
Turkey and the New Middle East: Between Liberalism and Realism

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Abstract

It is sometimes argued that Turkish foreign policy under the AK Party government reflects its ideology, and Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East is often used as an illustration of this influence. When it is closely examined, however, one can easily see that the government has often followed a mainly realist foreign policy approach in the Middle East and used the idealism for the maximization of Turkish national interests. In contrast to the power resources at the disposal of other regional powers, including the support of external powers, sectarian identities, or ethnic-linguistic ties, the key asset of Turkish foreign policy is its successful combination of democracy and Islam. Utilizing this image, Turkey has emerged as the most outspoken supporter of democratic transformations, aiming to create a liberal-democratic regional order. This, however, brings Turkey ultimately into conflict with other aspiring hegemonic powers, including both Israel and Iran.

Key Words

Turkey, Middle East, Liberalism, Realism, Arab Spring.

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Introduction

It is often asked whether it is objective material interests or ideas and perceptions that are decisive on Turkey's Middle East policy during the AK Party era. However, it is quite hard to answer this question since the AK party acceded to power in a rather critical stage with regards to relations with the Middle East. At this critical juncture the intellectual and structural context of the Middle East had been significantly shaped by the September 11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent Iraq war in 2003. It could be therefore argued that many policies that emerged with the AK Party government's initiatives and ascribed to intellectual factors have actually reflected changes in the strategic and structural environment surrounding Turkey. This does not mean that the AK Party leaders had no effect on the formation of policies. However, with the advantage of the intellectual foundations it represents, the AK Party government has been able to portray a more flexible and dynamic foreign policy perspective as regards the Middle East.

In the AK Party era, Turkey has succeeded in returning to the region as a normal power without having an historical fixation. In this sense, it could be argued that AK Party government, with its strong mandate, has realized a revision in foreign policy that could not be completed following the end of the Cold War due to domestic political instability. The AK Party has projected to the region a vision that emphasizes secular democracy and its compatibility with Islam. As Fuller indicates “For most Arabs, the election of a mildly Islamist party in Ankara exemplified that countries, which shares common heritage and history can unite one day.”¹ As a symbolic expression of this reunification, Turkey facilitated the election of Prof. Dr. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, an academic who is closely acquainted with the region, as the General Secretary of the Organization of Islamic Conference in 2005 in the first democratic elections conducted in the history of the organization. It was a symbolic expression of the message that the Islamic world and the Middle East are, from now on, located at the centre of Turkish foreign policy and that Turkey desires to see materialization of a democratic Islamic world.

In accordance with Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s policy target of “zero problems with neighbours”, Turkey moved to assert itself as a central player in the region by playing a mediatory

role in the conflicts between its close allies and neighbours. Although Turkey’s mediation efforts between Israel and Syria as well as between the United States and Iran have been aborted, they were nevertheless initiatives that emphasized assertiveness in Turkish foreign policy. By virtue of this proactive attitude that numerous foreign observers have evaluated as neo-Ottomanism, Turkey has embraced for itself an active role not only in the Middle East, but also in Central Asia and Northern Africa.²

In this article, a general perspective on the Middle Eastern policy that Turkey has pursued in the last ten years will be presented by examining Turkey’s relations with four power blocs in the region: (1) Israel, (2) Iran, (3) the Arab countries that are within Iran’s sphere of influence (Iraq, Syria and Lebanon) and (4) the Arab countries which stand in opposition to Iran’s increasing dominance in the region (apart from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain). Evidently this categorization shows that the most significant factor in Turkish foreign policy making vis-à-vis the Middle East is the emergence of Iran’s regional hegemony.

The outbreak of the Arab democratic revolts in the winter of 2010-2011 caused a dramatic rupture in this regard by forcing a revision of foreign policy.

Under the AK Party rule, Turkey followed a foreign policy towards the region that emphasized bilateral relationships that often ignored internal characteristics of regimes, particularly human rights issues in Syria and Iran, emphasizing instead strengthening trade relations. In this sense it was realist with regard to acceptance of existing regimes as partners and liberal in the sense of placing heavy emphasis on economic integration. The outbreak of the Arab democratic revolts in the winter of 2010-2011 caused a dramatic rupture in this regard by forcing a revision of foreign policy, according to which Turkey emerged as the champion of democratic transformations in North Africa. The victim of this revision, however, was the strategic partnership with the Syrian regime that Turkey had built in the last decade. Under the cloak of Turkish democracy promotion in Syria lies a realist mindset regarding the rise of an Iran-led Shia bloc, which Turkey so far attempted to manage diplomatically. Also in this regard, Turkey's activism regarding the Palestinian question, leading to a deep crisis with Israel, helped trim Iran's regional influence.

Tension in the Turkish-Israeli Relations: AK Party's Secret Agenda?

