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Relations between Turkey and Syria in the 1980's and 1990's: Political Islam, Muslim Brotherhood and Intelligence Wars

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine how continuities and discontinuities over a period of nearly half a century have shaped the AKP government's relationship with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad regime. From the start of the 1980s until the 2011 Arab Uprisings, relations between Turkey, Turkish Islamists, Syria, and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood remained highly complex. Based on the information available from open sources and newspaper archives, this study terms the conflict between the Turkish and Syrian intelligence services that broke out in the 1980s as an "intelligence war." Both countries viewed the PKK and the Muslim Brotherhood – domestic enemies which they were trying to stamp out – as useful actors to be played off against the other party. While the Syrian/PKK part of the equation was frequently alluded to by the Turkish media and Turkish academia, Turkey's relations with the Muslim Brotherhood were gradually forgotten. Though open support for the Brotherhood was never an element in Ankara's official foreign policy, Turkey's intelligence and security forces did establish ties to the Brotherhood in order to strengthen Turkey's hand against Syria and made use of the organization insofar as it was in their interest to do so.

Keywords: Turkey's Foreign Policy, Syria, Muslim Brotherhood, Political Islam, Cold War, Anti-communism

1980 ve 1990'larda Türkiye ve Suriye arasındaki İlişkiler: Siyasi İslam, Müslüman Kardeşler ve İstihbarat Savaşları

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı, yaklaşık yarım yüzyılı aşkın bir süredir devam eden süreklilik ve kopuşların, AKP hükümetinin Suriye Müslüman Kardeşler ve Esad rejimi ile ilişkisini nasıl şekillendirdiğini incelemektir. 1980'lerin başından 2011 Arap Ayaklanması'na kadar Türkiye, Türk İslamcılar, Suriye ve Suriye Müslüman Kardeşler arasındaki ilişkiler son derece karmaşık bir seyir izledi. Açık kaynaklardan ve gazete arşivlerinden elde edilen bilgilere dayanarak, bu çalışma 1980'lerde Türk ve Suriye istihbarat teşkilatları arasındaki çatışmayı bir "istihbarat savaşı" olarak tanımlamaktadır. Her iki ülke de iç düşmanları olarak tanımladıkları PKK'yı ve Müslüman Kardeşler'i, diğer tarafa karşı kullanabilecekleri aktörler olarak gördüler. Denklem Suriye / PKK kısmı Türk medyası ve Türk akademisi tarafından sık sık dile getirilirken, Türkiye'nin Müslüman Kardeşler'le ilişkileri unutulmuştur. Her ne kadar Müslüman Kardeşler'e açık destek vermek, Ankara'nın resmi dış politikasının bir unsuru olmamasına rağmen, Türkiye'nin istihbarat ve güvenlik güçleri, Türkiye'nin Suriye'ye karşı elini güçlendirmek için Müslüman Kardeşler ile bağlar kurmuş, bu örgütü kendi çıkarları için kullanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye Dış Politikası, Suriye, Müslüman Kardeşler, Siyasal İslam, Soğuk Savaş, Anti-komünizm

Turkey's post-2011 Syria policy has been the most ambitious as well as the riskiest foreign policy gambit in the history of the Republic. Launched amid confident predictions that the Assad regime would crumble within months or even weeks, Turkey's Syria adventure is now universally recognized as a drastic setback for the foreign policymakers of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).¹ In a moment of candor, Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş admitted that many of Turkey's current problems are the result of the situation in Syria and the AKP's Syria policy.² Ankara's support for the Syrian rebels has set off a kind of chain reaction, causing the Syrian army to withdraw from much of the Turkish border and thus creating a power vacuum in northern Syria. This vacuum has been filled by the PYD (the Syrian branch of the PKK, with which Ankara has been fighting for more than 30 years), which has claimed autonomy in those regions. In recent years, Syria linked terror attacks have become a major security threat to Turkey, especially to big cities such as Ankara and Istanbul. In addition, there are now more than 3 million refugees of the Syrian war living in Turkey; whether they will return to Syria, and how to achieve the social, cultural, and economic integration of those who remain in Turkey, are quite pressing questions for the AKP government.

The core ideological dynamic underlying the AKP's post-2011 Syria policy has been political Islam. In the spring of 2011, when the first protests broke out against the Syrian regime, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood started to organize meetings in Turkey. Syrian-born businessman Ghazwan al-Masri, a prominent name in Turkey's Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MÜSİAD) and a close associate of Erdoğan, played an important role in organizing these meetings.³ Indignant at the AKP government's close ties to the Brotherhood, Syria issued the following warning to Turkey via its ambassador in Ankara: "For us, the Muslim Brotherhood is like the PKK is for Turkey."⁴ Responding to the holding of a press conference in Istanbul by Riad al-Shaqfa, a key figure in the Brotherhood and took part in the 1982 Hama Uprising, and its broadcasting by *al-Jazeera*, the Syrian ambassador stated, "You should not give a platform to people with blood on their hands." According to the ambassador, Erdoğan had introduced Bashar Al-Assad and Al-Masri to each other in 2009, asking Assad to be of assistance to Al-Masri in Syria. But Damascus was uncomfortable with Al-Masri's financing of anti-Assad meetings.⁵

After Turkey had created an anti-Assad front in Syria following the Arab Uprisings, President Assad admitted that the AKP government's enthusiasm for the Muslim Brotherhood predated 2011 by many years, stating:

1 "Davutoğlu Esad'a Ömür Biçti", 24 August 2012, https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/davutoglu-esada-omur-bicti,Nsez_e7zmEO7uz5O9Pv6hw (Accessed on 12 December 2017); Ertuğrul Günay, who at the time was serving as Minister of Culture and Tourism on the same cabinet as Davutoğlu, has stated that at a Council of Ministers meeting in the early months of 2012, he had stressed that the Assad regime was propped up by its allies and by Arab nationalism and had warned, "You can't get rid of him by bringing in people from outside." The response he received was just the opposite: "The prime minister said, 'Don't worry, this will be over within six months.' The Honorable Mr. Davutoğlu offered an even shorter time-frame: 'It won't even take six months, sir.'" Fatih Vural, "Mavi Marmara'nın Gidişine Öfkeliydi", *Bugün*, 27 July 2014.

2 Murat Yetkin, "Numan Kurtulmuş: Başımıza Gelen Birçok Şey Suriye Politikası Sonucu", *Hürriyet*, 18 August 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/numan-kurtulmus-basimiza-gelen-bircok-sey-suriye-politikasi-sonucu-40200349> (Accessed on 10 December 2017).

3 "Syrian Dissidents Gather in Istanbul to Call for Reform", *Agence France Press*, 26 April 2011. For an interview with Ghazwan al-Masri while he was serving as presidential representative for MÜSİAD, see Oytun Orhan, "Suriye Asıllı İşadamı Gazi Mısırlı (Gazwan Masri) ile Söyleşi", *Ortadoğu Analiz*, Vol.5, No.49, 2013, p.135-138.

4 Sevil Küçükkoşum, "Syria 'Offended' by Turkish PM's Statement Envoy Says", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 May 2011.

5 Ibid.

From our earliest meetings on, he [Erdoğan] was always very excited about the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Syria. He was so interested in the Brotherhood that he gave less priority to the improvement of Turkish-Syrian relations than he did to issues regarding the Brotherhood. This instinct to assist and protect the Brotherhood became the real starting-point, the fulcrum, of Erdoğan's Syria policy.⁶

The aim of this study is to examine how continuities and discontinuities over a period of nearly half a century have shaped the AKP government's relationship with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad regime. Turkish Islamists' interest in Syria and the Brotherhood dates back to before 1970, the year when Erbakan founded the *Milli Nizam Partisi* (National Order Party). Yet almost no academic studies have been done on this topic; the present article therefore aims to fill the existing gap. Moreover, contrary to what some scholars of Islamism claim, the relationship between the political establishment and political Islam during the Cold War era in NATO member Turkey was never articulated in terms of absolute polarities such as the center and the periphery or Kemalism and Islamism.⁷ As the struggle against the communism constituted the ideological backbone of Cold War-era Turkey, a cooperative partnership was formed between political Islam, on the one hand, and the Turkish state and the political establishment on the other. These dynamics were equally prevalent in the complex web of interrelations among Turkey, Syria, Turkish Islamists, and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. A close scrutiny of this historical process will explain what would otherwise seem like a bizarre turn of events: prior to 2011, Erdoğan – who was well aware of the 1982 Hama Uprising – could still call Bashar Assad (the son and successor to the elder Assad, who had bloodily suppressed the massacre) his 'brother', only to pronounce him a 'dictator' and a 'murderer' just a few months later. Such a drastic reversal in such a short space of time is a rarity in international relations.

In light of the historical background between Turkey and Syria, it is surely no coincidence that a Syrian-born businessman like Ghazwan al-Masri should assume important duties in MÜSİAD and –starting in the spring of 2011– should organize the Muslim Brotherhood to overthrow the Assad regime. Nor is it a coincidence that another Syrian-born individual, Halit Hoca, whose family fled to Turkey due to their membership in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, should become president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces with the AKP's support.⁸ The embrace of principles like Arab nationalism, socialism, and secularism by the *Ba'ath* regime which has been in power in Syria since 1963 has given it a unique importance for Islamists in Turkey in terms of their outlook on the Middle East and their efforts to interpret the region. In Islamist discourse, the *Ba'ath* regime in Syria, just like the Kemalists in Turkey and the Arab nationalist regimes of Nasser, Gaddafi, Bourguiba, Saddam, and Arafat in the Middle East, is one of the greatest obstacles to the unification of the Muslim world as an *ummah*. Moreover, from the 1970s onward, Islamists began to bring a sectarian approach to their understanding of Syria, viewing the Assad regime as an instance of the tyranny of Syria's *Alawite* minority over its *Sunni* majority. This historical legacy inevitably colored the AKP's Syria policy following the Arab Uprisings. In 2011, AKP Deputy Chairman Hüseyin Çelik stated, "There are genetic ties between the CHP and *Ba'athist* regimes in Arab countries. The CHP

6 Utku Çakırözer, "Esad: Erdoğan'a Vahiy mi İndi?", *Cumhuriyet*, 4 July 2012, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/354604/Esad__Erdogan_a_vahiy_mi_indi_.html (Accessed on 5 April 2019).

