Turkey's rise in the Greater Middle East: peace-building in the periphery

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Introduction

Turkey’s new dynamism in regional affairs is unprecedented for a country whose rallying cry was the inward-looking ‘Peace at Home, Peace in the World’. In September 2008 alone, the following events occurred that demonstrate Turkey’s new dynamism. Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan met with his Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts in New York on 26 September. Babacan noted that tripartite talks will continue in order to improve political dialogue and create a forum for common understanding. French President Nikolas Sarkozy, who holds the rotating presidency of the EU, highlighted Turkey’s reliability and mediating role in the indirect talks between Syria and Israel in Damascus on 4 September. Afghanistan’s Foreign Minister Rangin Spanta informed the international media in early September that a second round of trilateral talks between Turkish President Abdullah Gul, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari will take place in Turkey in December. While Turkey was seeking a greater involvement in regional peace efforts, Turkey won 151 votes in the UN General Assembly on 17 November 2008 and secured a non-permanent member seat in the Security Council for the 2009–10 term. The main source of support is Turkey’s successful peace attempts in the Caucasus and the Middle East, and its new openings to Africa and Asia. Turkey’s transformation into a regional peace-maker is the result of a domestic transformation that in turn changed its vision about its neighbourhood and its role in foreign affairs.

Turkey’s increasing involvement in the search for solutions to regional problems is a new development. Turkey’s position represents an alternative voice from the periphery for solutions to the decades-long conflicts in a number of problem-prone regions. It is rare to observe strong peace initiatives in the Middle East, the Caucasus and South Asia coming from within the region. The peace-broker role has been played by the USA, European actors and the UN, or sometimes a combination of these actors and regional countries. These countries are at the top of the power echelons of the international system and they have certain interests to preserve the systemic order as it is. In this sense, the usual peace-makers are status quo powers acting pursuant to their projection of power within the international system. For example, US peace attempts were formalized within the framework of US military unilaterality. The imposition of such strong positions creates obstacles to regional politics in different parts of the world, preventing the emergence of solutions from within the regions that are actually facing the problems. Turkey is an interesting case, which challenged the US
position in Iraq and the Syrian–Israeli peace process, among others. Both Ankara and Washington want a stable and secure Iraq and a solution to the Syrian–Israeli problems. However, the US administration was critical of Turkey’s Iraq and Syria policies, and only began to support Turkish peace attempts after recognizing solid developments in a number of initiatives. Turkey’s emergence as a peace-maker in the periphery is related to Turkey’s domestic transformation and its new foreign policy vision. This paper will focus on the emergence of this new peace-making role, which will be discussed by way of raising the cases of Iraq and the Syrian–Israeli negotiations.

Changing framework of Turkish foreign policy

I hold the view that a comprehensive approach to Turkish foreign policy should deal with state identity not only as an internationally exogenous phenomenon but also as a dynamic process that includes the identities of both the policymakers and societal units. One needs to recognize that the formulation of national interests and foreign policy is a direct result of the internalization of identity preferences that are shaped by cultural mentalities and patterns of social and economic life.

In this environment of pluralism in foreign policy-making, Turkey has acquired a new foreign policy identity, which led to the emergence of a self-confident, multi-dimensional and dynamic foreign policy approach. Turkey’s new policy attitude reflects a sharp break from its past policy behaviour. Turkish foreign policy has been traditionally subordinate to the international systemic order and shaped under the constraints of domestic politics. Turkish policymakers were designing foreign policy based on their interpretation of the international system and projecting their domestic concerns onto the foreign policy-making process.

