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**The Regional Repercussions of
Turkey-Syria Relations**

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The Regional Repercussions of Turkey-Syria Relations

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Abstract

The Arab uprisings which began in December 2010 have turned into a development which has affected the whole of the Middle East. Many Middle Eastern cities began to undergo important transformations in their social, political and economic structures. As a result of the influence of these uprisings the conflicts which also began in Syria in March 2011 have become a turning point in the Turkey-Syrian relationships. Since March 2011 there has been a reversal in their relationship which was heading towards a very positive direction and a reversal in the positive social, economic and political influences gained by some of the Syrian border cities of Turkey following the July 1998 Adana agreement. This study will be dealing with analysing how the Turkey-Syria relationship from 1998 to date has made an impact on the political, economic and social aspects upon the city of Hatay. In this context, we argue that Turkey's Syrian policy has become the most important factor that has influenced and transformed the city of Hatay situated along Turkey's Syrian borders. The study will elaborate upon the bilateral relations within the framework of their economic relations, ethnic conflicts/reconciliations and their refugee affairs.

Key Words: Turkey-Syria relations, Arab uprisings, Hatay, refugee, ethnic divides /alliances

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The borders have become important due to, on the one hand, the increase in the number of the refugees/migrants fleeing from war, hunger and poverty conditions; and on the other hand, the ongoing debates on the strength of the national borders within a globalized world.

The borders function as memory spaces of the nation-states since they are physical entities surrounding a homeland. The culture and identity formation of space across politically inscribed boundaries that demarcate identities such as nationality, citizenship, ethnicity become important factors to be considered within this framework (Kearney, 2004). The symbolic spaces of the borders are always, on the one hand, under social, cultural, and political construction (Kumar and Grundy-Warr, 2007), and on the other hand, are multiple since people tend to seek their identifications and social alignments along different axes (Robertson, 1992; Appadurai, 1996) under influence of local, national and supranational entities. From this perspective, we will attempt to examine the Turkey-Syria relations and their impact on the Hatay border space in terms of its historical, social, economic and cultural transition since 1998. This paper explores how the two types of borders – the geopolitical and the cultural – are interrelated (Kearney, 2004) and transform the border space of Hatay at the Turkish-Syrian border. It argues that Turkey's Syrian policy has become the most determining factor that has transformed the political, social and economical situations as well as the identification processes in Hatay since the late 1990s.¹

Spring Time in Bilateral Relations and its Influence

Until the late 1990s, the relations between Syria and Turkey remained problematic due to the water, Hatay and Kurdish issues. With the water and Hatay issues keeping their importance for Syria; and Turkey developing a concern about the Syrian support for the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), the relations became more complicated.

The water issue which arose between Syria, Iraq and Turkey remained active in the 1980s. While this problem was considered by Syria and Iraq as a water sharing problem of the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates due to the construction of barrages by Turkey in the 1980s; Turkey described it as a water sharing problem of the River Orontes (Kut, 1993), which flows through Lebanon, Syria, and Hatay to the Mediterranean Sea. Under the influence of the Kurdish issue, this problem between Syria and Turkey has become not only a technical and economic problem but also a political one. In this period, as Turkey considered this issue interdependent with the Kurdish question, it refused to negotiate in this matter without any progress regarding Syria's support for the PKK. As for Syria, it continued to support the Kurdish PKK movement until the late 1990s, and used this factor as a bargaining tool for other problems with Turkey (Eder and Carkoglu, 2002).

¹This study is the outcome of a qualitative study of field between 2000 and 2013.

The bilateral relations shaped around the developments regarding these questions paved the way for social, economic and cultural repercussions on the border cities between two countries. However, the Adana Agreement became a turning point in relations between Turkey and Syria. In this context, not only did diplomatic relations improve, but also the economic ties between the two countries were strengthened. In June 2000, with Bashar el-Assad's presidency, several agreements on economic and security cooperation were signed between Syria and Turkey. It was decided that Syrian experts would participate in the international training program of the GAP. In this positive atmosphere, the Syria declared that even the Hatay issue between Syria and Turkey could be resolved (Ntvmsnbc, 2000). Turkey was eager to open its borders as much as Syria would agree to. Turkey's aim was to realize cross-border trade and to create a free-trade zone by removing customs restrictions (Aras, 2012). Turkey and Syria signed the free trade agreement, according to which they agreed to reduce customs taxes gradually until they would finally be removed (Milliyet, 2004).

