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From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey’s Relations with Syria and Iran

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In recent years, there has been a notable softening in Turkey’s foreign policy toward Syria and Iran. How might we explain the change in Turkey’s attitude toward these two countries considering the hostile relations of the 1990s and the worsening security situation in the Middle East? Drawing upon securitization theory, this article argues that domestic problems have influenced Turkey’s foreign policy toward Iran and Syria in the past, as foreign policymakers have successfully externalized the sources of political Islam and Kurdish separatism. The remarkable softening of Turkey’s foreign policy toward Syria and Iran since the beginning of the present decade can best be explained by looking at changes at the domestic level, particularly in terms of the process of desecuritization currently taking place within Turkey. Among other things, this process of desecuritization is the result of the European Union accession process and concomitant steps toward democratization, a transformation of the political landscape, and the appropriation of EU norms and principles in regional politics. Within this process of desecuritization and democratization, formerly securitized and dramatized issues have begun to be perceived as normal political issues. As a result, the policymaking process is now emancipated from ideational barriers, while there has been a substantial increase in the flexibility of foreign policy attitudes and the ability of foreign policymakers to maneuver in regional policy.

Keywords Turkey • Iran • Syria • securitization • desecuritization

Introduction

There has been a notable softening in Turkey’s foreign policy toward Syria and Iran in recent years. This softening is especially remarkable given that the two countries are under intensive pressure from the international community for a variety of reasons.
Considering the hostile relations of the 1990s and the worsening security situation in the Middle East, how can this change in Turkey’s attitude toward Syria and Iran be explained? Recent scholarly work on this subject points to the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, the deepening Iraq crisis, and the fear of the partition of Iraq with a Kurdish state in the north (which would supposedly bring Turkey closer to Syria and Iran, countries that also have significant Kurdish populations). In addition, there is the negative spillover effect of other protracted problems in the region, along with rising anti-Western and anti-US sentiments within Turkey (Altunışık & Tür, 2006; Olson, 2006). We argue, however, that the change in Turkey’s foreign policy toward Syria and Iran can best be explained by looking at changes at the domestic level, particularly in terms of the desecuritization process that has been taking place within Turkey. This is not to ignore the relevance of the previously mentioned factors. On the contrary, we suggest that the above-mentioned domestic and external factors have produced an environment that is conducive to the desecuritization of Turkey’s relations with the two countries.

Turkey has had problems with Syria and Iran particularly within the context of its fight against its twin enemies: political Islam and Kurdish separatism (Calabrese, 1998; Olson, 1997). Turkish foreign policymakers hold Syria and Iran responsible for giving external support to Kurdish separatists and Islamist reactionaries. Kurdish and Islamist threats have not been simply imagined and invented by Turkey’s security elite, so the question is to what extent can these problems be related to other countries? And, how is Turkey’s foreign policy being reshaped by political transformation at the domestic level? In order to answer these questions, we make use of the literature on securitization and desecuritization. Drawing upon key concepts from this literature, interviews with foreign policymakers and representatives of civil society in Turkey, and an analysis of public speeches and documents related to foreign policy, we argue that domestic problems have influenced Turkey’s foreign policy toward Iran and Syria in the past, as foreign policymakers successfully externalized the sources of political Islam and Kurdish separatism.

More recently, Turkey’s relations with the two countries have been undergoing a process of desecuritization. This is the result of the European Union accession process and concomitant steps toward democratization at the domestic level (which are then reflected in Turkey’s relations with Syria and Iran), as well as the emergence of a conducive environment for desecuritization at the regional level (due to the appropriation of EU norms and principles,1 the isolation of Syria and Iran in world politics, and developments in

1 The ‘zero problem’ policy, a reflection of the EU’s neighborhood policy into Turkish foreign policy, has been formulated by Ahmet Davutoğlu (2001), an adviser to Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan. Davutoğlu has urged Turkey to pursue a ‘zero problem’ policy with its neighbors and to damp down its conflicts with them.
Iraq following its occupation by US-led forces). Desecuritization in this article has two dimensions: (1) desecuritization of certain domestic issues and (2) desecuritization of Turkey’s relations with the two countries under consideration. We argue that these two dimensions are closely related. We acknowledge that the process of desecuritization has certain limitations stemming from political culture, external factors, and changing domestic circumstances. Moreover, as will become clear, in a sense desecuritization can never really happen (Behnke, 2006). We do not ignore the limitations of our approach and discuss its theoretical shortcomings throughout the article. Bearing these limitations in mind, we apply the concepts of securitization and desecuritization to understand Turkey’s changing foreign policy attitude toward Syria and Iran.

Desecuritization and Foreign Policy in Turkey

From the perspective of securitization theory, security is not framed as an objective and material condition. It is seen rather as a ‘speech act’ – that is, ‘something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so’ (Wæver, 1995: 47). Obviously, security, from this perspective, is understood as a socially constructed concept. What makes a particular issue a security issue is presentation of the issue as an existential threat that calls for extraordinary measures. By labeling something a security issue, an actor claims a need for the use of extraordinary means, emergency measures, and other actions outside the boundaries of normal/ordinary political procedures.

