

# New Actors and Issues in the Post-Arab Uprisings Period



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Edited by

Jülide Karakoç and Duygu Ersoy

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We would like to thank all those who contributed to providing a richness to this collection of work. Finally, we do not want to forget to thank our family members for their never-ending support.





# INTRODUCTION

The Arab uprisings that started in Tunisia at the end of 2010, along with the wave of protests they generated across the Middle East and North Africa, had significant repercussions in almost every part of the region. The emerging demonstrations served as a platform for the voicing of grievances on such issues as unemployment, corruption, high inflation rates, poor living conditions, and the lack of civil liberties.

These problems have long instigated unrest in the Middle East so uprisings with such demands are not a new phenomenon for the region, but what differentiates the uprisings of the 2010s from those of previous years is the extent to which they spread. After starting in Tunisia, where protests eventually brought about the removal of an authoritarian leader, similar activities spread quickly to other parts of the Middle East and North Africa. Egypt, Libya, and Yemen followed Tunisia with protests that resulted in the downfall of longstanding authoritarian regimes, while other states, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, were able to suppress the uprisings with violence. The civil war in Syria, in which many internal and external actors have become involved, is ongoing.

These uprisings are somewhat unique in terms of their consequences. They have paved the way for a legitimacy crisis for the ruling governments in the region. Alongside the appearance of some new actors and the rise in prominence of others, existing national borders have been challenged. Kurds living in the north of Syria declared an autonomous region called Rojava but were immediately targeted by the militants of a radical Islamist organization, Islamic State (IS) – another rising actor in the post-Arab Spring period that has exerted control over territories in Syria and Iraq through massacres of minority groups such as Christians, Kurds, and Shia Muslims. The conflict between the Kurds and IS continues, and this violence has come to dominate the political sphere, where issues related to ethnic/religious differences, human insecurity, migration and refugees have become more complicated and serious. Almost all states in the region are facing one or more of these problems.

Within this tumultuous environment, the position of regional or external actors, ranging from ethnic/religious groups to states, has become an

important factor in determining the flow of events in the region. However, some of the new alliances have proved to be ineffective, revealing the need for policy reconsiderations, and paving the way for new conflicts and alliances throughout the region.

This edited volume aims to shed light on the new issues that have emerged in the post-Arab uprisings period, paying heed to the policies of regional and external actors under these new conditions. The different chapters in the book focus on the political situation of different actors in the region, ranging from refugees to states.

In Chapter I, Jülide Karakoç discusses the challenges faced by the United States in the Middle East, arguing that US policy in the region has long been based on indirect orientalism, and that, compared with its more traditional form, this indirect version of orientalism maintains an orientalist dogma that is based on Western superiority over the East by oriental actors. She argues that following such a policy has created dualities among actors in the region, highlighting the Sunni and Israel biased, anti-Iranian policy followed by the United States in pursuit of its interests. Karakoç claims that the indirect orientalist policy of the United States is being seriously challenged by new actors and issues in the post-Arab uprisings period, the appearance of which, she asserts, paves the way for changes in the positions and foreign policies of regional actors. In such a period, she suggests, the United States needs to revise its policies, which have, proven largely inconsistent and ineffective.

In Chapter II, Nazlı Şenses opens a discussion on the consequences of categorizing migrants both in theoretical and practical terms, examining in particular the status of Syrian refugees in Turkey. She argues that categorizations, in addition to their failure to cover migration in its complexity, lead to the creation of hierarchies between migrants that affect their actual living conditions. Examining the relationship that exists between the temporary protection status and the living conditions of Syrians in Turkey, and questioning the dichotomy between forced and voluntary migration, and the category of refugee as a privileged status, Şenses concludes that making such categorizations constitutes a means of reclaiming national sovereignty.

In Chapter III, Arzu Yılmaz discusses Kurdish politics in the Middle East in the post-Arab uprisings period, focusing in particular on Kurdish political actors and their relationships with local actors such as Iran and Turkey, and with international actors engaged in Middle East politics.

Paying particular attention to recent developments that have led to a legitimacy crisis regarding existing national borders, she examines the impact of discussions regarding the potential establishment of an independent Kurdish state in Syria and Iraq, and the repercussions of such a move on the relations among Kurdish political parties, taking into account the alliances that have been forged with regional and international actors.

