
Turkey as a New Security Actor in the Middle East: Beyond the Slogans

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Abstract

The article argues that Turkish foreign policy has moved beyond slogans. An overview of Turkey's relations with Syria, Iraq, Iran and Israel shows that Turkey is increasingly more relaxed, mature and flexible in its foreign policy, and is constantly enhancing its repertoire of policy tools. As far as security is concerned, relying mainly on soft power, Turkish strategy is closer to the European strategy in that it tries to look to the security of whole population groups and their general welfare. Turkey's domestic transformation, consolidation of democracy and economic growth have been major factors in the formulation of this new foreign policy and in the emergence of Turkey as a trading power, stabilizing force and peace-promoter in the region. Nevertheless, it is also seen that Turkey is now mature enough to employ different strategies in its relations with regional actors and in dealing with security issues.

Key Words

Turkey, Turkish foreign policy, Middle East, Security, Ahmet Davutoğlu.

Introduction

The Middle East now occupies a central place in Turkish foreign policy (TFP). This is a result of a number of remarkable internal and external processes. Based upon the accomplishments of previous governments, such as the rapprochement with Syria, the decline of the PKK's activities after Öcalan's arrest, relatively better relations with Iraq, the rapprochement with Greece after the 1999 earthquake, and the EU's granting of candidacy status in 1999, consecutive AK Party governments have embarked upon an accelerating democratization and rapid economic growth process.

Thus within a decade, Turkey has transformed itself into one of the most important players in the region at the economic, political and discursive levels through the strengthening of relations with Syria, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other actors, along with strong relations with Israel (until recently). As a result, Turkey has been very active in the Middle East and North Africa in the last decade, trying to be among the top actors in every important regional issue. In this article, I will try to show that current policymakers are trying to move

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TFP beyond such slogans or catchphrases as ‘neo-Ottomanism’, ‘bridge’, or even ‘zero problems’. An overview of Turkey’s relations with Syria, Iraq, Iran and Israel, which are chosen for the purpose of this article, show that Turkey is increasingly more relaxed, mature and flexible in its foreign policy, constantly enhancing its repertoire of tools without any obsession with slogans that might restrict its manoeuvring.

Within a decade, Turkey has transformed itself into one of the most important players in the region.

Two internal processes will be emphasized as crucial factors in changing the character of Turkey as a regional actor: democratization and economic growth. It can be observed that while Turkey was and is much more direct with Syria and openly criticises the regime when necessary, it is more pragmatic with Iran and advocates a policy of mutual non-interference. Turkey has promoted relations with Iraq to a considerable extent and tries to have mutually beneficial relations with the local government in northern Iraq (the KRG). For Turkey, this relationship depends mainly on the issue of PKK terrorist activities. Its ties with Israel have deteriorated to almost beyond repair and currently give the impression that relations with Israel will not be mended

no matter what happens in the foreseeable future. It will be seen that such a flexible foreign policy is necessary to serve the rising constituency of the AK Party. As far as security is concerned, the new TFP is closer to the European strategy than the American approach. The impact of Turkey’s new approach to security has been particularly visible in recent years. However, this convergence with Europe has mainly taken place through the application of *universal* values rather than deliberate harmonization with the EU, as this link has grown weaker in the last five to six years.

The New Foreign Policy as a Reflection of Internal Change: Democratization and Economic Growth

In this section it will be argued that Turkey’s domestic transformation, specifically the consolidation of democracy and economic growth, is the background to the new foreign policy. Turkey’s domestic reforms have enabled the new ruling elite to implement political views that are radically differentiated from the previous era, and, along with rapid economic growth, has increased the power of the country and been the main factor in the emergence of Turkey as a stabilizing force and peace-promoter in the region. In this process, the AK Party has branded itself a conservative democratic party that favours a vibrant market economy and close ties with

the West, particularly the European Union. International dynamics have also helped. The reforms, required by the EU membership process, have consolidated democracy further and brought, *inter alia*, a gradual ‘normalization’ of civilian-military relations which has greatly contributed to Turkey’s ability and desire to be relatively an island of stability within the Middle East which is often described as being in turmoil.¹

Rising conservative business circles want to deepen Turkey’s integration into the global economic system as the previous closed economy of Turkey was not big enough. They have naturally encouraged the AK Party to pursue a pragmatic, economics-based multi-directional/multi-dimensional foreign policy which means increasing economic ties with different regions of the world.² The Middle East has become one of the most important economic areas for Turkey and it hopes to benefit further from increasing economic relationships with the Arab Gulf states by attracting a higher percentage of their funds for trade and investment.³ In addition, democratization has brought the supremacy of the civilian mindset to state affairs including foreign policy. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s remark that “what makes your borders safe is not the number of your tanks, [but] is the volume of mutual trade and investment with your neighbours” is very similar to Özal’s emphasis on the importance of economic ties and people-to-people contact with neighbours (e.g.

