

The “new” Turkish foreign policy and its implications for Norwegian peacebuilding

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Executive Summary

This paper is based on interviews with diplomats, experts and political analysts and provides an overview of Turkey’s foreign policy, particularly in relation to peacebuilding. In the past year, Turkey has moved to the centre stage on the international scene. After making the headlines with its joint mediation initiative with Brazil on Iran’s nuclear issue, in May Ankara clashed with Israel over the storming of the Gaza-bound “humanitarian flotilla”. Suddenly all eyes were on a country situated in this most turbulent and strategic region of the world – a country that had appeared at least until recently to be a reliable and predictable ally of the West, and of Israel.

However, the country’s actions and reactions should not have come as a surprise. Over the past ten years Turkey has been busy developing a very active foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East and Central Asia. It has reached out to countries traditionally considered as adversaries, such as Russia, Iran and Syria. Ankara has also not been afraid to express its differences and diverge from the West on certain issues, from Cyprus to Armenia to Palestine.

In fact, looking increasingly to its eastern neighbours, Turkey has become a key actor in the region by asserting its autonomy in relation to the EU and US, and by

developing its own strategy based on a renewed assessment of its assets and interests. In this endeavour, Turkey draws its credibility from its growing economic power, its capacity to be “part of and apart from” the West, its democratic model (compared to its Eastern neighbours) and its relationship to both Islam and secularism.

Despite all the new developments, Ankara – which has put forward its advocacy for dialogue and mediation as a key element of its foreign relations – maintains strong relations with the EU and US, particularly through its Nato membership. The Government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan also consistently pushes for Turkey’s accession to the EU. The country could, therefore, become an important partner for Norwegian diplomacy in the future, particularly in the field of peacebuilding initiatives.

Norway could co-operate with Turkey to improve and stabilise its internal democratic system, reinforce civil society, initiate interfaith dialogue, develop mediation and peacebuilding expertise, and co-operate with its army in order to enhance its peacekeeping and peacebuilding capacities. Turkey’s efforts to initiate mediation talks over Iran’s nuclear policies also indicate that there is room for joint efforts by Oslo and Ankara on non-proliferation and denuclearisation issues.

However, unresolved issues internally (minority rights, freedom of expression, the role of the military) and externally (eg, Cyprus, and shifting relations with former key allies like the EU, US and Israel) might add some volatility to any partnership. In particular, the internal tug-of-war between various competing actors (secularists, Muslims, the army and others), which are vying not only for power but for the soul of the country, is of considerable concern.

There is also a special need to clarify Turkey’s long-term foreign policy strategy and objectives, and whether the country’s peacebuilding initiatives are a sign of genuine peaceful diplomacy or a tactical move to build up its strategic interests in the region. These considerations make Turkey a rather unpredictable partner. Nevertheless, the growing influence of Turkey on the international scene and its specific characteristics make this country a potentially very interesting partner for Norway.

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The “new” Turkish foreign policy

In the past two decades Turkey’s international profile has changed considerably. This change has accelerated in the past eight years with the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). “Turkey has gone from being a relatively passive observer of events on its borders to a dynamic player with the kind of influence to help shape the politics of the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia,”¹ writes Steven Cook.

Pointing at Turkey’s new initiatives, and in particular to its role as a mediator in one of the most turbulent and strategic regions of the world, many international observers have come to see Ankara as a promising and necessary partner. However, in other quarters these new developments have had the opposite effect, raising questions and even concerns about “where Turkey is going”. Headlines and analysis on the alleged Turkish estrangement from the West have been flourishing in foreign policy journals and op-ed pages.

The current foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, appointed to the post in May 2009, was previously the main foreign policy adviser of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He has given an intellectual rationale to the multiple initiatives of Turkish diplomacy; his 2000 essay on “strategic depth” spells out a foreign policy that seeks to express rationally the interests of Turkey. According to his supporters, this new foreign policy is not an intellectual castle in the air but first and foremost a realistic recognition of the major traits of Turkey:

- **Its hard power:** after very difficult years in the early 2000s, Turkey has emerged as an economic powerhouse. Its business sector has not only exploited growing links with the EU to boost its role as a major producer of industrial consumer goods, but it has also expanded its presence in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Middle East, especially in the

field of public works. Turkey is ranked as the seventeenth global economic power and is a member of the G-20.