Although security as a speech act has become almost a slogan of the Copenhagen School, this conceptualization of security creates some methodological problems when the theory is applied to specific cases. As Balzacq (2005) notes, such a conceptualization of security overlooks the objective context in which security agents are situated. Indeed, Balzacq (2005: 172) argues that

securitization is better understood as a strategic (pragmatic) practice that occurs within, and as part of, a configuration of circumstances, including the context, the psychocultural disposition of the audience, and the power that both speaker and listener bring to the interaction.

The presentation of security as a speech act is potentially too narrow to fully grasp the social contexts of securitization (Williams, 2003: 528). Taking into consideration the social context of securitization is a significant contribution to securitization theory, and one that will guide our analysis. This will help contextualizing the instances of securitization and desecuritization in Turkish foreign policy. Securitization is understood here not simply as
speech act but as a ‘situated interactive activity’ (Balzacq, 2005: 179) that takes into consideration the role of external objective developments.

Securitization is a power-laden process that is structured by the differential capacity of actors to make socially effective claims about threats (Williams, 2003: 514). Therefore, securitization can be seen as a field of power struggle in which securitizing actors point at a security issue to obtain the support of society for a certain policy or course of action. In the case of Turkey, this power game has been played between the bureaucracy/military and the political elite. Relations between these two elite groups have been based on mistrust. Indeed, ‘from the 19th century onwards, the bureaucratic and military elites acted in the belief that they were solely responsible for maintaining order and modernizing their country’ (Heper, 1992: 176). This mistrust has been part of the state tradition and political culture in Turkey. Our argument here is that mistrust of the political elite on the part of the bureaucratic/military elite (which includes the higher education and judiciary systems) has often led the latter to securitize certain issues in order to sustain their power status. The presentation of political issues as existential threats has hindered the emergence of healthy public debate. At times, the general public is scared into thinking that the secular character of the state is under threat, and is mobilized through street protests.² At other times, Turkish intellectual life is constrained by nationalist discourses that inhibit open discussion of minority and human rights (Oran, 2007). In this power game, the political elite can also become a securitizer of various issues in an effort to build support among nationalist voters.³

Despite the domination of Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy agenda by a civilian–military bureaucracy (Cizre-Sakalloğlu, 1997) and the successful securitization of major political issues, Turkey has recently been undergoing a period of desecuritization. Desecuritization is understood here as the broadening of the boundaries of normal politics. In other words, desecuritization is the process of ‘moving issues off the “security” agenda and back into the realm of public political discourse and “normal” political dispute and accommodation’ (Williams, 2003: 523). Defining desecuritization in this way sounds quite straightforward. What is more challenging is to suggest a methodological framework for analysis. What kind of evidence do we need in order to suggest that an issue has been desecuritized? The answer is nothing. We need to see (or hear) nothing to suggest that an issue has been desecuritized.

² In April 2007, hundreds of thousands took part in huge demonstrations in major Turkish cities to protest against the government, which they claimed had a hidden agenda of establishing Islamic rule in the country. The protests followed a row between the military/bureaucratic and political elites over the election of a new president. The government had nominated Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gül for the presidential election. However, the fact that Gül’s wife wears a headscarf was perceived as an existential threat by the Turkish army, which sees itself as the guardian of the secular republic.

³ The Republican People’s Party (CHP) is an interesting case, since it has organic and ideological links with the bureaucratic/military elite and often acts as a securitizer.
desecuritized. If securitization is a speech act, desecuritization should be marked by the lack of any such speech acts (Behnke, 2006). To declare that a particular issue or actor no longer constitutes a security threat simply leads to a continuation of the debate on the correctness of the declaration (Behnke, 2006). Therefore, desecuritization occurs not through further speech but through its absence.

In order to grasp Turkey’s changing foreign policy attitude toward Syria and Iran, we first need to analyze the process of desecuritization at the domestic level. In the current section, then, we look for evidence of this process and evaluate why and how formerly securitized and dramatized issues have begun to be perceived as normal political issues. It makes sense to start the discussion with securitization, because understanding the logic of securitization and pinning down when it is at work enables us to observe the degree of desecuritization. We also assess the limitations of the desecuritization process stemming from political culture, external factors, and changing domestic circumstances.

An inevitable question at this point would be why desecuritization is occurring in Turkey. As explained above, we follow those who improved securitization theory by pointing out the significance of contextual factors (Balzacq, 2005; Williams, 2003). In Turkey’s domestic politics, the main driving force has been the role of the EU membership process. The EU serves to desecuritize various issues as member-states focus on issues such as integration into the economic and political games of the West (Wæver, 2000). The negotiation process triggers a change in identity and interests through which securitized issues such as minority rights start to be downplayed. Since 1999, when Turkey and the EU officially started membership talks, there have emerged more open discussions for greater rights for individuals and ethnic groups within Turkey. The capture of the leader of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) in February 1999 and the so-called postmodern coup against the Welfare Party-led coalition government in 28 February 1997 have also contributed to a political climate that has not only triggered an economic and political reform process but also eased the transition to a reform-oriented mindset and a process of desecuritization. The Kurdish issue has long been ignored by the bureaucratic/military elite, which perceived it simply as a terror or regional development issue. In 2005, however, Tayyip Erdoğan became the first prime minister to acknowledge that ‘the state made mistakes about the Kurdish issue’ (Radikal, 2005a). He has also repeatedly emphasized the Kurds’ right to express their culture and identity. This is a significant turning point, particularly given that simply speaking about Kurdish rights had previously been perceived as a threat to the state. We would argue that this change at the domestic level is directly reflected in Turkey’s relations with Syria.

