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Post-Coup Turkey and its Relevance to Middle East Dynamics

ABSTRACT

Foreign policy of Turkey has re-surfaced in the academic, political and diplomatic circles in the aftermath of July 2016 attempted coup. This renewed debate is raising question on the Turkish foreign policy with regards to the European Union, NATO, its trustworthiness in fight against the 'Islamic State' in Middle East and its growing nexus with Iran. This paper focuses on the reasons of recent developments in Turkey domestically, which is actually the result of conflict between AKP government and Gulen Movement's followers over the control of state institutions which ended up with a coup attempt. These developments have certain implications on Turkey's existing foreign policy. This paper argues that a certain area of foreign relations, such as ties with the US and NATO needs to be revised but the existing focus on Middle East region will remain the same with its "Strategic Depth Doctrine" in the years to come.

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In the post-coup environment of 15 July 2016, foreign policy of Turkey is in the limelight and has been generating responses. The West has questioned the membership of Turkey in NATO and its ongoing and long desired goal to get into the European Union (EU); it has also raised concerns over the reliability as a Western ally in the region against the IS in the aftermath of failed coup. The post-coup situation aggravated the apprehension about the future of Turkey's existing foreign policy towards Middle East. Therefore, this paper endeavors to highlight the Turkish role in the region and its implications by analyzing the circumstances leading to the coup, its impact on Turkish foreign policy and its ability to pursue the cherished goal of Turkey as a role-model.

An Analysis of the 15 July Failed Coup

In the changing global dynamics marred by terrorism, religion and ideology has dominated the academic discourse and inter-state relations, Turkey has re-emerged as a core actor having membership of important international organizations like the United Nations (UN), NATO and G-20 as well as a potential candidate of full membership of European Union (EU) in the quest of change in international arena because of the combination of a state structure of secularism as well as the Muslim majority population. (Hussain: 2015) This feature makes Turkey unique as a state and is also one of the reasons of it maintaining a successful foreign policy. The efforts made by Turkey in order to counter the Western World have become all the more important in the aftermath of the failed coup carried out by the followers of Fethullah Gulen. (Usluer: 2016)

Undoubtedly, the failed coup attempt has resulted into certain implications for Turkey. Firstly, the Turkish leadership is indebted to the historical heroic role played by the civilians against the coup plotters and especially those who sacrificed their lives for the democratic order. The only way to payback this debt is the enforcement of democracy in its true spirit. The important feature ever seen in the history of Turkey was that "the people from different ethnic, religious and political backgrounds together prevented the coup to be successfully carried out. Now it falls on the government to ensure human rights for all the citizens as its primary task. Secondly, sound democratization is needed at home in order to strengthen Turkey's ties with the international institutions and ensure its commitments to international organizations in the given domestic environment." (Ahmet: 2001)

The domestic confrontation between Gulenists and AKP government in Turkey was to control national institutions, which resulted into attempted coup. It has certain implications for Turkish future foreign policy at regional and international levels. (Usluer: 2016) "Keeping this situation in mind, whether Turkey takes a more cogent action in terms of foreign policy behavior on the basis of operational approach, depends on the security concerns. In any case it seems that Turkey will continue to protect its foreign policy. One thing is important that the inclinations of new Turkish foreign policy have their roots in its domestic developments which have not suddenly appeared rather they were present before July 15 2016." (Usluer: 2016) This is obvious if previous ties between AKP and Gulen movement are seen since 2002. As far as foreign policy towards Middle East in particular is concerned, we would have a brief look into the historical

prospect and argue that if it is affected from the attempted coup or vice versa.

Turkish Foreign Policy under AKP Since 2002

Since 2002, Turkish foreign policy contained two phases under Justice and Development Party (AKP) after winning the general elections. The leadership of AKP government has more of a mainstream religious mindset. Since the AKP takeover in the state after gaining a win in the general elections in 2002, the foreign policy has gone through remarkable changes. "Moreover, the transformation of the global system from bipolar to unipolar after the end of Cold War and the beginning of globalization where neoliberal evaluations took place around the globe also catalyzed this. Also, the domestic factors have contributed to shape Turkish foreign policy under the government of AKP." (Coskun: 2008)

During the last 15 years Turkish foreign policy has undergone two phases. "The first phase is the new foreign policy approach on the basis of culture and history which was introduced by Davutoglu under AKP government, which was totally different from the traditional foreign policy of Turkey." (Ahmet: 2001) Since 2002, AKP followed a proactive foreign policy on the basis of "soft power" activities shifting away from security focused foreign policy, which was need of the time as well due to the change in international system from bipolar to unipolar after the end of Cold war and beginning of globalization. It was the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey "peace at home and peace in the world." Turkish foreign policy remained isolated at the regional level as well as in international order. The power of Turkey was represented

only through military by the participation of its troops in NATO operations and it was known in the international arena only through its military power. However, under AKP government, Turkey was presented in a different, more softer way when it sent immediate humanitarian aid to conflicting areas such as the Flotilla to Gaza in 2010, (Migdalovitz: 2010) establishing Turkish cultural centers around the globe, overhauling the old glorious Ottoman heritage in different countries, resolving the disputes at regional as well as at international level such as Iranian nuclear issue and Israel-Palestine issue.