Greece) for regional stability. Intensifying a peaceful regional web of ties suits Turkey as it has a comparative economic advantage.

Previously a more security-oriented outlook to foreign policy often made Turkey a destabilizing force (a *loose cannon*) in the region. The Turkish elite saw the ‘Kurdish question’ and Islamism as the main threats with strong foreign connections. Thus, domestic problems led to tense relations with regional and extra-regional actors.⁴ For example, Şükrü Elekdağ, the former Turkish ambassador to Washington, when referring to a defence-cooperation agreement concluded between Greece and Syria in 1996, argued that Turkey in response had to prepare for “two and a half wars” (i.e., full-scale wars against Syria and Greece, along with the already ongoing low intensity war with the PKK).⁵ As Dağlı argues, for decades TFP was directed by a “siege mentality” according to which Turkey was surrounded by enemies; a description which was also convenient for domestic purposes as external ‘threats’ justified the authoritarian regime inside. “A liberal turn in Turkish foreign policy”, as Dağlı calls it, rescued Turkey from these past fears and insecurities and has enabled Turkey to look at foreign policy issues and regional affairs from different angles.⁶

Naturally, TFP is firmly dependent on the dynamics of internal politics: the attitudes of opposition parties and the nature of the regime and personalities of key individuals. It should also be

pointed out that there have emerged broadly two political camps in Turkey. The first, the relatively larger group, includes centre-right politicians, liberals, and the religious-conservatives who generally support the AK Party and the few other ideologically closer smaller parties. This camp struggles with the 'old elite' who generally control the military and judiciary. The other camp, which is composed of secularists, the military and civilian bureaucratic elites as well as various groups of nationalists who generally support the Republican People's Party, Nationalist Movement Party and the Workers' Party, accuses the AK Party leadership of being mere instruments or subcontractors of the US and the EU.⁷

A stable, peaceful region is now considered essential for Turkey to deepen its democracy, sustain its economic growth and possibly secure its accession to the EU.

The change in TFP is in part a reflection of the emergence of a new elite with considerably different views on foreign policy. For example, according to Davutoğlu's intellectual framework, Turkey's new foreign policy approach should be based on the following five principles: 1) there should be "a balance between security and democracy" in Turkey; 2) Turkey should have a "zero problems with neighbours" policy; 3) Turkey should "develop relations with

the neighbouring regions and beyond"; 4) it should pursue "a multi-dimensional foreign policy" and its relations with global actors should be complementary, not competitive; and 5) Turkey should conduct a "rhythmic" (sustained and active) diplomacy. According to this new thinking, Turkey has a unique geography and has influence in a large neighbourhood: Turkey is a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country in terms of influence.⁸ Turkey, with a much better geographical reach than most, should break away from a 'static and single-parameter policy' and become a 'problem solver' by contributing to 'global and regional peace'. Turkey needs to play a more effective role as an 'order-instituting country' in its regional hinterlands, the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁹

The fact that Turkey also had a helpful external environment during the period under discussion has been a crucial boost for the country. For example, the EU's 1999 decision to grant Turkey candidacy status not only marked the beginning of an EU-stimulated process of domestic reform but also the Europeanization of Turkish foreign policy. A stable, peaceful region is now considered essential for Turkey to deepen its democracy, sustain its economic growth and possibly secure its accession to the EU. Being part of conflicts or wars in the region will increase the power of the authoritarian elements in Turkey. Establishing regional peace, security

and stability is also a means to foster Turkish democracy and hence secure the supremacy of civilian governments.¹⁰ The decline of the military's influence in Turkey has facilitated both a broadening and a 'softening' of Turkish foreign policy. Whereas in the past, Turkey had tended to rely heavily on hard power, it has been increasingly seeking diplomatic solutions to problems, especially with its neighbours in the last few years. Ankara has also sought to act as a broker or mediator in regional disputes. For example, Turkey persuaded the Iraqi Sunnis not to boycott the elections and when Turkish authorities visited countries such as Lebanon, Pakistan or Afghanistan, all factions wanted to meet with them.¹¹

