Turkey and the Middle East: frontiers of the new geographic imagination

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Introduction

In this article, we will focus on the role of political transformation and reform in the emergence of a new foreign policy line in Turkey. We hold the idea that Turkey adopted a new course in foreign policy due to political transformation at home, which resulted in reconstruction of the previous policy attitudes in policy making circles. The analysis of the change in Turkey’s foreign policy rhetoric provides a useful framework for understanding foreign policy behaviour and we will discuss this premise in the context of Turkish policy toward the Middle East.

Political transformation in Turkey, which is partly a result of the European Union membership process, has had two pillars: democratisation and consolidation of stability. This domestic reform process, especially in the fields of civil-military relations, national security, and economic liberalisation and stability, has significant implications for Turkey’s foreign policy. Changes in these realms led to a new awareness of the Middle East and a shift from a bad-neighbourhood to a zero-problem policy towards this region. The article discusses these ideas by focusing on changes in Turkish foreign policy towards the Palestinian question, Iran and Iraq. Although the article focuses on Turkey’s foreign policy toward the Middle East, the discussion built here is applicable to other regions to understand how reforming politics and improving welfare can contribute to regional security.

The article is comprised of two parts. The first part describes the political transformation in Turkey and discusses how this has led to the emergence of a new regional rhetoric with respect to the Middle East. The second part analyses the development of the new regional policy by focusing on Turkey’s new and more proactive foreign policy line towards the Palestinian question, Iraq and Iran. Finally, the article concludes by pointing out the potential
limitations of these arguments that may stem from domestic/internal and regional/external risks.

Turkey’s Transformation and the New Regional Rhetoric

Turkey has been going through a process of serious reforms and political transformation, which accelerated after Turkey’s official recognition as a candidate country by the European Union (EU) at the Helsinki Summit in 1999. The membership prospect provided Turkey with a common goal around which different elite groups came together. The coalition government of the time adopted structural reforms in the economy and started a major democratisation program. In November 2002 elections, a moderate Islamic party, Justice and Development Party (or Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP), won a landslide victory and renewed their term in June 2007 further increasing their votes. The reform process quickened with this new government. We argue that this domestic reform process has significant implications for Turkey’s foreign policy by contributing to the emergence of a new geographic imagination. The reform process is analysed in relation to three fields: changes in the national security understanding; shift from bureaucratic-authoritarian tradition to civilian and societal foreign policy making; and economic liberalisation and stability.

The primary focus in terms of Turkey’s transformation should be put on the changes in the national security understanding, which requires beginning discussion with the ‘objects’ of national security under the premise of previous geographic imagination. In this regard, political Islam and Kurdish nationalism have been perceived as twin threats to the new Turkish Republic from its inception. During the Cold War, ideological divisions masked such identity problems and the fight against communism became the priority within national security goals. However, these identity problems re-emerged in different national and international contexts in the 1990s. The Kurdish problem in particular undermined the efforts of democratisation during that period.

In April 1997, Kurdish separatism and reactionary Islam (irtica) were included in the National Security Policy Document as the new national security threats. It was declared by the Office of Chief of Staff that ‘internal threats against the territorial integrity of the country and the founding principles of the republic became graver than external threats’ (Bilgin 2005: 188). This was a very clear example of securitisation. Here, securitisation refers to a process of depoliticisation through which political issues are declared to be security issues. Accordingly, ‘something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so’ (Weaver 1995:47). The military acted as a major securitiser of several political issues, especially those related to ethnic and religious identities. In that period, the EU subsequently requested Turkey to address human rights as a political issue rather than as a national security issue. EU pressure for greater rights for
individuals and groups have worried the Turkish security elite, concerned about Turkey’s national cohesion and territorial integrity. The Turkish State has attempted to stall or resist increasing levels of demand for greater levels of democratic participation and respect for human rights. From the perspective of the ruling elite, ‘the production of differences and the making of distinctions which transcend official state ideology represent an enemy within’ (Väyrynen 1997: 24).