The 'zero problem policy with neighbors' "formed by Turkey shifted its focus away from the West to East where sound relations were established with all Middle Eastern countries even with Syria." (Huber: 2013) Alternatively, this shifting policy broadened the horizons of its foreign interests from Middle East to other surrounding regions like Africa, Latin America and Asia Pacific. These changes which were implemented seemed constructive and realistic according to the explanations of the policymakers, but they were value-based and based on principle at the same time. Therefore, according to some scholars "Turkey attempted to create a balance between "Real Politik" and "Ideal Politik" in its foreign policy." (Kalin: 2012)

These policy changes were certainly supported by the domestic factors. First of all, the secular structure of Turkey encouraged in the anchoring of Turkey to the international order. Despite of its foreign policy shift, Turkey ensured that it will fulfill its commitments and agreements with international institutions and will continue to play its role more actively in International institutions like the UN, NATO, as well as council of Europe. (Usluer: 2016)It also continued

its quest to become a full member of the European Union and did not change its strategic goal by hastening the process. "However, the division between Islamists and seculars in Turkey influenced the leadership to pursue another type of foreign policy. Some argue that the AK Party's foreign policy has been shaped by the political struggle against Kemalist establishment at home, and in particular the powerful role that the military plays in the domestic politics of modern Turkey." (Jung: 2012)

At the end of 2013, the AK party initiated the second phase of its foreign policy which became more explicit after the coup attempt. (Usluer: 2016) The difference between the first two phases of Turkish foreign policy with regards to the applied methods is that the new policy is more psychological and more rational and considered operational and internationally focused by the policy makers. In terms of its foreign policy behavior, the coup attempt of July 15 made Turkey a "defensive realist" state. (Usluer: 2016) Therefore, "Turkey instead of subscribing to 'ideal politics' approach prefers more interest-based politics. The break-up of value-based relationship between Gulenists and AKP led to adopt a relationship based on interests by the AKP government at both the domestic as well as international level." (Usluer: 2016)

Secondly, "Turkey is now utilizing both 'hard' and 'soft' power approaches in the second phase after the attempted coup which ought to bring more remuneration." (Usluer: 2016) After the coup "Turkey has become more active to fight against the multi-faced terrorism as the state now faces multiple threats from both external and internal forces. Along with Kurdistan Workers Party (KKP), Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and the Democratic Union Party,

another threat has been added to Turkey in the shape of Gulen Movement, which means that Turkey now has to fight on more than one front. However, Turkey has intensified its soft power activities in order to substitute the part played by Gullenists in different fields like education and trade. In order to make its way in the international order, Turkey is playing a far more active part because it can see how the major international powers are inadequate to solve issues between Muslim world and the West.” (Aras: 2017) Additionally, having a cluster of Western-democracy and Muslim majority population with secular values, Turkey considers itself a main factor for playing a constructive role in the region to solve the impeding dilemmas. Many examples can be quoted in this regard, such as Turkey’s positive role in resolving Iranian nuclear issue as well as its role in Palestinian issue is another instance. Thus, its role in Middle East is obviously important because Turkey has remained a subject of debate amongst academic, political and diplomatic circle as a ‘model’ for Middle East region during the ‘Arab Spring’ on the basis of its soft power image. (Altunisik: 2008).

The Power Struggle between the Gulenists and the AK Government

The Gulen movement in Turkey is described as an operating equal to the state within a state for the last few years. And the followers of the movement are scattered within the state institutions like police, judiciary, armed forces and education etc. The government of Turkey has recently included the movement into the list of terrorist organizations and renamed it as “Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization” (FETO) because of its illegal activities and more importantly the attempts like July 2016 coup. (Altunisik: 2008)

However, only a few years back there were good relations between the ruling party AKP and Gulen Movement. "The reasons behind these relations were mostly in order to weaken the Kemalist establishment to enhance the democratic values in the state particularly for those groups, which wanted to practice religion in their daily life but were suppressed by the secular elites." (Usluer: 2016)

