

Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy Toward the Middle East : From Non-Involvement to a Leading Role

Cengiz Dinc^{*}, Mustafa Yetim^{**}

Abstract : *Turkey's foreign policy toward the Middle East has gone through a radical change over the decades. Earlier periods were marked by almost a complete neglect. However, since Özal, Turkey's interest toward the region has constantly increased. Especially in the last few years of the AKP government, in line with the new foreign policy vision, the Middle East has started to occupy a central place in Turkish foreign policy. In this article, underlying factors of this changing policy and newly envisioned regional role for Turkey will be analyzed. Turkey now pursues a pro-active and multidimensional foreign policy; and the Middle East seems to be the most suitable area for Turkey to implement a successful foreign policy based upon its new parameters.*

Keywords : *Turkey; Middle East, Turkish Foreign Policy, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Israel*

* Assistant Prof in International relations department at Eskisehir Osmangazi University. Email: cdinc@ogu.edu.tr

** Research assistance in International relations department at Eskisehir Osmangazi University Email: mustafayetimm@gmail.com

Introduction

Turkey's foreign policy toward the Middle East has gone through a radical change over the decades. Earlier periods were marked by a near complete neglect and even disdain. As the Cold War started, Turkey and its Middle Eastern neighbours found themselves in the opposite sides of the strategic divide. However, since Özal, Turkey's interest toward the region has constantly increased. Especially in the last few years of the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or Justice and Development Party) government, in line with the new foreign policy vision, the Middle East has started to occupy a central place in Turkish foreign policy (TFP). In this article, underlying factors of this changing policy and newly envisioned regional role for Turkey will be analyzed.

Ottoman Collapse, Emergence of the Republic and the Interwar Period

The Ottoman Empire was in the losing side in the WW I. During the Liberation War (1919-1922) against the Greek occupation, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk emerged as the national leader. The Kemalists, formed the Turkish Grand National Assembly (1920), ended the sultanate (1922), founded the Turkish Republic (1923) and abolished the Caliphate (1924). Their main aim was to pull Turkey from backwardness to 'the level of contemporary civilization'. For Turkey Western countries were the models.¹ Turkey had to join among the European states by reaching similar levels of technology, so that it would never be at their mercy again. According to nationalist and secularist mentality of the new elite, Islam needed to be somewhat 'nationalized' (i.e. 'Turkicized') and no longer allowed to tie the Turks to other Muslims as this tie had brought nothing but 'Arabization' and misery to the Turkish nation, which had to make too many sacrifices in defending the Muslim world against the Christendom.² In the end, the Arabs did not hesitate to 'stab' the Ottomans in the back during the WW I by helping the Western imperialist countries.

The Republic turned its face to the West and declined the Islam-dominated multicultural Ottoman heritage. The new motto was 'Peace at Home; Peace in the World' which has been interpreted, *inter alia*, as an indication of pursuing an idealist (peaceful, norm-based) foreign policy. Recently, with the benefit of hindsight; it is seen as realist and isolationist, befitting for the young republic which was weak and vulnerable. This isolationist policy was also required to eschew confrontation with any major external power or not to invite their intervention to the internal affairs of Turkey. Thus, Turkey was in no position to pursue an active foreign policy. It was encircled with countries in the Balkans; in the south and in the Caucasus, which either had support of the great powers (Britain, France or Russia) or were under their direct control. Therefore, up until the end of the WW II, Turkey's international orientation was non-alignment. The basic goal was to create a strong, modern state.³ Turkey pursued a pacifists, defensive, security oriented foreign policy.

The Arab nationalist discourse generally condemned the Ottoman past and saw the Arab revolt as a legitimate response to the Turkification and despotic policies of the time. This period also witnessed the further development of stereotypes and prejudices on each side. For the Nationalist Arabs, the image was the 'Terrible Turk' with his unrefined and coarse ways, blood thirstiness etc; for the Turks it was the 'Deceitful Arab', his cowardice, laziness or dirtiness...⁴ In contrast, Islamists from both sides emphasized Islamic common bonds.

During interwar period, neighbouring Arab countries under foreign domination were not considered a threat.⁵ The republic was too busy inside with nation-building which was made difficult by western plots. There were few exceptions to the neglectful diplomacy toward the Middle East. The Dispute over Mosul (1925-1926) was solved in favour of Britain and could not be joined with Turkey. In 1937, Turkey pioneered non-aggression pact of Sadabad between itself, Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq.⁶ The issue of the Sandjak of Alexandretta (greater part of today's Hatay province) was solved in favour

of Turkey in 1939 when the Sandjak joined to Turkey; this border area remained a disputed territory for Damascus.

The Kemalists were secular, nationalist and westernist in the sense that they wanted to connect Turkey geopolitically to the West. Thus, the southern neighbours had little to offer to the Turkey even if they were independent.⁷ This westernist character also defined the foreign policy orientation; for a Turkey that turned its face to the West, the Middle East was too backward, too complicated in terms of religious and ethnic diversity (each group often depending on an extra-regional patron). It was best to leave the Arabs alone. The pro-western foreign policy has more or less continued with different governments. Thus, Turkey has been traditionally a bystander in the Middle East politics. For its leaders, it was not worthy to get involved in the region's complex problems, and Turkey's Ottoman legacy and pro-western attitude made its Arab neighbours suspicious.⁸

The Cold War Period

During and after the Second World War, the relations between Turkey and the Middle Eastern countries remained limited. Turkey recognized the emerging states and tried to act together with the West. One exception was its objection to the partition of Palestine in 1947 in which it had sided with the Arab world. However, in line with its Western orientation Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize Israel in 1949. Immediately after the War, Turkey perceived the Soviet Union as the main existential threat. Whereas for the newly independent Arabs who were Pan-Arab nationalist and anti-imperialist, Moscow, which did not have any colonial baggage in the region, was providing economic and military assistance and balancing against excessive Western dominance in the region.⁹ Along with Turkey's qualified support for Israel, this development put Turkey and the Arabs on different sides of the strategic fence.¹⁰