Securitisation of political issues had significant implications for Turkey’s foreign policy too. ‘Excessive securitisation maximizes the intensity of the security dilemma with neighbours who do not share the ideological project’ (Buzan et al. 1998: 208). This was certainly the case in Turkey’s relations with Syria and Iran. For many years, Turkey’s domestic problems with Kurdish separatism were reflected in its relations with Syria. Likewise, the declaration of reactionary Islam as a national security threat coincided with a major diplomatic crisis with Iran in February 1997.1

Despite the domination of Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy agenda by a civilian-military bureaucracy (Cizre Sakallioglu 1997) and the successful securitisation of major political issues, more recently Turkey has been undergoing a period of desecuritisation. Desecuritisation is understood here as the broadening of the boundaries of normal politics. In other words, desecuritisation is the process of ‘moving of issues off the ‘security’ agenda and back into the realm of public political discourse and ‘normal’ political dispute and accommodation’ (Williams 2003: 523). The capture of the leader of the terrorist organisation PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) in February 1999 along with the so-called post-modern coup against the Welfare Party-led coalition government in 28 February 19972 and the decision made at the Helsinki Summit (1999) on Turkey’s candidate status, created a political climate that not only triggered an economic and political reform process but also prepared a relaxed environment in which a public debate on Turkey’s definition of national security began to emerge.

As Heper (2005) argues, the prospect of EU membership has also become an impetus for civil-military relations to evolve in a pattern similar to that found in liberal democracies. Although there has been a section in the army that perceives the EU demands as threatening to Turkey’s national security, the prospect of admittance into the EU constituted a basis for a grand consensus between the military and civilian elites (Aydinli et al. 2006). Although the EU demanded reforms that would increase the control of the military by civilians, this has not been a major problem. As Aydinli et al. (2006) explains, membership was highly desired by the military because that would be the crowning achievement of Turkey’s long and painful modernisation efforts.

Moreover, as Bilgin (2005) notes, it is believed in the army ranks that the accession process could offer a way to respond to several challenges facing the country, such as the Kurdish question, political Islam, relations with Greece, and economic difficulties. In other words, from the perspective of the military,
the costs of tackling these problems surpasses the cost of meeting EU demands even though compliance reduces the role/power of the military (Aydinli et al. 2006). Hence, the military did not object to the reforms, which cut back its power vis-à-vis the civilian government. Reforms that have been undertaken in this field since 1999 include shifting the balance of power in the National Security Council (Milli Guvenlik Kurulu or MGK) in favour of civilian members, appointing a civilian Secretary-General for the MGK, removing military representatives from Council of Higher Education and the Radio and Television High Council, and bringing the Turkish Armed Forces under the complete judicial control of the Court of Accounts. These changes also facilitated a decline in the role of the military in the securitisation of political issues at domestic and international levels. The relatively silent position of the military establishment on recent foreign policy developments such as the support for the Annan Plan by the government or the Turkish Parliament’s refusal to support the US-led coalition in Iraq are signs of the weakening of the military’s influence on foreign policy-making. In short, although it would be premature to claim a normalisation of civil-military relations in Turkey, it would be appropriate to claim that the recent developments demonstrate the institutional adaptability of the military to new circumstances and the pragmatism of the running parties especially within the context of EU membership.

Furthermore, Turkey’s democratisation process started to include questioning of even the most sacred and mystified subjects including national security. Politicians such as Mesut Yilmaz, the former chairman of the Motherland Party, emphasised the necessity of opening up national security to public debate (Radikal 2001). More recently, Bulent Arinc the Speaker of the Parliament, in a special meeting of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, claimed that the Turkish Parliament is completely excluded from the processes of drafting Turkey’s National Security Document and suggested that this is evidence of the power of a secret and anti-democratic structure (Radikal 2006). Academics working on security issues also called for the ‘demythologising’ of national security (Cizre 2003). Journalists have especially criticised the role of MGK and the classified status of the National Security Document (e.g. Altan 2005; Bayramoglu 2005; Dundar 2005; Mahcupyan 2005). Even within the security establishment, critical voices started to be heard among the military. Some prominent figures criticised Turkey’s defence strategy and budget (Erguvenc 1999: 46–49) and a retired senior officer from the National Intelligence Agency wrote an article in a newspaper asking for change in Turkey’s traditional stance on sensitive issues such as headscarves, terrorism and sub-identities (Ones 2005).

Our second focus is on the breaking up of the bureaucratic isolation of foreign policy issues as demands to re-politicise and de-securitise become more articulated. At this point, it is necessary to touch upon the link between securitisation and domestic power-domination games. In Turkey, this game has
been played between the civilian-military bureaucracy and the political elite. The main tenets of foreign policy have traditionally been established by the security elite and governments have had to remain loyal to the ‘red zones of the foreign policy and security establishment’ (Kaliber 2005: 320). In this environment, the presentation of political issues as ‘existential threats’ (Weaver 1995: 56) hindered the emergence of healthy public debate within the public sphere. Civil society has been largely absent in the formulation of Turkey’s foreign and security policy which has been highly state-centric. Relying on the bureaucratic isolation of foreign policy from the political elite and the public at large, the civilian-military bureaucracy also benefited from the ‘mobilization potential’ (Weaver 1995: 63) of securitising such issues as Cyprus and achieved high levels of public support by de-legitimising any opposition to official policy (Kaliber 2005).