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, "completely whipped out the Islamic values including the office of religious authority i.e. Sheikh-ul-Islam and the religious institutions like religious courts and religious schools from 1922 to 1924 and established a completely secular modern state adopting Western civilization." (Piterberg: 2003) On the other hand, social structure including Sufis prayer places, prayer calls (Ezan) and even reciting Quran was also banned. In brief, all the religious practices were completely banned and the military establishment took the responsibility of safeguarding, modernizing, westernizing and secularizing the country. (Erdemir: 2006) Since then, in order to keep Turkey on Kemalist lines, military establishment of Turkey has intervened in domestic politics many times; first in 1960, second in 1971, third in 1980, and finally in 1997, and attempted successfully either by plotting a coup, or exerting tremendous pressure on religious citizens not allowing them practice their religion. Before AKP came into power, the last coup has taken place in February 1997, which was known as 'post-modern coup.' (Hale: 1994)

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power after winning the 2002 general elections. It formed a one party government with 34.9% of vote after a long time of coalition governments and took the office under the

threat of coup from secular group in the state as the party was popular in its religious thoughts. (Hussain: 2015) In order to avoid this threat, the AKP launched an impressive campaign by declaring its commitment to the international institutions and focused on the accession process with the European Union by introducing a number of reforms adopting the political and democratic way through Turkish Grand Assembly and other state institutions. On the other hand, AKP kept the normalization of civil-military relations its priority although it was difficult because of various media outlets, politicians with their agendas as well as secular elites. (Uslure: 2016)

The Gulen Movement appeared strong at this point of Turkish history that was already embedded deeply in state institutions like police and judiciary via their penetration into the state organs. They committed themselves to defend democracy which seemed a victim of fragmented state structure of Turkey. In February 2013, a special authorized court issued summon to the National Agency Chief (MIT), Hakan Fidan to carry out an inquiry into the Kurdistan Communities Union, a terrorist group. "The special prosecutor wanted Hakan to deliver a statement for an operation which was to be kept secret for the sake of national interest. Furthermore, for being the responsible chief of MIT, which was interpreted as an attack on civilian government by the then Prime Minister Erdoğan as the National Intelligence Agency working directly under the prime minister." (Uslure: 2016) Later, Ilker Basgug, General Chief of Staff (2008-2010), was also arrested in 2013 during the premiership of Recep Tayyep Erdoğan. However, Erdoğan was not aware of the coup plot by him as he had worked with him and he was well respected by civil political

authorities. Therefore, on few occasions Erdoğan disagreed and showed his annoyance about his arrest and because of these two incidents the relations between Gullenists and government became worst and developed lack of trust day by day. (Uslure: 2016)

Meanwhile, more occurrences of taking forefront positions in the state institutions and also in the political circles created serious tensions for Erdoğan, which led to more complicated relations between the two sides. Consequently, first the Gullenists targeted the Prime Minister and attempted coup in 2013 to knock down his government, which was democratically elected. (Aras: 2017) After the attempt of this coup, the Turkish government carried out a significant operation against the Gullenists in order to oust them from the state institutions, which was a difficult task due to their strength in institutions like military, police and Judiciary. The coup which took place on July 15, 2016 is also an example of their strong presence in institution like military. This time they carried out a brutal and bloody coup. The Special Operational Forces as well as headquarters of Police Force along with the National Intelligence Services Buildings were targeted using bombs by the antagonists. On the other hand, the most strategic rout of the city which connects two bridges of Bosphorus in Istanbul and the Turkish parliament was viciously assaulted by bombs. Most importantly, civilians were attacked from helicopters. However, "the Turkish people came out onto the streets and resisted the brutal bloody coup in a peaceful manner by lying in front of tanks to safeguard their democratic institutions and values even economic growth of their state as well as their elected government."(Uslure: 2016)They made these sacrifices of their lives in order prevent the coup

even before their leaders could come out and ask for their help. It was the people's initiative which was appreciated all around the globe.

This incident marked a significant change in the modern history of Turkey in its social structure of Turkish nation. In the post-coup situation, this kind of incident had occurred for the time that both the secular and Islamist divide was on one page in order to achieve its own ultimate goal. Unifying the opposition and the ruling parties in Turkey may change the basic dynamic of the country that is bringing the secular and religious people on the one page. Firstly, "the 'secular versus Islamist' division may lose its importance in Turkish political literature. Secondly, the clash between religious and other secular groups may weaken the conflict and might begin to clash with other religious groups as already happening to some extent. This may result into country becoming 'Islamists secularized' especially with regard to the relations between the state and faith." (Aras: 2017)

As far as Turkey's foreign relations are concerned, the developments after coup indicate a minor shift in Turkey's interactions with regional states. Turkey's rational and international behavior is now motivated by the strong aim of whipping out the Gullenists from Turkey in which ruling and opposition parties are playing equal role. In this way, Turkey's relations with some countries like United States were a bit deteriorated while some harsh relations like with Russia were revised. (Uslure: 2016)

