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New Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Middle East: Neither so New, Nor so Turkish

Ana Almuedo



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Introduction

Turkish foreign policy activism and involvement in the Middle East boosted the literature and debates analysing the why, how and when of this new trend. Since Turkey strengthened its ties with the Middle East in the 2000s, a region that traditionally enjoyed little weight in Turkish foreign policy, some experts assumed a *brand new* Turkish foreign policy had emerged.¹

This paper could be considered as one of many in the recent literature about Turkish foreign policy. However, the aim here is to draw an analysis from an outsider-European perspective through the systemic level of foreign policy analysis. *New Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Middle East: Neither so New, Nor so Turkish* tries firstly to describe Turkish foreign policy as something that has not emerged from nowhere. It is not a *brand new* policy. Previous periods of Turkish activism in the Middle East already existed before the AKP, in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, under the government of Turgut Özal. Nevertheless, changes in the domestic and international context in the last two decades provided the AKP with the perfect framework to emerge as a regional power and to develop its foreign relations further.

The second hypothesis is that structural factors in the region and in the international system provided the context for Turkish assertiveness in the Middle East, even if the domestic factors and, to a minor extent, identity, may have helped. Turkish foreign policy is “nor so Turkish” because Turkish identity was not the main reason for the role Ankara achieved in the region. Turkey had the capabilities to become a regional power in the Middle East and, as long as structural changes took place in the region and in the international system, this provided Ankara with the ideal context to implement those capabilities.

In 2002, the AKP came to power. Ankara increasingly became a committed actor in the region following the principles of the “zero problems with neighbours” policy. This policy designed by current Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was based on the establishment of good relations with all neighbours on a sum-sum approach. As part of the “strategic depth” doctrine, Davutoglu pleads for an active engagement of Turkey with all the regions where it belongs, mainly by rediscovering its historical and geographical identity.²

Turkey's involvement in the Middle East expanded and it began to act as a third party in the conflicts of the region. Hard power and a securitised approach were replaced by a more balanced one focused on soft power capabilities. This change of orientation made many observers establish a cause-effect relation between the Islamist-rooted AKP's coming to power and Ankara's new activism in the Middle East. The “strategic depth” geopolitical vision of Turkey made experts emphasise Turkish domestic features as drivers of what was the new architecture of Ankara's foreign policy.³ According to Taspinar, Neo-Ottomanist features could be perceived in Turkish foreign policy in the sense of grandeur and self-confidence as Ankara tried to act as

1. B. Aras, *Turkey between Syria and Israel: Turkey's Rising Soft Power*, “SETA Policy Brief”, No. 15, May 2008; A. Sözen, “A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy: Transition and Challenges”, *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, March 2010, pp. 103-123.

2. On Davutoglu's “strategic depth doctrine”, see: A. Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, İstanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2001; A. Murrison, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6, November 2006, pp. 945-964; A. Davutoglu, “Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Affairs*, May 2010.

3. A. Sözen, A., op. cit.; Z. Önis, “Turkey and the Middle East after September 11: The Importance of the EU Dimension”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2004; B. Aras and R.K. Polat, “Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran”, *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 39, No. 5, October 2008, pp. 495-515.

a regional superpower, besides its willingness to embrace both the West and the Islamic world.⁴ However, some authors have highlighted identity or ideological values as the main motivators for the new design of Ankara's foreign policy. They conclude that the ruling Islamist AK Party is active in the Middle East just for ideological-Islamist reasons.⁵ Among them, Cagaptay asserts that Turkish activism towards the Middle East may conflict with its traditional ties with the West.⁶

While the domestic and the ideological factors may be borne in mind, this paper considers the structural changes in the international system as the main catalyst for the "new" Turkish foreign policy. Reducing Turkish activism to Islamist countries is a biased perspective as we may note that it is not just developing its relations with Middle Eastern countries, but also with Russia, China, Brazil and especially with the Balkans and Caucasus. We may even see how Ankara has taken some steps towards the normalisation of relations with Armenia, Cyprus and Greece.

This paper argues that the rising international and regional context surrounding Turkey provided Ankara with the capacity for strengthening ties with its neighbours and acting as a regional power. The Middle East power vacuum emerged at the beginning of the 2000s; new security challenges appeared in the regional context; Turkey looked for new markets and emerged as a "trading state",⁷ and the EU anchor gave self-confidence, thus laying down the perfect conditions for Turkey to emerge as a regional power, even with international ambitions. What is more, Turkey sees itself as the legitimate spokesperson of the region, even in the position of acting as a mentor for its neighbours. The Arab uprisings taking place from the beginning of 2011 is a very good example. Countries that had risen against their dictators and asked for a democratic regime looked towards Turkey to draw some lessons from its democratic experience. Furthermore, Islamist parties previously forbidden in those countries declared their willingness to follow the steps of the moderate Islamist AKP.

This paper will begin with an analysis of the Turkish domestic, international, and regional context. Firstly, it will examine how Turkish foreign policy was influenced by structural systemic changes, analysing the following: first, traditional Turkish Western ties; second, the democratisation process, closely related to EU membership; third, how the systemic changes, the Middle East power vacuum and the new security challenges guided the "new" foreign policy; fourth, how economic interests were drivers of foreign policy; and, finally, the use of soft power by Turkey. The next chapter will focus on the outcomes of the foreign policy that resulted from this change. Turkish relations with Israel-Palestine, Iran, Syria and Iraq will be studied, assessing the difficult equilibrium that has to be achieved to develop a "zero problems with neighbours" policy in the most conflictive region in the world.

4. Ö. Taspınar, *Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism*, "Carnegie Papers", No. 10, September 2009.

