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Turkish and European Union Political Maneuvers in the Syrian Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the political strategies enacted by Turkey and the European Union within the context of the Syrian conflict, sparked by the development of a gas pipeline in Syria. The study seeks to analyze the ramifications of these strategies on political stability and security in Syria, with a specific emphasis on understanding the perspectives of Turkey and the European Union. To achieve this, the study employs two theoretical frameworks: national interest theory and geopolitical theory.

Qualitative methodologies were utilized, incorporating primary data obtained through interviews with geopolitical expert Mrs. Dina Y Sulaeman, Director of the Indonesia Center for Middle East Studies (ICMES), and Dr. Muhammad Reza Ebrahimi, a Middle Eastern politics observer at the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization. Additionally, secondary data was collected from theses, journals, and research websites relevant to the study.

The findings reveal that both Turkey and the European Union engaged in political maneuvers in Syria driven by their economic and political interests. These maneuvers encompassed activities related to the construction of a gas pipeline in 2015 and backing for opposition groups seeking to overthrow the Bashar Al Assad regime. However, the Syrian government responded to internal opposition and protests with military

deployment and repression, indicating Al Assad's confidence in his government's capacity to withstand challenges from opposition factions.

Keywords: Political Maneuvers, Türkiye and the European Union, Syria

ABSTRAK

Manuver politik kedua negara bermula dari pembangunan jalur pipa gas yang ada di Suriah, demikian yang melatarbelakangi penelitian ini ialah Turki dan Uni Eropa melakukan manuver politik di Suriah dan pengaruh dari manuver politik Turki dan Uni Eropa terhadap stabilitas politik keamanan di Suriah, dengan rumusan masalah Turki dan Uni Eropa bemanuver politik di Suriah, pada penelitian ini teori yang digunakan ada dua yaitu teori national interest (kepentingan nasional) dan teori geopolitik.

Dalam penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan menggunakan data primer yang diperoleh dari hasil wawancara dengan Direktur Indonesia *Center for Middle East Studies* (ICMES) ibu Dina Y Sulaeman yang merupakan pakar geopolitik pengamat Timur Tengah dan Dr. Muhammad Reza Ebrahimi merupakan pengamat politik Timur Tengah di *Islamic Culture and Relation Organization*, sedangkan data sekunder diperoleh dari skripsi, jurnal dan penelitian Website yang terkait dengan penelitian.

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa adanya kepentingan ekonomi dan politik negara Turki dan Uni Eropa yang membuat kedua negara tersebut bermanuver politik di Suriah salah satunya mengenai perebutan pembangunan jalur pipa gas yang ada di Suriah pada tahun 2015, tujuan lain ialah penggulingan terhadap rezim Bashar Al Assad oleh negara Turki dan kaum oposisi lainnya yang di dukung oleh Turki, dalam hal merespon demonstran dan kaum oposisi yang terjadi di negaranya Suriah biasa-biasa saja dan pemerintah Suriah Al Assad tidak menyukai jika ada yang menginterupsi dan melakukan pembelotan terhadap negaranya dan melakukan hal yang wajar apabila demonstran dan oposisi memberontak maka pemerintah Suriah mengerahkan militernya untuk dilakukan pengamanan serta angkat senjata, Bashar Al Assad percaya bahwa kemenangan berpihak kepadanya dalam menghadapi oposisi-oposisi yang ingin menggulingkan pemerintahannya.

Keywords: Manuver Politik, Turki dan UNI Eropa, Suriah

INTRODUCTION

The Arab world awakening, commonly referred to as the "Arab Spring," signifies a pro-democracy resistance movement demanding change in several Middle Eastern countries (Machmudi, 2021). The Arab Spring events have gradually altered the political landscape of the Middle East. Following the political upheaval in Tunisia and the fall of the Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime (January 14, 2011), several Arab League countries, including Egypt, Libya, Syria, and others in the Middle East, experienced a domino effect. Egypt, long ruled by Hosni Mubarak, became a target of this domino effect. Additionally, Bashar al-Assad's government, which had been in power in Syria since 2000, also felt

the same effects of the "Arab Spring" movement and slogans demanding his resignation from the Syrian presidency (Herlambang, 2018).