- **Its soft power:** in a region beset by authoritarianism and religious extremism, Turkey projects itself as a “model country”, as a democracy and a state that has been able to balance secularism with Islam. It could therefore, more than any Western democracy, inspire reasonable and feasible political reform in a Middle East torn between authoritarian states and radical Islamist movements. This “moderate Muslim” image is seen as a key factor in the framing of Turkey’s diplomatic and security strategies.

Easternisation

The new foreign policy also expresses the recognition of changes in the international arena. The fall of the Berlin wall and the birth of new nations in its immediate vicinity have forced Turkey to look East. The rise of Islamic extremism, the US “war on terror”, the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath (particularly in the Kurdish region), the deepening Nato engagement in Afghanistan, the Israeli attacks against Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, have altered the strategic environment. This change has brought a sense of urgency to the need for Ankara to manage relations with neighbouring countries on its own terms.

With Turkey’s “zero problems with neighbours” approach, the current foreign minister has broken away from a rather inward-looking national security vision. He has broadened Turkey’s international perspectives and widened the horizons of Turkish foreign policy actors. He doesn’t see Turkey simply as a “bridge” between East and West, but rather as a central and focal country “in the midst of the Afro-Eurasia landmass... with multiple regional identities”.² Similar to other emergent countries, like Brazil or India, Turkey’s ambition is global.

1 Steven A. Cook, “Balancing a Bullish Turkey”, Expert Brief, Council on Foreign Relations, 4 December 2009, http://www.cfr.org/publication/20904/balancing_a_bullish_turkey.html, accessed 1 December 2010.

2 Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkey’s New Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007”, *Insight Turkey*, vol 10, no. 1, 2008, p. 78, http://www.insightturkey.com/Insight_Turkey_10_1_A_Davutoglu.pdf, accessed 1 December 2010.

The focus of Turkish diplomacy is on conflict resolution, mediation and peacebuilding, a new direction for a country that had long been perceived as essentially a Nato military bulwark in the region. Indeed, the towering presence of the military on the country's political scene did not seem to cast it in the role of natural peacemaker. Turkish troops have of course been taking part in peacekeeping operations for years, from the Balkans to Somalia, but the army has also been seen as a major and at times troubling actor, internationally in Cyprus and northern Iraq, and nationally in its relations with minorities – in particular the Kurds, and Islamic forces allegedly bent on rolling back secularism.

The military's role in Turkish politics does not make the country a natural peacemaker.

In fact, these developments cannot be dissociated from the discussions on the nature of the AKP. The ruling party emanates from Turkey's Islamist movement. Although it professes its attachment to Kemalist principles of republicanism, secularism and nationalism, it appears determined to pursue a more Muslim path – not to be confused with an Islamist (ie, radical or fundamentalist) path. This marks a clear departure from the old military-secularist establishment. The higher profile given by the AKP government to the Islamic character of Turkey has coincided with the elaboration of a diplomatic strategy that sees religion as an asset. While Ankara emphasises its secularism when it looks to the West, it underlines its Muslim character when it looks to the East.

Some observers have described these developments as the resurgence of "Ottomanism", ie, a foreign policy less focused on the Western concept of secularism and traditional Turkish nationalism, and more inspired by the sense of a common belonging to Islam. These changes in foreign policy have reflected – or have been reflected in – the AKP's domestic initiatives, in particular its attempt to promote a certain form of Islamicisation of society. But they are also reflected in initiatives meant to engage with minorities (eg, Christians, Kurds, etc.) marginalised by Turkish nationalism.