Traditional bureaucratic–authoritarian foreign policy

Turkish foreign policy long carried historical baggage as a legacy of the Ottoman Empire. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire created a trauma which could be called ‘a post-imperial loneliness’. The early republican elite experienced a difficult transformation from an Ottoman frame of mind to a new post-Ottoman Turkish mindset. It was not certain in the beginning that this intellectual journey would be westward. While the Empire was disappearing on the warfront and at the post-war negotiating tables, the late Ottoman intellectuals were discussing different ideas of Islamism and Ottomanism. Their intellectual transformation occurred under the demise of the Empire and the emergence of a nation-state in the Anatolian Turkish heartland, which dictated a new geographical necessity to the new Turkish state upon which it should be formed. Although Turkey’s new political elite had more room to manoeuvre in terms of their ideological choices and preferences of government, these choices and preferences were made under the conditions of intellectual transformation to a new post-Ottoman mind. This new mindset was responsive and defensive, with serious concerns for the survival of the new nation-state.
Falih Rifki Atay’s book Zeytindagi\(^1\) (*Olive Mountain*) is a good example for understanding how the new Turkish elite interpreted the past and looked toward the future. Atay considers the Ottoman presence outside Anatolia, in particular in the current Middle East, as a useless endeavour and waste of resources. He refers to the devastating situation in Anatolia and holds the Ottoman Empire responsible for its deterioration. He blames the Ottoman administration for spending all the wealth of Anatolia in the Arab deserts. Turkey’s new intellectual mind chose the Western model of government and secularism as appropriate for the country’s future, and this new project was based on forgetting Turkey’s Ottoman and Islamic past.

However, the new elite could not depart from the Ottoman bureaucratic tradition, particularly in foreign policy.\(^2\) They interpreted foreign policy as an elite business and appropriated the Ottoman style of bureaucratic–authoritarian tendencies in the foreign policy-making process. Turkish foreign policy establishment was run by security elites who reserved foreign policy-making for experts, and sometimes totally isolated it as a national security issue. Turkish foreign policy has also been an instrument of endorsement of Turkey’s new Western identity, and Turkey’s foreign policy choices have reflected this ideological orientation. The international system, on the other hand, also played an important role in shaping the political and ideological choices of Turkey and its foreign policy. The end of the ‘twenty years’ crisis’, as Carr put it, had a clear impact on the founding father’s decision to establish a nation-state with a secular and nationalist character. The end of the Second World War and the creation of the UN system had a similar impact on the transition to a multi-party system and democratization. Turkey’s preferences reflected the conscious decision to side with the West.

Turkey’s inclination toward the West in foreign policy matters was reflected in domestic politics through a kind of filtering mechanism. While clamouring for increased modernization and Westernization so as to elevate Turkey to the economic level of the civilized world, at the same time, the official identity at home had been one of distrust and latent enmity towards the West inherited from the Ottoman administrative elite. ‘Peace at Home, Peace in the World’—a principle of Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey—has long been a dominant rallying cry, and foreign policy-makers conducted foreign policy in an introverted and bashful manner. The establishment media and intellectuals of statecraft hewed closely to the ideological positions of the foreign policy elite, constantly struggling to legitimize the regime’s stance. Nationalist foreign policy followed a cautious and reluctant policy towards European countries, due to demands for increasing democratization and greater respect for human rights in Turkey. For example, Europe’s hesitancy to sell Turkey military equipment was a source of great friction. Turkey was more comfortable in its relations with the USA, which did not question Turkey’s domestic security environment after the Second World War.

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As argued, Turkey’s new state and foreign policy identity required an inward-looking and defensive policy approach to international relations. On occasion, Turkey showed considerable daring in its foreign policy. However, Turkish foreign policy has been shaped by the constraints of the ‘Sevres Syndrome’, a mentality directly related to its transformation from an Empire into nation-state. The ‘Sevres Syndrome’ refers to the Treaty of Sevres, outlining the partition of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War by foreign powers and their proxies in the Ottoman territories. The Sevres Syndrome regards the notion that the country is surrounded by enemies and constantly faces the danger of break-up or partition. This distinctively Turkish view of the world still plays a vital role in shaping the minds of nationalist foreign policy-makers.

The nation-state-based geographical imagination was the result of domesticating the nation-state territories, which created a well-defined sense of a homeland in strict territorial terms and was based on the ‘Turkification’ of all Muslim elements of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia. The regional rhetoric and language was built on the idea that the homeland was under continuous threat and, indeed, surrounded by enemies. The official nationalist discourse had kept the definition of homeland continuously sensitive and had been at an arm’s length from ultra-nationalist ideologies, which make reference to outside territories. This discourse helped policy-makers create a strong sense of defending the homeland, mobilize support at home and preserve their hold on power.

