

SECTARIAN SPLIT IN THE MIDDLE EAST WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE RELIGION-FOREIGN POLICY RELATIONSHIP AND THE ATTITUDE OF THE AKP

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Abstract

The insurrection movement in the Middle East, the so-called Arab Spring, turned into a sectarian battle after reaching Syria. The sectarian grouping that exercised domination over a large territory within a short time became determinant in the foreign policy of all the states in the region. The AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-Justice and Development Party) government which shaped the Middle East foreign policy with the Islam fellowship discourse (motivation) before the Arab Spring became a part of this sectarian grouping. This study aims to examine the effectiveness in the Middle East of the religion phenomenon, which has been ignored in international relations since the Treaty of Westphalia, over the attitude adopted by the countries in the region and the AKP government in the face of the Syrian civil war.

Keywords: Middle East, Turkey, Syria, AKP, and Sectarian Conflicts.

1. Introduction

Till the age of enlightenment, the legitimacy of the entire political authority all around the world used to be based on religion which began with the enlightenment to become a matter of questioning, especially in Europe. The political life which became secular in the positivist idea that progressed together with the centralization of reason and experience, began to question everything in the name of religion. It was the God himself standing in the dock and he assigned his sovereignty to the people as a result of this questioning. Religion was pushed out of social sciences as a consequence of positivist idea and secularization. International relations discipline also ignored the religion phenomenon for it was advancing within the social sciences.

In international relations, the Peace of Westphalia (1648) which ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe is considered to be a breaking point (nation states) in terms of suspending the religion phenomenon. Following this treaty which brought an end to the wars of religion in Europe, the Vatican lost power and kings became sovereign units able to act themselves. While these territorial states with certain boundaries and authorities became the main actors of the international politics, the concept of sovereignty began to be defined around this new structure we could call nation-state. French revolution and positivism, and consequently nation-state declared decisive victory. The source of legitimacy was now not religion but the people.

The religion phenomenon which began to be ignored as an aftermath of these developments made a sharp turn with the 11 September attacks on America, according to numerous international relations analysts. The assumption that this intellectual and historical experience in Europe was lived by the entire world was however not very realistic. To give the Middle East case as an example, because of it being the subject of this study, this region did not go through the enlightenment process experienced in the West, and witnessed a failure of nation-states in line with Arab nationalism, while the religion/sect phenomenon always preserved its weight on both intergovernmental relations and the internal politics of the states.

The AKP government which came to the power in 2002, promising to join the European Union and 'reach the level of contemporary civilization', has within this process made many reforms in this regard but yet received criticism recently that the economic relations it has recently developed with the Middle East were a kind of 'neo-Ottomanism' and 'axis shift'. AKP's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who has a significant place in the Middle East politics, attaches major importance to Turkey's relations with the Middle East in geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural regard. Despite the mutual economic cooperation with the Middle East, the most significant energy region in the world, being realistic in geopolitical and geoeconomic aspect, it still requires an academic debate with regards to factors such as "common history", "common culture" and "Islam fellowship", which it geoculturally contains, over the sectarian disintegration that became evident with the Arab Spring. The AKP's Middle East policy - which was summarized as "zero problem with neighbors" before the Arab Spring, was not based on the advancement of democratic values, respected the regimes of states and didn't intervene their internal affairs, was predicated on the improvement of mutual economic relations, and was on the other hand inspired by Islam fellowship- seems to have been affected by the sect-founded micro separations in the region in the wake of the Arab Spring. In this regard, this study aims to examine the influence of religion on the AKP's foreign policy on Middle East.

2. Religion and Foreign Policy

Till the age of enlightenment, religion had a major influence on both internal and foreign politics in Europe; such that the even the legitimacy of the political authority was grounded on religious references. The ruler was the God's representative on earth, which assigned a king, who drove sovereignty from the God, a rightful authority to practice laws and maintain the civilian order. The Pope, the head of the Catholic Church in the Middle Age and the religious leader of Christians, acted as intermediary in intergovernmental

conflicts, and was hierarchically above the political leaders. Also in the Orthodoxy, another substantial sect of Christianity influential in East Rome, the source of authority was grounded on religion, in other words, the ruling gained its legitimacy from the holy. The emperor, who was regarded as the God's caliph on the earth, was the head of not only the state but also the church. This is the reason why war and diplomacy, which both are among the basic concepts of foreign affairs, unavoidably had a religious concept. The situation was no different in Judaism either in the Middle Age. The king was assigned by God and his ruling gained legitimacy if he pursued the path of the God. (Şahin, 2009:15-19).

It was not only in Christian and Jewish but also Islamic world that religion had a strong influence on almost all areas of life. The ruling was shaped by a political/religious institution like caliphate. The caliph was the shadow of God on the earth and 'heaven only knows why'.