Thus, according to Turkish official view, Stalin scared Turkey towards the bosom of the United States. The Democrats also considered NATO membership a way of protecting themselves from a coup. On the way to the NATO membership, in order to be closer to the U.S., Turkey sacrificed hundreds of its sons in the Korean War (1950). In this period, there was a rise in Turkey's activism toward the Middle East while it generally remained loyal to the larger Western agenda in the region. Especially after becoming a NATO member in 1952, Turkey generally defined its national interest in accordance with its alliance with the West, especially with the U.S.¹¹ The increasing Turkish military and economic dependency to the West also led to a heavily dependent foreign policy. Turkey began to play a new role in Middle Eastern politics in line with American strategic thinking: the containment of Soviet influence in the Middle East (for example through an alliance of Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan). Menderes played a prominent role in negotiating the so-called Baghdad Pact between Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey in 1955. Following the Iraqi withdrawal in 1959, the Pact disintegrated and was renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). For Turkey, the Pact was a pro-Western, strategic alignment aimed at joining NATO and preventing the spread of communism. For Arab countries, it was an extension of British colonialism. The pact showed once again a weak Turkey's willingness to be subservient to the will of its Western allies.¹² Ironically, in the 1950s, Turkey was feeling strong in comparison to its southern neighbours; its foreign policy toward them was perceived by the Arab world as down looking. Turkey's eagerness to interfere in their internal affairs along with colonial powers or its attempt to portray itself as a 'Big Brother', brought the relations to the point of rupture.¹³

Turkey aligned with the Western interests without being sensitive to its southern neighbours' pan-Arab concerns and aspirations. Its foreign policy choices such as recognizing Israel, supporting France not Algerian independence or allowing America to use the Incirlik during the Lebanese crisis of 1958, damaged Turkey's image in the Arab Middle East. Turkey also sided with the Western powers in 1956 Suez Canal War. The crisis with Syria (1957-58) adversely affected Turkey's stance in the Arab perception.¹⁴ Turkey's isolation in the Middle East became obvious in the Cyprus crises (1963-64 and 1974) in which the Arab countries sided with the Greek Cypriots. Turkey's western allies and Israel did not support Ankara's position either. This motivated the Turkish elite to seek a more

balanced policy between the West and the Arab world. In addition, economic constraints (e.g. the need for petrol), as well as the decreasing perception of the Soviet threat might have contributed to this move.¹⁵ Developments during the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) and the Cyprus Crisis (1964) forced Turkey to re-evaluate its foreign policy. The Johnson Letter during the Cyprus Crisis made it clear that in case of a 'self-inflicted' Soviet attack the Article 5 of the NATO treaty would not be automatically applied to defend Turkey. This showed the shallowness of being part of bloc politics.¹⁶ Starting from the second half of the 1960s on, Turkey tried to pursue a more balanced foreign policy between the West and the Arab-Islam countries.¹⁷ This policy of 'equidistance' firstly showed itself in 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Turkey refused to allow Western use of the bases in order to help Israel and did not amass troops to Syrian border. On the other hand, it did not support the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) decision of severing all ties with Israel either.¹⁸ This policy, allowed Turkey to somewhat balance its relationship with the West with its relations with the Middle East and also facilitate its policy of remaining somewhat neutral between the conflicting countries in the region.¹⁹ These were the first signs of adding a new dimension to the foreign policy.

With the expressions of solidarity shown by the Turkish people after the Arab defeat in the June 1967 war, a softer image of Turkey grew in the Arab world. The 1967 defeat led to reconfiguration of Arab politics, to the emergence of the Palestinian resistance movement and the Islamic political movement.²⁰ The defeat also caused the decline of Arab Nationalism and relative rise of Islamist thoughts. The Arab world relatively distanced from the Eastern Bloc. Both Arab and Turkish isolationism facilitated the search for mutual support. Developing relations encouraged Turkey to pursue a more constructive policy toward the region.

The formation of a coalition government in January 1974 by leftist CHP of Ecevit and Islamist MSP of Erbakan, Cyprus question and oil shocks were among the developments that distanced Turkey from the U.S. and brought closer to Arab countries and the Soviet Union. Due to the Cyprus Intervention, Turkey was embargoed by the U.S until 1978. The embargo and economic repercussions of 1973 oil embargo accelerated Turkey's economic relations with the Middle East.²¹ Thus, from 1970s on, factors like three digit inflation, inability to secure hard currency necessary to pay interests of the foreign debts, rising oil prices, forced Turkish foreign policy to have an economic dimension, too, hence somewhat lessen the importance of security concerns. Turkey's intervention on northern Cyprus was received with enthusiasm and approval in Arab-Islamic circles. The Erbakan's National Salvation Party's mass Konya protest, on the way to the 1980 military coup, against Israeli policies electrified the Arab street and positively affected the Arab perception of the Turkish Islamists.²²

In 1973 Arab-Israeli war, too, Turkey supported the Palestinian cause by declaring that it would not allow the use of İncirlik base to facilitate the delivery of the American help to Israel, whereas, the Soviets used the Turkish air space to help the Arabs. However, as Criss and Bilgin argue, the closure of the bases during the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, did not amount to a complete reversal in Turkish foreign policy; Turkey simply adopted a policy of pragmatic, benevolent neutrality that tilted toward the Arabs.²³

Turkey sided with the Arabs and voted in favour of the UN resolution condemning Zionism as racism in 1975, recognized the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, TFP generally remained loyal to its main Western axis; Turkey never severed its relations with Israel. Even when the Arab world suspended its relations with Egypt due to Camp David agreement, Turkey declared that it supported the peace.²⁴

In contrast to nationalists, Arab Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brothers, expressed certain attachment to the memory of the Ottoman Caliphate.²⁵ As the Arab masses during the 1970s and 1980s have become more Islamic, Turkish Islamist leader such as Erbakan was viewed with a 'high degree of affection and appreciation'. Erbakan's referral to the glorious Ottoman-cum-Islamic achievements recalled the powerful historical bonds between the Arabs and the Turks; contributed to the rehabilitation of the Ottoman image in the Arab collective memory. Turkey was, at the same time, weakened by deadly internal conflict between the left and right in the 1970s. The 1980s were marked by the emergence of a more deadly conflict with the PKK. According to Turkey's secularists, rising PKK and Islamism threatened the republican project of a secular nationalist state. Due to perceived

support for these movements, Turkey has had hostile relations with almost all its immediate neighbours: Greece, Russia, Armenia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

A Wavering Turkey after the Cold War

The sudden collapse of the Eastern bloc heralded that Turkey could finally be connected its brethren in the former Turkic republics of the Soviet Union. It was hoped that Turkey would be the big brother of the Turkic world 'from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China' and the 21st century would be a Turkish century. This self confidence was, of course, related to the economic, social, and political transformation of the Turkish society through Özal's liberalization policies in the 1980s. These expectations proved to be too optimistic.