Political confidence at the local level paved the way for the questioning of established understandings of national security. Politicians such as Mesut
Yılmaz, former chairman of the Motherland Party, have emphasized the necessity of opening up national security to public debate (Radikal, 2001). Bülent Arınç, the speaker of the parliament, has claimed that the Turkish parliament was completely excluded from the process of drafting Turkey’s National Security Document and suggested that this was evidence of the power of a secret and anti-democratic structure (NTVMSNBC, 2006). Academics working on security issues have also called for the ‘demythologizing’ of national security (Cizre, 2003). Journalists have especially criticized the role of the National Security Council (MGK) and the classified status of the National Security Document.4 Even within the security establishment, critical voices have begun to be heard. Some prominent figures have criticized Turkey’s defense strategy and budget (Ergüvenç, 1999: 46–49), and a retired senior officer from the National Intelligence Agency wrote a newspaper article calling for change in Turkey’s traditional stance on sensitive issues such as the headscarf, terrorism, and sub-identities (Radikal, 2005b). It is possible to argue that the environment that has emerged in the EU membership process is no longer receptive to the classical definition of national security. Previously dramatized issues that were isolated from open and rational public debate have begun to be discussed within the realm of normal politics.

In this process of desecuritization, we have also witnessed the breaking up of the bureaucratic isolation of foreign policy issues as demands to repolitcize and desecuritize become more articulated. The military has become less visible in public discourse on foreign policy during the first decade of the new millennium (Aydınlı, Özcan & Akyaz, 2006). The AKP government has avoided further securitizing issues such as Cyprus and minority rights by seeking a solution-oriented policy.5 Civil society and the general public have been able to make their voices heard on foreign policy issues. Issues such as Cyprus and Turkey’s contribution to the war in Iraq provided an opportunity for public debate and introduced a less state-centric and more inclusive period in foreign policymaking. In 2003, thousands of people demonstrated against the AKP government’s proposal to let US ground troops enter Iraq via Turkey. They managed to exercise some degree of influence on the voting process in the Turkish parliament, which resulted in a rejection of the proposal. Civil society organizations have also been influential in the rapprochement between Greece and Turkey (Rumelili, 2005).

4 See Altan (2005); Mahçupyan (2005); Dündar (2005).
5 In a radical departure from traditional Cyprus policy, Prime Minister Erdoğan supported the Annan Plan for a settlement to the Cyprus problem, and on several occasions declared that he aimed to solve the problem within the framework of the UN. Even before the referendum on the Annan Plan, Erdoğan stated: ‘I am not in favor of pursuing the last 40 years’ policy in Cyprus. Politics is an art of creating solutions instead of problems. We will do our best to this end’; see Anatolia News Agency (2003). In addition, Mehmet Ali Şahin, minister of state within the AKP government, has underlined the need to extend greater freedom to minority charity organizations and foundations that provide for many of those minorities’ social needs; see Akyol (2007a).
Opposition to official policies by civil society groups has begun to be tolerated and has eventually led to more open debates on formerly dramatized foreign policy issues. A new generation of research centers has prioritized the desecuritization and societal construction of foreign policy in Turkey. For example, the Association for Liberal Thinking, the Turkish-Asian Center for Strategic Studies, and the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research share a common goal of encouraging desecuritization and democratization in the foreign policymaking process. Their conferences, workshops, reports, and periodicals widen the non-official realm of discussions and involvement in foreign policy issues. In December 2006, as a more concrete example, members of the foreign policy program of TESEV paid a visit to Armenia to work for the normalization of relations between the two countries (Kentel & Paghosyan, 2005). Such opening up has begun to introduce new perceptions and attitudes toward regions surrounding Turkey. Likewise, another civil society organization, TÜSİAD (2007), published a report on democratization in which it suggested that the Kurdish language should be taught in state schools as an elective course. Although nationalist circles criticized this report, there has been an open and fruitful discussion on the issues raised in it. Obviously, not all civil society organizations support the desecuritization moves. In fact, there are certain newly emerging civil society organizations that define themselves as secular, nationalist, and Kemalist, and attempt to draw particular domestic and foreign policy issues into the realm of security in ways similar to those adopted by the Turkish military.

Other reforms at the domestic level as part of the EU membership process include shifting the balance of power within the National Security Council (MGK) in favor of civilian members, appointing a civilian secretary-general for the MGK, removing military representatives from the Council of Higher Education and the Radio and Television High Council, and bringing the Turkish armed forces under the judicial control of the Court of Accounts. These changes are likely to be followed by others. TÜSİAD’s (2007) democratization report proposes that the chief of the General Staff should work under the defense ministry rather than under the office of the prime minister. The weakening of the military’s influence on foreign policymaking is exemplified by the relatively silent position of the military establishment on certain
foreign policy developments, such as the Turkish parliament’s refusal to support the US-led coalition in Iraq.\(^{11}\)