In Chapter IV, Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska examines how jihadi movements have adopted a postmodernist pop-culture to attract new members and induce fear in the West. She argues that jihadi cool, as a subculture within Muslim youth culture, uses Western popular culture to lure adherents into a particular ideology and lifestyle. In this sense, jihadi cool can be seen to have an authoritarian and absolute character. Górak-Sosnowska argues that jihadi cool, which seemed to lack form or content at the outset, has become the backbone for the recruitment of Western jihadists to Islamic State (IS), as well as the main factor in its propaganda machine as a result of a set of social and political factors.

Kıvanç Özcan in Chapter V analyzes the composition of the Syrian opposition. Examining the uprising in Syria up until January 2014, he argues that rising discontent among different groups against the economic policies of the Assad regime led to the erosion of its domestic support. In addition to the conditions created by this erosion, Özcan argues that foreign actors played a decisive role in the growth of the opposition. In this regard, he examines the policies not only of the regional actors who offered support to the opposition, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, but also Western powers, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Özcan asserts that the particular opposition groups supported by different countries are related to the latter's projections about Syria's future in a potential post-Assad era.

In Chapter VI, Duygu Ersoy questions the political potential of Syrian refugees as new agents challenging the limits of the established international order, examining the policies of the European Union and Turkey with regard to the refugees' demands to cross borders. The aims of these actors in putting the refugees in camps, transition zones, and detention centers, she suggests, is to keep them away from their area of jurisdiction, and argues that once again in history, refugees are revealing the limits of the European political system. Adopting Ranciere's approach to politics, Ersoy evaluates the motivation of the refugees in crossing

borders and leaving the places established for them as a form of political action.

In Chapter VII, Selin Bölme argues that the Arab uprisings in the region remain as a significant challenge for NATO, and with the Syrian crisis and the increasing violence being perpetrated by IS, the possibility of another military intervention has returned to the agenda. There is also an ongoing debate among members over NATO's commitments, as consensus in the Alliance on issues such as the use of force, burden sharing, and national interests have become more fragile. These constraints have led to hesitation on the part of NATO about taking a lead role in military interventions, and Bölme concludes that NATO prefers to develop cooperation with regional partners and help them to improve their military capabilities, allowing them to form their own coalitions against regional threats.

# CHAPTER I

## CHALLENGES TO US MIDDLE EAST POLICY IN THE POST-ARAB UPRISINGS PERIOD

JÜLİDE KARAKOÇ

The uprisings that are known as the Arab uprisings or the Arab Spring started in December 2010 in Tunisia, and affected almost every country in the Middle East and North Africa. Protesters took to the streets in search of welfare, dignity, and liberty against authoritarian rule, leading to some unexpected consequences in the region. In the wake of these uprisings, countries have faced many new issues with a new set of actors, with those issues relating to refugees, migration, human security, and religious and ethnic conflicts coming to the top of the agenda. These have had a significant impact on the foreign policies of both regional actors and those in the West, and among these, the United States in particular has begun to question its policies towards the region in the new period.

This chapter attempts to explore the challenges faced by the United States in terms of its Middle East policy in the post-Arab uprising period, and argues that the indirect orientalist policy followed by the United States related to the Middle East has become inconsistent and ineffective. To support this claim, after defining the basis of US Middle East policy, the chapter examines how new issues and actors of the post-Arab uprisings period are challenging US policy towards the Middle East.

### **Pillars of US Middle East Policy**

Since the 2000s, US policy towards the Middle East can be considered as being founded on indirect orientalism. What is this indirect orientalism, and how is it different from orientalism itself?

Orientalism, as described by Edward Said, can be defined as a discipline aimed at analyzing Middle Eastern politics in an academic milieu. It serves

to legitimize and promote Western superiority and dominance by creating an ideology of dualism between the West and Islam. As such, the Orient is considered undeveloped and inferior, and an entity to be controlled by the West (Said 2003). It is apparent that this orientalist dogma has not yet disappeared. As Dag Tuestad points out, orientalism still exists but with new conditions, and can be referred to as “neo-orientalism.” According to these neo-orientalist imaginaries, Middle East countries produce violence and terrorists while the West can be considered as representative of democratic values and habits. This deterministic approach ignores the reasons for the violence in this region, and fails to take into account the colonial, political, and economic interests that are labeled as “national interests” (Tuestad 2003, 591-599).

Taking all this into account, I suggest that US orientalist policy towards the Middle East can be referred to as indirect orientalism, meaning that the United States pursues an orientalist vision and policy towards the Middle East, not directly, but through local actors such as Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Within this version of orientalism, an orientalist dogma that is based on Western superiority over the Orient has tried to create dualities among the Middle Eastern countries. In this regard, US Middle East policy, which was established based on a Sunni-oriented, anti-Iranian, and Israel-biased perspective, is maintained via these local actors (Karakoç 2013, 224-227).

