

Hard revisionism: Turkish military interventions in Syria and Iraq

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Executive Summary

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May 2024

Given the concern directed towards the so-called “return to geopolitics” or the “crisis of the International Liberal Order”, and the western-centrist or biased use of the term revisionism (Turner and Nymalm, 2019), there seems to be an ever-increasing necessity for the developing of clear conceptual tools to grasp this evolving reality and avoid ambiguities and arbitrary use of terms.

In this manner, this research is an investigation about key notions such as international order, norms, status-quo or revisionism, in order to come up with standing criteria with which to consistently label and identify state behaviours within the status-quo-revisionism continuum. In this manner, the question revolves around the substance of revisionism and which actual practices states undertake to advance revisionist policies. Moreover, due to an awareness of recent developments in Turkish foreign policies in the Middle East, the research finds an opportunity to link those questions to the one regarding the extent of Turkish revisionism.

To answer this question, a literature review has been conducted regarding, on the one hand, debates around the actual content of revisionism and international order, and, on the other, recent developments of Turkish foreign policy. The research, thus, is structured along an opening debate around the different approximations to international order and revisionism and a following presentation of the social understanding of revisionism. Afterwards, in order to enrich the research, Turkish military interventions in Syria and Iraq are presented in a descriptive manner, in order to be later on analysed with the theoretical framework adopted.

In this manner, with the first part of the research, approximations to revisionism which define it as the intention to alter power relations have been presented (Morgenthau, 1948; Behraves, 2018; Groitl, 2023; Davidson, 2006; Mukherjee, 2022: 8; Ward, 2017; Cooley et al., 2019; and a summary of the works of Gilpin and Organski). These are found to produce problems in the identification of revisionism, for, on the one hand, it results difficult to isolate such intention among state behaviours, and, on the other, the identification of hegemon with status-quo is challenged by examples of hegemonic revisionism (Birdsall, 2016; Chan et al., 2021; Hurd, 2007; McKeown, 2019).

Conversely, this research adopts a theoretical standpoint defining revisionism as the dissatisfaction and desire to upend the fundamental norms and institutions, which are the constituting elements of order (Chan et al., 2021: 17, 18; McKeown, 2019; Legro, 2005;

Groitzl, 2023: 59). Furthermore, with further distinctions between the prescriptive and descriptive character of international order, and the difference between its efficacy and validity (Kelsen, 1979; Krasner, 1999; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Raymond, 2021), this social approach to other implies that revisionism amounts to a violation of norms and institutions accompanied with legitimating discourses that present understandings of the legitimate sphere different from the one limited by international order.

Having done that, this theoretical approach has been applied to the case of Turkish military interventions in Syria and Iraq. In this manner, Turkish evolution from the use of soft to hard power has been presented (Neset et al., 2021; Kutlay and Öniş, 2021: 1085; Altunışık, 2020; Uzgel 2023; Balci and Monceau, 2023; Toygür et al., 2022), together with the different operations launched in Syria and Iraq, which have resulted in the seizure of territory and the establishment of military bases. (Özer, 2022; Ozerkan, 2022; Çevik, 2022; Kowalczevska and Łubiński, 2022; Ferah and Tunca, 2022; Tziarras, 2022).

Even though Turkey presents these as licit behaviours, it has been argued that they break fundamental norms of the international society. Essentially, this is so because the seizing of Syrian territory and the unilateral interventions in Iraq, lacking both the consent of the invaded countries or lacking submitted proves to the UNSC of serious armed attack existence, amount to breach of international norms regarding the legitimate sphere to resort to violence. On top of that, in failing to acknowledge this as breaches of norms and furthermore pushing to legitimize this transgressive conducts, Turkey is found aiming at a redefinition of the sphere of legitimacy.

This revisionist attitude moreover can be understood to happen within a broader turn in Turkish foreign policy, from soft power to hard power, which other authors detect too the rise of a revisionist behavior (Alaranta, 2022: 122; Tziarras, 2022; Bekić, 2021; Tsakiris, 2019). Beyond these operations, Turkey has resorted to military action or support, called for the removal of other regimes and delegitimized neighbouring elites, the EU itself (Aydın-Düzgit and Noutcheva, 2022; Aydın-Düzgit, 2023).

To conclude, the research argues that further investigation could be followed on the challenge of the norms of coexistence in post-Cold War international order. In this manner, Turkish revisionism might but only be following a stream opened by US 2003 intervention in Iraq. Thus, comparative studies could be done with this and current Israeli legitimations on the war on Hamas, and how they alter the sphere of what is legitimate,

as to include the murder of civilians within self-defence or the total disregard for proportionality. For the insights provided by this research, it would be profitable too to generate a research within the same line, following the evolution of Turkish stance towards the international order, in order to further nurture the insights of revisionism.

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