Democratization and the need to ensure the continuation of economic growth made the AK Party governments more pragmatic, as compared to the more ideological stances of governments in the past. This pragmatism shows itself frequently in dealings with the Middle East. For example, although the AK Party elite see the Muslim and Ottoman dimension as positive factors for its rapprochement with the Middle East, one prominent AK Party member argues that Turkey has no ambition of being a model for the Islamic world: "Such a move may hurt feelings of Muslim countries. Turkey successfully combined Islamic culture with democracy. It can only be related to this debate in this framework".¹² AK Party members argue that Turkey is not seeking to revive the Ottoman Empire but its reintegration

into its surroundings, thereby correcting an anomaly of the Cold War years, by deepening political dialogue, increasing trade, and multiplying people-to-people contacts with neighbours through tourism, trade, and cultural and educational activities.¹³ This means restoring geographical continuity and enabling the free flow of people, goods and services.

Turkey successfully sought increased access to Middle Eastern investors and markets. As a result nearly 20 percent of Turkey's exports went to the Middle East in 2009, some \$19.2 billion worth of goods, compared with 12.5% in 2004. For example, Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have the same objectives in many fields, according to Davutoğlu. Trade between the GCC and Turkey grew from \$1.5 billion in 1999 to \$17.5 billion in 2008; imports from Turkey increased 15-fold.¹⁴ This economic strategy has served the party constituency who expect the government to provide necessary base, for sustained growth, which requires an open market with strong economic ties abroad.

It should be pointed out that the recent Turkish reliance on non-confrontational means has not been because Turkey lacks 'hard-power' instruments. On the contrary, Turkey has an impressive conventional force. For example, it has the second largest inventory of F-16 fighters in the world (about 240) and is capable of regional strikes (deep battle).¹⁵ It does not prefer to use it as military operations weak

havoc in the region and adversely affect the Turkish economy. Nevertheless, if needed, Turkish hard power can serve its foreign policy principles and interests. For example, air strikes have been used against PKK strongholds in northern Iraq. These moves are in line with the AK Party philosophy that the Turkish state must have both might (*kudret*) and compassion (*şefkat*).¹⁶

Turkey's activism and relying mainly on soft power in the region have been building for more than a decade. The new generation of businessmen, diplomats and television stars are all making connections in the region that will construct deep and enduring

relations. However, as one Turkish official puts it, "If some say the economy is the main goal of our expansion, I could easily counter that security is equally important". In other words, the security dimension of foreign policy initiatives is always considered. Turkey decided to be more active in the region because, as another official said, Turkey wants stability as a country which has suffered most from regional turmoil and which was "importing lots of security problems from the Middle East, arms, terrorist training".¹⁷ Thus, Turkey seeks stability and a more prominent role among the influential regional actors whose populations and economic power is shown at Figure 1.

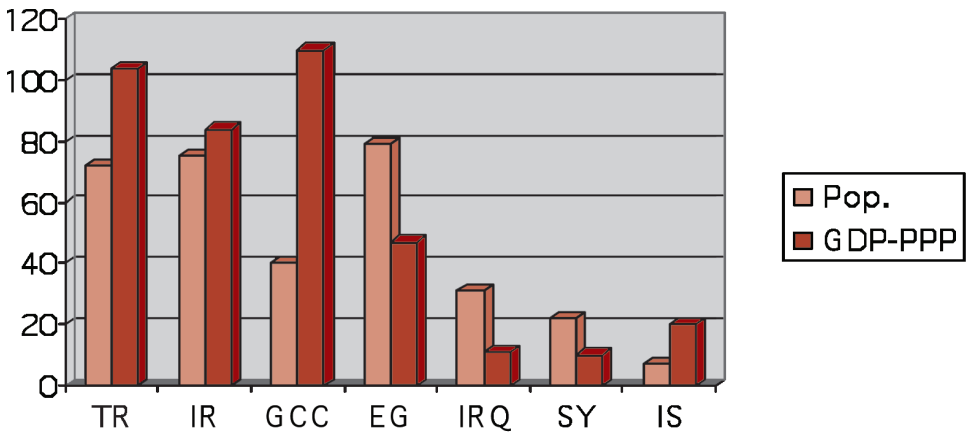


Figure 1: Comparison of Turkey, Iran, Gulf Cooperation Countries, Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Israel in terms of population (millions) and GDP (PPP in \$10 billion in 2009).¹⁸

Security through European Ways

While Fuller argued that an economically more vibrant “Turkey has strategically become part of the Middle East with a role of regional economic model”,¹⁹ for many observers and Turkish leaders Turkey is also firmly within Europe. Its candidacy and accession process to the EU clearly shows this. Just by its existence, the EU provides a unique paradigm for Turks and Kurds. The EU is seen as a project of progressively abolishing all borders and overcoming deep historical animosities. The EU has attained peace, stability and prosperity; a similar transformation can be accomplished in the Middle East, too, if the actors cooperate. While Turkey has attained the status of a major trading power and is less dependent on the US or EU market, its approach to the region through engagement and mediation in order to attain stability and prosperity through free travel, economic integration, and policy coordination looks more like the EU’s recipe for conflict resolution in the last 60 years.