How has the United States been able to implement this policy in the Middle East? On the one hand, the United States supported the neo-Ottomanist ambitions of Turkey to become a leader and determining actor in the region. To this end, Turkey was promoted as a role model for the other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and as a result, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) became salient as a representative political party of moderate Islam. In fact, the AKP started to be seen in this light when it came to power in 2002, making many reforms in its bid to join the European Union. These reforms were accompanied by Western oriented discourses from the political authorities, and at the advent of the Arab uprisings, discussions were being made in regional countries such as Tunisia and Egypt about how the AKP model could be adopted as a new political attitude. In this period, the United States was behind Turkey, since Turkey’s rivalry with Iran and its Sunni-based policy was compatible with its own Sunni-oriented and anti-Iranian policy. It was this that led to Turkey being promoted as a role model democratic country for the countries witnessing uprisings.

However, following such a policy, the United States has ignored Turkey's problems with democracy, in particular regarding the Kurdish question.

The framework of Turkey's orientalist policy and its neo-Ottomanist aims were drawn up along the lines of the "Strategic Depth" doctrine of Ahmet Davutoğlu (Davutoğlu 2001), the chief foreign policy advisor of then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. According to this doctrine, strategic depth is based on geographical and historical depth, with geographical depth being a part of historical depth, referring to "a characteristic of a country that is at the epicenter of historical events." Davutoğlu argues that Turkey has significant geographical depth that places it at the center of geographical areas of influence, and also asserts that it is the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire that provides this opportunity for Turkey. By referring to Turkey as not only a European but also an Asian country this doctrine gives importance to Turkey's active engagement in its neighborhood, and in pointing out Turkey's Ottoman legacy, is based on an Islamic worldview (Murinson 2006, 951-952). However, in this context, Turkish Sunnis became prominent as a part of both worlds, Western and Oriental, and were promoted as actors capable of bringing democracy to the undeveloped countries of the Middle East. Following this doctrine, Turkey tried to put itself forward as a role model for the countries witnessing uprisings, such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria, and in Syria in particular, it tried too hard to promote itself as an actor in the democratization of the Syrian Arab Alawite regime. Turkey chose to act as a representative of the Sunni population, which had suffered under the oppressive rule of the Assad regime, and intervened actively in the conflict in Syria.

This approach was not incompatible with US policy, in that Syria had been categorized as a "terrorist state" in the US National Security Strategy document released in September 2002 following the 9/11 attacks for supporting terrorism. This strategy document, known also as the "Bush Doctrine," chose to ignore Syria's cooperation in the gathering of intelligence on al-Qaeda after the attacks (National Security Strategy 2002), as well as the report entitled "Patterns of Global Terrorism" published in 2001, which also indicated that Syria was not involved directly in any acts of terrorism (Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001). Such information and details were common in almost every report published until 2010, but this did not impede the United States in taking up a position against Syria and its efforts to create dualities among the Middle East countries.

Elsewhere in the region, as an oil rich state and a Sunni actor, Saudi Arabia, has become another pillar of US Middle East policy, with which the United States has been cooperating, disregarding its undemocratic and authoritarian character. As an important military and commercial partner in the region, Saudi Arabia has been used as an instrument by the United States in pursuit of its Sunni-Shia dualities among the region's countries. Saudi Arabia, which is as important a Sunni actor as Turkey, now faces its own struggles against Shia states and organizations, and its anti-Iranian position has always been valuable for the United States. Moreover, it has used a harsh line of discourse against the Assad regime and has done all it can to overthrow the regime in Syria.

The final pillar of US policy towards the Middle East is Israel. The United States has long held an Israel-biased vision in the region, with the country considered representative of Western values. It is noteworthy that Israel is considered by the neo-conservatives in the United States as a Western fortress in the Middle East, being representative of Judeo-Christian morality in the region (Tuestad 2003, 596). As such, Israel's political interests are regarded as a priority in US Middle East policy to the detriment of other actors, and this policy has constituted another factor contributing to the West-Orient duality in the Middle East.

This indirect orientalist policy based on local actors, alleviating the need for direct intervention in the Middle East, has been challenged, to a large extent, by the developments and events in the region following the Arab uprisings. The Sunni-oriented and anti-Iranian pillars of this US policy have been damaged, with new issues and new actors paving the way for different visions between the United States and its local allies.