Similarly, religion could also be said to have an important place when looked at the founding philosophy and foreign policy tradition of the U.S. Before the gaining of independence, Americans would regard God as their true king. After independence, the desire of America's rulers to lay claims to North America revealed itself in the political philosophy called Manifest Destiny, according to which the U.S. has a natural right to expand throughout the continent and a duty to liberate the rest of the world, a duty destined personally to them by the God. To cite an example; Thomas Jefferson, an American Founding Member and an important representative of liberal theory, believed that American settlers were the chosen people of the God. (Sümer, 2008:122-123).

Within the age of enlightenment, religion began to become a matter of questioning, especially in Europe. The political life which became secular with the effect of the positivist idea that progressed together with the centralization of reason and experience, began to question everything in the name of religion. It was the God himself standing in the dock and he would have to assign his sovereignty to the people as a result of this questioning. When looked at the background of the enlightenment, it would be seen that the dominance of the church, which began to be questioned in the wake of the reformation, provided basis for the emergence of new sects in Europe such as Protestantism and Calvinism, and at the same time caused conflicts among these new sects and the Catholic Church that desired to maintain its authority. As a consequence of these conflicts, the Catholic Church remarkably lost power, while the Augsburg Agreement between German Princedoms in 1555 enabled the recognition of Protestantism on the basis of the acknowledgment that "kings and princes could be Protestant". The people, who weren't granted the "freedom to choose sects" like kings and princes through the Augsburg Agreement, were therewith forced to be liable to the sects chosen by their princes or kings. The Augsburg Agreement thus had two major outcomes; 1. The dominance of religion on state was replaced by the dominance of state on religion. 2. National churches began to emerge. 1555's Augsburg Agreement failed to ensure the aimed stability in Europe because it didn't grant the people the right to choose sects, recognized Lutheranism but not Calvinism. Consequently, kings and princes who wanted to use conflicts among sects for their political goals dragged Europe into a total collapse and led up to wars known as Thirty Years' Wars in history. The ending of sectarian wars with the Treaty of Westphalia signed in 1648 was a breaking point in international relations. Just like the Augsburg Agreement, the Treaty of Westphalia also granted the kings and princes the right to choose the religion of the state, but it also conditioned the treatment of religious diversities with tolerance. Again, the Treaty of Westphalia recognized Calvinism officially. The freedom to choose the religion of the state, which was granted to kings and princes with the Augsburg Agreement, freed the people from the pressure of the Catholic church but on the other hand drew them beneath the pressure of the kings and princes. With the Treaty of Westphalia, the principle of 'kings and princes' respect to the faith of minorities' pulled the people through the pressure of the kings and princes and established religious peace within the empire. As a natural consequence, this would end up in the use of religion less in foreign politics. (For more see Şahin, 2009:33-47).

According to the Westphalia order or theory, solemn wars manifested that religion leads up to intolerance, destruction, conflict, political chaos and even the collapse of the international order. For this reason, Westphalia was followed by the emergence of liberalism and the thought of tolerance to different faiths. Political secularization did not only restrict the influence of religion on internal politics but also minimized its influence on international relations. In this aspect, the Westphalia order was determinative in the general intellectual structure of Europe. (Thomas, 2003:24). Thusly, the 1815's Vienna Order established after Napoleonic Wars, the 1919's Versailles Order established after the First World War, and the 1945 's Yalta Order established after the Second World War did also ignore the religion and disallowed it as a factor in intergovernmental relations. (Şahin, 2009:53).

Fox and Sandler (2004:9) list the reasons for the negation of religion in international relations theory as follows; 1. International relations discipline which improved within the field of social sciences did also get its share from the exclusion of religion within social sciences in the West in conjunction with modernism. 2. Positive approach was recognized in international relations discipline. 3. Works for international relations were intensely influenced by behaviorism and used quantitative methodology, because of which religion as an immeasurable phenomenon was left out of assessment. 4. In addition, the exclusion of religion also from the realism and liberalism hypothesis, which are basic theories of international relations, could also be assessed within this framework.

When considering the political, historical and scientific developments experienced by Europe (Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, Modernism), it seems understandable to some extent that the religion factor is not appraised in evaluations on Europe from the point of international relations and foreign policy, yet an acceptance that this process was experienced by the entire world is not a right approach. (Şahin, 2009:15-19). Especially in the Cold War period, the U.S. used religion as an effective weapon against USSR. The U.S. President Truman's policies and nuclear weapon attempts that interested the whole world received support from the Church. (Ari, 2005:9). According to Truman, the Cold War was in essence a war between religion and materialism. (Sümer, 2008:130). Again, in the midst of the Spanish-American War, President William McKinley claimed to have received a divine sign to "educate the Filipinos, uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them" (McDougall, 1997:112). Towards the end of the Cold War, Ronald Reagan says that "There is sin and evil in the world, and we're enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might." (Talbot, 1983:113 quoted in Spanier&Hook, 2014). While the dissociation of religion and democracy was by no means in question within the founding philosophy of the U.S., religion still remains as a significant instrument of the U.S. in politics and almost all presidents of the U.S. put emphasis on "manifest destiny".

