

ACTIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY FACING THE *ARAB SPRING* IN SYRIA

Kinga Smoleń

Zakład Stosunków Międzynarodowych
Wydział Politologii UMCS
e-mail: kinga_smolen@onet.eu

Abstract: The analysis provided in this article encompasses the activities of the Republic of Turkey in light of the events of the *Arab Spring* in Syria. For this purpose, firstly, there is an outline of the assumptions of Turkey's geopolitical strategy in relation to the Middle East region. Secondly, the implementation of this strategy during the lengthy conflict in Syria is analysed thoroughly. Thirdly, a relationship between the outbreak of the *Arab Spring* in Syria and re-evaluation of Turkey's political activities in the Middle East will be shown

Key words: Turkey, the Arab Spring, Middle East region, Syria

INTRODUCTION

The events of the *Arab Spring* in Syria contributed to a re-evaluation of the regional policy of the Republic of Turkey. It was forced to make a choice whether it should meet the expectation of its western allies, including – among others – the United States, and promote the principles of democracy and strongly react to violations of human rights but, at the same time being aware of the fact that doing so would cool relationships with its recent political and economic partners, or rather – adhering to the principle “zero problems with neighbours,” part of its foreign policy concept *Strategic Depth* that excludes interference in the internal policy of other countries – continue the pragmatic cooperation with all political centers, including authoritarian regimes. Due to the emergence of a new regional entity in the form of the Islamic State, Turkey also faced a dilemma whether to give support to its Kurdish minority and also cope with the threat of jihadists. Regardless of the decisions, all actions taken by the Republic regarding the armed conflict in Syria would result in serious international repercussions. These factors determine the geo-strategic position of Turkey in the regional security system.

The analysis provided in this article encompasses the activities of the Republic of Turkey in light of the events of the *Arab Spring* in Syria. For this purpose, firstly, there will be an outline of the assumptions of Turkey's geopolitical strategy in relation to the Middle East region. Secondly, the implementation of this strategy during the lengthy conflict in Syria will be analysed thoroughly. Thirdly, a relationship between the outbreak of *the Arab Spring* in Syria and re-evaluation of Turkey's political activities in the Middle East will be shown.

1. THE GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST REGION

Turkey's foreign policy has undergone a visible evolution since the *Justice and Development Party* government was established in 2002. The establishment of a geopolitical strategy can be perceived as an adaptive process towards the constantly changing parameters of the post-Cold War international system. It sets new priorities for the country's external political actions and the tools for their realization.

The *Strategic Depth* strategy is based on the assumption that the "strategic depth" of every country should be analyzed in the two dimensions of history and geography. "Historical depth" is associated with a country's historical legacy, putting it in the centre of critical historical events and influencing its external policy.¹ "Geographical depth" results from the geopolitical location of a country, which conditions its international actions.²

The legacy of the Ottoman Empire constitutes the "historical depth" of the Republic. As its successor, Turkey is responsible for the stabilization and development of events in the post-empire area, which spreads over the Maghreb to Caucasus and from the Balkans to the Indian Ocean.³ The conditions that favour the co-operation of countries located in such a vast area should be a common tradition, history, religion and culture.⁴

The „geographical depth” is conditioned by the geostrategic location of Turkey between Europe and Asia, with to Africa and in the neighbourhood of such critical

¹ A. Szymański, *Wpływ położenia geopolitycznego na politykę zagraniczną Turcji* (*The impact of Turkey's geopolitical location on its foreign policy*), „Stosunki Międzynarodowe” („International Relations”), no 3–4 2011, p. 185.

² *Ibidem*.

³ A. Balcer, *W stronę strategicznego partnerstwa Unii Europejskiej i Turcji w polityce zagranicznej* (*Towards the strategic partnership of the European Union and Turkey in the domain of the foreign policy*), Warsaw 2010, p. 13.

⁴ J. Bocheńska, *Neoosmańska wizja polityki zagranicznej Turcji* (*Neo-Assurian vision of Turkey's foreign policy*), „Stosunki Międzynarodowe” („International Relations”), http://www.stosunkimiedzynarodowe.info/artukul,963,Neoosmanska_wizja_polityki_zagranicznej_Turcji_, 22.07.2011.

regions of the world such the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Asia and the South Caucasus.⁵ This location makes Turkey a “central country” possessing a “strategic depth” and constitutes a “bridge” between Christian and Islamic worlds.



Map 1. Turkey's geopolitical location

Source : World MapFinder, http://www.worldmapfinder.com/Map_Detail.php

The concept of *Strategic Depth* assumes the use of historical and geographical attributes in order to lead a “global and proactive policy within regional dimension”.⁶ The main aim of political actions is the security of the region, not particular countries. Therefore, it is also important for Turkey to present a balanced approach towards all regions and active political players.⁷ In this way it is going to act as a regional empire.⁸

The tool enabling the realization of an active policy within this regional dimension is *soft power*⁹, substituting physical force with dialogue, economic co-dependence and political, economic and social reforms. These changes have to have an evolutionary character.¹⁰

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ A. Murinson, *The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy*, “Middle Eastern Studies” 2006, vol. 42, no 6, pp. 951–953.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ See: J. S. Nye jr., *Soft Power: Jak osiągnąć sukces w polityce światowej (Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics)*, Warsaw 2007.