However, do these changes mean that Turkey is distancing itself from the West? Some international observers, especially in Israel and in US neo-conservative circles, take the line that Turkey has decided to assume a pro-Islamist foreign policy that puts the country in league with Hamas, Syria and Iran. Others even refer to an "anti-Western policy agenda", by pointing at Ankara's growing economic relations with Russia. Yet most analysts linked to the AKP bluntly reject this notion of an estrangement from the West. They highlight their push for accession to the EU and their positive relations with the US (exemplified by Barack Obama's visit to the country), and describe Nato as a major anchor for Turkey's security strategies.

Officially, and even in private, think tanks like the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) and the Turkish Asian Center for Strategic Studies (TASAM), which appear close to the current government, present Turkey's future in Europe as a guiding light. The new foreign policy is even justified by the prospect of EU accession. "Anchoring Turkey in the EU accession process", writes Amanda Akçakoca, a European Policy Centre (EPC) researcher, "gave it [Turkey] the confidence to develop a less hard security and more democratic foreign policy".³

EU accession

Paradoxically, Turkey is expanding its "out-of-area" foreign policy initiatives in order to enhance its added value to the EU, but also as a guarantee that it can rebound if the EU ultimately closes its doors to Turkey. However, diplomats in Ankara are all too aware of the risk that a "too independent" foreign policy may be used by those in the EU who are hostile to Turkey's accession, as a pretext to justify EU rejection. Jean Marcou, of the French Institute

³ Amanda Akçakoca, "Turkish foreign policy – between East and West?", Policy Brief, Brussels, European Policy Centre (EPC), October 2009, http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/686290973_Turkish%20foreign%20policy.pdf, accessed 1 December 2010.

of Anatolian Studies, endorses this interpretation. “Turkey’s relations with the West are less exclusive. Ankara finds it interesting to have two irons in the fire. It manifests itself, for instance, in its pipeline diplomacy: Turkey is a partner of both the Nabucco⁴ and the South Stream projects”. That is not to say that Turkey is severing its links with the EU. After all, “the European perspective still offers much more than the other alternatives: the Arab world, Russia or Iran”.

However, there is undoubtedly EU fatigue in Turkey. In fact, support for EU accession was largely the result of a misunderstanding. Turkish leaders and public opinion did not really understand that the process would require significant concessions. It is not just a simple ticket into the rich people’s world, but the commitment to change essential principles, like Turkish nationalism and its policies towards non-Turkish minorities. “The Turks’ dilemma”, wrote Hugh Pope, one of the most prominent Istanbul-based foreign correspondents, “is that while strongly attracted to the wealth of the West, and the achievements of Western systems, they are full of distrust of the Westerners themselves; indeed even the most pro-European Turkish officials I knew would say that even if Turkey fulfilled all EU membership criteria, say by 2015, it probably would not want to join the EU unless it had evolved into a purely economic and trading organization.”⁵



Israeli President Shimon Peres, as well as the deadly storming by Israeli soldiers of a Gaza-bound Turkish ship in May 2010 (and the resulting anti-Israeli demonstrations in Turkey), have created a picture of growing hostility in Turkey among the government and in wider society towards Israel. Many observers anticipate recurring tensions between the two countries, rooted in the general reorientation of Turkey’s foreign policy, and predict that this will impact on the security connections between the armies of the two countries.

Turkey’s relationship with the US is also a barometer of the alleged “Easternization” of Ankara’s foreign policy. The Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq was a low point in US-Turkish relations, with as many as 90% of Turks at one point expressing a negative view of the US. The Obama administration has gone to great lengths to re-establish good relations with Turkey, visiting the country early in his presidency and vocally backing Ankara’s EU accession. He also reaffirmed Turkey’s key role as a regional ally and stakeholder, and one which the US was relying on in order to resolve international conflicts, and has not officially recognised the 1915 massacres of Ottoman Armenians as “genocide”. In return, Turkey has offered its assistance to Washington in this framework. It also played its role in Afghanistan, responding to Obama’s call for more troops, and offered to mediate between Iran and Washington. But it did so according to its own visions and interests.