The reforms within the EU membership process enabled civil society organisations’ entry into politics, which in turn contributed to the widening of normal politics and the narrowing of the boundaries of security dominated realms. Turkey’s national security is beginning to be debated by a broader segment of society with increasing input from civilians. Previously dramatised issues that were isolated from open and rational public debate have started to be discussed within the realm of normal politics. Civil society groups’ entry into foreign policy making process has been supported by political and legal reforms within the context of EU membership. Opposition to official policies by civil society groups started to be tolerated, which eventually led to more open debates on formerly dramatised and depoliticised foreign-policy issues. The opening up of major security issues to public debate has contributed to a more transnational, demilitarised and inclusive policy making process. The changing patterns of relations between the securitisers (mainly the civilian-military bureaucracy) and society play an influential role in shaping the new regional policy and a redefinition of alliance and cooperation prospects.

In this process, public opinion and civil society have been able to make their voices heard on foreign policy issues. Civilian forces’ push for influencing foreign policy making has been especially visible in Turkey’s relations with the EU. Some civil society organisations such as the Economic Development Foundation (Iktisadi Kalkınma Vakfı) have actively supported the membership process. In 2003, thousands of people demonstrated against the AKP government’s proposal for sending troops to Iraq. At the end, these groups managed to exercise some degree of influence on the voting process in the Turkish National Assembly, which resulted in a decision not to send troops to Iraq. Civil society organisations have also been influential in the rapprochement between Greece and Turkey. Some of them benefited from the Civil Society Development Program (CSDP) of the European Union. CSDP aimed to promote Greek-Turkish civic dialogue at the grassroots and local levels, and to enhance the capacities of NGOs in Turkey (Rumelili 2005). Using these funds, Turkish NGOs not only improved their organisational, financial, and administrative
capacities but also contributed to amelioration of the relations between the two countries.

The last pillar of the change in domestic landscape that facilitated a more active foreign policy line is economic liberalisation and stability. Turkey went through several economic crises during the 1990s and another major one in 2001, which finally triggered an economic reform program championed by Kemal Dervis, the then Minister of Economics, and the same program continued under the AKP government. Since then, the Turkish economy has continued to be one of the fastest growing economies among the OECD members – with an average growth rate of 7.3 percent between 2002 and 2006. One of the main problems of Turkish economy, inflation, also seems to be under control as the inflation rate has fallen from almost three-digit numbers to a record low of 7.7 percent in 2005 and 9.6 percent in 2006 (Turkish Statistical Institute).

The economic reform program accompanied by a stand-by agreement with the IMF is based on structural reforms such as social security reform, an independent central bank, and further privatisation in various sectors including energy and telecommunications. These reforms will also help Turkey to achieve EU economic requirements. The confluence of EU requirements and the IMF program has prompted Turkey to pay special attention to the control of public expenditure, financial sector reforms intended to establish transparency and surveillance, and the reform of agricultural subsidies as well as to further the progress of privatisation (Onis 2004).

Recently adopted economic policies have had significant effects on Turkey’s foreign policy. The importance of economic considerations in external affairs has increased the role of entrepreneurial groups in foreign policy making and introduced a more transnational outlook to traditional foreign and security policy. Recently, Turkey signed free trade agreements with countries in the Middle East such as Syria and Egypt. Although Turkey’s biggest trade partner is the European Union, this move has to be seen not as a step away from EU, but as a step to supplement the EU’s trade policy towards the Middle East. Turkey and Egypt, for example, are both part of the Barcelona process and plan to join the Mediterranean free trade region by 2010. Another step for more economic cooperation has been taken between Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 2005 as the two parties signed an agreement that would lay the groundwork for a free-trade area encompassing much of the Middle East. The deal is expected to boost economic ties between Turkey and the GCC, which is comprised of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It seems that as Turkey moves towards economic and political liberalisation at home and strengthens its economic and political ties with the EU, it also emerges as a civil-economic power in the Middle East. It is no coincidence that the free-trade agreement with Syria came days after the European Union’s historic decision to start accession talks with Turkey. The cooperation agreement with the GCC and increasing involvement of Gulf
companies in the Turkish economy also followed the commencement of official negotiation between the EU and Turkey.