7 Behlül Özkan, "The Cold War-Era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and Its Rise to Power," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol.22, 2017, p.41-57.

8 For Halit Hoca's life story in his own words, see Feyza Gümüşlüoğlu, *Suriye'de Muhallif Olmak*, İstanbul, Mana Yayınları, 2013, p.55-81.

is Turkey's Ba'ath party." In addition, making allusions to CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's status as a member of Turkey's *Alevi* community (who share some doctrinal similarities with, yet are still distinct from, Syrian *Alawites*), Çelik asked, "Why do you come to the defense of the *Ba'athist* regime in Syria? Some unflattering reasons come to mind, to be honest. The *Baathist* regime in Syria relies on its *Alawite* base of support, which is 15% of Syria's population. Is this why Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu takes such an interest in Syria – out of a feeling of sectarian solidarity?"⁹ Similarly, in 2012, then-foreign minister Davutoğlu, addressing the CHP in Parliament, said, "Those who favor the *Baathist* way of politics cannot understand us"; likewise, in 2014, he stated, "all their [i.e. the CHP's] efforts have been to preserve the Syrian regime and Assad. The mentality is exactly the same. Assad is the Arab *Ba'ath*, the CHP is the Turkish *Ba'ath*, and the HDP is the Kurdish *Ba'ath*."¹⁰ Around the same time, then-prime minister Erdoğan put it even more bluntly: "Honorable Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu, you are a *Baathist*."¹¹ Such remarks show the ideological influence of Turkey's Islamists, whose the Cold War-era outlook was both sectarian and polarizing, making them approach Syria through the lens of the struggle against communism and see the Muslim Brotherhood as the sole legitimate alternative to the Assad regime.

Turkish Islamists' Views on Syria and the Muslim Brotherhood During the Cold War

From the second half of the 1940s – when the Muslim Brotherhood started to become politically influential in Egypt and Syria – until the mid-1960s, relations between the Brotherhood and Islamists in Turkey were close to non-existent. Cevat Rifat Atilhan, a founder of a number of Islamically-oriented but politically ineffectual parties that sprang up after 1945, and later a writer for Islamist journals such as *Büyük Doğu* and *Sebilürreşad*, argued that Turks and Arabs ought to be part of a broader Islamic Union.¹² But these calls for unity fell on deaf ears, both in Turkey and throughout the Middle East. However, in 1952 and 1953, *Sebilürreşad* published interviews with Muslim Brotherhood leader Hassan Ismail al-Hudaybi, conducted by Turkish journalists who had traveled to Egypt in order to observe the Egyptian revolution first hand. Al-Hudaybi stated that he was following developments in Turkey closely and that members of the Brotherhood had visited Istanbul: "The problem cannot be solved merely through having the prayer-call in Arabic or having *imam hatip* schools. The Turkish government should, in a single stroke, accept Islam as the social order, make religious education mandatory, and recognize the Qur'an as the supreme law. Until you do this, you cannot make any progress."¹³ Significantly, Al-Hudaybi mentioned that the Muslim Brotherhood had a presence in many countries but did not yet have a branch in Turkey. Nonetheless, Hudeybi optimistically predicted that "in the near future," he and his associates "would see much closer ties" with the Turkish

9 "Çelik'ten Kılıçdaroğlu'na 'Mezhep' Suçlaması", *Radikal*, 8 August 2011, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/celikten-kilicdarogluna-mezhep-suclamasi-1062721/> (Accessed on 11 December 2017).

10 *TBMM Tutanak Dergisi*, Vol.20, 26 April 2012; "Davutoğlu Çareyi Buldu: Bir Yerine 10 TOMA", *Cumhuriyet*, 14 October 2014, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/130265/Davutoglu_careyi_buldu__Bir_yerine_10_TOMA.html (Accessed on 11 December 2017).

11 "Erdoğan'dan Kılıçdaroğlu'na Sert Sözler: Sen Baasçısın", *Radikal*, 24 April 2012, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/erdogandan-kilicdarogluna-sert-sozler-sen-baascisin-1085904/> (Accessed on 11 December 2017).

12 Şaban Sitembölükbaşı, *Türkiye'de İslam'ın Yeniden İnkişafı (1950-1960)*, Ankara, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 1995, p.17-18; Mustafa Murat Çay, "Cevat Rifat Atilhan: Askeri, Siyasi ve Fikri Yönleriyle", *Unpublished PhD Thesis*, Konya, Selçuk University, Institute of Social Sciences, 2013, p.26-30.

13 "Müslüman Kardeşler Birliği: Azası Bir Milyon, Programı Kur'an", *Sebilürreşad*, Vol.6, No.126, 1952, p.10.

society; it would be a “felicitous time” for them.¹⁴ And indeed, starting in the 1960s, ties between the Brotherhood (not only in Egypt but also in Syria) and the Islamist movement in Turkey would develop rapidly.

The first half of the 1960s ushered in a ‘golden age’ of translation for Turkish Islamism, with the works of numerous Middle Eastern Islamists (especially from Egypt, Syria, and Pakistan) being translated into Turkish. Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Mustafa al-Sibai’s book *Religion and State in Islam* was published in Turkish in 1966; a summary of his book *Islamic Socialism* followed in 1967.¹⁵ The same period saw the publication of an important pamphlet by Salih Özcan, who played a significant role in the expansion of political Islam in Turkey. Özcan was the owner of the publishing house *Hilal Yayınları*, which specialized in translations into Turkish of the works of Middle Eastern Islamist thinkers. He also, thanks to his close ties to the Saudi monarchy, became a member of the Muslim World League. Özcan’s pamphlet offers a kind of summary of Islamists’ views of Syria’s Baath regime over a period of nearly half a century.¹⁶ From late 1940s onwards, when the *hajj* (pilgrimage) was legalized again in Turkey, Özcan and other Islamists traveled to Mecca overland (via Syria); during the course of their pilgrimages, they had the opportunity to meet face to face with, and forge closer ties with, many prominent individuals including members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁷ In 1967, while on a pilgrimage to Mecca, Özcan stayed for three days in Mina (an outlying district of Mecca), where he had long conversations with eminent Syrians. Among the names cited by Özcan are former Syrian president Nazim al-Kudsi, former prime minister Maarouf al-Dawalibi, and “15 Syrian merchants,” among them Aleppo-born artist and architect Wahbi al-Hariri, whom Özcan describes as an industrialist.¹⁸ In his pamphlet, Özcan provides a detailed account of his conversations with these politicians and businessmen.

The pamphlet’s cover serves as a promotional page where Özcan presents the reader with a chronology of events in Syria following the Baath Party’s 1963 rise to power, couched in the sort of anti-Communist language that was typical of Cold War-era Turkey: “This brochure is an official exposé of the true face of the Communists, who wear the mask of socialism and want to create a Red uprising as they deceive the poor people with the slogan ‘freedom, equality, social justice.’ Read it carefully and consider: what should we Muslims do in the face of the Reds’ surreptitious efforts?”¹⁹

14 “Müslüman Kardeşler: Programları, Gayeleri ve Faaliyetleri”, *Sebilürreşad*, Vol.6, No.149, 1953, p.383.

15 Mustafa Sibai, *İslamda Din ve Devlet*, İhsan Toksarı (Trnsl.), İstanbul, Yağmur Yayınları, 1966; Mustafa Sibai, *İslami Sosyalizm*, Cevdet Kayalar (Trnsl.), İstanbul, Hüsnütabiat Matbaası, 1967. A complete edition of “İslam Sosyalizmi” was published in Turkish in 1974.

16 Salih Özcan, *Ve Suriye Bugünkü Duruma Nasıl Düştü? İşte Acı Hakikat*, İstanbul, İttihad Matbaası, 1969. Özcan first had this piece of writing published in the weekly paper *İttihad Gazetesi*, which he owned; afterwards, due to heavy demand, he had it printed as a pamphlet. For detailed information about Salih Özcan, see Özcan, “The Cold War-Era Origins of Islamism in Turkey”, p.46-47; İsmail Kara, *Cumhuriyet Türkiyesi’nde Bir Mesele Olarak İslam 2*, İstanbul, Dergah Yayınları, 2016, p.520-523.

17 Among the individuals Salih Özcan described as his ‘friends and acquaintances’ were the Islamic scholar Mohammad Said Ramadan al-Bouti, former prime minister Maarouf al-Dawalibi, and Omar Bahai al-Amir, Syria’s ambassador to Pakistan during the 1950s. Ahmed Özer, *Bediüzzaman’ın Hariciye Vekili: Seyyid Salih Özcan*, İzmir, Işık Yayınları, 2011, p.287-304.

18 In 1965, Wahbi al-Hariri went to Saudi Arabia on the invitation of King Faisal, with whom Salih Özcan was also on good terms. There, he carried out research on traditional local architecture, which he went on to publish. The son of a wealthy Aleppo family, Hariri – who worked in the fields of architecture and archaeology – is described in Özcan’s pamphlet as “a big industrialist and a former billionaire.” “From Washington to Riyadh: A Collection of Artwork by Wahbi Al-Hariri Rifai 1914-1994,” Washington DC, GDG Exhibits Trust, 2012.

19 Özcan, *Ve Suriye Bugünkü Duruma Nasıl Düştü?*

The pamphlet's goal is educational: to explain what lessons can be learned from the failure to prevent the Baath Party from coming to power in Syria, based on the account provided by Özcan's interlocutors. The country's former president and prime minister point out that while they were in power, the activities of the 'Muslim Brotherhood' were banned by the police, while the *Ba'athists* and Communists were able to organize quite easily:

We were taken in by frequent reports by the police and secret police stating that 'the Muslim Brotherhood will mount a reactionary uprising and will seize control of the government'; thus we spent our time keeping tabs on the Muslims, not the Communists... unfortunately we only allowed freedom of the press to the leftists. We did not allow such freedom to the Muslims, who support us, and who make up 85% of our country. We made the nation angry at us.²⁰

Using his Syrian friends as his mouthpieces, Özcan touches on topics like the organization of the Baath Party among teachers, universities, and the army; its attribution of Syria's backwardness to its 'dependence on religion'; its nationalization of the property of wealthy individuals it describes as members of the 'comprador' class; and its appointment of members of the lower rungs of society to important bureaucratic posts like governor and chief of police. Meanwhile, wealthy industrialists like al-Hariri refrained from financially supporting anti-*Baathist*, anti-Communist groups. Concluding with the sentence, "The outlook in Turkey today is, unfortunately, the same," Özcan is anxious for his readers to take a lesson from what occurred in Syria.²¹

The Leftist and socialist politics became increasingly widespread in Turkey starting in the second half of the 1960s, acquiring a stronghold among university students and labor unions. Opposing such movements, for many Islamists, became a matter of great urgency. Numerous articles began to appear in Islamist newspapers and magazines arguing that more emphasis needed to be placed on religious values in education, politics, and culture, in order to counter the ascendancy of the Left. Predictably – given that the Cold War was then at its peak – this call was taken up by the army, in particular, as well as by other branches of the state bureaucracy. In short, the political establishment in Turkey saw Islamism as an antidote to Communism. The seizure of power by the Ba'ath Party in Syria was vividly remembered as an outcome to be avoided at all costs in Turkey.