### **New actors and issues of the post-Arab uprisings period and the destabilization of US policy**

As already noted, the uprisings that started in Tunisia spread rapidly to other countries in the region, with people taking to the streets in search of welfare, dignity, and liberty, leading to the overthrow of authoritarian leaders in such countries as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. In other countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, these events were quickly and violently suppressed, while the events in Syria resulted in a civil war.

During the uprisings and in the aftermath, no part of the region remained unaffected by these events. New issues appeared in the post-Arab



uprisings period that would complicate matters in the region, including ethnic and religious conflicts, a massive migration of refugees and threats to human security, which impacted on almost every community, group and state in the region. When viewed from this perspective, it is apparent that the Arab uprisings failed to satisfy the demands of those involved, and resulted in changes regarding the initial targets stated during the protests. There is now little hope of democratization in these countries since authoritarian tendencies dominate in all states despite the changes in governments.

Libya is still lacking a stable atmosphere after the deposition of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO intervention, and a state of chaos persists in the country due to the steady increase in the number of armed groups and widespread political assassinations. The active presence of these militias is considered an obstacle to the establishment of a new political authority.

In Egypt as well it would seem that the situation is moving increasingly further away from democracy. As it was military power that overthrew Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood government in July 2013, the Egyptian people are now facing undemocratic and suppressive politics implemented by the military-based government. There is an environment of distrust and insecurity throughout the country since all opponents to the regime are in jail or have been condemned to death. This situation removes all hope of the establishment of democracy in Egypt.

Among the countries that witnessed uprisings during the Arab Spring, the most promising in terms of democratic progress is Tunisia, where tolerance among the different social and religious groups is higher than in Egypt and Libya. The different stakeholders have agreed that power should be shared and that the system should force parties to form coalitions during constitutional debates. That said, even in Tunisia there is a lack of security, manifested as violence. Away from the political associations that are being formed in the post-Arab uprising period, the country is facing violent terrorist attacks from such radical Islamist groups as Ansar al-Sharia and Islamic State (IS) (Karakoç 2015, 172-201).

In this regard, developments in Tunisia and Egypt in particular, which are considered the most promising countries for democratization, have revealed the failure of political Islam. The idea of political Islam, also referred to as “liberal Islam” or “moderate Islam,” which implies a more secular attitude vis-à-vis religion, came onto the agenda once again amid

the Arab uprisings. However, intolerance among political actors and the environment of insecurity in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt have demonstrated that political Islam has failed to find success in these countries, in that there is no possibility of representation for different groups in the political area and the jails are full of political prisoners. This failure in the political domain has been accompanied by failure in the economic domain, with massive unemployment in the region's countries and lack of access to even the most basic goods (Mater 2014, 73).

The failure of political Islam has been supported by developments in Turkey. The recent authoritarian policies of the AKP government, which is considered representative of moderate Islam in Turkey, and its intolerance shown to government opponents in the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013, have led to disappointment regarding the implementation of democracy in the region after Turkey had been promoted by the United States as a role model for countries witnessing uprisings. This situation has politically weakened the position of the US ally.

Overall, it can be argued that the failure of political actors in the wake of the Arab uprisings is based on the failure to meet the demands of the people in regards to equality and justice. The newly established regimes have ignored the reasons behind the uprisings that started in late 2010, being content only to organize elections as the most basic requirement of a democratic regime, but then failing to give importance to demands predicated on representation and justice.

Of all the nations in the region, it is the Syrian people that are in the most unfavorable position. The ongoing civil war between the Assad regime and its opponents, which include the most radical Islamist groups in the region, is preventing any activity in the political sphere, although new actors are gaining prominence. In the north of Syria, the Kurds have declared an autonomous region called Rojava after being deprived of basic rights, and have declared an autonomous administration by distancing themselves from the other groups fighting the Assad regime. Nevertheless, their presence has been threatened by another actor that has gained strength during this civil war: IS.

IS appeared as a radical Islamist group attempting to garner power in the territories of Syria and Iraq through the use of violence. IS, widely known by its former name of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), rose out of opposition movements fighting against the Assad regime in Syria; however, its roots can be traced back to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) established

by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. After Zarqawi's death in 2006, AQI established Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) as an umbrella organization, and despite its lack of strength in the beginning, the organization became more powerful and effective under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who restructured the organization. In this new period, the organization started to carry out attacks against non-Sunni targets in Iraq. When the uprisings started in Syria that led to the civil war between the Assad regime and its opponents, the organization of al-Baghdadi put its support behind the al-Nusra Front, which was established in January 2012 and is accepted as the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. ISIS came into being after the declaration of al-Baghdadi in April 2013 announcing that forces in Syria and Iraq were to be unified under the name ISIS. This new movement, which recently changed its name to IS, has found support among those who left al-Qaeda.<sup>1</sup>

This organization chose violence as an instrument in its efforts to implement its rigid Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, and has become a powerful actor that has been spreading rapidly in the region. Its anti-Western discourse and intention to expand through the occupation of new territories in Syria and Iraq harmed and challenged the status quo established after the US invasion of Iraq. As a result of these developments, the United States has been forced to consider IS as a serious threat to its targets and policies in the Middle East.