Following the establishment of the AK Party government after the 2002

general elections, many internal and external political observers were curious about the nature of the new government's Israeli policies. According to some circles, this subject was a litmus test of the new government's loyalty to secularism. Subsequent to the February 28 process, even a slight deviation from the pro-Israeli perspective was seen as sufficient to reveal its Islamic identity. Presumably, taking these concerns into consideration, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan before assuming the post of Prime Minister paid a visit to Washington and held meetings at several key Jewish institutions where he expressed a strong will to further develop the relations between Turkey and Israel.³ Accordingly, until the outbreak of the 2008 Gaza War, the AK Party government maintained the usual course of Turkish-Israeli relations.

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It could thus be claimed that the AK Party kept its commitment to the relationship, which resulted in a spectacular growth in the volume of trade between the two countries. Whilst the

trade volume between Israel and Turkey was 1.3 billion US dollars in 2002, this had risen to 3.38 billion US dollars in 2008. In 2009, Turkey's exports to Israel totalled 1.5 billion US dollars, whereas its imports had reached 1.7 billion US dollars. More significantly, Turkey signed several defence contracts with Israel, including the purchase of ten Israeli-made unmanned aerial vehicles, which amounted to 2 billion US dollars. However, it should also be mentioned that the value of the trade relations with Israel constituted a very modest sum of one percent of Turkey's total trade volume. In contrast to this, Turkey's trade volume with the 22 Arab states had reached at 30 billion US dollars during the five years before 2008 and 40 billion US dollars in 2008. As for the Turkish-Iranian trade volume, this figure climbed above 10.5 billion US dollars in 2010.⁴

However, the political relations between the two countries have been heavily hindered by a series of actions by Israel. The offensive orchestrated by Israel against the refugee camp in Jenin in April 2002, had occurred only months before the AK Party government took office. This attack, which had the nature of a massacre, and the subsequent US support, directly contributed to

the development of an anti-American and anti-Israeli public sentiment in Turkey. US President George W. Bush's description of the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as "a man of peace" provoked strong reactions in the Turkish public opinion.⁵

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to an already strong resentment against American foreign policy as well as Israel which was the only country in the region which supported the invasion. At the same time, the Iraqi war

disrupted the traditional calculations regarding Turkish foreign policy within the Turkish political system due to the Northern Iraqi problem. The war helped the Iraqi Kurds emerge as a new actor in the region, and as a result, ensured that certain revisions in Turkey's internal and external political decisions were inevitable. With the new geo-strategic calculations that emerged on the Kurdish question, Turkey established close security relations with Syria and Iran. The Turkish-Israeli strategic alliance, which existed partially to end the

support Syria was providing to the PKK at that time, lost its meaning within this new conjuncture.

Israel's assassination of the seventy-year-old quadriplegic leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, and Abdulaziz Rantisi who was subsequently chosen to replace Yassin, provoked strong reactions in the Turkish public opinion, especially the grassroots of the AK Party. In the face of these events, Prime Minister Erdoğan increased his criticism towards Israel stating with a clear voice that these targeted assassinations amounted to "state terrorism".⁶ In February 2006, a Hamas committee led by Khaled Mashal visited Ankara and met with some Turkish authorities. The Turkish media and the main opposition party CHP considered this as a great mistake in terms of relations with the West.

Whereas Tel Aviv strongly criticized this visit, interestingly, Washington avoided making any direct criticism and stated that what really mattered were the messages that were given to Hamas. Despite being perceived and regarded in the West as a violent Islamic movement, it was an undeniable fact that Hamas enjoyed a strong support base in what was accepted as the Palestinian territories, having emerged as the winner in the democratic elections that the United States promoted. This posed a real dilemma. Seemingly, the realist flank in the US administration led by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was warm

towards Hamas's liaison with Turkey in order to avoid pushing Hamas to Iran's ranks.⁷ Ross Wilson, who was appointed as the US ambassador in Ankara to replace the arch neo-conservative Eric Edelman, and represented this pragmatic and realist perspective also placed the meeting on a positive framework.⁸ Meanwhile, from the perspective of Hamas, building good relations with Turkey was critical for earning diplomatic legitimacy as well as for reducing its dependency on Iran.⁹ Nevertheless, the pro-Israeli circles in the United States criticized the visit very strongly, stating that "Islamist" AK Party foreign policy architects were responsible for the Hamas visit.¹⁰

Despite these moments of crisis, the AK Party government continued the security dimension of relations with Israel. It employed these contacts to broker negotiations between Israel and Syria, the Arab state that Turkey now enjoyed close relations with. In the context of Turkey's approach to regional politics that placed diplomacy at the centre, Israel's surprise attack on Gaza between December 2008 and January 2009 was received with strong condemnation from Ankara. According to the report issued by the US-based Human Rights Watch approximately 1500 Palestinians lost their lives as a result of this attack in which white phosphorus bombs were dropped on civilian population.¹¹ The Turkish government was surprised since Israel

carried out the attack despite a verbal peace promise made by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert during his visit to Ankara just a couple of days prior to the offensive. In reaction, Ankara declared the end of its mediatory mission between Syria and Israel. The government also ensured that the children injured in the attacks would be brought to Turkey and receive treatment in Turkish hospitals. Prime Minister Erdoğan and his wife visited those children in hospitals and followed up on their situation personally. Erdoğan family's close attention to the Palestinian crisis has been closely followed by the Turkish as well as the Arab public through satellite television networks. The reaction by the Turkish public to Israel's disproportionate use of force in Gaza was massive. From Istanbul to Diyarbakir, demonstrations protesting the Gaza attack were held in nearly every city and town throughout the country.