Despite the modest growth in the trade with Arab-Muslim world in the 1970s, Turkish foreign policy remained predominantly security oriented until 1980s.²⁶ With liberalization, economic considerations gained weight and Turkey started to be more active in seeking economic opportunities in the region. Export to the Muslim countries in the region reached to 40 percent of Turkey's export, higher than its trade with the traditional western markets. Turkish construction firms were very active in the region.²⁷ Özal's period was critical in mobilizing Turkish business circles to be more active in the region and also in bringing Arab capital to Turkey.²⁸

Özal did not shy away from emphasizing Turkey's 'Islamic' identity in order to develop political and economic relations with the Middle East countries; he also thought that such a development would help for deepening the ties with the EU and U.S. The expression of this view was the metaphor of the 'Bridge Country' by which Özal meant that Turkey ought to appropriate the best of East and West; and since it knows both of them well, its position was ideal to be active in the both sides and facilitate the much needed dialogue between them and thus elevate Turkey's global prestige.²⁹

Özal's desire to be internationally more active manifested itself during the Gulf crisis. For Özal, the approaching war presented more opportunities than risks. Turkey could be benefited economically and elevate its position vis-à-vis the West. The war was a catalyst for Turkey's increasing involvement with regional issues.³⁰ Despite the objections of the officers and his aides, Özal supported the military operations to evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait. This support and the permission Turkey granted the multinational force to use the İncirlik during the crisis (1990-91) was another example of how Turkey cooperated with the West when she felt that such cooperation would be in the national interests. Turkey in accordance with UN resolutions shut down the Kirkuk-Yumurtalik pipeline and amassed around 100,000 soldiers to the Iraqi border; thus, forced Saddam to divide its forces. According to Özal's vision, this help would develop a strategic partnership with the Americans and also strengthen Turkey's position to enter the EU (EC).³¹ According to some observers, the Özal era constituted an important divergence from traditional TFP; made Turkey more active in the region. However, Özal's policies did not pay off. Besides, Turkey paid a high economic price due to the Gulf War. Politically, it was left facing a major escalation of its Kurdish problem; the PKK gained further strength.³²

While Turkey's increasing military relationship with Israel in the mid-1990s was commended by the West, Turkey generally made the Middle East an even more unstable and crisis prone through confrontational relations with Iraq, Iran, and Syria.³³ As experienced diplomat Elekdağ openly declared in 1996, Turkey was 'besieged by a veritable ring of evil'. According to him, Turkey should be prepared to fight 'two-and-a-half wars' simultaneously against Greece, Syria, and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).³⁴ Turkey tried to respond to growing perception of threats, by developing deeper ties with Israel while arguing that this was not aimed against any other Arab state in the region.

In this period, against the sporadically worsening PKK terror and its effects on the Kurds within, Turkey sought an issue-specific cooperation with other countries that have some Kurdish population, Iran Iraq and Syria against 'a common threat', namely creation of a 'federated' or independent Kurdish state in the region. The Turks widely believed that important Western powers

was encouraging Iraqi Kurds towards this aim. Ankara feared that, this would jeopardize its territorial integrity. A divided Iraq that would lead to a Kurdish state was worse than having to deal with Saddam's regime which despite the cruelty, provided some sort of stability in the N. Iraq.

Sticking with security oriented foreign policy between 1990-2000, damaged Turkish democracy, economic development and neighbourly relations. With the influence of the military domestic and foreign threat perception reached to a new high point in 1997 and 1998. The ruling elite perceived the twin threat of Kurdish opposition and Islamism 'as if Turkey was still in 1920s and 1930s'. Despite a different international order, Ankara showed the classical reaction of more authoritarianism, rejecting any cultural or political compromise.³⁵ The struggle against the PKK terror and political Islam also marked with deep economic crises.

Turkish state's reaction to the Kurdish question led to autism and security based relations with all the actors involved. Especially Iran and Syria were considered major threats. The PKK used Iranian territory to launch attacks in Turkey. Syria's support to the PKK was open and direct; Öcalan was living in Damascus. Turkey's problems with neighbours contributed to its development of closer ties with Israel to balance these countries in the region.³⁶ The Gulf War (1991) brought them closer. Both Turkey and Israel supported the American position politically and militarily to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. The Turkish Armed Forces (officer corps) which played an important role in this rapprochement. According to the influential generals, Israel could greatly contribute to the fight against the PKK in terms of intelligence, logistical support and technology, given that such support was not coming from the U.S. Both countries saw Syria and Iran as potential threats and cooperated in order to deter them. In August 1996, Turkey and Israel signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement. The biggest reaction to the Turkish-Israeli relations came from the Muslim countries (e.g. Egypt and Syria) of the region.³⁷ In addition to the deteriorating relations with the East; Turkey's relations with the West was passing through a difficult period. Contrary to expectations, the EU refused to grant Turkey candidate status at 1997 Luxemburg summit. Another negative development was the Kardak crisis which brought Turkey to the brink of war with Greece.³⁸

Rapprochement with Syria, after Syria's change of course, and Iran towards the end of 1990s, led to a relaxation in Turkish foreign policy. Öcalan's arrest and decline of the PKK's activities; relatively better relations with Iraq, rapprochement with Greece after 1999 earthquake in Turkey were among the key developments. The EU's granting the candidacy in 1999 also presented an invaluable opportunity to Turkey for accelerating democratization and desecuritization of foreign policy.

Weakening of the Western Dimension

The last decade under the AKP governments witnessed a relative weakening of the western dimension in Turkish foreign policy. The AKP leadership distanced the party from the National Outlook heritage and presented the party as based on a socially conservative but economically liberal philosophy (similar to that of Özal).³⁹ In the party's strategy, the role of the EU, or of the desire to be a member of it, has been very much valued, especially up until 2005- 2006. The EU circles generally welcomed the AK Party's performance.

It should be remembered that there are broadly two political camps in Turkey. The first, relatively larger group includes centre-right politicians, liberals, and the religious-conservative who generally support the AKP and other few ideologically closer small parties. This camp struggles with the 'old elite' who generally controls the military and judiciary. The other camp is composed of secularists, the military and civilian bureaucratic elites, and various sections of nationalists who generally support the RPP, NAP and the Workers' Party. In their view, the AKP has a hidden agenda of turning Turkey an authoritarian, religious based country. Often they accuse the AKP leadership of being mere instruments or subcontractors of the U.S or EU.⁴⁰

At first, foreign policy of the AKP was hailed by the West for its pragmatic stance. Observers expected a dependent relationship with the U.S and EU because it was seen that the AKP, due to pressures and plots of the opposite camp needed international support. According to AKP and the first

camp in general, the old guards tried every way to get rid of the party including plots of coups (2003-2004) and banning by the Constitutional Court. In both instances, the EU came with much stronger support for the democratic process than the U.S. This has been one of the factors that disappointed the first camp with the previous American administration.