5. S. Cagaptay, "AKP's Foreign Policy: The Misnomer of 'Neo-Ottomanism'", *The Turkey Analyst*, No. 24, April 2009; G.E. Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*, Washington, DC, United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007.

6. About the debate over the irreconcilable Turkish foreign policy towards the West and the Middle East, see: S. Cagaptay, "Turkey Is Leaving the West", *Foreign Affairs*, October 2009, [Online] Available from <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65661/soner-cagaptay/is-turkey-leaving-the-west?page=2> [Accessed: 13th March 2011]; B.K. Kanat, "AK Party's Foreign Policy: Is Turkey Turning Away from the West?", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2010, pp. 205-225; T. Oguzlu, "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, March 2008, pp. 3-20.

7. K. Kirişçi, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of Trading State", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40, 2009, pp. 29-57.

Turkey and its Changing Context

Turkish Historical Background

Turkey has had a strong Western vocation since the establishment in 1923 of the Turkish Republic on the principles of Kemalism, secularism and Westernisation. From that moment on and throughout the Cold War, Turkey saw the Middle East through the lens of its Western alignment. Ankara did not consider itself as a part of the Middle East and preferred to stay out of its conflicts. Turkey was a fundamental ally for the US during the Cold War due to its geopolitical position, blocking the Soviet expansion in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Until the late 1980s, Turkey did not even develop a planned strategy towards the Middle East. Establishing relations with the Middle East was seen as contradictory with Turkish Western ties. With the arrival of the Prime Minister Turgut Özal in 1983, the political and economic transformation of Turkey began. This economist opened the Turkish economy to new markets, including the Middle East. Özal's years represent a shift in the previous avoidance of the Middle East.

What is more, with the end of the Cold War the paradigm for Turkey changed radically. The security partnership between the US and Turkey had lost its rationale⁸ and it found its place in the emerging international order highly uncertain. Nevertheless, Özal decided to take part in the allied coalition in the Gulf War in 1990-1991 to demonstrate Turkish geopolitical relevance to the West. Taking part in the conflict was the beginning of Turkey's assertiveness in the Middle East.⁹ At the end of the Gulf War, the Kurdish separatist PKK began to rise up in the North of the country and Iraqi instability was a security threat to Turkish security. The previous openness towards the Middle East reversed and Turkish foreign policy became highly securitised.

The post-Cold War paradigm also opened Turkey to new regions previously left aside, not only the Middle East, but also the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia. As the EU started to absorb the Balkan countries and Russia regained its influence in Central Asia, the Middle East was the only region where Ankara could still exert its influence.¹⁰

The scenario for Turkey also changed in the year 1999 with two major events: first, the capture of the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, paved the way for the improvement of Syrian-Turkish relations and also for a better approach towards the Kurdish population; and, second, the recognition in the Helsinki European Council of Turkey as a candidate for the European Union (EU). From that year on, Ankara carried out great political and economic reforms to comply with the Copenhagen criteria. The consolidation of political and economic stability may have brought new political attitudes, more self-confidence and more willingness to get involved in the region. The EU-driven changes in domestic politics transformed the regional rhetoric of Turkish policy-makers, who saw themselves as a part of the EU. This helped Ankara to adopt a more self-assured attitude towards its neighbours and paved the way for a redefinition of friends and enemies in the region.¹¹ This

8. F.S. Larrabee, "Turkey's New Geopolitics", *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2010, p. 158.

9. A. Makovsky, "The New Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy", *SAIS Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1999, pp. 92-113.

10. S. Kardas, "Turkey: Redrawing the Middle East Map or Building Sandcastles?", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, Spring 2010, pp. 115-136.

11. B. Aras, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

phenomenon is what Ziya Önis calls "the EU anchor"; that is, how the changing domestic context, together with the external factors, paved the way for Turkey to become a benign regional power.¹²

Turkey's Western Ties: Emerging as an Independent Actor

During the Cold War, Turkish foreign policy was anchored in the West, mainly as a consequence of its historical Western orientation to reaffirm its status as a European country. The Middle East was only considered in the framework of its relations with the West.¹³ Turkey is a long-standing member of the major political and economic Western institutions: since the mid-20th century it has been part of the Council of Europe, OECD, NATO, and had its first Association Agreement with the EEC in 1963. Indeed, during the Cold War Turkey had a very cosy security agreement: it was a strategic ally of the US and an essential part of NATO. Meanwhile, Middle East security concerns remained on a second stage. With the end of the Cold War, Turkey finds itself in an unstable region with new challenges and opportunities to deal with.

Turkey has been for decades an unquestioned partner of the US. Even when Turkey lost its key value in terms of Soviet containment, relations between the US and Turkey showed considerable resilience and strength in the aftermath of the Cold War.¹⁴ In the post-Cold War era, regional security problems dominated US-Turkey relations. The US was a strong supporter of the strategic partnership between Israel and Turkey in the mid-1990s since it brought together two of Washington's closest allies with the strongest capabilities in the Middle East.¹⁵

This longstanding alliance suffered a setback due to the Turkish Parliament's decision in 2003 not to allow US troops access to northern Iraq via Turkish territory, bringing the relationship with the United States to its lowest ebb.¹⁶ Furthermore, with the separatist Kurdish organisation PKK announcement of the end of the ceasefire, Turkey accused the US of being unable to create stability after the invasion. From that moment on, the US and Turkey seemed to be locked in a cycle of mistrust. Even if they still have many interests in common and both states try to preserve the "strategic partnership" in some fields such as economics, energy, and the Palestinian-Israeli Peace Process, they do have some conflicting points of views in the region.