Prime Minister Erdoğan's abandonment of a panel during the 2009 Davos Summit, in which he was accompanied by Israeli President Shimon Peres, Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki Moon and Secretary General of the Arab League Amr Moussa, in condemnation of the Israeli aggression was the most dramatic event displaying Turkey's reaction. During the panel Erdoğan quite straightforwardly told Peres "You know how to kill children very well!" A more

concrete development that strained the relations between Turkey and Israel was the exclusion of Israel from the military manoeuvres, that were to be conducted within the framework of NATO, in Turkey in January 2009 as a reaction to Israel's Gaza attacks. The manoeuvres were postponed indefinitely when the USA and Italy also announced that they would not be joining as a reaction to Israel's exclusion.¹² In response, Turkey conducted its first joint manoeuvres with Syria in April 2009.¹³

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After this event Israel openly started to have an attitude towards Turkey. As evidence that proves Israel's reaction, in January 2010 the Israeli deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon invited the Turkish ambassador to Tel Aviv making him sit in a lower chair than his own and spoke against Turkey, in Hebrew, to Israeli television cameras in front of the ambassador. Although Israel explained this attitude as a reaction to a Turkish television series airing on the TRT called "Ayrılık", depicting the slaughter of Palestinian children by Israeli soldiers, it

still had to issue a written apology as a result of Ankara's strong response.

Prime Minister Erdoğan, in his speech at the opening of TRT's Arabic television *TRT et-Turkiye*, described Israel as the real threat to the region. Turkey's statement that it would not stay silent in the face of another Israeli attack towards Gaza was an indication of the final stage of the tough language against Israel.¹⁴ In the meantime, Turkey increasingly started to bring up the contradiction of the international powers by comparing the nuclear weapons in Israel's possession and the sanctions against Iran. Israel did not attend the 2010 Nuclear Security Summit as it was afraid that Turkey might bring up this subject to the agenda. In return, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman made statements comparing Erdoğan to the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Among all these, the most dramatic development that permanently unsettled Turkish-Israeli bilateral relations was the attack conducted by Israel on the Gaza aid flotilla comprised heavily of Turkish citizens. Israeli navy commandoes attacked the largest ship of the convoy, the *Mavi Marmara*, killing nine Turkish people, one of whom with American citizenship. Turkey's immediate reaction came from the deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç, while Erdoğan was in the midst of an official tour to several Latin American nations. In a cautious language, Arınç described the attack as

an act of piracy. Erdoğan cut his tour short and returned to Ankara, sending his Foreign Minister to New York to call the United Nations Security Council, on which Turkey was then a non-permanent member, to an emergency meeting. Describing Israeli aggression as state terrorism, Erdoğan expressed that Israel showed the entire world the levels it reached in killing civilians and that Turkey's enmity would be as thorough as its friendship.¹⁵

Despite the negative comments by some circles within the Turkish media, Erdoğan's severe criticisms of Israel did not receive a strong reaction from domestic political actors. One possible reason for this might be that despite the government's strong criticisms of Israel, the defence contracts signed with this country largely continued until recent days. When it is considered that Turkey, following a liberal economic understanding, permitted the investment of Israeli firms in telecommunication and agricultural sectors, it could be said that the AK Party follows a course that does not represent the presumed ideological perceptions with regards to foreign trade. For example, the contract providing satellite pictures for the Turkish Air Forces was signed for 141 million dollars with the companies Israeli Aerospace and Elbit.¹⁶ From this perspective, the reason for the political tension in Turkish-Israeli relations should not be sought in the political

ideology that AK party represents, but rather in the paradigm shift that took place in the way the Turkish political elite interprets Middle Eastern geography and the geo-political environment. At this point, the increasing power of Iraqi Kurds and Iran, as a result of the new power distribution after the Iraqi war, reveals new developments that should be emphasized.¹⁷

The Turkish government presented Israel a list of demands that includes an apology, compensation to the relatives of the victims and a lift of the embargo placed on Gaza from Israel as conditions in to relieve tension and normalize the relations.

The disappointment caused by Israel's neutral stance during the crisis Turkey experienced with Syria over the PKK in 1998 increasingly led the perception that Israel stands opposed to Turkey with regard to the Kurdish question. However, this was precisely why Turkey had set up an alliance with Israel. In 2003, the support of Israel and the pro-Israeli groups in the United States for the war against Iraq, a war which stood against Turkish interests, was noted by the Turkish political elite. Israel's further support for the Kurdish autonomous structure in Northern Iraq

was perceived as an indirect support given to the PKK.

