How Turkey's Initial Response to the Syria Conflict Weakened Security Governance

By Cüneyt Gürer

Turkey's foreign and regional security policies have been deeply affected by the Syrian crisis for at least the past seven years. Different dimensions of the crisis and the spillover effects in Turkey (refugees, terrorist attacks, foreign terrorist fighters, etc.) have raised questions and concerns about the country's approach to regional security. For years, Turkey's Syria policy has been dominated by the idea of playing

BOTTOM LINE
- Incoherent policies by Turkey towards Syria has deteriorated relations with the West
- The Turkish policy crisis was mainly brought about by conflict between political elites
- Turkey's inefficient policies also contributed to social unrest and increased security risks

an active role in Middle East politics. However, a number of miscalculations and a departure from previous institutional commitments moved Turkey from a policy of "zero problems with neighbors" to "zero friends" as Piotr Zalewski put it in a 2013 *Foreign Policy* article. In 2016, author and journalist Abbas Djavadi called it a "nothing but problems" condition. Because the crisis in Syria continues to affect regional stability, and there seems to be no winner out of the conflict, it is hard to declare a victory in achieving goals. Most regional experts agree that the initial policy— called "strategic depth" — originated from former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutogl not only failed to achieve concrete objectives, but it also affected the State structure significantly to cover the policy failures in the later stages.

Until recently, Turkey's regional security policies were closely aligned with international and regional organizations. As an important NATO member in the region, Turkey played a key role. In a May 2016 Atlantic Council report, Faysal Itani and Aaron Stein claim that Turkey is the regional actor most responsible for the emergence of a serious rebellion in Syria. But a miscalculation about the regional and international environment, a narrow approach to handling the armed opposition, and a failure by Turkey and its allies in the West and Middle East to manage the conflicting priorities have damaged Turkey's interests in

Syria. A consensus among experts is that Turkey not only failed to reach its political goals in Syria, it also created long-term policy and security problems with significant consequences.

As mentioned earlier, Turkey's policymaking process related to Syria was influenced by the political objective of becoming a regional leader in the Middle East. Considering the complicated nature of the Middle East, such an ambitious objective required comprehensive policy plans and support from long-standing Western allies with interests in the region. In attempting to implement this political objective, however, Turkey's political elite neglected to effectively use state institutions to create policies that could achieve the goals, yet preserve the country's Western ideals and institutions. Attempting to extend the area under Turkish influence has been an effective political tool to generate public support. But it has failed to create an effective Syria policy involving Turkey's relevant state institutions at the decision-making or implementation stages.

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The disengagement of the security bureaucracy from key security issues

In democracies, policymaking requires a balanced interaction between political executives and government experts. In the public policymaking process, the classic struggle between politicians and bureaucratic experts

over key security issues had previously existed in Turkey. But the power of the political elites in Turkey—originating from significant public support fueled by anti-Western sentiments and promises to restate Ottoman influence in the Middle East —diminished the importance of security bureaucracy over time.

A reluctance by bureaucrats to implement ambitious political objectives was successfully framed by politicians as bureaucratic resistance to the public's will. However, the source of the problem was mostly related to differences in how politicians and state institutions identified regional challenges and how to bring policy proposals to the table. This difference has been interpreted as a sign of disloyalty by the political ruling elite. The political choice to become more active in Syria and in the Middle East, at the expense of Western ideals, resulted in many miscalculations. Most of the key issues related to the choice were not openly debated, even within the relevant state institutions. Political elites claimed the state was not serving the people and managed to replace bureaucrats and experts in state institutions with those unwilling to question an ambitious political agenda that, in some cases, challenged Turkey's domestic laws and long-standing commitments and obligations on the international level.

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Security policymaking requires the involvement of various government agencies and outside experts to produce the best alternatives for decision-makers. The process requires experts and politicians to be fully aware of their roles. It is expected that government experts will disclose all possible outcomes of a policy, as well as any international and domestic legal limitations, and that politicians will balance the technical expertise with political power. Making the state too powerful to restrain political will reduces democracatic quality by forcing technical experts to prematurely implement policies without discussion, leading to unforeseen consequences. Turkey has been unable to maintain a healthy political balance and has suffered the consequences, particularly with the policymaking process related to the Syrian crisis. Security experts felt pressured to operationalize the political agenda, which in many cases had a limited path to success and contradicted traditional government structures. This departure was happening at about the same time Turkey had declared a Syria position different from the one broadly adopted by its Western allies.

