TURKISH-SYRIAN RELATIONS – WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Özlem Tür [1]
Middle East Technical University, Ankara

Abstract:
2009 witnessed a series of developments showing the depth of the relations between Turkey and Syria. Not only in the political and security fields but in the economic relations as well the two countries deepened their relations at an unprecedented level. Just to name a few of the remarkable developments over the last year, the two countries held a joint military exercise, signed a technical military cooperation agreement, established a Turkish-Syrian High Level Strategic Cooperation Council and lifted the visa requirement. These developments were unthinkable only a decade ago. Considering that the two countries came to the brink of war in 1998, the advancement and deepening of the relations to such a level in a decade is impressive as well as interesting. This article aims at looking at the dynamics of the relationship between Turkey and Syria. It argues that not only the common security concerns over the developments in the region, especially the impact of the Iraqi War but also domestic concerns played an important role in the deepening of the relationship. On the Syrian side the coming to power of Bashar Asad, the need for economic development in the country and its international isolation has been important. On the Turkish side, the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party with a new vision for the Middle East has especially been significant.

Keywords: Turkey, Syria, Iraqi war and the Middle East, economic integration, Justice and Development Party's foreign policy.

Resumen:
2009 fue testigo de una serie de acontecimientos que mostraban la profundidad de las relaciones entre Turquía Siria. Ambos países profundizaron sus relaciones hasta un nivel sin precedentes, no sólo en los ámbitos políticos y de seguridad, sino también en sus relaciones económicas. Sólo por mencionar algunos de los acontecimientos más destacables del año pasado, los dos países llevaron a cabo ejercicios militares conjuntos, firmaron un acuerdo de cooperación técnica militar, establecieron un Consejo de Cooperación Estratégica de Alto Nivel y suprimieron la obligación de visado. Tales desarrollos parecían impensables sólo una década atrás. Teniendo en cuenta que en 1998 ambos países estuvieron al borde de la guerra, los progresos realizados y la profundización en las relaciones hasta tal nivel en sólo una década, son tan impresionantes como interesantes. Este artículo persigue analizar las dinámicas detrás de las relaciones entre Turquía y Siria. Se argumenta que no sólo las preocupaciones comunes en el ámbito de seguridad por los últimos cambios acontecimientos en la región, en particular en impacto de la Guerra de Irak, sino que también factores de política doméstica tuvieron una influencia determinante en la profundización de la relación. Por un lado la llegada al poder de Bashir Al-Asad, la necesidad de potenciar el desarrollo económico y romper el aislamiento internacional, fueron muy importantes en Siria. Por otro lado, en Turquía, especialmente significativa ha resultado la llegada al gobierno del Partido de la Justicia y el Desarrollo y su nueva visión sobre el Oriente Próximo.

Palabras clave: *Turquía, Siria, la Guerra de Irak y el Medio Oriente, la integración económica, la política exterior del Partido del Desarrollo y Justicia.*

[1] Özlem Tür is Associate Prof. Dr. in the Middle East Technical University, Department of International Relations, Ankara, Turkey.

1. Introduction

Turkish-Syrian relations have gone through a very troubled period. The two countries were adversaries within the Cold War rivalry, had to manage bilateral problems, a legacy of the Ottoman past, and the stereotypical images of each other[2], Hatay issue and the water problem – the dispute over the appropriation of the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris. The PKK terror was added to the picture in the 1980s as the PKK found shelter in Syria and the Syrian dominated Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. The PKK terrorist activities, mainly operating from Syria and PKK's head Abdullah Öcalan's residence in Damascus constituted the most important reason in the escalation of tension between the two countries during the 1990s. The water issue also became linked to the terror issue during this period. In 1995, the then Foreign Minister Deniz Baykal's words were demonstrative of this: "Syria as a neighbor country should stop being the headquarters of a terrorist organization. It can be thought that hands with the blood of terror could be washed with more 'water'. However, Turkey will never bargain the use of terror for water."[3]

As the efforts to find a diplomatic solution to resolve the issue of Syrian support of the PKK failed in 1998, consensus emerged among the Turkish policymakers to toughen Turkey's stance against Syria.[4] The problems have escalated to such a level that on 30 September 1998, the National Security Council ratified a plan of action against Syria which was put forward by the Chief of Staff General Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu and as a result an additional 10,000 troops were mobilized along the border. In a speech on the following day, Kıvrıkoğlu stated that "an undeclared state of war" already existed between Turkey and Syria. The same day, President Demirel in his inaugural speech in the Parliament declared that Turkey was running out of patience and that Syria would have to live with the consequences of its support for the PKK.[5]A week later the Turkish government issued a final ultimatum to the Syrian government. The outcome was a complete success for Turkey: Damascus yielded to pressure by expelling Öcalan and closing down PKK activities on its territory in accordance with an agreement, the Adana Accords, signed on 20 October 1998.

