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TURKISH-SYRIAN RELATIONS IN 2000–2021: BACKGROUND,
CURRENT STATE, AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the development of Turkish-Syrian relations in the XXI century, with the influence of the previous decades and the transfer to Turkey in the 1930s of part of the Syrian territory (Alexandretta Sanjak), controlled by France. In the second half of the 20th century, Turkish-Syrian relations developed under the conditions of the Cold War and were accompanied by repeated demands of an already independent Syria for the return of the territory of Hatay. After the Justice and Development Party came to power, Turkish-Syrian relations warmed up somewhat. After the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, having revised the previous principle of the 0 problems with neighbors, the Turkish government unequivocally supported the anti-Assad opposition and began to support the armed opposition in the Syrian Arab Republic. Simultaneously with the intervention in the internal affairs of the southern neighbor, the Turkish leadership began transition to an active foreign policy expansion based on the principles of neo-Ottomanism. The authors analyze the reasons for the nihilistic attitude of official Ankara to the sovereignty of Syria in the 1930s and 2010s, identify similarities and differences of events and the role of Russia in the peacekeeping process in the Middle East. Based on the analysis of the historical dynamics of Turkish-Syrian relations in the past and their emerging configuration at the present stage, the most likely scenario for the further development of relations between Ankara and Damascus is a return to the state of permanent confrontation during the Cold War.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 10 years, relations between Turkey and Syria have become extremely tense and have repeatedly escalated into direct clashes between their armed forces. It began during the period of French domination in Syria, when Ankara managed to achieve the annexation of the Alexandretta Sanjak. The rapprochement between the two countries in 2010 became a short-term interlude between the long-term Turkish-Syrian confrontation during the Cold War in the second half of the XX century and a new stage of hostility that started with the beginning of the civil war in Syria.

2. Problem Statement

Today, Turkey is pursuing a policy of active expansion in the Middle East, including a wide range of means and practices from promoting film production and economic interests to direct military intervention. Most obviously, this offensive policy, called neo-Ottomanism, is manifested in the Syrian direction. Official Ankara has radically changed its foreign policy course from pacifism and neutrality to the growth of militarism at least twice in its recent history. This happened for the first time in the second half of the 1930s and again in the 2010s. And in both cases, Syria, Turkey's neighbor, was the first to experience these changes.

3. Research Questions

The origins of problems in Turkish-Syrian relations date back to the years when Syria was in the status of a French mandated territory (1920–1943). In 1938, a pro-Turkish *state* of Hatay was formed in the north-west of Syria based on the former Alexandretta sanjak. In 1939, this *state* became part of Turkey. It should be noted that the initiator of the idea of this annexation was Mustafa Ataturk, who as recently as 1930 declared that the principle of *getting along with neighbors and all states is the basis of Turkish policy* (Aslan & Unan, 1989). It is also well-known that he proclaimed the slogan *Peace in the country, peace in the whole world!* What is the secret of excluding the Alexandretta Sanjak from this pacifist concept? The answer lies in the ambiguous status of the mandated Syria, which continued to be an object, not a subject of the history. In addition to the rightless position of Syria as part of the French Colonial Empire, the Turks' attitude to its borders was affected by the extremely fresh memory of the former Ottoman past. In 1939 under the influence of Great Britain, which sought to keep Turkey in the orbit of its policy in the context of the impending war with Germany, France agreed to the annexation of Hatay. This deal, reminiscent of the Munich agreement, along with the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights, has become one of the non-healing traumas of the mass consciousness of Syrians.

In 1946, having gained independence, Syria declared non-recognition of the Franco-Turkish agreements on Khats and presented claims. In 1956, after the Suez crisis, Syria signed a treaty with the Soviet Union. This became the starting point for the growth of Soviet influence in the country in exchange for military equipment. Turkey was concerned about the increase in the power of the Syrian armed forces, as it seemed possible that Syria would try to take Iskenderun. Only a heated debate at the United Nations has suspended the threat of war (Brecher & Wilkenfeld, 1997).

In the 1960s, the issue of Turkey's growing exploitation of the Euphrates River, which reduced the flow of water to the territory of Syria and Iraq, became more acute. Militants of the Kurdistan Workers' Party who fought with the Turkish government, as well as members of the Armenian Secret Liberation Army (ASALA) and Turkish left-wing radicals found shelter in Baathist Syria. In the 1980s, tensions increased because Turkey granted asylum to members of the Syrian opposition organization *Muslim Brotherhood* (the organization is recognized in the Russian Federation as a terrorist organization). All these contradictions, although they did not lead to an open conflict, but limited the development of political and economic relations between Turkey and Syria during the Cold War (Szymański, 2017). It is with such a complex legacy of relations that Turkey and Syria entered the new XXI century.