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The last episode in the crisis took place when the UN-commissioned Palmer-Uribe report on the 2010 Gaza flotilla attack was leaked to the *New York Times*.¹⁸ According to the report, the Israeli-imposed blockage on Gaza was acceptable and the Israel's intervention on the blockade area was justified from an international legal perspective. Furthermore, according to the report, the Israeli commandoes faced 'organized and violent resistance' and were compelled to use force as an act of self-defense. Yet the Israeli forces' use of 'excessive and unreasonable force' and the Israeli military's treatment of passengers was found abusive. Turkish member of the panel, Özdem Sanberk, wrote a separate

note of objection pointing out that the legality of the blockade was itself challenged by the UN Human Rights Council and the passengers onboard Mavi Marmara resisted to defend themselves. Sanberk suggests that the report omits the fact that the Israeli troops opened fire on the passengers from the helicopters before boarding of Israeli commanders and some passengers were deliberately shot dead by the Israeli forces.¹⁹ Several international critics of the report point out that the panel that prepared the report questionably included as its deputy chair the former Columbian President Alvaro Uribe who was criticized for human rights abuses during his term in office.²⁰

In reaction to leaking of the report, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu immediately announced a series of measures against Israel, including most significantly the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador and the downgrading of its diplomatic representation to the level of second secretary. He also announced that Turkey would take all necessary measures to ensure the safety of sea navigation in the Mediterranean Sea. Turkish anger at Israel was not only related to the lack of apology but also to the Israeli cooperation with Greek Cypriot government in natural gas drilling in waters south of Cyprus. The Greek Cypriot natural gas drilling, being carried out by Texas-based Noble, enjoys Israeli air force cover.²¹ Turkey claims that, unless the dispute

in the island is addressed first and the naval boundaries are demarcated with agreement, Greek Cypriots' claim of the area as its exclusive economic zone carries no international legitimacy. Yet, unable to prevent the Greek gas drilling, Turkey moved ahead to sign its own underwater exploration agreement with Northern Cypriot government to carry out its own drilling.²²

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While the fate of relations depends on whether or not Israel meets the primary Turkish condition of apology, such an apology is highly difficult to come, particularly after the release of the Palmer-Uribe report. Also, it is highly questionable whether a late apology would restore the relations back to its normalcy. According to Israeli sources, the Israeli government appears to make the strategic decision not to apologize because apology may not reverse the tide in relations between the two countries. In case of an apology, as

the Israeli government suspects, “the Turkish government could present this as a vindication of its policies, gaining more points in the region and giving no assurances that it would stop its [verbal] attacks on Israel.”²³

Arguably the principal party responsible for this crisis in relations between the two countries is Israeli policies that completely disregard international law. In so doing Israel considers itself unaccountable relying on the unquestioned exclusive support it receives from the United States. Turkey strongly criticizes the US acquiescence of the Israeli aggression in open seas and its silence in the face of murder of Furkan Doğan, an American citizen, by Israeli commandoes at close distance multiple times. Turkey’s decision not to reduce the Israeli diplomatic status following the flotilla incident, in which Turkish citizens were murdered, was met with strong negative reaction by the domestic public opinion. The public mood against Israel is so strong that even the PKK is irked at any suggestion of receiving help from Israel when such an idea was raised by the Israeli officials.²⁴

Turkey’s Deep Geo-political Rivalry with Iran

Turkey’s perception of Iran varied in accordance with the ideological foundations and the political outlook of

different political actors. This is not only a result of Iran’s existing Islamic regime, but also of Turkey’s historically-rooted rivalry with this nation. Not allowing its relationship with Iran to be shaped by perceptions, Turkey carried out a cautious, but close diplomatic relations with Iran in the last ten years. As regards dealing with the Kurdish question, a complete alliance was established in economic and security areas. With this diplomacy-first approach, Turkey was able to desecuritize its relations with both Iran and Syria.²⁵

It is not possible to explain the policy of the AK Party government towards these two countries with the ideological foundations of the party leadership. Undoubtedly, Iran and Syria are two powerful neighbours that cannot be disregarded by Turkey and the Turkish business world. As a matter of fact, former President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who was an ardent secularist, visited Iran after Bush defined Iran as part of the “axis of evil” in 2002 and signed two treaties that aimed to strengthen economic and cultural cooperation.²⁶ Furthermore, Sezer confirmed the beginning of a new era in relations between the two countries by attending the funeral service of the late Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad. The AK Party leadership very much embraced the same approach and further developed a nearly problem-free relationship with Iran at least on the surface level. In essence, however, Turkey

remained cautious regarding Iran and its emergence as a regional hegemon following the Iraq War of 2003.