There have been important turning points, too, in weakening the EU dimension in TFP. The high expectations with the candidate status granted in 1999, among the Turkish society about EU process, proved to be illusory. According to many, the AKP governments took risks by engaging bold reforms requested by the EU process; by declaring that it would be always 'one step ahead' of the Greek side in search of a solution to the Cyprus problem (for which it was accused of selling Cyprus by its domestic critics). The Turkish Cypriot side has said 'Yes' in the 2004 referendum whose parameters set by the UN; on the contrary the Greek side said 'No'. Yet, the Greek side was admitted to EU and suffered no consequences. Despite the 'Yes' vote, the EU had not fulfilled its promises to Turkish Cypriots. Thus, the official position of Turkey has been that the resolution of the problem should not be expected unilaterally by the Turkish Cypriots or Turkey'.⁴¹

In October 2005, the official negotiation process between Turkey and the EU started but from the beginning it was paralyzed due to open resistance particularly by France, Germany, Austria and Greek Cypriots. Because of popular anxiety over further enlargement Sarkozy and Merkel blocked Turkey's accession process, offering instead 'privileged partnership'.⁴² Due to this fierce opposition, the accession negotiation is now at an impasse. In October 2010, Davutoğlu has noted that 'the EU is rapidly moving toward a point where it must make a strategic decision on its relations with Turkey'.⁴³ The EU has not tried hard to anchor Turkey and domestic dynamics in Turkey have not been enough to realize necessary reforms. Since the EU accession remains an open-ended process, with no assured membership even if it meets all the criteria, Turkey feels it has to independently pursue policies for its national interests.⁴⁴

There have been also crucial turning points and issues in Turkish-American relations. One of this has been the increasing unilateralism of the U.S. with the end of the Cold War, the Bush administration, in the post-9/11 world, was much more unilateral in its policies, including in the Greater Middle East (Iraq, Afghanistan). Turkey was also not compensated for its financial losses because of the Gulf War (1991). It was frequently estimated by Turkish side that the consolidated losses of Turkey due to the war amounted around 30 billion dollars and only around one tenth of this was compensated. This bitter previous example nowadays also occupies the mind of Turkish decision makers with regard to any similar intervention to its neighbours (e.g. Iran). More importantly after the war, the U.S led coalition declared no-fly zones in Iraq to protect the Kurds and the Shi'ites from Saddam regime. The northern NFZ above the 36th parallel, according to dominant view in Turkey, meant a safe haven for the PKK. The Kurdish leaders there were also accused by nationalist and authoritarian circles in Turkey of actively or passively supporting the terrorism. For most of the Turks, the U.S. tacitly supported the PKK, because it did not lift a finger against it in the area or did not let Turkey to conduct operations to strike PKK bases, from 2003 to 2008.

The most important crisis with the U.S. came with the decision of the Turkish Parliament on 1 March 2003, not to allow American troops to pass through Turkish territory to open a northern front in the upcoming war in Iraq.⁴⁵ The outcome contradicted the traditional image of Turkey as a mere instrument of American policies in the region and enhanced its international credibility. At that time, some 90 percent of the Turkish public was opposed to use of force against Saddam, 74 percent believed that real purpose of the U.S. was to gain control over oil and 60 percent believed that the U.S. favoured the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq.⁴⁶ The hood event, the capture of a dozen of Turkish military personnel in Sulaymaniyah and their humiliating treatment by the Americans in July 2003 deeply hurt Turkish pride and fiercely used by the opposition against the government. With these developments anti-Americanism in Turkey reached to all time high.⁴⁷ It should be also a cause of concern for the relations that with the influences of developments like the perceived American failure in Iraq or the decision of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the US House of Representatives to recognize the tragic events of 1915 as 'Armenian genocide', even with the election of Obama, the image of the U.S in Turkey has not bounced back as it did in Europe.

Therefore, it is clear that, Turkey's new desire to pursue a more balanced, multidimensional foreign policy instead of its traditional relatively western dominated policy is partly the result of its perceived rejection by the EU and the increasing cost of its relations with the U.S. Especially, some Islamist writers thank to Sarkozy and Merkel for pushing Turkey away and thus encouraging it to search for alternatives.⁴⁸ Turkey has become more powerful in regional dimensions in the last decade; the U.S. continued to make mistakes by its unilateral and questionable policies; TFP diverged considerably from the American policies. Therefore, while, Lesser argued in 2006 that the strategic quality of the relationship could not longer be taken for granted and it was high time to part with the 'myth of a golden age' between Turkey and the U.S.⁴⁹, in 2010, Birand points out that declaring the U.S. and Turkey as 'strategic partners' were mere words.⁵⁰ The relations are increasingly becoming transactional.⁵¹

Rather than being a rejected child of the European family, Ankara might try to a patriarch of the Muslim family. Turkey has the necessary economic, military and demographic potential to make a bid for a preeminent leadership role within the Muslim world.⁵² Contrary to Kemalist denial of the heritage, the AKP elite saw the Muslim and Ottoman dimension as positive factors for rapprochement with the Middle East and solve the deepest domestic problem of integrating Kurds to the system. The AKP is also pragmatist and realist. For example, one prominent AKP member declares from the party site that Turkey has no ambition of being a model for the Islamic world. 'Such a move may hurt feelings of Muslim countries. Turkey successfully combined Islamic culture with democracy. It can only be related to this debate in this framework'.⁵³

Increasing divergence from the western line led to a debate about Turkey's 'axis shift'; reasons of this debate include Turkey's policies toward the Iran nuclear issue and Israel. Some seasoned observers pointed out 7-8 years earlier that 'if the United States and Europe hope to work with Turkey in serious partnership, they must understand the full geopolitical complexity of Turkey that transcends a strictly Western orientation'.⁵⁴ So, axis shift perception cannot be new; a shift is also not inevitable. 'Active Turkish involvement into the regional politics need not be in conflict with Western interests. If the West (and Europe in particular) will finally have to take Turkey seriously as a partner – and stop viewing it as a Western client state'[...] 'rather than binding Turkey as closely as possible to Europe and the West, European policy is driving Turkey into the arms of Russia and Iran'.⁵⁵

Despite these warnings, the treatment of Turkey by the West is still deplorable. For example, Turkey together with Brazil brokered the May 17 nuclear swap deal under which Iran agreed to ship 1,200 kilograms of low enriched uranium to Turkey, and in turn to receive 120 kilograms of nuclear fuel for its Tehran reactor. This move snubbed by the United States and other big powers. Thus, it should not be surprising to see that Davutoğlu is busy with helping to laying intellectual basis of perceiving a non-western dominated world. According to him, there is no longer a Euro-centric cultural life. China and India rising with their own culture; Islamic world is becoming more culturally vibrant, Africa is rediscovering itself and creating an African consciousness modernization is increasingly multi-directional; the angle between modernization and westernization is getting steeper. New power centres emerging; Turkey with its geography history and culture, is a candidate to be one of these new centres⁵⁶.

