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Hossein Aghaie Joobani[*] and Umut Can Adısönmez[**]

Abstract

Throughout its Republican history, Turkey has attempted to formulate a "non-interventionist" foreign policy toward its neighbouring countries. Since the onset of the Arab Uprisings, however, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has abjured the traditional policy of "non-military engagement", adopting instead an assertive and security-oriented foreign policy that has paved the way for the securitization of the Syrian conflict in terms of its Kurdish component and of wider geopolitical aspects. This article aims to explore why and in what ways this abrupt shift toward securitization has occurred while discussing its broader implications on Turkish domestic politics as well.

Using the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, the article will unpack and analyse the internal and external dimensions of threat construction and otherization processes underlying Ankara's securitization policy toward Syria to make the case for the obsolescence of Turkey's traditional non-interventionist policy, which, we argue, results from an ontological insecurity approach toward the Syrian conflict. The article finds that Turkey's securitization policy (i.e. interventionist approach) was chiefly driven by the fear of Kurdish autonomy and the growing Russo-Assad-Iranian alliance in Syria; and by the grand ambition of bringing the Muslim Brotherhood into power in Syria and consolidating Turkey's agential importance in Western security architecture under the aegis of the US.

Keywords: Turkish Foreign Policy, Syrian Civil War, AKP, Securitization Theory, Kurdish Issue

Introduction

Since its establishment in 1923, the Republic of Turkey has sought to formulate and pursue a "non-interventionist" foreign policy toward its neighbouring countries (Özpek and Demirağ 2014; Demirtaş-Bagdonas 2014; Dinc and Yetim 2012; Khan 2015; Volk 2013). Prior to the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings and of the Syrian Civil War, there were two major deviations from the self-proclaimed non-interventionist policy. By virtue of invoking Article 51 (self-defence) of the UN Charter, Turkey launched unilateral military interventions in Cyprus in 1974 and in northern Iraq in 2007-2008 (Ruys 2008; Demirtaş-Bagdonas 2014).[1] The third case of deviation from the policy, as this article argues, concerns Ankara's military incursion

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into Syria dubbed the "Operation Euphrates Shield" (24 August 2016 – 29 March 2017), followed by another military operation code-named the "Olive Branch Operation" in Syria's Afrin region (20 January – 24 March 2018).

According to Turkish officials, the primary objectives of both operations were to counter the Islamic State (IS) insurgency near Turkish borders and, in the case of the latter operation, neutralize the Syrian affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Afrin canton. The Euphrates Shield Operation was particularly significant in that it not only marked the Turkey's renunciation of the non-military engagement policy toward neighbouring countries, but also proved to be a prelude to a new securitization phase in which the AKP (Justice and Development Party) elites would take matters into their own hands in dealing with the Syrian conflict.

From the outset of the Arab Uprisings, the conflict in Syria presented the ruling AKP with countless opportunities and challenges. Most notably, the power vacuum created in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings along with the seismic socio-political transformations gripping the region, posed formidable challenges to the AKP's traditional prudent and pragmatic approach toward MENA countries. We argue that Turkish political elites have since 2011 departed from the doctrine of Strategic Depth, as articulated by former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and shifted toward an assertive foreign policy that amounts to securitization of the Syrian issue in terms of its Kurdish component and of wider geopolitical aspects.

In this context, an important question arises as to why there has been a volte-face in Turkish foreign policy in the sense that the traditional principles of "zero problems with neighbours" were replaced by the policy of securitization as evidenced by Turkish military interventions in northern Syria and quite recently in northern Iraq. There has been a plethora of literature addressing the continuities and changes in Turkey-Syria relations in the context of the AKP government's post-Arab Uprisings policies toward the Middle East in general and toward the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in particular. Nevertheless, as of the writing this article, the Copenhagen School's securitization theory has seldom been used to shed light on the dynamics of threat construction and threat management in Turkey-Syria relations since the war started.[2]

On this basis, this article will employ a two-pronged analytical framework to foreground and analyse the securitization processes underpinning the AKP-led securitization policy toward the Syrian conflict while looking at its potential implications on domestic politics. The first prong will focus on internal dimensions of threat construction and otherization underlying Turkey's deep-seated fear of Kurdish statehood project, as exemplified by the PKK's fight against Turkey since 1984. The second prong highlights the external dimensions of threat construction and otherization with a focus on the AKP elites' aspiration of toppling the Assad regime, bringing the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood into power and balancing the power of rivalling states, namely Iran and Russia. It bears noting that the dynamics of Turkey-Russia-Iran relations have changed significantly since the Astana peace process unfolded in 2017 and the trio alliance began to perceive the US presence in Syria as a strategic burden. Nevertheless, for Turkey, the initial impetus to enter the Syrian war was to carve out a dominant role vis-à-vis Iran and Russia in the geopolitical power struggle.

Seen in this light, the article unfolds in four parts. The first part attends to the main tenets of the securitization theory, followed by a study of its relevance to the case of Turkey's policy detour toward Syria. The second section examines the patterns of divergence and convergence in Turkey-Syria relations from the dispute on the status of Hatay in 1939 to the outbreak of Syrian civil war in 2011. The third section will then apply the theory to the current case (Turkey's military operation in northern Syria) and operationalize it based on the two-pronged analytical framework mentioned above. Finally, the concluding part will allude to the potential achievements and deficiencies of securitization efforts made by the AKP and its implications on the future of Turkish domestic and foreign policy.

Securitization as the Theoretical Framework

Securitization theory, as formulated by leading scholars within the Copenhagen School of Security Studies deals with how security works in international politics. Originally conceived as a critique of the traditionalists' "narrow definition of security", securitization theory provides a powerful lens through which one can make sense of the broader meanings and wider applications of security in world politics.

