

Turkey's role in ensuring security in the middle east after the "Arab spring"

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Abstract: As a result of the political, economic, and social instability that began with the "Arab Spring" in the Middle East, ensuring security in the region has become increasingly concerning. Within the region, the activities of radical religious groups, opposition forces against political authority, and separatist factions have intensified simultaneously. In this context, analyzing the role and approaches of regional and global power centers in ensuring security in the Middle East is of great importance. This article examines Turkey's role in maintaining security in the Middle East after the "Arab Spring".

Keywords: Middle East, "Arab Spring," Kurds, Geopolitics, National Security, Opposition, Crisis.

Introduction: The Middle East holds a significant place in human civilization. It is well known that all major monotheistic religions originated in this region before spreading to other parts of the world. In the present day, the number of religious, ethnic, and sectarian conflicts in the region continues to rise, increasing concerns about security.

The Middle East's vast underground and surface resources, as well as its strategic geographical location, enhance its political and economic significance in international relations. However, not all countries in the region enjoy political or economic stability. Factors that once united the nations of the Middle East, such as ethnic, religious, and sectarian similarities, are now contributing to division and conflict. This situation directly affects regional security and socio-political processes.

This article focuses on Turkey's role as a regional power in ensuring security in the Middle East, as well as its concerns and geopolitical interests related to regional stability.

Literature Review

The Middle East has always been a focal point in Turkey's foreign policy due to its geographical ties to the region and its significance for Turkey's geopolitical and national security interests. As a result, the study of Turkey's policies in the Middle East has attracted

considerable academic interest. Scholars analyzing Turkey's role in the region include both Turkish and Western researchers.

Among the Turkish scholars who have extensively studied Turkey's foreign policy are Ali Balcı (Türkiye dış politikası: İlkeler, aktörler, uygulamalar, 2013), Mücahit Özçelik (İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Türk Dış Politikası, 2010), Tayyar Arı (Geçmişten günümüze Orta Doğu: siyaset, savaş ve diplomasi, 2012), and Çağrı Erhan (Türk-Amerikan ilişkilerinin tarihsel kökenleri, 2001).

Western scholars have also examined Turkey's foreign policy strategies. Bernard Lewis (Islam and the West, 1993) analyzed the historical relationship between Islam and the Western world, providing insights into Turkey's positioning. Alexander Murinson (The strategic depth doctrine of Turkish foreign policy, 2006) explored Turkey's geopolitical approach, particularly its "Strategic Depth" doctrine. Henry J. Barkley (Turkish foreign policy and the Middle East, 2011) studied Turkey's diplomatic engagements in the region.

In recent years, scholars from Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, have also begun analyzing Turkey's foreign policy more closely, reflecting the growing academic interest in Turkey's geopolitical influence in the Middle East.

Main Part

When we examine the current socio-political processes

in the Middle East, the issue of ensuring security in the region remains a primary concern due to the situation arising from the “Arab Spring.” As a result of the involvement of international power centers, demonstrations that began with the aim and hope of democratizing the region led to a multitude of security problems at varying levels, including terrorism, radicalization, and migration.

Some of these problems emerged directly from the demonstrations, while others were the result of long-standing historical processes that escalated after the 2010 “Arab Spring” protests and the intervention of international and regional power centers. Before the mass protests began in the region, issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, regime security, the arms race, and the polarization between Iran and the Gulf Arab states had existed for decades. However, under the influence of the “Arab Spring,” these issues reached a new stage.

It can be observed that many of the security problems currently faced in the Middle East are not new. They have been longstanding issues that have intensified due to recent developments, and their complexities have grown as a result of both regional and international interventions.

The political instability and stability in the Middle East directly affect Turkey’s national security. Therefore, Turkey cannot remain indifferent or distant from the socio-political developments in the region. The founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, once stated, “There is no homeland for Turks in the Middle Eastern swamp,” and sought to keep the newly established state away from political involvement in the region. However, over time, Turkey’s policy toward the Middle East has evolved both in structure and rhetoric.

Rather than remaining detached from regional problems, Turkey has adopted a solution-oriented diplomatic approach. Today, concepts such as cooperation, integration, development, and partnership between Turkey and Middle Eastern states have gained significance. After the Arab Spring, Turkey adjusted its foreign policy approach to the Middle East, seeking to leverage the changing political climate to its advantage. As a result, Turkey’s historical influence in the region has been revitalized.

While Turkey previously avoided direct involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts, it has now emerged as a key actor in resolving disputes among regional states. In this new era, Turkey’s policy toward the Middle East is based on open diplomacy and constructive relations aimed at ensuring peace and stability.