¹⁰ A. Davutoğlu, *Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007*, “Insight Turkey” January 2008, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7057/is_1_10/ai_n28514730/pg_2/?tag=content;coll,01.05.2012.

The regional policy should also opt for the rule of ‘zero problems with neighbours,’ which excludes any intervention into other countries’ internal affairs. In addition to strengthening political relationship with neighbouring countries, Turkey should also develop its relations with the United States and the European Union and strive for even closer co-operation with them.¹¹

Relations between Turkey and other participants of the international system have to be based on the “maximum of mutual interests.”¹² The term *other participants of the international system* has to be understood not only as the countries, but also as the so-called non-government actors and international organizations. Such an approach means the shift from “static” to “rhythmic” diplomacy, practiced equally in two-sided and multi-sided dimensions.¹³

The realization of *Strategic Depth* will make Turkey an important political actor, an active regional “player”, and a mediator, which will guarantee the stabilization of critical world regions.¹⁴ In this context, one should pay attention to the following attributes of the *Strategic Depth* policy: a broad group of decision makers (the increased the role of government and non-government civil actors), a pro-action attitude, a flexible approach towards the national security rule, the readiness to compromise, aiming at the stabilization of neighbouring regions, a balanced approach towards the sides of a conflict and the participation in the development of its solution, use of diplomatic means and a mutual win or loss.¹⁵ The country should be a model for economic development and a promoter of democratic changes, being an important power in the region.¹⁶

Increasingly independent, multi-vector and proactive external actions conducted by the government of the *Justice and Development Party* led to the establishment of the concept of energy policy. The energy policy priorities of Turkey for the years 2010 – 2014, developed by the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources (ETKB) are the following: the assurance of sufficient, certain and profitable supplies of energy for Turkey’s own use, the assurance of security of

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² A. Djavadi, *Turkey’s Kissinger Leads Foreign Policy Balancing Act*, December 12 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkeys-Kissinger_Leads_ForeignPolicy_Balancing_Act/1865343.html, 22.07.2011.

¹³ See: B Duran, *JDP and Foreign Policy as an Agent of Transformation*, [in:] M. H. Yavuz (ed.), *The emergence of a New Turkey. Democracy and the AK Parti*, Salt Lake City 2006, pp. 290–294, cited: A. Szymański, *Działania Turcji w regionie czarnomorsko-kaspijskim a realizacja nowej polityki zagranicznej*, (*Turkey’s operations in the region of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea and the realisation of a new foreign policy*), [in:] B. Bojarczyk, T. Kapuśniak (ed.), *Obszar czarnomorsko-kaspijski w stosunkach międzynarodowych* (*The region of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea in the international relations*), Lublin 2011, pp. 90–91.

¹⁴ A. Davutoğlu, *op. cit.*; see: Z. Meral, J. Paris, *Decoding Turkish Foreign Policy Hyperactivity*, „The Washington Quarterly”, October 2010, p. 75.

¹⁵ Z. Önis, *Turkey and the Middle East after September 11*, “Turkish Policy Quarterly” 2003, no 4, pp. 84–85.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

energy deliveries and taking into account the influence of the energy sector on the natural environment.¹⁷ Turkey is to act as a transit country, which only guarantees an untroubled and economically profitable transit of energy raw materials from the regions of the Caspian Sea, the Middle East and the North Africa to the members of the European Union. The country is going to become an integral part of the energy system in Europe in the regulative and infrastructural dimension and is going to shape energy relations.

The realization of this plan is¹⁸ first of all going to enable Turkey to have an active role in the distribution and sales of carbohydrates. Secondly, it is going to turn the transit and sales of raw materials into an important source of income as well as a means for building the country's position in the region and in Europe. Thirdly, it will ensure energy security; moreover, it will enable the Republic of Turkey to become an important actor shaping the policy of European Union's energy security together with other countries.

According to the concept of Turkey's energy policy, it has an infrastructure that enables the transit of energy raw materials from the East to Europe, especially the European Union countries.

The assumptions of the foreign policy concept developed by the *Justice and Development Party* government apply equally to all areas adjoining Turkey. It should be noted that, due to the specific nature of the Middle East, the purposes of Turkey's external policy have remained unchanged since the end of the Cold War. Just like in the 1990s, lasting peace and stability continue to be the priorities.¹⁹ This is to be achieved by performing a role of a mediator in regional conflicts, and by promoting democratic changes and the principles of liberal economy in the Middle East. The last assumption is a reference to the so-called liberal functional theory of regional cooperation propagated in the 1990s by the former president of Turkey, Turgut Özal.²⁰ According to this theory, economic development and economic connections in the region are supposed to put an end to conflicts in the Middle East.

According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the scope of threats to regional safety has remained unchanged for a few years and includes international terrorism, political instability the problem of the territorial integrity of Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Israel's conflicts with Palestine and Syria, and the increasingly strained relationships of Israel between Iran. In 2012, the catalog

¹⁷ See: The Republic of Turkey Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources Strategic Plan (2010–2014), http://www.enerji.gov.tr/yayinlar_raporlar_EN/ETKB_2010_2014_Stratejik_Planı_EN.pdf, 02.11.2012.