Prior to the end of the Cold War, the traditionalists had dominated the security debates, arguing that state-centric approaches to world politics that largely focus on military issues should be the research agenda of International Security Studies (ISS) (Booth 2003: 83-120). In the mid-1990s, however, those military and state-centric conceptions of security were seriously challenged by leading scholars of post-Cold War international security studies who began to pose thoughtful questions as to "what should be the research agenda of ISS, which concept of security should be employed and which epistemology should be adopted in its study" (Buzan and Hansen 2009: 162). Such critical approaches were concerned with broadening and deepening the scope of the field to move beyond traditionalist's view of military and state (Krause and Williams 1996: 230). Hence, those advocating for broadening of security agenda argued that the concept of security should cover other sectors than the military and thereby "include a wider range of potential threats, ranging from economic and environmental issues to human rights and migration" (ibid; Buzan and Hansen 2009: 188).

Those advocating for deepening the agenda of security studies asserted that the referent object of security should move beyond the state and include the security concerns of actors ranging from individuals and sub-state groups (Williams 2003: 513). Such was the scholarly environment in which the Copenhagen School approach flourished with prominent securitization theory scholars paying attention to social construction of security issues and the discursive construction of particular issues as security threats (McDonald 2008: 563). Hence, securitization theory emerged as an alternative approach to explaining and understanding security concerns as it sought to throw light on dynamics such as "social reality," "identity," "speech act," and intersubjective construction of security threats.

There are myriad ways to define what securitization is and what analytical advantage it has in explaining state behaviour. Yet, as one scholar puts it, securitization is the process through which "security" and "security threats" are brought into being in particular political contexts (ibid). More specifically, securitization theory delves into the processes by which "a securitizing actor succeeds in presenting a threat or vulnerability as an existential threat to a

referent object that has a legitimate claim to survival, thereby attaining endorsement for emergency measures" to counter it (Oelsner 2007: 261). According to Buzan, Wæver and Wilde, the theory seeks to provide a thorough understanding of "who securitizes, on what issues (threats), for whom (referent objects), why, with what results, and, not least, under what conditions (i.e., what explains when securitization is successful" (Buzan et al. 2013). Hence, the proponents of the theory look at different ways in which a particular issue is plucked out of the realm of "normal politics" and hurled into the sphere of "emergency politics," where it can be framed in terms of security, thereby creating conditions of possibility for using whatever means necessary to forestall a threatening development and safeguard the referent object in question.

In a nutshell, securitization theory "combines the politics of threat design with that of threat management" (Balzacq et al. 2016). The novelty of securitization theory lies in its distinctive framework for understanding of security as an intersubjective social process and the particular ways in which securitizing agents use language and even non-verbal means of communication to construct security threats in a specific context and handle them accordingly. This strand of thought elucidates how "securitizing moves" as well as emergency measures aimed at countering the perceived threat and protecting the valued referent object tend to be justified through the governing system's intertextual and discursive strategies so that the audience can concur with the grand hegemonic discourse at play.

Although the Copenhagen School approach to securitization has seen a proliferation of empirical usage in recent years, it also has been subject to scholarly criticism. In this regard, the so-called "second-generation securitization theorists" have endeavoured to build upon the exiting paradigm and fill in the potential gaps in theory and practice of securitization by raising salient questions about, inter alia, the role of audience, securitizations in non-democratic contexts, overemphasis on the notion of speech-act, and the role of images, etc. (Stritzel 2014: 11). Needless to say, the scope and aim of this article is not to ruminate on the critique of securitization theory. Alternatively, key here is the potential relevance of the theory to the case of Turkey's change of behaviour in the Middle East after the Syrian civil war.

We argue that what makes securitization theory a plausible fit for analysing the present case is two-fold. First, using a security-laden discourse, the AKP elites went to great lengths to present the Alawite-dominated government of Assad as an existential threat to Turkey's national security, thereby taking emergency measures, even if militarily, to counter the security threat. Turkey's military interventions in Syria, namely the Euphrates Shield Operation, can thus be seen as a principal securitizing move to prevent the Assad regime from gravitating more toward other rivalling geopolitical players (i.e. Russia and Iran) and if possibly replace his regime with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Second, the AKP cadre used any means at its disposal to frame the Kurdish issue as an existential threat born of Assad's mishandling of the Syrian civil war which, in Ankara's view, only exacerbated the Kurdish quasi-state-building ambitions in northern Syria. Thus, the urgency of removing the Kurdish statehood threat was apparently more pronounced than the one posed by the Islamic State. The assertion here is that Turkey's interventionist policy in Syria was largely driven by two insecurities, namely the fear of Kurdish statehood/the Russo-Iranian alliance (all players being cast out as the Other) and two ambitions, notably bringing the Syrian Muslim

Brotherhood in power and consolidating Turkey's position in Western security architecture. Of particular importance here is that all these insecurities and ambitions were in fact building blocks of deeper securitization practices which the AKP used to justify Turkey's interventionist policy towards Syria.

In shedding light on its premises, this study first builds on the discussion using the secondary literature, such as the context material and scholarly works focusing on the continuities and ruptures in Turkey and Syria prior to the Arab Spring. Then, it advances the dialogue by utilizing primary sources, i.e. Turkish officials' speeches, newspaper articles and legal documents. The main rationale behind these data selections is to demonstrate how and in which ways the securitizing actor, the AKP elites, discursively constructed and disseminated their "internal" and "external" security concerns vis-à-vis the multiple "Other(s)", various Kurdish-armed groups and the Assad regime, operating in the Syrian Civil War. This conventional discourse analysis method, which has been embedded into securitization theory, will help us show the radical securitizing moves and their leverages on the changing traditional "zero problems with neighbours" policy to the full-scale securitization.

Before we proceed with a comprehensive discussion of the foregoing issues, it is imperative that we put Turkey-Syria relations in historical context and identify patterns of securitization and desecuritization in bilateral ties.