The general idea regarding the reasons why Syria stepped back and expelled Öcalan was that Syria was helpless in the face of Turkish military might and that it had no other choice but to surrender to Turkish demands. In contrast with this view, Bashar Asad, in a recent interview said that looking back to those years the reason why Syria expelled Öcalan and entered into a cooperative relationship with Turkey was "not out of fear but because we preferred you. We would either be friends with the Turkish people or prefer the Kurds and lose you. Because our preference was with you, we sent Öcalan out"[6]. Despite this statement, considering Syrian military weakness at the time and the intense cooperation between Turkey

[2] Alliance of the Arabs with the Western powers against the Ottoman Empire during World War 1 affected the mindset of the Turks against the arabs for a long time. As a result of this experience Turks refered to arabs mainly treacherous and untrustworthy while the held the idea that Arab underdevelopment was a result of centuries-long Ottoman domination of the arab lands. For details see, Aras, Bülent and Köni, Hasan: "Turkish–Syrian Relations Revisited", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2002), pp. 47–60.
[3] *Hürriyet*, 31 December 1995.
[4] Aykan, Mahmut Bali: "The Turkish–Syrian Crisis of October 1998: A Turkish View", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 6, no. 4 (1999), p. 177.
[5] *Milliyet*, 2 October 1998.
[6] Birand, Mehmet Ali: "İsrail'e ve Avrupa'ya Sırtını Dönmüş bir Türkiye Cazip değil", *Posta*, 8 November 2009.

and Israel, this at best seems a preference out of necessity, not out of will. Fred Lawson shares this point by looking at Syrian policy towards Turkey before the Adana Accords and the following three years. Lawson underlines that Damascus's pursuit of better relations with Ankara from the autumn of 1998 to the end of 2001 grew out of a conjunction of developments that sharply increased the cost of armed conflict with Turkey.[7] Although Israel made sure to remain out of the conflict as Turkey was mobilizing troops along the Syrian border, Turkish-Israeli alignment leaving Syria subject to a possible coordinated military assault maintained its importance in this picture. Considering the Syrian military weakness, this factor becomes more significant. The Syrian military equipment acquisition halted with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Syria was considered to be "in dire need of modern weapons systems and intelligence gathering systems but is constrained by economic problems that are not likely to resolve for many years, if at all".[8] Thus, after 1998 Syrian officials "took the risk of lowering their guard and adopting a conciliatory posture toward the country's long-term northern adversary".[9]

In the aftermath of the Accords, it was interesting to see how quickly the bilateral relations developed and the "undeclared state of war" was left behind by both parties. The quick recovery of the relations show from the Turkish perspective the primacy of domestic security concerns. Once the threat to domestic security was eliminated through Syrian compliance, Turkish-Syrian relations began to normalize. What is interesting though is that the relations did not only return back to their normal stance prior to the conflict but rather went to unprecedented levels of cooperation in less than a decade. There was a general expectation at the time that relations would become normal, but this normalization will be followed by Turkey's traditional policy, in Mufti's words, "a steady retreat toward the correct but aloof and neutral postures of the past".[10] Despite the regionally based foreign policy approach of the Ecevit government during this time closer relations that in the future could lead to economic integration or strategic cooperation with Turkey's southern neighbors was not on the agenda. Mufti quotes the words of General Kemal Yavuz on the possibility of Turkey's active involvement in the Middle East and the formation of a strategic axis with Israel and Jordan and possibly other Arab states. Yavuz says: "Ismet Inönü put it very well: 'Getting into a sack with the Arab is like getting into a sack with a snake. You never know when it will bite you.' . . . It is not possible to enter into such an agreement with Arabs . . . they kiss you on both cheeks and then stab you in the back."[11]

This article argues that despite such an expectation of a return to Turkey's traditional approach towards the Middle East, relations with Syria deepened in a very short time due to several reasons at the international, regional and domestic levels. On the one hand, the radical change in the region with the 'regime change' strategy of the US and the subsequent Iraqi War brought the two countries together. On the other hand, the domestic reasons in both countries worked for deeper relations – on the Syrian side the change of leadership bringing Bashar Asad to power in 2000, the need for economic development and Syrian international isolation and on the Turkish side, the change in Turkey's politics with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet Ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) in 2002. The article

[7] Lawson, Fred H.: "The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship: Syrian Turkish Relations since 1998" in Lawson, Fred H. (ed.) (2009): D*emystifying Syria*, London, Middle East Institute in SOAS, pp. 184-185.
[8] "Shifting Sands, "Changing Prospects", *Jane's Weekly Defense*, 2 November 2000.
[9] See Lawson, *op. cit*., p. 188.
[10] Mufti, Malik: "From Swamp to Backyard: The Middle East in Turkish Foreign Policy", in Freedman, Robert O. (ed.) (2002): *The Middle East Enters to Twenty-First Century*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, p. 106.
[11] *Ibid*.

does not neglect the change in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East after the Adana Accords and capture of Abdullah Öcalan from 1998-99 onwards and the regionally based foreign policy approach under İsmail Cem's foreign ministry. However, the reasons for the deepening of the relationship at the domestic level on the Turkish side could be seen more explicitly with the Justice and Development's Party's vision and policy regarding the Middle East.