¹⁸ 18 E. Wyciskiewicz, *Polityka energetyczna Turcji. Implikacje dla Unii Europejskiej (Turkey's energy policy. Implications for the European Union)* [in:] A. Szymański (ed.), *Turcja i Europa. Wyzwania i szanse (Turkey and Europe. Challenges and chances)*, Warsaw 2011, p. 273.

¹⁹ *Turkey's Relations with the Arab Countries*, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-relations-with-the-middle-east.en.mfa, 24.05.2012.

²⁰ R. Gozen, *Turgut Ozal and Turkish Foreign Policy: Style and Vision*, "Foreign Policy" vol. 20, No. 3–4, 1996.

of threats in the Middle East was extended by public protests in the Arab countries. Bloody fighting between Syria's al-Assad and his opponents, which became a kind of litmus test for Turkey's regional policy, are particularly problematic. Another, even more significant challenge, is the activity of the extreme Islamists of the so-called Islamic state.

With regard to the concept of the energy policy, the government of the Republic of Turkey should make attempts to strengthen energy relations and deepen interdependence with almost all its neighbours and regional players in compliance with the so-called risk minimization principle.²¹ In relation to its regional position, Turkey's cooperation with Iran and Iraq and its relations with the Arab states are of particular importance.

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY IN THE MIDDLE EAST TOWARDS THE EVENTS OF THE *ARAB SPRING* IN SYRIA

The long-lasting armed conflict in Syria is presently one of the key challenges for Turkey's foreign and security policy. It also considerably limits its ability to pursue its economic interests in the Middle East.

In compliance with the principles of no problems with neighbours and no interference in their internal affairs, the AKP government officially opted for maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria, preventing the spread of the civil war and religious conflict to the entire Middle East region, and the gradual democratization of the conflict-torn country.²²

The first reaction of Prime Minister Erdoğan to the bloody suppression of the protests by supporters of Bashar al-Assad was merely an appeal for implementation of democratic reforms and avoiding further exacerbation of the dispute.²³ The Turkish authorities expected a prompt resolution of the conflict and they feared that its prolongation might result in serious implications for the country's policy in the region, for example, an uncontrolled influx of refugees to its territory; the loss of an important economic and political partner in, the fight against *the Kurdistan Workers' Party* (PKK) and, consequently, activation of the separatist aspirations of the Kurds (the start of the so-called *Kurdish Spring*), spillover from the Syrian war to neighbouring countries, and conflict with its closest neighbour.²⁴

²¹ E. Wyciszkievicz, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

²² A. Dziśiów-Szuszczkiewicz, *Regionalna rywalizacja o Syrię*, "Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe" No 22 2012a, p. 98.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ The meeting of Erdoğan's government and the Syrian leaders took place for the first time in 2003. Then, these two countries critically referred to the operations of the United States in Iraq. Syria, just like Turkey, fighting for years against the members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), feared that an attack on Iraq would lead to the destabilization, and consequently, creation

Turkey's clear opposition to Syrian government policy also increased the likelihood of deterioration of political and economic relations (gas supply) with Iran, which considers Syria as a key Arab ally and partner in the Middle East.²⁵ In addition, it could lead to restrictions on Turkey's trade with the countries of the region where Syria had been used as a transit state.²⁶ Some difficulties in the access to the oil in the Persian Gulf states could not be excluded either.

In the first phase of the conflict, the Turkish leaders predicted its quick end. They hoped that the non-confrontational attitude and engagement in the diplomatic dialogue between the international community and al-Assad's regime would strengthen the position of the Republic in the Middle East and make it a regional leader. The outbreak of *the Arab Spring* in Syria was supposed to provide an opportunity to continue the current regional policy based on deepening political ties, mediation in Middle Eastern disputes, e.g., between Syria and Israel; between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq; between Iran and the West; strengthening economic cooperation; and promotion of its culture.²⁷

Despite the risk of incurring negative consequences, the continued pacification of the opposition by Syrian authorities, sharp criticism by the international community, and the prospects of losing good relations with the Arab states forced Turkey to adopt firmer rhetoric. Erdoğan personally called on al-Assad to stop violent actions against civilians. At the same time, he described the military forces' activities as barbaric. The next step was introducing a policy of isolation against Syria. The firm attitude of the Turkish government to al-Assad's regime led to a visible increase in tensions between the two countries. Relations became hostile after several incidents: the assassination of a few Syrians who had found refuge in the territory of Turkey²⁸ and shooting down the Turkish F4-Phantom fighter by al-Assad's forces in June 2012. Turkey's authorities began to perceive the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in terms of an increasingly real threat. In response to the attack, they demanded a consultative meeting of North Atlantic Treaty

of the independent Kurdistan. The next impetus to the further development of Turkey's relations with Syria was the withdrawal of its leaders from the territorial claims against the province of Hatay belonging to the Republic of Turkey. The talks about the security resulted in signing a number of agreements by these countries. Turkey's agreements with Syria included, among others, their joint military exercises. Playing a role of the so-called mediator between Syria and Israel was an important point in the mutual relationships between the two countries. The states also signed an agreement on visa-free traffic and free trade exchange, extending the existing bilateral agreements. For example, Turkey's exports to Syria increased from \$ 1.1 billion in 2008 to 1.4 billion in 2009

²⁵ See more: A. Dzisiów-Szuszczkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 92–97.