Iran's nuclear policy is the most critical conflict point between Turkey and the United States. Washington has long asked Ankara to impose sanctions on Iran to deter it from continuing with its nuclear programme. However, Turkey has called for the intensification of diplomatic efforts to resolve the problem and has voted against the imposition of new sanctions over Iran in the Security Council of the United Nations, after the agreement signed between Iran, Brazil and Turkey over the nuclear programme of Teheran.

12. Z. Önis, op. cit.

13. M.B. Altunisik, *Turkey's Changing Middle East Policy*, "UNISCI Discussion Papers", No. 23, May 2010.

14. K. Kirişçi, "US-Turkish Relations: New Uncertainties in a Renewed Partnership", in B. Rubin and K. Kirişçi (eds.), *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001, pp. 129-150.

15. M.B. Altunisik, "Turkish Policy Toward Israel", in A. Makovsky and S. Sayari (eds.), *Turkey's New World: Changing Dynamics in Turkish Foreign Policy*, Washington, DC, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000.

16. K. Kirişçi, "Between Europe and the Middle East: The Transformation of the Turkish Policy", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 1, March 2004, p. 4.

Relations between Turkey and the European Union date from long ago. Turkey and the European Economic Community (EEC) signed their first Association Agreement in 1963 and since then Turkey has been trying to access the European Communities. The EU decision to recognise Turkey as a candidate for full membership in the European Council's Helsinki Summit in December 1999 accelerated both the process of democratisation in Turkey, and political and economic reforms heading towards meeting the Copenhagen criteria.

The EU membership perspective, it is argued, has given Ankara the confidence to develop a less hard security policy and a more democratic foreign policy.¹⁷ Furthermore, whilst Turkey is anchored in the EU it is more capable of playing an active role in the Middle East and act as a constructive regional power.¹⁸

However, Ankara's ties with the West suffered two main setbacks: first, the opposition in Parliament to allowing US troops to go via Turkish territory during the Iraqi invasion in 2003, and the stagnation of relations because of the instability created in the Middle East as a consequence of the Bush Administration's policies in the region; second, Cyprus became a member of the EU shortly after the Greek Cypriots rejected the UN's Annan Plan for a resolution of the conflict, although it was approved by the Turkish Cypriots. The Cyprus issue was thus transformed into an intra-EU conflict and Turkish membership remains hostage to this dispute.¹⁹ This does not mean that Ankara is "turning away from the West", but that the Western axis is no longer the only one and Ankara is diversifying its axis.

Turkish Internal Factors

The emerging domestic context and democratisation process affected Turkish foreign policy in many different ways. Firstly, civil-military relations changed, civilian control over the militaries was strengthened, and the military lost its privileged role on foreign affairs as other actors came on scene. As a consequence, security issues and the hard power approach was instead replaced by a more balanced, pragmatic strategy, giving priority to economic interests and soft power. As economics gained weight in Turkish relations over security, relations with neighbours expanded.²⁰

Secondly, civil society organisations became actors in Turkish foreign affairs. The number of think tanks in Turkey increased during the last eight years of the AKP in power, especially those related to economic and business organisations. Some of them, such as the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD), the Turkish Union Chamber (TOBB) or the Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON) based in Ankara, regularly lobby the government.²¹ These organisations became champions of the political normalisation of relations with neighbours as a means to achieve trading agreements, especially with Middle Eastern countries, which have proved to be lucrative markets.

17. A. Eralp, "Turkey and the European Union", in L.G. Martin and D. Keridis, *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy*, Cambridge, MA, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2004, p. 81.

18. A. Akçakoca, *Turkish Foreign Policy – Between East and West?*, "Policy Brief", European Policy Center, October 2009.

19. International Crisis Group, *Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints*, "Europe Report", No. 203, 7th April 2010, pp. 6-7.

20. K. Kırışçi, N. Tocci and J. Walker, *A Neighborhood Rediscovered: Turkey's Transatlantic Value in the Middle East*, "Brussels Forum Paper Series", German Marshall Funds, March 2010.

21. W. Kristianasen, "Les think tanks turcs, agents du changement", *Le Monde diplomatique*, 8th February 2010.

Whilst Turkey runs a deficit in its overall trade with the world, it had an \$8 billion surplus with the Middle East in 2009.²²

Thirdly, public opinion has an increasing role in foreign policy, as the democratisation process has made government more accountable to the citizens, while freedom of expression has been improved.²³ Furthermore, Prime Minister Erdogan and AKP leaders realised he might be bending to the demands of the electorate and defending certain principles in response to electoral expectations.

Middle East Systemic Transformation: Power Vacuum and Security Threats

The central hypothesis of this paper is that Turkish foreign policy is not a completely new policy created by the AKP government. A new approach has materialised through new assertiveness and involvement in Middle Eastern issues, playing a third party role in the conflicts, deepening economic ties, and emphasising the soft power strategy. Turkey has emerged as a regional power not only because of Turkish internal features, but mainly as a consequence of systemic transformations in the region. First, the security environment changed and the country started to find stability through developing closer economic ties.²⁴ Second, a shift in the balance of power left a power vacuum in the Middle East that was eventually filled by Turkey.

In 1999, the EU finally recognised the country as a candidate for membership at the same time that the leader of the Kurdish separatist organisation PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured. From that moment on, the separatist PKK, the most immediate security threat for Turkey, was over and, at the same moment, tensions with Syria ended. The main reasons for the Turkish Western orientation and alliance with the United States and Israel concluded, and Ankara started to diversify its relations and to further deepen its economic ties.

