Convention regarding the regime of straits signed at Montreux, http://sam.baskent.edu.tr/belge/Montreux_ENG.pdf

5 For more information on that see European Union External Action. EU Relations with Georgia. Retrieved from <http://www.eeas.europa.eu/georgia/>

6 For more information on that see European Union External Action. EU Relations with Ukraine. Retrieved from <http://www.eeas.europa.eu/ukraine/>

The EU, Ankara and Energy Security

The EU and Ankara share the same interest in diversifying and securing their energy supplies. Particularly, the recent tension between Russia and Turkey makes it more urgent for Ankara to reduce its dependency on Moscow, which provides 56% of the total natural gas imported by Turkey (BP, 2015) and 25% of the crude oil (UNCTAD, 2014). As stated by the European Energy Security Strategy (EC, 2014), this goal is also shared by the EU, which relies on Russian crude oil for 33% of its total oil imports, and 39% of total natural gas imports (European Union, 2015). A wider integration of the Turkish and EU pipeline network, which is already well underway with the construction of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) between Azerbaijan and Italy (via Turkey), would allow EU member states to gain easier access to the Caucasian fields and potentially the Middle Eastern oil and gas resources. Within this context, Ankara would also benefit from a more direct supply route from the North African fields, which are already connected to some southern European countries.

The discovery of large gas fields in the south-eastern Mediterranean, mostly located between the territorial waters of Israel (Leviathan-Tamar), Egypt (Zohr) and the Republic of Cyprus (Aphrodite), could also be a game-changer for both Turkey and the EU. Part of this gas could be exported to Europe mostly from the LNG shipping facilities located in Egypt (Adams, Saleh & Reed, 2015) but first Cairo should meet its internal demands, which might be possible by around 2020 (Chmaytelli, 2015). The added costs of liquefaction, storage, transportation and regasification could make this option less competitive in the long term, especially in comparison to Russian energy production (Zhukov, 2014). Another problem would be that both Israel and the Republic of Cyprus might be reluctant to export their gas through Egypt, as this means that Cairo could block or reduce it for political reasons. Furthermore, the Egyptian LNG export infrastructure can currently provide 19 billion cubic metres per year (bcm/y) (Tagliapietra & Zachman, 2015b) and Cairo is partially utilising its LNG plants for imported gas. Given that Zohr alone has a potential 20-year plateau production level of 20-30 bcm/y (Tagliapietra & Zachman, 2015a), there might be little room for accommodating gas from other countries without infrastructural improvements. It is for these reasons that Israel and Republic of Cyprus are now discussing a joint project for building an LNG plant in Vasilikos (Cyprus). However, this installation does not by itself provide a comprehensive solution since the cost of finishing it is \$7-10 billion and it would only be able to liquefy and ship 5 bcm/y (Roberts, 2013).

A much cheaper and more efficient alternative would be to connect the south-eastern Mediterranean fields to Turkey through new pipelines. Turkas Petrol A.S. estimates the cost of

realising an energy infrastructure for exporting 16 bcm/y from Israel's Leviathan-Tamar fields to Turkey to be around \$2.5 billion (Pflüger, 2013). Given that most of the newly discovered gas fields are separated by not more than 100 kilometres (Tagliapietra & Zachman, 2015b), the total for connecting these areas to the aforementioned pipeline would not be much higher. The proposed project is much cheaper than an alternative route to Greece, which might cost at least \$3.8 billion to export only 8 bcm/y (Roberts, 2013), and can be easily connected to the SGC. Despite the SGC being presumably reserved for the gas flowing from the Shah Deniz gas field (Azerbaijan) to Europe (Natural Gas Europe, 2015) in its first years of activity, it is expected to double its export capacity from 16 bcm/y (2018-2019) to 31 bcm/y (2026) within a short period, eventually reaching 60 bcm/y with infrastructure expansion (Tanchum, 2015). This increase in capacity would allow it to host additional amounts of gas from the newly discovered fields of the south-eastern Mediterranean region (Günaydin, 2014).