When analyzing the reasons behind the appearance and growth of IS, it can be seen that US policy has played a leading role, whether directly or indirectly, and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 is notable in this regard. It is well known that after the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, a new administration came to power based on the powerful presence of the Shias and Kurds, who had been previously discriminated against in Iraq. In the presence of a government led by a Shia prime minister under a Kurdish presidency, Sunni parts of society found themselves excluded from the new regime. Following the removal of Saddam Hussein, all institutions and structures related to the ancient regime had been dismantled and all public officials and civil servants were discharged. In the face of their new situation, a significant number of the Sunni population lent their support to radical armed groups struggling against the newly established regime, among which IS became the most prominent. What made IS stand out among the other jihadist organizations was not its ideological standpoint but rather its use of violence to achieve its aims, including beheadings, torture, mass

killings, and abductions of other ethnic and religious minorities (Karakoç 2014, 598).

The strategy of IS to increase its membership through media and economic means is also remarkable. Its institutionalization in occupied areas and the social services it provides have been important factors in its rise (Al-Tamimi 2014, 5-15). Its effective use of these instruments has turned it into a very serious threat in the eyes of the United States. US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel's statements are significant in this regard. Considering IS as more than just a terrorist group, he argues, "They marry ideology, a sophistication of strategic and tactical military prowess, they are tremendously well-funded. This is beyond anything that we have seen." Another striking observation related to IS was made by the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dempsey, who sees IS as "an organization that has an apocalyptic, end-of-days strategic vision and which will eventually have to be defeated."<sup>2</sup>

Another noteworthy factor in the rise of IS has been the indirect support provided by the United States through local actors to groups fighting the Assad forces. The United States, along with two pillars of its Middle East policy, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, began providing support to the groups fighting the Assad regime in the form of financing and weapons, although they failed to make any distinction between the groups, among which are radical Islamist organizations (in particular the al-Nusra Front and IS). Furthermore, Turkey has been reported as providing support as a transit route for IS members on their way to Syria and Iraq, and as a country giving logistic support to IS. The events of January 2014, when trucks stopped in Turkey close to the Syrian border were found to be carrying weapons, allegedly for IS, cause outrage in different segments of society. What was even more striking was that a police search of these trucks was blocked by then Interior Minister Efkân Ala, although officials stated that the trucks were carrying aid to Turkmens in Syria.<sup>3</sup> Beyond this alleged support from the Turkish government to IS, another important factor is that many Turks have joined IS in its jihad.

Saudi Arabia is also considered by some circles to be supporting IS, with Iran in particular explicitly accusing Saudi Arabia of providing direct support. The participation rate in IS from Saudi Arabia is much higher than Turkey while wealthy Saudi citizens also support IS financially.<sup>4</sup> Despite the expressed discomfort at the rise of IS by now-deceased King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and the potential ideological and security threat it poses to Saudi Arabia, support for IS inside the country is obvious.

These allegations are important, in that it is widely accepted that one of the most important factors in the rise of IS has been the support provided to it by both regional and external actors, among which, as noted earlier, are the Sunni allies of the United States. Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's assessment of the situation is worthy of note in this regard, claiming that "the failure to help Syrian rebels led to the rise of IS"<sup>5</sup> while US Vice President Joe Biden has also accused regional allies of the United States of supporting the growth of IS.<sup>6</sup>

All these developments reveal the failure of US policy in the Middle East and highlight the incompatibility between US policies and those followed by its regional partners, which shows the need for the US to revise its indirect orientalist policy. First, Turkey was reluctant to participate in an anti-IS coalition, stirring serious reactions in both Turkey and the United States. This decision compelled some US media outlets to suggest that Turkey is no longer an ally of the United States, and provoked claims from US ambassador to Turkey Francis Ricciardone that Turkey was working with terrorist organizations.<sup>7</sup>

In reply, the Turkish government, explaining its reluctance to engage IS, cited security concerns that were exacerbated when IS took 49 Turkish diplomats hostage in Mosul in June 2014. It was only after the release of the hostages that Turkey condemned IS as a terrorist organization.<sup>8</sup> However, it is noteworthy that anti-IS statements from Turkey have always been moderate and weak. Although the Turkish authorities began to voice their explicit condemnation of IS activities more freely after the release of the hostages, they seemed very reluctant to engage in a fight against it.