Turkey with the AKP government, which came to power in 2002, has engaged in the regional questions in an active manner. The purpose was to become a major regional power by filling the vacuum in the Middle East, following the failure in Iraq and the absence of Arab leadership on the Palestinian issue. This aim of the AKP was epitomized by the "strategic in depth" doctrine and "zero problems with the neighbors" principle promoted by Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu (Davutoglu, 2009). In accordance with this new discourse, during that period, Turkey strengthened its relations with Syria.

The upper level visits were realized between the two countries during the AKP government. In January 2004, the President of Syria, Bassar al-Assad, visited Turkey. This visit was immediately followed by Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Syria in December 2004. The two sides tried to develop a common approach vis-à-vis the developments against the establishment of a Kurdish state in the north of Iraq (Bar, 2006). In this period, Assad followed a severe policy against the PKK militants and impeded their activities in Syria (Ntvmsnbc, 2005). The relations were "improved in a perfect manner in all areas" as declared by President Assad in October 2006 (Ntvmsnbc, 2006).

In October 2009, the Strategic Cooperation Council, including ministers of the two countries, met in Aleppo and Gaziantep to improve bilateral relations in all fields. The AKP's attempt to strengthen trade relations with Syria received support from different business organizations. This strategy succeeded by providing an increase in volume in the Turkish-Syrian trade (Aras, 2012). Positive developments were also marked in relation to the border security issues. In July 2011, both sides agreed upon the clearance of mines in the Turkey-Syria border and the agricultural use of these areas.

This opening in their relations has brought about an atmosphere of spring and of hope to Hatay at the border. Hatay's economy felt an appreciable development in transportation and tourism sector. The cross-border and small scale trade increased. In Hatay, business life functions as the space where

ethnic communities link their “bonding” and “bridging” capital (Field, 2003) through circumstantial and instrumental relations based on capitalist structures which let them go beyond ethnicity and religion to develop business relations and cooperation. As all of the communities were affected positively from this economic development, this economic prosperity had positive impact on the intercultural relations of Hatay inhabitants. Since this period was a time when Turkey was going through negotiations with the EU and Turkey was promoted as role model to the Middle East in the democratic sense and to solve the regional problems, the questioning of the unitarian identity and the voicing of multiculturalism was set in motion.

In this context, the Prime Minister’s Office organized a conference in Hatay entitled “Meeting of Civilizations” in 2005 with a view to exhibiting an example of multiculturalism in Turkey to the whole world. This time some newspaper articles were explaining with pride how Hatay’s multicultural structure was problem-free. Therefore, Hatay was presented as proof of the pluralistic openness of the Turkish state for ethnic-religious minorities. This presentation helped the development of a multicultural regional identity in Hatay over ethnical/religious identities. This situation shows that the opening of the physical borders also contributes to the opening of the cultural borders. However, it is noteworthy that the emphasis on ‘respect for multiculturalism’ along with this “Meeting of Civilizations” has evoked all the debates related to the essence and functioning of diversity in Hatay. Despite it being true that Hatay has remained a unique Anatolian city where all the major ethnic/religious communities represent an important ‘social capital’, there are criticisms directed at the artificial character of the existing multiculturalist discourses.

There were nationalist sentiments expressed as “is Hatay always going to be famous for its Christian churches? As a Muslim this is making us anxious” (Arab Sunni, M, 40, univ.) and as “Hatay is being Vaticanized”¹. While some just interpret how they coexist together in a funny but challenging way as “when I married my wife was very thin, now she has become 80 kilos, even if we do not like it we have to put up with it. The same applies to the Alawite(Turkish Sunni, M, 56, p.s.) and “Do we have to be awarded for not killing each other? They used to shoot each other [meaning the events in the 80’s], now they don’t. Everybody lives hiding their religion (Turkish Sunni, M, 40, univ.). On the one hand, the Alawites were voicing their disappointment for not being represented in this conference. According to one respondent, ‘these practices can be interpreted as ‘a complementary attitude of ignorance at State

¹See ‘The meeting supported by Erdoğan has created a debate’, *Milliyet*, 29.08.2005; <http://www.aktifhaber.com/akpde-hatay-sorunu-45820h.htm>, (20 May 2012).

level' despite the Alawites forming an important part of Hatay's multiculturalism (Arab Alawite, M, 50, univ.).

Nevertheless, under the influence of the positive developments in relations, people in Hatay witnessed the strengthening of the cultural cooperation between Turkey and Syria. Mutual visits of intellectuals, poets, artists, and musicians contributed to this framework. Common cultural activities were realized. Such an atmosphere paved the way for the decrease in prejudice related to the Arab culture, literature and language in Hatay.