It should be noted that we do not claim that a process of total desecuritization is taking place in Turkey. Rather, we argue that certain issues – especially those involving political Islam, Kurdish and other minorities, and understandings of national security – are becoming desecuritized. We acknowledge that when some issues are being desecuritized, others may climb up the scale of securitization (e.g. relations with northern Iraq following the US occupation). Here, we follow Behnke (2006: 65), who argues that ‘in a sense, desecuritization can never really happen’. The army, the most significant securitizer, still enjoys a high level of support among different segments of Turkish society (TESEV, 2004). Retired army generals frequently argue against demands for further democratization by referring to Turkey’s ‘sensitive’ geopolitical location, which supposedly gives the army a unique role in domestic and international politics.\(^{12}\) The more vocal personality of the current chief of the General Staff, Yaşar Büyükanıt, who replaced Hilmi Özkök in 2006, seems to be more resistant to Turkey’s democratization process, in contrast to the pro-EU/democratic attitudes of his predecessor (Çagatay, 2006). Moreover, the army continues to see itself as the guardian of the secular regime. It did not hesitate to intervene in politics in April 2007, claiming that the government was unable and unwilling to protect the secular state. Following this intervention, the government had to call for elections to be held on 22 July 2007, four months ahead of schedule. The fact that the AKP obtained 47% of the votes in those elections – the second-highest result for any party in the history of the Turkish Republic – provides us with some idea of the level of unpopularity of the military intervention within Turkish society and indicates a certain degree of desecuritization.

Obviously, securitization is not the purview of the military sector alone. Security is also produced by the discursive practices of elites, the media, and academia. Hence, the diminishing role of the army does not automatically bring desecuritization. However, though there exist various securitizers within Turkish society, successful securitization is not decided by the securitizer but by the audience of the security speech act (Williams, 2003). This raises the question of whether the Turkish audience still ‘buys’ securitizing moves. The mass demonstrations against the government in April 2007 could

\(^{11}\) The army’s silent position may also be explained in terms of a wish to leave the government to face the whole responsibility for and consequences of such a decision alone (we thank one of the anonymous referees for this point). Even so, the fact that the army could not dare to take on such responsibility demonstrates a certain degree of decrease in its power and self-confidence.

\(^{12}\) A number of retired generals comment on foreign policy issues and discuss national security threats within the Turkish media. When called upon to contribute their technical expertise on particular issues, they usually outline their ideas for securitizing the issues concerned and call for more strict measures on security matters. They also publish their views in foreign policy/security journals and books; see, for example, Ilhan (2002, 2004).
be seen as evidence of successful securitization, where people were mobilized to protest against the government’s so-called Islamic moves. These protests were organized by secular, Kemalist, and nationalist civil society organizations that have begun to be militant in their activism during the past few years. Although such organizations were both vocal and visible in the run-up to the July elections, the political party that is most often associated with them, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), was able to secure only 21% of the votes in those elections. The AKP’s high share of votes can be seen as an indicator of the divided nature of Turkish society. Despite the accusations that it had a hidden Islamic agenda and was threatening the unity of the nation by granting rights to minorities, the government still managed to secure a high level of support.

In addition to the local factors discussed above, there are also limits to the desecuritization process that depend on external developments. Since the beginning of 2007, the slowing down of Turkey’s EU membership process and the increase in ethnic/separatist terror have demonstrated the fragility of the desecuritization process. There are also limitations arising from domestic developments in Syria and Iran, along with a number of protracted problems in the Middle East, with their concomitant trans-boundary and trans-societal dimensions.

Securitization of certain political issues at the domestic level previously created an ideologically driven, inflexible, and enemy-oriented foreign policy in regional politics. Domestic politics and foreign policy interacted dynamically, causing external relations to become an extension of local political contentsions. In particular, identity issues such as political Islam and Kurdish nationalism were securitized to such an extent that they almost determined Turkey’s relations with Syria and Iran. The current process of desecuritization and democratization has changed this inside/outside matrix in a way that has emancipated the policymaking process from ideational barriers, increasing the flexibility of foreign policy attitudes and creating more room to maneuver in regional policymaking. In the next section, we will exemplify the change in foreign policy toward Syria and Iran.

**Turkey’s Relations with Syria and Iran**

The domestic transformation in terms of desecuritization and democratization has changed political attitudes within Turkey, in turn paving the way for decreasing the range of geographic others and redefining friends and enemies in the region. These are not temporary policies in response to emerging

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13 In this part of our article, we were able to benefit from our own previous work; see Aras & Polat (2007).
situations, but long-lasting policy choices that will resist potential domestic and external limitations. Liberal societal forces are increasing their influence within Turkish foreign policymaking and competing with old bureaucratic-authoritarian traditions. This decisive stance to narrow the range of enemies in domestic politics and widen the legitimacy base of the political system provides relief in regional security matters. Although one can still talk about the need for desecuritization at home, the current desecuritization process has led to a certain degree of change in foreign policy toward Syria and Iran. That is why we put forward issue-specific desecuritization while linking domestic transformation to change in foreign policy behavior. Turkey’s foreign policy priorities and the regional security environment constitute the wider context in which the desecuritization of Turkish foreign policy has occurred. The common concerns about a Kurdish problem in all three countries, the search by Syria and Iran for regional allies to counter US pressure, and Turkey’s desire to eliminate security dependency on the USA have been influential in developing relations in regional terms. However, what has happened goes beyond mere détente, representing a more decisive will and long-term prospect for mutually beneficial and constructive relations in Turkish foreign policy toward Syria and Iran. The absence of former securitization is obvious both in the form of lack of speech acts and in the elimination of various objective security threats. In this case, a desecuritization analysis is more meaningful than attempts to explain the changing relations in terms of détente, cooperation, or ideological preferences in foreign policy.14

Turkey’s increasing self-confidence at home changes its regional threat perceptions and creates a more positive attitude for providing peace and stability. Turkey’s transformation is clearly aimed at putting an end to the Cold War-style security-state apparatus that has ruled the country for half a century, and it has changed the framework of the country’s domestic and foreign policy. We will discuss Turkey’s new orientation and policies in its relations with Iran and Syria separately. Of prime importance is the fact that desecuritization is leading to the emergence of different senses of Iran and Syria in the regional policy projections of policymakers, paving the way for a softening of relations with the two countries.