The changes in national security understanding, new patterns in civil-military relations, the new dynamic role of civil society in foreign policy making, and the emerging civil-economic role in regional affairs in the Turkish case exemplify the relationship between political transformation and foreign policy behaviour. Turkey’s domestic transformation, favourable international environment, and the advent of a new rhetoric changed Turkey’s regional policy. The meaning of the nation’s geography changed, territorial limitations for involvement in the region were eliminated in the perceptions of policy makers, domestic security was tied to regional security, societal factors increased their role in policy making, de-securitisation changed the security-first approach to foreign policy making and, as a result, the altered policy attitude created a new framework for Turkish policy in the Middle East. Turkey’s immediate neighbourhood is now perceived as an area of opportunity. This outlook has been made possible by the new geographic imaginary, which represents Turkey’s new regional profile as a civil-economic power. The new policy attitude put an end to the need for internal and external enemies and also paved the way for leaders to question the policies towards the Middle East. It marks a remarkable break from the old imagination and it is now on trial in regional politics.

Turkey’s new activism in the Middle East

Turkey’s new regional policy places different assumptions about the regional countries in the minds of policy makers. In this sense, the new regional rhetoric/imagination is shaped under the changing nature of nation-state and its frontiers have expanded beyond the homeland in the cognitive map of policy makers. Although there is no question of the viability of the borders that separate Turkey from the Middle East, the Turkish area of influence and, in another sense, Turkish responsibility goes beyond the national borders under the impact of the new geographic imagination. The territorial limits to Turkish involvement in the Middle East disappeared in this new mindset. The relationship between ‘bordering and othering’ (Van Houtum 2005: 674) lost its meaning after removing the strains of domestic threat perceptions in regional policy. This transformation goes beyond the classical discussions of perception or misperception in foreign policy attitudes (Jervis 1976). It creates a wide-spread impact on the culture of national security and of geopolitics, which means widening the horizons of policy makers and the emergence of certain new attitudes in foreign policy.

The domestic transformation changed the political attitudes that paved the way for decreasing the range of geographic others and redefining the friends and enemies in the region (Hammerstad 2005). These are not temporary responsive policies to emerging situations but long-lasting policy choices that will resist
both domestic and structural factors. Societal forces are increasing their influence in Turkish foreign policy making and competing with old bureaucratic-authoritarian tradition. The increasing self-confidence at home changes the threat perceptions in regional terms and creates a more positive attitude for providing peace and stability. At the same time, foreign policy makers are paying more attention to international legitimacy, values, and norms (Keyman 2004). The flexibility and adaptability of the new policy line seems greater than the previous policy attitudes considering the dynamic harmonisation process with the EU foreign policy line. Turkey’s transformation has already put an end to the Cold War-style security-state apparatus that ruled the country for half a century and has changed the framework of the country’s domestic and foreign policy.

Of prime importance is the fact that Turkey’s transformation changed the regional rhetoric of the policy makers. They favour the idea that Turkey is emerging as a role model for those across the Middle East who are seeking reform and modernisation. However, they are also careful enough to note that Turkey’s influence does not imply a hegemonic relationship, but rather points to an alternative path for reform and economic development that other—primarily Muslim—countries might take. There is a belief among Turkish foreign policy elites that the Middle East is now more likely to be receptive to constructive Turkish involvement. In this section, we will discuss the changing Turkish policy and attitudes toward the Palestinian question, Iraq, and Iran within this wider framework.

Palestinian question

The Palestinian question occupies a central place in Turkish policy toward the Middle East and the recently adopted Turkish attitude in this problematic issue exemplifies Turkey’s new policy line in the region. Turkish policy makers consider the Palestinian question an area of responsibility and opportunity to claim a constructive Turkish role in the Middle East. Turkish administrators define their position as a critical policy line that seeks to deter Israeli aggression against the Palestinians and to condemn Palestinian terrorist attacks on innocent Israeli targets, while pursuing good relations with both Israelis and the legitimate Palestinian government (Prime Minister’s Speech 2006).

Turkey’s new geographic imagination led to a more confident role in the Middle East, which found its expression in the statements of policy makers. Former Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit defined the Israeli Jenin operation as ‘genocide’ and Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan criticised the assassination of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and the heavy civilian casualties in the Rafah refugee camp as ‘state terror’. As an example of Turkey’s serious attention to the Palestinian question, Turkey established the Palestine Economic and Social Collaboration coordination office, which is headed by veteran politician and
former minister Vehbi Dincerler. Turkey’s attention to Palestine also intensified with the establishment of the West Bank branch of TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency).