Undoubtedly, unlike others in the region, Turkey does not see Iran as an existential security threat, but as a rival in terms of impact and influence, a significant trade partner and natural gas supply source without which Turkey had to completely rely on Russia, and an operational ally against the PKK terrorism. Nevertheless, policy-makers in Ankara are deeply concerned about the profoundly increased power of Iran in the regional geopolitical structure that emerged after the Iraq War. In this new environment, it is necessary to state that Turkey's two Arab neighbours, Iraq and Syria, are now within Iran's sphere of influence, which is an unprecedented development in the entire history of Turkish-Iranian competition. Due to this chain of alliance, Iran has effectively become a Mediterranean power and many Arab leaders including the Jordanian King Abdullah II spoke of an emerging Shia crescent, encapsulating the area from Bahrain to Lebanon, and to the fear of many Sunni Arab regimes, might turn into a Shia full moon.²⁷ For this reason, in order to decrease Iran's impact in the Middle East in general,

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Turkey felt it necessary to gain more prominence in the Palestinian question and win hearts and minds of the Arab public. However, until very recently, Turkey did not pursue a policy that confronts the Shia bloc and expressed that an Iran integrated within the system is very important for regional peace and stability. The main logic in this calculation was that Iran was in a particularly critical position with regard to Iraq's stability with implications for the Kurdish question. In this framework, Turkey followed a pragmatic and integrationist policy towards Iran as different from the axis of the Arab world and that of Israel and the United States. Turkey is aware that confronting Iran will not stop it from acquiring nuclear weapons, but on the contrary, further accelerate this process. Turkey grants Iran its right to nuclear energy as a result of its increasing influence and decreasing natural resources and natural rights arising from international law. Together with Brazil, Turkey has played an active role in overcoming Iran's nuclear crisis by means of a uranium swap scheme. Along with Brazil, it was the only country to vote no on the sanctions brought against Iran in the UN Security Council.

It was also with this strategic mindset that the AK Party government was amongst the first governments to congratulate the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad after his disputed 2009 presidential election victory. Although this attitude was sharply criticised by Iranian liberals, Turkey was not convinced by any evidence that indicates fraud in the elections and did not make it a part of its policy to intervene in domestic politics of Iran with the expectation, of course, that Iran adhered to the same principle. Interestingly, the Iraqi and Afghani governments almost competed with each other to congratulate Ahmedinejad despite being under the invasion of American troops.²⁸

As will be discussed in the following section, Turkey's diplomatically cordial relationship towards the Shia bloc has dramatically changed after the Arab popular revolts, especially after they encapsulated Syria. Iran clearly sees Syria as an indispensable part of its sphere of influence in the region and after Turkey began to pressure Syrian regime to be respectful of the democratic demands of its people, majority of whom are Sunnis, Iranian military circles have directed against Turkey some harsh statements. It was in this context that Ankara accepted to deploy NATO early warning system in the southeastern province. In reaction, a senior commander in Iran's Revolutionary Guard stated that it will

target Malatya in case of an Israeli attack against its nuclear facilities.²⁹ Most likely in response to such threats, Turkey would like to strengthen its missile defence capabilities by purchasing Patriot PAC-3 anti-missile batteries from the United States.³⁰

The Iranian Sphere of Influence in the Arab World

Syria, Iraq and Lebanon are three critically important countries for Turkey. Turkey has a historically-rooted fierce rivalry with Iran in this region. However, a soft geopolitical competition is currently on the agenda. With the Iraqi war completing the puzzle by bringing Shia elements to power, Iran is now able to reach the Mediterranean thanks to its sphere of influence over three countries. In addition, Iran with Syria and Iraq completely closes Turkey's geographic reach to the rest of the region, with a combined border of nearly 1800 kilometres. These countries also are of critical importance to Turkish security interests due to the Kurdish question. As a result of the Iraq war, an autonomous political Kurdish presence emerged, which Turkey has to take into consideration from political and economic aspects. In the meantime, both Iran and Syria have not completely abandoned their interest in using the PKK card against Turkey.

Syria was often cited as the most successful diplomatic undertaking of the AK Party government in the last few years as a realization of “zero problem with neighbours” ideal. Although the normalization of Turkish-Syria relations started before the AK Party government, the contribution of the AK Party government in the development of these relations was indisputable.

The death of Hafz al-Assad who pursued anti-Turkish policies and supported terrorism meant the end of another serious obstacle for the betterment of Turkish-Syrian relationship. In protest for Turkey’s ambitious Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), hydroelectric project which allegedly decreased quantity of Euphrates water flowing into Syria, Hafiz Al-Assad developed a policy of supporting PKK terrorism and moved to develop an alliance with Greece. In response, Turkey supported Israel in an attempt to create a bloc. In 1998, Turkey threatened Syria with a military offensive if it did not close the PKK camps in Syria and hand over leaders of the PKK. Syria complied with these demands easing the way to start diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries. The prospects of good relations were further improved when Beshar al-Assad who was regarded as more pragmatic and liberal replaced his father in 2000 following his death. Meanwhile Turkey supported Beshar during his deep family power struggle with his uncle, Rifaat al-Assad.³¹

In the course of next few years, Turkish-Syrian relations were improved to the point that the two states declared mutual removal of visa requirement in 2009. As of 2010, civilian human traffic between the two countries has reached 100 thousand people per month. While only twenty thousand Turkish citizens visited Syria in 1990, this number reached a record of one million.³²