Iran

Turkish foreign policy toward Iran is exemplary in terms of showing how desecuritization of a number of internal issues that were previously identified and utilized as security matters can change a country’s foreign policy attitudes and preferences. The securitization of domestic political disputes and the reflection of socially constructed enemy images shaped Turkey’s

14 We would like to thank one of Security Dialogue’s anonymous referees for raising this point.
threat- and security-oriented policy toward Iran. It was almost a truism among Turkey’s bureaucratic/military elite that Iran had a campaign to export the 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-empted the possibility of reaching an understanding with Turkey’s democratic secular regime (Aras, 2001: 108).

In the eyes of Turkish decisionmakers, for example, the so-called Baqeri crisis was part of a broader campaign launched against Turkey designed to persuade Islamic Turks to embrace a regime similar to the one in Iran. In February 1997, Ankara 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 Iran and Turkey agreed to exchange ambassadors again. This was a time when the Islamist Welfare Party was in power and when there were serious suspicions about the government’s secular credentials. Thus, there was already a suitable environment (the domestic ‘threat’ of political Islam) that was then combined with a hostile statement/act by a neighboring country, which eventually led to the toppling of the coalition government following an indirect military intervention through the National Security Council. Iran was perceived as posing an existential threat to the organizing ideology (secularism) of the Turkish state and as attempting to undermine the domestic legitimacy of the secular government. Güven Erkaya, the head of the Turkish naval forces during the process that started with the 28 February intervention, solidified this concern by stating that ‘Shariah [Islamic law] will come from the streets. There will be Iranian-style popular uprisings’ (Akyol, 2007b). A commonly used slogan in political protests in Turkey is ‘Turkey will never be Iran’. Such issues of identity are also represented through the use of certain images, with images of veiled women in black and bearded men in traditional dress in Iran, for example, often being presented in the Turkish media as images of the ‘other’, posing an existential threat to ‘our’ identity and regime. The second major problem in relations between Turkey and Iran was the continuous claims of Turkey’s bureaucratic/military elite that Iran was providing support to the PKK and allowing it to use its

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15 Bülent Ecevit, a veteran politician and former prime minister, then leader of the opposition party, argued that the Iranian diplomat’s activities revealed once again Iran’s efforts to export the Islamic Revolution to Turkey; see http://www.byegm.gov.tr/yayinlarimiz/ayintarihi/1997/subat1997.htm (accessed 22 August 2007).

16 The military, concerned about the future of secularism in the face of the Islamist challenge, launched a campaign against the Welfare Party-led coalition government. On 28 February 1997, the National Security Council decided to take steps to reinforce the secular character of the Turkish state. The coalition government had to step down in July 1997 after threats of military intervention. This process is now referred to as a ‘postmodern coup’ in Turkish intellectual circles. For more information, see Akpınar (2001).
territory. Although such claims were not totally baseless, this situation is a clear example of externalizing a number of domestic problems. As Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde (1998: 156) argue, ‘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’.

In a short period of time, Turkey’s desecuritization and democratization showed that most of the problems between Ankara and Tehran had little to do with Turkey’s intrinsic national interests. To say this is not to ignore the existence of real problems and security issues. However, we argue that the highly problematic nature of relations between the two countries was primarily the result of internal disputes and domestic security problems in Turkey – that is, of securitization of such issues by reflecting them onto Iran as an external ‘other’. The Turkish establishment’s representation of Iran has been tainted by its tendency to see all Islamists and Kurds as ‘others’ in domestic politics. The bureaucratic/military elite has sought to play upon nationalistic sentiments by suggesting that internal challenges are the product of conspiracies from Iran, especially with respect to the rise of Islamic and Kurdish demands.

As an example, in 1999, when a newly elected female member of parliament appeared in the Turkish parliament wearing a headscarf (challenging the principle of secularism), she was immediately accused by President Süleyman Demirel of being an ‘agent provocateur’ working for Iran.\footnote{Merve Kavakçı was elected to the Turkish National Assembly from the Virtue Party (FP) as deputy for Istanbul in the 1999 elections. She refused to take off her headscarf at the plenary session of the parliament and subsequently attracted harsh criticism. She was ousted from the parliament after it was revealed that she had obtained US citizenship without securing the permission of Turkish authorities.} When asked a question about Iran’s role in the so-called Kavakçı affair, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit not only claimed that Iran was trying to export its own Islamic regime into Turkey, but also accused Iran of supporting and hosting the PKK.\footnote{See http://arsiv.zaman.com.tr/1999/05/10/guncel/16.html (accessed 22 August 2007).} Indeed, in the past, the typical cyclical pattern of ruptures in Iranian–Turkish relations has been characterized by severe crises involving ideologically driven incriminations and, at times, the recall of diplomats, generally followed by periods of pragmatic relations. The major crises that have emerged between Turkey and Iran – in 1985, from 1988 to 1990, from 1993 to 1994, and in 1997 – have all followed this pattern.