Political elites not only departed from Western allies, they also realized that they could not continue with the same state structure or with experts (including bureaucrats) who were mostly supporting cooperation with the

West. This divide mostly affected the security bureaucracy and the security experts, but later extended to other government areas. One other major dilemma for the security bureaucracy during this process has been to work within the existing legal and institutional framework that has been considered by political leaders as obstacles to the idea of the "great nation, great power, target 2023" slogan used in election campaigns and public meetings. These policies are supported by political loyalists in the government and paved the way for the problematic political engagements in Syria.

The decision to support and organize opposition against the Assad regime was problematic from the start in the way it was framed. Turkey's political elite cast the conflict as an issue of "political loyalty" and patriotism, rather than a well formulated state policy At earlier phases, Turkey used diplomatic channels to persuade the Assad regime to introduce government changes and initiate reforms even before the violence escalated in Syria in 2011. When diplomacy produced no workable solution and Assad continued to violently suppress the opposition, Turkey decided not only to support the opposition but also to shape it, hoping that the violence would not continue for long and that Assad would be replaced.

However, the political elite developed these policies mostly with "loyalists"

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and ignored the institutional engagements, previous alliances, and even country's own laws. The lack of clarity in Turkish policies related to Syria created significant information asymmetry for government agencies that caused clashes amongst the same agencies. An example of this ambiguous policymaking and implementation process is the "open-door policy" that allowed Syrian refugees to enter Turkey on a humanitarian basis.

From the beginning of the crisis, a lack of coordination among agencies created significant security risks and made the country a transportation hub for the jihadi groups. Although the initial response to the humanitarian crisis was effective, the State never introduced (even to this day) long-term policy solutions for Syrian refugees in Turkey. When the crisis began to undermine the country's security, opposition groups demanded from ruling elites a more thorough explanation of Turkey's policy. In response to this pressure at the domestic level, the ruling party proposed three important changes to the law to limit public discussions about early policy failures. This eventually reduced the acceptance of opposing ideas from the public and undermined the stability of state institutions. The first of these legislative changes occurred in

February 2014 and authorized the Telecommunications Directorate of Turkey to order the blocking of websites based on vaguely defined grounds without prior court approval. Having a nontraditional approach to the Syrian crisis and relying mostly on intelligence networks for its ground-level operations, Turkey revised a law in April 2014 to give greater power to its National Intelligence Organization. The changes allowed the agency to access personal data without a court order and granted agents immunity from prosecution for any violations of the law they might commit in the course of their work. Second, the law also made it a crime to report on or acquire information about the National Intelligence Organization and even includes a prison term of up to nine years for journalists convicted of publishing information leaked from intelligence sources. And third, the final important change was a homeland security package adopted in March 2015 that enhanced police powers. Although not active participants in the policymaking, many government agencies are forced to cover for the consequences of Turkey's problematic Syria policies.

Conclusion

The initial political choices—based on the assumptions that the Syrian crisis would not take long to resolve and that Turkey could follow a path that undermined its relations with long-standing allies—had significant consequences. Turkey became less pro-West, more vulnerable to security risks, and weakened as a state because of the ineffective and imbalanced

interaction between political elites and policy experts. Giving more power to institutions to control political dissent rather than using those institutions to create workable policies weakens the Turkish security structure and dramatically increases the distance between the state and society. Accordingly, the coup attempt and the subsequent purges significantly weakened security institutions. Mass purges in the security agencies created gaps that cannot be easily filled in a short period. To fill the gap, the government publicly announced a lowering of the criteria and education requirements for new recruits to security agencies.

A March 2017 report by the U.S.-based Bipartisan Policy Center assessed the risks to the Turkish state and found that the increasing power of political figures in Turkey is weakening the state and boosting the influence of security and intelligence institutions. What is characterized as a strengthening of the state by giving more power to security agencies actually increases the state's vulnerabilities and diminishes its power over time. Turkey and the West have shared values and common interests that are beneficial to both parties if those values are respected and the shared concerns are addressed mutually. Ignoring the weakening of Turkey's state institutions and failing to properly address the problems will further complicate the existing situation.♦

Dr. Cüneyt Gurer is an EDSN fellow, a Philipp Schwartz Initiative Fellow at the University of Siegen, Germany and conducting research on "Conflict, Refugees and Dynamics of Integration." He has received his Ph.D. degree from Department of Political Science at Kent State University (2007). His research interests and areas of expertise are Conflict and Human Displacement, Integration policies, Transnational and Comparative Security Policies, Research Methods and Statistics. He has been also affiliated with the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies as an Adjunct Professor. He is also studying on a research project examining the interaction between political regime changes, democracy, and security.