The region faced a deep crisis during the 2000s, with the failure of the Arab-Israeli Peace Process and when the Second Intifada broke out. Closely related to the failure of the Peace Process was the radicalisation of Islamism and the spread of terrorist threats in the region and all over the world. The Lebanon also became highly polarised and radical Islamism increased, led by the rise of Hezbollah. In this context, the US invasion of Iraq made the situation even worse. The invasion created instability in the country, particularly affecting Turkey, as the Kurdish PKK announced the end of the ceasefire and began to operate on the border of Turkey, in the North of Iraq.

The failure of the Bush Administration to create order in the Middle East generated a power vacuum,²⁵ not only as a consequence of the unpopular invasion in Iraq, but also because the US lost its credibility and leverage in the region. From that moment on, the Peace Process was dead-

22. International Crisis Group, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

23. K. Kirişçi, N. Tocci and J. Walker, *op. cit.*

24. S. Kardas, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

25. M.B. Altunisik, *op. cit.*, 2010.

locked in the midst of the inability of the American Administration and the Quartet to effectively mediate in the conflict. This gap opened a space for Ankara's diplomacy, which started mediating actively in the conflicts in the region, notably in the Arab-Israeli conflict.²⁶ The most important case was the mediation between Israel and Syria, through secret talks from 2004 to 2008. Ankara abandoned its third party role after the outbreak of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in December 2008, only a few days after representatives from Israel, Turkey and Syria held a meeting.

The second power vacuum created in the Middle East was a consequence of Arab divisions, the decline of Pan-Arabism, and the loss of leverage of traditional Arab powers. Egypt, suffering a deep economic and social crisis, did not have the ability to attract trading agreements, while Turkey, which became a growing economic power, ranked as the 17th largest economy in the world. After the war in 2003, Sunni dominance in Iraq broke down and was replaced by the Shiites, giving way to an Iranian influence in the country.

The axis of power in the region is now changing, from the traditional Egyptian and Saudi Arabian powers to other non-Arab powers, such as Iran and Turkey. Nevertheless, Ankara is perceived in a different way among Arab countries: its democratisation and political stability, its economic growth in an open economy eager to sign trading agreements and even to sign visa liberalisation policies with Arab countries, the diplomatic activism and the reputation Erdogan is enjoying today as a hero among the Arab countries made Turkey emerge as a constructive and benign power for the countries in the region. Ankara, unlike Teheran, has demonstrated its ability to talk to different parties in the region, as when it acted as a mediator between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq.

Ankara has already started to act as a mediator in the conflicts among the regional actors, and to promote institution building and economic interdependence.²⁷ This cooperative strategy is driven by its immediate security vulnerability.

New regional challenges for Turkey happened at the same time as a deterioration of Turkish ties with the West. With the relations with the US strained after the Iraq invasion and the EU negotiations for membership that seemed endless, Ankara broadened its foreign policy agenda and opened up to new areas. Turkey's recent diplomatic activism does not, however, mean turning away from the West. The EU still remains a priority for Turkey, but it may not be the only one.

Turkish assertiveness does not imply an Islamisation of Turkish foreign policy. The development of the Turkish economy and further political ties with China, Russia or Brazil show that Turkey is not only active in the former Ottoman territories or in the Muslim countries. Furthermore, after the dissolution of the Eastern bloc, Turkey took on an ambitious agenda to increase its influence in the Balkans and in Central Asia, especially in the Turkic Republics. However, as Russia is re-

26. N. Tocci, "Filling the Vacuum: A Transatlantic View of Turkey in the Middle East", in K. Kirişçi, M.B. Altunisik and N. Tocci, *Turkey: Reluctant Mediterranean Power*, "Mediterranean Paper Series", February 2011.

27. S. Kardas, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

gaining its influence in Central Asia, it limited Turkey's access to the region.²⁸ The Middle East remained for Turkey to play an active role.

Identity-based explanations fail to appreciate the unique combinations of structural factors that allow Turkey to play this role in the Middle East.²⁹ The structural changes that have taken place required a domestic-level catalyst: the consolidation of state strength under AKP rule, enabling a more constructive implementation of the foreign policy objectives and application of a liberal approach to the Middle East. A single party government for two consecutive terms was able to carry out the political and economic reforms necessary under the Copenhagen criteria. At the same time, EU membership provided enough confidence to emerge as a civil-economic power in the Middle East.³⁰ The AKP effectively used its soft power and became a valid mediator for many parties in the region.

AKP policy, however, only partially explains Turkey's recent assertiveness in the Middle East. Apart from the power vacuum (or geopolitical retreat), interest-driven motivations and security concerns remain behind Turkish economic interests typical of a "trading state."

Boosting Economic Ties: Turkey as a Trading State

Current Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, has indicated that economic interdependence is the most important tool to allow it to "gain depth" in its neighbourhood.³¹ The principle of "zero problems with neighbours" is related to creating economic interdependence with the surrounding countries. Kemal Kirişçi has argued that economic motivations have influenced the desire to have "zero problems with neighbours" as Turkey increasingly becomes a "trading state."³²

Turkey has seen how the steady growth of its foreign trade goes hand in hand with a prosperous economic growth. It is now eager to expand its markets and to increase exports. The Muslim and Middle East countries have proved to be lucrative markets and its share of trade with the Middle East has almost doubled from 9% in 1996 to 19% in 2008, while the EU share has decreased from 56% to 44% in the same years. Far from meaning "a turning away from the West," this trend implies a particularly lucrative Middle East relationship. Whilst Turkey runs a deficit in its overall trade with the world, it had an \$8 billion surplus with the Middle East in 2009.³³

Alongside the efforts to create a broader free trade area with Middle Eastern countries, Turkish foreign policy turned out to have a positive language of cooperation rather than conflict.³⁴ The idea of promoting economic interdependence with Turkey's neighbourhood has been highly insti-

28. B. Buzan and O. Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 393-394.

29. E.F. Keyman, *Turkish Foreign Policy in the Era of Global Turmoil*, "SETA Policy Brief", No. 39, December 2009, pp. 11-13.