2. The Biginnings of the Rapproachement: 1998-2003

Following the signing of the Adana Accords, there were developments in Turkish-Syrian relations in a very short time. The immediate result of the agreement was the closing down of the PKK training camps in Syria and the termination of the logistical support for the organization. The two parties agreed that "a direct telephone link would be established, special representatives would be appointed in each country's diplomatic missions, and a system of monitoring of security enhancing measures and their effectiveness was to be initiated"[12]. Regular meetings were held by the Joint Security Committee. They comprised military officials from both sides, and there was an increase in diplomatic visits at various levels.[13]

Until 2000, we can talk about a period of trust-building in the relations. With June 2000, Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's attendance at Hafiz al-Asad's funeral ceremony the relations were symbolically enhanced between the two countries. After Sezer's visit, it was clear that the two sides wanted to deepen their relationship. A couple of months later, in September, the two countries signed a security cooperation agreement. Syrian Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam visited Ankara in order to "turn over a new leaf" in bilateral relations.

In Syria, at the societal level there was an opening towards Turkey as well. First of all, there were economic developments. In 2000, the trade volume between Turkey and Syria was only $724 million[14], and both parties were showing willingness to increase the economic relations. Although prospering under the shadow of security and political developments, Aydın and Aras underline that after the signing of the Accords, a variety of measures were adopted to encourage commercial expansion and a memorandum of understanding was signed restarting the Joint Economic Committee inactive since 1988.[15] During this time, in Syria there was not only a willingness to increase trade as can be seen in *Daily Tishreen* that was writing about the opportunities of further economic relations with Turkey and talking about a potential of $4 billion trade volume[16] but also there was an effort to leave the past behind. For example, it was during this period that for the first time in Syria there was a panel titled 'Ottoman State: Contemporary Readings". The panel was held in line with the spirit of the time, signifying a new Syrian approach:"the legacy of the past did not constitute an

[12] Altunışık, Meliha and Tür, Özlem: "From distant neighbors to partners? Changinf Syrian-Turkish Relations", *Security Dialogue*, vol. 37, no. 2 (June 2006), p. 226.
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] See the web page of Turkish Directorate of Foreign Trade. By clicking on Syria, figures can be reached at http://www.dtm.gov.tr/dtmweb/index.cfm?action=detay&yayinID=244&icerikID=347&dil=TR.
[15] Aydın, Mustafa and Aras, Damla: "Political conditionality of Economic Relations Between Paternalistic States: Turkey's Interaction with Iran, Iraq and Syria", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 1&2 (Winter/Spring 2005), p. 33.
[16] See the transcription of Syrian writer's column in el-Hayat on 30 May 2002 in Turkish Daily Radikal. Elarnavut, Muhammed M.: "Türkiye-Şam Hattı Düzeliyor", *Radikal*, 19 June 2002.

impediment for the relations and a new political thinking in bilateral relations was on the agenda as an alternative to ideologies"[17].

On the Turkish side, there was also a willingness to improve relations with Syria. However, despite this willingness especially the Hatay issue complicated the matter. The military, while at times adopting a pragmatic approach, emphasizing cooperation on security matters and leaving water and border issues without a pressing timing brought up the Hatay issue in 2001. During the meeting bringing together the countries' generals in charge of military planning, there was a discussion whether the two countries could hold joint training exercises. The possibility was averted as the Turkish military side "insisted that the authorities in Damascus in return [for the exercises] relinquish all claim to the province of Hatay. This, the Ba'thi regime adamantly refused to do so."[18] The Turkish Foreign Ministry also shared the same position. Foreign Ministry underlined the importance of solving the water issue and the border issue – Hatay – between the two countries first and prepared a declaration of principles that included respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of each country as a prerequisite for the advancement of relations.[19] The Syrian Foreign Ministry was reluctant to accept the foreign ministry's declaration of principles, as in the previous example. As a result of this reluctance, Syrian President Bashar's expected visit to Turkey was postponed. Eventually, however, the Syrian side assured Turkey that they were willing to resolve the border issue, but they stressed that they would need time to explain this to the Syrian public and remained cautious about pushing it to the top of the agenda. This position was accepted by the Turkish Foreign Ministry. Bashar will agree to accept Hatay as a part of Turkey in 2004.