The issues escalated as the demands of the people, especially from the opposition, for reform in Syria intensified. However, protests by the opposition faced counter-demonstrations, particularly in Damascus, from people who were pro-Assad regime. In his first speech after the riots in Syria, Bashar Assad addressed the legislative council, expressing his intention to take action and quell the demonstrations by attempting to accommodate and understand the demands of the protesters while accusing foreign parties of being behind the unrest in Syria.

However, demonstrations persisted and spread to other cities. In response to the demonstrators, the Syrian government increased security measures and deployed military forces to suppress demonstrations, even establishing security barricades on the outskirts of the Syrian capital. The Bashar Assad government ordered the release of all detained demonstrators. However, this did not alleviate the suffering of parents whose children were imprisoned, leading to further protests aimed at overthrowing the Bashar Assad government in power (Herlambang, 2018).

Following incidents and various bloody events resulting from ongoing demonstrations in Syria, the European Union (EU) implemented an arms embargo and penalties such as travel bans and asset freezes against several prominent Syrian officials deemed most responsible for the turmoil in Syria. This embargo has pushed the Bashar Assad regime further away from its regional allies. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Prime Minister of Turkey, condemned the brutality carried out by the Syrian military against civilians in mid-2011. Subsequently, Turkey provided support to the Syrian opposition by hosting conferences.

Under international pressure, the Bashar Assad government granted permission at the end of 2012 for a delegation from the Arab League to assess the extent of implementation of strategies to quell demonstrations using persuasive approaches. In conclusion, the Arab League team's assessment tended to be positive, leading to criticism from human rights groups and Syrian opposition who were disappointed and deemed the assessment inaccurate.

In various analyses and perspectives, initially assuming the conflict in Syria to be religious in nature, it shifted over time. Analysts of the Syrian conflict later understood that the Sunni-Shia theological differences were not the main catalyst for the conflict in Syria (Sulaeman, 2013), but rather linked to various interests, particularly those of the European Union and Turkey, especially concerning Syria's natural resources.

Syria, as a country managing crude oil infrastructure and gasoline pipelines, makes its natural resource assets strategically significant, placing Syria's geopolitics on a global economic scale, particularly crucial for the economies of Middle Eastern countries. Qatar suggested to Bashar al-Assad in 2000 the construction of a 1,500-kilometer gas pipeline through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, and the EU's dependency on Russian oil and gas, seeking suppliers, which would presumably offer lower prices than those provided by Russia.

However, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad stated in 2009 that the country would not sign the pact proposed by Qatar to safeguard its ally Russia's interests. Assad then sought to reach an agreement with Iran by constructing a gas pipeline connecting Iran, Iraq, and Syria. For Iran, Syria is a vital conduit to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. Iran intends to build an electrical pipeline network through Syria to provide gas and oil transportation routes to Europe. Additionally, Iran is determined to strengthen its

political influence in Syria, which borders Lebanon, where Hezbollah is a key player in the region and has recently emerged as a major partner for Iran alongside Israel.

Iran and Russia have interests in maintaining the Bashar Assad regime because if the Assad regime falls, Iran's interests in the Middle East and Russia's political and economic interests in Europe will become more problematic. Russia is interested in disrupting the Qatar-Saudi Arabia-Syria-Turkey-Europe gas pipeline network, which may jeopardize Russia's gas dominance in Europe. Moreover, providing Europe with access to cheaper gas and oil routes would reduce Europe's dependence on Russia. This has angered the European Union and many Gulf countries (Herlambang, 2018).