The nationalist discourse of the foreign policy elite is by nature exclusionist, with the elite constantly seeking to protect its own position, among other things, by dramatizing the dangers posed by enemies. Turkey’s ruling elite had consistently and consciously held Turkey’s foreign policy hostage to domestic politics. After adopting a new regional rhetoric and a more active policy line in the region, Turkish foreign policymakers moved beyond mere reaction to images projected by self-interested securitizers, formulating a fresh policy that was attentive to changing domestic, regional, and interna-
tional politics. The typical cyclical pattern disappeared in the relations with Iran and became a thing of the past.

Turkey’s new policy line aims to promote a regional peacemaker role for the country and gives priority to democratic legitimacy in international relations. Its new neighborhood policy is based upon a vision of minimizing the problems in Turkey’s neighboring regions while avoiding being pulled into international confrontations. Turkish policy is built on a model of enduring cooperation among countries, with this model being delicately balanced between the shared interests of the parties and the perceptions of international society, especially within the top echelons of the power hierarchy in international relations.

Investments by Turkish companies in Iran and agreements concerning the purchase of natural gas have added a new dimension to the two countries’ relations under the impact of the new policy orientation. This new policy line targets minimizing problems with Iran and developing political and economic relations to foster peace and stability in the region. Turkey’s accommodating policy line is similar to that of the EU when it comes to a number of Iranian issues, ranging from the nuclear problem to political reform (Aras & Bıçakcı, 2006).

As an example of the new policy line, which stands in sharp contrast to former Turkish–Iranian relations, Turkey is playing a facilitator role in the nuclear issue between Iran and the group known as 5+1 – the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany. Turkish policymakers have propagated 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 US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, head of nuclear diplomacy in Iran Ali Larijani, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Mohamed El Baradei, and the EU’s foreign policy chief Javier Solana.

Turkish attempts were considered successful when Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül persuaded Javier Solana to travel to Iran and present the report of the 5+1 group on the Iranian nuclear issue to the Iranians and to encourage Iran to adopt a moderate attitude toward it (Çandar, 2006). It should be noted that Ali Larijani paid a visit to Turkey in May 2006 to discuss the Turkish role in relation to a number of issues, ranging from the Iraq crisis to US–Iranian relations. During his contact with Turkey, Larijani also discussed the idea of a Turkish mediator role in relation to the nuclear issue (Kohen, 2006). When Gül was in Washington on 6 July 2006, US Secretary of

Ahmet Davutoğlu (2006), who plays an important role in the foreign policy decisions of the government, has underlined the critical importance of Turkish initiatives toward Syria and Iran for regional peace and stability, arguing that Turkey’s constructive policy line toward Iran, aimed at bridging the gap between Iran and the international community on a number of issues, will continue.

Interview with Ambassador Bülent Karadeniz, head of Center for Strategic Research at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, November 2006.
State Condoleezza Rice praised Turkish mediation in the Iranian nuclear issue. This visit, during which Gül shared his observations with his US counterpart, came after Gül’s visit to Tehran in June (Söylemez, 2006). The Turkish position is to enhance diplomacy but to ease some of the pressure on Iran in order to facilitate a constructive Iranian response to the demands of the international community. On the Iranian front, Turkey has urged the Iranian establishment not to play for time and to understand that Iran is in a serious situation vis-à-vis the USA and the international community. Turkey’s involvement in the Iranian nuclear issue is related to the desecuritization of identity issues and the breaking up of the threat–security chain at home in two visible ways. First, Turkey no longer considers Iran to be an external ‘other’ and a source of domestic problems at home. The diminishing Iranian threat at the policy level paves the way for Turkey to get involved in developing relations with Iran and attempting to use this warmer attitude toward Iran as leverage to influence Iranian policymakers on the nuclear issue. Second, the elimination of the range of ‘others’ in regional terms has increased Turkish self-confidence in foreign policy, and Turkish foreign policymakers have been sufficiently emboldened to get involved in the solution of regional and international security problems. In this way, Ankara aims to keep Iran within the boundaries of peaceful nuclear energy production and prevent the emergence of another Iraq-like quagmire in its neighborhood.

Clear evidence of the changing Turkish attitude toward Iran is the softening approach of Turkish policymakers and the perceptions of Iranian policymakers of these attitudes. In this sense, during his visit to Iran in December 2006, Erdoğan called for increasing the trade between Turkey and Iran to $10 billion, pointing to the success of a 500% growth in trade exchanges in the last four years from $1.2 billion to $6 billion. He also added that Iranians are willing to cooperate with Turkish businessmen on areas such as ‘natural gas, oil, drilling wells, and on building facilities like refineries and petrochemical installations, as well as working on joint investments in other countries’ (Cemal, 2006). The chairman of Iran’s Expediency Council, Hashemi Rafsanjani, presented the Iranian view that bilateral ties are excellent in economic and commercial fields and that strengthening political cooperation would be most beneficial for both countries. There is sufficient confidence within Turkey that the Iranian model poses no challenge to Turkey (Akyol, 2007b). As Turkish and Iranian perceptions exemplify, it is possible to argue that desecuritization of relations with Iran has enabled Turkey to avoid the ‘panic mode’ (Eriksson, 1999: 315) of securitized politics.