Contrary to the Europe-based sense for the negation of religion in international politics, the U.S. used religion as an essential means of motivation during the Cold War, and did also not avoid making an alliance with Islamic countries on this basis. The project of forming an Islamic buffer/zone against the Soviet Union known as 'Green Generation' was also produced for this purpose. Within this framework, Turkey and Iran, till the 1979's Iranian Revolution, fulfilled significant missions (Arıboğan, 2013:32). Following the elimination of the communist threat, the question "against whom a great hegemonic power like the U.S. would use freedoms" came to the fore (Sümer, 2008:137). The theory of 'clash of civilizations' which was promulgated by Samuel Huntington and widely discussed in international politics in this period became an answer to this question. According to Huntington, a religion-based clash of civilizations was going to take place after the Cold War. However, the above-mentioned alliance between Islam and the West against 'irreligion' collapsed with 11 September which could also be interpreted as a strong return of religion to international relations.

In the period after 11 September, which was construed as the religion's return into international relations, some U.S.-centered think tanks called attention to the importance of religion in international relations, and started to voice that the U.S. failed for not taking account of the religion phenomenon in some conflict regions on the world well enough. Likewise, Secretary of State in Clinton's period, Madeleine Albright, drew attention to this matter in the report released by Centre for Strategic and International Studies in 2007, criticizing that the U.S. ignored the religion phenomenon in foreign policy and failed to make sufficient effort in this regard, arguing that the matter couldn't be handled only as Islamic terrorism (Smock, 2008:7).

In the Middle East, religion has a major place in both internal and foreign politics. The region is shaped by the religion so much that Israel, to give an example, is a state completely an order of the God, let alone background discussions. HAMAS is an organization that opposes to God's order Israel State with God's order. Arabia is a kingdom claiming to be the servant of God's order. 1979's Iranian revolution which dismissed the Shah regime was identified with the God's order. The ruling and ruled people in Iran are awaiting for the Mahdi to practice the order of God and revolution serves to provide an environment for the arrival of Mahdi (Delal, 2012).

3. The Influence of Religion on Middle East Politics

The Middle East could be defined in the widest sense as a territory extending from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt in the west to the Gulf of Oman in the east, also involving Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Turkey, Caucasus and Middle East Turkish Republics in the north, as well as Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, also surrounding the Arabian Peninsula from Saudi Arabia to Yemen in the south, and with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine in the middle.

In a narrower sense, the Middle East is a region extending from Turkey and Iran in the north to Oman in the east, to Yemen in the south and up to Egypt in the west, dominated by Arabs, Persians and Turks in ethnic regard, and by Muslims in religious regard. Apart from that, Jews in the post-I. World War period and Kurds in recent period have attained an important status in the regional politics. The region also houses a remarkable rate of Christian population (Ari, 2012:21).

When looked at the fault lines of the sectarian differences, basically as Sunnism and Shiism, with respect to the Islamic faith, the scene seen is that the largest Shia population is in Iran and around 70 million, while there are estimated to be 50 million Shia population in each of India and Pakistan. Other 4 million are in Afghanistan, 25 million in Iraq, 4 million in Saudi Arabia, around 70 percent of the Bahrain population (some 1 million), 10 million in Yemen, around 10 percent of the United Arab Emirates population (Arıboğan, 2013:87) (some 700 thousand), around 25 percent of the population in Kuwait and Qatar (Ari, 2012:68). 4 million Alevi/Nusayri population in Syria (Arıboğan, 2013:87) and roundly 12-20 million Alevi population in Turkey should also be evaluated within this scope. (Regular Report on Turkey's Progress towards accession, 2004:44).

In a comparison with the West, Şahin attributes the strong influence of religion in the Middle East to the following causes (Şahin,2009:98-110); 1. The Middle East didn't go through the ideal experience; the Reform, Renaissance and Enlightenment, lived in the West. This is why the West is dominated by secular rules of law, while this is replaced by Islamic rules, which also include sectarian differences, in a large part of the Middle East. 2. The fight for Nation-State was succeeded in the West. The fight between Nation-State and religion, however, still continues in the Middle East. 3. The rise of Political Islam after the failure of Arab Nationalism; The defeat of Arab Nationalism, which emerged after the First World War and reached the peak with Egypt president Jamal Abdel Nasser after the Second World War, in the 1917 Arab-Israeli War (Six Day War) was a major factor in this. It needs to be remembered that the Arab world lived its brightest

