

Referendum implications on Turkish foreign policy



Situation Estimation
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Jusoor for Studies
Research Unit



جسور للدراسات
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Preface

16th April 2017 referendum, was not only Turkish domestic affair, but also was linked with foreign political affairs in many aspects, it's thought that, the result will be based on important implications at the foreign policy (Turkey is aware of lacking it) level, due to problems within the current political parliamentary system, moreover, the civil authority lacking of complete control in making foreign policy decisions as Turkey is under heavy bureaucratic and slow decision making which hinder and weaken the great momentum of foreign issues coming from the relationships between state's institutions.

Turkish diplomacy depends on soft power due to institutions' relationships, the thing that led to weakening Turkey position, limiting its choices and lack of its foreign movements, on contrary of other countries (sub-state actors) in the region relying on hard power in order to establish facts on the ground.

Turkish diplomacy depends on traditional instruments, which are in need of enhancing and developing in addition to core staff and HR with experience and training, formed an obstacle before activating Turkish foreign policy.

Adding to what mentioned previously, internal hinders from opposition, demonstrations broke out in 2013 in Gezi Park, the consecutive crises faced the government, explosions committed by ISIL and PKK, fighting FETO (Gülen movement) and coup attempt on 15th July 2016, these factors affected the state mechanism in handling regional issues and turmoil in addition to disagreements with international, worldwide and regional powers.

Transition to presidential system, made a new step in the form of the whole state, influencing different policies and programs. An attempt to anticipate the impact of this Turkish foreign policy shift, will be conducted by this report.

How will the Turkish foreign policy be affected?

Transition to presidency in Turkey will provide many factors, contributing in shifting the form of Turkish foreign policy, these shifts can be as the following:

- 1- The new system will provide a focal political decision as the president to be the Generalissimo with responsibilities for: directing foreign policy, helping in acquiring flexibility in decision-making and mitigating of bureaucracy.
- 2- Shifting of resolution form will lead to an increase in effective and rapid coordination between states' institutions, unifying their efforts for the sake of the general objective.
- 3- The ability of establishing vital institutions and required powers.
- 4- Raising the authority of political organ upon military, enabling making decisions related to plans and operations executed abroad, also, forming alliance with other countries (previously, conducting these procedures required a permission form parliament and might be rejected by opposed parties).

Since the president is the Generalissimo and responsible (in all aspects) for the direction of foreign policy, his powers will enable him to address problems and remove obstacles restricting the movement of foreign policy.

Implication on the foreign policy agenda:

Formal application of constitutional amendments (including shifting to presidential system) will be embarked early of November 2019, until that date, a transition period for internal and external policy to take place as extensive preparation for the upcoming phase will be conducted.

Since the end of referendum, active foreign policy began to emerge as hard power beside soft power and Turkish diplomacy appeared in its highest effectiveness level.

After less than 10 days of referendum, Turkish jet fighters raided on YPG outposts in Syria and PKK outposts in Iraq, in this context, Turkey stressed on fighting the Kurdish scheme of establishing a Kurdish state until the very end, embarking a proactive strategy in countering the Kurdish threat⁽¹⁾.

Declaration of a series of presidential exchanges to effective regional and international countries, has taken place, thus May is deemed one of the most active months concerning presidential diplomacy as Erdogan's agendas are:

first visit to India – first meeting with the new elected American president - visit to Russia and China – attending NATO summit in Brussels – visit to many Arabian Gulf countries.

The nature of visits indicates to vast political and economic arrangements, influencing the future of foreign policy. Erdogan-Trump meeting has a particular importance with high expectations from the Turkish end knowing that, form and nature of Turkish foreign policy will be influenced by the outcomes.

Syria: Russian and American ties

Washington reliance on Kurdish forces in Syria (Ankara considers this issue delicate and decisive) and FETO existence in America have a particular importance in the relationship between Turkey and USA.

In this regard, Turkey is seeking a balancing process between American interests in eliminating ISIL and Turkish interests in preventing any establishment of a Kurdish state in Syria.

Despite the fact that America (Secretary of Defense especially) still considers SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) as a suitable ally for Raqqa

campaign, Ankara is betting on altering this equation after meeting (as planned) with Trump.

Anyway, escalation of Turkish military involvement in Syria is expected with the possibility of separate Turkish action or a joint military operation with Iraq Kurdistan forces against PKK in Sinjar, military campaign against Kurdish forces in Tell Abyad and Raqqa (2) is considered as an option for Turkey.

Ties with Russia:

Turkish policy stresses on the fact that Moscow is not an alternative for Washington and a balancing equation is adopted instead. An attempt to discuss Al-Assad future with Russia is taking place after the referendum result, also focusing on the continuity of trade relations and economic projects between the two countries.

Ties with EU:

Most notable issue for foreign policy agenda was, addressing the Turkish-European tension along with preventing some Turkish seniors (ahead of them Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, minister of foreign affairs) from meeting with Turkish electors (voting for the referendum) in: Germany – Netherland – Austria, as Turkish people living abroad form a vital voting blocs with a great influence on the result especially after the close outcome of the referendum on the behalf of applying the constitutional amendments (end of 2019) with 51.4%.

Tension in Turkish-European ties continued after the referendum (with less intensity), followed by a dialogue about negotiation of Turkey joining EU. Erdogan threatened of ending the negotiations with EU in case new chapters were not opened about this issue.

Turkey rejected EU demands of cancelling state of emergency stating that: "France should cancel it first (3)" yet Turkish foreign policy (gained a great momentum after the referendum) will handle relations with EU more reasonably as Turkey is working through threats and common interests toward EU.

Ties with the region:

Turkey will follow the policy of gaining more allies (already took place with UAE and Israel). Despite the political differences between Turkey and Iran, relations (non-sectarian) between the two countries are going to be tensed and in test case for both of them.

Improvement in relations between Turkey and Arabian Gulf is expected, especially after: breaking the ice with UAE was accomplished, transiting ties between Turkey and Saudi Arabia at strategic level (a vital step for both countries).

Conclusion

Presidential system in Turkey is considered one of the domestic stability at political level, the thing that will provide great stability in foreign policy form and trend, however, it depends on the nature of foreign crises and parties that Turkey is facing. As for the current issues, it seems a great chance for decision makers to address the lack and flaws of previous foreign policy in Turkey.

:Margins

1Khurshid Daly, Turkey choices to face Kurds before Trump-Erdogan meeting. 3rd May 2017

2Khurshid Daly, Turkey choices to face Kurds before Trump-Erdogan meeting. 3rd May 2017

3Bassem Dabbagh, Erdogan criticizes EU, Al Arabi Al Jadid journal. 2nd May 2017

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