November 2002 brought the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in Turkey. The Justice and Development Party's vision regarding the Middle East has especially been important in improving relations with Syria further. Just like the panel held in Syria on revisiting the Ottoman past, with the AKP's ascendance to power a new Middle East policy was put into effect that stemmed from Turkey's historical responsibility, the Ottoman rule in the region, and its experience. In this new vision, the legacy of the past, the Ottoman era, and the culture not only "make it easier for Turkey to be involved in the region but also compels Turkey to be a part of it".[20]

3. Deepening of the Relations: The Iraqi War and the Common Security Concerns

As there was a willingness at the political level on both sides to foster relations, the post-September 11 developments created a favourable environment that drew the countries closer and the Iraqi War and its impact deepened the relations between Turkey and Syria by creating common security concerns. Before the Iraqi War, Turkey and Syria's similar concerns over a possible war in the region and especially the future of Iraq, regarding the need to maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq, brought the countries together. Going beyond this concern Syria was worried about its own fate within the US plans to remake the Middle East. In Hinnebusch's words, "The US conquest of Iraq threatened the Syrian regime's very

[17] *Ibid*.
[18] See Lawson, *op. cit*., p. 184.
[19] See Altunışık and Tür, *op. cit*., p. 227.
[20] Altunışık, Meliha: "World Views and Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East", *New Perspecitves on Turkey*, no.40 (Spring 2009), p. 186.

survival"[21]. The growing anti-US sentiment in both countries, but more importantly the concern about the Kurdish issue and the implications of a possible independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq as a result of a US-led War led to a deepening of the relations.

Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's visit to Turkey on 6–8 January 2004, became an important turning point. Bashar's visit was important not only because this was the first visit to Turkey ever by a Syrian president but also because it was during this visit that Bashar put his signature on documents explicitly recognizing Turkey in its current borders, therefore accepting Hatay as a part of the Turkish Republic. During the visit economic issues were also discussed. The two sides decided to open up a consulate in Gaziantep and border centers in several Turkish cities to facilitate trade in the border regions. Demining of areas in the border territories to permit organic agriculture was also agreed.

During Bashar's visit important regional security issues were brought to the agenda one of which was the Kurdish question: how best to deal with the effects of Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq. During his visit, Bashar underlined the existence of common views and threat perceptions within Syria and Turkey in relation to Iraq. In reference to Turkey's previous announcements that the establishment of a Kurdish state would be unacceptable and thus constitute a red line for Turkey, Bashar stated that "a Kurdish state would violate our red line too".[22] In addition to Iran–Syria–Turkey trilateral meetings, Syria became part of the 'Iraq's Neighbors Initiative' started by Turkey.

As told above, Turkish-Syrian relations were deepening as a result of similar security concerns in the region. While concern over Iraqi War was shared, so was the concern over Israeli actions. As early as 1999, despite the continuing cooperation with Israel, Prime Minister Ecevit had blamed Israel for committing genocide against Palestinians. With the collapse of the Peace Process and the al-Aqsa intifada, the Palestinian issue began to constitute a more important place in the political agenda of Turkish governments under the AKP. In May 2004 Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, pointing to the Israeli operation in a Palestinian refugee camp in the Gaza Strip in which dozens of civilians were killed, said that these operations escalated to the point of state terror. Erdoğan asked: "what is the difference between a terrorist who kills civilians and Israel which kills civilians?"[23] While this statement strained the relations between Turkey and Israel, there was also concern in Turkey over the news on Israeli activities in Northern Iraq. Seymour Hersh in an article in The New Yorker wrote that the Israeli secret forces, disguised mainly as businessmen, had been operating in Northern Iraq even before the War started and they were helping and even preparing the Kurds towards independence.[24] Some analysts regarded that these developments would lead to the dismantling of the long maintained Turkish-Israeli alliance.[25] These statements came during the same period of Israeli insistence to Syrian authorities to expel all representatives of radical Palestinian organizations. These criticisms were turned into Israeli actions in Damascus as well. For example, in September 2004 Israel claimed responsibility for the killing of a member of Hamas near his house in Damascus.[26] Thus not only growing anti-US sentiments, the possible implications of the Iraq partition and the formation of a

[21] Hinnebusch, Raymond: "Syria: Defying the Hegemon", in Fawn, Rick and Hinnebusch, Raymond (eds.) (2006): *The Iraq War – Causes and Consequences*, London, Lynne Rienner, p.129.
[22] See Altunışık and Tür, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
[23] *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 27 May 2004, FBIS-NES-2004-0527.
[24] Hersh, Seymour M.: "Plan B", *The New Yorker*, 28 June 2004.
[25] Kibaroğlu, Mustafa: "Clash of Interest over Northern Iraq Drives Turkish-Israeli Alliance at the Crossroads", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 59, no.2 (Spring 2005), p.1.
[26] See Lawson, *op.cit.*, p. 191.

Kurdish state but also the growing concern over Sharon governments policies pushed Turkey and Syria closer to each other.