Foreign policies come to be extensions of domestic politics. The ‘others’ who are excluded during the construction of the nationalist identity providing a negative input for foreign policy formulation, make foreign policy hostage to considerations of the establishment identity. In this regard, the Kurdish and Islamist rebellions during the establishment period gave the leaders of the republic an opportunity to silence the opposition. The threats of Kurdish separatism and Islamist rebellion shaped the cognitive map of the security elite and contributed to the creation of a harsh political culture whereby most serious subsequent opposition to government policies or comprehensive disagreement with its progress laid open the possibility that the disaffected groups would be labelled as traitors. Conducting foreign policies in line with an understanding of mere security is in conformity with the growing role of the military in foreign policy formulation. In the end, ideological narrowing in domestic politics caused foreign policies to be harsher, less sensitive to change and less flexible in regional policies.

**Turkey’s new foreign policy**

Turkey’s new foreign policy orientation has opened new horizons in its relations with neighbouring states and is closely linked to its transformation in the domestic landscape. Turkey has achieved considerable progress in its effort toward EU membership and has gained enough confidence to emerge as

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a civil–economic power in the Middle East. The emergence of a new policy approach paved the way for a change in the perception of this geography. Turkish policy-makers are preparing the ground for a more active Turkish role in the region. The Turkish case exemplifies proven ways of reforming politics, improving welfare and contributing to regional security. There is ample evidence 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 beyond the region.

The elimination of the range of ‘others’ within the country and its surroundings led to the emergence of a new regional identity. To understand this process, I will emphasize Turkey’s political transformation. Turkey’s bid for EU membership is at the centre of the change in the domestic landscape. In order to prepare for EU accession, Turkey has undertaken vast and serious legal, political and economic reforms. Turkey’s bureaucrats, politicians and citizens united to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership and tolerated the pain of the IMF-directed structural adjustment programmes. The domestic transformation changed the political attitudes that paved the way for decreasing the range of geographic ‘others’ and redefining Turkey’s friends and enemies in the region. 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. At the same time, foreign policy-makers are paying more attention to international legitimacy, values and norms.

The significance of Turkey’s domestic transformation is the consolidation of stability in the country, enabling it to emerge as a peace-promoter in neighbouring regions. Security is, to a considerable extent, an internal problem and foreign policies are extensions of the domestic considerations in this geography. In traditional understanding of foreign and security policies, there was a visible tendency to externalize domestic problems and search for foreign enemies as the root causes of security problems. In some cases, there may be external causes for the problems, but political elites had a tendency to exaggerate them and to manipulate them to preserve their hold on power.

This new imagination places different assumptions about regional countries in the minds of policy-makers. The crux of the question lies within the aforementioned transformation, which reshaped foreign policy choices. In this sense, the new foreign policy has been shaped under the changing nature of the nation-state, with frontiers that have expanded beyond the homeland in the cognitive map of policy-makers. The territorial limits to Turkish involvement in neighbouring countries disappeared in this new mindset. The relationship between ‘bordering and othering’ lost its meaning after removing the strains of domestic threat perceptions in regional policy.

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This transformation goes beyond the classical discussions of perception or misperception in foreign policy attitudes. It creates a widespread impact on the culture of national security and the culture of geopolitics, which means widening the horizons of policy-makers and the emergence of certain new attitudes in foreign policy. The change could be understood in a multilateral framework that includes the changes in the domestic landscape and the bilateral interaction of each component of the political, economic and cultural transformation with the emerging foreign policy line. For example, questioning the national security culture enters into a bilateral formative interaction with the geographic imagination, which re-configures the formulation of national security and integrates new factors into the foreign policy-making process. As Kirisci interpreted, according to Turkish policy-makers, ‘the political development, economic capabilities, dynamic social forces, and ability to reconcile Islam and democracy at home are the qualities that offer Turkey the possibility to develop and implement’ such active and influential policies in distant geographies like Asia and Africa.