Continuities and Ruptures in Turkey-Syria Relations

To be sure, any attempt at analysing Turkey-Syria relations requires a balanced scrutiny of the historical evolution of bilateral ties. Turkey and Syria have had a chequered relationship since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent establishment of the Republican state (Aras and Köni 2002: 47-60). The history of relations between Turkey and Syria is marked by periods of intense enmity in the 1950s and of rapprochement in early and mid-2000s, relapsing again into a state of total breakdown since the outbreak of the 2011 Syrian civil war. To be more specific, Turkey-Syria relations can best be pared down into three distinct phases:

In the first period (1939-1998), which lasted roughly from the eve of World War II to the signing of Adana Accord between Ankara and Damascus, three overarching disputes brought the two nations to the brink of war. The first cause of belligerence related to an irreconcilable territorial dispute over Turkish southern province of Hatay – which was part of Syria until France decided to hand it over to Turkey in 1939. The annexation of Hatay province put a considerable strain on the collective memory of the Syrians. As some scholars argue, a groundswell of Ba'athist sentiments developed in Syria following the loss of Hatay as large numbers of Arab Alawites who had left Hatay decided to join the Ba'ath Party (Islam 2016: 14; Jørum 2014: 146).

The second polemical issue pertains to the apportionment of the water resources of the Euphrates-Tigris river basin with Syria as the downstream riparian state censuring Turkey for its water management policies. According to Kibaroğlu, water came to Turkish foreign policy radar in the early 1980s as a series of large-scale dams and giant irrigation projects were constructed in the Euphrates-Tigris river basin as part of the South-Eastern Anatolia

Development Project (Kibaroğlu 2015: 154). Yet, given that some 75 percent of the entire basin originates in Turkey, Damascus demands an equal allocation of water for continuation of its agriculture-based development programs. Notwithstanding the divergent perspectives and the legal complexities of the ongoing water dispute, there are very few reasons to be optimistic about possible desecuritization of the water problem at this stage.

In fact, the prospects of a positive change in the two countries' approach look decidedly unpromising as Syria has since the late 1990s resorted to terrorist activities against Turkey in order to win concessions in the dispute. This brings us to the third source of tension between Turkey and Syria—that is Syrian support for the separatist PKK. In essence, the Kurdish issue has been predominantly viewed as one of the most heavily securitized issues in domestic politics with strong implications on Turkey's external relations as well (Aras and Karakaya Polat 2008: 499). The Kurdish quest for statehood, against the backdrop of Turkey's three-decade old struggle with the PKK, has become an indispensable vector of the AKP-led securitizing policy and a recurrent theme in its repertoire of the security discourse employed by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK has been listed by Turkey as a terrorist organization. The AKP cadre sees the PKK activities and its separatist creed as the foremost existential threat to Turkey's territorial integrity and national security (Ünal 2016: 91-125). The framing of the Kurdish issue and the PKK violence as a security threat is supported by Article 2 of Law No. 2945 on National Security Council (MGK 2013).

In hindsight, the politics of threat design was further buttressed by that of threat management under Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel governments. Both governments took a range of extraordinary measures up until 1999 in the form of, inter alia, cross-border operations into northern Iraq to protect the state against the PKK threat (Pusane 2014: 84). It was in this period that the Syria-Turkey relations took a turn for the worse when Turkey accused the then Syrian President Hafez Assad of providing safe havens to Öcalan and PKK rebels and of using the Kurdish separatist activities as a leverage against Turkey regarding the waterway issue. Mention must be made that the "Syrian Military Offensive Plan" to destroy Turkish dams was leaked also in this period, although Turkey disregarded it as a bogus threat (Allan 2000: 73). Consequently, by invoking Article 51 of the UN Charter, or the resort to self-defence, Turkey threatened Damascus with military action in the event of the latter's refusal to expel him from Syria. As can be seen, Turkey did not pursue an interventionist agenda against Syria during this period and rather adhered to provisions of international law to avoid a further escalation of tensions with Syria (Demirtaş-Bagdonas 2014: 141). The searing antagonism and tit-for-tat retaliatory behaviour dominating Turkey-Syria relations died down following the signing of the Adana Accord in 1998, which ushered in a brief period of détente in bilateral relations (Aras 2011: 601).

In the second period between 1998 and 2011, Turkey and Syria entered into a desecuritization phase owing to the signing of the Adana Accord, the subsequent termination of logistical, financial, and military aids to the PKK by the then Syrian government, as well as Hafez Assad's death in 2000. As Demirtaş-Bagdonas observes, the ensuing post-Adana Accord transformations augured well for enhancement of Turkey's initially security-oriented cooperation toward a more comprehensive partnership on economic, political and cultural fronts (Demirtaş-Bagdonas 2014: 141). From a vantage point, the gradual shift away from

military and security-oriented Turkish foreign policy at the top echelon of power took place after the end of the Cold War. It also occurred as a corollary of a constellation of substantial socio-economic and political transformations unfolding under the leadership of Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel, who sought to redefine Turkey's position as a leading actor in the post-Cold War era (Yalvaç 2016: 13; Grigoriadis 2014: 159-60). Özal's policy of rapprochement with the Arab countries, his promulgation of free-market economy and support for US policies in the Middle East, Caucasia and Central Asia, and pursuant of détente with the Soviet Union via trade and economic deals can be seen as good examples in this respect (Bertrand 2013: 68; Aral 2010: 72).

What deserves attention is that Özal, first as prime minister (1983–89) and then as president (1989–93), had no scruples about rejecting Turkey's traditional policy of non-interference in Middle East disputes chiefly because he wanted to pursue a proactive and risk-taking foreign policy in the face of regional security challenges (Altunışık 2009: 179). Therefore, Özal pushed for involvement in the First Gulf War in order to elevate Turkey's role as an anchor of Western security and strategic interests. This unorthodox detour from the longstanding policy of non-involvement was apparently a turning point in Turkey's foreign policy direction. It was a remarkable shift in the sense that with the Soviet threat almost obliterated after the Cold War, Turkey had found itself in a state of identity crisis because NATO as a vital "Western component" of Turkish identity was about to lose its raison d'etre (Yanık 2011: 83). Hence, by adopting a pro-American foreign policy as exemplified in the case of the Turkey's involvement in the Gulf War, Ankara launched a new activism in its foreign policy (ibid; Markovsky 1999). Despite the new activism, as Yalvaç reckons, "Özal's neoliberal hegemonic project" was dealt a devastating blow due in part to the economic crises of 1994, 2000, and 2001 (Yalvaç 2016: 14).