In 1974, Sezai Karakoç, a prominent thinker in political Islam, argued that the unity of 'Islamic countries' would be best achieved through the creation of regional federations; one such federation ought to be the "Tigris-Euphrates Islamic Federation, made up of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq."²² Believing that Turkey ought to hearken back to its Ottoman roots and undertake the critical mission of uniting the Middle East, Karakoç sought to 'seriously question' the legitimacy of "the existence of the Ba'ath regimes in Syria and Iraq."²³ Nonetheless, towards the end of 2011, Karakoç opposed the AKP's foreign policy of seeking regime change in Syria, for which he was criticized by a number of Islamist newspaper columnists.²⁴

20 Ibid., p.13.

21 Ibid., p.14.

22 Sezai Karakoç, "Parçadan Bütüne", *Günlük Yazılar 4 Sur*, İstanbul, Diriliş Yayınları, 1986, p.89-91.

23 Akif Emre, "Bir Dünya Tasarımı ve Ortadoğu", *Hece*, Vol.7, No.73, 2003, p.44-45.

24 Ruşen Çakır, "İyi ki Sezai Karakoç Var", *Gazete Vatan*, 11 April 2012, <http://www.gazetevatan.com/rusen-cakir-442981-yazar-yazisi-iyi-ki-sezai-karakoc-var/> (Accessed on 12 December 2017); "Sezai Karakoç'tan Çarpıcı Açıklamalar", *Yeni Akit*, 2 March 2015, <http://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/sezai-karakoc-tan-carpici-aciklamalar-54600.html> (Accessed on 12 December 2015).

Starting in the second half of the 1970s, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood ramped up its fight against the *Baath* regime, while in Turkey there was a proliferation in the number of Islamist magazines and newspapers. Interest in Syria among Turkey's Islamists grew accordingly. The most significant change during this period was a growing tendency to speak of the Assad government and Syrian Alawites in increasing sectarian language. Thus, during this period, Islamists' criticisms of the *Baath* regime – namely, that it nationalized the property of the wealthy and used secularism to expel religion from the public sphere – acquired an additional, sectarian dimension. Hafez Al-Assad was described as a 'dictator' at the head of a regime which allowed Syria's *Alawite* minority to oppress its *Sunni* majority. By the end of the 1970s, the Islamist media had begun referring to Arab *Alawites* as *kâfirs* or 'infidels', in accordance with the *takfiri* world view which holds that any Muslim who has left the faith has entered a state of apostasy known as *kufur*. Likewise, it frequently referred to the Assad regime as *taghut*, a term used by Turkish Islamists to indicate a leader who has disobeyed God's commands and prohibitions and sought to establish an order that clashed with the Muslim religion. This was a clear sign of a radical transformation in Turkish Islamism as well as evidence of the growing influence of Middle Eastern Islamist writers whose works had been translated into Turkish. A fatwa concerning the 'Nusayris' (*Alawites*) by the 14th-century Ibn Taymiyyah, who would later have a marked impact on Wahhabism, resonated strongly among the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (and, through them, among Turkish Islamists from the 1970s onward).²⁵ Ibn Taymiyyah's *fatwa* described the 'Nusayris' as "greater infidels than the Jews and Christians," stating that the damage they had done to the Muslim community was worse than that of "the infidel Mongols and the Crusaders."²⁶ Strikingly, such terms are nowhere to be found in Hayati Ülkü's April 1965 piece *Nusayrilik* (Nusayrism) in *Tohum*, the journal of the *İstanbul İmam-Hatip Okulları Mezunları Cemiyeti* (Istanbul Society of Graduates of Vocational Religious High Schools), published since 1963.²⁷ There is no trace of *takfiri* discourse in the article, an introduction to Arab *Alawism* in Turkey and Syria. Yet, towards the end of the 1970s, Islamist publications in Turkey began making reference to Ibn Taymiyyah's views on the Nusayris and arguing that waging 'jihad' against the Assad regime was a religious obligation for Muslims. The frequent use after 2011, too, of terms like *tağut* (*taghut*) and *kâfir* (infidel) by fundamentalist fighters in Syria and radical groups in Turkey to refer to the Assad regime is good evidence of the continuity of Islamist discourse and the preservation of historical memory.

In 1976, the Islamist magazine *Vesika* announced Syria's occupation of Lebanon with the headline "The Don Quixotism of Assad the Alawite"; it described Hafez Al-Assad himself as one whose "Alawism predominated over his Leftism."²⁸ In 1979, as clashes between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad government grew steadily fiercer, many Islamist newspapers and magazines began to feature news stories and opinion columns about Syria. A notable example occurred in June of 1979, when the radical group known as the 'Fighting Vanguard' executed *Alawite* pupils at the Artillery School in Aleppo; the Assad government held the Muslim Brotherhood responsible for the killings and began a nationwide campaign of arrests and repression. These events received extensive coverage in the Islamist press in Turkey. When pronouncing on events in Syria during that period, a highly sectarian

25 Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, p.202.

26 Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayri-Alawis: An Introduction to the Religion, History, and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, p.303.

27 Hayati Ülkü, "Nusayrilik", *Tohum*, Vol.2, No.19, 1965, p.30-31.

28 "Alevi Esat'ın Donkişotluğu", *Vesika*, No.14, 1976, p.7-8.

discourse was employed by writers like Ali Bulaç, Selahaddin Eş, Hüsnü Aktaş, Abdurrahman Dilipak, and Fehmi Kuru, all of whom would exert considerable influence over political Islamist thought in the years that followed.²⁹ According to Ali Bulaç, “The Alawites, who make up roughly 10% of the population and who consist of deviant Shiites, are displaying a ruthless enmity towards the Muslim Sunnis”; following the raid in Aleppo, Bulaç maintained, “due to the Alawite Baathists’ increased acts of oppression and destruction, Muslims have felt it necessary to defend their own lives.”³⁰ Similarly, Selahaddin Eş wrote, “Hafez Assad’s bloodstained, anti-Muslim regime in Syria continues to drink people’s blood, but this same blood continues to poison its secular regime.”³¹ The Islamist magazine *Hicret* deemed the Muslim *ulema* of Syria, who had published statements condemning the Muslim Brotherhood, to be “religious-scholarly lackeys collaborating with the unbelievers,” while Hüsnü Aktaş provided excerpts from Muslim Brotherhood *communiqués* as an antidote to “the horrific terror perpetrated by Assad the Alawite.”³² Writing in the newspaper *Milli Gazete*, Abdurrahman Dilipak described the Arab nationalism espoused by the *Ba’ath* regime as “the ideal of a greater Syria taking in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, just like the ideal of Turanism in Turkey,” while praising those struggling against Hafez Assad, who he claimed was despised by all Muslims: “The pupils of Sayyid Qutb, of Abdel Qader Awda, are becoming new martyrs. Day in, day out, they are raising the banner of the cause in which they believe.”³³ In a series of columns familiarizing readers with the Islamic Republic of Iran, Dilipak wrote, “Even the Nusayri movement, which does not bother with prayer or with keeping the fast, considers itself a branch of Shiism,” going on to add that “the Alawites in our province of Hatay are part of this movement; they are in a state of *kufr* (heresy).”³⁴

Fehmi Kuru stands out among the authors listed above in one important respect, having gone to Syria for seven months in 1979 to learn Arabic. Consequently, he is one of only a handful of Islamists in Turkey to have observed the clashes between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad regime with their own eyes. Beginning in the summer of 1979, Kuru published his observations regarding Syria under a pseudonym in the Islamist newspaper *Yeni Devir*.³⁵ In line with the claim made about Syria by

29 Ali Bulaç, after writing a column for *Zaman* for many years, was arrested following the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. Abdurrahman Dilipak is a columnist at *Yeni Akit*, a staunchly pro-AKP newspaper, while Selahattin Eş is a columnist for *Star*, another pro-government paper. Hüsnü Aktaş, who was a columnist for *Akit* (as it was then known) during the 1990s, is the president of a foundation called the *Vahdet Vakfı*. Fehmi Kuru began writing columns for Islamist newspapers like *Milli Gazete*, *Zaman*, and *Yeni Şafak* in the second half of the 1980s.

30 “Esad’ın Tağuti Düzeni Çöküyor”, *Tevhid*, No.30, 16 July 1979, p.1-2.

31 “Kuklalar Devrilecek”, *Tevhid*, No.25, 11 June 1979, p.14.

32 “Suriye’de Kan Gövedeyi Götürüyor: Kaatil Esad Çaresizleştiğe Kuduruyor”, *Hicret*, No.7, 29 October 1979, p.12.

33 Tarık Behlül, “Suriye’nin Son Sıkıntıları”, *Milli Gazete*, 1 August 1979. Dilipak sometimes writes for *Milli Gazete* under his own name and sometimes under a pseudonym. He explained his various pseudonyms in a piece he wrote in 2008. Abdurrahman Dilipak, “Size Kısaca ‘Lo...’ Diyebilir miyim?”, *Habervaktim*, 17 November 2008, <http://www.habervaktim.com/yazar/8993/size-kisaca-lo-diyebilir-miyim.html> (Accessed on 13 December 2017). At the age of 19, Mehmet Metiner (an AKP deputy since 2011) wrote a letter entitled “Biz Müslüman Mıyız?” (Are We Muslims?), published in the September 12, 1979 edition of *Milli Gazete*. In the letter, Metiner used the term *tağut* to describe the regime in Syria. Mehmet Metiner, “Biz Müslüman Mıyız?” *Milli Gazete*, 12 Eylül 1979.