21 Interview with Cengiz Çandar, veteran journalist and adviser to former president Turgut Özal, Athens, 26 January 2007.
Syria

In late December 2004, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan paid an official visit to Syria, which abounded with optimistic prospects for future bilateral relations. This visit came after Syrian leader Bashar Assad’s visit to Turkey in January 2004. Assad summarized his official visit to Turkey with the statement: ‘We have together shifted from an atmosphere of distrust to trust’ (Birand, 2004). Until the end of the 1990s, official Turkish policy toward Syria could be defined as one of conscious alienation and controlled tension. The changing nature of the relationship, however, is highly commendable when one considers the problematic nature of international relations in the Middle East and the remarkable shift in Turkish foreign policy behavior. Turkey’s two major problems with Syria, particularly during the 1990s, centered on water and the activities of the PKK (Çarkoğlu & Eder, 2001). Turkey guaranteed a water flow of 500 cubic meters per second to Syria in a protocol signed in 1987. Interestingly, the flow was raised to over 900 cubic meters per second in the aftermath of Turkey’s crisis with Syria over PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in October 1998 (when Turkey demanded that the PKK leader be expelled from Syrian territory). During his visit in December 2004, the Turkish prime minister indicated that Syria could make further use of the Tigris waters, which may help put the water problem behind both countries (Aras, 2004).

Another problem between Syria and Turkey centered on Turkish accusations that Syria was providing help and shelter to the PKK, which has been at war with the Turkish state for the last two decades. Before the October 1998 crisis, there were suspicions within Turkish policy circles that Syria was seeking to exploit the Kurdish problem and use it as leverage against Ankara in the dispute over water and other minor regional issues. The escalation of nationalist sentiment in Turkey, domestic uncertainties in Syria, Russia’s withdrawal from Middle Eastern politics, and the suitability of the international environment provided Turkey with an opportunity to take action (Sezgin, 2002). As the tension between Syria and Turkey escalated, Ankara openly began to talk about a military operation against Syria to capture Öcalan and his associates. Egyptian officials engaged in shuttle diplomacy between the two countries to help defuse the problem. This initiative, and the constructive engagement of other countries in the region, such as Jordan, led to the acceptance of Turkish terms by Syrian President Hafez Assad, formalized by the signing of the Adana Accord in 1998. Even before acquiescing to Turkish demands, Assad had deported Öcalan. The entire process satisfied the Turkish side, and bilateral relations improved.

For a long time, Turkey and Syria were locked in a relationship shaped by historical enmity, the prevalence of hostile establishment ideologies, and the attempts of policymakers to ‘externalize’ a number of major domestic problems. However, the recent changes in Turkey’s domestic politics and interna-
tional orientation have brought political maturity, helping to push the country’s national security apparatus into the background. Meanwhile, though change has not occurred in Syria to the same extent as in Turkey, Syria has also undergone its own transformation, and Turkey’s reform process has been followed closely by Bashar Assad’s administration. Turkey’s new policy line has started to make different sense of Syria in the foreign policymaking process, and the former problematic agenda has given way to cooperation prospects. Turkey, seeing itself – albeit gradually – as part of the EU, has adopted a more self-assured attitude toward its neighbors. This new attitude, which is no longer shaped merely by security concerns, emerged thanks to a favorable sequence of developments, such as the capture of the PKK leader, the diminishing level of separatist terrorism, and the ongoing process of EU membership. In the eyes of Turkish political elites, close relations between Turkey and Syria are highly meaningful from both commercial and security standpoints. President Bashar Assad has pursued a more pragmatic line in Syria’s relations with the West, particularly since the attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. However, following the Hariri assassination, Syria was forced out of Lebanon. There has been increasing pressure on the Syrian administration to initiate political reform at home and to adopt a more constructive line in regional politics.

Turkish politicians have begun to favor 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 serving to ease tension in the region. Syria is now a potential ally and friend in the new regional rhetoric of Turkish policymakers. Former minister of foreign affairs Abdullah Gül has expressed the view that Turkey and Syria have legitimate concerns about the future of Iraq and should cooperate in every possible way, as they already have begun to do, to enhance peace and stability (Civaoglu, 2007). During Erdoğan’s visit to Syria in December 2006, Assad voiced the Syrian leadership’s perception of the new Turkish attitude that “Turkey and Syria have common views on regional issues and [Syria] appreciates Turkey’s efforts for restoration of peace in the Middle East” (Radikal, 2006). Syria and Turkey signed a free-trade agreement with the understanding that this agreement should be expanded to the regional level to catch the spirit of the times, namely, cooperation and interdependence for enduring peace and stability, which would be an exemplary pattern for other neighboring countries to follow (Aydın & Aras, 2005).

