A Comparative Study on Iran's and Turkey's Foreign Policy Approaches to the Syrian Crisis 2010-2011

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Abstract: *Undoubtedly,no other eventin recent yearscan be compared with Syrian developmentsin its capability of fosteringpolitical polarization that reminds us the Cold War era. Meanwhile, the positions and policies of regional and international players have given new forms to political equilibrium, with the confrontation of some of the old friends, and on the other hand bringing together strategic rivals in the Syrian politics. This crisis has affected theregional relations between Iran and Turkey and given rise to challenges in the relations between the two countries. The most important finding of the present article, which has been reached via using descriptive-analytical method, is the fact that Iran's and Turkey's foreign policies towards the Syrian crisis are based on maintaining national interests and increasing regional power. While Iran supports the Syrian government and its president, Bashar al-Assad, Turkey has supported the regime's opponents in Syria. This has affected the relations between Iran and Turkey, and has brought Iran-Turkey relations into a new phase.*

Key words: *Syria crisis, foreign relations, Iran foreign policy, Turkey foreign policy*

INTRODUCTION

Developments in the region during the past five years have led to major changes in the concepts and theories of international relations, especially those related to the country's foreign policy issues. National interest as leading guide of every state has also encountered major challenges for the countries in the region; Iran and Turkey, as the two major and active players in the region who seek to promote their level of action in the region and the world, have established new ties and at the same time experienced new breaks in their notions of each other and their national interests.

As two non-Arab countries in the Middle East, Iran and Turkey are among the key countries in the region. The two countries have not had any border conflicts or similar issues since 1639, and the borders of the two countries remain unchanged until today. With the victory of the Justice and Development Party in the parliamentary election of 2002, Turkey's foreign policy underwent through major changes. Turkey tried to communicate with all parties involved in regional crises; Turkey emerged as an economic pole of the region and improved its relations with other countries; Turkey established ties with all its neighbors, including Iran and Syria; Turkey invited Israel and Syria to negotiate, and tried to bring them to negotiation table for direct talks in 2008;Turkey proposed Iran and the United States to hold talks on nuclear issues, and pioneered the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the internal negotiations of the Palestinians. But with the advent of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, bilateral relations between Iran and Turkey entered a new phase. These two countries were friendly neighbors until mid-2011 and shared views on many issues and their relationships were promoted to strategic partners. Today, these relationships are changing, and the two countries are no longer communicating as two old friends. With the eruption of public uprisings in Syria in January 2011, the differences of views of the two countries grew to vast proportionate and they openly stances against each other. In fact, the differences between the two countries' views on the developments in Syria revealed when Turkey pursued a policy of supporting the oppositions of the government of Bashar al-Assad, while Iran, insisting on reforms, called for an end to

the interference of foreign countries in the developments in Syria and the full stop of arms export from neighboring countries to the opposition (Massoudnia, 2011: 157).

1- Iranian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Crisis:

Syria in the current context is Iran's most important regional issue for decision-making in the domain of foreign policy. Thus, we can analyze two role-centered views of regional players regarding the Syrian crisis. First, playing a role on the basis of "geographic gravity", which is closer to the classical Realism theory, and secondly, playing a role based on the "identity"-centered conception of the interests and the sense of threat from the role that is undertaken by other players, which can be traced in the framework of constructive theory.

As to the first view, role playing is based on the "geographical gravity" and its necessity to create a balance and political-security stability in the Middle East. Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are the key players of this view who pursue most of their foreign policy goals and objectives upon the priority of bringing stability to the Middle East's political geography. Accordingly, the absence or presence of a regional player's active role is against the traditional balance of power system in the region, and it causes instability and increases the competition. Here, the players are of key role in the regional stability and increasing cooperation, even despite the existing disagreements on the management of issues, as well as in reducing tensions that are directly related to the goals, principles and geopolitical interests of these players.