On several occasions and press conferences, Turkey, led by Erdogan, did not explicitly or openly demonstrate involvement in the conflict and turmoil in Syria. However, as the conflict in Syria escalated, Erdogan endeavored to approach refugees through his soft political stance. Responding to the Syrian scenario, in the Viransehir district in the southern province of Sanliurfa, Turkey sent 20 combat vehicles, including tanks, to the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) for deployment.

Political maneuvering is a swift move in a political arena. Generally, political maneuvering is an action or step taken to achieve specific political goals. The intended political goal, for instance, could be to secure the party's status or due to differences in beliefs, ideologies, visions, and missions. Similarly, Turkey and the European Union have specific purposes and goals in the conflict in Syria.

In terms of political maneuvering in Syria, the goals of both Turkey and the European Union are to compete for the construction of a gas pipeline to be built in Syria. The Turkish government deliberately sent a military battalion to reinforce troops stationed around the Syrian border. The multitude of issues in Syria has led to the emergence of political interest groups and rejection of refugees from Syria, prompting political maneuvering from both Turkey and the European Union in the conflict in Syria. Therefore, given the background of the aforementioned issues, this research will focus on how foreign interventions, including those of Turkey and the European Union, in Syria and the fate and future of political stability and security in Syria post-intervention, as well as the maneuvers of Turkey and the European Union in Syria (Rahmasari, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the book "The International Relation Dictionary" by Jack C Plano & Roy Olton, it is explained that the theory of national interest is the fundamental objective and the most decisive factor that guides decision-makers in formulating foreign policy. The theory of national interest is very common but is an element that is a crucial need for a country. This element includes the survival of the nation and the state, independence, territorial integrity, military security, and economic prosperity.

In the book "Contemporary International Relations," Daniel S. Papp explains that national interests have many factors, such as economics, ideology, military power and security, morality, and legality. (Rahmasari, 2019)

National interest is the fundamental objective and the most important factor in formulating foreign policy. Therefore, national interest in the economic aspect includes cooperation in trade between countries to strengthen the industrial sector and other aspects. (Fryda Lucyani, 2009)

METHOD

The writing in this article employs a qualitative descriptive method. This research model offers results without modification or other treatments. The information produced takes the form of narratives or papers. This study describes, documents, and analyzes events related to the research topic. As a reference material, the author collects various information regarding the Political Maneuvering of Turkey and the European Union in the Syrian Conflict (2011-2019). In this context, the author divides the reference material into two sources: primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources refer to data directly collected by the researcher from the first-hand source, namely interview results obtained from informants related to the Syrian conflict. Meanwhile, secondary sources are information or data that support this research, such as websites available on the internet.

As a scholarly work, this journal article certainly has research objectives. The purpose of this journal research is to understand the objectives of Turkey and the European Union in conducting political maneuvers in Syria and also to understand the influence of Turkish and European Union political maneuvers on the economic and political stability of Syria. This journal can also serve as a reference for other writers, both in the field of science and those who want to expand their knowledge of this field, and in political science, this journal is expected to provide new contributions and inspirations to the knowledge of Islamic political science.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Causes Behind Turkey and the European Union's Political Maneuvers in Syria

In Idlib and Aleppo, in particular, the conflict persists. Armed clashes frequently occur in the region among opposing factions. This conflict involves at least four major groups. In other words, the Syrian regime led by President Bashar al-Assad, countries supporting Assad such as Russia and Iran, and then Turkey, which is a massive supporter of the anti-Assad movement.

Since 2011, Turkey has been involved in the civil conflict in Syria. The Turkish government supports the Free Syrian Army, which opposes Assad. Even the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) directly trains FSA soldiers (Abrar Thea fathanah, 2020).

Turkey did not join without reason. Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that if President Assad commits war crimes in provinces bordering Turkey. Kurds make up the largest ethnic population in the Middle East, according to Politico. Kurds migrated to Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran after losing their own country after World War I.

