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Book Review: 'Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity' by Dr. Gülriz Şen

April 27, 2014 by [Changing Turkey](#)

Review of Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür (eds.), [*Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*](#), (Ashgate, 2013), ISBN: 9781409452812

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Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity is a timely and in-depth account of the drastic change in Turkish-Syrian relations which improved remarkably since the end of the 1990s from the edge of armed confrontation into "brotherly" relations marked by growing political and economic integration and recently suffered from an abrupt break-up with the start of the Syrian Uprising. Edited by Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, the book is a collection of sixteen concise essays authored by acclaimed regional and international scholars of the subject. The book critically analyzes the rise and fall of Turkish-Syrian relations and addresses with analytical vigor the history, geopolitics and political economy of the relations as well as the foreign policy implications of multi-level change in Turkish-Syrian relations.

The book devotes considerable attention to understanding and explaining the recent thaw in relations which can be traced back to 1998, when Turkey's coercive diplomacy and military showdown against Syria's sustained support for the PKK resulted in the Adana Accords and paved the way for gradual rapprochement. According to Süer, who utilized conflict resolution analysis based on Zartman's

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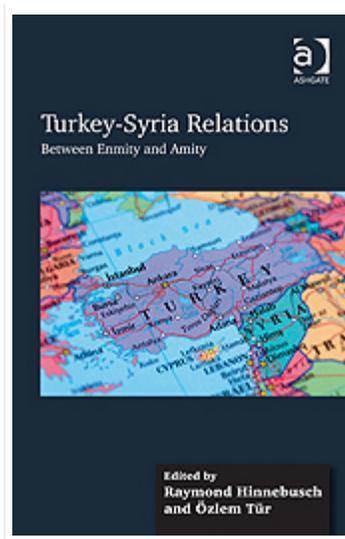
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"ripeness theory", the successful resolution of the conflict in the late 1990s was the outcome of the "ripeness" of both the objective and subjective conditions of the conflict (p. 15). As Jörum (Chapter 9), Akbaba and Özdamar (Chapter 10), Daoudy (Chapter 11) and Kibaroglu (Chapter 12) discuss in detail respectively, the major sources of enmity in Turkish-Syrian affairs have been the territorial dispute over Hatay; Turkey's concern for and resentment against Syrian support for Kurdish separatism and the entanglement of growing discord over the water issue in contentious security issues. Alongside material sources of the conflict, Turkish-Syrian affairs were also partly shaped by the elites' instrumentalization of external threats for self-legitimization, which served to deepen mutual mistrust built on historical myths and realities (p. 210). Moreover, as El-Fadl's analysis of Turkey's position in the 1957 Syrian Crisis puts forward, deep beneath the Turkish decision to mobilize its troops on Syrian borders lay a desire to prove Turkey's pro-Western credentials and ensure Western economic aid to revive Turkish economy and sustain the nation-building project, even though it was justified in the name of containing Arab nationalism and pro-communist forces in the context of the Cold War (Chapter 4).

The authors assert that it was mainly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 that hostility was replaced by amity between Turkey and Syria. Kabalan argues in favour of the role of geopolitics and changing balance of power in the region to account for Turkish-Syrian rapprochement (Chapter 3). Altunışık asserts that it was the *regional constellations* which carried bilateral affairs into a strategic level and underlines that notwithstanding greater hegemonic penetration with the Iraq War, regional actors such as Turkey and Syria were still able to maintain their autonomy and pose their own challenges by "resisting, changing and countering" the attempts to re-make the Middle East (pp. 177-187). Hinnebusch and al-Taqi's analysis adds up the systemic factors arguing that Turkey and Syria established relations of amity at a time an "indeterminate multi-polar system" permitted greater autonomy for regional states and greater contestation of the US hegemony (p. 95). Threatened by the US imperial outreach and possible disintegration of post-Saddam Iraq that would jeopardize their territorial integrity, the course of the 1990s pitting Turkey against Syria as well as Iran over the Kurdish issue was reversed and these states now found a common ground for realignment in regional politics against growing US presence and for preserving Iraq's integrity (Chapters 14 and 15). Moreover, Syria's aspirations to reach out the West through Turkey, its reluctance to rely solely on Iran and its search to draw a wedge between Turkey and Israel also contributed to the recent thaw in relations (Altunışık, p. 187).