In the second view, role playing is based on "identity conception." According to this view, culture, values, and principles of governments play a vital role in shaping the regional politics of players, and the interests and identity of players change when certain developments occur (such as recent developments in the Arab world). Turkey and Qatar represent this view and have regulated their regional policies and benefits in Syrian crises based on their identity role and ever-increasing presence in the changing conditions of the region. To put it otherwise, these two players, with having any centrality and geographical gravity, as well as an identity link to regional issues, only relying on with own soft power, have been struggling to play a key role in the Syrian crisis beyond their political-security capabilities. In fact, the scale of the role of Turkey and Qatar depends on their proximity or coalition to/with a traditional player in the region. Before the emergence of the recent developments in Arab world, Turkey and Qatar, played a mediating role in Hezbollah and Hamas issues through Iran (a traditional player), and, consequently they were able to enter the Middle East issues. The new Egyptian government never included Qatar in a quadripartite regional cooperation. Saudi Arabia is not happy with the role that Qatar or Turkey currently plays in supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian crisis, which is altogether in conflict with the Saudis' interests and principles of Salafism. Turkey's internal affairs, as recent developments in that country show, do not let the country to play an active role in the regional issues. The Syrian crisis has demonstrated that it is really hard to replace the traditional and classical role of states that is based on geographic stability with the role of new players who do not have the classic identity as well as any connection to the political-security issues of the region. Therefore, the role of Turkey and Qatar is gradually weakening. (Barzegar, 2013).

Then, not only regionalism in the Middle East is one of the most basic principles of Iranian foreign policy, rather due to the geopolitical structure of the Middle East, Iran is considered as one of the main foundations of the strategic developments of the region. Iran's main option is restoring the current Syrian regime, rebuilding the country and granting freedoms in the form of civil national demands. (Partow, 2013: 7).

Iran supports the Syrian Government: Reasons

1-1-Maintaining the Regional Power Balance

In the course of the developments related to Syrian crisis, regional rival powers of Iran, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, are unhappy with the current situation and are demanding a change in the regional power balance. These players seek to cut Syria's ties with Iran, as one of Iran's key allies in the region and the bridge to the Hezbollah and Hamas resistance groups, and by doing so to change the regional power balance in their own interests (Nejat, 2014: 74).

1-2-Strategic and Geopolitical Significance of Syria for Iran

Syria is a geopolitical player and three factors of locating in the Middle East strategic area, being on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea and having 186 kilometers of coastline and neighboring the Occupied Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, clearly show its geopolitical significance in the regional and international relations. This country can be a major route for oil and gas export from Iraq and Iran to Europe through the ports of Banias and Tartus on the Mediterranean coast (Jafari Volandani and

Nejat, 2014: 172). Syria's route reduces the Iraq and Iran's dependence on Persian Gulf, the Suez Canal, and even Turkey for energy export. This is one of the reasons that have incited the Turkish geopolitical rivalry with Syria.

1-3-Strategic Unity of Syria with Iran in the Region

During the years after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Syria has been continuously the closest Arab ally to Iran. The Syrian regime was beside Iran during the war that Saddam imposed to Islamic Iran. Syria's place, both geopolitically and in view of the type of government in which it holds power, on the one hand, and also due to Syria's support for the resistance movement and the Iranian front, on the other hand, is of paramount importance for the strategic and regional policies of Iran. (Farzandi, 1391: 24).

1-4Maintaining the Link with Hezbollah and the Opposition to Israel

Basically, one of the major factors involved in close Iran-Syria relations can be sought for in the adoption of the same foreign policy against Israel as well as support for Hezbollah in Lebanon. These close relations are supposed to provide the security of Iran as well as Syria against Israel. In these anti-Zionist strategies, Lebanon's Hezbollah plays a key role in the foreign policy of Iran and Syria, and with the support of Iran and Syria has been able to strike heavy blows both politically and militarily, on Israel. The relations of Iran and Syria are fundamentally important for both sides, and maintaining this unity in the region is of immense importance for Iran (Salimi, 2015).