This group has often faced repression, like other minority groups. With the help of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) militia, they seek independence from Turkey. Ten thousand people were killed in the conflict between the Turkish government and the PKK in 1980. Ankara, the United States, and the European Union all considered the PKK a terrorist organization at that time. Throughout the Syrian war, the Syrian government, which Turkey associated with the PKK, controlled parts of northwestern Syria, including Idlib and Aleppo. This area is close to the Turkish border (Abrar Thea fathanah, 2020).

Plans to build gas pipelines are a conspiracy theory. There are plans to build a network of liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipelines from Qatar to Europe, according to the Italian news agency ANSA. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq followed suit. Globally, Qatar is the largest LNG exporter. Qatar's LNG exports reached 104.8 billion cubic meters in 2018.

In Turkey, the pipeline is ready to receive gas supplies. Energy observer Felix Imonti stated that the only obstacle is Al-Assad. As quoted from ANSA, Al-Assad rejected Qatar's proposal in 2009 to preserve the interests of his ally, Russia. The Red Bear country provides about 37% of the European Union's gas supply, according to Eurostat data. Qatar and Turkey, which have prepared to build a gas network, are certainly interested. As a result, Al-Assad must be removed.

In an ideal scenario, Turkey wants to control the Syrian government in the hands of individuals or groups ideologically and strategically aligned with Turkey. However, Ankara realizes that this is not possible after September 2015 when Russia intervened militarily and took control in Syria. Now Turkey's focus is to ensure that non-jihadi rebel forces sympathetic to Turkey maintain control over as much territory as possible, allowing Turkey to have a greater role in Syria's future, considering the balance of power at the global and regional levels.

Additionally, it is crucial for Turkey to prevent PKK affiliates from establishing a legitimate presence in Syria, especially if the organization extends from the Iraqi border to the Mediterranean Sea. This would alter the geopolitical landscape and challenge Turkey's national security. As a result, Turkey seeks to weaken PKK affiliates such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria and prevent their expansion. Compared to the PYD and YPG, Turkey also strengthens the military position of its own forces and rebel allies.

The primary objective is to ensure that Syrian citizens who should seek refuge in Turkey can remain safe in Syria, thereby relieving Turkey of the significant challenge of accommodating around 3.2 million Syrian refugees in its territory. Approximately 2 million to 2.5 million of them are in the Idlib Province, with half of them fleeing from other countries. Turkey has a strong incentive to avoid Russian-backed regime offensives in Idlib, which could trigger massive displacement. Since the Syrian uprising in 2011, Turkey's objectives in Syria have evolved. Although the initial goal of diplomatic relations and subsequent military escalation was to change the Syrian regime, the current primary focus is on ensuring Turkey's own security. The short-term policy focus is on preventing groups associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) from expanding their territory, believing that Syrian areas governed by PKK networks pose a direct threat to its national security and stability.

The Syrian civil war has resulted in significant losses for Turkey across various aspects of life. Peace negotiation processes with the PKK failed due to the conflict, which also halted all positive efforts over the past decade to address Kurdish issues in Turkey. This influx of three million Syrian refugees into Turkey also triggered ISIS terror attacks and alleged pro-Assad network assaults, resulting in numerous civilian casualties. Therefore, the government's medium-term goal is to halt the conflict, stop and reverse refugee movements, and prevent the conflict from destabilizing Turkey.

In the long term, Ankara aims to gain economic benefits from Syria's reconstruction and maintain effective influence in determining Syria's future. To achieve these medium and long-term goals, Turkey must continue to be one of the stakeholders directly influencing the region's progress. This necessitates increased direct military involvement in Syria, as is currently being pursued, to overthrow the Bashar Al-Assad government. From an economic perspective, Syria is a crucial area for the construction

of gas pipelines to Europe. The European Union (EU) is heavily reliant on gas from Russia, while Western Europe also has interests in overthrowing the regime in Russia. The EU needs to reduce its dependence on Russian gas. Qatar and Iran are the two largest gas-producing countries in the Middle East. Qatar and Iran, both allies of Russia, play significant roles in the development of gas pipelines to Europe. However, Russia opposes gas pipelines passing through Turkey to Europe because it would diminish its influence when Europe no longer relies on its gas. The common interest between Turkey and the EU lies in gas pipelines, as Turkey desires gas from Qatar to pass through its territory to Europe. Syria's Assad, a long-time ally of Russia, entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Iran in 2011 to build a gas pipeline from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and into Europe, which Russia approved.