Turkish politicians promise to contribute to security, stability and prosperity in a wide range of territories that go beyond Turkey’s immediate neighbourhood, namely, Asia and Africa. Turkey’s newfound interest in these territories is the result of putting its home affairs in order, gaining self-confidence in international relations, developing a universal vision of foreign policy and seeking a leadership role in world politics. As argued by Ahmet Davutoglu, chief advisor to the Prime Minister and the intellectual architect of the foreign policy of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party):

In terms of geography, Turkey occupies a unique space. As a large country in the midst of Afro-Eurasia’s vast landmass, it may be defined as a central country with multiple regional identities that cannot be reduced to one unified character. Like Russia, Germany, Iran, and Egypt, Turkey cannot be explained geographically or culturally by associating it with one single region. Turkey’s diverse regional composition lends it the capability of manoeuvring in several regions simultaneously; in this sense, it controls an area of influence in its immediate environs.

Namely, although the distance remains the same, the perception of these geographies changes under the premises of a new geographical imagination. The physical distance and prior difficulties of getting involved in these geographies no longer make sense in policy circles and among the public. There emerges a process of discovery of the ‘closeness’ of these geographies and ‘availability’ for Turkey’s involvement through the instruments of remembering past relations, unfolding cultural and civilizational affinities, and exploring opportunities for engagement.

The changing meanings of Asia or Africa in the new rhetoric of foreign policy-makers are examples of the dynamic interaction between power and geography.

10Davutoglu, op. cit., p. 78.
There emerges a process of re-positioning, which places the country in a wider geographical landscape or makes it part of new regions. Turkey’s new foreign policy places Turkey within various regions in a way that it occupies not only an important geo-political position but also would be able to emerge as a meaningful player in political and economic settings. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan exemplified this rhetoric when he said that ‘Istanbul is not only a centre combining the continents but also a central symbol combining and synthesizing the civilizations.’ He places Istanbul in the centre of a vast landscape that Turkey’s geography gains meaning in a wider territorial context. Davutoglu further argues that:

Turkey’s engagements from Chile to Indonesia, from Africa to Central Asia, and from the EU to the OIC will be part of a holistic approach to foreign policy. These initiatives will make Turkey a global actor as we approach 2023, the one hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Turkish republic.

In this mindset, Turkey emerges as an influential player in a geography extending from Africa to the Far East in the same context.

**Turkey’s peace attempts**

Turkish foreign policy-makers have gained the self-confidence and political will to pursue peace attempts in the neighbouring regions. Turkey hosts Middle Eastern, Eurasian and African leaders as well as high-level politicians and officials from Western countries and facilitates platforms for the solution of conflicts in various geographies. Turkish policy-makers try to overcome differences between countries in conflict through confidence-building measures and by acting as a mediator and facilitator for the solutions to chronic regional problems. Turkish policy-makers’ vision and policy style is exemplary to observe the emergence of peace-maker role in the periphery of the international system. They try to initiate regional dynamics for peace-making and mobilize regional actors to create a new awareness of peace in a wide geography extending from the Middle East to the steppes of Eurasia.

**Turkey’s role in the Syrian–Israeli peace process**

Turkish–Syrian relations create a channel for the Syrian administration to get out of its vicious cycle of isolation in the post-September 11 era. Turkey is considered a gateway to Europe and a country that knows how to accommodate differences within international society. The deliberate establishment and strengthening of ties between Turkey and Syria holds promise for both. In 2007, the total volume of Turkish trade with Syria increased to US$1.2 billion, up from US$797 million in 2006. The signing of a free trade zone in 2007 between Syria and Turkey would

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12Davutoglu, op. cit., p. 96.
further increase the trade volume. There is a decisive will on both sides to overcome obstacles in the interest of improving trade and business relations. The agreement to strengthen bilateral economic relations during President Bashar Asad’s visit in October 2007, and talks about coordinating joint investments in a subsequent visit by Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Dardari, are signals indicating the goodwill of officials on both sides. During the latter visit, every aspect of bilateral economic relations was discussed with a view to overcoming any pending obstacles. Turkey’s south and south-eastern regions have a new orientation toward the Syrian economy and there are promising prospects for tourism in the near future. Turkey’s civil–economic and soft powers are visible in Syria and both sides see the benefit of improving political and economic relations.