Implications of the July Coup Attempt on Turkish Foreign Policy

Many aspects of Turkish foreign policy have been under discussion since the attempted coup of July 15, 2016. In

order to hamper the fight against terrorism by a weakened Turkish military, deterioration of US-Turkish relations and EU-Turkish relations are only few examples among large questions in the regional context. The post-coup environment created another option for Turkey in the shape of an axis of alliances with Russia and Iran. However, after the coup despite of speculations and questions, the state's foreign policy in terms of interactions with international institutions as well as international actors needs to be revised. Certainly, the coup presented a crucial example of how incidents like this in domestic politics affect foreign policy of a country. (Uslure: 2016)

Ahmet Davutoglu, the first foreign policy adviser of both President Abdulla Gul and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan designed the earlier phase of Turkish foreign policy. He had spent a long period of time in the academic field before joining politics. Thus he was an experienced man putting what he has theorized into practice. "Davutoglu was the man who introduced the first phase of Turkish foreign policy arguing that since Turkey is in a position of geostrategic importance, and can use its historical legacy and geographic location as an active factor to engage with neighboring states thereby Turkey would become a 'central state' in the region." (Ahmet: 2001) Davutoglu, "basically distinguished himself from the traditional foreign policymakers who were emphasizing Turkey's role as bridging East and West. While agreeing Turkish bridging role he widened the area of Turkish influence on the basis of its historical and cultural ties which were not only in East and West but also in Balkans, Caucasus, as well as in Africa. His perspective in Turkish foreign policy left remarkable marks as he also developed the principles of 'zero problems with neighbors' and

'rhythmic diplomacy' which contributed a lot in the pursuit of peaceful foreign policy in the region as well as in the world." (Murison: 2006)

However, realizing the complex web of global operating system and due to domestic developments, Turkish foreign policy entered into a new phase accordingly under Justice and Development Party rule. The unexpected collapse of relations between Gulen Movement and the government and more importantly disbelief in idealism which was introduced by Davutoglu, Turkey's foreign policy shifted into new phase. In the second phase of Turkish foreign policy under AKP, it became more reactive in terms of rationality and operationally, especially in having relations with individual states. In terms of security interest the hardline policies would be adopted keeping the value based policies out of the game. "Therefore, AK Party's new phase in foreign policy will not become entirely a value free hard line politics, but it will prioritize rational choices. As far as its global role is concerned, Turkey will continue playing its role but with slightly different rules of game in the post-Cold war period." (Brown: 2001)

Turkish foreign policy based on Davutoglu's 'Strategic Depth Doctrine' and its operational principles of 'Zero Problems Policy with Neighbor' continues successfully despite of some difficulties during the Syrian crisis. (Murison: 2006) Therefore, unless and until its base is not changed which means that until the strategic depth doctrine is not changed, there will be no change in Turkish foreign policy. As far as the attempted failed coup is concerned, it has not disturbed the strategic doctrine from any aspect because it has completely failed. The government is carrying out operations against the culprits which is a domestic issue and

has nothing to do with its foreign policy. Nonetheless, the states supposedly involved in the coup were taken seriously and it had no links with the relations with Middle East.

Conclusion

The escalated tensions between AK Party government and Gulenists after the coup attempt of July 2016, Turkish foreign policy has undergone some changes. Since the end of 2013, the roots of these tensions existed between these two groups. As far as the Turkish foreign policy behavior is concerned, it is more rational and operational in the post-coup period. In order to increase its operational capacity and employing a rationale mode, Turkish foreign policy has become more active in the international arena.

Since the attempted coup, security has also become a major concern for the government. It has declared Gulen Movement as a new terrorist organization (FETO) in the post-coup environment. Since then, Turkey has become operationally more active due to multi-faceted fight against terrorism, which is being pursued against organizations like FETO and PKK, ISIL, and PYD and the state has employed both hard power and soft powers in order to whip them out. However, Turkey is a vital actor in international politics with regards to the relationship between the West and the Muslim world because it has the significant experience and deep understanding of relation between religion and politics. In this context, Turkey proposed a solution by suggesting a more equally distribution of balance of power between the West and the Muslim world in international organizations.

As far as Turkey's foreign policy pursued by AK Party towards Middle East is concerned, no major shift in the post-

coup period seems visible because Turkey has become more active in increasing operational capacity and it is using both hard power and soft power approaches. Thus, the soft power is also being used in pursuing its foreign policy on the one hand and there is no interference from the Middle East in pursuing the attempted coup, on the other hand. Therefore, Turkey will pursue the same relations with Middle East region as it had and would continue to play its vital role in the region.

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