

# From “Central Power” to “Splendid Isolation”: Turkish Foreign Policy’s Declining Ambitions

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**Turkish Foreign Policy’s Declining Ambitions**

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## Summary:

Despite high ambitions about Turkey's "central power" role in its surrounding regions, Turkish foreign policy has faced sizeable challenges in the Middle East and beyond. As war and conflict continued tearing apart several Middle Eastern countries, Turkey's capacity to influence diplomatic developments declined; instead of offering solutions, it appeared in many cases to become part of the problem. The target of regime change in Syria remained elusive, while the international community found it hard to understand why Turkey appeared more comfortable bordering jihadist than Kurdish political entities in Syria and remained neutral in the jihadist assault on Iraq. These had a negative spillover effect on Turkey's own Kurdish question and brought a hard-won peace process to the brink of collapse. The spectrum of regional isolation emerged, as Turkey withdrew its ambassadors from a number of countries in its vicinity because of various diplomatic confrontations. This was one of the reasons for Turkey's failure to be elected as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council despite investing considerable resources on that goal. Turkey's perceived self-righteous albeit unpopular status was described with the use of term "splendid isolation." This situation raised substantial concerns about Turkey's ability to maintain an important regional role and called for a reconsideration of key aspects of Turkish foreign policy.

## Key Words:

Turkey, foreign policy, Syria, Egypt, Kurdish question, jihadism, Iraq, isolation, United Nations

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# From “Central Power” to “Splendid Isolation”: Turkish Foreign Policy’s Declining Ambitions

## Introduction

Turkish foreign policy has continued facing formidable challenges in 2014 and 2015. “Splendid isolation”, a term coined to describe Britain in the late nineteenth century was introduced again in order to describe Turkish diplomatic position in the Middle East. The Syrian civil war, Turkey’s declining relations with key states in the Middle East, the jihadist challenge, the Kurdish question within and beyond the Turkish borders, as well as Turkey’s failure to be elected as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council were all pointing at the predicament that Turkey’s “splendid isolation” brought about.

## The Elusive Regime Change in Syria

The Syrian quagmire was the first of the issues where Turkish foreign policy faced a formidable challenge. More than four years since the outbreak of the civil war, the durability of the Assad regime remained a big disappointment for Turkish diplomacy. Regime change did not occur within a matter of weeks or months, as the dominant assumption in Ankara had been when the insurgence broke out. On the contrary, the war turned into a stalemate, leading to a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions. While more than four million Syrians were registered as refugees in neighboring countries, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) was also huge. Turkey carried a heavy burden from this crisis. More than two million registered and unregistered refugees posed a formidable humanitarian challenge. The construction of refugee camps along the long borderline with Syria could alleviate but not fundamentally address the problem. Meanwhile, all big cities were facing the daunting task of integrating a rising wave of irregular migration from Syria, which raised social tensions and xenophobia. Economic activity was also heavily affected. Syria used to be one of the major destinations and transit routes for Turkish exports. These opportunities

were dashed by continuous warfare, primarily affecting rising industrial centers in eastern and southeastern Turkey.

The predicament of Turkish foreign policy in Syria was not affected by a streak of military successes by opposition forces in northern and eastern Syria. Growing cooperation between Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia in particular since the ascent of King Salman to the Saudi throne contributed to the reinforcement of opposition forces and yielded some significant military successes. As a coalition of opposition forces led by the “Al-Nusra Front” (*Jabhat al-Nusra*) were able to occupy a series of strategic locations such as Jisr-al-Shughur and the provincial capital of Idlib in the Syrian northwest in May 2015, the “Islamic State (IS)” forces advanced in the east central part of the country capturing the city of Tadmur and the adjacent ruins of Palmyra. Yet even these successes failed to tilt the military balance of power and signal that a military collapse of the Assad regime was imminent. Developing a convincing alternative to the Assad regime has remained an elusive target. Turkey’s support for the “Al-Nusra Front”, despite its jihadist ideology and al-Qaeda affiliations puzzled many in the West. While Turkey joined the international alliance against the “Islamic State”, its rather relaxed approach of the jihadist challenge has not ceased to attract international attention and criticism. Turkey’s hopes that engagement with the “Al-Nusra Front” would help it abandon its jihadist identity and turn into a mainstream Sunni Islamist political organization, ready to participate in the government of a post-Assad Syria were not shared by many. Most international actors failed to share this optimism and were gravely concerned about the future of the Alawite and Christian communities of Syria under either an “Al-Nusra Front” or an IS-controlled regime.