Turkey’s position in the Middle East must rest on four main principles (as formulated by Davutoğlu): security for everyone; priority for dialogue as a means of solving crises; economic interdependence as “order in the Middle East cannot be achieved in an atmosphere of isolated economies”; and cultural coexistence and plurality.²⁰ According to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip

Erdoğan, the destinies of the countries in the region are intertwined.²¹ Erdoğan has argued that Turkey’s growing influence in its south and east is actually “taking the burden off the shoulders of the EU”.²² Indeed, an intense economic, political and cultural relationship is the basis for creating a zone of stability and prosperity (and eventually perhaps freedom) in the southern neighbours. This strategy is also much like the EU’s aim of promoting a ‘ring of friends’.²³

Thus, Turkey has been launching initiative after initiative aimed at stabilizing the Middle East. It has been facilitating efforts to reduce conflicts, expand visa-free travel, increase trade and integrate infrastructure.²⁴ It has been actively trying to cooperate with regional countries in multiple areas including banking, telecommunications, construction and security. These initiatives, which show that Turkey’s role as a regional security actor is changing through, *inter alia*, Europeanization, and that Turkey can also contribute to European energy security as a transit country. For example, with the Nabucco pipeline project, signed in July 2009, Turkey will help to diversify energy sources to southeast and central Europe.²⁵ Thus, Turkey aims to satisfy its own energy requirements and collect transit revenues by serving as an energy hub.

Turkey has rather successfully acted as a facilitator in trying to help solving problems between regional actors. It has pursued and pursues ‘positive neutrality’ in the region. Turkish involvement in

regional issues has ranged from efforts to mediate between the Arabs/Palestinians and Israelis, between the Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and between Bosnia and Serbia. Even though not all of these mediation efforts have been successful, they have helped Turkey gain visibility and prestige.²⁶ It has become clear that in recent years Turkey has taken the view that a new and better order in the region can ideally be established by institutionalizing ‘representative democracy’ across the area. Yet, Turkey is realistic enough to also maintain good relations with non-democratic regimes (e.g. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council members) and major powers.

Turkey has taken the view that a new and better order in the region can ideally be established by institutionalizing ‘representative democracy’ across the area.

Turkey’s ties to Europe and the US may have become less visible but that doesn’t mean Turkey has changed its fundamental direction. As the Turkish President Abdullah Gül said, “What Turkey is doing is clear. Turkey, surely, is moving simultaneously in every direction, towards East and West, North and South” but “the important point is to which direction its values are moving”. He defined that “direction” as

“democratic values, supremacy of law, respect of human rights, transparency, gender equality, and a functioning free market economy”, which could be interpreted as a reconfirmation of Turkey’s EU membership goal.²⁷ Turkey has been arguing that the Islamic world needs to radically transform itself in the fields of economics, politics, culture and education, as Abdullah Gül declared, “put the house in order”, to meet global challenges. Thus, Turkey’s security strategy in the Middle East does not undermine its NATO status or desire to join the EU. Rather, by becoming an ‘exporter’ of security rather than a consumer in the region, the Turkish strategy is winning more praise from the US and Europe than it receives from the authoritarian regimes in the area.

Turkey’s move towards a more developed democratic system and free market has also had a regional impact. In recent years, prominent personalities in the Middle East have discussed the importance of Turkey as a model or example for the transformation of the Arab world. Turkey’s credentials are based on it being a democratic (secular) Muslim country with a successful liberal economy. Turkey provides an attractive political and economic model for both secularists and Islamists in the region. In fact, as the prime minister of a secular country and thanks to his own religious credentials as a pious Muslim, Erdoğan comfortably speaks about the dangers of sectarianism in the region and advises

peaceful coexistence despite ethnic, sectarian cultural differences.²⁸ As Kirişci argues, Turkey has a “demonstrative effect” in the region despite its shortcomings. A survey conducted in seven Arab countries reveals that 61 percent of the respondents considered Turkey to be a model for Arab countries, with 63 percent of the respondents agreeing that “Turkey constituted a successful example of coexistence of democracy and Islam”. Kirişci points out that the “Trading State” (defined as “a state whose foreign policy becomes increasingly shaped by economic consideration and a country in whose GNP foreign trade acquires an important place”) dimension is important for Turkey’s image. It also provides an economic dimension to the demonstrative effect. It is seen that Turkish democracy is flourishing with the growth of its economy; as per capita income rises, individuals become more self-confident and open to the world. Per capita income in Turkey increased from just around \$1,300 in 1985 to \$2,773 in 1995 and almost \$11,000 in 2008. Kirişci also reminds us that Turkey’s visa-free travel policy and popular Turkish TV series reinforce the positive image of the country in the Arab world.²⁹