The transformation of relations was not solely confined to an adjustment to changing threat perceptions as the editors succinctly underline (p. 209). It encompassed deeper political and economic processes at work. As Tür elaborates



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in her chapter on the political economy of relations, one of the major pillars of the thaw was growing economic integration which was intrinsic to Turkey's economic development patterns and the rising role of Anatolian bourgeoisie in Turkish foreign policy and resulted in the growth of trade, investment, joint ventures and tourism between Turkey and Syria, culminating in a Free Trade Agreement which came into force in early 2007 (pp. 159-160). Once "distant neighbors", the geopolitics of Turkish-Syrian relations formerly built on enmity was replaced with a liberal agenda aimed at crafting political and economic interdependencies. For Turkey, Syria was a gateway to the Middle Eastern markets, especially to the oil rich Gulf region, while for Syria growing economic integration with Turkey promised a lifeline to the Assad regime in its struggle against the mounting American sanctions (p. 161). Turkey posed itself as an economic model for Syria's quest for liberalization and integration into global economy, a model that would even enable Damascus to "extract milk from the male goat", as Moubayed quotes Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan (Chapters 6 and 13). Under the AKP government, Syria became a "showcase" of Turkey's policy of engagement with the Arab world and "zero problems with neighbors" policy (Han, p. 63 and Moubayed, p. 75). Turkey's Syria policy was also a test case for its new foreign policy activism through soft power tools (Altunışık, p.187). Before Turkish-Israeli relations ran into crisis with the deterioration of the Palestinian conflict, Turkey also assumed a mediator role in the peace talks between Israel and Syria and helped Syria to break out its isolation in the face of mounting estrangement with the US (Kabalan, p.35). For Syria, the rising political economy and soft-power of Turkey was highly appealing, as it was in search for protection and adjustment to multi-layered challenges in its internal and external environment under Bashar al-Asad's presidency (Hinnebusch and al-Taqi, p. 108).

The book aptly demonstrates the role of "political will" upon the improvement of relations. Hinnebusch and al-Taqi remark that the change in international and regional context in return impacted on the *innenpolitiken* of both states and led to shifts in the practice and orientation of ruling elites as well as their perceptions of identity, ideologies and development strategies (p. 95). Relations of amity developed under new political leaders and through novel conjunctures of domestic, regional and international dynamics. Accordingly, both the AKP government and al-Asad regime took decisive steps toward amicable relations by redefining their identities, interests and priorities. This confirmed that after years of enmity the tilt towards amity was a *choice* rather than necessity, as Turkey and Syria started to see each other as friends rather than enemies (p. 209). As a matter of fact, the affairs were considered even beyond friendship, as Turkey likened its growing ties with Syria to "coming together of long lost brothers", bound by "common destiny, common history and common future" as Foreign Minister Davutoğlu remarked in 2009. In such an atmosphere of cooperation, integration and brotherly bonds, previous bones of contention over water and territory were to a large extent de-securitized. Daoudy observes that it was only after the political relations started to improve that transnational cooperation over water became operational and the discourse of "benefit-sharing" and increasing emphasis on the "technical" nature of the dispute took precedence over references to sovereignty (p. 141). Kibaroglu likewise draws on the shifts from emphasis on "water rights" and the "sharing the quantity of the water" towards the discourse of "water needs" and "management of the quality of water", and discusses the role of bureaucratic learning processes alongside change in political relations (p. 157). Regarding the territorial dispute

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over Hatay, Jörum observes a similar change brought by the improvement of political relations in the post-1998 era and maintains that neither Turkey, nor Syria allowed their latent conflict over Hatay to mar the progress (p. 122). By doing so, they were able to arrive at a common position based on Turkey's acceptance of Syria's "non-recognition" and Syria's willingness to recognize the province as Turkish territory *in practice* (p. 122). Özdamar and Akbaba in their assessment of the role of ethnic and religious dynamics on Turkish-Syrian affairs reach the conclusion that these factors remained secondary to the more traditional policy concerns of security and economic relations as the "golden era" between 2000 and 2011 has shown. These rather served as "practical tools" to be used, once material and security interests were in clash (p. 132).

