



Article Type: Research paper

An in-depth analysis of strategic policies of Türkiye's Foreign Affairs from Soft Power to Hard Power in Syria

* Bahareh Sazmand¹, Merve Kaya Tayyeb²

1. Associate Professor of Regional Studies, Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

2. Ph.D. Regional Studies, Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

Article Info.

Received: 12/09/2022

Accepted: 19/09/2023

Available Online: 05/09/2024

Abstract

Since 2002, with the advent of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Türkiye's foreign policy framework has been transformed by a new discourse centered on the multidimensional doctrine of "strategic depth" in the form of soft power and public diplomacy. Türkiye's foreign policy, especially after the socio-political developments known as the "Arab Spring," provided Türkiye with the opportunity to use Davutoğlu's idea of relying on "historical depth, geographical location, and the rich and great legacy left by the Ottoman Empire" to consolidate soft power and play an active role in resolving regional and trans-regional conflicts. But the Muslim Brotherhood's settlement in Egypt left Türkiye alone in the region. Syria became a major problem, leaving it alone in the region and its allies, not paying attention to its national security interests in the field of foreign policy. The rise of ISIS further exacerbated Türkiye's

Bahareh Sazmand, Ph.D.

Address: Faculty of Humanities, Ayatollah Boroujerdi University, Boroujerd, Iran.

E-mail: bsazmand@ut.ac.ir

How to Site:

Sazmand,, B. & Kaya, Tayyeb, M (2024). Autopsy of the change in Türkiye's foreign policy strategy from soft power to hard power in Syria. *The Fundamental and Applied Studies of the Islamic World*, 6(2), -35-38.



Authors retain the copyright and full publishing rights.

Published by Iranian Association of Geopolitics. This article is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

problems in the region. The unrest in Syria, the escalation of the Kurdish issue in northern Syria, and the future of Syria have put Türkiye in a difficult situation. The withdrawal of Syrian army forces from northern Syria in July 2012 and the Syrian Kurds' takeover of the area caused concern in Türkiye. Türkiye strongly supported the Syrian opposition, with the analysis that the regime of Bashar al-Assad will fall in the short term. Domestic developments in Türkiye's, such as the Gezi Park protests, the end of the project of national unity and brotherhood with the Kurds after the attack of Ceylan Pinar in the continuation of the resumption of Türkiye's internal crisis with the PKK, the disputes over the "presidency" system in Türkiye between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the People's Democratic Party (HDP), the PKK's new hope for the creation of a state in northern Syria, the attacks of ISIS, and international pressures paved the way for the revival of Türkiye's defense policy and dealt a blow to Türkiye's soft power strategy. The failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016 by the Gulenists accelerated this turnaround. Due to the increasing risks facing its national-security interests in the region, Türkiye gradually increased its hard power approach and replaced it with soft power to some extent. The period of strategic cooperation and soft power in Turkish-Syrian relations generally took place in a tense atmosphere. Since 1998, when the PKK demanded the withdrawal of the PKK from Syria, bilateral relations between Türkiye and Syria began, and after the AKP came to power, it reached the highest level of cooperation with the signing of the military cooperation agreement in 2002. The arrest and extradition of PKK terrorists by Syria to Türkiye and the attacks carried out in the form of joint operations were welcomed by Türkiye, and as a result, the two countries became closer to each other. Due to the importance given to the expansion of economic relations in Türkiye's foreign policy, Syria was one of the countries that had the most extensive relations with Türkiye in the region. In 2009, Türkiye and Syria experienced their closest historical period. But the popular uprising of the Arab Spring in 2011 in Syria led to a civil war in the country and strained relations between the two countries. And it changed Türkiye's approach to Syria from soft power to hard power. As a result, the AKP government, with its foreign policy strategy centered on soft power, intended to be a "model country" and a leader for the people and countries of the Middle East region. Türkiye pursued a policy of soft power in order to implement it through its developed relations with Syria. In this context, relations with Syria have improved rapidly since 2002 within the framework of a zero-problem policy with neighbors, and even in 2009 it became a strategic partnership between the two countries. Despite the zero-problem policy with neighbors, between

2002 and 2011, relations between Türkiye and Syria, which had improved too quickly without resolving the problems, quickly deteriorated after 2011. It is understandable that given Turkey's failure to persuade Bashar al-Assad to reform, the development of relations with Syria was superficial and the use of soft power against the Syrian government was not beneficial. On the other hand, the inability of the AKP's foreign policy decision-makers to predict the Arab Spring also contributed to the strained relations between Türkiye and Syria because the unpredictability of a phenomenon such as the Arab Spring, which affected the entire Middle East policy, prevented maneuvering in Türkiye's foreign policy. Consequently, the Arab Spring process not only reversed Turkish-Syrian relations but also caused a major problem for a foreign policy based on soft power. The policy that was based on the overthrow of Assad led to the stagnation of Turkey's foreign policy in Syria and the Middle East. Türkiye's multidimensional foreign policy, which ran from Latin America to Europe-Balkans and from Africa to the Middle East, was grounded by international systemic threats in Syria. After the Syrian civil war turned into a proxy war between global and regional powers, Türkiye's faced a crisis of national security and survival and thus more than the loss of its achievements in the region. Aspiring to be the center country and leader of soft power in the Middle East, Türkiye became a hard-to-survive power-front country. Although in 2016 the entry and exit of Syrian and Turkish nationals was visa-free, Turkey built a wall on the Syrian border, which ended the policy of opening the doors of the Middle East through Syria in this process. Initially, the AKP leaders thought that it was possible to lead the Arab Spring process and even saw it as an opportunity to become a model country. According to this view, Türkiye's policy in Syria until 2015 was based on managing the change and transformation of the government, but neither Türkiye's soft power nor hard power was sufficient and effective to control the post-Arab Spring process and fill the power vacuum, even for Syria. The tense ups and downs in the Middle East were the end of the passionate Turkish-American cooperation that had strengthened Türkiye's foreign policy in the region between 2002 and 2011, but since 2013, the United States of America has left Türkiye alone in the Syrian civil war and began to cooperate with the PYD instead of Türkiye. This brought Türkiye's foreign policy in Syria to a standstill. The growing influence of the PYD and the terrorist group ISIS, which also had the ability to carry out operations on Turkish soil, turned Syria into one of the most serious centers of security crises in the world and greatly worried Türkiye. In addition to failing to achieve its ideals, Türkiye was forced to fight the terrorist groups of ISIS in 2014 and then in 2016 to confront the PYD. The infiltration of the coup plotters

into the Turkish state system was the point of internal failure of the country and caused a change in Türkiye's political approach. As a result, both Türkiye's soft power could not control the developments in Syria and fundamental changes in Türkiye's domestic policy, both of which forced Türkiye to adopt a hard power policy, and Türkiye's regional activity after 2016 was accompanied by aggressive measures to address security concerns. In Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016, Operation Olive Branch in 2018, Operation Peace Spring in 2019, and Operation Spring Shield in 2020, the areas of Jarablus and al-Bab, Afrin, east of the Euphrates, plus 30 kilometers southbound between Tall Abyad and Ras Al-ayn, were taken from ISIS, and especially from the PKK/YPG. It was cleaned up. Therefore, Türkiye's new security doctrine has been considered since 2016, and in the cross-border issue, it has followed the strategy of eliminating threats from the source.

Key words: Turkish Foreign Policy, Justice and Development Party, Syria, Neo-classical Realism.