The relations reached another level with Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Syria in December 2004. The visit was important as it opened up negotiations over the water issue and led to the signing of a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries. As the visit came right after the decision to start EU-Turkey accession negotiations one of the issues on the agenda became Turkey's EU membership. Regarding the water issue what was interesting was to see that the problem of sharing the waters of the rivers was left behind and began to be seen as a technical issue. Erdoğan said that Syria could use more water from the Tigris River for their increased needs. Syrian Prime Minister Otri announced this as 'good news' to the population and to the question, 'whether Turkey and Syria were leaving the traditional water problem behind' during the press conference, Erdoğan answered, "From now on we have agreed. We are aiming development and cooperation. Other issues are forgotten." [27]

The Free Trade Agreement which would come into force in 2007 was also signed during this visit. Syria and Turkey signed this agreement with the understanding that it should be expanded to the regional level and ensure the cooperation and interdependence in the region.

There was emphasis on the Syrian side regarding Turkey's EU accession process. Bashar, in praise of Turkey's foreign policy has announced that Syrians were watching Turkish foreign policy with admiration and taking it as a model for themselves. Underlining how glad they were for Turkey's EU negotiations and how important it was for Syria and the region, Bashar said that as Turkey would enter the EU, Syria would be a neighbor to the EU and they were watching the process with a great interest and enthusiasm.[28] The importance of Turkey's EU accession will be underlined during the future visits as well. How Turkey will be the gate of Syria to the European markets and how Syria would be Turkey's gate to the Middle East and the value of Turkey for Syria as a country within the EU negotiation process with a possible accession will be underlined by the Asad regime. Bashar would go as far as saying that Turkey that has turned its back to Israel and Europe will not be attractive for Syria.[29] Also Turkey's possible mediation in the peace talks between Syria and Israel came to the agenda during this visit. However, this will be materialized only in the later years.

4. Sezer´s 2005 Visit and Breaking the Syrian Isolation

Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's visit in April 2005 was especially meaningful for the relations, mainly for the Syrian side as it came at a time when Syria was increasingly being cornered over the events in Lebanon. Turkish government sent positive messages to Damascus and became an important country that supported the Syrian regime that was under increasing pressure after the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the possibility of Syrian responsibility in the act. The visit of President Ahmet Necdet Sezer in 2005, further underlined the support Ankara was giving to Damascus at such a critical moment. Although there were no agreements resulting from the visit, this stood as an important gesture to Syria and the will of Turkey to deepen the relations despite criticism.

[27] "Ekonomik Partner Olduk", *Hürriyet*, 23 December 2004.
[28] *Hürriyet*, 23 December 2004.
[29] See Birand, *op. cit.*

The importance of Sezer's visit to Syria, despite growing pressure of the international community to isolate Syria, should be underlined not only as a message of support for the Bashar regime at the highest level, but also showing the extent of the relations. The visit was criticized before it was realized especially by the US regime. The US Ambassador Edelman said in response to a question regarding Sezer's visit that "the US, EU countries and Egypt were in a consensus with putting sanctions on Syria and that they were expecting Turkey to support the decisions of the international community". Edelman underlined, in an implicit manner that, in case Sezer went to Damascus, Turkey would be marginalized by the international community. Edelman added that "Of course it is up to Turkey to act in line with the international community or not".[30] Whether Turkey was acting on its own in defiance of the hegemon in its relations with Syria or whether this was a part of a coordinated policy between US and Turkey became much of a debate during this period. Some writers underlined that Turkey's policy of supporting Syria, at a time when isolation of Syria was pursued risked the future of Turkish-US relations and thus was a limitation on the deepening of the relationship with Syria. As Oktav underlines, "Turkey's stakes in its relationship with the United States appear to be too high to be completely risked for the sake of improving bilateral relations with Syria. No government in Turkey, including the AKP government, has been willing to forfeit its 'alliance' with the United States".[31] Uzgel, on the other hand, argues that despite the visibility of US opposition to Turkey's relations with Syria, implicitly US supports closer relations between the two countries. Uzgel notes that US supports such a development as Syria allying itself with Turkey, a Western ally, would pull Syria away from Iran, which would obviously be in line with US and Israeli interests in the region[32]. Uzgel notes that thinking about Turkey's policy of close relations in the Middle East at large and Syria in particular are in line with the US policy. Rather than risking defying the hegemon, Turkey actually acts with it according to this perspective. Considering that calls for engaging Syria began to be heard in the US especially after the Lebanese War of June 2006 and ideas of seperating Syria from Iran began to be written in newspapers[33], the second idea seems to prevail. Since then how to normalize relations with Syria, and involve Syria in regional developments has been on the agenda of the US and thus, Turkey finds no difficulty in deepening the relations with Syria.

Sezer's visit was met very positively not only at the political level but also by the Syrian population, bringing the two societies further together. During the Lebanese crisis, Erdoğan's role was also praised by some Syrian writers. Erdoğan was thought to be "keeping silent […] in contrast to most US allies after the passing of the UNSCR 1559[…]".[34] Bashar said regarding Turkey in the same month, "Turkey has become one of the friendliest countries toward Syria in the region, and not only pursues good relations at a bilateral level but also cooperates with Syria on a number of regional issues".[35]

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[30] "ABD: Suriye'ye Bastırın", *Radikal*, 15 March 2005.