2- Turkey's Foreign Policy in Syrian Crisis

According to many analysts, Turkey's foreign policy is an inconsistent mixture of Westernism, nationalism, peaceful regionalism, regional supremacy, secularism, independence, populism and Turkism, which has led to some contradictory behaviors in its foreign policy in recent decades. One of Turkey's questionable behaviors is its foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis, which contradicts the policies of Erdoğan's government in recent years in the international arena.

While the foreign policy of the Islamist party of Justice and Development since the beginning of 2000 has been based on normalization of relations with its neighbors and a tendency towards a positive and independent role playing in the region, it suddenly changed upon the emergence of the Syrian crisis, and having close relations with the western countries in general and US in particular was replaced. The most important reasons for Turkey's shift to this policy can be summarized as follows:

2-1- Changing the Regional Power Balance

Recent developments in the Middle East can be declared as the main focus of the regional power balance. Even the slightest shift in the structure of political power in the countries of the region will have strategic implications for different countries. Accordingly, countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia have sought to influence regional equilibrium. Therefore, Turkey and the players that play the role of regional rivals of Iran are trying to reduce the role of Iran in regional security in the Middle East. For this reason, they seek to change the balance of regional power against Iran, on the one hand; and on the other hand, they are trying to influence the new wave of modernization in shaping the regional power structures (Mosalanejad, 2012: 35).

2-2- Geopolitical Significance of Syria for Turkey

Syria's geopolitical significance is considered an important factor in Turkey's stance on the Syrian crisis. In fact, the strategic position of Syria in the region has been one of the reasons for provoking the Turkish geopolitical rivalry with Syria. Turkey is trying to increase its geopolitical areas; therefore, the internal unrest of Syria, after the dominoes of the Arab revolutions, provided an opportunity for the Ankara government to play a role in the developments of the country. No doubt, the Turks conceive Syrian crisis as a unique historical opportunity for acquiring regional domination and increasing their influence in the Middle East, and believe that any change in its regime will greatly increase the influence of Turkey in Syria and, consequently, the Arab Middle East.

2-3- Prioritizing National Interests

Although under Erdogan, Turkey has been expanding its relations with Syria in line with the policy of "tackling problems with its neighbors". However, in spite of the improvement of relations between the two countries in recent years, Turkey's approach to Syria has changed completely following the Arab revolutions. The main pivot of the turn of Erdogan's approach to Bashar al-Assad's policies following recent developments in Syria is due to domestic factors, such as the importance of national interest in Turkish foreign policy.

2-4- Playing the Role of Leadership

The significance of Turkey in the region is continuously increasing, and the Turks' interest in becoming the chief player in the region has overshadowed most of their diplomatic efforts (Omidi and Rezaei, 2011: 233). Then, one of the main goals of Turkey of role playing in the developments in Syria should be sought for in Ankara's ambitions to achieve the role of political leadership in the region.

4- The Consequences of Syrian Crisis for Iran-Turkey Foreign Policies
Despite the expansion of Iran-Turkey relations in the economic, political and cultural spheres after the victory of the Justice and Development Party in Turkish elections and the insistence of the leaders of the two countries on the expansion of economic relations up to the 30 billion dollars a year, and the efforts that Turkey has made to mediate between Iran and the West over the nuclear issue, the fact is that the two countries are disagreeing about some regional and global issues.

Generally speaking, the most important factor that is involved in the coldness of the relations between Turkey and Iran, is the disagreement between the two countries regarding the nature of the crisis in Syria. Iran traces the root of the political crisis in Syria, not to the domestic issues, but rather back to the "the conspiracy of Western governments to destroy the anti-Zionist resistance front" and calls the players of the crisis the mercenary terrorists, but the Turkish government seeks to find the clues to understanding the nature of the Syrian crisis in the developments in Egypt, Libya and Yemen, and the resistance of political dissidents and the armed groups against the government of Bashar al-Assad as a struggle to achieve a democratic government. Accordingly, the positions of the two countries are in conflict in certain points, and the geopolitical and security based interpretation of some of the leaders of the ruling party of Turkey reflects the differences between the two countries' stances as regards the Syrian crisis.