In the first years after the Justice and Development Party came to power, it seemed that relations between the countries were normalizing once and for all. Already during the exchange of visits of Erdogan and Assad in 2004, there was a decline in tension around this issue. The Syrian government has stated that it has no claims to sovereignty over the area that has been given to Turkey. Nevertheless, these statements and the refusal of Syria from the rights to the territory of Hatay were not legally fixed in any way. During the visit of the Turkish Prime Minister to Damascus, a protocol was also signed on the construction of a joint hydroelectric power plant in the border Turkish vilayet of Iskenderun. The reservoir built near the hydroelectric power station allowed thousands of hectares of land to be irrigated on both sides of the border, making them suitable for agriculture and creating thousands of additional jobs (Suleymanov, 2015). In addition, Turkey has repeatedly tried to mediate between Syria and Israel to reach a peace agreement and return the Golan Heights to Syria. In September 2009, a visa-free travel agreement was signed between Turkey and Syria (Grigoriadis, 2010). In 2000, the volume of trade between the two countries amounted to \$724 million; in 2008 it reached \$1.8 billion, and a goal of \$5 billion was set for 2012. Erdogan said that he was not satisfied with the current volume and the desire to bring the figure to \$5 billion within 3–4 years (Tür, 2010). Thus, in the mid-2000s-early 2010s mutually beneficial economic relations were actively developing between Syria and Turkey, and a real prospect of a relatively quick and prosperous solution to all the problems that existed between the countries appeared.

In 2011, as part of the *Arab Spring* that swept the Middle East, unrest began in Syria, which soon escalated into a full-scale civil war. The previous agreements were crossed out by the Turkish side, which unequivocally supported the armed opposition and provided it with a logistics platform for supply. On October 3, 2012, the Turkish side opened fire on Syrian territory in response to an incident on the border, where five people were killed because of falling artillery shells. The world community condemned the incident and urged not to allow the escalation of the conflict. June 22, 2012, the Syrian Air Force shot down a Turkish F-4 fighter jet over its territorial waters. In response, official Ankara declared non-recognition of the legitimacy of President B. Assad and deployed the Patriot air defense system along its border, as well as stepped up support for the Syrian opposition, including several radical Islamic armed groups (Suleymanov, 2015).

The turn in Ankara's relations with official Damascus coincided with the transition from the former peace-loving policy to a new foreign policy concept known as *Strategic Depth*, which implied reliance on the former Ottoman traditions. In scientific research and mass consciousness of recent years, the term *neo-Ottomanism* has been firmly entrenched behind this concept (Eshba, 2016; Shpakovskaya &

Barnashov, 2018). At the same time, this concept has undergone significant adjustments. As noted by the Turkish researcher G. Tuysuzoglu after the beginning of the Arab Spring, Turkish foreign policy has acquired a factional character, which led to the deterioration of Turkey's relations not only with Syria, but also with Iran and the central government in Iraq (Tüysüzöğlü, 2015). It is obvious that the main goal of the new Turkish policy towards Syria was to establish a *puppet government* in Damascus, or at least a government dependent on Ankara. The minimum task of Turkish policy towards Syria can be considered the possibility of separating several northern regions from it. There is a noticeable similarity with the events of the 1930s, when Turkish intelligence actively inspired the pro-Turkish movement in the Alexandretta Sanjak. The example of the formation of a *puppet Hatay government* in the past to a certain extent serves as an ideological justification and a guideline for Turkish hawks today. As in the 1930s, the Turkish leadership actively used to justify the support of the armed opposition the pretext of protecting ethnic tribesmen - Syrian Turkomans (Rogov & Faraponova, 2020). Nevertheless, in the early years of the development of the intra-Syrian conflict, the Turkish government avoided direct intervention in it, acting mainly through its agents among the Syrian opposition.

Only at the beginning of 2017, Turkish military forces launched a ground operation in Syria and occupied the city of Al-Bab, which was previously under the control of ISIS (recognized as a terrorist organization in the Russian Federation). The defeat of ISIS forces by the troops of the Syrian Arab Republic and its allies, as well as the capture of the de facto capital of the named terrorist organization, Raqqa, by Kurdish forces in March 2017, called into question the legitimacy of the presence of Turkish troops on Syrian territory. However, the expansion of the zone of influence of the Kurdish formations only increased Ankara's participation in the Syrian conflict process. In many ways, it was initially determined by the fear of the emergence of an independent Kurdish state near its southern borders. According to Ankara, the example of the existence of such a state entity can inspire a separatist movement inside Turkey and even a greater threat than the ISIS militants. These fears are not groundless. With the support of the United States, Kurdish armed groups have formed a virtually independent quasi-state of Syrian Kurdistan in the northeast of Syria (Gevorgyan, 2019). The cool attitude towards the latter somewhat brings the positions of Damascus and Ankara closer. The need to counter the activities of Kurdish militants and their possible penetration from Syria into Turkish territory is actively used by official Ankara as a reason to legitimize the presence in Syria. Official Damascus demands the return of the northern regions of the country occupied by the Turkish military and their proxies under control.