A Maturing Turkey and its Middle East Policy

The 1980s brought about an important shift in the policy of 'avoidance' of the Middle East. The Özal governments tried with some success to benefit from Middle Eastern capital to revive the Turkish economy. Turkey also pursued a policy of 'active neutrality' during the Iran-Iraq War, multiplying exports to these countries. The Gulf War (1991) brought a dramatic change in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East. After decades of non-involvement and non-interference in domestic politics of individual countries, Turkey under the leadership of Özal attempted to make a bold move. It continued to support western, particularly American vision in the region but this time, Özal wanted a prominent place in the decision making mechanism. After all, Turkish leadership saw something to be gained by being active in the region; namely inclusion of Mosul into Turkey and thus correcting a

historical mistake if the territorial integrity of Iraq, an important objective for Turkey since then, was not to be respected. Özal also seemed to imply that, Turkey could secure the compliance of the Western powers for this annexation. Özal's implied solution to the Kurdish question was a form of federation. Since, an independent Kurdistan was a dream, Turkey, as the only democratic country despite its shortcomings in their region, was to emerge as the guardian, second best choice for the Kurds. The opposition and the TAF saw, Özal's move as adventurist and too dangerous. Demirel and Çiller governments returned to classical security-oriented policy toward the Kurdish question.

Nevertheless, the rapid economic growth since 2001, and relative political liberalization due in part to the positive influence of the EU, especially through 1999-2005, changed the domestic political landscape in Turkey. This change has also reflected in the foreign policy. Dağı calls it 'a liberal turn in Turkish foreign policy.' It rescued Turkey from its past fears and insecurities and taught Turkey to look at its foreign policy issues and regional affairs from different angles. For decades TFP was directed by a 'siege mentality' according to which, Turkey was surrounded by enemies. The geopolitical position of Turkey was exaggerated to argue that many major powers and neighbouring enemies had their eyes on it. Such a negative description of the outside world was also convenient for domestic purposes as external 'threats' justified the authoritarian regime inside. Democracy, human rights and pluralism were regarded as secondary and even risky. The 1999 decision of the EU to grant Turkey candidate status, not only marked the beginning of an EU-stimulated process of domestic reform, but also the Europeanization of Turkish foreign policy. Instead of trying to project power over regional actors, the current Turkish leaders began to seek peace and stability in the neighbourhood. A stable, peaceful region is now considered essential for Turkey to deepen its democracy, sustain its economic growth and possibly secure its accession to the EU. Being part of conflicts, or wars in the region will increase the power of authoritarian elements in Turkey. Establishing regional peace, security and stability is also a means to foster Turkish democracy and hence secure the supremacy of civilian governments.⁵⁷

In the last decade, Turkey has been able to add economic clout to its demographic power, Turkey is now the 15th largest economy of the world in GDP-PPP terms, passing the 1 Trillion USD threshold in 2008. This rapid economic progress has been the major source of confidence in foreign policy and also activism in search of new markets and trade connections. With a total foreign trade of 334 billion dollars (2008), Turkey has a big open market which makes its stability important for the global economy. The expanding economy, under conservative governments, has also produced its own counter-elites; for example, the so-called 'Anatolian tigers', businessmen from rapidly emerged traditional, conservative cities who generally support the AKP. Turkey's traditional Istanbul-based business elite, with close ties to previous secular governments, fear that the economic power is shifting to the counter-elite with closer ties to conservative governments. The conservative business circles want to see Turkey integrated into global economic system, as the previous closed economy of Turkey was not a big enough. They naturally encourage the AKP to pursue a pragmatic, economy-based multi-directional/multi-dimensional foreign policy⁵⁸ which means increasing economic ties with different regions of the world. The Middle East has become one of the most important economic areas for Turkey which hopes to benefit further from increasing economic relationships with the Gulf Arab states by attracting a higher percentage of their huge funds for trade and investment.⁵⁹

Turkey sought after increased access to the Middle Eastern investors and markets and as a result nearly 20 percent of Turkey's exports went to the Middle East in 2009, some \$19.2 billion worth of goods, compared with 12.5 percent in 2004. Turkey and the GCC have the same objectives in many fields,' according to Davutoğlu. Trade between the GCC and Turkey grew from \$1.5 billion in 1999 to \$17.5 billion in 2008; imports from Turkey increased 15-fold.⁶⁰ Similarly, the trade volume between Turkey and Iran reached 10 billion dollars per year. According to Fuller, economically more vibrant Turkey has strategically become part of the Middle East with a role of regional economic model.⁶¹

Turkey's economic conditions make it a centre of attraction for the investors, including from neighbouring regions;⁶² the new framework of TFP in the last few years has also included political and civilizational dimensions. Davutoğlu is usually considered the brain behind the recent TFP under the AKP. He became minister of foreign affairs in May 2009 but he has been the chief foreign policy advisor to Erdoğan. Davutoğlu's views are usually reflective of the AKP leadership and also of the

President. Being a respected academic, he puts these ideas in a sophisticated framework and thus provides the philosophical ground for the new TFP. For example, Davutoğlu has argued since 2001 that Turkey, thanks to its geographical position, possessed a strategic depth of geography and history which it had hitherto failed to exploit, due to lack of a vision and that Turkey should develop an active engagement in the regional political systems in the Middle East, Asia, the Balkans and Caucasia.⁶³

In the AKP era, Turkey has been trying to pursue a pro-active and multidimensional foreign policy. Thus, it is implicit that the previous foreign policy was found stagnant, reactive to developments and foreign actors; and mono-dimensional (oriented toward the West). This reaction is related to the 'sense of urgency' to catch up with the more advanced societies and being fed up with being an underdog in the international system. With the AKP, there is a feeling that Turkey somehow passed a certain criterion in the last few years and now should be considered as one of the big players. Hence, the Republic of Turkey should aim to be one the top 10 countries in the world by 2023.

The AKP leadership constantly emphasize that they change Turkey for the better. A multidimensional and pro-active foreign policy is part of this 'transformation'. According to Davutoğlu, Turkey has a unique geography, occupies a centre of attraction in its region; in terms of its area of influence, Turkey is a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country. Turkey should provide security and stability not only for itself, but also for its neighbouring regions. and generally looking to benefit from its geographical position and historical assets.⁶⁴ If wanted, Turkey has the opportunity to manoeuvre in several regions simultaneously; the capacity to do so should be constantly enhanced, with an appropriate vision.