²⁶ *Id.*, Sukcesy i porażki "anatolijskiego tygrysa" – wyzwania dla polityki zagranicznej i bezpieczeństwa Turcji, "Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe" No 21, 2012b, p. 71.

²⁷ Sz. Ananicz, *Turcja wobec kryzysu syryjskiego*, OSW, 10.10.2012, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2012-10-10/turcja-wobec-kryzysu-syryjskiego>, 25.01.2015.

²⁸ E. Dumanlı E, *PM: Turkey may invoke NATO's Article 5 over Syrian border fire*, 12.04.2012, "Today's Zaman", <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-277185-.html>, 30.01.2013.

Organization member states. Due to the aggravating situation, NATO confirmed its defense guarantees with respect to Turkey. (*Syria – the war*).

Shortly after the decision of the North Atlantic Alliance, a further hardening of Turkish policy took place. The *Justice and Development Party (APK)* government increased the military forces along the border with Syria.²⁹ It also started talks with the rebels. According to unofficial information, the Turkish leaders made their territory available to the members of *the Free Syrian Army (WAS)*.³⁰ They organize training for them, provide financial support and light weapons as well as intelligence information.³¹ The authorities of the Republic of Turkey also host the main opposition group – *the Syrian National Council (SRN)*. Turkish leaders present them as representatives of the Syrian opposition in international forums.³² The leaders of Turkey also decided to give shelter to Syrian refugees.³³ In September 2013, after the use of chemical weapons against the civilian population, the Republic of Turkey supported the plans for US military intervention in Syria.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of these actions and to obtain legitimacy for its policy, Turkey is trying to draw the attention of the greatest number of representatives of the international community, especially different countries, but also a variety of organizations and groups. An important political gesture is to engage Turkish leaders in the organization of meetings of *the Group of friends of Syria*.³⁴ In July 2012, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Erdoğan's government, Ahmet Davutoğlu participated, in turn, in the meeting of Syrian opposition representatives organized in Cairo by the Arab League.³⁵ Turkish authorities took part in the preparation of economic sanctions against Syria. They also tried hard to get the UN Security Council adopt a resolution condemning Syria and calling on al-Assad to resign.³⁶ Prime Minister Erdoğan's government officially demanded that the North Atlantic Alliance develop so-called contingency plans in the event of a military intervention in Syria. According to Turkish politicians, this should involve, for instance, establishing a no-fly zone and a buffer zone in northern Syria.³⁷

²⁹ A. Dzisiów-Szuszczkiewicz, *Regionalna...*, p. 99.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ Sz. Ananicz, *op. cit.*

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ Until September 2012 the Bureau of High Commissioner for Refugees matters registered appearance of 84 thousand of refugees in Turkey; see more: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>. In October 2014 this number increased up to 1,5 million, Ł. Wójcik, *Wejda, nie wejda*, "Polityka", 08.10.2014, <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/1595309,1,dlacze-go-turcja-biernie-przyglada-sie-tragedii-kurdow-przy-syryjskiej-granicy.read>, 31.01.2015.

³⁴ A. Dzisiów-Szuszczkiewicz, *op. cit.*

³⁵ *Turkey, Arab League urge Syrian opposition to unite*, 02.07.2012, "Today's Zaman", <http://www.todayzaman.com/news-285278-turkey-arab-league-urge-syrian-opposition-to-unite.html>, 30.01.2013.

³⁶ Sz. Ananicz, *op. cit.*

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

Apart from political activities, Turkey is also trying to become independent of economic cooperation with Syria, seeking, for example, alternative business contacts in the Middle East.³⁸ *The Justice and Development Party* (AKP) decided, among other things, to levy a 30-percent tax on goods coming from Syria.³⁹

The events of *the Arab Spring* in Syria, apart from the unfavorable geopolitical changes in the region, generate additional serious security challenges for Turkey. One is the activation of the Kurdish minority.⁴⁰ Taking advantage of al-Assad's weakened power and the support of Iraqi Kurds, the Kurdish minority Syria is striving to win autonomy. Initially, this was to be created within the structures of democratic Syria. In January 2012, however, the Kurds officially ceased their support for the Syrian opposition represented by *the Syrian National Council* (SRN). They began to conduct an independent policy within *the Kurdish National Council* associated with the Iraqi Kurds.⁴¹

The leaders of the Republic of Turkey are afraid that the creation of a second region of Kurdish autonomy in the Middle East will strengthen the position of the Kurds and encourage the several-million minority living in Turkey to fight for political independence. Another problem worthy of attention is the fact that guerrillas from *the Kurdistan Workers Party* (PKK) found their shelter in the Kurdish area in Syria, which they regard as a foothold to carry out armed attacks on the Turkish territory.⁴²