As many commentators agree, Turkey is perhaps the only country in the entire Middle East that has integrated with modernity. It has a functional and democratic political system, a productive economy, and has found a workable balance between religion and secularism.

For example, Pope argues that Turkey, with its “robust” democracy, “genuinely elected leader”, and products that are “popular from Afghanistan to Morocco” (including dozens of TV series), is “the envy of the Arab world”. Salem argues that Turkey is well placed to make a bid for a leadership role. Çandar points out that the emergence of Turkey in the international arena as an autonomous regional power has been due to the decline or at least the suspension of American influence in the region, the ineffectiveness of EU policy in the region, and the destruction of the Sunni dominance in Iraq following the war in 2003, leaving the space open for Shiite Iran’s influence.³⁰ In this view, Turkey is entering the Middle East vacated by traditional Sunni powers, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as the new ‘central power’. While there have been many commentators from the Arab world that supports the views above, such claims, especially if they come from officials, are counterproductive; Turkish leaders often refuse to say that Turkey aims for leadership or is a model in the region. This move seems prudent as Cairo, for example, was anxious about Turkish involvement in ‘Arab affairs’ in ways that might shift the geopolitical balance. Turkey’s activism could overshadow its role in the Palestinian issue. After realizing Egypt’s concerns, Turkey was careful to argue that its role was complementary to that of Egypt. Turkey was not trying to steal a role from Egypt.³¹

Relations with Syria: Ups and Downs

The Turkish-Syrian relationship today is the best example of how the regional political landscape can quickly change and change again. Within 10-12 years, Turkey's relations with Syria evolved from the brink of war to "full harmony", according to Davutoğlu, just before the Arab Spring came to Syria. Syria, which is ruled by a Shiite minority and has been traditionally close to Iran, was under intense American pressure as a 'rogue' state. Nevertheless, Turkey had a constructive policy toward Syria because, as Davutoğlu stated, "There are two visions regarding the region. One vision is the mission of building welfare, peace and stability" and "the other vision is based on creating disputes and uneasiness [...] the first vision will narrow the zone of the second vision". It must be a common aim, he added, "to get out of the vicious circle and turn the region an area of stability and prosperity".³²

During this time, Turkish-Syrian relations progressed to an unprecedented level. There were joint cabinet meetings and relations improved in many areas, from security, energy, and banking to higher education. Turkey's great contribution to the ongoing process of reintegrating Syria into the international system despite the punitive agenda of the Western powers has also helped to promote its own constructive and peaceful image in the Arab world. Turkey's Syria policy produced 'unthinkably'

good results. For example, the Syrian government was closely following the Turkish government with regard to the PKK issue so much so that it declared, in support of a solution, that it might grant amnesty to some 1,500 Syrian nationals within the PKK if the organization laid down its arms. On lifting visas in 2010, Davutoğlu's words show a glimpse of the new thinking on Turkey's part: "I would like to address the Syrian people. Turkey is your second country [...] we are lifting the borders which were artificially put and becoming the people of one hinterland. We are turning the economic cooperation to an economic unity. We are hoping that this will be a model for all our neighbours."³³

The low institutionalization of cooperation with authoritarian regimes because of their personal character showed its face also in Turco-Syrian relations.

However, the low institutionalization of cooperation with authoritarian regimes because of their personal character showed its face also in Turco-Syrian relations. While Turkey had been advising and hoping that the Assad regime could manage a gradual and peaceful transition to a more democratic structure, the Syrian government seemed to be unwilling or unable to enact the necessary reforms required for the transition of the country to normalcy. For example, according to Erdoğan,

Assad could use the fact that he is a Nusayri while his wife is a Sunni to promote sectarian tolerance in the Syria. However, as the wave of the Arab Spring hit Syria in March 2011, the opposition in Syria seemed to prefer to clash with the regime rather than wait for state-initiated reforms that might never come. As experts pointed out the risks a state collapse would pose for Turkey, especially the possibility of an influx of refugees across the lengthy border, the Turkish government immediately said that Turkey would not to put a limit on the number of refugees and would welcome all who seek safety across the border. It did not hesitate this time to put an authoritarian regime under the spotlight by drawing attention to the possible refugee influx.³⁴