During the Sharon government’s withdrawal from Gaza, Turkey offered to mediate between the Israelis and Palestinians in case of conflict. Sharon refused Turkey’s mediation offer, while appreciating Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan’s effort. Erdogan pointed out that ‘Turkey has the capacity to help the Palestinians after the redeployment in the economic field’. This is best exemplified by the initiative of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) with respect to managing an industrial zone on the border of Israel and the Gaza Strip (TOBB-BIS 2006). The ‘Industry for Peace Initiative in Palestine’ is an example of the self confidence in foreign policy elites and business leaders under the impact of the new geographic imagination that trade would be the basis for sustainable peace in the region and this initiative would create a concrete basis of cooperation between Palestine, Israel, and Turkey. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also defined the Erez project as “the initiative which would contribute to the regional peace”. The site on which the TOBB intended to build an industrial complex was destroyed during the escalation of the conflict in Gaza in August 2006, but Rifat Hisarciklioglu, the president of the TOBB, indicated the organisation’s determination to invest 100 million US dollars to restore the project and employ six thousand Palestinian people after maintaining stability in the region. The TOBB convened the fourth meeting of Ankara Forum in January 15, 2007 in Tel Aviv to discuss the further steps in the Revival Project for the Erez Industrial Region. Hisarciklioglu underlined that the project is the only concrete proposal in economic terms and Turkey is as crucial a share holder in the project as the Palestinians and Israelis. As stated in the Joint Declaration of the Fourth Meeting of the Ankara Forum: “The project is now coming to the stage of implementation in early 2007”. Then Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres underlined his support to the project that: “There is no time to waste any time. Erez industrial zone will be beneficial to all related parties”.

The subsequent HAMAS victories in the local elections in 2005 and Parliamentary Legislative Elections opened a new era in the Palestinian question. HAMAS denial of Israel was the main concern of the international community and the US and the EU started to discuss possible measures to force HAMAS to recognise Israel. Turkey interpreted the HAMAS rule in a different way and favoured diplomatic engagement with HAMAS to pre-empt possible problems in this new era. The Turkish position, as expressed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is that all related parties should respect the result of the elections and it would be against democratic principles if outside actors attempted to weaken this new order by imposing economic measures against the Palestinian administration (Bila, 2006). According to Turkish policy makers, HAMAS was in search of allies in the Middle East to put an end to
economic and political alienation it was facing from the international system. In such an environment, the only possible entry for HAMAS was the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis (Congar 2006).

When the Iranian religious leader, Ali Khamenei, invited HAMAS leadership to Tehran, he supported this perception. In the midst of all these developments, the Turkish ministry of foreign affairs invited Khaled Mashal, political leader of HAMAS in exile, to Turkey. This unexpected visit was criticised by some circles in the US and Israel. In response, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul stated that it was not possible for Turkey to remain a spectator to the Palestinian problem while even the land registration records of Palestine are still in Turkey (Civaoglu, 2006). As a response to critical comments of Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, he explained that his team advised HAMAS to disarm, become more moderate, and enter into diplomatic negotiations with Israel (Akyol, 2006).

HAMAS received an invitation from a number of other countries, such as Russia, South Africa, Venezuela, and Iran, indicating that Turkey was not alone in its engagement with HAMAS. Turkey also pursued diplomatic activities in the EU and partially influenced the EU decision to resume economic aid to the Palestinians under HAMAS rule (Kalayci 2006). Turkey’s HAMAS diplomacy is a new development in the sense that there is no other example of Turkey’s involvement at this level of complexity concerning the Palestinian question, intervention in regional alliances, and diplomacy vis-à-vis the US and the EU.

During the clashes between HAMAS and another powerful Palestinian group FATAH in the Gaza Strip, Turkish policy makers continued an active policy to persuade the clashing sides to end the civil war situation in the Palestinian territories. This stance is an example of changing regional rhetoric, which paves the way for a more active and confident policy line in the Middle East. In addition, there is new self-confidence in Turkey’s ability to tackle the difficulties of Middle Eastern politics in a way that can also help others to recognise the true nature of the regional problems and to adopt more meaningful policies for the region.

I Iraqi problem

Developments in Iraq have been followed with anxiety through the filter of two potential threats. First, it has been feared that any Kurdish independence or autonomy would have a demonstration/contagion effect on Turkey’s Kurdish population. Second, Turkey fears that a weak central government would lead to strengthening of PKK by using Northern Iraq as a safe haven for its activities. Moreover, Turkey wants to see a strong central government in Iraq ‘that is not only capable of bringing back political and economic stability, but that will also be robust enough to become a future counterweight to Iran in the region’ (Barkey and Taspinar 2006: 2). These threats are not only about Turkey’s future
in the region but more importantly they reflect the two fundamental threats that have shaped domestic politics for decades. Hence, the territorial integrity of Iraq has become a ‘red line’ for the civilian and military bureaucracy and limited the options of the government towards making a compromise in Iraq.