The union of Syrian Kurds with members of the PKK was one of the reasons for Turkey's prolonged inaction to the bloody fights between Syrian militants and members of the so-called Islamic State in the town of Kobane on the Turkish-Syrian border. The Turkish government also delayed the October 2014 intervention for other reasons. According to some unconfirmed reports, nearly a thousand Turks fought the troops of the so-called Islamic State. The territory of Turkey is also inhabited by almost 1.5 million Syrian refugees who might be the target of Islamists' terrorist attacks.⁴³

The government of Turkey allowed the transit of Iraqi Kurdish troops (known as Peshmerga forces) to Kobane only after more than a week. It was a reaction to the help that the United States started to offer to the Syrian Kurds, who were under the tutelage of the Syrian branch of the terrorist organization *the Kurdistan*

³⁸ F.Özerkan, *Turkish PM warns of civil war in Syria*, 09.01.2012, "The Daily Star Lebanon", <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Jan-09/159284-turkish-pm-warns-of-civil-war-in-syria.ashx#axzz246QoVubB>, 20.08.2012.

³⁹ A. Dzisiów-Szuszczkiewicz, *Sukcesy...*, p. 71.

⁴⁰ See more about the role of the Kurdish minority in the armed conflict in Syria in: M. Szkułdarek, *Rola czynnika kurdyjskiego w syryjskiej wojnie domowej*, "Przegląd Politologiczny nr1/2014, p. 299–313.

⁴¹ N. Bahlawan, *Arabska Wiosna w Syrii i jej reperkusje w regionie Bliskiego Wschodu*, "Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe" No 1/2012, p. 173–174; <http://ksm.ka.edu.pl/tresc/1-2012-Bahlawan.pdf>

⁴² Sz. Ananicz, *op. cit.*

⁴³ Ł. Wójcik, *op. cit.*

Workers Party (PKK). Turkey feared that the American intervention would lead to the empowerment of radical Kurdish groups, making it difficult to regain control of its frontier with Syria.⁴⁴

The attitude of Turkish leaders to the events in Kobane clearly shows that they are trying to avoid confrontation with the jihadists. Although this information has never been confirmed, there is no doubt that since the outbreak of the war with al-Assad's regime, Turkey has agreed to smuggling money and the transit of radical Islamists across its territory to Syria. Turkey also agreed to be a base for fights conducted on Syrian territory. The passivity of the Turkish authorities should be explained by the fact that they regarded the so-called Islamic State as an effective tool in the fight with the regime and in undermining the Kurdish position in the region.⁴⁵ Moreover, in case of a hypothetical attack on its part, it would not be able to successfully defend its territory. Nevertheless, the June 2014 abduction of 49 Turkish officials at the Mosul consulate indicates that the fighters of the so-called Islamic State are ready to attack Turkey. There is a particularly high risk of retaliatory actions by the Islamists as soon as the Turkish government officially stands out against them.⁴⁶

Until recently, the "neutral" attitude of Turkey towards the so-called Islamic State was contrary to the expectations of the United States and the Kurds. Thus, it was highly probable that the lack of engagement by the Republic in the coalition against terrorism⁴⁷ would expose it to ostracism in the western community. The involvement of the West, especially of the United States, in the conflict with jihadists might, on the one hand, be an opportunity to stabilize the situation in the region. On the other hand, however, it is very likely that it will result in adverse repercussions for Turkey. Firstly, the military operation limited to air raids is not producing the expected results. Assuming a pessimistic scenario, it may end up with the terrorists' retreat to Turkish territory. Secondly, there is a risk that the anti-terrorist operation will strengthen al-Assad's regime. However, the leaders of the Republic of Turkey consider the government of Assad and the lack of an inclusive political system in Iraq as the main sources of problems in the Middle East.⁴⁸ Thirdly, the more frequent "presence" of the United States is associated

⁴⁴ Sz. Ananicz, *Turcja ustępuje w sprawie Kobane*, OSW, 22.10.2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2014-10-22/turcja-ustepuje-w-sprawie-kobane>, 31.01.2015.

⁴⁵ *Id*, *Dylematy Turcji w wojnie przeciwko Państwu Islamskiemu*, OSW, 15.10.2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2014-10-15/dylematy-turcji-w-wojnie-przeciwko-panstwu-islamskiemu>, 31.01.2015.

⁴⁶ *Id*, *Turcja wobec eskalacji konfliktów w Iraku i Syrii*, OSW, 24.09.2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2014-09-24/turcja-wobec-eskalacji-konfliktow-w-iraku-i-syrii>, 31.01.2015.

⁴⁷ The participation of the republic of Turkey would be restricted to operational activities, for example, engagement in the air raids against the so-called Islamic State, allowing to use the air base in the southern and western area of its territory.