Relations with Iraq and the Issue of PKK Terrorism

Relations with Iraq have a critical importance for Turkey, partly because events in northern Iraq could be expected to have serious effects on Turkey's internal Kurdish problem, and partly because of the substantial interdependence of the Turkish and Iraqi economies. Previously, Turkey had refrained from having contacts with Kurdish authorities in Northern Iraq, but in order to achieve its foreign policy aims, Ankara has started to act in line with the new realities in Iraq. Instead of relying on military means to overcome the threat of terrorism from northern Iraq, Turkey has

lately increased its contacts with Arab and Kurdish authorities in the country and tried to convince them to cooperate more in the fight against the PKK. In this respect, Turkey's new stance became obvious after 2007.³⁵

As Akyol argues, "Turkey's decades-old 'Kurdophobia' and the old paradigm based on a 'paranoid mindset that saw the world as full of enemies' might be passing".³⁶ The intertwining of PKK terrorism with the Kurdish question has been the most important thorn in Turkey's relations with some of its Middle Eastern neighbours. Less fixation with the Kurdish question is necessary for Turkey to engage with the region more effectively. Thus, Turkish policymakers in recent years admitted that the PKK should be tackled by instruments other than militarily. This has become synonymous with a softening approach to the Kurdish question in Turkey and a new policy of rapprochement and cooperation with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).³⁷

Prior to 2008, the Erdoğan government, and especially the Turkish military, had been wary of establishing direct contacts with KRG authorities, fearing that this would strengthen the KRG's drive for independence. In 2007, then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül cancelled the scheduled visit to Turkey of KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani when the chief of the Turkish general staff announced his opposition to such contacts. Only after Gül became president did he invite Jalal Talabani

to make an official visit in 2008. This positive development led Talabani to openly advise Kurdish politicians and the PKK to make most of “the opportunity” and intensify dialogue with the AK Party government for a solution to the Kurdish problem.

An economically prosperous Northern Iraq will continue to be a valuable market for Turkey.

Overall, the AK Party is more willing to co-opt the Kurds and play “big brother” to them in line with the more accommodative character of its conservative ideology. Since late 2008, however, the Erdoğan government has begun to intensify such contacts.³⁸ It has become clear that there should also be a ‘zero-problems with Kurds’ policy.³⁹ This also makes economic sense as Turkey benefits from expanding trade with northern Iraq. For example, according to a newly renewed contract, Turkey will receive \$450 million per year from the Kirkuk-Yumurtalık pipeline. Better relations with the KRG and Iraqi government would also allow Turkey to protect the interests of the Turcoman in Iraq.⁴⁰ Normalization serves both sides. As the KRG has oil reserves, it needs to be able to extract and transport it to Western markets. Oil pipelines from northern Iraq already flow into Turkish ports on the Mediterranean and they provide the most efficient and cost-effective means of getting Iraqi oil to

international markets. An economically prosperous Northern Iraq will continue to be a valuable market for Turkey. The long-standing strategy of allowing its businessmen to bind the Iraqi Kurdish economy tightly into Turkey acquired a real political dimension as dialogue with Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government began. In March 2010, this reached a high point with the arrival of a Turkish consul-general in Arbil, the seat of the Iraqi Kurdish administration.⁴¹

A solution to PKK terrorist activities, mainly through political reforms regarding the Kurdish minority in Turkey, is perhaps the most important agenda item for Turkey. The AK Party’s popularity in both Turkish and Kurdish constituencies has raised the optimism for a settlement. Although the government’s ‘Kurdish Opening’ is aimed at the disbandment and disarming of the PKK through solving the more general problem of the Kurdish question, the initiative has faced strong nationalist opposition from the National Action Party (MHP) and parts of the Republican Peoples’ Party (CHP). The initiative has also been unpopular with the Turkish public which has become more nationalistic in recent decades. Nevertheless, having strong enough political support from the electorate, the government is trying to solve the deepest domestic problem of the country, integrating the Kurds, through a basic human rights perspective.⁴² It could be seen that the AK Party’s more overall liberal approach to the Kurdish question is praised by many commentators from

different ideological backgrounds. In the long run it is expected that the recent reforms would undermine the public base of the PKK and considerably reduce its capacity. A PKK under pressure will be less able to sabotage a peace process in Turkey.⁴³ As Turkey needs the support of Iraqi authorities against the PKK, the remarks by Iraqi Kurdish leaders that they could put pressure on the organization if a comprehensive democratic solution is reached within Turkey can be seen as a positive step. In a broad sense, in recent years Turkey has understood that it needs to help the smooth functioning of a strong and unifying government in Iraq, which is vital to preserve the regional balance of power.⁴⁴ Ankara has also realized that the support and cooperation of the KRG government in eradicating the PKK is critical, which in return requires more positive engagement with the regional authority.