34 Abdurrahman Dilipak, “İran İslam Cumhuriyeti”, *Milli Gazete*, 3 March 1980, p.3.

35 In 2017, Fehmi Kuru announced on his personal website that he had written columns for the Islamist newspaper *Yeni Devir* under the pseudonym ‘A. Akıncı’. Writing in the newspaper *Hürriyet* in 2000, Emin Çölaşan used the following expressions regarding the seven months Fehmi Kuru spent in Syria: “He wormed his way into the Muslim Brotherhood”, “He established ties with members of the Mukhabarat”. “He constantly informed Turkish diplomats and members of Turkish Intelligence Agency (MİT) about the information he had gathered and the rumors he had heard.” Kuru responded to these accusations one day later in the newspaper *Yeni Şafak*. “Hayalkırıklığı Kaderimiz Olamaz”, 12 May 2017, <http://fehmiroku.com/hayal-kirikligi-kaderimiz-olamaz-amerikalilar-ne-yapacaklarini-yillar-once-anlatmislardi/> (Accessed on 14 December 2017); Emin Çölaşan, “Bir Katilin Ölümü”, *Hürriyet*, 13 June 2000, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/emin>

political Islam for half a century, Kuru's verdict was that "the Alawites run the country." Nonetheless, since "Islamic consciousness is growing day by day," he predicted that Syria could undergo a transformation similar to the Islamic Revolution in Iran: "Even though the conditions in Syria and the character of its people are very different, the country will be freed of its government in short order."³⁶

All of these individuals can be said to make up the Second Wave of Republican-era Islamists (born at the end of the 1940s or the beginning of the 1950s) who followed in the footsteps of Erbakan. All in their late 20s and early 30s when they penned these columns, they approached Syria with an Islamist worldview formed under the influence of prominent Muslim Brotherhood ideologues who had been translated into Turkish starting in the 1960s. Similarly, the *Akıncılar Derneği* (Raiders' Society), which might be termed the unofficial youth arm of the *Milli Selamet Partisi* (National Salvation Party-MSP), proclaimed its support for the Muslim Brotherhood once the situation in Syria began to deteriorate. Following the Brotherhood' surprise, the Assad regime blamed the Brotherhood of being in league with the US and Israel. The Raiders' Society president Mehmet Güney responded to this allegation as follows: "By acting as though the Muslim Brotherhood is the lackey of Zionism, the Ba'ath movement believes that it will cause Islam to lose favor with the people." According to Güney, "the Muslim Brotherhood movement is opposed to all systems created by human beings."³⁷

Milli Gazete, the publishing mouthpiece of the MSP, featured official statements and *communiqués* by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood on its front page. *Milli Gazete* proclaimed "the necessity of jihad found in Qur'anic verses and hadiths," a formula which was also typical of Muslim Brotherhood news bulletins.³⁸ The Assad regime was described as "Russia's puppet"; under the headline "Towards a State Based on Divine Revelation," the newspaper published the Brotherhood's challenge, "Assad, you killer, our Muslim people want an Islamic state. Give it to them, or sacrifice your life for the sake of disgraceful, rotten socialism."³⁹ *Milli Gazete* also published a *communiqué* by Issam al-Attar, a former Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader living in Germany, with the caption "The only fault of people oppressed in Syria is to be Muslim," along with a picture of the Arabic original, on its front page.⁴⁰ Moreover, the newspaper *Yeni Devir* provided its readers with an entire page of Turkish translations of statements by the Muslim Brotherhood denouncing the Assad government.⁴¹ Notably, *Milli Gazete* and *Yeni Devir* constantly republished Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwa proclaiming *Alawites* are "infidels."⁴² In all of these news pieces and opinion pieces, the Muslim Brotherhood and its sympathizers were portrayed as 'Muslims' and had the newspapers' support, while the Assad regime was characterized as an apostate, infidel, *Alawite* minority government which was oppressing Muslims. In July of 1979, in response to the fighting in Syria, the MSP's European branch, the European National Outlook Organization (*Avrupa Milli Görüş Teşkilatı- AMGT*), organized a "demonstration

colasan-bir-katilin-olumu-39160996 (Accessed on 14 December 2017); Fehmi Kuru, "Teker", *Yeni Şafak*, 14 June 2000, <http://www.yenisafak.com/arsiv/2000/haziran/14/fkoru.html> (Accessed on 14 December 2017).

36 A. Akıncı, "Suriye'de Azınlık İdaresi Müslüman Avına Başladı", *Yeni Devir*, 1 July 1979; A. Akıncı, "Suriye'de Fırtına Öncesi Sessizliği Var", *Yeni Devir*, 27 July 1979.

37 "Güney: Hafız Esat Yaptıklarının Hesabını Verecek", *Milli Gazete*, 30 June 1979.

38 "Suriye Müslümanlarının Cihadı Merkezi Bir Teşkilata Kavuştu", *Milli Gazete*, 27 October 1979.

39 "Esad'ın Despot Düzeni Tarihi Sürecini Tamamlıyor", *Milli Gazete*, 27 July 1980.

40 "Suriyeli Müslümanlar Bildiriler Yayınlayarak Esad Zulmünü Lanetliyor", *Milli Gazete*, 21 August 1980.

41 "Suriye'de Binlerce Müslüman Suçsuz Yere Zindanlara Atıldı", *Yeni Devir*, translated by O. Zeki Soyyiğit, 9 July 1979.

42 O. Zeki Soyyiğit, "Baas Yöneticileri ve Allah'a ve Peygamberine Meydan Okuyorlar", *Milli Gazete*, 29 July 1979; "Baas'ın Tankları Binlerce Müslümanın Üzerine Ateş ve Ölüm Kustular", *Yeni Devir*, 30 July 1979.

and march to protest the slaughter of Syrian Muslims.” AMGT president Yusuf Zeynel Abidin gave a speech in which he declared that he and his fellow AMGT members “condemned the martyrdom of 15 members of the Muslim Brotherhood” and that “Assad the Ba’athist would definitely be held accountable for this massacre.”⁴³ Among the speakers at the demonstration was Syrian-born Fazıl Üveyce, a Muslim Brotherhood member who occupied an influential position at AMGT.

Yet even as Islamist newspapers, from 1979 onwards, were giving front-page coverage to events in Syria and declaring their support for the Muslim Brotherhood; even as Islamist writers were predicting that Syria would experience an Islamic revolution similar to Iran’s; even as Islamist youth organizations and Islamist societies in Germany were protesting against the Assad government; amidst all of this, the MSP and its leader Necmettin Erbakan remained silent. Right until the September 12 military coup, the archives of Islamist newspapers and other publications contain no record of any statement made by the MSP, Erbakan, or other prominent Islamist politicians regarding Syria and the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite establishing close ties with Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other Middle Eastern countries, Erbakan’s relations with Syria were almost non-existent. In August 1976, Erbakan, who was then serving as deputy prime minister, met in Ankara with Maarouf al-Dawalibi, an adviser to the king of Saudi Arabia who had previously served as prime minister of Syria; al-Dawalibi had close ties to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁴ As Salih Özcan has discussed in his 1969 book, al-Dawalibi was an opponent of the *Ba’ath* regime. Erbakan also met with al-Dawalibi, if somewhat briefly, while on a visit to Saudi Arabia in 1979.⁴⁵ It is likely that the clashes between the Muslim Brotherhood and the *Ba’ath* regime came up at these talks. Moreover, during his frequent visits to Germany in the 1970s, Erbakan also met with Yusuf Zeynel Abidin and Fazıl Üveyce, both of whom were native speakers of Arabic and were on close terms with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. However, despite all his ties to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and his appeal among Islamists, Erbakan avoided making any public statements on this issue. A possible reason for the MSP and Erbakan’s silence regarding Syria is the Assad regime’s accusing the Brotherhood of partnership with the US and Israel. Such statements by Damascus may have played a role in preventing Erbakan –whose anti-Westernism and anti-Zionism was periodically accompanied by anti-Semitic language as well– from openly supporting the Brotherhood against the Baath regime. Indeed, Erbakan’s position on Syria remained constant throughout the 1980s and 1990s; at no point in his political career did he strongly or openly criticize the Assad government.

In contrast to Islamist newspapers and societies, which maintained their sectarian stance towards the *Baath* government, two journalists covering foreign policy at the center-left newspapers *Cumhuriyet* and *Milliyet*, Örsan Öymen and Sedat Ergin, were invited to Damascus by the Syrian government in April of 1980. There, Öymen and Ergin met with PLO leader Yasser Arafat, Syrian foreign minister Abdul Halim Khaddam, and Syrian information minister Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad. In the meeting, the information minister made direct accusations against the Muslim Brotherhood, the US, Israel, and Egypt: “The reactionary movements which have lately sprung up in Syria are driven by the gang known as the Muslim Brotherhood along with the dregs of capitalism and feudalism. This reactionary movement is directly linked to plans to establish hegemony over and conquer our country, plans favored by pro-American, Zionist, pro-Sadat elements.”⁴⁶

43 “15 Müslüman’ın Kanına Giren Suriye, Almanya’da Telin Edildi”, *Milli Gazete*, 28 July 1979.

44 “Erbakan Suudi Arabistan Kralının Özel Müşavirini Kabul Etti”, *Milli Gazete*, 4 August 1976.

45 “Kardeş İslam Ülkeleri ile İşbirliği En Kısa Zamanda Kurulmalıdır”, *Milli Gazete*, 3 September 1979.