Moreover, the victory of the Islamic Welfare Party (RP, Refah Partisi) in the 1995 general elections had titled the balance of power in Turkish politics toward the pro-Islamic factions. These factions promoted "a foreign policy vision centred on a binary, identity-based worldview: the West and the Muslim world were in opposition" (Dalay and Friedman 2013: 124). Seen in this light, the Welfare Party under the newly elected Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan sought to establish closer ties to Muslim countries (i.e. Syria), instead of deepening Turkey's relations with the EU. This is the context in which to make sense of the root causes of the normalization of Turkey-Syria relations in 1998. A year later, however, Turkey was granted candidate country status by the EU, a turning point in Turkish foreign policy in that, as Bilgin argues, it afforded other societal and political actors an opportunity to "frame other issues as 'threats to Turkey's future'" (Bilgin 2007: 555). In this setting, Turkey-Syria relations was gradually becoming desecuritized as Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer attended the funeral of Hafez Assad in an unprecedented move that helped the then Syrian government break international isolation after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri.

Turkey's quest for becoming a leading regional and global actor went into overdrive after the AKP came to power in November 2002. Dubbed as the visionary architect of the AKP's foreign policy, former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu envisioned a new global agenda on the basis of Turkey's exceptional geographical and historical characteristics. He defined these characteristics as "depths" to be explored or strategic advantages that must be

utilized to reconfigure Turkey's position in the changing global order. The new Turkish geopolitical *weltanschauung* sought to promote a synthesis of Islam, democracy and free market values while at the same time retaining Turkey's secular constitutional structure (Keyman 2010: 12). Similar to Özal's vision, the AKP government launched a new phase of Turkish foreign policy activism economically predicated on a neoliberalist doctrine and politically beholden to its institutional and functional ties and commitments to NATO in the post-Cold War era. Unlike Özal, however, Davutoğlu rebuked, at least in principle, any liminal representations of Turkey "as a torn society, straddling Europe and Asia, in-between the West and the Muslim world", positing that such a role "embodies passivity and dilutes Turkey's central position in the Middle East" (Rumelili 2012: 505; Altunışık 2009: 186). Furthermore, the ideological components of the AKP's Strategic Depth doctrine outweighed its ideational underpinnings largely associated with the idea of Turkishness – a concept which was integral to the theory and practice of Özal's foreign policy (e.g. Turkey's relations with Central Asian countries).

Looking at the ideational and discursive foundations of the AKP's Strategic Depth doctrine, one can identify a particular civilizational narrative which is derivative of an Ottoman Islamist understanding of (Turkish) identity that forms the basis of the AKP's broader project of "Sunni-fication" in the Middle East (Hintz 2016: 346; Ardıç 2014: 101-122). Key here is whereas Turk-ification constituted the central narrative of the early Republican era, the AKP's search for a "new subjectivity" required it to construct and interpolate a "Modern," "Medium," and "Muslim" image of itself and thereby set a model for other players in the region to follow (Tezcür 2010: 1-19). For this to happen, the AKP elites continue to underscore Turkey's "Westernness" through identification with key organizations like NATO and European institutions like the EU.

At the regional level, the Strategic Depth doctrine was somewhat designed to replicate for Turkey the Ottoman era's peaceful relations with the Muslim neighbours and enhance strategic, economic, and security partnership with them (Bilgin and Bilgiç 2011: 191; Aygül 2014: 405). As Davutoğlu notes, for Turkey to be able to shape regional power dynamics, it is imperative that the existential security threats in the Middle East are dealt with in an effective and peaceful manner (Hintz 2016: 335-361). Hence, by exploiting its exceptional geographical and historical depth as well as the soft power elements of its foreign policy, Turkey tried to become a leading regional actor tasked with removing regional security threats and mediating inter-state conflicts. It is this context that the central tenets of Davutoğlu's foreign policy manifesto, including "Zero Problems with Neighbours", "Multi-dimensional foreign policy", and "Rhythmic Diplomacy" found meaning. As some scholars believe, Davutoğlu 's doctrine was premised on "what he called 'normalization' and 'de-securitization' of Turkish foreign policy by changing the security perceptions of the country embedded in its political culture" (Kara and Sözen 2016: 55). This foreign policy paradigm showed itself in Turkey's conciliatory attitude toward Syria following the signing of the Adana Agreement. The accord served as a catalyst that helped the two countries resolve their disputes on water issues and the activities of the PKK. The desecuritization in Turkey-Syria relations was also due in part to the diminishing of Turkey's threat perceptions toward the Kurds and the kind of strategic environment that dominated the Middle East region in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War. The Strategic Depth doctrine of the AKP elite thus catapulted

the Turkey-Syria relations to a new height as a range of partnership agreements were signed between Ankara and Damascus on various areas such as free trade, bilateral military cooperation and lifting of visa. This level of unprecedented cooperation demonstrated, above all, the effectiveness of Davutoğlu's policy of zero problems with neighbours (Davutoğlu 2008: 77-96).