In parallel, Turkish government moved to waive visa requirements for Lebanese and Jordanian citizens visiting Turkey. In addition, Turkey led in the establishment of a free trade zone to include Syria, Lebanon and Jordan creating a market of 100 million people. In July 2010, the “Close Neighbours Economic and Trade Association Council” (CNETAC) to include the same countries was created to research the possibility of cooperation and integration in different economic sectors. Turkey’s 3 billion dollars worth of trade with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan constituted around ten per cent of Turkey’s total trade volume with the Arab world, far exceeding its trade level with Israel worth 2.5 billion US dollars.³³

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Unfortunately, the honeymoon in Turkish-Syrian relations was not to last long. In March 2011, public revolts similar to the ones that toppled regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya soon encapsulated Syria, leading to massive uprising. The Syrian Baath Party regime in power since 1963 reacted to the events with violence despite attempts by Turkey to convince al-Assad to lead a peaceful transformation. According to a report published by the United Nations, Syrian regime utilized brutality against civilians, including torture and rape of under-aged children.³⁴

The 22-member Arab League took the initiative to pressure Syria to end its violence and when it failed in these attempts expelled it from the organization. In August, the UN Security Council adopted a statement condemning Syria's violence; yet, due to Russian and Chinese objections, it has failed to pass a resolution involving economic measures against Syria. Turkey fully cooperates with the Arab League, the United States and Europe in imposing sanctions against Syria while the Baath regime is given firm support by Russia, China, Iran and Hezbollah. In response to Turkish position, Syria cancelled its free trade agreement with Turkey prompting the latter to impose 30 per cent customs duty on products entering from Syria. In addition, provoking Ankara's strong protest, a pro-Assad mob attacked the Turkish embassy

in Damascus burning the Turkish flag. Meanwhile, quite interestingly, Israel is ambivalent in its stance regarding the fate of Assad despite his support to Hezbollah and Hamas. For Israelis, it is easier to deal with the regime in Damascus since "it represents a coherent state with more reliable leadership."³⁵ One can interpret this line as an Israeli preference to see the continuation of Syria's minority regime to a new democratic political system in which pro-Islamic parties ascend to power as they did elsewhere in the region.

The present tension in Turkish-Syrian relations spells the end of Turkish diplomatic handling of Iranian sphere of influence, as well Turkey's following a non-conventional foreign policy in the region distancing itself from the position of the West. While Turkish-Israeli tension is a clear indication that Ankara does not necessarily synchronize its foreign policy with that of Washington, it is also interesting that the same tension does not create an obstacle for an unusually warm relationship between the AK Party government and Obama administration.

Ironically, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki who himself came to power following Iraq war of 2003 voices support to Assad.³⁶ This was a predictable outcome of the Iraq war, in addition to creating suitable conditions for a *de facto* independence to Northern Iraqi Kurdish groups resulting in serious implications for its fight with the PKK terrorism. With the coming to power of Shiite majority

in Iraq, Iran has closed the geographic gap between itself and its Syrian ally, reaching to the Mediterranean Sea.

Despite all these negative developments, Turkey avoided moves that would threaten stability in Iraq. On the contrary, it tried to provide integration of all parties, most significantly Sunni Arab groups by ensuring their involvement in Iraqi national politics and 2005 general elections.

Undoubtedly, having a clear majority in the population, the Shiite Arab parties dominate any election results, leading to the outcome of Iranian influence in Iraqi politics. Recognizing this reality, Turkey has attempted to build ties with the Shiite Arabs. In March 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan became the first Sunni leader to have visited the mausoleum of Ali, son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad in Najaf. The Prime Minister, during the same visit, organised a sincere discussion regarding the future of Iraq with the most prominent Shia leader in Iraq, Ayatollah Sistani, who is regarded as the most influential figure in Iraqi politics. The fact that Sistani is Persian and of Iranian citizenship, however, is an indicator of the depth of Iran's historically-rooted influence in the country. In this regard, Turkey does not have any chance to compete with Iran over gaining popularity of the country's Shia Arab population. Recognition of this fact in the new realist context will force Turkey to approach Iraqi Kurds,

since they increasingly recognize that their isolation cannot be ended by Israel. In fact, in the realm of economics, Northern Iraq is a lucrative market for Turkish companies, particularly in trade and construction sectors. As a result of this interaction, Turkey's export to Iraq, much of which is to Northern Iraq, grew from around 900 million dollars in 2003 to 6 billion dollars in 2009. In the meantime, Turkish NGOs invested in education from primary schools to universities. The fate of this relationship, however, rests on the relationship between the Northern Iraqi authority and the PKK, as well as on the success of Turkish democratization as regards to its own Kurdish question.

Turkey seeks to play an active role in Lebanon to help mediate sectarian divisions countering Iranian efforts to gain influence. In November 2010, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Lebanon shortly after Iranian President Ahmedinejad's visit to the same country in October of the same year and was enthusiastically received by the Sunniled government.