Yet the growing tensions between Israel and Turkey, two major pillars in the region, have created a headache for Washington and has the potential of derailing US strategic partnerships in the Middle East. “It is becoming evident to Turkey,” writes Amanda Akçakoca, “that promoting regional stability and good regional relations may sometimes take precedence over relations with Washington. Ankara is discovering that many of its strategic geopolitical aims are incompatible with those of the US.”⁶

Friction with Israel v US backing

The country’s flare-up with Israel has been one of the major reasons behind the re-assessment of Turkey’s foreign policy. The shouting match at Davos in January 2009 between Erdogan and

4 The Nabucco pipeline project connects the Caspian region to Bulgaria via Turkey. The South Stream gas pipeline connects Russia to Bulgaria through the Black Sea and is seen as a competitor to the Nabucco project.

5 Hugh Pope, *Sons of the Conquerors. The Rise of the Turkic World*, New York, Overlook Duckworth, 2005, pp 39-40, <http://www.sonsoftheconquerors.com/>, accessed 1 December 2010.

6 Amanda Akçakoca, “Turkish foreign policy”, EPC, 2009. p 2.

Turkey's autonomy

The apparent increase in the autonomy of Turkey's foreign relations should not come as a surprise. Turkey's pro-Western policies since the end of the second world war have been a major hallmark of its diplomacy. However, Ankara has not been afraid at times to express its differences and diverge from Nato or European choices on a range of issues.

Ankara is not afraid to show its differences to the West.

The Cyprus issue, for instance, is a reminder that Turkey's nationalism has the potential to trump

international alliances. In 1974 Ankara invaded Cyprus in contravention of the warnings of its major Western allies, and it has long resisted attempts to settle the issue according to the wishes of its Western partners. Turkey's active policy of denying the 1915 Armenian genocide runs contrary to the statements of many European countries, and even the US Congress, which recognise these as acts of genocide. In 1975 Turkey voted in favour of the UN resolution qualifying Zionism as racism and then abstained on a similar resolution in 1991. In 2003 Turkey backed away from joining the US-led "coalition of the willing" in the invasion of Iraq. And in recent years the country has redefined its relations with Jerusalem without taking its cue from Washington. Furthermore, it has kept its bridges open with so-called "rogue states", like Sudan and Iran.

Although in the field of international relations, dependence is a two-way street, Turkey has also acquired leverage on its EU and Nato partners. It is often seen as a pivotal actor in the future of the region. But because of its geographical location and hard power, it has also become a decisive player in the "great games" of energy battles, pipeline diplomacy and regional hegemonic rivalries, games in which the EU and the US are inevitably implicated.

Turkish foreign policy actors

Although considered as rather conservative, Turkey's foreign ministry has been playing a very visible and active role in the redeployment of Turkish diplomacy. But it is not the only actor in town.

The army: Although weakened by AKP-sponsored institutional changes, and by damning press exposés of its conspiratorial temptations, the army remains a major player in Turkey, in particular in the country's relations with Nato and Israel. Its huge business, financial and corporatist interests add to its influence on foreign policy, as well as its links with Nato, Israel and the US military-industrial complex.

Companies: Turkey's international expansion has also been fuelled by the country's economic actors. Turkish companies in public works, telecommunications, consumer goods and transportation have served as "advance teams" for Turkish diplomatic initiatives. They have created links and signed contracts, adding to Turkey's national interests in the countries where its corporations and traders are operating: in Iran, in Central Asia and the Caucasus, but also in Africa and South Asia.

Muslims: Although constantly reaffirming its secularism, Ankara has also benefited from a very active Muslim connection. The official religious institution, the *Diyanet*, and also non-state actors like the *Fethullah Gulen*⁷ networks, have been working for years in many foreign countries. They compete with other religious diplomacies like the Saudi Arabia-supported Wahhabi, from Senegal to Indonesia.