era within the period when this territory was politically dominated by Islam. Upon the failure of Arab nationalism, Political Islam received support only from masses against both its secular rulings and the U.S.'s hegemonic policies in the region. 4. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran paved the way for a religion-oriented politics in the region. 5. The founding of the Israel state and the relative emergence of Israel-Palestine question also contributed to the religion in becoming an important political factor in the region. Israel has been using religion as a very effective argument in both motivating its nation and determining its international politics. To the Israelis, Jerusalem is "the promised land". Jerusalem is also of importance for the Muslims for housing the Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa where Prophet Muhammad is regarded to have ascended into heaven. From this point of view, if a resolution is to be improved against the ongoing war between Palestine and Israel, any attempt ignoring the situation of Jerusalem seems to have no possibility to accomplish a result (Şahin, 2009:142).

Iran has been working to expand its sphere of influence by bringing the Shia state identity into the forefront. When examined carefully, it would be seen that the especially with the Arab Spring, the Shia identity has strengthened its side from Syria towards Iraq and Iran. According to Arıboğan (2013:88-89), the Shia geopolitics pursued by Iran extends to Mediterranean over Iraq and Syria territory, to the Caspian Basin over Azerbaijan, and up to Central Asia over Pakistan and India.

Sect-oriented policies in the Middle East could be exemplified by the provision of military support by Iran to Shia groups in Iraq and Afghanistan in 1990, and support by Sunni states Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to Sunni groups against these activities of Iran (Şahin, 2009:132). Again in Iraq and especially after the withdrawal of U.S. military from the region, the sectarian identities oppressed since the occupation started to come to surface. While the Shia character of the Baghdad government became more and more dominant, it would be appropriate to conclude a sectarian conflict from Shia prime minister Maliki's attitude against the Sunni deputy president Hashimi, the latter's shelter in Turkey in the following process and his embracement and protection by it (Arıboğan, 2009:88). The fact that with the eruption of the civil war in Syria, Shia Iran took sides with Assad, that Turkey took part in the front against Assad, that Sunni HAMAS took sides with a Sunni block like Turkey and Saudi Arabia despite the involvement of the Shia Hezbollah organization in the war in Syria against the regime, and even the similar policies pursued by Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government and Turkey should also be evaluated in this context.

4. The Middle East Policy of AKP Before and After The Arab Spring

As a matter of fact, there existed a fairly spring climate between Turkey and the Arab states in the region before the eruption of the civil commotions called Arab Spring in the Middle East. Especially between 2008-2010, Turkey's foreign policy was evaluated as proactive, and described by many academics as the 'Neo-Ottomanism'. Within this period, economic relations with many Arab states were strengthened, visa obligations were mutually removed and an effort was made for the improvement of political relations within this framework. This very active foreign policy which was called as "zero problems with neighbors" with the attempts of the Turkish Foreign Minister of the time, Ahmet Davutoğlu, raised debates over 'Turkey turning away from the West and showing a tendency to the Middle East' which were conceptualized as an 'axis shift'. It is no doubt that the ideological identity of the AKP stands at the center of these debates. At this point it would be useful to treat the subject in the light of the views of Davutoğlu who had significant influences on the foreign policy of Turkey. According to Davutoğlu who lays emphasis on the importance of the Middle East in geopolitical, geocultural and geoeconomic aspect, Turkey's omission of the Middle East for various reasons for a long time is unacceptable. Davutoğlu points to the oil richness of the region which - he stresses- was divided by imperialists with unreal boundaries after the First World War. At this point, Davutoğlu (2009:331) refers to the Ottoman heritage, saying;

“That Turkey be able to use the Ottoman heritage it bears as a strategic base is essential for not only Turkey's Middle East policies but also for the establishment of a fair and lasting order in the region. A regional strategy with a deep perspective cannot be developed by turning back on Turkey or adopting a passive attitude dependent on the attitude of the global actors”, and describes the Turkey's geocultural character as identified with the Islam civilization heritage (Davutoğlu, 2009:328).

At this point it needs to be determined that this transformation of the Turkish foreign policy, which completely turned towards the West with the aim of reaching the 'level of contemporary civilization' throughout the republic's history, and didn't see the Middle East for ideological reasons, is understandable from geopolitical and and geoeconomic aspect. It doesn't seem realistic that Turkey, which is by 90 percent dependent on abroad in energy field and bears the possibility of having the route of energy transfer from the region to Europe, would remain uninterested in the Middle East, also because of the potential for a sectarian, religious and ethnic conflict the region has. However, at the heart of the debates on an 'axis shift' lies the shift of the balance between geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural policies, in its favor geoculturally. Despite the fact that the AKP government rejects definitions such as 'neo-Ottomanism' and 'axis shift', claiming it to be amending the mistakes created by the unidirectional foreign policy oriented on the West and developing a multi-directional policy, the ideological history of the AKP, membership negotiations with the EU that came to a halt from 2010 to 2013, and some discourses of AKP policy-makers have always fed these concerns. To cite an example, like the Davutoğlu statement 'We will perform prayer at Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa one day' (Kardaş, 2011:22-26).