30. B. Aras, op. cit., p. 3.

31. From an interview with Ahmet Davutoglu, *Turkishtime*, April-May 2004, as quoted by International Crisis Group, op. cit.

32. K. Kirişçi, op. cit., 2009.

33. International Crisis Group, op. cit., p. 10.

34. Interview with Meliha Benli Altunisik, *Crisis Group Interview*, Ankara, 11th March 2010, as quoted by: International Crisis Group, op. cit., p. 10.

tutionalised in Turkish bureaucracy. The business community has become a strong advocator of improving economic ties and business interest groups became influential in foreign policy. Furthermore, rapidly growing economic markets made Turkey a centre of attraction for the regional countries eager to sign trade agreements with Ankara.

Turkish Soft Power: A Model for the Arab Countries?

Turkey has emerged as a new pole in the axis of Middle Eastern powers. It has risen as a regional power with plans to intervene in the international arena. To a large extent, the position it holds in the region is due to the power of attraction it exerts among the Middle Eastern countries.

Turkey has reached a good level of economic growth, social development, and political stability. A country integrated into the West, member of international organisations such as NATO and the Council of Europe, and the accession negotiations with the European Union since 2005. What is more, Turkey's political reform and its democratisation process began in the late 1990s, with the coalition government led by Bülent Ecevit, consolidating Turkey as a model for Arab and other Muslim countries.

The Islamist AK Party coming to power in 2002 demonstrates, first, the level of maturity and pragmatism political Islamism has reached in Turkey and the compatibility of Islam with democracy and, second, the importance of secularism and democratisation for the evolution of political Islamism. Turkey has the assets to exert power among Muslim countries and to act as a model. Nonetheless, of the main differences between the previous secularist coalition government and secular establishment, on the one hand, and the currently ruling AKP, on the other, is their divergent views of Turkey acting as a model among the Arab countries. The former has been rather uncomfortable speaking about the role of Turkey in the Middle East. The latter, however, has shown this inclination that Turkey should be a role model.³⁵ The immediate consequence of these different attitudes on foreign policy is that with the AKP in power they will look to Turkey to play a central role in the Middle East and act as a regional power.

The assertiveness and ambitions of AKP leaders helped to bring Turkey into the heart of Middle Eastern politics. The Davos episode in 2009 when Prime Minister Erdogan walked out after accusing Israel's President Simon Peres of "barbarian actions in Gaza,"³⁶ and further criticism over Israeli offensives in Gaza in 2008-2009, turned Erdogan into a hero in the Arab streets.³⁷ The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) carried out a study on the perception of Turkey among some Middle Eastern countries. One of the results of the survey is the high percentages of Arabs that consider Turkey is becoming more influential in Arab politics (71%).³⁸

In the same survey, carried out shortly after the Davos incident, when Erdogan's reputation as a champion of the Palestinian cause was reaching its height, 79% of the Arab people asked to con-

35. M.B. Altunisik, "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2008, pp. 44-46.

36. "Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel", *The New York Times*, 29th January 2009.

37. "Erdogan Gets a Hero's Welcome", *Arab News*, 31st January 2011.

38. M. Akgün, G. Perçinoglu and S.S. Gündoğar, *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East*, Istanbul, TESEV Publications, 2010.

sider whether Turkey should play a mediatory role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were strongly in favour.³⁹ The current government has been very active diplomatically and very willing to play a mediation role for the resolution of conflicts in the region. This third party and facilitator role is another way for Turkey to expand its relations with the Middle East,⁴⁰ but it is also another way to be present in Middle Eastern politics and to become the inevitable actor when dealing with a conflict in the region.

With the beginning of the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the popular uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Yemen in 2011, the call for change and democracy came to the Middle East and North Africa. The Turkish experience was identified as the example of coexistence of democracy and Islam from which Arab countries could draw some lessons. Rachid Ghannouchi, the Tunisian Islamist leader from the Ennahda, as well as the young generations of the Muslim Brotherhood, made reference to the Turkish Islamist AKP as their example to follow.⁴¹

However, the different response from Ankara to the popular uprisings in the Arab countries may erode the role of Turkey as sponsor of democratic values in the region. Ankara responded cautiously to the revolts in Tunisia,⁴² in line with other European governments. Once Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, President of Tunisia, was out of the government, Turkey pleaded for democratic transition in Tunisia. Turkish reaction was quite different when popular revolts started in Egypt. Only 6 days after the “day of rage” bringing together thousands of Egyptians in the streets, on 1st February Erdogan urged President Hosni Mubarak “to meet his people’s desire for change.”⁴³

Erdogan’s convincing call for Mubarak’s resignation contrasts with the response from Ankara regarding other popular uprisings in Arab countries, such as Libya and Syria, where the reaction was far from severe. The double standards applied in condemning the repression may erode Turkish credibility when talking about democracy or human rights. Turkey has emerged as a model of democratisation in the region and it should be coherent with this paradigm, trying not to commit the same mistakes as the West on choosing stability and narrow economic interests over democratic calls in the Middle East and North Africa. Turkey has emerged as a regional power in the Middle East, and being a regional power entails responsibilities as well as advantages.⁴⁴

39. M. Akgün, G. Perçinoglu and S.S. Gündoğar, op. cit.

40. M.B. Altunisik, op. cit., 2008.

41. Interview with Rachid Ghannouchi, *Al Jazeera*, 7th February 2011; T. Ramadan, “La Turquía democrática es el modelo”, *El País*, 10th February 2011.