46 Sedat Ergin, “İran’a Yönelik Saldırıları ABD ve Siyonizmin Çıkarlarına Hizmet Eder”, *Cumhuriyet*, 26 April 1980.

Notably, Ahmad requested that Ankara conduct tighter supervision over the passage of fugitives across the Turkish-Syrian border in order to provide greater security in the region; during the 1980s, Damascus would frequently call attention to the fact that Muslim Brotherhood members were crossing the Turkish border to carry out operations in Syria. Rebutting claims of sectarian conflict, Ahmad said, "We are Muslims. And you are aware that there are 72 sects in Islam. Our Turkish brothers know that sectarianism is not an issue for us."⁴⁷

The Muslim Brotherhood against the PKK: Turkish-Syrian Intelligence Wars in the 1980s

The military junta which took power in Turkey through the September 12 *coup d'état* was influenced by two dynamics –one in foreign and one in domestic policy– in its position on Syria. In terms of foreign policy, Syria's relations with Turkey, from the 1970s onward, were extremely limited. Given Turkey's membership in NATO, the Turkish military was not pleased by the fact that Damascus and Moscow enjoyed good relations; that Syria believed it had a territorial claim to the Turkish province of Hatay only added to the generals' misgivings. Syrian foreign minister Khaddam's 1981 visit to Ankara was the first visit between the Syrian and Turkish foreign minister in eight years. The epithet used by Cengiz Çandar and Sedat Ergin to describe Syria during this period –Turkey's 'distant neighbor'– is a good indication of the state of Turkish-Syrian diplomatic relations at the time.⁴⁸ Problems in Turkey's domestic politics were another dynamic which negatively impacted Ankara-Damascus relations. Just before the 1980 coup, Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the PKK, fled to Syria; numerous members of leftist groups likewise sought refuge there in the aftermath of the coup. Accordingly, during the 1980s, the powers that be in Turkey, including its military regime, viewed Syria as a country that harbored terrorists fleeing from Turkey. Conversely, during all its bilateral meetings with Ankara throughout the 1980s, Damascus complained that Turkey was providing a safe haven for the Muslim Brotherhood, which it similarly described as 'terrorists'. The Assad regime's objection regarding the Muslim Brotherhood has not received sufficient attention in Turkish academic publications on Syria, which have placed a one-sided emphasis on Damascus's support for the PKK as the most significant cause of damage to Turkish-Syrian relations.

A military "domestic threat report" (no. 3508-2-80), drafted on June 2, 1980, a few months before the 1980 coup, and signed by Chief of the General Staff Kenan Evren, accused Syria of fostering Arab nationalism and engaging in weapons-smuggling in order to bring about 'separatism' in Hatay; supporting Kurdish activities in Turkey; and backing leftist groups which it described as carrying out "anarchist activities."⁴⁹ One sentence in the report, concerning the government of Syria, is particularly striking: "The Alawite Baathist regime is in a difficult situation due to the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood organization, established by Sunni Arabs." Turkey's post-September 12 military regime was well aware that it could use the Brotherhood against the Assad regime, which it believed supported 'terrorists' in Turkey.

47 Örsan Öymen, "Anarşiyi Önlemek İçin Sınırı Ortak Denetlemeliyiz", *Milliyet*, 26 April 1980.

48 Cengiz Çandar and Sedat Ergin, "Uzak Komşu: Suriye", *Cumhuriyet*, 09 June 1981, p.1, 11.

49 The journalist Orhan Gökdemir published the General Staff's report as a supplement to his book. Orhan Gökdemir, *Öteki İslam*, İstanbul, Sorun Yayınları, 1995, p.99-105.

Sources on Ankara's relations with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s are extremely limited. However, published intelligence reports along with journalistic accounts of the period provide some clues to the nature of Turkey's relationship with the Brotherhood around this time. Yaşar Yakış, who served as counselor at the Turkish embassy in Damascus in early 1980s, and who later became the first foreign minister of the AKP era, has stated that during the period in question, Ankara did not support the Muslim Brotherhood but merely "turned a blind eye" to them.⁵⁰ A May 1982 report entitled "Syria: Muslim Brotherhood Pressure Intensifies," written by the US Department of Defense shortly after the 1982 Hama Uprising, pointed out that the greatest support for the Muslim Brotherhood came from Iraq, while Muslim Brotherhood militants had infiltrated Syria "to a lesser degree from Turkey."⁵¹ The report included a map with three arrows showing how the militants had made their way into Syria from Turkey. In a clear indication of the continuity of Turkey's Syria policy, the same three transit points that were used in 1982 –Yayladağı, Reyhanlı, and Kilis– were also heavily employed to funnel militants and weapons to Syria following 2011. Confirming this piece of information, journalist Soner Yalçın has written that a minister of the *Anavatan Partisi* (Motherland Party) whom Yalçın leaves unnamed told him, "The CIA, Mossad, and MİT supported the Brotherhood against Assad. Assad often complained about this. MİT, in particular, became very involved in the matter in 1981. So much so that Assad came to realize that Turkey was the source of everything that happened to him. He warned Turkey on this issue many times."⁵²

According to Yalçın, in a 1989 meeting in Ankara, State of Emergency Regional Governor Hayri Kozakçıoğlu hinted that Turkey was backing the Brotherhood in retaliation for Syria's support for the PKK. Until Turkish police and intelligence archives are opened, it is impossible to know whether Ankara merely 'turned a blind eye' to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s or –if it did support the Brotherhood– what the precise extent of its support was. Even prior to the 1982 Hama Uprising, Syrian statesmen had begun to inform their Turkish counterparts that they objected to Turkey's position on the Brotherhood.

In a piece written on the occasion of Syrian foreign minister Khaddam's 1981 visit to Ankara, Çandar and Ergin stated, "Earlier, [Khaddam] claimed several times that some militants from the Muslim Brotherhood –which was stepping up its operations in Aleppo against the Syrian Baathist regime– had escaped to Turkey."⁵³ Similarly, in an interview in Damascus in June of 1985, Khaddam –then serving as Assad's vice president– told Turkish journalist Mehmet Ali Birand that a number of Syrians who had engaged in anti-government activities were present in Turkey.⁵⁴ In a report which he wrote following this interview, Birand stated that Syria was concerned that "the religious 'Muslim Brotherhood' organization, which is fighting against the Hafez Assad regime, may, after receiving support for a while from certain powers in Turkey, carry out an assassination attempt."⁵⁵ In March of

50 Private interview with Yaşar Yakış, İstanbul, 16 December 2017.

51 "Syria: Muslim Brotherhood Pressure Intensifies", *Defense Intelligence Agency*, May 1982, <https://syria360.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/dia-syria-muslimbrotherhoodpressureintensifies-2.pdf> (Accessed on 18 December 2017). The following sentence appears in the report, referring to the date February 14, 1982, in the midst of the Hama Uprising: "Brotherhood sources in Ankara reported that large portions of the Damascus-Hama-Aleppo Highway were under the control of the Islamic Revolution." No information is provided about the identity of the 'Brotherhood sources in Ankara'.

52 Soner Yalçın, *Erbakan*, İstanbul, Kırmızı Kedi, 2013, p.293.

53 Çandar and Ergin, "Uzak Komşu: Suriye".

54 Mehmet Ali Birand, "Şam Ankara'ya Göz Kırıyor", *Milliyet*, 6 June 1985, p.1, 6.

55 Mehmet Ali Birand, "Hatay Sorunu Musalla Taşına Konmuş, Bekliyor", *Milliyet*, 07 June 1985, p.7.

1986, during a visit to Ankara by Syrian Prime Minister Abdul Rauf al-Kasm, newspapers reported that, at Syria's request, the following clause was added to the text of a security agreement under negotiation: "Turkey will perform its duty with respect to the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood."⁵⁶

On an official visit to Damascus in 1987, Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal complained about PKK leader Öcalan's activities in Syria, while the Syrians, for their part, informed Turkey of their concerns regarding the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Birand, the Syrian officials with whom he met had provided Ankara with a list of "Muslim Brotherhood" militants in Turkey, but the Turks had said, they "could not find them."⁵⁷ In response to Prime Minister Özal's complaints of PKK activities in Syria, Hafez Assad stated that "even though the Muslim Brotherhood organization was planning anti-Syrian activities in Turkey, [Syria] had never held the Turkish government responsible and had never thought that the Brotherhood was acting with Turkey's consent."⁵⁸ The upshot of it all was that Syria constantly made its complaints about the Muslim Brotherhood known to Turkey during these bilateral talks.

Two events involving Syria, Turkey, and the Muslim Brotherhood dating from the second half of the 1980s are particularly noteworthy. In April of 1986, the media reported that 200 people had been killed in a bomb attack on a train traveling from Latakia to Aleppo, near the town of *Jisr al-Shughur* close to the Turkish border.⁵⁹ About 20 days later, Syrian state television reported that five individuals, including two Turkish citizens, two cousins named Mustafa and Mehmet Albayrak, had been arrested in Aleppo on charges of planning the attack. According to this news report, the five people had carried out the attack in the name of the Muslim Brotherhood and had obtained the explosives from Iraq, bringing them into Syria via its border with Turkey. A *New York Times* story claimed, among other things, that the Muslim Brotherhood had an "operational center" in Antakya.⁶⁰ Visiting Ankara in order to provide information about the matter, Brigadier General Gharib from the Syrian Ministry of the Interior informed Minister of the Interior Yıldırım Akbulut that Syria blamed Iraq for the bombing.⁶¹ One week after this news report was featured in the Turkish and world media, an even more startling development occurred; an Arabic-speaking individual crossed over from Syria to the village where the Albayrak cousins lived, three kilometers from the Syrian border; there, he carried out a bomb attack and then fled.⁶² A year following the train bombing, the two Turkish suspects were not among the five people who Syria announced had been executed.⁶³ A full 23 years later, following efforts by President Abdullah Gül, the two Turkish cousins were returned to Turkey; however, in news stories on the subject, they remained silent about what had happened in 1986.⁶⁴

56 Nur Batur, "Sınır ve Su Konusunda Anlaşmazlık", *Milliyet*, 6 March 1986, p.14.

57 Mehmed Ali Birand, "Suriye'nin Ankara'ya Kaygılı Bakışı", *Milliyet*, 14 July 1987, p.7.

58 Mehmet Ali Birand, "Apo Suriye'de Yok ki Verelim", *Milliyet*, 17 July 1987, p.6.

59 "Suriye'de Terör", *Milliyet*, 20 April 1986, p.8.

60 Ihsan A. Hijazi, "Syria Hints at a Revival of Dissidents", *New York Times*, 9 May 1986, p.3; "Sabotajcı İki Türk Yakalandı", *Milliyet*, 11 May 1986.

61 "Suriye'de İki Türk Tutuklandı", *Cumhuriyet*, 14 May 1986, p.7.

62 The *muhtar* of village of Bohşin, Hasan Albayrak was removed from his post by the governor of Hatay following this event, on the grounds of 'negligence'. "Suriyeli'den Bombalı Saldırı", *Milliyet*, 18 May 1986, p.14; "Bombalanan Köyde Korku", *Milliyet*, 19 May 1986, p.12.

63 "Five Convicted Bombers Are Executed", *Associated Press*, 24 August 1987.