The implementation of this project would be beneficial for the producing countries, making the south-eastern Mediterranean gas price extremely competitive. However, the current low gas prices and the presence of many political issues to be addressed could greatly slow down such a plan. The pipeline requires the direct approval of the government of Cyprus and it potentially passes through the disputed waters that Ankara claims to be part of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), while no other state in the region recognises this political entity. Despite this problem still being a major obstacle to the creation of the proposed pipeline, the recent peace talks between the leader of the TRNC and the premier of the Republic of Cyprus could provide a peaceful solution to the border controversies (Kambas, 2016). Other developments could arise both with respect to Israel, with which Turkey has tense relations following the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident but is now trying to restart its diplomatic ties (Kershner & Arango, 2015), and Egypt, as Turkey harshly criticised the ousting of former President Mohammad Morsi but now seems to be about to set a new beginning with Ankara. Within this context, Europe can play an active role in mediating between Ankara and the other states of the south-eastern Mediterranean littoral, since it has good relations with all of them and is directly involved in the region. The European Union could also potentially be a promoter, together with Turkey, of an annual forum for addressing the main energy challenges of the area.

The lifting of sanctions against Iran could also represent a unique occasion for Turkey to reassert its ambition of becoming an international energy hub. It is estimated that Iran has the second largest proven gas reserves (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

[OPEC], 2013a) and the fourth of oil (OPEC, 2013b). These sources could at least partially reach European consumers and help diversify the EU's energy supply. Turkey would be the natural gateway for Tehran's energy exports, given the already existing oil and gas pipeline network and its strategic geographical position. Despite political tensions regarding the Syrian crisis, the two countries never broke their commercial ties, especially in the energy sector. For example, in 2014, 18% of all gas imports to Turkey came from Iran (BP, 2015). The main issue for Ankara is to decrease the price of natural gas (\$507/1000 m³ compared to \$349/1000 m³ for Azerbaijani gas [Tanchum, 2015]) since it is the highest among the countries from which Turkey imports gas. As President Erdoğan suggested during a recent visit to Tehran (Cetingulec, 2015), this issue could be solved if Iran's energy export volumes increased. The energy import growth might be facilitated if the Iranian gas reached European consumers through Turkey.

Conclusion

Although the current geopolitical situation offers several opportunities for collaborating in the security field, the effective implementation of regional partnership greatly depends on the political will of the EU and Turkey. A closer collaboration requires a general paradigm shift that aims at restoring mutual trust and setting a different standard for a renewed alliance. Given that the Turkish accession process to the European Union is proceeding slowly, the EU cannot fully count on Ankara's prospective membership as a tool of political leverage for engaging Turkey in its Middle East policy. In this context, it is necessary for Brussels to conceive of Ankara as an assertive partner with its own interests and priorities that could be included in a broader European strategy for the region, rather than as a reluctant ally.

Turkey should realise that it is not possible to achieve its regional objectives on a stand-alone basis. Ankara could engage its allies in handling an issue which cannot be solved only in military terms but requires a long-term political vision. As the EU currently does not have a strong position on many of the issues that are central for Turkish security, such as the demand from certain Kurdish groups for greater autonomy or even independence, it may not take much persuasive force. In addition, the ruling Turkish leadership, the conservative Party of Justice and Development (AKP), should be willing to take unpopular but realistic decisions, such as taking a more flexible position concerning the Cyprus issue or accepting a Kurdish region within a potential Syrian federal republic which would be strongly opposed by the religious-nationalist electoral base of this party.

The possibility of a pragmatic partnership based on shared interests could succeed if both sides recognise the benefits it could bring to the regional stability of the Middle East and to

their own economic interests. Turkish leadership recently proved capable of taking pragmatic decisions with regard to one of the countries considered most unpopular among its population: Israel. The recent decision of Tel Aviv and Ankara to re-open their embassies as a first step towards normalising their relations is a promising development that may be seen in the context of a general re-orientation of Ankara's foreign policy to create good relations with its neighbouring countries after a period of regional isolation. The EU could guarantee that this plan will succeed by making partnership with Turkey a new cornerstone of its policy in the region.

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