Relations with Iran: A Delicate Balance

As Turkey and Iran show similarities in terms of their size, industrial base, population and (conventional) military powers, competition between them seems natural. However, for Turkey, Iran, unlike most other Middle Eastern countries, is a large and important neighbour and hence has to be managed, not confronted. As Turkey imports around 93 percent of its oil and gas needs, and its demand for energy continues to increase, it also wants to be an energy corridor; Iran is

crucial to this strategy. Naturally Turkey prefers the rehabilitation of Iran with its reintegration into the international system and as a fully cooperative player in the global energy market. Turkey has been opposing the American pressure against energy deals and investment in Iran since the laste Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan was prime minister. This position was recently reiterated by Ahmet Davutoğlu, who said that “as a growing economy and surrounded by energy resources, Turkey needs Iranian energy as a natural extension of its national interests. Therefore, Turkey’s energy agreements with Iran cannot be dependent upon its relationships with other countries.”⁴⁵ As Iran is expected to provide a significant portion of the gas supply for the Nabucco project, its position is also crucial for European energy security. Since the Ankara-Tehran rapprochement is mainly a pragmatic policy based on mutual national interests, Turkey has been busy further developing trade relations, which has reached \$10 billion per year.⁴⁶

Turkey prefers the rehabilitation of Iran with its reintegration into the international system.

However, in the last few years, Turkey’s position has become more delicate with the acceleration of the Iranian nuclear program. Turkey has supported the idea of making the Middle East a nuclear weapons free zone.

Unlike many other actors, Erdoğan did not hesitate to criticise Israel's assumed nuclear arsenal. Turkey is also a principled advocate of the peaceful use of nuclear energy as the AK Party government plans to construct nuclear power stations despite the opposition of environmental groups. In fact, it could be argued that the Turkish government, similar to American policy, has been trying to balance Iranian influence in the region. However, as Yetkin observes, the Turkish Prime Minister has tried to say to the West "let's prevent the nuclearization of Iran but if we do this by force, the whole world will be a zone of war".⁴⁷ Akgün argues that nothing in the world is more natural than Turkey saying to the US to "consult me too if you are planning an embargo or a bombing for my neighbours".⁴⁸

As President Gül explained, Turkey got involved in the issue because it would be among the biggest losers in case of a major war. To the surprise of the world, Turkey together with Brazil brokered the 17 May 2010 nuclear swap deal under which Iran agreed to ship 1,200 kilograms of low enriched uranium to Turkey, and in turn would receive 120 kilograms of nuclear fuel for its reactor in Tehran. Thus, Brazil and Turkey have showed that they too have the ability to influence global affairs. This move was snubbed by the United States and other big powers, although the content of the deal was what the US had earlier sought

from Iran as the leaked letter of Obama to da Silva clearly showed. The US and the other Western powers preferred to impose further sanctions on Iran in the UN Security Council, which was passed by a vote of 12 to 2, with Turkey and Brazil voting against and Lebanon abstaining.⁴⁹ Turkey was heavily criticized in some Western circles for protecting Iran and opposing the US more than even Russia or China did on this issue. However, it should not be forgotten that while Iran clashes with Israel and the West, takes an aggressive stance militarily towards the West in Iraq, in Gaza and in Lebanon through its ties with Iraqi Shiites, Hamas or Hezbollah respectively, Turkey provides almost a completely opposite picture in all of the issues above by trying to promote democracy and stability in these areas.

Thus many critics find Turkey's Iranian policy risky and difficult to maintain as Turkey also wants to have good relations with the Gulf countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia) and Egypt which all fear a nuclear-armed Iran.⁵⁰ As Turkey generally tries to strike a balance in regional affairs, the government declared that Turkey would naturally comply with the resolution. There are some signs that Turkish leaders are also uncomfortable with Iran acquiring nuclear weapons as nobody can guarantee that Iran would not use the issue against Turkish interests in the region.⁵¹ Turkey prefers that Iran, too, gives priority to regional

economic relations and rely on soft-power instruments. However, Iranian strategy seems focused on emerging as a more dominant hard-power player in the region, especially in the Gulf.