[31] Oktav, Zeynep Özden: "The Limits of Change: Turkey, Iran, Syria" in Ateşoğlu Güney, Nurşin (ed.) (2007): *Contentious Issues of Security and the Future of Turkey*, Aldershot, Ashgate, p. 93.

[32] Uzgel, İlhan: "Dış Politikada AKP: Stratejik Konumdan Stratejik Modele", in Uzgel, İlhan and Duru, Bülent (eds.) (2009): *AKP Kitabı – Bir Dönüşümün Bilançosu*, Ankara, Phoneix, p. 364.

[33] See for example the column of Thomas Freidman in *The New York Times* in July 2006. Friedman, Thomas: "Talking Turkey to Syria", *The New York Times*, 26 July 2006, at http://select.nytimes.com/2006/07/26/opinion/26friedman.html?_r=1&scp=6&sq=Thomas+Friedman+Syria&st=nyt.

[34] Moubayed, Sami: "Turkish-Syrian Relations: The Erdoğan Legacy", *SETA Policy Brief*, no. 25 (October 2008), p. 3.

[35] "Esad ile Özel Röportaj" , *CNNTürk*, 6 April 2005.

Turkish support has actually been significant in bringing Syria back in from the cold. As argued above, the fact that engaging Syria evolved as an idea in the West as well, Turkish government took the credit in the following years for the support it was giving to Syria. For example, when the French president, Nicholas Sarkozy, eventually broke the international boycott and visited Syria in 2008, Bashar met him accompanied by Erdoğan.

5. Turkey´s role as a Mediator: Syrian-Israeli and Syrian-Iraqi Mediation

As mentioned above, Turkey's role as a mediator in the conflict between Israel and Syria came to the agenda in 2004. According to Israeli sources, it was Israel that waited and that "it took Israel three years to accept the offer"[36]. But by 2007, the public opinion matured and the ground for indirect talks was prepared. Bengio, underlines that there emerged a willingness by that time in Israel to talk to Syria. Until that time there was the concern that what would come after the peace talks with Syria could only be a 'frozen peace'; Israel giving up Golan but receiving nothing in return[37]. Despite this fear the negotiations started. During this period the declining importance of the bilateral relations was palpable. There was a tension in the political scene due to Turkish Prime Minister's messages of 'state terror' and the primacy of the Palestinian issue on the Turkish political agenda. However, Turkey was still seen as a mediator in the negotiations. Despite the crisis, the idea that unlike Turkey of 1990s, Turkey of the 2000s, under the AKP having close relations with both Israel and Syria could play such a mediation role was emphasized. Negotiations started and continued under Turkish mediation; however they were halted after Prime Minister Erdoğan's "One Minute" show in Davos in 2009. The mediation effort is especially important in showing the level of trust between Syria and Turkey. There has been willingness on the Syrian side to resume the negotiations, but the Israeli side has been reluctant to start the talks since then. What is important here is that Syria has given messages of full support to Turkey's mediation role. If negotiations are to resume, Syria sees Turkey as a reliable partner in the process.[38] Turkey also showed its willingness for such a role despite no progress in the issue.

Bashar told in an interview that they valued Turkey's support of Syria highly and that Turkey could communicate Syria's messages to any party. He said: "We have full trust for Turkey. Let me give you an example, even if we do not ask them [Turkey] talks about us to Washington, tells our opinions. This is very important. Besides, the role it played in negotiations with Israel was very important. Because of this, relations came to a point that Turkey can talk for us."[39]

Turkey also played a mediator role in Syria's troubled relations with Iraq after a series of bombs have exploded in the Green Zone in Baghdad in August 2009. The Maliki government has blamed the Syrian government for the bombings and held Damascus responsible for supporting terrorist activities and aiming at destabilizing Iraq. The Iraqi Ambassador was also called back as a result. As the tension escalated, Turkish Prime Minister Davutoğlu traveled to Baghdad and Damascus to "learn about the opinions of both parties over the developments and to communicate Turkey's position within this context". Davutoğlu proposed to Iraq, "tell us every message you want to be communicated to Syria

[36] Interview with Alon Liel, who was a part of the Israeli negotiating team. Jerusalem, 22 November 2008.
[37] Interview with Ofra Bengio, Tel Aviv, 23 November 2008.
[38] "Esad: Türkiyesiz Masaya Oturmayız", *Sabah*, 18 Mayıs 2009; "Suriye Görüşmeler için İstekli", *Habertürk*, 17 Mayıs 2009.
[39] See Birand, *op. cit.*

and give us all the evidence and information and we will pass it onto the Syrian side."[40] In the period that followed, Turkey brought the Foreign Ministers of Iraq and Syria together in Istanbul. In the meeting Turkey not only mediated the crisis but also offered both countries to establish a tripartite border security mechanism. This mechanism will aim at combating PKK, El-Qaida and Ba'thist forces in Iraq[41]. The tension was eased in the following period as a result of this effort.