In March 2017, large-scale seven-party talks were held in Astana (Republic of Kazakhstan), one of the main tasks of which was to achieve an acceptable compromise between Syria and Turkey. As a result, there were a lot of recommendations on the withdrawal of Syria from the state of civil war, including that the Syrian region of Idlib, occupied by pro-Turkish and independent militants from it, will become a de-escalation zone (Bibikova, 2020). Russia's assistance to the Turkish-Syrian dialogue is caused not only by its close economic partnership with Turkey, but also by understanding the latter's role in the fate of millions of Syrian refugees. At the same time, the Russian Foreign Ministry consistently supports the legitimate demands of Damascus to return to it the areas occupied by pro-Turkish groups.

Unlike France in the 1930s, the Russian Federation has great respect for the sovereignty of Syria, which is under its friendly patronage. This attitude was especially pronounced during the offensive of the

Syrian troops against the militants of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham at the end of 2019-2020. The successes and rapid advance of the SAR army caused dissatisfaction with Turkey, which sent its military equipment to Idlib, declaring the need to protect its observation posts, and in an ultimatum demanded that the Syrian government withdraw troops outside the de-escalation zone. After Damascus rejected Ankara's ultimatum, two days of fighting between Turkish and Syrian troops began. Only the firm position of Russia has separated the warring parties. March 5, 2020, the Presidents of Russia and Turkey, V. Putin and R. Erdogan, have agreed on the cessation of hostilities in the Syrian province of Idlib (Felgenhauer, 2020).

There are well-founded doubts about the desire of the Turkish side to assume obligations. Some experts suspect that taking advantage of the weakening of Syria, Ankara is trying to repeat the Hatay precedent in Idlib, as evidenced by the cancellation of Syrian identity cards and family documents in this territory and their replacement with new Turkish ones, the opening of branches of Turkish universities here and even the renaming of local names in the Turkish way (Semenov, 2021). There is no doubt that in the context of Turkey's foreign policy expansion, pressure on the official Syrian government to somehow subordinate Damascus and involve it in the neo-Ottoman project will undoubtedly continue. However, given the increasingly recovering position of the current President of the SAR B. Assad, Damascus may not be limited to the return of the northern regions of the country, but will return to the traditional claims to Hatay (Lundgren, 2014; Suleymanov, 2015). Turkey's economic resources have been undermined by the pandemic and the maintenance of more than three million refugees, because the provision of tens of thousands of fighters in northern Syria cannot last indefinitely. There is no doubt that the Turkish Government is aware of the prospect of losing control over the North Syrian areas and therefore will make efforts to get, perhaps, a high price for their return. Such relations cannot be called friendly or even equal in any way, and therefore, the most likely scenario for the further development of Turkish-Syrian relations is their rollback to a state of permanent confrontation and geopolitical competition in the region of the Fertile Crescent of the Cold War.

4. Purpose of the Study

Identification of the origins and key aspects of the Turkish-Syrian confrontation in the second half of the XX – early XXI centuries, as well as analysis of the state, dynamics and prospects for further development of Turkish-Syrian relations.

5. Research Methods

The methodological basis of the research is the principles of historicism and objectivity. With the help of the principle of historicism, it was possible to chronologically trace the sequence of foreign policy relations between the governments of Turkey and Syria in the XX – early XXI centuries. The problem of the role of collective memory as a tool for solving urgent political problems is also touched upon.

6. Findings

Syria has twice in its history become the first object of Turkish expansion after departing from the policy of foreign policy neutrality. It should be noted that, as in the 1930s, the activation in the Syrian direction in 2010 was supported by most of the Turkish population, which in both cases is explained by the appeal to the Ottoman past. If in the first case it was relevant due to relatively recent memories of the collapse of the empire, then at the present stage the actualization of the Ottoman political heritage is the result of the active information policy of the Turkish government. Ankara's intervention in the internal affairs of Syria is part of a large-scale turn in the Turkish foreign policy doctrine, according to which Turkey should strive to restore the status of hegemon in the Eastern Mediterranean after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

7. Conclusion

In the second half of the 1930s, Turkey obtained from France the cession of the territory of part of the mandated Syria – the Alexandretta Sanjak. At the same time, the French leadership was not interested in the opinion of the Syrians. After Syria gained independence, its new leadership put forward claims to the South Turkish province of Hatay formed on the site of the former sanjak. During the second half of the 20th century, Turkish-Syrian relations were strained.

After some warming in the 2000s, Turkish-Syrian relations have again deteriorated. Since 2017, Turkish military forces have been directly involved in the intra-Syrian conflict and control several northern regions of Syria on behalf of local political groups dependent on Ankara. There is a similarity with the situation of the 1920s and 1930s. In turn, the Syrian government, which is restoring its former positions, demands their return. In this regard, the most likely scenario for the further development of Turkish-Syrian relations is a return to the state of permanent confrontation during the Cold War.

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