According to Davutoğlu, 'a central country with such an optimal geographic location cannot define itself in a defensive manner'. Turkey should not accept to be seen a mere 'bridge' between the West and the Muslim world, as previously presented by Turkish foreign policy implementers. Since Turkey is one of the central countries, in fact, with a much better geographical reach than most, it should break away from a 'static and single-parameter policy' and become a 'problem solver' by contributing to 'global and regional peace'. After his appointment, he stressed that Turkey needed to play a more effective role as an 'order-instituting country' in its regional hinterlands, the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus. Thus, by definition Ankara wants to be a policy-producer instead of being a 'policy-implementer' for the U.S or Europe.⁶⁵

According to Davutoğlu's intellectual framework, Turkey's new foreign policy approach should be based on the following five principles: 1) There should be 'a balance between security and democracy' in Turkey. Its political regime must be legitimate; otherwise it will not have an influence in its region. 2) Turkey should have a 'zero problems with neighbours' policy. Its relations with its neighbours should be and is on the right track (in comparison to policies of the previous governments). 3) Turkey should 'develop relations with the neighbouring regions and beyond'. 4) It should pursue 'a multi-dimensional foreign policy'. Its relations with global actors (such as the U.S., NATO, the EU, Russia, China) should be complementary, not competitive. 5) Turkey should conduct a rhythmic diplomacy (serious, sustained and always active).⁶⁶ This new policy influenced by factors at every unit of analysis: cognitive map of the individuals, domestic political factors, orientations of other regional countries, extra-regional powers and the factors at the systemic level.

Therefore, the recent 'transformation' of TFP has more to do with the changes in the foreign policy decision making processes, diversification of area of interests and issues, normalization of foreign policy perspectives, and democratization in Turkey than an ideological re-configuration, de-Westernization, or 'Middle Easternization' of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey has been trying to establish mutually beneficial relations with Brazil, Russia and Iran, too, which were not part of the Ottoman geography.⁶⁷ Therefore, AKP members openly argue that, contrary to recent charges, Turkey's foreign policymakers are not seeking to revive the Ottoman Empire. Instead, 'we seek Turkey's historic reintegration into its immediate neighbourhoods, thereby correcting an anomaly of the Cold War years'... 'we aim to deepen our political dialogue, increase our trade, and multiply our people-to-people contacts with our neighbours in the form of sports, tourism, and cultural activities'. Such a re-integration would also benefit the European Union and our other Western, NATO allies. None of them, therefore, should express discomfort with Turkey's new policies.⁶⁸ The AKP elite

frequently argue that historical and geographical imperatives force Turkey to adopt proactive policies and assume a leadership role.

The new TFP is not independent from the complex dynamics of internal power struggle. The new vision, as put forward by Davutoğlu, is portrayed by AKP leadership and perceived by its supporting base, as much more democratic (at peace with ethnic and religious diversity), more independent and cooperative in its foreign policy dealings. In domestic politics, the AKP sees itself as an agent of transformation toward a better and more powerful Turkey, including in areas of economy and politics. In many interrelated areas the processes are described recently as one of normalization; whether it is about civilian-military relations or about Turkey's manoeuvres in the Middle East. Thus, in this vision, the power is given back to the people; national history is interpreted as more tolerant and accommodative.⁶⁹

Turkey, under Erdoğan's leadership, tries to create a more autonomous, self-regulating and self-confident country; this exertion includes the foreign policy agenda. Here, the previous 'crisis-driven' foreign policy making is said to be substituted by *normalization*. Çandar argues that, Turkey is not drifting anywhere but emerging as a new power centre in the 'former Ottoman geography'. What is happening is what was not possible in the Cold War and is a normal development. Thus, its relations with other powers have to change, too, whether it is with the U.S or with Israel.⁷⁰ According to Davutoğlu, Turkey must be actively involved in regional affairs and can no longer say that 'let us keep our distance' from the region. Every crisis is also an opportunity, if carefully managed with a right vision. He implies that Turkey should rapidly be a more open and democratic country and reformulate its foreign policy to reflect the demands of such a society and adapt to the realities of an increasingly multi-polar world.

It is clear that both the Turks and Kurds in Turkey have learned much from the European experience. While the AKP cadres imply that Turkey is closer to the Middle East in terms of culture and a natural leader of the region; their preferred way of engagement is to lead to stabilize the region.⁷¹ Thus, it differentiated from the American style, and generally, like a European country acted as a facilitator in trying to help solving problems between the regional actors.⁷² For example, Syria and Israel knocked Turkey's door when they wanted to start secret negotiations. Turkey persuaded the Iraqi Sunnis not to boycott the elections; When Turkish authorities visited countries such as Lebanon, Pakistan or Afghanistan, all fractions want to meet with them.⁷³ Thus, Turkey promoted its prestige and also tried to change the perception in the EU that Turkey is in the middle of an instable region.⁷⁴ It can be argued that the Middle East now occupies a special position in the new TFP. Although, Turkey tries to be active in other neighbouring regions; the presence of the EU in the Balkans and Russia in the Caucasus diminishes its chance of shaping the playing field. On the contrary, in the Middle East, there seems to be a double vacuum. The influence of the U.S, as the extra-regional power and of other regional leaders, Egypt and S. Arabia as the Sunni powers are perceived to be declining.

Therefore, the Middle East is currently the most suitable area for Turkey to implement a successful foreign policy based upon its new parameters. According to Davutoğlu, Turkey's position in the Middle East must rest on four main principles: security for everyone; priority for dialogue as a means of solving crises; economic interdependence as 'order in the Middle East cannot be achieved in an atmosphere of isolated economies' and cultural coexistence and plurality.⁷⁵ According to Erdoğan, the destinies in the region are intertwined.⁷⁶ Turkey claimed to pursue positive neutrality in the region as Davutoğlu argued, 'Turkey is neither pro-Israeli nor pro-Syrian: it seeks an Israeli-Syrian accommodation in order to add another building block to regional stability'.⁷⁷ However, in practice, Turkey shifted toward the weaker Muslim actors in the region so far. A more liberal border regime with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan has been set up by lifting visas, facilitating easier trade. Turkey actively seeks to cooperate with regional countries in multiple areas including banking and telecommunications. The Turkish government became more active in regional and other multilateral institutions. A Turkish scholar, E. İhsanoğlu, has become the general secretary of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 2004 and Turkey gained the observer status in the Arab League.