6. Economic Relations

Economic aspect of the relationship has been important from the very beginning of the normalization of relations after the signing of the Accords. As mentioned above, the economy developed under the shadow of the political developments. Although calls for an "economy not affected by politics but politics affected by economics" [42] were made, generally the trend continued to work otherwise. For the Syrian part, Turkey's economic power has especially been important. As Lesch underlines, economy stands out as a test case for "the success or failure of Bashar's tenure. The problem is that Bashar cannot afford for much longer a disappointing economic performance".[43] The over-grown public sector has provided for decades an important source of legitimacy and a support base for the ruling regime in Syria and whether Bashar could revitalize it by a successful reform process becomes an important question for the future of the regime in the country. The deepening of the relations with Turkey came at such a critical timing for the Syrian regime, like in other aspects of the relationship, when it was feeling economically stuck as a result of its need to make 'selective reform' in accordance with the broadening of the ruling coalition in the country[44] and the worsening of the peace talks in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Turkey's accession negotiation process with the EU increased the economic value of the relationship further.

Turkey is seen by Syria not only as an important market but is also seen as an example in terms of economic development. Turkey also portrays itself as a model for Syria in this aspect. Erdoğan, in a visit to Damascus in April 2007 attended the Syrian-Turkish Business Council meeting after the entering into force of the Free Trade Agreement in 1 January 2007. In the meeting Erdoğan called the Syrians to follow the Turkish reform process. He said: "Our exports were at $36 billion and then reached $114 billion over a period of five years. This can easily be done in Syria. All you need is will power and only then will you be able to extract milk even from a male goat! We are willing to put our hand in yours".[45] In 2000, trade volume between the two countries was $724 million; it reached $1.8 billion in 2008 and the target is set for $5 billion for 2012. Erdoğan said that he was not satisfied with the current volume and aiming to bring the figure to $5 billion in three-four years. "We talked about this

[40] "Davutoğlu Devrede", *Milliyet*, 1 September 2009.
[41] Ergan, Uğur: "Türkiye-Suriye arasında Üçlü Mekanizma Kurulacak", *Hürriyet*, 17 September 2009.
[42] This was the slogan of the Turkish-Syrian Business Council, see *Hürriyet*, 3 February 2003.
[43] Lesch, David W. (2005): *The New Lion of Damascus – Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*, New Haven, Yale University Press, p. 208.
[44] Hinnebusch, Raymond: "The Politics of Economic Liberalization: Comparing Egypt and Syria", in Hakimian, Hassan and Moshaver, Ziba (eds.) (2001): *The State and Global Change – The Political Economy of Transition in the Middle East and North Africa*, Richmond, Curzon, pp. 111-134.
[45] See Moubayed, *op. cit*., p. 5.

with my brother Otri" Erdoğan said, "There is a political will for this. We will succeed in this, God willing"[46].

Turkey and Syria has built a Turkish-Syrian Regional Cooperation Program that became operational in 2006, aiming to develop technical, economic, cultural and scientific cooperation. It aims at facilitating a regional development by financing projects that will create employment as a priority. The program publishes a monthly report in Turkey– the last one was published in November – December 2009. It is interesting to see in this report the short stories on the back cover almost teaching the readers to love each other and to share. The title of the second issue of the journal was: Love and sharing starts at your vicinity. The program encourages integration of the two countries' economies and aims at a joint development of the region at large.

Since the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement, not only the level of trade have jumped between the two countries, but also there has been substantial investment from Turkish companies – particularly in Aleppo – and numerous joint infrastructural projects have been started. Despite the positive gains there also seems to be a negative side of the issue for the Syrian regime, which should be considered. The free trade agreement has started to put out of business some old Syrian manufacturing families that couldn't compete with superior Turkish imports[47]. Moreover, the fact that Syria remains very much the junior partner to Turkey in the economic relations carries the potential of turning into a problem in the future.

7. 2009 and Beyond: Lifting of the Visa Requirement, Economic Integration and High Level Strategic Cooperation Council

The relationship turned to a new phase with the lifting of the visa requirements between the two countries. The decision to lift the visa requirements were taken during the meeting in September 2009. This meeting became very significant for the relations as it carried the cooperation between the two countries to a level of economic integration. It was also during this meeting that the decision to form a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council was taken.