## Between Kurds and Jihadists

Developments in the Kurdish issue also posed a major challenge to Turkish foreign policy. As Iraq followed Syria into becoming a jihadist war zone, the crisis provided rare opportunities for the legitimization of the Kurdish nationalist movement on the international level. On the one hand, rising global concern about the rise of jihadism and its security threats it posed against Western states made it urgent that military action be taken against the “Islamic State”. On the other hand, it was also clear that no Western state would be willing to go beyond air operations and send land troops to deter the jihadist threat. Kurdish militias provided valuable land troops available to fight against the “Islamic State”, not only in Iraq but also in Syria. This fact gave the Kurdish armed groups diplomatic advantage and brought Turkey into uncomfortable dilemmas.

The event that highlighted the discord between Turkish and global views and became a critical juncture for the recognition of the Syrian Kurdish groups was the siege of the Syrian town of Kobane by “Islamic State” forces. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Syrian Kurdish groups, the biggest among them being the “People’s Protection Units” (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*-YPG), struggled to establish their own sphere of influence against the regime, the jihadists and other opposition forces. Eventually they were able to control the provinces of Afrin in the northwest, Kobane in the north and Jazeera in the northeast of Syria. Rojava, as the emerging Kurdish political

entity in Syria was named, was meant to provide the nucleus of Kurdish self-government in northern Syria. While Syrian Kurdish forces never came close to consolidate their control in the north by unifying these three territories, they soon came under the attack of the rising "Islamic State" forces. The province of Kobane proved of crucial importance, as it neighbored the towns of Tal Abyad and Jarablus, both of which controlled crucial supply lines from Turkey. Boosted by the military equipment looted in Iraq following the capture of Mosul, the "Islamic State" moved swiftly to occupy virtually the whole of the Kobane province and invade the town itself in October 2014. The "Islamic State" assault on Kobane appeared to threaten the very viability of Rojava in northern Syria. As the embattled Kurdish forces were fighting a last-ditch battle in the streets of Kobane, international attention grew stronger, and Kurds around the world rallied to support the town defenders; Repelling the IS attack became a matter of honor for them.

Meanwhile, the Turkish government appeared to be in disharmony with that global stance. The transit passage of supplies and military forces in support for the Kobane Kurds was refused for a long time and was only agreed upon after strong international pressure. President Erdoğan famously predicted in October 2014 that Kobane would fall into the IS hands "at any time". This enraged Turkey's Kurds and sparked violent demonstrations. At least fourteen Turkish citizens of Kurdish descent lost their lives during clashes with security forces, while a curfew was imposed in six Turkish provinces. The ambivalent statements and addressed conditions regarding Turkey's participation in the international alliance against the "Islamic State" did not amuse the West or the Arab partners of Turkey. Turkey's eventual decision to allow the transit of Kurdish fighters to Kobane through Turkish territory was only made following the US decision to deliver supplies to the Kurdish forces by air. Eventually a series of international coalition air strikes against IS targets and the arrival of supplies through Turkish territory shifted the balance, and the Kurdish forces were able to expel the "Islamic State" from Kobane and reclaim large parts of its territory. Yet the siege of Kobane remained the epitome of what many viewed as a relaxed and unconcerned stance of the Turkish government regarding the prospective rise of the "Islamic State." Turkey appeared more alarmed at the prospect of a new Kurdish entity emerging across its borders, following the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. In the eyes of Turkish nationalists, the "Islamic State" or the "Al-Nusra Front" was preferable neighbors to an YPG-led Rojava.