In the third period (2011-present), Turkey-Syria relations are fraught with uncertainty and enmity. Syria-Turkey relations had improved steadily up until the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings. Prior to the tectonic socio-political upheavals of 2011, the AKP appeared to be content about the expansion of Turkey's sphere of influence in the region both economically and normatively. Most notably, due to the fact that Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood groups had occupied key governmental positions in Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt, there was a clear sense of complacency among the AKP's leading cadre about the success of the so-called Turkish model in the region (Öniş 2014: 203-219). In contrast, the situation in Syria proved to be different. The Arab revolts in the North Saharan countries first came as a bless in disguise for Turkey, primarily because it afforded Ankara an unique opportunity to shift the balance of power in its favour by promoting the Turkish model as well as the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria (Ayata 2015: 110). Nevertheless, Assad's defiance of Turkey's calls for cessation of hostilities and introducing democratic reforms was seen an affront to Turkey whose détente with Syria in the past was praised as the success story of Strategic Depth doctrine. From 2011 to 2016, however, Turkey's foreign and security policy was characterized and even more so marred by the AKP government's erratic shift from preserving its doctrine toward pursuing an interventionist policy which eventually motivated Turkey to adopt a securitization policy toward the Syrian conflict.

Having discussed the recurring vicissitudes in Turkey-Syria relations, the next section will apply Copenhagen School's securitization theory to analyse Ankara's sudden detour from the traditional non-military engagement policy in the third period.

The Securitization Factor in Turkey's Foreign Policy Shift in Syria

As mentioned previously, the Arab revolts in 2011 and the unexpected demise of several dictatorial regimes in the MENA region generated profound dilemmas for Turkish Middle East policy in general and the "Strategic Depth" doctrine in particular. It was a dilemma of geopolitical (realpolitik) and of normative (ethics) nature in the first place. On the one hand, promoting the Turkish model narrative and siding with the region's pro-democracy movements against authoritarian regimes pushed the AKP elites to take on a robust (foreign policy) activism while anything less than that would have rendered Turkey's normative appeal as questionable. On the other hand, the foreign policy activism would have failed miserably had the ruling establishment not taken into account the context-specific complexities of MENA region in socio-political, cultural, and historical terms. The AKP leadership's overconfident foreign policy, which undoubtedly was rooted in the success of Davutoglu's doctrine from 2002 to 2009, witnessed a crucial moral test – first in Libya and then in Syria. Having won a clear majority of seats in the parliamentary elections of 12 June 2011, the AKP elites tried to exploit the election victory. As such, they translated it into the

popular backing of their regional agendas and used it as a legitimizing tool to expand their normative influence on the troubled MENA countries.

In this context, while cautiously accruing geopolitical gains from the security vacuum left by the Obama administration's desire to "disengage" from the Middle East, Turkey decided to play the role of a mediator and a regional normative power, urging the MENA region's leaders to adhere to core values and norms relating to democracy, human rights, social justice. Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, almost all authoritarian leaders such as the then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi were deposed either by means of peaceful protests or through military interventions. This implied that with autocrats leaving office there were no particular existential threat (related to the Arab Uprisings) left to be countered with utmost urgency.

In this climate of rapid normative and geopolitical transformations, the AKP exploited the situation to enhance cross-border cooperation between Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood in the region while simultaneously striving not to deviate from its foreign policy principle of "non-military engagement" (Özpek and Demirağ 2014: 334-39). However, beginning in March 2011 when the Syrian popular protest unfolded, the "brotherhood discourse" and norm-based narratives of change gradually gave way to the discourse of danger and threat. The initial assumption was that owing to the successful desecuritization efforts undertaken by Turkey and Syria during the 2000s, Assad would either implement those reforms that Syrian protesters and opposition groups demanded from him or would relinquish power under the international pressure. Assad's defiance accompanied by the killing of demonstrators by security forces in cities of Daraa and later in Homs in April 2011 reignited securitization narratives that had in previous decades overshadowed Turkey-Syria relations. Notwithstanding the prevalent rhetoric of "Assad must go", Turkish pro-government newspapers such as *Star* and *Yeni Şafak* framed the ensuing events as a "massacre" and sought to influence the public perceptions of Assad in different ways so as to make the case for legitimization of a Libya-style intervention in Syria (Tür and Kumra 2016: 119).

In parallel with a slow erosion of trust and amity between Turkey and Syria, the discourse of danger and threat perceptions toward the Syrian regime reigned supreme, particularly as a result of three pivotal events in the summer of 2012: (a) the downing of a Turkish military jet by Syrian forces, (b) the Syrian regime's transfer of control over the northern Kurdish regions to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), an offshoot of the PKK, and (c) the continued Syrian military strikes and range of tit-for-tat attacks close to Turkey-Syria border (Daoudy 2016: 1085; Çakmak 2016: 708). Consequently, Turkey shifted toward an assertive foreign policy that led to a puzzling and dangerous securitization of the Syrian conflict. Therefore, the Turkish military intervention in northern Syria dubbed "Euphrates Shield Operation" (August 2016-March 2017) is considered a securitizing move that ran counter to Ankara's traditional policy of non-involvement and the soft-power based "zero problems with neighbours" principle. As this article argues, the grand securitization in question consisted of threat construction and otherization practices with both internal and external dimensions.

The internal dimension: the evil trio of PKK-PYD-Assad

The perceived threat of Kurdish statehood in northern Syria where the PYD has already gained de facto autonomy (Rojava, or Western Kurdistan) permeated forcefully into the security discourse and practices of the AKP government. The threat was seen as the malign side effect of the weakening of the Syrian government triggering a resurgence of the Kurdish minority groups harbouring geopolitical ambitions to advance their causes of self-determination from Kobane to Afrin (Romano 2015: 53-63). The AKP government has invariably been critical of the spillover effects of the Syria war, arguing that it could trigger a PKK-linked Kurdish separatist movement inside Turkey since the border regions are populated predominantly by Kurds. Hence, despite the previous desecuritization efforts made in 2009 and 2013 under the Kurdish Opening I and II initiatives, a renewed process of threat construction and otherization was set in motion whereby the Kurdish issue became highly securitized.