⁴⁸ Sz. Ananicz, *Dylematy...*

with a lower chance of independence of Turkey in achieving the objectives of the regional policy.⁴⁹

Taking into account the complexity of the situation and its location, the Turkish authorities took actions to persuade the United States to redefine its geopolitical strategy in the Middle East. Firstly, they urge their ally to change the goals and methods it used in the campaign in Syria. They argue that it is al-Assad's regime that is a source of instability in the region, and is responsible for the humanitarian disaster, whereas American activities create a fertile ground for the emergence of entities such as the so-called Islamic State. Secondly, they demand more support for the rebels fighting al-Assad. This assistance would involve training (including the one on Turkish territory) and arms.⁵⁰ Thirdly, Turkey demands that a buffer zone be created along the border with Syria and Iraq to separate the Republic of Turkey from the areas where there are fights between coalition forces and the Islamic State.⁵¹

At the same time, the Turkish Government tries to reduce the potential of jihadists in the Middle East and their presence on its territory. To do so, it is exerting more control along the border with Syria; limiting fuel smuggling from Syria that is a source of income for the Islamists; increasing security checks at airports; detaining people interested in joining the ranks of the so-called Islamic State; and providing secret support for the rivals of the Islamic radicals.⁵²

3. THE IMPACT OF THE EVENTS OF THE *ARAB SPRING* IN SYRIA ON TURKEY'S GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The outbreak of protests and social unrest in Syria, caused, as in other countries in North Africa and the Middle East, by political, economic and social factors, poses a serious challenge to the security in the Middle East.⁵³ Several regional players, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia (and Qatar) and Iran (with Hezbollah) have been competing for influence in Syria and are directly or indirectly involved in the course of the conflict and possible solutions to it. The events of *the Arab Spring* in Syria have both regional and international dimensions. The United States, Russia and China joined the international discussion about working out an effective way of putting an end to this dispute and on the future of the civil war-ravaged country.

⁴⁹ *Id*, *Turecja na dystans z USA i Państwem Islamskim*, OSW, 17.09.2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2014-09-17/turcja-na-dystans-z-usa-i-panstwem-islamskim>, 03.02.2015.

⁵⁰ *Id*, *Turecja...*

⁵¹ *Id*, *Turecja...*

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ A. Dzisiów-Szuszczkiewicz, "*Arabska Wiosna*" – *przyczyny, przebieg i prognozy*, "Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe" No 18/2011, p. 42–46.

Taking into account, on the one hand, the scale of the relations of Russia, China and Iran with Syria and, on the other hand, the convergent (in many parts) strategy of the West (US and Europe), Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar towards the Middle East, it is clear that Syria currently reflects a clash of divergent interests of the two informal coalitions.⁵⁴ Geopolitical leadership in the whole region is at stake in this competition for influence.⁵⁵

The involvement of regional and international players in Syria as well as the conflict itself became a kind of test for Turkey's regional policy. They proved Turkey's limited ability to exert any impact in the Middle East and also revealed the weakness of the foreign policy objectives adopted in its *Strategic Depth* strategy.

Thus, the efforts of Turkish authorities, made in compliance with one of the strategy's main principles, "zero problems with neighbours," not to entangle itself in a conflict with Syria situated in the immediate vicinity nor to get involved in its internal affairs, failed. The appeal made at the beginning of the civil war for a cessation of the bloodshed, failed to generate the desired reaction from al-Assad's regime. Given Western expectations regarding Turkey's participation in the conflict, and assuming its relatively quick termination, the government of the Republic aspired to take on a role of a *mediator* between the authorities in Syria and the international community. In this way, they wanted to prevent the escalation of the war and also to guarantee that it could gain a position as a regional leader. Definitely hostile political rhetoric by al-Assad's government as well as armed incidents on the border and the shooting down a Turkish reconnaissance aircraft finally showed the futility of the mediation.⁵⁶

In the light of the intensifying conflict and cruel activities of Syrian regime supporters against the civilian population, and an increasing threat from its neighbour, and pressure from the Western allies, the Republic of Turkey finally departed from the key principles of "no intervention in the internal affairs of other countries" and "zero problems with neighbours" and joined the coalition against al-Assad. Thus, Turkey showed its weakness and inability to apply the following points: *the Strategic Depth* in the form of a balanced approach to the parties to the conflict and participation in working out solutions of the regional security conflicts.

Turkey's inability to influence the geopolitical situation in the Middle East confirmed not only the need for its involvement in the conflict but also its minimal ability to influence its course. During several months of civil war, neither the Prime Minister nor the President of the Republic of Turkey, Erdoğan, managed to implement any points of the strategy. Summing up, the conflict continues, no buffer zone was created in northern Syria and flights were not banned over this

⁵⁴ *Id*, *Regionalna*, p. 91.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

⁵⁶ J. Wódka, *Polityka zagraniczna "nowej" Turcji. Implikacje dla partnerstwa transatlantyckiego*. Warsaw, 2013, p. 63, https://www.isppan.waw.pl/subpage/europeistyka/publikacje/files/working_paper_3.pdf, 03.02.2015.

territory. What is more, leading politicians from Turkey did not persuade the representatives of the Western countries to give more logistical support to the rebels.