The rise of the "Islamic State" had another important spillover effect. It challenged Turkey's relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. It took several years before Turkey and the KRG developed a mutually beneficial economic and diplomatic partnership against old suspicions and enmity about the prospect of establishing an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. In the early phases of the Syrian civil war, the KRG avoided identification with the YPG, the leading Syrian Kurdish group whose relations with Turkey were problematic and distanced itself from the Rojava project. The Turkish-KRG partnership suffered a shock with the rapid advance of the "Islamic State" in northern Iraq and the occupation of Mosul in June 2014. The capture of Mosul, Iraq's third biggest city, by the IS forces was a spectacular success that highlighted the vulnerability of Iraq to the jihadist threat and raised a security emergency for the KRG. As the KRG sided with Turkey in its dealings with Syrian Kurds, its leadership considered that Turkey would defend it against the advancing IS forces. Nevertheless, Turkey chose to remain neutral. As the KRG biggest city, Erbil,

was threatened by advancing IS forces, it was not Turkish armed forces but the airstrikes of a US-led international coalition that safeguarded it. This became a shock not only because the Kurdish armed forces appeared to be far less competitive than expected but also pointed at the need to maintain US military involvement in Iraq despite the withdrawal of US forces in 2011. All these drove a wedge in the relations between the KRG and Turkey and questioned the coordination of US and Turkish strategies. The visit of the US Vice President Joseph Biden to Turkey in November 2014 was expected to ease tensions and differences over the Syria policy of the two NATO allies. This followed a diplomatic crisis, which ensued when the US Vice President disclosed in October 2014 details of a conversation with Erdoğan on Turkey’s Syrian foreign policy, which were vehemently denied. Yet the different approaches regarding the rise of the “Islamic State” did not dissipate. Priorities seemed to be clearly different: the collapse of the Assad regime for Turkey and the end of the IS threat for the United States.

While Turkey argued that the survival of the Assad regime is the main reason pushing Syrian Sunnis to join the jihadist cause, the United States –and other Western states- considered that a fall of the Assad regime would likely turn Syria into the hands of jihadists and risk unspeakable atrocities against the country’s Alawite, Christian, Druze and Shiite populations. The insistence of the United States on a stronger involvement of Turkey in the international operations against the Islamic State was one of the agenda items. Sealing the Turkish border where it touched on IS-controlled territory and preventing the flow of volunteers, supplies and smuggling would be essential for deterring the further development of the “Islamic State.”

On the other hand, Turkish proposals for the establishment of “security zones” within Syrian territory under the control of the Turkish army with the aim to protect opposition forces and host Syrian refugees did not meet the support of any of its Western allies and faced considerable opposition within Turkey as well. The question was raised again in summer 2015 when a streak of military victories by PYD forces and the capture of the strategic town of Tal Abyad raised the prospect of territorial unification of all three Kurdish cantons and the emergence of a contiguous Rojava. Combined with clashes between “Al-Nusra Front” and IS forces near the Turkish border, these developments made many Turkish analysts reconsider the plausibility of a Turkish intervention. Such a move was heavily objected by the West and found few supporters within the Turkish military, as it threatened to drag the Turkish armed forces into the Syrian quagmire.

These policies had important domestic political implications. Conservative Kurds that used to comprise one of the most sizeable and loyal voter groups of Turkey’s incumbent Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) were deeply disappointed by what appeared as AKP’s support for the Islamic State against the PYD in Syria. A sizeable number of them shifted their electoral allegiance from the AKP and voted for the first time for the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democracy Party (*Halkların Demokrasi Partisi*-HDP) in the June 2015 parliamentary elections. Boosted by this support, the HDP was able for the first time in the history of the pro-Kurdish political movement in Turkey to cross the ten percent electoral threshold and win 80 seats in the Turkish parliament. Despite that historic success, the Kurdish issue remained Turkey’s security Achilles’ heel, especially in light of developments in Syria and Iraq. The bloody suicide attack in the Turkish town of Suruç in July 2015 manifested once again how permeable the Turkish-Syrian border remained



and how vulnerable Turkey was to terrorist operations instigated by jihadist groups. Turkish military operations against Kurdish and IS positions in Iraq and Syria threatened to drag Turkey into the Syrian civil war quagmire, but also derail the Kurdish peace process within Turkey. Allowing the use of the Incirlik airbase for US air operations against the "Islamic State" did not mean a shift of Turkish priorities. The Kurdish and not the jihadist forces remained Turkey's main preoccupation.