The government, by contrast, follows a different policy line shaped within the desecuritisation process and emergence of new regional policy in Turkey. This process contributed to the emergence of a new regional profile which has created more room for manoeuvring in terms of Ankara’s Iraq policy. Turkey’s new orientation seems more flexible and adaptive to the challenges in Iraq. It aims to develop initiatives regarding the emergence of an Iraqi state while also planning to provide security for Kurds and Turcomans in Northern Iraq (Cetinsaya 2006). Turkey’s new active policy line strives to develop relations with the different segments of Iraqi society regardless of ethnic and sectarian differences. This is not only a pragmatic response to the inescapability of Kurdish autonomy in the region, but also the result of a departure from the tradition of perceiving threats as coming from outside. The decline in Kurdish separatist terrorism in Turkey contributed to a more relaxed attitude towards Iraqi Kurds although there are still certain anxieties especially among the hardliners in the civilian-military elite. Turkey’s Iraqi policy integrated regional legitimacy concerns in the policy making process and left former red lines behind while opening new horizons. For example, former Undersecretary of the National Intelligence Agency noted during an interview that ‘there is no red line anymore. There is a reality—read an autonomous Kurdish state in Northern Iraq—and Turkey has to live with it’ (Milliyet 2007). This can also be seen as an outcome of the de-securitisation process in Turkey.

In accordance with this policy line, Turkey did not join the US-led occupation forces in Iraq, but has put enormous effort into mobilising regional support for a stable Iraqi state. As part of a new regional profile, Turkish policy makers present Turkey as the only country that can pursue constructive relations with all Iraqi actors and Iraqi neighbours. Erdogan noted that his government pursues continuous and equal relations with all ethnic groups to motivate them for Iraq’s unity and welfare (Prime Minister’s Speech 2007). In order to contribute to political stability in Iraq, Turkey has followed four different paths of diplomatic relations: through the United Nations Security Council, Organisation of Islamic Conference, Iraq’s neighbours and ethnic and religious groups in Iraq. Among these initiatives, Platform for Iraqi Neighbours has arguably been the most important one. The platform met for the first time in Istanbul on 23 January 2003 to find a peaceful solution and continued its activities after the beginning of the Iraqi war. As part of this platform, by January 2007, the foreign ministers of related countries have met formally nine times and informally three times in different locations such as Istanbul and Tehran. Through the platform, Iraq’s neighbours all agreed on the territorial integrity and political unity of Iraq. Some of the meetings were attended by representatives from the EU Commission and the United Nations as well as the Secretary
General of the Arab League and of the Organisation of Islamic Conference. The United Nations Security Council has taken these meetings seriously and has requested further regional cooperation on the Iraqi question. According to Gul, ‘the Platform is a unique example in the region bringing together regional countries with a common voice on such a sensitive issue as Iraq’ (Foreign Minister’s Speech 2004). He also believes that the initiative is appreciated by the international community and the UN. Certainly, the Secretary General of the UN, inspired by this initiative, established a consultation group involving the platform members.

Turkey also played an active role in making the Arab League and the OIC more sensitive on this issue. Turkey engaged in back stage diplomacy, bringing together the Americans and the Sunnis on several occasions. On one such meeting before the elections in Iraq, Sunnis agreed on bringing an end to Sunni terror while the Americans agreed to provide the conditions for a just election (Akyol 2005). In addition, Ankara brought major Sunni opposition figures and US envoys together to ensure Sunni participation in Iraqi national elections on 30 June 2005 and to take part in the political process. A prominent Sunni leader, Tariq-al Hashimi, the Vice-President of Iraq, has met former US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in Istanbul on one such initiative (Idiz 2005). In order to contribute to the democratic process in Iraq, Turkey organised training programs for 350 Iraqi politicians from various political parties (Prime Minister’s Speech 2006). As these efforts demonstrate, Turkey’s ruling elite has a newly developed self-confidence that it can play a constructive role in the Middle East including in Iraq.

Despite popular opposition to the US policies in Iraq and increasing nationalist pressure, Turkey’s new regional profile has utilised diplomatic channels for conflict resolution and management in Iraq, and pursued a Turkish initiative to mobilise Iraq’s neighbours and other regional countries in this cause. This new profile seems to find a receptive audience in the region. Turkey’s Iraqi diplomacy also paved the way for Erdogan’s invitation to the Arab League as a special observer. Turkey’s participation in a mainstream Arab international political organisation was something that could not be easily imagined even in the previous decade. In the minds of policy makers, Turkey’s new regional rhetoric sows the seeds of future support and sympathy for its Iraqi policy, which consolidates and strengthens new regional rhetoric and orientation (Davutoglu 2006).