Yet, it is possible to describe the AKP's Middle East policy before the Arab Spring, which Bilgin calls 'geopolitics of civilizations', as a foreign policy not based on the advancement of democratic values, respecting the regimes of states, not getting involved in their foreign affairs, and predicated on the improvement of mutual economic relations, close political relations, cultural kinship and Islam fellowship (Bilgin, 2004:269-291; quoted by; Öniş, 2012:46). This new policy which former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan calls 'unlimited cooperation' is in essence an economic one but motivated by Islam fellowship and cultural kinship (Kardaş, 2011:32). In the first place, the new foreign policy caused hesitation to the AKP government in determining a policy with respect to protecting the economic relations being improved and supporting the rising demands for democracy. Later on, this policy motivated by Islam fellowship and cultural kinship got its share from sectarian polarization as will be examined under the next heading. To summarize the attitude of the AKP government in the paradox of people's democracy demand and maintenance of economic relations within the Arab Spring period, it would be enough to cite the examples of Libya and Syria. When revolts first erupted in Libya, with which Turkey had good economic relations, Turkish companies already had contracts amounting to 15 billion dollars with the Libyan state. That is why Turkey opposed to a probable NATO intervention in Libya, and strongly criticized the imposition of sanctions by the Security Council on Libya (decision no 1970) in February 2011, so much so that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said a probable intervention by NATO was totally intended for oil (Djalili and Kallner, 2013:86). Later on, when it became clear that NATO was going to conduct this operation, Turkey made a u-turn and took sides with NATO (Öniş, 2012:52). Before the eruption of insurrection in Syria, the AKP government improved its relations with Syria that had formerly deteriorated due to 'Hatay Problem', 'Syria's relations with the PKK' and 'Water Problem', and took steps such as the removal of the visa obligation and advancement of trade, as part of its new foreign policy summarized as “zero problem with neighbors”. As part of their economic cooperation, the governments of Turkey and Syria were having talks over the establishment of a joint economic area with Lebanon and Jordan, undertaking a major project of dam construction over the Orontes River, planning to build a gas pipeline to transfer Iranian gas to Turkey over Syria, and considering enhancing the possibilities of trade and investment in energy (Djalili and

Kallner, 2013:109). Just like was the case in Libya, Turkey was facing with dilemma between the 'democratic demands of people' and 'economic interests'. Indeed, the AKP government which strongly went against a probable foreign intervention in Syria during the first days of the civil commotion described protest demonstrations as a 'struggle for freedom' in May 2011 (Djalili and Kallner, 2013:111) and accused the international community in the coming process of remaining insensitive to the Syria issue.

At the beginning of the insurrection, Turkey's concern that economic relations with countries like Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria would be harmed caused it some hesitations over the policies it would determine but this gave place to a fresh decision to improve relations with the new governments once it was understood that the old ones wouldn't remain. As has been mentioned above, the Middle East policy of the AKP government before the Arab Spring could be summarized as improving economic and political relations by using historical ties with the region, and respecting the internal affairs of the states while doing this. If looked carefully, it would be seen that this policy bears no concerns for democracy. On that sense, it is also seen to be compatible with the discourse put forward by Bush in the post-Cold War period in the U.S., called the New World Order, which pushed aside the discourses on democracy, peoples' right to self determination, justice and human rights, focused more on peace, security and order, and was basically grounded on status quo (Kurtbağ, 2010:204). On the other hand, the historical, cultural and religious references in the AKP's Middle East policy, the framework of which was set by Davutoğlu, could also be said to be corresponding to this new order for recommending Turkey, which Huntington (1996:178-179) describes as a 'divided country' in his book 'Clash of Civilizations', to refuse the secular heritage and turn towards Muslim countries. Although Davutoğlu argued that secular Turkey would invalidate the 'divided land' definition of Huntington by improving comprehensive and inclusive relations with the region, the strategy pursued in fresh relations with the Middle East (2009:137-142)- which Turkey considered an alternative to membership in the European Union, that became impossible in its own words, and to overcome the stiff relations with the EU- is actually inspired by Huntington in the context mentioned above. Turkey's new Middle East policy for the improvement of economic relations, that it predicated on historical ties and cultural kinship which includes religion, was reciprocated especially in Arab streets with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's 'one minute' breakthrough in Davos and the mentioned policies received great support. However, this new relation and discourse Turkey had over the Middle East territory before the Arab Spring left the AKP government in a dilemma after that, in order for the formerly developed economic relations not to be harmed, and got Turkey included in the Sunni block in the region that polarized in sectarian regard within the process of insurrection, as will be analyzed under the next heading. When the 'Islam fellowship' discourse in macro aspect was divided into a micro level (sect) with the Arab Spring, many states and actors in the region defined their place once again and more strongly intentionally or unintentionally.