## Growing Regional Isolation: Egypt, Iran and Beyond

Meanwhile, Turkey's relations with most of its Middle Eastern neighbors remained problematic. Bilateral relations with Egypt have remained at the lowest point since the July 2013 military coup. Turkey refused to recognize the military regime led by Abdelfattah Sissi and remained steadfast in that position, even though most countries in the West and the Middle East concluded that they had to do business with the new government. As the Sissi regime consolidated its power, Turkey remained unable to engage and exert any influence on Egyptian domestic and foreign policy. While the Sissi regime consolidated its position domestically and systematically persecuted the Egyptian "Muslim Brotherhood", there was no chance of a balancing role for Turkey. Similarly, the dire state of Egyptian-Turkish relations was one of the factors limiting the possibility of Turkey's constructive involvement in the Libyan crisis. As the situation in Libya descended into chaos, the internationally recognized government remained upset with Turkey's links with the Islamist insurgents. The negative effect of all these on Turkey's missed business opportunities in Egypt and beyond cannot be overstated.

Relations with Iran remained heavily affected by the opposite sides the two countries took in the Syrian civil war. The announcement of the Iranian nuclear deal in July 2015, while it could pave the road for substantial improvements in bilateral relations, was reminiscent of Turkey's declining regional influence. While some years ago, Turkey and Brazil spearheaded a diplomatic initiative for an Iranian nuclear deal, this deal was eventually achieved with Turkey on the sidelines. One had to add to these a series of bilateral conflicts, which continued to hamper Turkey's Middle East policy, despite the much-publicized "zero problems with neighbors" policy. In 2015, due to various reasons, Turkey had no ambassadors in no less than seven states in the Middle East and the Caucasus. In the eyes of some government officials, this isolation was due to Turkey's strict observance of international norms. Refusing to recognize the Sissi regime was seen as respect for democratic rule, because Sissi had come to power by means of a military coup. The West was, therefore, accused of applying double standards, due to the recognition of the Sissi regime. Yet, regardless of the discussion whether championing such norms is a good idea in foreign policy, Turkish diplomatic choices would themselves raise concerns about the application of double standards. Insisting on democratic rule in Egypt, but not in Sudan or in the post-Soviet Central Asian republics could be an example.

## The UN Disenchantment

While the Syrian civil war exposed the growing isolation of Turkish foreign policy, developments at the UN level seemed to confirm Turkey’s declining global appeal. Turkey’s failure to be elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council was another alarming signal for its declining fortunes as a regional and global actor. This election was seen as an opportunity for the recuperation of Turkey’s image as a global actor and the promotion of its views and policies in key problems of regional and global security. The establishment of numerous new embassies in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the allocation of sizeable resources towards improving Turkey’s image throughout the world were meant to serve that aim, as well. Nevertheless, in the October 2014 vote at the United Nations General Assembly Turkey lost to Spain by wide margin (60 to 132). Despite building for years a profile as “defender of the dispossessed”, even representatives of developing states that enjoyed Turkish support failed to cast their vote favorably. An early warning for this imminent failure could be observed at the UN General Assembly speech of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in September 2014. While Erdoğan’s visits and speeches used to attract the attention of international media and representatives, his first address to the UN General Assembly as President of the Republic was badly attended. Some of the pro-government newspapers in Turkey came to the point of digitally manipulating the event pictures and adding audience to them, so they did not appear humiliating to the eye of the Turkish reader. This poor performance was in stark contrast with Turkey’s global rising star some years ago. Turkey used to feature as a success story of political reform and economic growth and be considered an emerging regional power in the Middle East and beyond.

## Conclusions

Foreign policy developments in 2014 and 2015 underscored the declining fortunes of Turkey’s ambitions for regional leadership and a major global role. What was coined as “splendid isolation” was pictured as a self-righteous position. Yet this failed to conceal the failure of Turkish foreign policy to meet high expectations and engage successfully with neighbours and partners. Bringing Turkey out from its “splendid isolation” and integrating it again to its neighbourhood and the international community would be a welcome development not only for the country itself, but also for international peace and stability. This would require a radical rethinking of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East and beyond.

## Additional Readings

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