Iran

Turkish diplomacy towards Iran followed a cyclical pattern under the premise of the old bureaucratic-authoritarian policy line. It was almost a truism among Turkish foreign policy decision-makers that Iran had a campaign to export Islamic revolution to Turkey by all possible means at its disposal, including
support of illegal, overt Islamist groups. According to this line of reasoning, the peculiarly religious nature of the Iranian regime pre-empts the possibility of reaching an understanding with Turkey’s democratic secular regime (Aras 2001: 108). In the eyes of Turkish decision-makers, for example, the mentioned Baqeri crisis was part of a broader campaign launched against Turkey, calling on Islamic Turks to embrace a regime similar to the one in Iran. Iran was perceived as posing an existential threat to the organising ideology (secularism) of the Turkish state and as attempting to undermine the domestic legitimacy of the regime. The second major problem in relations between Turkey and Iran was Turkish foreign policy makers’ continuous claims that Iran allowed the PKK to use its territory. This situation is a clear example of externalising a domestic problem. As Buzan et al. (1998: 156) argues ‘it is rare for foreign actors to challenge directly the legitimacy of regimes although it is somewhat more common for weak regimes to blame domestic unrest on foreign orchestration’.

Most of the problems between Ankara and Tehran, however, were the result of internal disputes and domestic security problems in Turkey—namely of securitisation of these issues by reflecting them on Iran as an external other. The Turkish establishment’s representation of Iran is tainted by its tendency to see all Islamicists and Kurds as ‘others’ in domestic politics. Indeed, in the past, the typical cyclical pattern of ruptures in Iranian-Turkish relations, characterised by severe crises involving ideologically driven incriminations, and, at times the recall of diplomats—generally followed by periods of pragmatic relations. After adopting new regional rhetoric and a more active policy line in the region, Turkish foreign policy makers moved beyond mere reaction to images projected by self-interested securitisers, and formulated a fresh policy that was attentive to changing domestic, regional and international politics. The typical cyclical pattern disappeared in the relations and became a part of the past.

Turkey’s new policy line aims to promote a regional peacemaker role and give priority to democratic legitimacy in international relations. Turkey’s new neighbourhood policy has a vision of minimising the problems in its neighbouring regions while avoiding involvement in international confrontations. Turkish officials have a view that their handling of the relations with Syria and Iran are exemplary in this sense. Turkish policy is built on a model of enduring cooperation among countries, which is delicately balanced between the shared interests of the parties and the perceptions of international society, especially in the top echelons of the power hierarchy in international relations. As an example of the new policy line, which contrasts sharply with former Turkish-Iranian relations, Turkey plays a facilitator role between Iran and the group known as 5 + 1, namely, the permanent members of UN Security Council and Germany. Turkish policy makers propagate the idea that Ankara has emerged as an ideal channel for the 5 + 1 initiative to persuade Iran to adopt a more responsible line regarding nuclear proliferation. Turkish diplomats carry on intensive shuttle diplomacy, discussing this issue with the US Secretary of
State, Condoleezza Rice, head of nuclear diplomacy in Iran, Ali Larijani, head of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mohamed El Baradei, and EU’s foreign policy chief, Javier Solana. In June 2006, Turkish attempts were considered successful based on the assumption that Turkish Foreign Minister Gul persuaded Solana to go to Iran and present the report to the Iranians, and prepared Iran to adopt a moderate attitude toward the 5+1 report on the Iranian nuclear issue (Candar 2006).

It is salient that the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani, paid a visit to Turkey in May to discuss the Turkish involvement in a number of issues ranging from the Iraqi crisis to US-Iranian relations. Larijani also discussed the idea of a Turkish mediator role in the nuclear issue during his visit (Kohen 2006). When Gul visited Washington on 6 July 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice praised Turkish mediation in relation to the Iranian nuclear issue. During his US trip, Gul shared his observations of his earlier trip to Tehran with his US counterpart (Soylemez 2006). The Turkish position aims to enhance diplomacy while releasing pressure on Iran to enable the facilitation of a constructive Iranian response to the demands of the international community. On the Iranian front, Turkey urges the Iranian establishment not to play for time and to understand the seriousness of its situation vis-à-vis the US and the international community. It is possible to argue that de-securitisation of relations with Iran enabled Turkey to avoid the ‘panic’ mode of securitised politics (Eriksson 1999: 315). As Buzan et al. (1998: 208) argued ‘excessive securitisation produces the international equivalents of autism and paranoia’ through which everything from nuclear missiles to miniskirts (or headscarves for that matter) is securitised. De-securitisation, on the other hand, reduces the threat perception from neighbours and allows more room for manoeuvring within regional politics. Exemplifying this, in July 2007, Turkey reached an agreement with Iran to transport Iranian and Turkmen natural gas westward to Europe.9