As another example of Turkey’s changing Syrian policy, in response to Israeli and Palestinian assertions that an intervention by Syria could help efforts to find a solution to the Lebanon crisis in August 2006 (which escalated

24 Interviews with Dr. Redwan Ziadeh, Syrian political analyst, and Dr. Samir Al-Taqi, Syrian strategist and head of the pro-government Sharq (Orient) Center, Damascus, August 2007.
25 Interview with Dr. Sami Moubayed, political scientist at Kalamoun University, Damascus, 3 September 2007.
after Palestinian militants captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit), Erdoğan sent his adviser Ahmet Davutoğlu to Damascus. He conveyed Turkey’s position to the Syrian president, including concerns about the escalation of the violence and the spread of the crisis to the whole region (CNBC-E, 2006). Turkey’s involvement in this crisis is unique, especially given the former Turkish stance towards Syrian regional affairs and Middle Eastern conflicts in general (Bilhan, 2006). Davutoğlu’s mission indicates that Turkish policymakers trust that Turkish–Syrian relations are in such good shape that Syria will respond positively to Turkish demands in regional matters. The shift of the Turkish stance toward Syria is remarkable. Whereas Turkey was blamed for cooperation with Israel and for forming an anti-Syrian coalition in the 1990s, Syrian leader Bashar Assad has indicated that ‘Turkey has become one of the friendliest countries toward Syria in the region, and not only pursues good relations at a bilateral level but also cooperates with Syria on a number of regional issues’ (CNNTürk, 2005). The link between changing policy behavior and desecuritization should be underlined in efforts to understand this remarkable shift in policy orientation.

Conclusion

For many years, domestic problems have influenced Turkey’s foreign policy toward Iran and Syria as foreign policymakers succeeded in externalizing the problems of political Islam and Kurdish separatism onto those countries. The remarkable softening of Turkey’s foreign policy toward Syria and Iran since the beginning of this decade can best be explained by looking at changes at the domestic level, particularly with reference to the desecuritization process that has been taking place in Turkey. Among other things, this development is the result of the EU accession process and the associated democratization, transformation of the political landscape, and appropriation of EU norms and principles in regional politics. Within this process of desecuritization and democratization, formerly securitized and dramatized issues have begun to be perceived as normal political issues. As a result, the policymaking process is now emancipated from ideational barriers, while the flexibility of foreign policy attitudes and the ability to maneuver in regional policy has increased substantially. This has led to a new foreign policy attitude toward Syria and Iran, as well as a more active and dynamic policy line in the Middle East in general.

In explaining the change in Turkey’s foreign policy toward Syria and Iran with reference to the desecuritization process in Turkey, we do not ignore the

26 Interview with Abboud Sarraj, Professor of Political Science at Damascus University, Istanbul, 25 May 2006.
problems that exist between these countries or the potential for retreat from the desecuritization process. Although Turkey’s domestic transformation through desecuritization seems to be persistent enough to promote better relations with Syria and Iran, certain limitations arise from Turkey’s political culture, along with external factors and changing domestic circumstances. However, as we have argued, the securitization of domestic issues for a long time led to exaggerated threat perceptions in relation to Syria and Iran, and the normalization in the domestic political landscape and the desecuritization process are likely to resist further securitization of Turkey’s relations with these states.

Concerning the theoretical framework employed in this article, we believe that there are certain particularities of the Turkish case that both facilitate and hinder use of the securitization theory. The strength of the theory is its demonstration of the socially constructed nature of what is often perceived as ‘objective and neutral’ national security in Turkey.27 The weakness of the theory is its tendency to reduce security to speech acts, neglecting the social context in which objective and external developments take place – in other words, why and under which circumstances do security speech acts occur? In order to address this weakness, we have benefited from second-generation literature on securitization/desecuritization, which emphasizes the role of social context. The Turkish case also presents a challenge to securitization theory by swinging between securitization and desecuritization. While certain issues are becoming desecuritized (relations with Syria and Iran), others are climbing on the securitization scale (relations with northern Iraq, for example). This can be explained by the issue-specific nature of securitization and desecuritization. We agree with Behnke (2006: 4), who argues that ‘in a sense desecuritization can never really happen’, and continues:

States continuously securitize issues and actors in order to produce a national identity. Desecuritization is perhaps best understood as the fading away of one particular issue or actor from the repertoire of these processes. At some point, certain ‘threats’ might no longer exercise our minds and imaginations sufficiently and are replaced with more powerful and stirring imageries.

One of the merits of securitization theory is that by explaining the processes through which a certain issue is securitized, it also provides us with clues to desecuritization. As Roe (2004: 282) argues, if an issue can be shifted from the realm of normal politics to a status that requires emergency measures, then it can also be shifted back again – it can be desecuritized. This may encourage a shift from a discourse of danger to a discourse of difference based on discord–mediation sequences rather than threat–defense sequences (Jæger, 2000). If this is the case, then it would not be too optimistic to expect the breaking up of the vicious circle that has dominated Turkish foreign policy

27 On the role of geography and geographical determinism in Turkish national security, see Bilgin (2005).
toward Syria and Iran. Once this is achieved, the desecuritization process in Turkey may be accompanied by similar processes in Syria and Iran, possibly leading to further rapprochement between these countries.

In applying the concepts of securitization and desecuritization to understanding Turkey’s traditional and changing relations with Syria and Iran, this article has shown the strong link between domestic and foreign policy. As Turkey puts its domestic house in order, it becomes more confident toward its neighbors. The conceptual framework that we have developed here can be applied to understand Turkey’s relations with other neighbors – such as Greece, with which Turkey has had problematic relations for many years. More importantly, desecuritization can provide the clues for escaping the circle of violence and enmity in the Middle East, a region that has been characterized by mutual distrust and hostility for so long.

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