In the last few years, Turkey tried to play a positive role in the region by both emphasizing its European credentials while embracing the positive aspects of its Middle Eastern cultural and religious

affinities and offering economic conduits to Europe (both in trade and as a potential energy corridor). Gül pointed some time ago that Turkey's background in regional cooperation provided Turkey with an opportunity to 'contribute to transforming the Middle East into a new area of cooperation in order to create a globally more competitive region'.⁷⁸ It is clear that Turkey has been trying to gain a prominent position in the region and Davutoğlu claims that the 'zero problem policy toward Turkey's neighbours' has been successfully implemented. However, its manoeuvres also disturbs other major actors. For example, professor Awda from Egypt warns that 'confusing' strategies pursued by Turkey in foreign policy 'have caused concern in the Middle East'. There is confusion over what Turkey wants to do strategically. 'Turkey has not effectively communicated with other countries in the region about its initiatives.'⁷⁹

It is envisioned by the AKP leadership that Turkey's growing influence in its hinterlands will also serve as a springboard for its power position vis-à-vis the West and the global powers. Soft power and instruments of cooperative security and economic interdependence constitute the basic elements of the new TFP. In Davutoğlu's view 'Islamic civilization needs to transform itself radically in the fields of economics, politics, culture and education to meet contemporary challenges'. Surveys show that the Turks overwhelmingly preferred economic cooperation over 'societal-cultural' or 'military' cooperation. Even on relations with Israel, the number who favoured ending all ties is lower than the number who favoured developing economic relations.⁸⁰ Therefore, the apparent shift in TFP is more a result of *reelpolitik* and systemic changes than ideological preferences of the party in power. Davutoğlu declares that Turkey does not want to be a frontier country anymore and does not want problems with any neighbour, including Iran. In this vision, intense economic, political and cultural relationship is the basis for creating a zone of stability and prosperity (and eventually perhaps freedom) in the southern neighbours. This strategy is also much like the EU's aim of promoting a 'ring of friends'.⁸¹ Davutoğlu, encourages its staff to look at the diplomatic developments with self-confidence. Turkey should conduct a global diplomacy.⁸²

The new TFP toward the Middle East has also its critics. For example according to Gürsel, the AKP from the earliest days instrumentalized the foreign policy, too, in order to transform Turkey into an Islamic-conservative society. Its transformation project involves authoritarianization. This fact is finally seen by some Americans such as Thomas Friedman who had saluted 'the Turkish model as an antidote to Bin Ladinism'. Friedman observed in 2005 that his talks with Turkish authorities were about Turkey's effort to join the EU. Now, to find them 'adamant to join the resistance front of Hamas-Hezbollah-Iran is shocking'.⁸³ Gürsel argues that the AKP's foreign policy negates the European perspective and transforms political culture whose references have been universal western democratic values, into Islamic conservative lines and *Middle-Easternize* it. The political culture of Middle East has been consisted of theocracy, fundamentalism monarchism authoritarianism nepotism, tribalism, sectarianism, oppression of religious and ethnic minorities, genocide, and humiliation of women... Not a single positive dominant component can be shown. Therefore, 'Turkey may turn its face to Middle East but should never turn its direction towards it'.⁸⁴

Some other experts also argue that despite the activism of the AKP government and 'the acclaim it showers on itself', the result is mixed.⁸⁵ Moreover, Akyol warns against that Turkish leaders are using a rational, reasoned language toward the West but an emotional one with full of anger, excitement and even tears toward the East.⁸⁶ Another important point raised by observers is the fact that Turkey suffers from serious internal problems which have to be solved in order to progress towards its 'strategic horizons'. Internal divisions such as Turk-Kurds, Sunni-Alevi or Secular-Pious (/Islamists), consume Turkey's energy and diminish legitimacy of its system.

Davutoğlu's vision is after a new 'imagined community'. The importance of national borders in Turkish involvement in the Middle East has been declining. 'Bordering' or 'othering' are no longer primary tools of TFP. Both domestic and foreign threat perceptions are to be discarded according to new vision. Davutoğlu presses for ever continued widening of horizons.⁸⁷ The new cultural imagination requires adaptability and ability to learn from different historical and current narratives. However, naturally, Turkey is trying to privilege its Ottoman-Islamic past among them. Turkey is also learning to use its rising soft power by 'putting larger concepts of cultural affinity, historical companionship, geographical proximity, social imagery into consideration'.⁸⁸

Potential Costs and Risks

The new activism with a 'divergent' set of policies from the West also seems to have some potential costs. Those who entertain the idea of punishing Turkey primarily because of its policies toward Iran nuclear issue and Israel, generally argue that Turkey's drift toward the East has reached a critical point and they even argue that Turkey should be thrown out of NATO. PM Erdoğan repeatedly told in 2010 that, those who argue that there has been an 'axis shift' in TFP are mischievous subcontractors and made clear that Turkey would not back down from its recent policies.⁸⁹ According to Dağı, the reactions to Turkey's 'No' vote for further sanctions to Iran approved by the UNSC, have shown that there are those who do not forgive the 1 March [2003] Incident. They still see Turkey as an American outpost and expect full obedience; obviously they cannot comprehend the 'new' Turkey.⁹⁰ According to Akyol neo-cons and pro-Israeli circles in the US tries to put Turkey into a family picture together with Hamas. The 'Islamofascist' accusation about AKP is an old neo-con campaign.⁹¹ This angry turn of the Jewish lobbies against Turkey is a negative development since the most important support against the Armenian lobby used to come from them. However, the lobbies must see the reality that the deterioration in the Turkish-Israeli relations came with the brutality of Israeli militarism in Gaza and prolonging hostility toward Turkey will worsen the problem and eventually harm Israel, too; the solution should be sought with delicate touches not with extreme policies.⁹² Turkey's taking on Israel seems to attract the wrath of the powerful pro-Israeli circles in the U.S. For example when the military threatened to intervene against Erdoğan and the AKP in 2007, some neo-cons seemingly suggested that the US should not try to discourage it as the lesser evil. Since 'One Minute' crisis all neo-cons, including those who used to praise the AKP as a democratizing, moderate force - have turned against Ankara.⁹³ According to Aslan, neo-con circles in the U.S. might even try to revive the system of tutelage in Turkey with the support of the pro-Israel lobby.⁹⁴

Turkey's Recent Policies Toward Iraq, Syria, Israel and Iran in Brief

As Akyol argues, Turkey's decades-old 'Kurdophobia' and the old paradigm based on a 'paranoid mindset that saw the world as full of enemies' might be passing...⁹⁵ Since the PKK terror intertwined with the Kurdish question has been the most important thorn in Turkey's relations with some of its Middle Eastern neighbours as explained above, abstracting itself from the Kurdish question is necessary for Turkey to engage with the region multidimensionally. Thus, when Turkish policymakers in recent years admitted that the PKK can be tackled by instruments other than military means, it became synonymous with a new policy of rapprochement and cooperation with the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG). In that regard, it represented a watershed in Turkey's approach toward Iraq given the fact that Turkey had refrained from extending legitimacy to the KRG in the post-Saddam era. According to Çandar, Erdoğan is committed to lead the process to its final destination.⁹⁶

The AKP Government's constructive engagement with the KRG is an attempt to win the confidence and cooperation of the Iraqi Kurds on issues, ranging from security to economic exchanges. It is clear that, there should also be a 'zero-problems with Kurds' policy.⁹⁷ This also makes economic sense as Turkey benefits from an expanding trade with N. Iraq. For example, according to newly renewed contract, Turkey will receive 450 million dollars per year from the Kirkuk-Yumurtalık pipeline. Better relations with the KRG and Iraqi government would also allow Turkey to protect the interests of the Turcoman in Iraq.⁹⁸