Iran has also repeatedly described Turkey's policy towards Syria as hostile and in contrast with the principles of regional politics and the long-term interests of the country, in line with the goals and strategies of Western powers, and considered Turkey a means for the realization of these goals. Anyway in spite of the numerous negotiations that have taken place between Iran and Turkey in recent months, the two sides have not succeeded in bringing their positions closer together. Instead, the continuation of the disputes regarding the Syrian crisis led to tensions between the two countries. The launching of NATO's missile defense shield in Turkey and Ankara's policies towards Iraq; the gradual shift in Turkey's stance on the nuclear issue and Erdoğan's unprecedented statements of Iran's honesty as regards this issue, after returning from Iran in April 2012, and Turkey's defense of the unilateral Western sanctions are among these issues. This behavior of Ankara can be construed as following the West and putting indirect pressure on Iran in reaction to Iranian politics in Syria (Athari, Haji Mina and Enayati, 2013: 20). Among the main consequences of the differences of opinions of the two countries one can refer to the annulment of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit in protest to the NATO Patriot missile system in Turkey in December 2012 and the suspension of Iran's visa waiver in August 2012 in condemning anti-Iran statements of the Turkish authorities, Turkey's alleged support of Syria's Kurdish opposition and participation in a coalition led by the United States to overthrow the Syrian government. Considering the results of Turkish elections of 2015 and the domination of the incumbent AKP, the cold relations between Tehran and Ankara will continue, as Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Davutoglu have not retreated from their positions towards Bashar al-Assad and believe that Assad should be toppled. For this reason, it is not possible to improve the relations and convergence of the two countries' views on the developments in Syria in the short term.

Conclusion
Based on our previous discussions it is clear that Iran and Turkey have different perspectives of the nature of the Syrian crisis, and these contradictory views on the Syrian crisis has doubled the tensions between the two countries. Turkey, on the one hand, is pushing for a regime change in Syria to strengthen the western solution, and on the other hand, Iran believes that the Syrian government is faced with conspiracies managed by the foreigners. Meanwhile, what exacerbated Tehran and Ankara's rivalry was the Syrian crisis, which is increasing day by day. Iran and Turkey have both major interests in Syria and each of them has specific reasons for supporting or not supporting the Syrian government. The most important reasons behind Iran's support for the Syrian government are: maintaining regional equilibrium, strategic and geopolitical importance of Syria for Iran; the strategic alliance between Syria and Iran in the region; maintaining a link with Hezbollah and a line of opposition against Israel; and the main reasons for Turkey's aggressive policy are: changing the balance of regional power; the importance of the geopolitical Syria for Turkey; the consideration of national interests; its leadership, which has faced such challenges in adopting this policy as: the

emergence of internal turmoil in Turkey; the issue of Kurdish autonomy; the spread of terrorism; the failure of Turkish politics in Syria ; The defeat of the Turkish-Arabic alliance; the refusal of Washington from invasion, which led to a change in its foreign policy approach in Syria. However, the differences between Iran and Turkey's view of Syria, although has its roots in various issues, including; the essential difference of the two countries' foreign policies, dependence or independence on/of the West; but one the main causes of this is the rivalry of the two countries on the balance of power in the region. Iran's regional policy focuses on strengthening alliances and coalitions with friendly groups and governments in the region. The withdrawal of Turkey from the traditional standpoint of the AKP, namely the focus on mediating or zeroing the problem with neighboring countries and adopting a biased stance in the Syrian crisis, is just against the regional policy of Iran, namely the preservation of the current balance of power.

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