42. “Ankara Cautious to Applaud New Era in Tunisia”, *Today’s Zaman*, 16th February 2011.

43. “Turkish PM Erdoğan Urges Mubarak to Heed Egyptian Outcry”, *Hurriyet*, 1st February 2011.

44. P. Salem, “Turkey Should Participate in Libyan No-Fly Zone”, *Hurriyet*, 13th March 2011.

**The “Zero Problems with Neighbours” Policy:
The Difficult Equilibrium**

Current Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, Professor and former chief advisor on foreign policy to Prime Minister Erdogan, designed the “strategic depth” doctrine, which was to later guide AKP foreign policy. The core hypothesis of this doctrine is based on the Turkish geographical and historical Ottoman legacy. According to Davutoglu, this legacy placed Turkey in the centre of many areas of influence, and he pleads for active engagement in all the neighbouring regions of which Turkey is also a part.⁴⁵

As we have seen above, economic motivations have influenced the Turkish desire to implement a “zero problems with neighbours” policy, as it was increasingly becoming a “trading state.”⁴⁶ Nonetheless, avoiding grievances with all its neighbours has proven a difficult task for Turkey, as it belongs to the most conflictive region in the world.

Turkey and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Turkey’s alignment with Israel has become one of the most important features of Turkish and Middle Eastern politics. Israel-Turkish relations began in the economic realm and developed further to a strategic partnership in the mid-1990s.

At that time, Turkey needed partners in the region as it was facing security challenges from Syria, Iraq and Iran. Israel seemed the perfect ally: a pro-Western country, privileged ally of the United States, which could give some leverage in the relations between Ankara and Washington and even gain the support of the Jewish lobby in the US Congress in a crucial moment when Armenian and Greek lobbies were pressing for arms embargos on Turkey. This was another motivating factor for the Turkish-Israeli partnership: Ankara was facing some restriction of arms transfer and military technology from the US and Europe for human rights concerns over the Cyprus and Kurdish issue. The military agreement signed in 1996 on training, intelligence, and defence-industrial cooperation was seen as a great chance to overcome those restrictions, especially at a time when the military role in Turkish foreign policy was increasing, legitimised by security perceptions.⁴⁷

Unusual for a question of foreign policy, Turkish relations with Israel sharply divide domestic opinion. Whilst the military and foreign policy-makers see the benefits of having close relations with Israel, Turkish public opinion is sympathetic to the Palestinians.⁴⁸ Turkey had voted in favour of the Palestinians in all the resolutions adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations and in many other forums. They opposed the 1980 declaration from Israel proclaiming Jerusalem as its capital, when the relationship with Tel Aviv hit its lowest point. Turkey recognised the Palestinian state after its declaration in Algiers, while it was the first Muslim country to recognise Israel officially.

The Israeli invasion in the Gaza Strip in winter 2008-2009 triggered a crisis in Turkey-Israel relations. The incident came only four days after the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to Ankara

45. On Davutoglu’s “strategic depth” doctrine, see: A. Davutoglu, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2008, pp. 77-96; A. Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6, 2006, pp. 945-955.

46. K. Kirişçi, op. cit., 2009.

47. M. Özcan, *Harmonizing Foreign Policy: Turkey, the EU and the Middle East*, Hampshire, Ashgate Publishing, 2008, p. 124.

48. W. Hale, “Turkey and the Middle East in the ‘New Era’”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2009, p. 149.

as part of Ankara's role as mediator between Syria and Israel. Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Davutoglu threatened to stop military cooperation if the situation in Gaza was not settled.⁴⁹ Erdogan walking out of the Davos Forum after the discussion with President Simon Peres over the offensive in Gaza was a turning point in Turkish-Israeli relations.

Israel worked to maintain the relationship with Ankara, as its ties with the Arab states were even colder. They finally managed to restore relations, although they never returned to the 1990s levels. A similar perception of threat from the neighbouring Arab countries and Iran seemed to be the main link between Turkey and Israel.⁵⁰ Once Ankara had restored its relations with Damascus and Teheran, these security threats were deterred, and closer ties with Israel no longer seemed so necessary.

The *Mavi Marmara* affair occurred in this context of deteriorating relations. On 31st May, Israeli forces intercepted the flotilla in international waters owned by a Turkish NGO. Eight Turks and one US-Turk were killed by the Israeli forces. The reaction in Turkey was furious. Demonstrations against Israel broke out in Turkish cities and Ankara recalled its ambassador to Israel and cancelled joint military exercises. Almost a year after the episode, relations between Israel and Turkey have not been restored. Turkey insists on conditioning the normalisation of relations on the compensation of the victims by Israel.

Structural changes are underway both in the region and in the international system and this is affecting relations between Turkey and Israel. Rather than just assessing the restoration of relations based on the apology over the *Mavi Marmara* issue from Israel, we can say that the parameters on which Turkish-Israeli relations were based are no longer the same. Syria, Iraq and Iran are not a close threat for Turkey; Western ties are not so important for Ankara; the Turkish military has lost its weight in foreign affairs and soft power and trade gained ground; and, essentially, Turkey has emerged as a self-assured regional power.

The cost-benefits estimation might have changed on the Turkish side, as it may no longer be interested in losing its leverage over Arab countries and public opinion support (and submit to what has been perceived by Turks and Arabs as an "offence"). Without a common threat perception in its neighbourhood, the security cooperation with the Hebrew state is no longer a priority for Ankara.