5. The Case Making The Sides Clear; Syrian Civil War

The insurrection movement in the Middle East, which was called the Arab Spring, began in Syria firstly as peaceful demonstrations demanding a reform. The major demands of demonstrators included the abolishment of the martial rule led by the Baath regime in Syria since 1963. Demonstrations spread further upon allegations that students who drew paintings on walls in criticism of the Assad government were arrested and tortured, and later upon the harsh intervention of state forces in the demonstrations on 15 March 2011. In the meantime, the Assad government made some reforms in an attempt to end the demonstrations, such as abolishing the martial rule in effect since 1963 and granting identity to Kurds deprived of identity (Hannon and Russel, 2013:9-11). This and other similar steps didn't manage to end the civil war in Syria but on the contrary got the war spread further. Witnessing a Sunni-Shia-oriented clash in a short time, the country turned into a 'substitute war' between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Despite not accepting it, Turkey was

added to the Sunni front in this confrontation. From this point of view, an examination of the Syrian civil war would be an important example in terms of revealing the religion's influence on both internal and international politics. On this basis, one would need to look at the effect of the sect factor and sectarian conflicts in Syrian civil war on the determination of the policies by the region states.

5. 1. Use Of The Sect Factor In Internal Politics In Syria

The Assad family ruling the state for years established a strong political security net between the army and the regime by assigning Alevis to central duties. With regards to defense, this situation brought Syria to a position more advantageous than other Arab countries witnessing protest demonstrations (Taşkın, 2013:316). To broach the subject, Alevis make up the 80 percent of the officers in the Syrian army, according to some observers, as was also stated by Landis (2012:73). This figure may have been exaggerated but there exists no doubt over the presence of a remarkable Alevi domination. Similarly, the Syrian Republican Guard and air forces are affiliated to Assad's brother and are intensely made up of Alevis. In Syria, where irregular and special forces known as Shebbiha are made up by Alevis or Sunnis affiliated to Assad, almost the whole bureaucracy is in the power of Alevis. It is alleged that Alevis constitute 60 percent of the 360 diplomats in charge at the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while the rate of Sunni employees doesn't go over 10 percent. To give a more striking example, at least one person from every Alevi family takes part in the Syrian army, with others working for the ministries of the Syrian regime. It needs to be mentioned that besides the Alevis who make up 12 percent of the Syria population, other minorities in the country are also supporting the regime for fear that Islamists will come to the power (Landis, 2012:73).

Assad's close ties with the Alevi minority places the matter on a sectarian orbit, which makes the problem more and more inextricable in itself because the progress of the matter over the sect issue means that there will always be an Alevi community to take sides with Assad against a Sunni threat. This situation also constitutes an obstacle for the opponents to unite.

Similarly, the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis, which also bears a kind of sectarian alliance and places Syria at the center of the equation, has long posed a hindrance to the domination of Israel and America on Mediterranean. While creating a negative atmosphere with regards to the U.S. and Israel's dominance on the region, this situation on the other hand serves as a factor consolidating the public support for Syria against the U.S. and Israel (Taşkın, 2013:319).

5.2. Influence Of The Sect Factor On The Determination Of Policies By Regional And International Powers

When examining the developments along the war period, the consistency between the determination of a position by the regional powers and the sectarian identities is interesting for revealing the influence of religion on international relations in the Middle East territory. To make a list of the developments;

1. The Shia government of Iraq pursued a policy supporting the Alevi Syria.
2. The Syria-Iran-Hamas and Hezbollah alliance against Israel and the U.S., which went beyond a sectarian basis, cracked with the Syrian civil war. Hamas, the Palestinian wing of Muslim Brothers, left the front as a consequence of the bloody intervention of Syria, and the general headquarters of the organization was moved from Syria to Qatar. According to Çubukçu (2012:200), sectarian attitude was as much effective as moral attitude in this. Hezbollah got actively involved in the war in Syria in support of the regime.
3. Turkey pretended to be 'pursuing a sect-oriented policy'. It is also possible to include in this framework the fact that Turkey supported the Muslim Brothers-weighted opposition against the Alevi government in Syria, and refused to turn over Tariq al Hashimi, the former deputy president sentenced to death on charges of "links with Sunni terrorist groups", to Iraq. Turkey accused the government led by Prime Minister Nuri

al-Maliki of Shia origin of oppressing the Sunni minority, and supported his rival Sunni Riyad Allavi in the elections. Fadi Hakura from the Britain-based think tank Chatham House points out that all these cases are reasons for the strengthening of the perception that Turkey pursued a sect-oriented foreign policy (Belli, 2012). During their tours abroad, former President Abdullah Gül, Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu were frequently directed questions examining the Turkey-Al Qaida relation. Turkey did never accept these allegations, yet Foreign Minister Davutoğlu acknowledged that such a perception has emerged among the international community. He summarized this situation by saying that 'perceptions got ahead of the truth' (Çakır, 2013).