The opening of the cultural and physical border not only facilitated economic relations, but also created regional consciousness over any ethnic or religious consciousness. However, this situation did not pose a threat to Turkish national identity (Wilson and Donnan, 1998). On the contrary, Turkey's positive attitude towards Syria fuelled the belonging feelings of the ethnic identities in Hatay.

Winter Time following the Arab Uprisings

Just as the relationship between the two countries were going very well and reflecting upon the regional development in a positive way this spring time in the bilateral relations has turned to winter following the Arab uprisings which launched in December 2010. As the so-called Arab uprising changed the balances in the Middle East, it also affected Turkey-Syria relations to a great extent over the course of time. Since the beginning of the uprisings, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya overthrew their leaders; and other countries such as Yemen, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia responded violently to the uprisings which occurred in their countries. Syria did not remain unaffected from these events. In March 2011, the wave of uprising reached Syria to a limited degree. Nevertheless, these protests have grown with outside support.

Since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria in March 2011, the bilateral relations began to deteriorate. Turkey realized some meetings with Syria in order to provide Assad's reconciliation with the opponents. Davutoğlu met with Assad in August 2011. In this context, Turkey revealed its position against the Assad regime. Erdoğan openly declared its support for the rebels in November 2011 (New York Times, 2011).

Turkey has been supporting the Syrian National Council (SNC) around the refugee camps on its soil and has been providing military aid in an active manner. Some of these camps are harboring Syrian defected military officials who have been called the "Free Syrian Army" (RT, 2012). Whereas Turkey lances its help as humanitarian, it also promotes a Sunni-based policy in the Middle East, which is parallel to that of the US. It wants a Sunni government to come to power instead of Assad's Alawite regime. In this context, it has become obvious that Turkey supports Muslim Brothers in Syria. This Islamist organization held a conference in Istanbul and denounced the Assad regime (Aras, 2012). The leader of this organization expressed their support for a possible military intervention of Turkey against the Assad regime (Reuters,

2011). Supporting such Sunni groups, Turkey also aims to counter its rival Iran in the region (Gause and Lustick, 2012).

Turkey calls to the “international community” to respond militarily to the Syrian regime at every occasion. Meanwhile, the conflict between the Assad forces and the Syrian opponents backed by Turkey has been intensifying. During the conflict on the border, five persons were killed in Urfa – a border town of Turkey. Upon this event, Turkey’s parliament has authorized cross border military action against Syria (CNN, 2012). Turkey retaliated the shelling of its border town by firing at targets in Syria. Then, Turkey forced a Syrian passenger plane to land in Turkey to stop the transfer of weapons to Syria said its foreign minister (BBC, 2012). The car bomb event in February and May 2013 at Hatay’s border gate to Syria and town of Reyhanli (in Hatay) near the Syrian border, which caused more than 50 deaths and injuries, has made relations tenser than ever (Sunday’s Zaman, 2013; BBC, 2013).

The serious breakdown of the Turkey-Syria relationship has affected daily life within all border cities, but the most in Hatay. This is not only because of economic and safety reasons but also its demographic profile and ethno-religious composition which highly resembles the Syrian one. At present it has become the subject of interest to international humanitarian NGO’s, researchers, journalists and to security intelligence agents due to having two entry points - into Syria and for sheltering a large number of Syrian refugees.

The Syrian events have resulted in raising the unemployment figures and in creating a crisis. This situation has affected the city economy on a large scale, which would definitely change the balance on which ethnic relations are orientated. International business, with the economic contribution from all the groups, in particular Arab speaking minority communities, has been functioning as an important dimension in the infrastructure that enhances the experience of diversity and cooperation in Hatay. However, following the Syrian uprisings and Turkey’s Syrian policy, the trade volume to the Middle East has slowed down. The transportation has almost stopped. Therefore, thousands of inhabitants have been exposed to poverty in Hatay.

As far as the safety in Hatay is concerned, it has become an important cause for concern. The quality of life among the border inhabitants deteriorated. Mutual attacks on borders caused fear in the city. The car bomb events particularly realized in February and May 2013, one in Hatay’s border gate to Syria and the other in Reyhanli-a town near the Syrian border-, causing more than 50 deaths and injuries, have fuelled fear as well as anger among the city inhabitants. In this context, the concern of the city inhabitants about the expansion of the Syrian conflict into Hatay has increased. The feeling of exclusion and fear has also intensified following the abduction of the two Orthodox bishops by the Syrian rebels in a suburb of Aleppo as they were returning from Hatay¹ and the threatening note left to an Alawite priest’s

¹See <http://rt.com/news/orthodox-bishops-abducted-syria-231>, (15 May 2013).

house.¹ These events have potential to change balance in Hatay since the Orthodox Christians living in Hatay are spiritually bound to the Damascus Patriarchy in Syria despite their official dependence on the Istanbul Greek Orthodox Patriarchy (Macar and Benlisoy, 1996). Until today, this link with Damascus has remained valuable (Andrews 1989) as the Christians' experience of border identities is related to their relatives in Syria, to their marital relations with Syrian Christians and to their network with the Syrian Patriarchy, where they send their priests for religious training.