64 "Suriye'nin Serbest Biraktığı Türk Mahkûmlar Türkiye'ye döndü", *Milliyet*, 29 May 2009, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/suriye-nin-serbest-biraktigi-turk-mahkumlar-turkiye-dondu-gundem-1100634/> (Accessed on 19 December 2017). In 1993, the magazine *İkibin'e Doğru*, known for its speculative news reports, claimed –based on the account of an

The second startling event in this period occurred just one month later. On June 16, 1986, “300 kilos of plastic explosive” were seized in an operation by the “Turkish Intelligence Services”; two Turks and an Arab were arrested in connection with the raid.⁶⁵ According to the Public Prosecutor’s Office of the Ankara State Security Court, all the arrangements regarding the explosives –which had been brought in from Iraq, and were to be smuggled into Syria by way of Turkey– had been made by Muhammad Khair Azkour, a military attaché at the Syrian embassy in Ankara. It was alleged that these explosives would be used in attacks by the Muslim Brotherhood in Aleppo and that, in this way, “the Syrian intelligence forces sought to achieve their aim of a provocation which would not result in loss of life and would entail minimum loss of property.” Thus, the Syrian intelligence forces would “be in a position to make accusations against Turkey on the pretext that people in Turkey were turning a blind eye to, were tolerating, the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood Organization.” Allegedly, the Syrian military attaché fled from Turkey, while the other defendants received jail sentences ranging from six to 20 years.⁶⁶

Even judging from the information available from open sources and newspaper archives, it seems fair to term the conflict between the Turkish and Syrian intelligence services that broke out in the 1980s as an ‘intelligence war’. Both countries viewed the PKK and the Muslim Brotherhood –domestic enemies which they were trying to stamp out– as useful actors to be played off against the other party. During the Cold War, the *Ba’athist* regime in Syria felt an ideological affinity to the outspokenly Marxist-Leninist PKK; at the same time, it did not escape the Turkish military and the Özal government, which had embraced the ‘Turkish-Islamic synthesis’ following the 1980 coup, that they could use the Muslim Brotherhood against Syria. Syria clearly regarded its northern neighbor –a NATO member which was many times larger than itself in terms of both population and economy– as a *Sunni* power which was upsetting its own internal balances of power. Likewise, Ankara saw Damascus as the USSR’s closest ally in the Middle East, and perceived the close ties between Moscow and Damascus as a ‘communist’ maneuver to encircle it from the south. As was mentioned earlier, hundreds of leftists fled to Syria following the September 12 coup; this, too, increased Ankara’s perception of Damascus as a ‘communist’ threat. In addition, the Assad regime was uneasy at the possibility that Ankara might try to assert a historical claim over Syria.⁶⁷ Notably, Syrian vice president Khaddam commented that “today’s Turkey is the same Turkey that rebelled against the Ottomans,” a pointed reminder to Ankara that it had rejected its own Ottoman heritage.⁶⁸

Though neither Damascus nor Ankara refrained from using the PKK and the Muslim Brotherhood for their own ends, the Syrian/PKK part of the equation was frequently alluded to by the Turkish media and Turkish academia, while Turkey’s relations with the Muslim Brotherhood were

anonymous ‘revolutionary’– that the 1986 bombing “had been carried out, with MİT’s knowledge, by two Turkish brothers who were members of the Muslim Brotherhood.” The report also claimed that Muslim Brotherhood members, during those years, were allowed to cross the border by the Turkish patrolmen, and that they received military training in Turkey. Yıldırım Akbulut, then serving as minister of the interior, delivered a written statement regarding this incident to Parliament in 1986. Akbulut stated that Turkey did not support any actions against Syria or other countries and was firm in its resolve to fight terrorism. “Mumcu Suikastinde CIA İzleri”, *İkibin’e Doğru*, 31 January 1993, p.9; *TBMM Tutanak Dergisi*, Vol.31, 7 October 1986, p.485.

65 “Askeri Ataşelik Sorumlusu Kaçtı”, *Cumhuriyet*, 28 January 1987, p.10.

66 “Silah Kaçakçılarına 6-20 Yıl Hapis Cezası”, *Milliyet*, 5 June 1987, p.9; Turan Yılmaz, “Sabotajcılara 37 Yıl Hapis”, *Cumhuriyet*, 7 February 1988, p.8.

67 Cengiz Çandar, *Mezopotamya Ekspresi*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2012, p.83-84.

68 Birand, “Şam Ankara’ya Göz Kırıyor”.

gradually forgotten. Nonetheless, in October of 1992, a headline for the newspaper *Hürriyet* reported that there had been negotiations between Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood in 1987 concerning the possibility of Öcalan being killed by the Brotherhood. Allegedly, the Brotherhood had offered to kill Öcalan in exchange for the release of a high-ranking Brotherhood militant who had been caught with explosives in Mersin; however, “MIT prevented the operation.”⁶⁹ One can assume that the US and CIA, as well as the USSR and KGB, had some involvement –to the extent that it served their own ends– in this Cold War-era game of chess between Turkey and Syria, in which the PKK and the Muslim Brotherhood were used as pawns. Moreover, relations between the two countries became even more complex with the addition of the ‘Hatay question’, which Damascus saw as unresolved, as well as disputes in the 1980s regarding the sharing of water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. With the break-up of the USSR in 1991, Syria lost its greatest foreign patron, and became increasingly weaker as a result; meanwhile, in response to the PKK’s stepping-up of violence in Turkey, Ankara ratcheted up pressure on Damascus.

Turkish Islamists’ Policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood and Syria Following 1980

Turkish Islamists can be classed into two different groups based on their views of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, to which they feel an ideological affinity. One group considered that the *Ba’athist* regime of Syria merited the terms *kâfir* and *tağut*, and lent its full support to the Muslim Brotherhood’s armed struggle, which it saw as an instance of ‘jihad’. This group of Turkish Islamists studiously ignored the fact that the Brotherhood’s armed attacks had the result of weakening Syria, one of the most prominent anti-Israel, anti-American countries in the Middle East. The end of the 1970s, a time when the Brotherhood’s violence in Syria began to pick up pace, was also the era of ‘jihad’, which began following the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan, and which was motivated in large part by anti-communism. Such Turkish Islamists, who viewed Syria as a part of the global ‘jihad’, criticized the West for failing to support the Brotherhood’s fight against the Syrian *Baathists*, the Soviets’ ally in the Middle East.⁷⁰

The second group of Turkish Islamists was led by Erbakan and consisted mainly of Islamist politicians as well as certain prominent leaders of the religious orders known as *cemaats*. Islamists of this stripe did not approve of the Muslim Brotherhood’s armed struggle against the Assad regime; on the contrary, they thought this served the interests of the West and of Israel. These Islamists, however much ideological affinity they might feel for the Brotherhood, and however close their ties to it, did not support its military operations in Syria, either during the 1982 Hama Uprising or during the 1990s. They likewise refrained from publicly denouncing the Assad regime. Remarks made in a 2017 press conference Temel Karamollaoğlu, the president of the *Saadet Partisi* (Felicity Party), regarding the 1982 Hama Uprising effectively sum up this second group’s stance towards Syria. In 1982, a Muslim Brotherhood group including AMGT member Fazıl Üveyce came to Turkey to meet with Erbakan: “They said that they were about to start a Muslim Brotherhood revolt in Syria and they asked Erbakan Hoca for support.” Karamollaoğlu recounted that Erbakan had addressed the question of an armed

69 Saygı Öztürk, “Aponun Başı İçin Pazarlık”, *Hürriyet*, 20 October 1992, p.1, 30.

70 “Bütün Müslümanlar Afgan’lı Mücahidlere Yardım Etmelidir”, *Milli Gazete*, 12 March 1980; “Suriye Halkının Sesi”, *Milli Gazete*, 13 February 1982.

uprising as follows: “By no means attempt such a thing. You cannot be successful...do not do it. You will only cause a great massacre.”⁷¹ Karamollaoğlu also stated that the same Muslim Brotherhood group had requested support for an armed uprising from Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu, the leader of the İsmailağa *cemaat*, an important branch of *Naqshbandiyah* in Turkey: “His Reverence Mahmut Efendi said that such an enterprise would be absolutely impermissible from an Islamic perspective because it would lead to the killing of innocent people...‘Look,’ he said, ‘If you attempt such a thing, then even if you die, don’t think you will become a martyr.’”⁷² In a piece written in 2015, Islamist writer Ali Bulaç recounts these conversations from 1982 in similar fashion. Remarking that Erdogan opposed armed rebellions in Muslim countries throughout his political career, Bulaç notes that Erdogan once said to him, “Whatever we in the world of Islam do, we must do it in cooperation with these rulers [of ours].”⁷³

Although Erdogan and other prominent Islamists might oppose the imminent revolt against the Assad regime behind closed doors, from January 1982 onwards, the newspapers *Milli Gazete* and *Yeni Devir*, as well as Islamist magazines like *Mavera* declared the Muslim Brotherhood’s armed struggle a ‘jihad’ and gave it their full-fledged support. Chief among the Brotherhood’s Turkish supporters were Islamists like Sadık Albayrak, Yasin Hatipoğlu, Hüsnü Aktaş, and Fehmi Kuru. Albayrak, a columnist for *Milli Gazete*, wrote many pieces about the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Syria during the first half of 1982.

Albayrak’s columns described the rebellion and the Brotherhood’s plea for support from its Turkish co-religionists along with lengthy excerpts from Brotherhood *communiqués*; he termed the Damascus government “the administration of the Nusayri atheist Assad.”⁷⁴ Albayrak’s writings periodically referenced the aforementioned *fatwa* of Ibn Taymiyyah which had declared the *Alawites* ‘*kâfirs*’. In Albayrak’s words, “The Nusayri movement, both in thought and in action, is a perverted, un-Islamic movement.”⁷⁵ In one column, Albayrak recounted an interview from the magazine *el-Müctema* with Muslim Brotherhood member and Islamic Front leader al-Bayanouni. In the interview, al-Bayanouni had said the following of Assad: “He continually interferes in Turkey’s internal affairs. As you know, it has been revealed that he has set up training camps for Armenian terrorists and constantly provides weaponry to separatists and terrorists in Turkey.”⁷⁶ These words were obviously spoken and published in order to sway conservative, nationalistic public opinion in Turkey along with the military regime administering the country. Yasin Hatipoğlu declared that “the Brotherhood is the true owners of Syria”; similarly, Hüsnü Aktaş showered the Brotherhood with praise and pronounced one of its most radical members, Marwan Hadid, as a “hero.”⁷⁷ On the first anniversary of the Hama Uprising, Fehmi Kuru stated that the Assad government had “delivered a serious blow to the Islamic movement,” while adding that “it would be premature to say that it is all over.”⁷⁸

71 “Erdogan ve T Karamollaoğlu Suriye’deki İhvan İle Ne Konuştu”, *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOxjc7hFX1s> (Accessed on 20 December 2017).