Another issue that has destabilized the alliance between the United States and Turkey is the position of the two sides regarding the Kurdish struggle against IS in Kobane. Whereas the decades-old Kurdish struggle in different countries in the Middle East previously attracted little attention around the world, after IS attacked Kobane, the resistance and fight put up by the Kurds made them prominent actors for Western countries almost overnight. In fact, Kurds living in northern Syria had chosen to distance themselves from forces fighting the Assad regime since they did not agree with these groups regarding the future of Syria and the new political order to be established after the overthrow of the Assad regime. Instead, they chose to unify and organize around the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*-PYD), an organization established by Syrian PKK (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Workers' Party) militants with

the objective of obtaining their basic human and political rights. When the uprising started in Syria in March 2011, they fought against the Salafist al-Nusra Front. Later, during the conflict between the Assad regime and Sunni opponent groups, they distanced themselves from these groups. In January 2014, the Kurds declared an autonomous administration in northern Syria that they named Rojava. However, they came under attack from IS and have been continuing their struggle since July 2014. IS has launched violent attacks against Yazidi Kurds and northern Syrian Kurds, with hundreds of Yazidis being kidnapped, killed, or enslaved, while thousands have been forced to flee their country.<sup>9</sup> In the current situation, both Syrian and Iraqi Kurds are engaged in struggles against IS militants. However, the Kurds' prominence as actors in the region has not pleased Turkey. In October 2015, the Turkish military attacked fighters from the PYD. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu declared, "We hit twice."<sup>10</sup>

A number of other developments over the last decade had already contributed to the rise of the Kurds in the Middle East, with the proclamation of the Kurdistan Regional Government as an autonomous administration in the north of Iraq in 2003 following the US invasion being of particular importance in this regard. Besides their autonomous administration, Kurds have become a determinant in Iraqi politics, with all presidents since the invasion being of Kurdish origin. In this regard, they have become key actors with the Shias in the establishment of the new political spectrum in Iraq, although the most significant factor in their increased prominence in the Middle East has occurred in the wake of their struggle against IS.

It is within this framework that the US alliance with Turkey has been destabilized since the United States decided to continue its struggle against IS by providing support to Kurdish fighters in the form of air attacks. The defense of the town of Kobane from the IS onslaught by Kurdish PYD forces paved the way for Western sympathy and support for the Kurds, which has not pleased Turkey. Speaking in late October 2014, Tayyip Erdoğan voiced his displeasure at the latest development: "We're only talking about Kobane, a city on the Turkish border where there is almost no one left besides 2,000 fighters ... It's hard to understand this approach; why are coalition forces continuously bombarding Kobane. Why don't the coalition forces want to act in other zones?"<sup>11</sup> This statement was a clear indication of the belief that a Kurdish autonomous zone in the north of Syria would constitute a threat to the Turkish state, given the ongoing Kurdish issue in Turkey. In fact, prior to making this statement, President Erdoğan had declared that the PYD in Syria and the

PKK, classified as terrorists by the Turkish government, were the same in the eyes of Turkey. As a result, he said the US should not expect Turkey to approve of its support for the PYD.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, at that time Turkey, had to allow Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces to cross the Turkish border in order to help defend Kobane against IS. It was after the Turkish government succumbed to US pressure and internal protests concerning the lack of response from the government that Kurds were allowed to join the conflict in Syria;<sup>13</sup> however, Turkey's refusal to allow the coalition to use the Incirlik Air Base in its southern region put a strain on US-Turkey relations.

During this period, there were several claims in the country that Turkey was supporting IS militants, with persistent allegations that it was following an IS-biased policy regarding Syria and hindering the provision of support to Kobane. In addition, Kurdish peshmergas fighting against IS claim that IS have been using weapons marked as coming from the state-owned Turkish Mechanical and Chemical Industry Corporation (MKE).<sup>14</sup>