The United States and the rest of the western countries consider *Islamic State* fighters as the main source of danger in the region. However, analyzing the relations between the Republic of Turkey with the Middle East, we should take into consideration its isolation in the region. This is confirmed by its so-called “frozen” relations with Egypt and Israel, diplomatic tensions with Saudi Arabia, and more and more “strained” relations with Iraq (with the exception of Kurdistan).⁵⁷ The divergent attitude to the war in Syria also complicates Turkey’s relations with Iran – a recent economic partner.

An isolated Turkey has little possibility to exert an independent impact on the war in Syria. A few factors there are decisive, for instance, the internal divisions among the opposition and the growing importance in the ranks of the radical forces, especially the militants of the so-called *Islamic State* and *the Al-Nusra Front* within the opposition as well as the susceptibility of the moderate opponents of *the Free Syrian Army*, *the Islamic Front* and *the Syrian National Coalition* to the influence of Saudi Arabia and Qatar.⁵⁸ The lack of domestic public support for any of Turkey’s radical actions in Syria is also significant. The social and political crisis started by the mass protests in May and June 2013, further deepened by the corruption scandal that had broken out in December, diverted the government’s attention from foreign policy and discouraged it from continuing unpopular actions during the electoral period.⁵⁹ The confrontation between the ruling *Justice and Development Party* and the Fethullah Gülen Movement resulted in a rivalry between individual state departments, especially between the intelligence (on the side of the government), and the police and the gendarmerie (on the side of the Gülen Movement), that limited Turkey’s freedom of action towards Syria. This was illustrated by the attempts made by the police and gendarmerie to capture the deliveries of supplies sent to the Syrian rebels by the military intelligence.⁶⁰

The lack of success of its regional policy weakens the position of Turkey as the important “player” in the Middle East. Also, the dynamic and critical situation in the region makes the threat to Turkey’s security one of primary importance, especially, as it has been emphasized several times, so-called Islamic State jihadists’ activity and the separatist aspirations of the Kurds of northern Syria. Due to this situation as well as its regional “loneliness”, the Turkish leaders abandoned the offensive strategy in favor of the actions of a clearly defensive nature. Their new policy is manifested, among other things, by less hostile rhetoric towards

⁵⁷ J. Wódka, *Polityka zagraniczna “nowej” Turcji. Implikacje dla partnerstwa transatlantyckiego*. Warsaw, 2013, p. 63, https://www.isppan.waw.pl/subpage/europeistyka/publikacje/files/working_paper_3.pdf, 03.02.2015.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ In March 2014 self-government elections were held, in summer – the presidential election, and in 2015 the parliament elections will take place.

⁶⁰ Sz. Ananicz, *op. cit.*

the activities of the Kurdish *Democratic Union Party* (PYD). Turkish authorities did not opt for military intervention, when in January 2014, the members of the party proclaimed Kurdish autonomy in north-eastern Syria. In response, they only closed border crossings with the areas that are controlled by the Kurds.⁶¹ A direct confrontation with the Kurds would mean taking up fighting with *the Kurdistan Workers' Party* (PKK) on its territory. Lack of intervention, in turn, is connected with likely negative consequences. It is likely to result in, among other things, strengthening the regional position of the PKK and awakening Kurds' separatist aspirations in Turkey.⁶²

Facing threats from jihadists since mid-2013, Turkey operates a very balanced policy towards them. In order to counter allegations of supporting Islamic extremists among the Syrian rebels made by the western international community, Turkey takes limited actions aimed at weakening their influence in the region. These actions are reflected, for example, by increased controls on Turks interested in joining the ranks of the so-called Islamic State as well as by the support given secretly to their opponents. This policy results from the Turkish authorities' concern about possible retaliatory attacks on the part of jihadists. The growing threat is confirmed, for example, by incidents of exchange of fire between the Islamists and the police in Istanbul and central Turkey that occurred in March 2014 and resulted in the deaths of civilians and policemen.⁶³ In the long term, such moderation could result in the further development of the Islamic extremists' potential and expansion of their influence in the Middle East. For Turkey, itself, however, it may imply an increasing ostracism, not only in the region but also among Western partners.

Turkey's defensive strategy in the Middle East can be observed by the distinct change in attitude about the events of *the Arab Spring* in Syria. Mediation efforts and calls for the democratization of al-Assad's regime, followed by numerous attempt to draw international attention to the problem, were replaced by the non-escalation of tensions with Syria and focusing on defending its own territory and the possible defense of other countries. The Turkish authorities avoided confrontational actions, for example, after the bomb attack in Reyhanli.⁶⁴ They are aware of the enemy's potential and its support by Iranian forces.