Turkish politicians began to favour the idea that a constructive Syrian policy line in the Middle East would help get rid of the suspicions directed at Syria, in addition to easing tension in the region. In the new regional rhetoric of Turkish policy-makers, Syria is now a potential ally and friend. From their perspective, as former Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gul expressed, Turkey and Syria have legitimate concerns about the future of Iraq and should cooperate in every possible way, as they already have started doing, to enhance peace and stability. During Erdogan’s visit to Syria in December 2006, Assad expressed the Syrian leadership’s positive perception of the new Turkish attitude, stressing the fact that, ‘Turkey and Syria have common views on regional issues and [that] his country appreciates Turkey’s efforts to restore peace in the Middle East.’

Syria and Turkey signed a free trade agreement with the understanding that the agreement should be expanded to the regional level in the spirit of the time, namely, cooperation and interdependence for enduring peace and stability, which would provide an exemplary pattern for other neighbouring countries to follow. The shift in Turkey’s stance toward Syria is remarkable. While Turkey was blamed for cooperation with Israel and accused of forming a coalition against Syria in the 1990s, a new, cooperative vision now prevails. As Syrian leader Bashar Assad remarked, ‘Turkey became one of the friendliest countries toward Syria in the region, one which pursues not only good relations at a bilateral level but also cooperates with Syria on a number of regional issues.’

Turkish policy-makers now try to utilize their developing relations with Syria to influence Syrian policy with the aim of promoting peace and stability. The increasing levels of trust on both sides have made Turkey a potential mediator in the decades-long Syrian–Israeli conflict. Turkey pursues a multi-dimensional policy line, in part, to foster just such a role in the region, and has already enjoyed some degree of success. For example, in light of Israeli and Palestinian assertions that Syria’s intervention would help bring about a solution to the Lebanon crisis in August 2006, which escalated after Palestinian militants captured the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, Erdogan sent his chief advisor Ahmet Davutoglu to Damascus. Davutoglu conveyed Turkey’s position to the Syrian president,

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13 Suriye’den Turk yatirimcilara ozel davet ciktii, Referans (Turkish Daily), 4 February 2008.
14 Milliyet (Turkish Daily), 2 February 2007.
15 Radikal (Turkish Daily), 6 December 2006.
17 Esad ile ozel roportaj, CNN Turk (Turkish TV), 6 April 2005.
including concerns about the escalation of violence and the spread of the crisis to the whole region. Turkey’s involvement in this crisis is unique if one remembers Turkey’s former stance of deliberate non-involvement toward Syria’s regional affairs and Middle Eastern conflicts in general. This demonstrates the trust of Turkish policy-makers that Turkish–Syrian relations were in such good standing that Syria would respond positively to Turkish demands in regional matters.

The most promising period for Israeli–Syrian negotiations was the era following the Madrid Framework signed in 1991. The framework provided channels for bilateral dialogue and the resolution of regional issues along multilateral tracks. Despite its promise, however, this framework did not produce any improvement between Syria and Israel. The US-sponsored talks in 1996 at the Wye River and in 2000 in Shepherdstown likewise produced no result, as did the secret diplomacy initiative of 1998. The subsequent Arab plans, the US-led ‘road map’ and the recent Annapolis initiative did not draw much attention to Israeli–Syrian negotiations, as priority was given to the Palestinian question. The US attitude toward Syria, Syrian involvement in Lebanon and the Hariri assassination decreased international society’s trust in Syria and lowered expectations for a settlement of the Israeli–Syrian dispute.

Turkey’s mediating role was strengthened when Turkey moved ahead to bring Syria and Israel together. The level of engagement, at the outset, was limited to conveying messages from each side and the process was extremely difficult. The Israeli administration wants to contain Syria, end the Syrian–Iranian alliance, and prevent Syrian support for Hezbollah and HAMAS. Syria wants the Golan Heights back unconditionally and demands Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese lands. The Syrian condition of Golan-for-peace means a return to the borders before the 1967 Arab–Israeli war. Israel responds to this demand with conditions: the establishment of demilitarized zones in the withdrawn territories and border modifications based on security concerns.