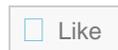
The book also addresses the limits behind the drastic transformation of relations; that are further exposed with the outbreak of the Syrian Uprising and Turkey's gradual positioning against the Assad regime. Oktav argues that Turkey's alignment with Syria was *ad hoc* in nature and it constituted a *quasi* alliance in the absence of a formal collective defense pact (Chapter 15). She argues that a durable alliance faced two major impediments stemming from (1) the power asymmetry between Turkey and Syria, and (2) Turkey's continuous attempts to balance between the West and the region; the latter being perceived as the main stumbling block which prevented further integration in the emerging alliance (p. 194). Han in his neo-classical realist analysis of Turkish foreign policy postulates that since 2010 Turkish foreign policy has been in a position of retreat in the face of systemic factors, which limited Turkey's autonomy for action and put an end to the "years of euphoria" marked by its growing self-confidence in domestic and foreign policy (Chapter 5). From this perspective, the Syrian crisis has shown that Turkey's ambitions have surpassed its *middle size power* capabilities. Furthermore, Turkey's lack of hard power to materialize its ambitions resulted in its search for revitalization of alignment with the West in contrast to its former demand for greater autonomy and its apparent "lurching away from the West" (pp. 66-69). Moubayed draws on the poor institutionalization of relations, which were largely sustained by the high chemistry between Erdoğan and al-Asad (p. 74). Robins' chapter on "football diplomacy" in this regard provides an interesting analysis of how cultural and sporting events served to develop closer personal ties between the leaders and complement the burgeoning institutional and commercial linkages (Chapter 7). Yet, with the "Arab Spring" reaching out to Syria, the "honeymoon" and "friendship through sports" seem to be over, for having failed to persuade the Syrian leader to make decisive reforms and share power. Consequently, Turkey overtly positioned itself against the Syrian regime. Turkish-Syrian affairs are now caught in "sectarian polarization" (p. 109) and the buffer zone that the *quasi* alliance of Turkey, Iran and Syria sought to achieve against external powers has collapsed, which opened the region to greater external penetration and reinforced Turkey's alignment with the US (Hinnebusch & al-Taqi, Oktav and Altunışık). The course of events since 2011 has reversed relations of amity, disrupted the growing integration and revived the past patterns of enmity. Having witnessed desecuritization in the last decade, whether the new conjuncture would turn the clock back and bring re-securitization of affairs is yet to be seen.

To conclude, the book with its thorough discussion of the major issues and fault lines of Turkish-Syrian relations presents a valuable and timely attempt to rethink one of the vital affairs of a transforming region. The scope of the book extends Turkish-Syrian relations with its analytical endeavor which places changing

patterns of Turkey-Syria relations within the major theoretical debates of the discipline of International Relations (IR). The book merits praise for avoiding the pitfalls of single-factor explanations and in particular, for its conclusion that successfully sums up the analytical implications of Turkish-Syrian affairs as a case study for understanding the role of various dynamics in changing alignments. Having shown that identities and interests; systemic and domestic factors as well as global and regional levels interact in a "circular fashion" affecting one another, the editors contend that it is the inter-relations that should be considered for a "productive approach" and call for a "synthetic framework" that would incorporate realism, liberalism and constructivism (p. 223). The book hence is a must-read for students and scholars of IR and the Middle East and stands as a well-structured, comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of Turkish-Syrian affairs.

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