In compliance with its changed international policy, Turkey's commitment was restricted to obtaining security guarantees from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The activities of the government in this field should be considered effective. As a result, an air defense system was located on its territory in the

⁶¹ *Ibidem.*

⁶² *Ibidem.*

⁶³ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁴ In May 2013 in Reyhanli near the border there was a bomb attack as a result of which over 50 Turks were killed. The authorities of the Republic of Turkey accuse Syria of this attack.

form of two batteries of the *Patriot* anti-ballistic missile system and four hundred soldiers who provide service, support and intelligence services for the system.⁶⁵

Turkey also makes attempts to improve its image in the international system. For this purpose, it decided on a series of activities to rebuild Turkey's relationship with Iran⁶⁶ and Russia. In the context of Turkey's relations with Iran, it should be underlined that the divergent attitudes of the two countries about the events of *the Arab Spring* in Syria further deepened existing differences in their policies concerning the attitude toward Israel and the stationing of the missile defense system on Turkish territory. They also have economic differences. For example, Iran suspended the visa-free regime with Turkey, referring to safety issues associated with the organization of the Summit of the Non-Aligned Countries in Tehran.⁶⁷ The relationship between the entities is also complicated by the religious division between Shiites (Iran) and Sunnis (Turkey) which is presently very clear in the region.⁶⁸

As it was noticed by Şaban Kardaş, the events of *the Arab Spring* highlighted the historical nature of the dispute between Russia and Turkey.⁶⁹ They also deepen its international isolation, as Turkey's policy is identified with the interests of the United States in the Middle East. Aware of this fact, the leaders of the Republic of Turkey retreated relatively quickly from their appeal for international isolation of the countries that support al-Assad's regime. Officially, they do not emphasize Russia's role in the armed support for the fighters.⁷⁰

CONCLUSION

The events of *the Arab Spring* in Syria proved to be a test for the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey. In view of the complexity of the conflict and the number of parties with divergent interests, Turkey proved to be a geopolitical "player" that was too weak to shape the events in the Middle East.

The attempts made by Turkish leaders to implement the *Strategic Depth* strategy inevitably failed. The escalation of the civil war in Syria, the scale of

⁶⁵ K. Strachora, *USA i NATO broni Turcji*, OSW, 19.12.2012, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2012-12-19/usa-i-nato-broni-turcji>, 11.02.2015.

⁶⁶ See more: P. Osiewicz, *Stosunki irańsko-tureckie na początku XXI wieku: Implikacje dla regionu Bliskiego Wschodu*, "Przegląd Strategiczny" 2011 No 1, http://studiastrategiczne.amu.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/10_osiewicz.pdf

⁶⁷ W. Nowak, *Arabska Wiosna a kwestie bezpieczeństwa Izraela i jego sąsiadów*, "Przegląd Politologiczny" 2014 No 1, p. 127.

⁶⁸ Ş. Kardaş, *Sailing in unchartered waters*, GMF On Turkey Analysis, 31.10.2012, http://www.gmfus.org.wp-content/blogs.dir//1/files_mf/1351696453Kardas_RussiaSyria_Oct12.pdf, 20.12.2012.

⁶⁹ Ş. Kardaş, *Sailing in unchartered waters*, GMF On Turkey Analysis, 31.10.2012, http://www.gmfus.org.wp-content/blogs.dir//1/files_mf/1351696453Kardas_RussiaSyria_Oct12.pdf, 20.12.2012.

⁷⁰ J. Wódka, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

atrocities against the civilian population, and pressure from the western international community, did not allow Turkey to remain neutral in the conflict, forcing it to break its foreign policy concepts that had assumed the absence of widely understood problems with neighbours and a lack of intervention in their internal affairs. Also, Turkish appeals seeking a diplomatic end to the civil war did not meet with the expected response. In these circumstances, Turkey did not become a *mediator* and did not peace to the region. In view of these failures, Turkish authorities first started to replace the offensive policy with increasingly defensive actions that focus on avoiding tensions and the protection of its territory.

The minimalist and balanced policy of the Republic of Turkey towards Syria and other related events in the region is understandable, taking into consideration its complicated and complex situation. In addition to the failure of the assumptions of the foreign policy strategy, the country faced serious challenges with respect to its security: a possible attack from the unpredictable Islamic State and also the separatist aspirations of the Kurds in the region that could lead to renewed fighting between Turkey and the PKK as well as the demands for independence by the several million Kurdish minority that live in its territory. Turkey's complex situation is further complicated by its isolation in the region and the perception that it is allied with the United States, a country Muslims in the region treat with mistrust and even hostility.

Taking these issues into account, the Turkish leaders follow a balanced policy in the Middle East, which is based on not generating conflicts with Kurds and Syrians as well as limited actions against the Islamic extremists. This strategy is supposed to protect the Republic of Turkey from, firstly, a potential military intervention in its territory on the part jihadists, secondly, an outbreak of separatism among Kurds living in this country, thirdly, ostracism from the international community, accusing Turkey of supporting extremists and avoiding involvement in the serious regional disputes.

DZIAŁANIA REPUBLIKI TURCJI WOBEC „ARABSKIEJ WIOSNY” W SYRII

Streszczenie: Przedmiotem analizy w artykule jest polityka Turcji w warunkach wydarzeń określanych „arabską wiosną”. Stąd też, po pierwsze, skoncentrowano się na rekonstrukcji geopolitycznej strategii Turcji wobec regionu Bliskiego Wschodu. Po drugie, przedmiotem analizy stała się realizacja tej strategii wobec konfliktu w Syrii. Po trzecie, skoncentrowano się na pokazaniu relacji między początkiem „arabskiej wiosny” w Syrii i zmianą politycznej strategii Turcji wobec Bliskiego Wschodu.

Słowa kluczowe: Turcja, „arabska wiosna”, Bliski Wschód, Syria