Turkey and Iran: Between "Zero Problems" and a Desire for the Status Quo

Turkey and Iran established cordial and respectful relations, in spite of the differences raised by their antagonistic political system and their divergent international alliances. At the core of Kemalist

49. "Turkey Sets 'Gaza Condition' for Military Ties with Israel," *Today's Zaman*, 17th October 2009.

50. E. Inbar, "The Strategic Glue in the Israeli-Turkish Alignment", in B. Rubin and K. Kirişçi (eds.), *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001, pp. 115-116.

values were political Islam and the Kurdish question, two issues with the ability to strain Ankara-Tehran relations.⁵¹ However, diplomatic ties between the two countries have lasted. Turkey and Iran have also come to cooperate on security issues over the Kurdish question.

During the 21st century, trade and energy agreements developed further. Trade between the two countries soared and Iran became the second gas supplier to Turkey after Russia. Furthermore, the two countries signed a liberalisation of visa agreement, thus bringing more than one million Iranian visitors per year to a country with a Muslim-majority population, democratic, economically and socially developed, and integrated into the West (one more of the effects of Turkish soft power).

The convergence of interests between the two countries could explain the level of relations they maintained and could also explain why Turkey does not agree with the US and Europe in its claims over the Iranian nuclear programme. Nevertheless, this subject is far more intricate than just a convergence of interests on trade and energy issues. Turkey does not directly fear an Iranian nuclear attack, although it does fear an eventual nuclear arms race between Israel and Iran and the instability it could generate in the region. Turkey is very aware of the adverse repercussions for its economy and the stability of its country if an atmosphere of insecurity and instability takes root in the Middle East. Ankara knows the consequences of this scenario very well because it already experienced it after the Gulf War in 1991.

This is the perspective from which we should understand the appeasing rhetoric of Prime Minister Erdogan and his attempts to conciliate both parties. We can thus understand both the initiative driven by Turkey and Brazil in 2010 to find a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear programme, and Turkey's opposition to sanctions on Iran for its nuclear programme within the Security Council of the United Nations. Again, the Gulf War experience and the UN sanctions imposed on Saddam Hussein taught Turkey how detrimental they could be for its economy. Besides, this measure failed to solve the problem and finally led to a military intervention.⁵² The logic behind this procedure lies between the "zero problems with neighbours" approach and the maintenance of the actual status quo in the region.

Turkey and Syria: From Conflict to Cooperation

The relationship between Ankara and Damascus has always been hostile. Traditional grievances hampered relations, such as the Syrian claim on the province of Alexandretta (Hatay) or, more recently, the water conflict over the Euphrates and Tigris. However, the Kurdish question was the main hindrance for Turkish-Syrian relations. While Syria was giving logistical support to the Kurdish PKK and harbouring its leaders, a full-scale crisis erupted in 1998, with an armed conflict about to break out. The struggle, which ended with the eventual capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, eased the tensions with Syria.

51. K. Kirişçi, N. Tocci and J. Walker, op. cit.

52. Ibid.

From an internal point of view, this may be a consequence of the democratisation process and EU membership perspective, as Turkey's attitude towards its neighbours became more self-assured and gained enough confidence to emerge as a civil-economic power in the Middle East. This changed the perception of enemies and friends in the region.⁵³ Once the conflict with Syria was over, it moved from enemy to friend.

The Syrian case is particularly significant to diminishing the Islamisation factor as a driver of change of Turkish foreign policy, if we take into account that the improvement of ties between the two countries predates the current AKP government. Once the security threat was removed, and after the diplomatic ties regained with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Necdet Sezer's attendance at Hafez al-Assad's funeral ceremony in June 2000, bilateral agreements on the economy, the military and intelligence were boosted.

From 1999 to March 2010, 51 protocols were signed on trade, development and cultural exchanges. Even though the US and the EU had made efforts to isolate Syria, relations between the two countries kept on improving to the point of signing a visa liberalisation agreement that came into effect in 2009, establishing the Strategic Cooperation Council that same year.

Currently, the relations between Damascus and Ankara are in very good shape, even to the point that the two other issues that used to confront the two countries remained unsolved: Syria's claim on the province of Hatay and the Euphrates water issue. President al-Assad recognised Hatay as Turkish territory some years ago and it is no longer a Syrian claim. The water issue is still unresolved. This outcome illustrates how the external context was more important to easing the tensions than the domestic issues. The Turkish-Syrian relationship was shaped by a situation of confrontation between the two countries. Once the confrontation was over, so was the security threat. With the context changed, the path for easing tensions was paved.

Turkey and Iraq: The Kurdish Question

The Kurdish question has always been a common factor in relations between Turkey and Iraq. Both countries have been against the Kurdish aspirations of independence and have cooperated on this. Despite conflicting issues between the two countries over the Euphrates water and various security problems, during the 1980s Özal years, Turkey implemented an effective foreign policy towards Iraq and Iran in terms of economics and politics.⁵⁴

Turkey's support of the coalition against Iraq in the Gulf War was a turning point in their relations. With the end of the Cold War, Ankara was uncertain about its position in the new international order and, to reaffirm its geopolitical relevance to the US, Özal decided to alienate the coalition. This alienation, however, brought harsh consequences for Turkey: economic sanctions imposed

53. B. Aras, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

54. P. Robins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, London, Hurst, 2003, p. 57.

on Saddam Hussein's regime prejudiced Turkish interests, similarly to the no-fly zone. The refugee crisis of April 1991 created a "safe haven" in northern Iraq, which aroused Kurdish aspirations for an autonomous entity in this territory.⁵⁵ The Turkish *raison d'être* has been and still is Turkish territorial integrity and a strong opposition to the creation of a Kurdish state.