The movements at the Turkish-Syrian border have thus influenced the social cohesion and ease, which already sits on a very sensitive balance among the local ethnic groups. It is upon this slippery slope that it is difficult to determine how the Syrian issue is going to transform the inter-ethnic relations in the city as conflict or reconciliations are showing a potential to inverse in every direction. Nearly every ethnic/religious groups have relatives or co-religionists, or co-ethnics in Syria. With the intensification of the civil war in Syria, the fact that the city's border towns accommodated the thousands of Syrian refugees either those who have been settled in the refugee camps or those who have come with a passport and have stayed in the properties they have rented; as well as radical Islamists who have travelled transit over Turkey to fight in Syria, have changed the general aura of the city.

Points of views that generalize the Alawite minority group as Baathists as a result of their concerns and reactions against the prospect of a war between Turkey and Syria; and all refugees as warriors are damaging both groups and bringing them into confrontations. "When the number of refugees increased, they began to think in terms of - if the Syrian problem does not get resolved in the short term, all of these refugees will remain here and share our bread, in fact we will be deprived of our bread (..) After all, those from Hatay, no matter which group they come from as a result of having lived with each other for many years they know each other. Apart from the Iskenderun industrial zone as here is not used to in migrations from the outside, they have begun to show a common attitude against those who are coming from Syria (...) the people do not want to share their bread" (Arab Sunni, 45, M, Univ.).²

The crisis has created a volatile discourse and stance against refugees. Both the city people and the refugees are becoming victims both in the social and in the economic sense. Today, within the rules of the camps controlled by the United Nations, the refugees are not allowed to enter the city center, however they are seen everywhere. Therefore, exodus of refugees across border raised tension in the city. "The refugees, whose legal status has yet to be determined, opening up their own hospitals, schools and business places as

¹The representatives of some labour unions, chambers, the Armenian community, the Alevi and other cultural associations provided a press release in front of the Antakya Orthodox church. See *Samandağ Kent Günlüğü*, 15 May 2013.

²At the end of each citation religious affiliation, gender, age and highest level of school career will be indicated: "p.s." for interviewees for whom elementary/primary school was the highest level of scholarization, "h.s." for people who finished high school, and "univ." for people who got a university diploma.

soon as they arrive has began to cause the local businesses to feel aggrieved and has caused fights among the refugees and the local people. In fact in one fight a police officer was shot at and killed.” (Turkish Alawite, M, 55, Univ.). This situation is increasing reactions against the refugees: They become target of attacks in wake of Reyhanlı bombing (Dünya Times, 2013).

Both in the local and national press, some discussions are taking place throughout this process of change as to what is going to be the Arab Alawite’s stance and how they are likely to develop intensified transnational identifications. Within the secular regime it has been observed that the Alawites have adopted the Turkish identity – either in the citizenship or in the ethnic context - and have abandoned their language in order to become integrated towards the regional culture and benefit from the economic and educational opportunities. Religion, similar to the other communities, is an indivisible part of their identity. However, the recent events intensify the feeling of being a minority and being “held in contempt” among the members of the three Arab minority groups.

The polarizations that appeared to be between the Alawites and the Sunni refugees turned out to be between all the people of Hatay -regardless of religion- and the refugees. Many Arab, Turk and Circassian Sunnis illustrated their annoyance towards the killing of civilians and terrorism. They associated them with the refugees and directed their anger towards the Sunni refugees who before the event were able to take shelter in the town. Anti-refugee attitude has become widespread. The reason for the people’s concern on public order is triggered by ideas such as “they are not being familiar with the Hatay culture” [in the sense of living together, being tolerant]; “they have a lot more confidence than the locals”; “they have terrorized here”; “it is not clear as to who is coming or going”. At the border provinces and districts tension is on a rapid escalation, an environment of fighting and violence is on the rise every passing day. Indeed, the real question is based on the existence of radicals amongst the group of people who appear to be refugees.