Turkish policy-makers are confident that they may play a constructive role in the resolution of the Israeli–Syrian dispute. They are aware of the complicated nature of the problem and the difficulties of bringing the sides together. However, Turkey’s new activism in the Middle East prioritizes regional stability and security, and Turkish policy-makers aim to play a role in initiating Israeli–Syrian negotiations. Prime Minister Erdogan, after a visit to Damascus in April 2008, confirmed Turkey’s mediating role in the initiation of negotiations between Syria and Israel for a peaceful resolution of the dispute about the strategic Golan Heights. He further stated that he would attempt to restart direct talks between Syria and Israel. Foreign Minister Ali Babacan evaluated the situation from a more realistic standpoint and stressed that the resolution of this chronic dispute would require ‘strong political determination’ from both sides. He also added that ‘we are still at the very beginning of the process’. As an initial success of Turkish mediation attempts, Israeli and Syrian authorities declared on 21 May 2008 that they started indirect talks under the supervision of Turkish diplomats in Ankara. The two sides had their fifth round of talks in November 2008 in Turkey.

18 ‘An interview with the prime minister’, CNBC-E (Turkish TV), 7 November 2006.
19 Radikal, 30 April 2008.
20 Today’s Zaman (Turkish Daily), 30 April 2008.
Turkish policy toward Iraq

The Turkish government adopted a different policy approach toward Iraq in the aftermath of the US invasion. The March 2003 motion that forbade US troops from using Turkish territory in the war against Iraq was a historical turning point for Turkey, as Ankara made it clear that it will follow the principle of democratic legitimacy in its regional and international policies. The Turkish parliament prevented the USA from opening a northern front against Iraq on the basis that the international community considered the war illegitimate. Turkey’s decision prolonged the process of the Iraqi invasion, forced the USA to search for greater legitimacy and drew more attention to the Palestinian question. The parliamentary motion that prohibited the use of Turkish territory by American troops saved Ankara from much of the negative impact of the Iraq crisis in regional terms. The Parliament’s decision was shaped by a powerful consensus in Turkish society on this issue; it was correct both in ethical and strategic terms. The widely held belief that Ankara would face numerous problems with the USA did not bear out. Rather, the decision served to increase Turkey’s prestige regionally and internationally.

The new policy was shaped within the democratization process and the emergence of a 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. Turkey’s new active policy approach 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 inevitability 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 hard-liners 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, the former Undersecretary of 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.’ This can also be seen as an outcome of the democratization process in Turkey.

As part of its 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. In order to contribute to political stability in Iraq, Turkey has followed four different paths of diplomatic relations: through the UN Security Council,

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Organization of Islamic Conference, Iraq’s neighbours, and ethnic and religious groups in Iraq. Among these initiatives, the Platform for Iraqi Neighbours has arguably been the most important. The platform met for the first time in Istanbul on 23 January 2003 to find a peaceful solution and continued its activities after the Iraq war.

As part of this platform, the foreign ministers of related countries have met formally 11 times and informally 3 times in different locations such as Istanbul, Baghdad 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 European Commission and the United Nations as well as the Secretaries General of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). The UN Security Council has taken these meetings seriously and has requested further regional cooperation on the Iraqi question. Inspired by this initiative, the UN Secretary General established a consultation group involving the platform members.

Turkey also plays an active role in making the Arab League and the OIC more sensitive to this issue. Turkey engaged in backstage diplomacy by bringing together the Americans and the Sunnis on several occasions. On one such meeting before the elections in Iraq, Sunnis agreed to end Sunni terror while the Americans agreed to provide the conditions for a fair election. 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. Tariq-al Hashimi, a prominent Sunni leader and vice president of Iraq, has met former US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in Istanbul on one such initiative.

In order to contribute to the democratic process in Iraq, Turkey also organized training programmes for 350 Iraqi politicians from various political parties. 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 Iraq.

