

## ON THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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For many years, whenever we referred to the Middle East problem, we mainly thought of the Israeli-Arab conflict, which no doubt has been the major issue in the area.

The same is true today, when we talk about the Middle East peace process. What we usually mean when we use this term is the peace process involving Israel and the Palestinians (which has made considerable progress despite the existing difficulties), Israel and Jordan (which has led to the restoration of good relations), and Israel and Syria (which hopefully will develop into a substantial dialogue).

From the Turkish perspective, the Middle East peace process deserves active support. Turkey firmly believes that the settlement of the Arab-Israeli disputes will pave the way for a new era of stability and closer ties between the nations of this region. Turkish diplomacy has been trying to bring its own contribution to the continuation and progress of the peace process, as we have seen once more, during the recent trips by President Süleyman Demirel to this area.

But the problems of the Middle East are not all related to the Israeli-Arab conflict. There are a number of other issues that should be addressed if we are going to have peace, security and well-being in the whole region.

Turkey, sitting at the northwestern end of the Middle East, but with one foot in the Mediterranean and Europe, is in a good position to realise the existence of other problems and to seek more comprehensive solutions to them.

One major problem is terrorism. Again, this problem has been seen mainly as part of the Arab-Israeli dispute. The recent bomb attacks by Hamas in Israel have mobilised world opinion on this issue. The summit conference held at Sharm-el-Sheikh, March 1996, displayed international awareness caused by the terrorist groups which want to destroy the Middle East peace process. It also showed for the first time a strong desire and determination, at least by the participating countries, including Turkey, to establish a common front against terrorism.

As a country which has suffered from political violence for a number of years, Turkey has been striving to bring this issue to the world's attention and to promote international cooperation against what the Turks see as one of the greatest evils of our time.

Turkey faces the problem of terrorism on various fronts. The main source of terrorism in Turkey is the PKK, a Kurdish separatist organisation, whose activities in the last twelve years have caused the death of more than 18,000 people. Turkey has also been the scene in recent years of terrorist attacks by other groups, such as the Turkish branches (if we may call it so) of Hizbollah, Islamic Jihad and similar organisations having strong links with their counterparts in Syria and Iran.

For sometime, the Turks have been trying to draw the world's attention to the activities of these groups in Turkey, which not only use the same kind of methods as the groups active in Israel, but also are backed or encouraged by the same countries.

The recent outrageous attacks by Hamas against Israeli civilians finally pushed the world to act. Although the emphasis at the Sharm-el-Sheikh conference was on the activities of Hamas in connection with the Middle East peace process, there was agreement on a new strategy against terrorism.

Ankara expects that the framework of this cooperation will be enlarged to include not only Hamas, but also all other terrorist organisations, which of course in the case of Turkey includes the PKK. Turkey is already engaged in such cooperation with Israel, under a recent agreement signed on security and intelligence. The hope is that the US and Europe will show more understanding now to Turkey's views and needs about terrorism.

Another issue which causes serious differences and yet could become an area of cooperation in the region is the question of water.

Some experts predict that the future conflicts and even wars in the Middle East could be about water.

Most countries in the region suffer from a lack of water or inadequate sources of water. Turkey, on the contrary, has plenty of such resources.

Israel has shown interest in buying water from Turkey's Manavgat river and, once the technical aspects of the deal are completed, an agreement to that effect may go into force.

But Turkey's major idea is to launch the ambitious Water for Peace project, which would use two rivers in southern Turkey, namely the Ceyhan and Seyhan, to provide water through a pipeline system to various Middle Eastern countries. This would largely meet the needs for water in Syria, Jordan, Israel and the Gulf States. It would provide a good source of income for Turkey.

However the implementation of this idea which American experts and Administration officials view with sympathy requires first of all the good will of all the nations in the region. The idea was in the deep freeze for a couple of years after the Syrians objected to the project because it would involve Israel. But the hope is that with progress in the Middle East peace process, this project may be taken up more seriously in the near future.

Meanwhile, Turkey faces a dispute with Syria and Iraq over the amount of water which it supplies to them from the Euphrates. This issue is currently causing a good deal of tension between Ankara and its Arab neighbours.

The question of water certainly needs a new approach and should become the subject of bilateral and regional cooperation, rather than of dispute. In this regard, I believe that the Water for Peace project offers great opportunities for closer economic and political links among the nations of the Middle East.

The continuation of the peace process and the ending of tension between Israel and all its Arab neighbours, should certainly remain the main goal for all the countries in the region and should receive the full support of the international community.

But there are other important problems in the Middle East that need to be tackled and I have mentioned, as a striking example, only two of them.

Therefore, if we want to see a comprehensive peace and stability in the region, the existence of all these problems should be acknowledged and the same kind of common efforts to resolve them should be undertaken.

In other words, what we need now is a new and broader agenda for peace and cooperation in the Middle East. It sounds like a very difficult task, almost a mission impossible. But it is a challenge that deserves the endeavour of all nations concerned with peace, security and prosperity in the Middle East.