The Turkish Parliament rejected the transfer of US troops via its territory in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and it even approved the end of the state of emergency in some parts of the south-east of Turkey only some months after the Iraqi invasion. These moves were seen as positive signs of the democratisation process and Europeanisation of Turkish foreign policy.⁵⁶

The Erdogan government has also made an approach towards the Kurdish community and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, as part of the "zero problems policy",⁵⁷ facilitated mainly by the pragmatic approach towards the PKK. Parallel to improving relations with the KRG, Turkey and Iraq have also fostered an economic and political relationship. A balanced and pragmatic foreign policy towards Iraq has been effectively settled, as conflict has given way to high levels of cooperation. In September 2009, a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was established including bilateral trading agreements.

55. K. Kirişçi, "Provide Comfort and Turkey: Decision Making for Refugee Assistance", *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1993, pp. 227-253, as quoted in K. Kirişçi, N. Tocci and J. Walker, op. cit., p. 5.

56. M. Özcan, op. cit., pp. 130-142.

57. F.S. Larrabee, op. cit., pp. 163-164.

Conclusion

Turkey pursued a rather passive and reactive foreign policy during the Cold War whereas, in the post-Cold War period and especially the AKP years, Ankara became more active and involved in the Middle East. Some authors asserted that this shift meant Turkey was “turning away” from the West, as they consider Turkish assertiveness in the Middle East incompatible with its Western orientation.⁵⁸ Western elements are still present in Turkish foreign policy, but it is no longer its sole orientation.

In parallel, new structural factors reshaped both the international system and the Middle East. Firstly, systemic changes left a power vacuum in the Middle East, a consequence of the inability of the Bush Administration to provide order in the region, intra-Arab divisions and leadership shortcomings in the region, and the inability of the US and the Quartet to effectively achieve the Peace Process. Iran and Turkey were the only ones capable of filling this vacuum but the ability of Turkey to talk to all the parties in the region and to mediate in the conflicts, together with the development of Turkish soft power, boosted its role in the region.

Secondly, Turkey felt immersed in a region of instability: Iraq was an unstable country after the US invasion and the PKK was rising in the north of the country; the increase of terrorism and radical Islamism posed a serious threat to Turkish security, as it suffered terrorist attacks within its territory; and the Arab-Israeli conflict remained unresolved. As the US failed to provide security in the region and its credibility and legitimacy was thus seriously damaged, Ankara started to act as a mediator in the region. Turkey is eager to play a third party role in the Middle East conflicts, as it has recognised double benefits in doing so. Apart from helping to ease tensions and stabilising its surroundings, it has proven an ideal way to enhance its influence in the region. It is increasingly becoming the unavoidable actor in Middle Eastern dialogues, especially when the West is involved. Thirdly, Turkey has become an economic power and has made efforts to create economic interdependence with the surrounding countries as a way of “gaining depth” and avoiding conflicts with its neighbours.

To sum up, Turkey is eager to increase its power both in the regional and the international systems. Using its soft power capabilities and boosting economic ties have proven to be a very effective way of achieving this. Furthermore, Ankara was able to implement those instruments only in the regional context explained above. Regarding its geographical position, economic level, human resources and military power, Turkey is an important player in the surrounding areas: the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, the Middle East has been the only region where Ankara has extensively developed its regional power.

To conclude, this paper has described, firstly, that Turkish foreign policy is not something that emerged from nowhere. A precedent of this activism already existed in Turkey before the AKP, but

58. S. Cagaptay, *op. cit.*, October 2009.

without the appropriate domestic and international context it was not as developed as during the AKP years. Secondly, structural factors in the region and in the international system as a whole provided the context for Turkish assertiveness in the Middle East, even if the domestic factors and to a less extent identity acted as a catalyst. Turkish foreign policy is “nor so Turkish” because Turkish attributes were not what drove the involvement of Ankara in the Middle East. Turkey had the capability to become an assertive regional power in the Middle East, and the regional and international systemic transformation allowed Ankara to implement them.



IEMed.

The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), founded in 1989, is a consortium comprising the Government of Catalonia, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and Barcelona City Council. It incorporates civil society through its Board of Trustees and its Advisory Council formed by Mediterranean universities, companies, organisations and personalities of renowned prestige.

In accordance with the principles of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership's Barcelona Process, and today with the objectives of the Union for the Mediterranean the aim of the IEMed is to foster actions and projects which contribute to mutual understanding, exchange and cooperation between the different Mediterranean countries, societies and cultures as well as to promote the progressive construction of a space of peace and stability, shared prosperity and dialogue between cultures and civilisations in the Mediterranean.

Adopting a clear role as a think tank specialised in Mediterranean relations based on a multidisciplinary and networking approach, the IEMed encourages analysis, understanding and cooperation through the organisation of seminars, research projects, debates, conferences and publications, in addition to a broad cultural programme.

EuroMeSCo

Comprising 58 institutes from 35 European and Mediterranean countries, as well as 28 observer institutes, the EuroMeSCo (Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission) network was created in 1996 for the joint and coordinated strengthening of research and debate on policy and security issues in the Mediterranean, aspects considered essential for the achievement of the objectives of Euro-Mediterranean policy.

As agreed by the EuroMeSCo General Assembly in 2010, the objectives of the network are: encourage communication, foster joint initiatives and facilitate the publication of the works of member institutes; promote the activities and research of the network among experts and institutions linked to Euro-Mediterranean relations; and provide policy recommendations in the framework of the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean.

The EuroMeSCo work plan includes the organisation of an annual conference, where the members debate political and security issues in the Mediterranean that have emerged during the year; a research programme to foster research projects among the institutes and experts of the network; and a series of seminars, workshops and meetings to stimulate debate on Mediterranean politics.