Lebanese politics is deeply divided between the March 14 alliance led by Saad Hariri who is supported by Saudi Arabia and the United States, and the March 8 alliance led by Hezbollah and supported by Syria and Iran. In 2008, a clash between Hezbollah and followers of then Prime Minister Saad Hariri over his decision to close a Hezbollah

telecommunications facility broke out and left 80 people dead. Qatar then brokered a deal that ended the conflict. Yet the tension has returned, when a UN-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigating the 2005 assassination of Lebanon's former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri indicted four senior Hezbollah members of involvement in the incident. Eleven Hezbollah-led opposition ministers in the coalition government resigned in protest of Prime Minister Hariri's refusal to reject the Tribunal, causing its collapse in January 2011.

In all of these events, Turkey assumed an active diplomatic stance especially through regular trilateral summit meetings with Syria and Qatar to resolve the crisis. In the absence of Saudi Arabia and Egypt as large Arab powers to play an effective role in regional politics, Turkey enlisted the support of Qatar, a tiny but diplomatically influential Gulf state.

Showing the volatile nature of Lebanese politics, the Lebanese political division further increased following the events in Syria.

The crisis of government was solved when March 8 coalition managed to convince Sunni politician Najeb Mikati to become the Prime Minister and thus form the government. Still, Turkey's active diplomacy in Lebanon indicates its

central position in Middle East politics and ultimately increases its rivalry with Iran. In this regard, Lebanese crisis shows shifting balance of power in the region where, as Anthony Shadid notes, "Turkey has proved the most dynamic, projecting an increasingly assertive and independent foreign policy in an Arab world bereft of any country that matches its stature."³⁷

Showing the volatile nature of Lebanese politics, the Lebanese political division further increased following the events in Syria. Hezbollah firmly supports the Syrian regime causing friction in the March 8 coalition, and the March 14 coalition backs the opposition.³⁸ In this new context, as Turkey has clearly distanced itself from Syria and taken an active position to force a democratic transformation in its neighbour, it will not be able to maintain its claimed role as a neutral arbiter in Lebanese politics.

The Sunni Arab Bloc

Bahrain and Saudi Arabia perceive Iran as an existential threat from their traditional foreign policy perspectives due to their own Shia populations, while the United Arab Emirates has a troublesome relationship with Tehran due to Iranian controlled group of islands in the Gulf. One can add to this group Egypt, the most populous Arab nation that is also disturbed by Iran's increasing power in the Middle East and the

Mediterranean region. Although Egypt maintained a hostile relationship with Iran during the Mubarak era, after the toppling of Mubarak regime, it showed some gestures to Iran, allowing Iranian warships to pass through the Suez Canal. Israel expressed concerns about the prospects of relations between the two countries, which have not had diplomatic relations since 1979.³⁹ Nevertheless, as the 2011 parliamentary elections clearly demonstrated, pro-Islamic parties will have the most dominant position in the future of Egyptian political system and, in this regard, one can expect that sensitivity about Iran's emerging regional hegemony would be maintained in Egyptian foreign policy.

Egyptian and Iranian interests ultimately clash, since the former desires to emerge as the leader of the Arab world, which is a natural position for a country of its size and influence. As a matter of fact, the el-Fatah and Hamas reconciliation, which Turkey was not able to achieve despite all its efforts, has become possible under the mediation of Egypt. Turkey's interests lie in turning Egypt, which attained a democratic system, not into a rival but a partner. In this sense, for Turkey, Egypt can emerge as a significant geostrategic partner. According to Davutoğlu, "a partnership between Turkey and Egypt could create a new, democratic axis of power".⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, Turkish leaders voiced the strongest international support

for the regime change in Egypt and expressed their appreciation for Egypt's efforts towards achieving Palestinian reconciliation. Both countries have shared concerns regarding Israel and Iran. The Freedom and Justice Party, established by the Muslim Brotherhood, emerged as the strongest in the recent elections and will be playing an important part in Egypt's future. In contrast to its main competitor, the Salafi al-Nour party, which is closer to Saudi Arabian interpretation of Islam, Freedom and Justice Party sees the AK Party as a model for the country's democratic transformation.

Saudi Arabia is at some distance from Turkish interpretation of democracy and its compatibility with Islam. The strict interpretation of Wahhabism, Saudi official teaching of Islam, regards Shia in extreme hostility terms. In Saudi perceptions, Iran is an existential threat mainly because of the Shia minority which constitutes approximately 10-15% of its population. What is more critical is that this population lives in the oil rich Gulf area of the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia takes the most active position as regards to the expansion of Iranian sphere of influence. The latest indicator of this was Saudi Arabia's sending troops to help repress the public uprising in Bahrain, where more than sixty per cent of the population adhere to the Shia sect.