4. Close relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (IKRG) are also worth being examined within this context. The fact that Kurds are Sunni, lived problems with Shia central governments and took sides at the same front in the case of Tariq al-Hashimi is also compatible with the 'Sunni block' scene. In this regard, it would be useful to look at the Turkey, PKK/PYD, IKRG relation after the civil war in Syria. As is known, there exist serious problems about the future of the Kurdish regions in Syria, which Kurds call Rojava, between the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government President Barzani and the PYD, which is known to be close to the PKK and announced at the beginning of the civil war in Syria that it would remain impartial unless there happened an attack on the Kurdish region. When examining the sub-components of these problems which could shortly be summarized as a struggle for power, it would be seen that conservative Barzani stands on one side and the PKK/PYD on the other. Turkey's place in this equation could be summarized as follows; Turkey grounded its policy on two major considerations in the face of the developments in Syria; 1- "Assad must go", 2- Standing against the probable attainments of the PYD, considering it as the Syrian wing of the PKK, Prime Minister Erdoğan summarized this policy saying that they would "disallow the PYD to seize control and intervene if necessary" (Israeli, 2013:93)¹.

Within this context, some Kurdish parties but not the PYD were invited to the 'Friends of Syria' meeting that gathered in Istanbul under the leadership of Turkey on 15 July 2011 and 1 April 2012. Turkey, while on one hand attempting to passivize the PYD, which it considered as a wing of the PKK, in the international area, did on the other hand try to develop an alliance with the KDP, which waged a power struggle with PYD in Rojava, on the Syria issue. On the other hand, the 'resolution process' which was named as a project of resolution for Turkey's Kurdish question through dialogue, was progressed in parallel with these developments. Within this process, PYD/PKK accused Turkey of giving support to jihadist organizations in the region, such as Al-Nusra and ISIS, while Turkey and Barzani accused the PYD of supporting the regime. There exists no doubt that under the alliance between IKRG and Turkey lie mutual economic interests, and the ideological/power struggle on the basis of the polarization between IKRG and PYD/PKK. When looked at the scene revealed by the points mentioned above, it is seen that Sunni Barzani and Erdoğan stand on the same side, and the Shia Iraqi central government and Assad stand on one other. On this basis, the fact that Öcalan didn't mention Alevis in his letter which was read out in Diyarbakır on 2013 Newroz Day as part of the resolution process, and that he received reaction from Alevis in this regard, led up to comments like 'Öcalan, the leader of the socialist PYD/PKK line, also included the Sunni Kurds in the Sunni block' within the sectarian polarization in the Middle East. PKK/PYD, Barzani, AKP triangle could be said to bear such an equation; the AKP and Barzani are Sunni, religionist and conservative; Barzani and the Kurds represented by PKK/PYD are also Sunni but PKK/PYD has a more encompassing socialist line. When looking at the matter from the Sunnism and Shiism point of view, Sunni Kurds and Sunni Turks are in the same category, while the Iraqi government and the Assad regime are at the other front. On that sense, the struggle between Barzani and the PYD/PKK line goes beyond a usual struggle for power because the consolidation of the socialist line among Kurds would mean a loss of power for the tribal and conservative line of Barzani. On

¹ See Also <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/01/27/Turkey-s-Erdogan-says-no-to-Syrian-Kurdistan.html>

the other hand, if the allegations on 2013 Newroz are true to a certain extent, this would mean a redeal, for which it is yet too early, needs it to be noted. Yet, the reaction Öcalan received from Alevis is important in terms of manifesting that every development in the region is subjected to a sectarian review.

5. Shia Iran adopts an attitude siding with the Syrian regime and at the same time supports the Iraqi central government.

6. The civil commotions led by Muslim Brothers in Egypt ended up with the fall of the Hosni Mubarak government, and the Muslim Brothers that came to the power as a consequence of a follow-up election were supported by Turkey. Separately, Tehran was disturbed by the diplomatic initiatives taken by the new Egyptian government with tendency to Muslim Brothers against Hamas, while Cairo closed the Al Alam television broadcasting in Arabic, on the grounds that it spread Shiism propaganda. In addition to the above-mentioned developments, it would be appropriate to evaluate the new government's support to Sunni opponents and the close relations it developed with Turkey in line with the sectarian fault lines.