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 organization was something that could not be easily imagined 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. The Extended Iraqi Neighbours meeting in Istanbul on 2–3 November 2007 is a signal of Turkey’s ability to pursue regional diplomacy for the Iraqi cause. Turkish sensitivities on the territorial unity of Iraq and PKK terrorism dominated the agenda of the meeting and generated support from Iraq’s neighbours as well as the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The final declaration underlined the urgent need for cooperation against terrorist groups in Iraq.

Baghdad is closer to the Turkish position than ever before. Despite his continuous change of positions, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, in reference to the PKK, said that ‘we do not want to sacrifice our cultural and economic relations with Turkey because of a terrorist organization’. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari added that ‘we have agreed that the position we should take is a common one to fight terrorism. We will not allow any party, including the PKK, to poison our bilateral relations.’ Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Regional Government, also stated that Iraq should not be a launching pad for any terrorist activity. Turkey has continuous diplomatic dialogue with the Kurdistan Regional Government and this dialogue is likely to develop further in the near future. Kurdish leaders send warm messages to Turkey and their positive attitude provides ground for better political and economic relations.

Turkey’s recent incursion into Northern Iraq rang alarm bells in the USA. With the Turkish side losing patience, Erdogan’s visit to the USA on 5 November 2007 resulted in the furthering of US guarantees for collaboration in the fight against terror. Erdogan made it clear that Ankara will not spend more time with previously inefficient mechanisms like triple coordination of the USA, Turkey and Iraq, and that it reserves the right to pursue cross-border operations in Iraq against the PKK. In the midst of the debate about a possible military operation, Erdogan paid a visit to Britain on 23 October 2007. He underlined the Turkish government’s decisive stance to employ every possible measure to put an end to PKK terror. His British counterpart, Gordon Brown, stated that Britain would ‘step up’ counter-terrorism cooperation with Turkey. In addition, Turkey’s signing of the ‘Strategic Partnership Document’ with Britain is a major achievement for Turkish diplomacy in the EU. Brown’s support was followed by a statement from EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn underscoring that the EU ‘condemns all terrorist attacks and understands Turkey’s need to protect its citizens’. Turkey’s Iraq policy is an independent stance, which aims to stabilize Iraq and reconcile differences between different groups, while fighting against the terrorist threat in Northern Iraq. Turkey’s peace-maker role challenges the US dominant position and pursues intense diplomatic activities at the regional and international levels to justify and gain support for its position. It is noteworthy that, despite their early critical attitude, Turkish policies in Iraq have started to impress US policy-makers.

Conclusion

Turkey’s emerging peace-maker role in the periphery of the international system is a new development. This role is the result of a domestic transformation and the emergence of a new foreign policy vision. Increasing self-confidence at home has changed the threat perceptions in regional terms and has created a more positive attitude toward providing peace and stability. 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

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28 Hurriyet (Turkish Daily), 23 October 2007.
29 Hurriyet, 24 October 2007.
31 EU tells Turkey to think twice before military action’, Today’s Zaman, 26 October 2007.
domestic and foreign policy. The shift from bad-neighbourhood to zero-problem policy in Turkey’s vicinity in such a short period of time is remarkable. The impact of a changing geographic imagination on Turkey’s neighbourhood policy is an indicator that the perception of geography at the policy level is a social construction of geographical space.

Turkey has developed the political will and capabilities to contribute to peace and stability in neighbouring regions. Turkish policy-makers have confidence that Turkey will continue to facilitate platforms for the solution of regional problems, to bridge the gap between conflicting countries through confidence-building measures, and to undertake a strong mediator role for several chronic international problems. The new mindset places Turkey into a wider geography and assumes constructive roles for the problems of former faraway territories. There is no guarantee that Turkey will be able to solve the decades-old chronic conflicts. However, Turkish peace-building in the periphery challenges the notion that only those at the top of the power echelon of international system may facilitate peace in different parts of the globe. In addition, the Turkish experience shows the availability of efficient and constructive roles in the periphery for actors willing to promote peace and stability. More important, Turkey’s attempts to broker peace in the Middle East exemplify the fact that the involvement of the so-called peripheral actors in peace-building is likely to contribute to the creation of a new consciousness of peace and problem solving at the regional level, which could pave way for the emergence of regional solutions to regional problems.

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