72 *Ibid.*

73 Ali Bulaç, “Erdogan Olsaydı”, *Zaman*, 2 March 2015.

74 Sadık Albayrak, “Suriye’de Neler Oluyor”, *Milli Gazete*, 10 February 1982; Sadık Albayrak, “Golan’dan Şam’a Doğru”, *Milli Gazete*, 11 February 1982; Sadık Albayrak, “Sönüyor Göğsünün Üstünde Bombalar”, *Milli Gazete*, 13 February 1982. Sadık Albayrak is the father of former Minister of Energy Berat Albayrak, who is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s son-in-law.

75 Sadık Albayrak, “Ne Demek Nusayri?”, *Milli Gazete*, 18 February 1982.

76 Serhat Albayrak, “Bir Mülakat ve Bir Cephe”, *Milli Gazete*, 25 February 1982.

77 Yasin Hatipoğlu, “Irak-Suriye Kavgası”, *Milli Gazete*, 26 April 1982; A. Hikmet Bircanlı, “Şanlı Hama Destanı”, *Milli Gazete*, 16 February 1982. Hüsnü Aktaş wrote columns for *Milli Gazete* under the pseudonym ‘A. Hikmet Bircanlı’.

78 Fehmi Kuru, “Hama’dan Önce”, *Mavera*, Vol.7, No.75, February 1983, p.8.

As of 1983 it was indeed 'premature' to say that it was all over between Turkey's Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Syria. In the nearly three decades from then until the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the situation hardly remained static. In the years following the Hama Uprising, Islamist newspapers and magazines published numerous interviews, analyses, and other pieces regarding the leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood; Turkish Islamists followed such developments closely, even relatively esoteric ones like the details of the intra-Brotherhood power struggle. Upon the founding of the *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party), Erbakan had numerous meetings with prominent Muslim Brotherhood figures in the Middle East.⁷⁹ In short, Turkish Islamists took great pains to maintain relations with the Brotherhood in the post-Hama era.

The 1990s Honeymoon between Erbakan and the Assad Regime

Starting in the early 1990s, Erbakan began to oppose Turkey's increasingly severe policy towards Syria. As far back as 1990, he was already criticizing Turkey for taking advantage of Syria *vis-à-vis* water-sharing from the Tigris and Euphrates and for hinting that it might form a partnership with Israel on the issue of water: "Whose water is this? Throughout their history, Syria and Iraq have had a right to this water; now it will be cut off from them and taken to Israel."⁸⁰ After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Erbakan's anti-Communism became less pronounced, while his foreign policy worldview became markedly more anti-Western. In November of 1990, one week after Erbakan had a meeting in Ankara with the USSR's ambassador, he hosted the ambassadors of Syria and Afghanistan –Moscow's two key allies in the Middle East– on the same day.⁸¹ In 1992, Erbakan likewise met with the ambassadors of Russia, Iraq, and Syria, all on the same day.⁸² Such frenetic diplomacy between Erbakan and the ambassadors of anti-Western countries only became possible with the end of the Cold War.

In the first half of the 1990s, as clashes with the PKK reached the level of a 'low-intensity war', relations between Ankara and Damascus became more strained. In 1992, Interior Minister İsmet Sezgin visited Damascus, where he reiterated Turkey's grievances regarding the PKK's presence in Syria.⁸³ The following year, Major General Adnan Badr Hassan, head of the Political Security Directorate of the Syrian Ministry of the Interior, met with Mehmet Ađar, chief of Turkey's General Directorate of Security.⁸⁴ It was reported that in exchange for Damascus ceasing to allow the PKK to operate, "Turkey would capture members of the 'Muslim Brotherhood' organization currently on its soil and would return them to Syria."⁸⁵ In January of 1996, Turkey started to put greater pressure on Syria; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a memorandum to Damascus, formally requesting, for the first time ever, that Abdullah Öcalan be handed over.⁸⁶ As for Syria, it vocally objected to Turkey and Israel's February 1996 military partnership agreement, which Damascus perceived as Ankara's attempt to hem in its southern neighbor. Nor was this perception mistaken: Ankara's strategy of putting greater pressure on PKK-supporting Syria was one of the main reasons for the Turkish-Israeli entente.

79 "Erbakan'ın Sabıkalı Dostları", *Cumhuriyet*, 26 August 1997, p.4; "Dört Refahlıya İdam İstemi", *Milliyet*, 16 March 1999, p.16.

80 Ahmet Baydar, "Özal Anayasa Suçu İşledi", *Milliyet*, 21 April 1990, p.10.

81 "RP Genel Merkezine Elçi Akını", *Milli Gazete*, 10 November 1990.

82 "Çerçişev'den RP'ye Ziyaret", *Milliyet*, 13 November 1992, p.11.

83 Soner Gürel, "Sezgin, Şam'da Sert Çıktı", *Milliyet*, 16 April 1992, p.7.

84 "Suriye'den Apo'yu İstedik", *Milliyet*, 21 November 1993, p.21.

85 "DYP İktidarına Verilen Yeni Rol: 'Müslüman Kardeşler' Üyelerini Sindirmek", *Milli Gazete*, 4 December 1993.

86 "Apo Notası Yanıtsız", *Milliyet*, 16 February 1996, p.23.

A series of small-scale bombings in the vicinity of Öcalan's residence in Damascus in May 1996 were alleged to have been planned by the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey; this was said to have been Ankara's warning to the Syrian regime.⁸⁷ Following the explosions, the media reported that Syria had arrested 80 Syrian citizens of Turkmen ethnicity.⁸⁸ Journalist Ferai Tınç, who traveled to Syria around that time, reported, "Many people I spoke to believe that MİT was responsible for the bombings. People's impression is that these bombings, which haven't resulted in any damage as yet, were a kind of warning."⁸⁹ Simultaneously with Ankara's increasingly harsh stance towards Damascus, the US began to take a more negative view of the Assad regime. The same very month as the Damascus bombings – at a time when the Clinton administration was giving up hope of bringing Syria and Israel to the table for peace talks – MİT Undersecretary Sönmez Köksal and Mehmet Eymür, the chief of MİT's Counter-Terrorism Department, attended an intelligence summit in Washington. Topics such as Syria, Iran, and the PKK were addressed at the summit, which also featured a round table meeting titled "Dealing with Syria."⁹⁰ It was surely not lost on Damascus (which was following these events closely) that the bombings in Syria, and the claims that Turkey was behind them, occurred around the same time as these meetings in Washington attended by high-ranking members of MİT.

By far the strongest reaction to the rapprochement between Turkey and Israel – a rapprochement in which anti-Syrian sentiment played a significant role – came from Turkey's Welfare Party. In May of 1996, after meeting with the Syrian ambassador, Erbakan made a statement to the press in which he claimed that propaganda was being disseminated in Turkey to the effect that "Syria is backing the terrorists." He went on to express his support for the Damascus government: "Syria itself says 'this has nothing to do with us.' The Beqaa Valley is not inside Syria – it is outside. It is the West that is really directing all of this. These terrorists are not entering Turkey from Syria but from Iraq. Why? Because foreign powers have created a power vacuum there."⁹¹ On June 28, 1996, not long after making this statement, Erbakan became prime minister for the first time. Significantly, the first diplomat hosted by Erbakan, after his government won a vote of confidence from Parliament, was the Syrian ambassador. Along with a considerable number of fellow Islamists, Erbakan believed that Syria would extradite Öcalan to Turkey, or expel him from Syria, if the treaty signed between Israel and Turkey were annulled and concessions were made to Syria on the water issue.⁹² Receiving positive signals from the Welfare Party, Hafez Assad sent a congratulatory message to Ankara following the Erbakan government's vote of confidence; Syria's official newspaper, *Tishreen*, reported that Damascus was "ready for unlimited partnership" with Ankara.⁹³ In July and August of 1996, Erbakan met with the Syrian ambassador three times. The ambassador, Abdul Aziz al-Rifai, traveled to Damascus after the first meeting; on his return, he met with Erbakan at the latter's house for a full hour, contrary to all precedent, at 11:30 at night, in order to relay Assad's message. Around this time, government officials were quoted as saying

87 "Israel's Hand Seen Behind Mounting Tension Between Turkey and Syria," *Mideast Mirror*, 17 June 1996; "Esad'ı Sarsan Bombalar," *Milliyet*, 17 June 1996, p.19.

88 "Sınırdaki Hareketlilik," *Milliyet*, 8 June 1996, p.24; "Israel's Hand Seen," *Mideast Mirror*; Lale Sariibrahimoğlu, "Operasyonlar Ocakta Başladı," *Cumhuriyet*, 7 June 1996, p. 10; Aydın Engin, "Fol da Yumurta da Yokken," *Cumhuriyet*, 9 June 1996, p.4.

89 Ferai Tınç, "Kimsenin Giremediği Suriye," *Hürriyet*, 1 July 1996.

90 Yasemin Çongar, "ABD'de İstihbarat Zırvesi," *Milliyet*, 21 May 1996, p.19; Yasemin Çongar, "MİT'ten Terörün Beş Adresi," *Milliyet*, 23 May 1996, p.19.

91 "Suriye PKK'yı Desteklemiyor," *Milliyet*, 7 May 1996, p.12.

92 "Toward a Turkey-Syria Thaw," *Mideast Mirror*, 12 July 1996; Utku Çakırözer, "Su Ver PKK Bitsin," *Milliyet*, 24 July 1996, p.9.