Turkey and the United States, after months of negotiations, agreed on a plan to train and equip moderate Syrian rebels in the battle against IS militants. According to this plan, also involving Qatar and Saudi Arabia and expected to last three years, 5,000 "moderate" rebels would receive training annually in Turkey, for which the United States would send more than 400 troops to the country.<sup>15</sup> Despite this train-and-equip strategy, which the United States ended in October 2015, the rift between the policies of the United States and Turkey increased. This is all too apparent in the comment of CIA Director John Brennan, who said that the United States did not want to see the collapse of the Assad regime, which would probably favor IS.<sup>16</sup> In addition, on March 15, 2015, US Secretary of State John Kerry said that he wanted to "re-ignite" negotiations with Bashar al-Assad to end the conflict in Syria, admitting that they would have to negotiate with the Assad regime in the end.<sup>17</sup> Turkey's reactions to these statements reveal an opposing policy and vision regarding the most important issues in the region. Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, regarding the Assad regime as the reason for all the problems in Syria, said, "What, will you negotiate with a regime that has killed more than 200,000 people and used chemical weapons?"<sup>18</sup> These comments seemed to increase the rift between the policies of the United States and Turkey in the Middle East. Moreover, in October 2015, the US administration declared that it had abandoned its efforts to build up a new rebel force in Syria against IS by accepting the failure of its \$500 million campaign to train thousands of fighters. Instead, the Obama administration

announced that it would provide ammunition and weapons for groups already engaged in the battle.<sup>19</sup>

The United States' Sunni-biased policy has been, to a great extent, harmed by these developments. Taking into account the fact that the anti-Iranian pillar of US policy has also suffered a setback as a result of US talks with Iran in Lausanne, it can be said that the basic determinants of its policy towards the Middle East have now become invalid. The initial aim of the United States to overthrow the Assad regime and thereby weaken Iran as a regional actor seems to be hard to achieve. Meanwhile, US actions regarding Syria are actually strengthening Iran's position in the Middle East. The US anti-IS coalition has led Iran to gain power while Iran's ally Assad and other Shia actors in the region have also benefitted from Western states' efforts. In the current situation, Iran and the United States seem to have much more in common in terms of regional politics in that they both want the Iraqi Shia regime to continue and for political stability to be established in Iraq. The United States and other Western actors were in talks with Iran, attempting to curtail Iran's nuclear activities to ensure that it cannot develop nuclear weapons. In return, the United States and other countries offered to lift sanctions on Iran. Iran's statements were significant, revealing its willingness to negotiate. For example, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani stated, "There is nothing that cannot be resolved."<sup>20</sup> In mid-July 2015, after many months of diplomacy, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, Russia and Germany (the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council or P5+1) with the European Union, achieved a nuclear deal with Iran that is expected to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. Along with this accord, all parties have agreed on the principle that Iran's nuclear program will be peaceful in return for lifting international oil and financial sanctions.<sup>21</sup> Following this agreement, proponents of the nuclear accord, in both Iran and the United States, have considered an improvement in relations inevitable. Some even expect a policy shift in the region regarding the Syrian issue based on collaboration between two countries.<sup>22</sup> However, the agreement did not please Israel, which is the permanent ally of the United States in the region. Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, declared that the accord was a "historic mistake." He asserted that it could lead to the appearance of a "terrorist nuclear superpower" in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup>

Within this framework, although there has been no explicit declaration that the United States is prepared to negotiate or cooperate with Iran and Syria



against IS, it is obvious that new issues in the post-Arab uprisings period have brought the sides closer together.

The direct intervention of Russian military forces in Syria since late September 2015 has also appeared as a challenging factor weakening the foundations of US Middle East policy. Russia was already very engaged in Syrian politics by following a pro-Assad policy since the beginning of the uprisings. However, its direct military intervention has unsettled the policies of other actors by forcing them to either strengthen their position in the conflict or retreat. Russian officials explained the aim of military intervention as preventing the spread of IS and other radical Islamist groups. However, it is obvious that, by this intervention, Russia wanted its close allies to gain power in the region and thus to be a determining actor in the Middle East. This aim was explicitly revealed shortly before Russian air strikes began by President Vladimir Putin himself in an interview published in CBS News. He said, "There is no other solution to the Syrian crisis than strengthening the effective government structures."<sup>24</sup>

Russia's return to the Middle East with its military deployment in Syria has not passed without reactions. Members of the US-led coalition against IS released a joint declaration criticizing Russia's intervention. The US and its allies, France, Germany, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, called on Russia to cease attacks on the Syrian opposition, asserting that Russian attacks may "only fuel more extremism and radicalisation." However, Russian officials deny that some of their airstrikes mainly target rebel groups opposed to the Assad regime instead of IS.<sup>25</sup>

Russia's intervention has had significant diplomatic consequences. Various actors in the Syrian war met in Vienna on November 30, 2015. On the one hand, there were the US and its allies, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, while on the other hand, there were Russia and Iran<sup>26</sup> whose participation at the Geneva II meeting in January 2014 was vetoed by the US and Saudi Arabia. China, which supports the Assad regime, was also included. Even Egypt, whose current regime is not recognized by Turkey, was present. Finally, although the Kurdish PYD was not invited to Vienna meeting, during these meetings and afterwards, Russian officials' statements indicating that they should also be invited to further meetings on Syria's future<sup>27</sup> concerned Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Unlike its good relations with the PYD, Russia's relations with the principal pillar of US Middle East policy, Turkey, has worsened.