The Influence of Political Maneuvers by Turkey and the European Union on Political Security Stability in Syria

The internal conflict and the expansion of the United States into several Middle Eastern countries have stimulated continued nationalist resistance. On the other hand, Syria's success in moving towards a market economy requires integration into the world capitalist system, which has long been dominated by American hegemony (Hinnebusch, 2009). Another equally important factor in understanding Syria is the growing sense of unease because Syria is a small country surrounded by several powerful nations that can be perceived as a threat at one time or another.

Historically, the historical borders have been violated by the United States and Israel in recent years. Syria faces a significant military imbalance compared to its neighboring countries, and it is currently sandwiched between Israeli forces to the west and US forces to the east (Iraq). Therefore, Syria feels concerned about threats to its country, which it considers to be Western imperialism, especially after the increasingly massive intervention of the United States in destabilizing the Middle East following the election of George Walker Bush as President of the United States (2000-2008).

When Vladimir Putin was elected President of Russia, a new political and strategic relationship was re-established with Russia led by Hafez al-Assad, which was then continued to his son, Bashar Assad. Damascus became Russia's seventh-largest arms importer. However, in 2000, the European Union attempted to take advantage of liberalization and began to press for negotiations. As a result, the EU sought to stabilize the region through economic cooperation, assistance for political reform, and cultural exchange (European Commission, Barcelona Declaration 2008).

Syria's relationship with the EU encompasses a broad dimension through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Social, economic, cultural, and humanitarian partnerships aim primarily to promote cultural understanding and exchange between civil societies. Cooperation is also extended to education and culture to combat crime, money laundering, illicit drugs, control, and prevent illegal immigration.

CONCLUSION

The background behind Turkey and the European Union's political maneuvers in Syria lies in political and economic interests, where both countries have their respective goals in terms of competing for gas pipelines in Syria. Turkey, for instance, aims to overthrow the Bashar Al Assad government by exploiting Sunni-Shiite issues because Turkey is aware of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Iran and Syria regarding gas pipelines. Another reason Turkey seeks to overthrow the Assad regime is Erdogan's discomfort with Syrian immigrants entering his country. The influx of Syrian immigrants into Turkey is a consequence of the turmoil sparked by democratization protests in Syria, which are linked to the gas pipeline issue. In overthrowing the Bashar Al Assad regime, Turkey plays a leading role as both a key figure and a headquarters, supporting opposition forces aiming to topple the Assad regime.

In contrast, the European Union responds positively to Syria because they rely on Russia, the largest gas supplier in Europe. Russia agrees with the construction of gas pipelines through the Iran-Syria route, as Russia is Syria's ally, and the two countries have a very good bilateral relationship.

Syria's government stance towards the opposition and demonstrators is reasonably firm when their country is attacked. However, Syria opposes separatism and defection. Bashar Al Assad believes his country can withstand opposition attempts to overthrow his government. The Syrian government's response to demonstrators is moderate, but it employs military force when demonstrators take up arms or when the country is attacked by demonstrators and Al Qaeda.

The influence of Turkey and the European Union's political maneuvers on political stability and security in Syria results in Syria receiving full support from Russia in maintaining Bashar Al Assad's power. Although Russia also has its own interests and does not want to lose its influence if the government falls under Western control, this is what makes Russia fully support Bashar Al Assad's regime in combating opposition forces in Syria.

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