Relations with Israel: The Odd One Out?

In line with its new strategy of dealing with the important issues of the region, Turkey has been involved in the Palestinian question. Having already established ties with Israel, Turkey has also enhanced its dialogue with the Palestinians, including with Hamas which is considered an illegitimate entity by Israel. On a related chapter in Arab-Israeli relations, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu made it clear that the Israeli government led them to believe that Turkey had brought Israel and Syria to the brink of face-to-face talks or even a peace deal. Yet with no warning, Israel launched “Operation Cast Lead” in Gaza which moved Turkish public opinion further towards the Palestinians and galvanized the perception that grave injustice is being done to the Palestinians. It seems that the Turkish side took a strategic decision that Israel, with its current policies toward the Palestinians, toward Syria, toward Iran and with its image among the Arab public, was the odd one out in the region. Thus, the operation was presented as the turning point for relations. Just a few weeks later, in January

2009 at the Davos Forum, Erdoğan, repeatedly demanded “one minute” more from the moderator, and shouted to President Peres that “you know well how to kill people”. According to Birand, by taking up the cause of Palestinians, Erdoğan brought about a peace between Turkey and the Arab street which used to see secular Turkey as no more than an obedient servant to the West.⁵²

Turkey is acting as an ‘aspirant’ power whereas Israel is a staunch ‘supporter of the status quo’.

The lowest point in the relations came with the *Mavi Marmara* Incident of 31 May 2010 when Israeli Defence Force commandos killed nine Turkish citizens in international waters. After the incident, Davutoğlu said that unless there is an Israeli apology and compensation, Turkey will try to isolate Israel in every international platform. Turkish attitude vis-à-vis Israel might seem over-confident; yet, according to commentators like Çandar, it must be preferred to the usual “inferiority complex” that marked the previous periods.⁵³ With hindsight, commentators point out that the golden age in Turkish-Israeli relations in the 1990s was exceptional.⁵⁴ The relations between the two countries did not run deep. Israel has not been as open to Turkish technology and business deals as would

be needed to foster stronger financial ties between businesses and corporations. The relationship has been largely limited to the military realm.⁵⁵ It appears that Turkey is acting as an ‘aspirant’ power whereas Israel is a staunch ‘supporter of the status quo’. Israel does not seem to want a lasting agreement for peace but prefers a continuation of the situation with its currently superior military position. Overall, Turkish perception shifted toward the views that rather than helping, Israel was resisting the rise of Turkey. Israel now seems to be the odd one out both in the region and in the foreign policy strategy of Turkey.

Both democratization and the desire to promote intensive economic ties with the countries in the region require stability.

Turkey’s attempts at establishing a new order in the Middle East mean that Israel can no longer act as a *sui generis* actor in the area above other regional actors without risking further frictions with Turkey. By drawing attention to the plight of the Palestinians and by describing Gaza as an open prison, Turkey has become the most vocal and persistent critic of Israel. With his daring criticism of Israel, Erdoğan became a ‘hero’ for the Arab street, which in many countries became full of Turkish flags and Erdoğan posters.⁵⁶ Thus, the Turkish Prime Minister can address the Muslim

populations in the region directly, which in the long run will make Turkey more influential in the region.

As the *Mavi Marmara* Incident put the Turkish government in a very difficult position in the eyes of the Turkish public, Turkey still waits for an apology from Israel by constantly emphasizing that failure to do so would result in further measures against Israel. Turkey also implied that it would support Palestinian statehood. Thus, it is difficult to argue that Turkey provides any space for a face-saving apology from Israel. On the contrary, it is clear that that Turkey will not shy away from taking part in Middle Eastern issues, even though Israel is on the opposite front in some issues.

Conclusion

It has been argued that in the formulation of TFP, Turkish leaders have increasingly gone beyond the slogans and refrained from presenting Turkey as the new leader or model for the region. Two processes have been particularly important in shaping this new policy: democratization and economic growth. The constituency of the AK Party naturally demands a continuation of these processes which have also been effective in transforming Turkey’s stance in the region as a security actor. Both democratization and the desire to promote intensive economic ties with the countries in the region require

stability. This encourages Turkey to pursue a moderate foreign policy. Thus, Turkey's approach to regional security is getting closer to the European style of constructing regional stability through economic interdependence and the application of universal values such as democracy, human rights and the rule

of law. Although to a great extent the Turkish reliance on soft power and its efforts to promote peace and stability are the attitudes the region exactly needs, it is also seen that as the Turkey becomes more self-confident, relaxed and flexible, the possibility of using hard power has not been completely ruled out.

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