The Saudis expect Turkey to employ a tougher stance on Iran and are

disturbed by Turkey's more diplomatic approach towards Iran on the nuclear energy issue. While sharing a concern about the rise of Iranian power in the region, Turkey has so far persistently refused to take part in a Saudi-led Sunni alliance. As mentioned above, Turkey accepts the existence of Shia populations as a reality and has sought ties with the Shia community with Prime Minister Erdoğan paying symbolically significant visits to Shia religious sites in Iraq and holding meetings with leaders of the Shia community. Turkey issued warnings against Iran and Saudi Arabia to act with restraint in their clash over Bahrain and opposed Saudi interference in the island.⁴¹ Foreign Minister Davutoğlu held many discussions over the phone with numerous leaders including the Bahraini Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa in order to ease the tension. Turkish officials hosted the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal to discuss the topic. The Turkish Foreign Ministry issued a statement noting that Saudi forces' entrance to Bahrain was a result Bahrain's right to sovereignty, but nevertheless stated that the proportionality of the force used against the protestors increased after this event.⁴²

Until the recent hardening of Turkish position vis-à-vis the Iran-led Shia bloc and Turkey's support to the Arab League in countering the Syrian regime, the Saudi-led Gulf alliance

was quite unhappy with Turkey's soft diplomatic approach. This does not mean, however, that Turkey sides with the Saudi-led alliance of monarchies. Due to differences in interpretation of religion, Saudis are not very happy with the prospect of a Turkey-friendly Muslim Brotherhood-controlled chain of regimes from Tunisia to Egypt and mostly likely expanding to Syria. Furthermore, there is a concern that the expansion of a democratization wave may eventually encapsulate the Kingdom itself. It voices support to democratization wave in the Middle East and clearly demands ending all unelected repressive dictatorships. In his message sent to the Alliance of Civilizations forum held in Qatar in December 2011 Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan made a statement that targets regimes beyond Syria: "We have to end blood and tears in the Middle East. As long as dictatorships that are intolerant of all kinds of opposing views and movements continue to exist, we cannot have peace of mind and stability."⁴³

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Turkey's liberal and pro-democracy discourse is followed with suspicion by authoritarian Sunni Gulf regimes who, being unable to counter Iranian ambitions on their own, rely on the support of the West and even Israel. According to *the Times* of the United Kingdom, in the event of an Iranian attack, Saudi Arabia will open its air space to Israel, a speculation that Saudi regime has vehemently denied.⁴⁴ Interestingly, such overtures do not escape from the attention of pro-Israeli circles. Martin Indyk, an important name of the American Jewish lobby as the founder of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) and the director of Saban Centre for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institute, is of the opinion that Israel ought to resolve its Palestinian question somehow and form an alliance with the Sunni Arabs in order to counter Iran's increasing influence in the region.⁴⁵

Concluding Remarks: Turkey's Moment in the New Middle East

The wave of democratization which grasped all Middle Eastern nations following the overthrow of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya is a moment of crisis as well as opportunity for Turkish foreign policy. Turkey naturally chose to pursue its foreign policy with existing governments and in this respect

engaged in comprehensive relations with authoritarian unelected Arab regimes, including Syria and Saudi Arabia.

The wave of democratization which grasped all Middle Eastern nations following the overthrow of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya is a moment of crisis as well as opportunity for Turkish foreign policy.

Democratic uprisings in the Arab world is a moment of crisis for Turkey at least in the sense of economic relations. As a trading nation short of major energy resources, the main priority of Turkey is to expand its exports to the Middle East. Between 2002-2010, the period in which AK Party was in power, Turkey managed to increase its volume of trade with the Arab world five-fold.

The foreign trade lobby in Turkey was suspicious of the Arab democratic revolts and saw it as foreign-inspired disturbances keen on destroying Turkey's economic expansion. According to calculations fed by these circles, the damage of the Arab spring for the Turkish economy is estimated to stand at 384 million US dollars. According to the Turkish Exporters Assembly, the biggest part of the loss in exports was in Libya. While Turkey has exports worth 146.6 million dollars in January 2011, this figure fell to 23.5 million dollars in

March. The fall in exports was recorded at 24 percent for Egypt and Yemen, and at 20 percent for Tunisia.⁴⁶ Such figures, however, discard the long term prospects in which democracy in the region leads to major economic boom for the entire region, boosting Turkey's trade volume.

Democracy is the greatest foreign policy asset and source of soft power for Turkey in the region.

However it is clear that Turkey's liberal democratic system and economic success, coupled with the stance it took against Israel, creates an important appeal in the Arab world. As Ibrahim Kalin, chief advisor to Turkish Prime Minister, points out, a democratic and prosperous Arab world will reinforce Turkey's power in the region.⁴⁷

Democracy is the greatest foreign policy asset and source of soft power for Turkey in the region. Unlike other

aspiring regional powers, Turkey does not enjoy the unquestioned support of a superpower, or a deeply-rooted geo-cultural sphere of influence, based on sectarian solidarity. It does not speak the language of the region, and, as a secular system, does not champion a religious ideology that would help spread its influence. History offers advantages as well as disadvantages for Turkey when it approaches the region. The only power that will pave the way for Turkish sphere of influence in the region will be its own democratic and economic appeal. In this sense, Turkey's liberal foreign policy is clearly based on *Realpolitik* calculations of national interest rather than any idealist dreams. The political system in which Islam, democracy, and secularism coexist and result in a peaceful society experiencing stability and an economic boom in the middle of a global financial crisis is Turkey's greatest export asset. It for this reason that, according to all public opinion polls, Prime Minister Erdoğan emerges as the most popular leader in the entire region.

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