Before we venture ahead with the core argument in this section, it merits noting that according to Weiss's typology, Turkey's approach toward the Kurdish issue can be divided into three periods: "(1) a securitization from the founding of the republic and approximately the late 1990s; (2) a de-securitization phase extending from approximately 2000 to 2009; (3) a re-securitization phase, which has unfolded over the last several years" (Weiss 2016: 570). The latter phase, we argue, was marked by four pivotal developments which had significant implications for Turkey's foreign and security policy, and its domestic politics alike. Above all, these developments enabled the politics of threat design and threat management, thus securitization, as adopted by the AKP elites toward the Syrian issue and the Kurdish problem.

The very first development relates to the unilateral establishment in November 2013 of the Rojava transformational administration governing the three self-proclaimed cantons of Afrin, Kobane and Jazira in northern parts of Syria. Interesting to note is that the creation of the interim rule in northern Syria came on the heels of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process (Kurdish Opening II). As a result, the Rojava factor not only came as a severe blow to the ongoing peace talks, it also stymied all AKP efforts to prevent the PKK-affiliated PYD from gaining ideological and political foothold in the major border towns in Syria. Hence, the security discourse of the AKP began to focus on Assad's cooperation with the PYD and the dangers of the so-called "devil triangle" consisting PKK-PYD-Assad. Using the rhetoric of existential threat and of "othering" in their references to Assad and the PYD, the state-run media revived the "old enemies" perceptions about Syria and the PKK. In fact, by associating Syria with terrorism and likening Assad to Slobodan Milošević, the former President of Yugoslavia, a new social reality was constructed so as to convince the populace that terrorist groups backed by the Syrian government were posing a security threat to Turkey.

The second and third salient developments that arguably contributed to Turkey's securitization of Syrian conflict concern the Islamic State's siege of Kobane (September 2014 to January 2015) and the PYD's capturing of the town of Tal Abyad from the IS in June 2015, respectively. Both incidents are significant for our understanding of Turkey's incremental changes in its Syrian policy because they pushed Ankara toward adoption of a full-fledged securitization narrative from mid-2015 onwards (Okyay 2017: 837). Above all, they solidified the Syrian Kurds' nationalistic sentiments and consequently strengthened

Turkey's perception of security threats. The battle to reclaim the Syrian city of Kobane from the IS was not merely a territorial gain. More than anything else, it was a nationalist gain. When the images of the bravery of the Kurdish forces of the People's Protection Units (YPG) and its female soldiers (YPJ) were displayed on various media outlets all around the world, the AKP government feared that the Syrian Kurds' struggle might generate a robust nationalist mobilization among Kurds inside Turkey. The threat of Kurdish nationalism was so existential that former Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan stated that "the issue of Kobane and the protests it was generating in the country was 'a problem that threatens Turkey's union'" (Thornton 2015: 875).

The worst-case scenario for Turkey unfolded in mid-June 2015 when the YPG forces gained control of the strategically important town of Tal Abyad from the IS militants. Owing to the American air support and intelligence sharing, the YPG found a unique opportunity to use the border town to link Kobane to Jazira canton in the north-eastern Syrian province of Hasakeh. As one scholar notes, on the one hand the YPG's strategic victory "enhanced the territorial visibility of a potential future Kurdish mini-state in northern Syria, while on the other hand, it fuelled the general perceptions about foreign-backed conspiracy to partition Turkey" (Weiss 2016: 581). In response to PYD/YPG's growing influence in northern Syria along Turkish borders, Davutoğlu suggested a direct military intervention, a securitizing move which was a direct result of the securitization of Syrian conflict in general. The July 2015 suicide bombing at a Kurdish cultural centre in the Turkish border town of Suruç put the final nail in the coffin of the two-year cease-fire between the Turkish government and the Kurdish militants. For Ankara, the Suruç bombing was the last straw in their fight against terrorism whereas Kurds saw it as a vindication of Turkey's apathy toward the Kurdish plight at the hand of the IS, very much similar to what happened to them in Kobane.

Consequently, two alternative securitizing measures were taken by Ankara, shorn of direct military intervention, to protect the Turkish state as the referent object of security against the threat of terrorism posed by the YPG and IS. In the first move, Turkish authorities allowed the US for the first time to use its İncirlik air base in the southern city of Adana to launch military strikes against the IS positions. Next, under the pretext of combating the IS terrorists, Turkish fighter jets targeted PKK-affiliated YPG militias in northern Syria who are part of the American-led coalition fighting the IS (Gunter 2016: 82). Simultaneously, the AKP government continued its sectarian policy as reflected in the Syrian civil war through its support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other military groups such as the former al Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, now commonly referred to as Tahrir al-Sham) fighting Assad and his supporters. It is essential to indicate that during the Euphrates Shield Operation the Turkish leaders employed a securitization discourse according to which the IS threat was treated in the same way and with the same urgency as the one posed by the PYD. Erdoğan himself stated in March 2017 that "Turkey is a country that has been battling terrorism for 35 years and now it faces a threat from such groups as ISIS, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Jabhat al-Nusra" (Kremlin Official Website 2018). The securitization narrative was more pronounced during the Olive Branch Operation as Turkey's president asserted in January 2018 that "the YPG terrorist group has released Daesh members to fight against us [Turkey]. What difference does that make? They are all the same

[…] "Turkey will first exterminate the terrorists in Afrin and then make the region liveable again" (Daily Sabah 2018).