93 "Esad'tan Kutlama," *Milliyet*, 10 July 1996, p.19; Banu Güven, "Suriye'den Sınırsız İşbirliği Vaadi," *Milliyet*, 12 July 1996, p.17.

that Öcalan had been “under close observation” in Syria for two weeks.⁹⁴ According to Syrian Prime Minister Mahmoud Zuabi, Erbakan’s attempts to mend fences with Damascus were a “very positive” step.⁹⁵

All of these developments, which occurred directly after the establishment of the Erbakan’s coalition government with Tansu Çiller, were clear indications of Erbakan’s intentions of resetting Turkey’s relations with Syria. Erbakan sought to discontinue Turkey’s strategy of working with Israel in order to put pressure on Damascus, in exchange for which he believed the Assad government would take steps to appease Turkey on the issue of the PKK. To that end, he even considered going to Damascus and discussing these issues with Assad in person. Yet Erbakan’s plan never went beyond the drawing board, due to opposition from his coalition partner Tansu Çiller as well as President Demirel, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and MİT. Çiller gave assurances to Western ambassadors that Erbakan would not visit Damascus; as for Demirel, he contradicted Erbakan’s own statements by declaring, “Terrorism in Turkey is supported by Syria.”⁹⁶ The press reported that the staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was uncomfortable with Erbakan’s meetings with the Syrian ambassador; “high-ranking officials” at MİT were quoted as saying that Syria would not extradite Öcalan to Turkey and that Erbakan’s efforts were doomed to fail.⁹⁷

Months later, Erbakan stated that his Syria initiative had been blocked by the Turkish establishment, and that the General Staff and MİT had opposed his idea of visiting Damascus.⁹⁸ That an Islamist politician like Erbakan should have made efforts towards rapprochement with Syria’s *Ba’athist* regime –which Turkish Islamists, from the 1970s onwards, had seen as their enemy– is nonetheless remarkable. Erbakan’s efforts undoubtedly overlapped with the Syrian government’s own attempts, starting in the 1990s, to enjoy a new honeymoon with the Islamist parties and organizations in the region. The Assad regime permitted some of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders to return to Syria on condition that they would not become active in politics; it also promoted Islamic education and Islamic organizations in Syria as long as they did not become a threat to the regime.⁹⁹ Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghudda returned to Aleppo in December of 1995 after reaching an agreement with the Syrian regime; in 1996, shortly before his death, he went to Turkey, where, together with Prime Minister Erbakan, he gave an Opening Day speech at Selçuk University in Konya.¹⁰⁰ Erbakan felt comfortable hosting and appearing in public with a Muslim Brotherhood leader who had made peace with Assad, yet his meetings with anti-Assad Brotherhood leaders were still held in secret: as prime minister, he was careful to tread lightly with Damascus on such a sensitive issue. As an anti-Western, anti-Israel Islamist, Erbakan was undoubtedly viewed by the Syrian regime, from the late 1990s onwards, as a potential political partner. Mustafa Tlass, the minister of defense for the Assad regime, which had spent years fighting against the Muslim Brotherhood, commented on

94 Utku Çakırözer, “Ankara-Şam İlişkilerinde Yumuşama,” *Milliyet*, 9 August 1996, p.15.

95 “Şam’dan Ankara’ya Mesaj,” *Cumhuriyet*, 23 July 1996, p.11.

96 Ferai Tinç, “Çiller: Erbakan Şam’a Gitmiyor,” *Hürriyet*, 11 July 1996, p.1, 31; “Terörü Destekleyen Suriye’dir,” *Cumhuriyet*, 12 July 1996, p.1, 9.

97 Örsan K. Öymen, “Dışişlerinde Erbakan İsyanı,” *Milliyet*, 20 September 1996, p.21; “Erbakan MİT’i Kızdırdı,” *Cumhuriyet*, 13 August 1996, p.1, 19.

98 Yalçın Doğan, “Erbakan’dan Mütthiş Açıklamalar,” *Milliyet*, 16 May 1997, p.15.

99 Eyal Zisser, “Hafız Al-Assad Discovers Islam,” *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol.6, No.1, March 1996, p.49-56.

100 Lefevre, “Ashes of Hama,” p.175; Utku Çakırözer, Burhan Eliş, and Tevfik Pekçak, “Saygısızlığa Ödül,” *Milliyet*, 1 October 1996, p.17.

the closing of the Welfare Party by Turkey's Constitutional Court as follows: "If the military does not return to the right path and does not respect Muslim rights, the Turkish people will take revenge and Turkey will become exactly like Algeria."¹⁰¹ Coming from an official in Syria's *Ba'ath* regime (regarded as the 'castle' of secularism in the Middle East), this statement of support for an Islamist party against the Turkish army (likewise regarded as the 'castle' of secularism in Turkey) is astonishing. Yet despite this pragmatic rapprochement between the *Ba'ath* regime and Turkey's Islamists, which was based on opposition to the West and to Israel, Turkish Islamists continued to regard the Assad regime as the Other, ideologically speaking. In the words of Recai Kutan, the leader of the *Fazilet Partisi* (Virtue Party), which was founded after the closing of the Welfare Party, "Syria is run by a 10% minority with a kind of perverted Alawite way of thinking; they are known as Nusayris." Such a statement is an expression of a sectarian worldview which Islamists have never truly abandoned but which they have been compelled, due to practical concerns, to conceal.¹⁰²

Conclusion

From the start of the 1980s until the 2011 Arab Uprisings, relations between Turkey, Turkish Islamists, Syria, and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood remained highly complex. Though open support for the Brotherhood was never an element in Ankara's official foreign policy, Turkey's intelligence and security forces did establish ties to the Brotherhood in order to strengthen Turkey's hand against Syria and made use of the organization insofar as it was in their interest to do so. Though the archives of Turkey's intelligence and security forces are not open to the public, a perusal of newspaper and magazine archives nonetheless yields valuable information on this topic. From time to time, members of Turkey's intelligence and security forces have not scrupled to leak information regarding the Muslim Brotherhood to the media, such as that "[the Muslim Brotherhood] became closely linked to Turkey and the US during the Gulf War," or that "Turkey's intelligence agency has allowed members of the Brotherhood to remain in certain locations including Yalova, Mersin, and İskenderun."¹⁰³ It is quite striking that Erbakan, the leader of Turkey's Islamists, neither supported nor was a party to this relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁰⁴ On the contrary, Erbakan did not approve of the Brotherhood's resorting to violence against the Assad regime, with which Erbakan became on good terms during the 1990s. As early as 2003, following the invasion of Iraq, Erbakan predicted that the next step taken by the West would be the invasion of Syria;¹⁰⁵ years later, his political heirs, the Felicity Party, would oppose the AKP's policy of arming the Syrian opposition in partnership with the US. In January of 2012 – by which point Ankara had burned all its bridges with Bashar Al-Assad – Felicity Party leader Mustafa Kamalak met with Assad in Damascus and declared his opposition to foreign intervention in Syria. Kamalak's actions, which

101 "Syrian Minister Warns Massacres in Turkey," *Associated Press*, 20 January 1998.

102 "Kutan'ın Büyük Gafı," *Milliyet*, 7 October 1998, p.14.

103 Kemal Yurteri, "RP'nin Suriye Bağlantısı," *Cumhuriyet*, 7 February 1995, p.4.

104 Media reports and academic studies have addressed the relationship between Muslim Brotherhood members who fled from Syria to Turkey beginning in 1982, on the one hand, and Hizbullah members with shady connections, on the other. Therefore, there were in fact groups of Turkish Islamists who took the opposite political position from Erbakan and supported the Muslim Brotherhood's struggle against the *Ba'ath* regime. Murat Akın and Fenni Özalp, "İslam Ülkelerinde Terör Örgütleri," *Cumhuriyet*, 6 February 1993, p.14.

105 "Tehlikeyi Gösterip Doğru Yolu Çizmişti," *Milli Gazete*, 6 October 2012, <http://www.milligazete.com.tr/haber/1081053/tehlikeyi-gosterip-dogru-yolu-cizmistisi> (Accessed on 3 January 2018).

drew condemnation from the AKP, were a clear indication of the continuity of Erbakan's legacy when it came to Syria.¹⁰⁶

Davutoğlu, the architect of the AKP's post-2011 Syria strategy, shared Erbakan's pan-Islamist foreign policy; unlike Erbakan, however, he believed in working together with the West, not against it, in order to achieve this aim. As a member of the *Yenilikçi* (Reformist) movement of political Islam, Davutoğlu saw nothing wrong with arming the Syrian opposition –in partnership with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the US– and becoming a party to the civil war in Syria in order to overthrow the Assad government. The AKP, it should be noted, was able to implement its post-2011 Syria policy due to its wide-ranging purge –through the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* trials– of *ulusalcı* (left-wing nationalist) elements from the security and intelligence apparatuses. A member of this *ulusalcı* coterie, Soner Polat (who was arrested as part of the *Balyoz* trials) served as head of the Intelligence Department of the General Staff between 2005 and 2007. During that time, he wrote a report in which he argued, just as Erbakan had, that regime change in Syria brought about through the foreign pressure would run counter to Turkey's interests.¹⁰⁷ On this issue, one could say that since the 1990s, the *ulusalcı*s and the traditionalist branch of Islamism represented by Erbakan have become united in their opposition to the West. A chance remark by Erbakan (who was serving as prime minister at the time), to Bülent Ecevit, leader of the *Demokratik Sol Parti* (Democratic Left Party), is quite telling in this regard. Referring to Mümtaz Soysal, an *ulusalcı* politician known for his hawkish stance towards the West, Erbakan burst out: "If only the Honorable Mümtaz Soysal could serve on our cabinet as minister of foreign affairs!"¹⁰⁸ However, even though the *ulusalcı*s and the traditionalist wing of the Islamists were united by their anti-Westernism and saw eye to eye on Syria, they diverged on many other issues, to the point where sustained cooperation was impossible. The AKP, whose foreign policy was diametrically opposed to theirs, started to implement its own Syria policy following 2011, after it had shored up its power domestically. Working in partnership with the West, the AKP sought to overthrow the Assad regime and bring the Muslim Brotherhood –which it saw as ideological kindred spirits– to power. To what extent the AKP inherited and made use of relationships which Turkey's intelligence and security forces built with Syria and the Muslim Brotherhood from the 1980s onward is a question which deserves in-depth scholarly treatment.

106 "SP Lideri Kamalak, Esad'la Görüştü," *Hürriyet*, 7 January 2012, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/sp-lideri-kamalak-esadla-gorustu-19626931> (Accessed on 3 January 2018).

107 Soner Polat, "Ne Oluyor," *CNN Türk*, 25 August 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oFUtSJsiuM> (Accessed on 5 April 2019)

108 "Keşke Soysal Dışişleri Bakanı Olsaydı," *Hürriyet*, 19 July 1996.