Conclusion

In this article, we underlined the link between domestic transformation and emergence of a new geographic imagination that re-shapes regional policy, re-defines enemies as potential allies, and creates a wide-spread impact on the cultures of national security and geopolitics. The result is the emergence of new attitudes in foreign policy. We also underlined a direct connection between consolidation of domestic security and stability and regional security. The Turkish case exemplifies the assertion that legal, political, and economic transformation of the domestic scene should play a meaningful and constructive role in regional security. Specifically, our way of analysing the domestic politics/foreign policy nexus through an altered regional rhetoric helps us to have a better grasp of newly emerging Turkish foreign policy behaviour.
Turkey’s new foreign policy orientation opened new horizons in its relations with the neighbouring states and is closely linked to the transformation in the domestic landscape. Turkey achieved considerable progress in its move toward EU membership and gained enough confidence to emerge as a civil-economic power in the Middle East. The emergence of a new policy line paved the way for a change in perception of this geography and Turkish policy makers are trying hard to prepare the ground for a more active Turkish role in the region. Turkish policy makers hold to the notion that what happened in Turkey is not an exception. The Turkish case exemplifies ways of reforming politics, improving welfare and contributing to regional security. We have discussed this fresh regional vision in terms of Turkey’s policies toward the Palestinian question, Iran, and Iraq. There is enough evidence to show that Turkish policy makers exhibit a high degree of self-confidence and willingness to get involved in regional issues and even to pursue extensive and intensive diplomatic initiatives that go beyond the region.

It is important to note that this new role is the result of the policy line being applied to the region and there is no guarantee that it can be applied successfully. Some policy analysts also question the foundations, diplomatic style and policy choices of this new regional policy line. They point out the sudden and abrupt departure from the traditional policy line and argue that a pro-Islamic government has an undeclared Islamic agenda in the new activism in the Middle East. A recent article by Altunisik and Tur (2006), for example, suggests that the amelioration of bilateral relations between Syria and Turkey as well as Turkey’s closer ties with the Muslim world in general can be explained by AKP’s roots in political Islam. The following quote is also representative of the critical attitudes to the new regional rhetoric and policy:

Since the AKP’s (Justice and Development Party) rise to power, Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East, and with that concomitant Turkish public sentiment toward the region, has changed beyond recognition. The AKP has been ignoring the wedges between Turkey and the West, while building bridges between Turkey and the Muslim Middle East (Cagatay 2006).

There are also criticisms from different segments of Turkish political elite and intellectual circles for the attitudes, positions, and initiatives in specific cases (Mert 2006).

Although Turkey’s domestic transformation seems to be persistent enough to promote an active Turkish role, there may be setbacks in cases of economic crises, political instabilities, or a retreat from the EU process. However, foreign dynamics are likely to bear more influence on this new policy. The relations with Syria, Israel, and Iran will be test cases for Turkey’s emergence as an active regional peacemaker and peace-promoter in the Middle East. The difficulties ahead would lie not only in bilateral relations with these countries, but also in relations with the outside powers, i.e. the US. The region is already in crisis and
the most likely prospect is the deepening of the existing crises and the emergence of new conflicts. In this regard, Turkish policy makers increasingly face limits set by the dynamic and problematic nature of regional politics and by the intervention of outside actors, which would determine the frontiers of the new geographic imagination in Turkish policy toward the Middle East.

Notes
1. In February 1997, Ankara had accused Iranian Ambassador Mohammad Reza Baqeri of interfering in Turkey’s internal affairs by voicing support for the rule of Islamic law at an Islamists’ rally in the Ankara district of Sincan. The incident caused a diplomatic crisis that lasted for six months until the two parties agreed to exchange ambassadors again.
2. On February 28, 1997, the National Security Council took some decisions to ‘reinforce the secular character of the Turkish state’, which is known as the soft or post-modern coup. The coalition government had to step down in July 1997 after threats of military intervention.
5. See <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/8395C7CE-AEAC-4CF9-8319-B7F5C6AD0DCF.htm>.

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