The general significance of all the four developments and the discursive representations of the Syrian conflict cited above is that they point to the internal dimensions of threat construction and otherization, thus securitization, in relations to the Kurdish issue. If we perceive, as Bourbeau does, that securitization is "the process of integrating an issue into a security framework that emphasizes policing and defense" (Bourbeau 2014: 187) the AKP's approach toward the Kurdish issue as an indispensable part of the Syrian conflict embodied all aspects of a full-fledged securitization. The AKP government served as a prime example of an imprudent securitizing actor willing to go extra mile to defend the threatened "Self" against the threatening "Other" – the latter often framed in state-owned media outlets in terms of the evil trio of PKK-PYD-Assad (Adısönmez 2016: 629-635). Linked to this argument is that for Turkey removing Assad from power could help the country gain more leverage in dealing with or even possibly eliminating the threat of Kurdish mobilization/statehood along its borders. Hence, the volte-face in Turkish foreign policy since the onset of the Syrian revolt had external dimension as well. As previously mentioned, the geopolitical power struggle among Turkey, Iran, and Russia at the time in tandem with Ankara's lofty ambition to bring the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in power informed the external aspect of the securitization policy toward Syria.

The external dimension: Ikhwan ideology and Turkey-Iran-Russia nexus

As one scholar has noted, foreign policy serves as "a medium for politicians to propose idealized national/state identities and thereby to define their own identities" (Kirdiş 2015: 181). Therefore, foreign policy making and identity construction are mutually constitutive. When a state engages in the process of (re)constructing certain identities, it literally creates difference and thus an "other" (ibid: 178-194). According to Buzan and Hansen, the state, in its quest for security, needs "the threatening Other to define its identity, thereby acquiring ontological security" (Buzan and Hansen 2012: 218). What can be culled from the preceding arguments is two-fold. First, for reasons explained previously, the Kurdish mobilization/nationalism constitutes the threatening Other for Turkey at both national and regional levels. Second, when it comes to the external dimensions of Turkey's securitization approach toward the Syrian conflict, attention must be paid to the AKP elites' evocation of friend-enemy discourse and the "us" versus "them" mentality which was evident following the Arab Uprisings events. Although Davutoğlu's Strategic Depth doctrine was predicated on the principle of "zero problems with neighbors," the perilous turn of events in North Africa and later on in Syria challenged the AKP elite's untested idealism and pushed them to side with certain political parties like the Muslim Brotherhood. In Syria, by virtue of forging a regional alliance with Qatar and backing both the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army, Turkey openly called for the ouster of the "enemy" Assad, and replacing the Syrian ruling Ba'ath Party with the "friendly" Muslim Brotherhood.

The high-water mark in Turkey's relentless support of the Ikhwan movement came on July 3, 2013 when President Mohamed Morsi was toppled in a Saudi-backed military coup orchestrated by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. "For me, Morsi is Egypt's president, not Sisi",

stated Erdoğan while labelling the coup as "unacceptable" (Bekdil 2017). Ankara's support of Muslim Brotherhood was also evident in Erdoğan's adoption of the four-finger "Rabia" salute as a symbol of solidarity with the movement's sympathizers (Reuters 2017). Regardless of the symbolic gesture, the initial assumption among the AKP elites was that the Muslim Brotherhood, whether in Syria or elsewhere, could best represent Turkey's model of democracy, Islam, and free-market economy. The othering discourse used by Erdoğan was grounded in this ambitious view, according to which the AKP government was projected as being democratic, humanitarian, and progressive whereas Syrian regime was framed as being despotic, murderous, and retrogressive. Therefore, Ankara saw the Turkish model as a viable alternative for the post-Assad Syria. If successfully applied, the model could afford the AKP a rare opportunity to eliminate Turkey's long-standing security concerns, namely the Kurdish mobilization along Syrian border, the PKK's terrorist activities, and Iran's growing influence in the region. Such an othering discourse, as Milliken observes, seeks to advance "a particular `regime of truth` while excluding other possible modes of identity and action" (Milliken 1999: 229). The Iranian model of theocracy was evidently the last thing the AKP elites wanted for a post-Assad Syria. Nor was it desirable for Turkish authorities to tolerate a Saudi-backed general in the mold of al-Sisi. Hence, Ankara promoted and lobbied for a Libya-style humanitarian intervention by NATO to topple Assad. But the initial normative struggle between Turkey and Syria quickly turned into an all-out geopolitical rivalry as seen by the ongoing proxy war in Syria between Russia, Iran, and Turkey and other major regional players.

Seven years into the conflict, Turkey's deep-seated security concerns have reached fever pitch. The US support of PKK-linked YPG forces and the fear of an expanding Rojava aided and abetted by external powers have only exasperated Turkey "ontological insecurities" (Kinnvall 2004: 741-67; Steele 2008). This is predominantly because there is an enduring sense of historical trauma in Turkish society, a kind of trauma which stems from the Turkish collective memory of the malicious intentions and hypocritical deeds of *Dış Mihraklar* (external powers). Such perception of the disingenuous intentions and behaviours of the Other has been a major determining factor behind the development of "a relatively consistent security culture of realpolitik" that reigned supreme from the Ottoman era to the present (Karaosmanoglu 2000: 201; Aydin 2003: 166).

In fact, the security context in which the Turkish Republic was founded was fraught with insecurities and recurrent feelings of dread and distrust toward the neighbouring states (Joobani 2016). The bitter experiences of the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), World War I (1914–1918), and the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1922), and the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 created a challenging physical and cognitive environment for construction of a stable sense of agency and continuity for Turkey in its relations with other actors. It is against the background of this "perennial 'insecurity complex'" (Aydin 2003: 164) that Turkey on 24 August 2016 launched its Euphrates Shield Operation and later on in January 2018 waged another war this time on the YPG-controlled canton of Afrin to disrupt the "terror corridor" in northern Syria. In fact, the "Olive Branch" and the "Euphrates Shield" operations marked the climax of Turkey's securitization policy toward Syria. Above all, they were clear aberrations from Turkey's traditional foreign policy of "peaceful settlement of disputes" and "non-military involvement". This is why the Strategic Depth doctrine is a myth

while Turkey's ontological insecurity manifests itself in much greater light and with much more tenacity in both the realms of regional and domestic politics.