As the “Arab Spring” spread across most Arab

countries in the Middle East, Turkey found itself entangled in numerous challenges. The socio-political instability in the region also led to shifts in Turkey’s political outlook toward the Middle East. At a certain point, due to various reasons, Turkey had tense relations with its neighbor, Syria.

In 1998, Turkey and Syria signed the Adana Agreement, which gradually improved bilateral relations. Despite pressure from the United States, Turkey-Syria relations continued to develop until 2011. In December 2009, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Damascus with a high-level delegation, and in May 2010, Bashar al-Assad’s visit to Turkey took place in a completely friendly atmosphere.

However, in 2010, mass protests known as the “Arab Spring” erupted in Tunisia due to widespread issues such as unemployment, corruption, poor living conditions, and restrictions on freedom of speech. These protests quickly spread to other countries facing similar problems, including Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, and Syria.

The “Arab Spring” reached Syria in March 2011, significantly affecting relations between Turkey and Syria. As the situation in Syria evolved, Turkey did not remain a passive observer of the Ba’ath government’s policies against Syrian citizens and protesters. Instead, it sided with opposition groups against the Assad regime.

Turkey’s primary objective in this move was to strengthen its regional influence and actively participate in the overthrow of a long-standing adversarial regime in Syria. By playing an active role in the region’s transformation process, Turkey aimed to expand its influence in the Middle East and reshape the regional power dynamics in its favor [Oran, Baskin (ed.), 2017, *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olaylar, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, Cilt: III 2001- 2012, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları]. In the early 2000s, along with improving relations with Syria, Turkey also strengthened its ties with Lebanon. In 2004, high-level reciprocal visits took place between the two countries. However, after the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005 and the Hezbollah-Israel conflict in 2006, Turkey’s opposition parties strongly criticized the AK Party’s Middle East policy.

Critics in Turkey viewed this situation as a gradual attempt by the U.S. and Israel to drag Turkey into the “Middle Eastern quagmire.” Despite internal opposition, Turkey continues to pursue an active foreign policy in the Middle East, demonstrating independent political will in the region.

The peace and security of the Middle East region also means the socio-political stability and security of

Turkey. After the outbreak of the crisis in Iraq and Syria, the terrorist attacks against Turkey by ISIS, the Kurdistan Workers' Party and their affiliated groups, the Democratic Union Party and the People's Protection Units, the shooting down of a Russian plane in Turkish airspace, the sending of Russian military forces to Syria after the events of the "Damascus Spring" and the bombing of the Bayirbuchak Turkmen near the Turkish border, which led to the aggravation of Russian-Turkish relations, and the US "Kurdish Corridor" project, which further cooled Syrian-Turkish relations, mean that new threats have emerged to Ankara's national security.

The wave of refugees that Turkey has faced since the Arab Spring has had a significant impact on the country's social, political, cultural and security processes. To this day, Turkey spends a large amount of money on the refugees that are already in the country. This is an excessive burden on the country's socio-economic situation. The implementation of Turkey's Syrian refugee policy, which aims to "gradually return refugees to their homes", is very complicated and time-consuming due to the unstable situation in Syria. After the fall of the Baath regime in Syria, it is of fundamental importance for Turkey to work with the international community to develop joint solutions on the issue of Syrian refugees.

Turkey, through operations "Euphrates Shield", "Olive Branch", "Peace Spring" and "Claw Sword", has thwarted the US "Kurdish Corridor" project and changed the balance of influence of external forces in Syria. In December 2024, an interim government was formed in Syria after the fall of the Baath regime. The current interim government in Syria is made up of leaders of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group and members of the Free Syrian Army, which opposes the rule of Bashar al-Assad on the Turkish side. Turkey is thus participating in the new political processes in Syria as a regional powerhouse. As a result of Turkey's disastrous policy in the Middle East, several countries in the region are feeling the need to reconsider their relations with it. In particular, Egypt and the Arab countries of the Gulf can be mentioned separately.

Taking into account Turkey's domestic political path, as well as its foreign policy tasks and obligations in the region, the revival of the "Levant Quartet" format in resolving the Syrian crisis is urgent and important. This format may play a major role in the process of regulating relations between Turkey and the countries of the Middle East region in the future.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing Turkey's current policy in the Middle East, it can be said that Turkey's current active foreign policy

in the region aims to prevent threats to its security, as it is a regional power center, and thereby protect its geopolitical interests and national security in the region. Turkey's reduction in foreign policy activity in the Middle East in the current circumstances will lead to a decrease in its political influence.

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