The stance of the Turkish-Syrian relations today is the best example of how the regional political landscape can change quickly. The two countries have overcome the decades old enmity and distrust. According to Davutoğlu, Turkey and Syria is in full harmony now, thanks to established cooperation mechanisms. 'There are two visions regarding the region. One vision is the mission of building welfare, peace and stability' the other vision is based on creating disputes and uneasiness...the first vision will narrow the zone of the second vision. As regional cooperation

improves, the positive agenda will become stronger' it must be a common aim to get out of the vicious circle of conflicts and crisis and turn the region an area of stability and prosperity.⁹⁹

In the new TFP toward the region, Israel now seems to be the odd one out. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu made it clear that Israel led them to believe that Turkey had brought Israel and Syria to the brink of face-to-face talks or even a peace deal. Yet, with no warning, Olmert launched Israel's winter 2009 assault of the Operation Cast Lead on Gaza. This was the turning point for the relations. Erdoğan hardly missed any opportunity to criticize Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. Relatively impartial Turkish observers generally also put the blame on Israel. Çandar argues for example that nobody was talking about an axis shift in December 2008. The relations have not collapse because of the ideology of the AKP or unusually strong rhetoric of Erdoğan, but because of the Israeli operation in Gaza in which 1400 people were killed.¹⁰⁰ A few weeks later, in January 2009 at Davos Forum, Erdoğan, repeatedly demanded 'One Minute' more from the moderator, burst out by shouting to President Peres: 'You know well how to kill people'. According to Birand by taking up the cause of Palestinians, Erdoğan brought about a peace between Turkey and the Arab street which used to see secular Turkey as no more than an obedient servant of the West.¹⁰¹ The lowest point in the relations came with the Mavi Marmara Incident of 31 May 2010 when IDF commandos killed 9 Turkish citizens in international waters. After the incident, Davutoğlu said that unless there is an Israeli apology and compensation, Turkey will try to isolate Israel in every international platform. Turkish attitude vis-à-vis Israel might seem over-confident; yet, according to commentators like Çandar, it must be preferred to the usual 'inferiority complex' that marked the previous periods.¹⁰²

For Turkey, Iran, unlike most other Middle Eastern countries, as a large and important neighbour has been to 'be managed rather than confronted.' Turkey imports around 93 percent of its oil and gas needs, its demand for energy continues to increase; it also wants to be an energy corridor. The place of Iran is crucial in this strategy. Therefore, as it is argued frequently by Turkish officials, Turkey's energy agreements with Iran or with any oil or gas rich country of the region cannot be dependent upon with its relationships with other countries.¹⁰³ Turkish officials often refer to four centuries long stable relationship between the two countries.

Energy has been the major driver behind the warming of Iranian-Turkish relations. In July 1996, shortly after taking office, Turkish PM Erdoğan concluded a \$20 billion deal for Iranian gas. Today, Iran, after Russia, is the second-largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey. In the last few years, with the acceleration of Iranian nuclear program Turkey's position became more delicate. Erdoğan's Iran policy is very risky and also it is very difficult to maintain a delicate balance between Iran and Gulf countries, S. Arabia or Egypt which fears from a nuclear Iran.¹⁰⁴ In fact, the Turkish government, similar to the American policy, has been trying to balance the Iranian influence in the region. However, as Yetkin observes, Turkish PM tries to say to the West that 'Let's prevent nuclearization of Iran but if we do this by force, the whole world will be a zone of war'.¹⁰⁵ Akgün argues that nothing in the world is more natural than Turkey's saying to the U.S that 'Consult me too, if you are planning an embargo or a bombing for my neighbours'.¹⁰⁶ As President Gül recently reiterated that Turkey got involved in the issue, because it would be among the biggest losers in case of a major war.

Conclusion

Turkey's relations with the Middle Eastern countries remained minimal and security oriented up until 1980s. Only with Özal, Turkey started to discover potential economic benefits of trade relations. In the last few years, Turkey dramatically changed its policy toward the region. Turkish leaders believe that the country has gathered enough economic and political power to play for a leadership role in the region. With the liberating effect of the end of the Cold War, the Middle East is perceived to be full of economic and political opportunities. Turkey must seek for new markets and attract foreign investment; especially oil rich regional countries are becoming important partners.

The AKP argues that Turkey is a central not a frontier or bridge country. The new foreign policy towards the Middle East emphasized upon economy and civilizational ties rather than security

concerns. This makes sense of, as Turkey does not have adequate military power to shape the region. Turkey, having learned from the European experience, tries actively to fashion a region where the actors tied to others with a web of relations. The change in TFP towards the region has been dramatic. Just a decade ago Syria was an open enemy, Saddam's Iraq was a dangerous zone and the Kurds were to 'divide' Turkey. Today Syria is a friend and an ally, Iraq is a needy, potentially rich neighbour where Turkey is fairly influential, and the Kurdish-Turkish relationship may improve with deeper democratization.¹⁰⁷

Of course, Turkey is new to this strategy and make many mistakes, for example by aligning too heavily with Sunni Arab actors in the region while excluding equally Sunni Kurds in Iraq as bitterly protested by Celal Talabani in the fall of 2010. Turkey maintains close contacts even with all groups in Iraqi society Its involvement in Iraqi policy is first time in republican history, being described as this influential. Foreign policy making is a marathon and it is also heartening to see that Turkey can afford to make mistakes in this important neighbour. Çandar observes that either Davutoğlu himself or the conditions 'corrected' some of Turkey's mistakes in recent years

Critics argue that the deepest relationships have been fostered with the poorest countries of the region (Syria, Lebanon and Jordan). The region is still full of problems and potential major conflicts. Many Arabs in the region are anxious about the low level of institutionalization of the new situation. Are these Turkish policies permanent? How they are perceived by the Officer corps? Will they continue if there is a change of government in Turkey? Ironically, many Arab governments especially that of Syria want Turkey to have normal relations with Israel so that it can help to broke a peace. Turkish leaders are perceived to be in a hurry as if wanting to write history.¹⁰⁸

Turkey, with its young and dynamic population is a quick learner. The success and influence of its foreign policy towards the region depend upon many internal and external factors. Further democratization will require Turkish governments to pursue an effective regional policy. It might be an interesting twist of history that it currently burdens a conservative party in Turkey to provide reconciliation among the different sections (Turks-Kurds, Alevis-Sunnis), further democratization and sustainable economic growth. Turkey must be successful in its internal transformation, be it with AKP or another party in power. Otherwise, it cannot continue its current pragmatic and constructive foreign policy in the Middle East.¹⁰⁹

NOTES

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