U.S. President Obama's remarks on military intervention in Syria at a press conference dated 6 March 2012 show that the sectarian division in the region has also influenced the approaches of international powers. Obama, stressing that the situation was much more different than was in Libya, and that he found a unilateral military operation by the U.S. wrong, said that; "We put the international community into action on Libya. We obtained the approval of the UN Security Council, received full support from the Arab countries in the region and moved after making sure that a military operation would produce results in a short time. The situation in Syria is much more complicated" (Akgün, 2012:14). The 'much more complicated' assessment doubtlessly points both to the failed alliance at the UN and the sect-founded conflict in Syria. This is because there failed to be formed an internal unity among the opposition due to the sect-oriented problem, and also because it couldn't be anticipated which kind of consequences an outer intervention would have on other countries with Shia population, such as Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain and Kuwait, and what sort of a chaos this would end up in on the entire Islamic geography (Çubukçu, 2012:200).

7. It is not possible to discuss the occupation by ISIS of the middle section of Iraq in a short time independently from the Syrian civil war, nor to pass over the sect factor in this. The attitude adopted by regional powers in the face of the most recent developments, which were expected to divide Iraq into three parts, represents quite a sectarian split. While Iran reacted to the developments following the occupation of Middle Iraq by the ISIS organization of Sunni origin, and called for jihad against ISIS (www.zaman.com.tr, 2014) , Saudi Arabia announced opposition to any kind of an outside intervention against ISIS. Although ISIS stormed the Turkish consulate after seizing control of Mosul, and took the diplomatic staff, including the Consul-General, hostage on 11 June 2014, Turkey blamed the Shia government of Maliki and held the sectarian policies of the central government responsible for the developments encountered (Karabat, 2015) Criticizing the central government over sect-oriented policies, the Turkish government appeared like consentient with the division of Iraq into three parts. Similarly, it is possible to consider the reasoned reaction manifested by Turkey after Kurdistan Regional Government leader Massoud Barzani's indication of independence around the above-mentioned economic interests, and as an alliance with Sunni Kurds in terms of barricading the advancement of the Shia geopolitics. In this sense, it wouldn't be exaggerated to interpret the most recent developments as an operation of countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey against Iran over Iraq.

8. Before an intervention against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the U.S. gave precedence to an alliance with Sunni Arab countries.² Some of these including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Jordan were

² ISIS targets in Iraq were first hit by coalition forces on 8 August 2014. The first airstrike of the Coalition against ISIS in Syria was carried out on 23 September 2014.

ensured to appear in the initial ranks of this alliance on which the Sunni identity of the ISIS also had a significant influence. The formula which was found in order to disallow the region being dragged into a chaos on the basis of a sectarian conflict, turned into one showing regard to sectarian conflicts.

9. The operation started on 25 March 2015 by Saudi Arabia-led Sunni countries (www.bugun.com.tr, 2015)- including United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan and Egypt- against Shia Houthis who attempted to seize the power from the Sunni government in Yemen was like a summary of the sectarian breakup in the Middle East. While the Saudi Arabia accused Iran of supporting radical Shia groups, Turkish President Erdoğan also blamed Iran for similar reasons.

6. Conclusion

It would not be a right approach to assume that the entire world went through the secularization process experienced in Europe with the Age of Enlightenment, which could be summarized as "replacement of religion or God-centered social structure by reason-centered social regulations".

In the Middle East which didn't experience a process of enlightenment, religion always maintained its importance in both internal and foreign politics. An analysis of the developments within the process of Arab Spring would reveal that the religion phenomenon has always been of importance in the determination of policies by regional powers. While the civil commotions that erupted with democratic demands turned into sectarian conflicts in a short time, this transformation necessarily influenced the problem solving strategy of international powers.

This new policy of the AKP government, which towed its discourse of Islam fellowship on the basis of advancement of economic relations in the Middle East before the Arab Spring, was debilitated by the change of the civil commotions in the Middle East into sectarian conflicts, while the AKP government became a part of this polarization while the region witnessed clashes and conflicts on micro level.

In consideration of its problems with its neighbors like Iraq, Syria and Iran and the alliances it developed with various power groups within these countries, it is possible to say at this stage that sectarian approaches also influenced the lines on which the AKP government placed its policy in regional relations, after starting out with the argument of 'zero problems with neighbors'. As an example could be cited Turkey's embracement of Tariq al-Hashimi while having problems with the Shia government of Iraq, the close relations it established with Sunni Barzani, the support it gave to Muslim Brothers-dominated Sunni opposition against Alevi/Nusayri Assad, and its adoption of policies contrary to Shia Iran.

Beyond question, it would not be a right approach either to argue that sectarian conflict is the only factor in each one of the alliances and polarization mentioned above. Every alliance and polarization does no doubt bear various reasons but it would be rightful to state that any review of the subject, especially when it is the

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