Disturbed by Russia's direct intervention in the Syrian war in support of the Assad regime, Turkey chose to strengthen its opposition to the Assad regime. Subsequently, Turkey shot down a Russian fighter plane over its Syrian border in December 2015, which increased tension between the two countries. Turkey, which expected NATO support against Russia and the Assad regime, could not gain the support it hoped from its allies, in particular from the US. The US administration explained that they did not want to create tensions with Russia.<sup>28</sup> Turkey's activities in pursuit of its regional political goals have the potential to create difficulties for US Middle East policy in the long term. The tensions that developed in December 2015 between the Turkish and Iraqi governments over the Turkish military presence in the Bashiqa camp, which lies near Mosul, a city controlled by IS since June 2014, are striking. The Iraqi government considered it an infringement of its sovereignty and demanded an immediate withdrawal of the Turkish military forces from the camp. Under US pressure, Turkey declared that it would do this.<sup>29</sup>

These developments related to Russia's direct intervention in the Middle East reveal the United States' dilemma regarding the pillars of its indirect orientalist policy. Those who are actually fighting radical Sunni Islamist groups are Shia actors, such as Iran, the Syrian army, Hezbollah, and Shia militants in Iraq. However, the US cannot openly cooperate with these actors since it could alienate its Sunni partners, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar (Cockburn 2015). Consequently, Russia's actions in the region, along with these Shia actors and Kurds, have the potential to become more effective than those of the United States, which might reduce US influence in the region. In particular, Russia's significant presence in the Middle East may have two consequences regarding the Syrian war. First, if Russia and the United States, along with their allies, cannot agree to cooperate against IS and include Assad in resolving the Syrian crisis, it will prevent the collapse of Assad's regime and prolong the war. This may increase insecurity and instability from Syria to Iraq. The recent tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which started with Saudi Arabia's execution of a prominent Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, is very worrisome in this regard. Iran's Shia leadership have stated that the execution of Nimr "would cost Saudi Arabia dearly," and the event has deepened the Shia-Sunni rift.<sup>30</sup> Second, if the recently discussed global coalition is formed, and all its participants can unite against the common enemy of IS and other IS linked radical Islamist groups in the Middle East, this would be an opportunity to transform Russia's challenge into a chance to end the Syrian war with fewer losses and create a stable atmosphere in both Syria and Iraq.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Following recent developments and the appearance of the new actors and issues in the Middle East in the post-Arab uprisings era, the indirect orientalist policy of the United States has revealed itself as problematic and invalid. Previously, the United States and its local allies had been unified around a common cause based on the immediate collapse of the Alawite Assad regime, thereby weakening Iran's position in the region. However, circumstances in the region have not supported the realization of this short-term target. Rather, in the post-uprisings period, Iran and its Shia line seem to be more powerful than before while the Iran-backed Syrian regime does not seem to be weakening. Russia's direct intervention in the Syrian war in favor of the Assad regime has supported this framework.

The rise of IS in Syria and Iraq threatens not only other sects, religions, and ethnic groups in the region, but also the United States' position in the Middle East, bringing it to a point where it is no longer clearly insisting on the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria, much to the satisfaction of Iran. The United States' position vis-à-vis regional issues seems to be widening the rift with its traditional Sunni allies, who are completely against the continuation of the Alawite Assad regime and the empowerment of Shia Iran. The rise of the Kurds as a political force in the Middle East as a result of their resistance against IS and their cooperation with the United States constitutes another cause for concern for the United States' regional allies. Russia's return to the Middle East by directly intervening in the Syrian war has not changed their prominent status regarding the fight against IS. However, although the current situation has made the Kurds important actors for the United States, subsequent developments and events may change their role following agreements reached among their rivals since they have received no guarantees regarding their political status. As such, it is all too apparent that recent issues have revealed a need among regional and Western actors engaged directly or indirectly in Middle East politics to make a reassessment of their policies in the Middle East.

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