Confident of the "success" of Turkey's military operations in northern Syria and buoyed up by the recent victory of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party in the June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, the AKP cadre has focused more conveniently on using its newly-achieved zone of influence as a bargaining chip against the US and other key players. Turkey and the US are, as the time of writing this article, at loggerheads over a range of issues from the former's purchase of S-400 missile system to the latter's refusal to extradite US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen, who is accused of masterminding the July 2016 failed military coup. Although the rupture in US-Turkey relations, which emanates partly from the same ontological insecurity considerations, has resulted in Ankara's leaning toward Russia and to a lesser extent Iran, which does not necessarily mean that the two NATO allies would not be able to reconcile their differences. Put differently, Turkey's securitization policy toward Syria may have cost the AKP cadre their "strategic depth" doctrine but Turkey appears willing to use the geopolitical foothold it has gained in northern Syria as a bargaining chip in its talks with Washington over the fate of Syrian Kurds.

Concluding Discussion

From a vantage point, up until the breakout of the Arab Uprisings, the AKP leadership attempted to apply the "Turkish model" narrative and its "Strategic Depth" doctrine to the region, erroneously believing that the country's strong historic ties with the former Ottoman territories would help the ruling party materialize its hegemonic goal of advancing Turkey's soft power. As this study shows, with the recent developments brought about by the Syrian conflict, particularly the emergence of PKK's Syrian branch PYD and its military wing YPG as well as the fear of growing Russo-Iranian alliance, Turkey has not only departed from its years-old desecuritisation process towards Syria, but also abandoned its traditional "non-interventionist foreign policy".

In light of these crucial geopolitical developments, we argue that the AKP elites have made a major policy mistake by turning their cooperation mind-set into pursuance of conflict with Assad, believing the US under the NATO aegis would allow Turkey to establish its desired position in the MENA region. Thus, the steady decline of the hegemonic "Turkish Model" project resulted from complex, intertwined development involving internal and external securitization processes conducted by the AKP elites. Rather than transforming Turkey from a medium-size regional actor into a leading regional actor, within which the AKP might practice its new regional order in the MENA region, the AKP's model gradually collapsed in theory and practice. Building on the theoretical lenses of the Copenhagen School, we underscore two findings of this work in the following lines.

First of all, we reached a conclusion that Turkey's securitization policy (interventionist approach) was primarily driven by the fear of Kurdish autonomy/the Russo-Assad-Iranian alliance; and bringing Muslim Brotherhood into power in Syria/consolidating Turkey's agential importance in Western security architecture. Drawing upon on these arguments, we conclude that Turkey's volte-face politics and securitization attempts towards Syria was

caused by Turkey's underestimation of the Assad regime's resilience and the AKP's overestimation of Davutoğlu's Strategic Depth doctrine. Before clashes broke out in Syria, the AKP elites should have predicted that it would be unwise to overlook the causes of the civil unrest and avoid offering myopic and imprudent solutions to such highly complex regional and internal dynamics.

Secondly, seven years into the conflict, Turkey's involvement in the Syrian civil war has not only changed Ankara's traditional foreign policy thinking but also dramatically altered the way the country deals with any issues associated with its southern neighbour. The AKP's two-fold securitization policy in Syria, which was analysed from the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, bears testimony to the points mentioned above. With respect to the internal aspect of threat construction/otherization, the AKP policy makers implemented an opportunistic project of eliminating the threat of Kurdish statehood once and for all by removing the evil triangle of PKK-PYD-Assad, either through NATO intervention or by backing the rebels in Syria. It was an ambitious project which backfired due in part to the Russian's and Iranians' growing involvement in the Syrian crisis.

As for the external aspect, at the height of the Arab Uprisings there was a noticeable sense of "moral superiority" among the AKP elites who assigned the Muslim Brotherhood with the mission to promote their "Turkish model" in MENA region, including in Syria. The Ikhwan ideology was framed as an ideal alternative to the Iranian theocracy and Saudi Arabia's autocracy. The time was ripe yet Assad's unpredictable resistance shattered the hopes of the Turkish government. Later on in 2016, Turkey's cross-border military operation in Syria caused the extinction of the traditional policy of non-military engagement. But more than anything, it exposed the ontological insecurities of Turkey. It revived and strengthened the Sèvres Syndrome narratives, the hidden agenda of external forces, be it PKK, the West or others, who are supposedly biding time to partition the country when the time comes.

In the final analysis, the extinction of the Strategic Depth doctrine is clear. Now that Turkey's once-domestic PKK conflict has become increasingly regionalized due in part to the interventionist policies of the AKP, and at a time when the country grapples with economic malaise and deep political polarization, the future looks more uncertain. Oddly enough, however, the AKP has not given up on the domestic securitization of terrorist groups, following instead an extensive otherization and threat construction agenda especially after the abortive July 2016 coup of Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü (FETÖ). For now, with the rise in the number of terrorist groups like FETÖ and the persistent securitization of existential threats posed by "enemies" of the New Turkey, it seems that the era of the AKP's consolidation of power at all levels of state governance has just begun. Whether or not Turkey can extricate itself from this pernicious domestic securitization is yet unknown. Further research on Turkey's turbulent domestic and external political strategies and constant securitization tendencies are direly needed to provide us with plausible answers about how the AKP could devise a novel and productive foreign policy approach capable of redressing the irreparable harms caused by the Strategic Depth philosophy.

Notes

1. We accept the fact that Turkey's Northern Iraq interventions in 2007-2008 were a clear deviation from the self-proclaimed non-interventionist policy. However, rather than aiming at "threat manufacturing" with "otherization" processes and regime change through extensive military activism as we have witnessed during the Syrian Civil War, Turkey's interventions in Iraq were conducted as temporary cross-border operations sought to eliminate the PKK rebels escaping from the Turkish territory. Thus, Turkey's current military activism may be traced back to the Iraqi interventions in 2007-2008, but the leadership's logic is different.

2. Among the few exceptions are the works of Okyay (2017); Daoudy (2016); Çakmak (2016); Weiss (2016); Karakaya Polat (2008).

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