Regarding the lifting of visa, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu said: "I would like to address the Syrian people. Turkey is your second country and Turkish people are waiting for you with open arms without a visa"[48]. The lifting of visas is seen as the materialization of the first step of unification between the two countries. The artificiality of the border between the two countries began to be underlined much more during this period. Thus, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu said "We are lifting the borders which were artificially put and becoming the people of one hinterland. We are turning the economic cooperation to an economic unity. We are hoping that this will be a model for all our neighbours."[49]

Erdoğan in a speech he made to the Turkish-Syrian Business Council in Syria underlined some important points on the issue as well. He said that the relations were

[46] See Erdoğan's Speech in Syria, at the Turkish-Syrian Business Council. "Başbakan Erdoğan Suriye'de, Türkiye-Suriye İş Konseyinde İşadamlarına Seslendi", 23 December 2009, at http://www.akparti.org.tr/basbakan-erdogan-turkiye-suriye-is-konseyinde-isadamlari_6551.html.
[47] Phillips, Chris: "Turkey: Syria's Best Friend", *The Guardian*, 1 October 2009.
[48] "Türkiye ile Suriye Arasında Vize Kalktı", *CNNTURK*, 17 September 2009, at http://www.cnnturk.com/2009/turkiye/09/16/turkiye.ile.suriye.arasinda.vize.kalkti/543804.0/index.html.
[49] Gürcanlı, Zeynep: "Türkiye-Suriye için Fransız-Alman Modeli", *Hürriyet*, 13 October 2009.

normalizing between the two countries. The separation of the two peoples with a border was artificial and abnormal and that they were "building the communication and cooperation that should exist between brothers and relatives". Referring to the ongoing debate in Turkey whether Turkey was shifting its axis in the foreign policy, Erdoğan said that the focus was not shifting but rather the focus of Turkish foreign policy was normalizing. Erdoğan said: "When I watch Syria from my own country I get emotional. For example I am affected when the Saudi King comes to Syria, but also equally I get affected when my brother Bashar Asad goes to Saudi Arabia. Now, in a similar manner I am waiting to see my brother Bashar Asad's visit to Lebanon. With all these [developments] in this region unity, togetherness and cooperation will bring us to a bright future. I have always longed for this and now we are succeeding in these. Is it possible not to feel the excitement of these beautiful days?"[50]

As the steps for economic integration was being materialized, so were initiatives for closer political and military relations. During the same meeting that decision on the lifting of the visa was taken, the decision to form High Level Strategic Council between the two countries was also put into effect. Within the context of this mechanism, at least once every year the Prime Ministers will host together a meeting composed of important ministers of each state. Accordingly, the ministers responsible for Foreign Affairs, Energy, Trade, Public Works, Defense, Interior Affairs and Transportation will meet at least twice every year to build a common action plan. This action plan will then be discussed in details in the Ministerial Council and then will be executed under the joint leadership of the two Prime Ministers. This Council is indicative of the extent and depth of the relationship.

On the military front as well, there has been impressive improvement. Turkey and Syria held a military exercise in April 2009. The Turkish military announced that the aim of the exercise was "to boost friendship, cooperation and confidence between the two countries land forces and to increase the ability of border troops to train and work together".[51] The drill was especially important for the Syrian forces, whose military weakness was mentioned above. The drill also attracted concern from Israel mainly due to the possibility of technology transfer that Turkey received from Israel into Syria. Although there was no such sign of leakage, Israeli concern persisted on the issue.

8. Conclusion

Turkish-Syrian relations have reached unprecedented levels in a decade time. This article argued that a combination of international, regional and domestic dynamics have been important in this development. International and regional developments after September 11 and the Iraqi War have brought the two countries together. Concern over Israeli policies and the Palestinian issue have been important in this context as well. Domestically, Bashar's coming to power and the new regime's economic and military weaknesses as well as its international and regional isolation made Syria turn to Turkey. Deepening the relations with Turkey in such a context became an important asset for the Bashar regime. Turkey's EU accession negotiation process also added to the importance of relations with Turkey for Syria as Turkey could be a gate for Syrian goods to European markets. For the Turkish side, the impact of the AKP governments in the deepening of the relationship has been vital. It could

[50] "Başbakan Erdoğan Suriye'de, Türkiye-Suriye İş Konseyinde İşadamlarına Seslendi", 23 December 2009, at http://www.akparti.org.tr/basbakan-erdogan-turkiye-suriye-is-konseyinde-isadamlari_6551.html.
[51] "Turkey Brushes off Israel Concern over Syrian Drill", at http://www.ynetnews.com/Ext/Comp/ArticleLayout/CdaArticlePrintPreview/1,2506.

be argued that any government in Turkey would have cooperated with Syria, mainly for security and economic reasons. The Iraqi War would have compelled Turkey to pursue an active foreign policy and thus would have brought the two countries together anyway. However, the deepening of the relations to such a level of "common destiny, common history and common future" with such an emotional discourse of unity seems to be the contribution of AKP to the relations that would otherwise not be seen. Whether these developments would manage to build strong constituencies in both countries that would sustain the relationship in the long term is still yet to be seen.