The city people are showing a tendency to take a very surprising and paradoxical political stance against multi-component international politics with respect to their personal socialization processes and daily interests. People who were on opposite poles in the past, are today able to be on the same pole according to conjuncture. As we have already noted, this time the distance arised between the Sunni and Alawite turned to be between the local people (regardless of religion) and the refugees. Through these development we have seen how identification processes are being flexible and multiple with regard to value-orientations. As Barth (1969) defined very well, ethnicity is a bundle of shifting interactions rather than a nuclear component of social organization. Self-ascription and ascription by others are the critical factors that create ethnic groups and identities. Such internal and external ascriptions establish boundary mechanisms that help distinguish a particular group from others. But these boundaries are not permanent and remain in constant flux. Accordingly, the greater differences between the values and orientations of people lead to more

constraint on inter-ethnic interaction than ethnic group characteristics and racial differences.

Turkey's Sunni based policy in the Middle East has paved the way for concern among the Alawites and Christians, as a result of which interesting political stances have emerged such as a group of Alawites who have developed a sympathy with Turkish nationalism (in line with the Turkish Worker's Party). So, in this respect it is very interesting to hear that "Members of the Turkish Workers Party along the Turkish nationalist lines (nationalist), who view all the developments as a part of America's Middle East politics, carry Asad's posters in their own meetings as they consider him to be anti-imperialist. The Alawites due to their secular ways and being along the Kemalist lines are able to meet at the same point with them. As a consequence with regard to the Alawite, in particular among the secular Sunni Turks, there is a perception of, "they are not on the Syrian side, they do not want education in their own language like the Kurds, they are Arabs but they are good Arabs" (Turkish Sunni, 58, M, Univ.)

It was also very interesting to hear from a conservative nationalist partisan being able to talk in terms of "there are some Alawites who work within our party" (Arab Sunni, M, 43, h.s.) or to hear from a right-wing nationalist activist "where are those leftist brothers (...) we should get together against American imperialism". People who see themselves as left-wing are able to take on a Turkish nationalist stance even if they are of Arabic descent with regard to the debates concerning the Kurdish issue, the social peace discourses and the parallel debates of the local autonomies; education in the mother language; the issue of citizenship; whether the emphasis should be on being Turkish or having a Turkish identity?". However, a while ago the Alawites were considered a suspected group by the nationalist, dominant authority. In this respect, when the Kurdish question became a matter of conflict between Turkey and Syria, some newspaper articles appeared implying that there may be a possible cooperation between the PKK and Arab Alawites, and between the Arab Alawite students that had been educated in Syria.¹ Such accusatory articles had caused a high level of discomfort within this community. This attitude is connected to the nationalist perception of the religious minorities as "internal aliens", "others" within their own country (Canefe, 2002; Bora, 1995; Oran, 2004, Dündar, 2002). Being exposed to such attitudes different expressions of identity emerged especially among the minority groups. Therefore, the Turkish citizenship identity was adopted by some and there were also people who accepted Turkishness as an ethnic identity.

Nevertheless, identity politics in Turkey run through the Syrian crisis on a religious basis has always a potential to threat the regional peace found on a pluralist culture. In relation to the latest protests associated with Gezi park –in which one of the persons who died was from Hatay- the government's response to democratic demands of the society, seem to be very decisive in how Turkey

¹See "Türk Öğrencilere Suriye Kancası", *Milliyet*, 2 March 1998; T. Şardan, "Hatay'a Büyük Gözaltı", *Milliyet*, 18 September 2000; N. Akman, "Hataylı'nın Kefiliyim", *Sabah*, 1 Nov. 1998.

will deal with its plurality and border management. The government neither have provided a speech to calm down the inhabitants - in particular the minorities- who are worried about their own future; nor clarified the status of the refugees called ‘guests’. It is difficult to determine how the Syrian issue is going to transform the inter-ethnic relations in the city which are showing a potential to inverse in every direction upon such a slippery slope.

Conclusion

Since the late 1990s, Turkey-Syria relations have had different effects on the border cities of Turkey by creating political, economical and social transformations. The relations being largely shaped by the Turkey’s policy towards Syria have not only paved way for the economic, political and social changes but also for different belongings and political stance among the inhabitants of Hatay.

Turkey’s Sunni biased policy towards Syria does not seem to have created a Sunni-Alawite divide in the region. By contrast, this policy fuels an enmity throughout the city of Hatay against the Syrian refugees. If Turkey-Syria relations continues as it is, the identification process in this border city will probably be affected in negative manner under the perceptions of exclusion from the whole of society.

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