Cultural and media: Turkey has also developed its cultural and media diplomacy. Turkish TV series have become a hit throughout the region, turning Turkish actors and actresses into celebrities. Turkey also plans to start an Arabic-language TV channel that will compete with Iranian (Press TV) and Arab "global" TV stations like al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya.

Civil society: Although Turkish civil society is weak, fractured and at times repressed, there is a growing attention to the role of citizen exchanges in the context of this new diplomacy. A number of common platforms between Turkish

⁷ This movement, founded by Fethullah Gulen, preaches a conservative, mainstream and non-violent form of Islam. Emphasizing traditional values, the common good, interfaith dialogue and economic liberalism its leaders have at times been dubbed the "Anatolian Calvinists", <http://en.fgulen.com/>

and foreign NGOs have been developed, particularly in Africa, with the aim of enhancing Turkish soft power.

Development assistance: All these initiatives are supported by an increasingly active development assistance policy, in particular through the official development agency, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA), from Albania to Mongolia, and Senegal to Uzbekistan.

An unpredictable policy?

In spite of its current image as an emergent country, an economic powerhouse, an alternative model in the context of the so-called “clash of civilisations” and a major political actor situated in one of the most strategic regions of the world, Turkey remains rather unpredictable. Its reliability is weakened by the internal tug-of-war between various competing sectors vying not only for power but, much more substantively, for the very definition of the state and of the nation. Therefore, the nature of Turkey’s foreign policy and its role as a potential partner in peacebuilding initiatives will be largely determined by the issue of this battle for the soul of the country. So who are these sectors vying for power?

Turkey remains an unpredictable partner due to its internal tug-of-war.

Kemalists

Heirs of the 1923 independence war, guarantors of the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Kemalists profess a doctrine at the crossroads of nationalism, statism, secularism and republicanism. Their key pillars are the army, part of the judiciary, an important economic sector and the state bureaucracy. Their natural political expression is through the CHP (Republican Party), a party rooted in authoritarianism and statism, and a controversial member of the Socialist International.

Wary about Turkey opening to the East, which they suspect is based on an Islamic agenda, and depicting themselves as modernists, they resist

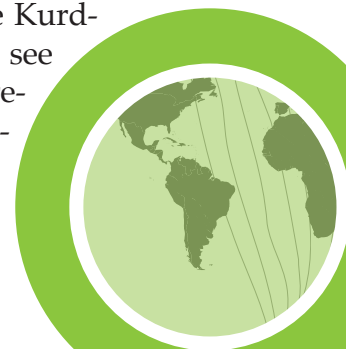
the concessions to Turkish sovereignty that EU integration implies. They hold strong views on Turkishness (the “imagined ethnicity”, to paraphrase Benedict Anderson’s seminal work on identity) and on territorial integrity, which they believe is constantly threatened – especially by the Kurdish insurgency and by the international campaign for the recognition of the Armenian genocide. By undermining the government’s initiatives towards the Kurdish Turks, they have also weakened Turkey’s legitimacy as a regional peace broker. Furthermore, they are tempted by an Eastern strategy, one not based on Islam but on the “centrality” of Turkey, its economic and military power, and the Turkic connection in Central Asia.

Democratic conservative Muslims

The AKP has succeeded in presenting itself as separate from the Islamist past of its major leaders, Erdogan and President Abdullah Gül. It has different wings, from more liberal to more conservative. Its mainstream refers to the model of European Christian democratic parties, with a liberal line on the economy and a moderate to conservative position on social issues. In its first years of government, the AKP has identified itself as a strong supporter of the EU accession process, although it has failed to totally convince outsiders that it has no hidden Islamist agenda.

Secularist democrats

Clearly forming a minority, they represent the “ideal Turks” for the EU pro-Turkish sectors and for the US liberal community. Many have voted for the AKP in order to speed up democratic reforms, by reducing the power of the army and by minimising the weight of ethnic references in the identity of their country. They are mostly influential in academic circles, foreign policy think tanks and parts of the media. They are strongly in favour of the EU integration process, advocate for a real opening on the Kurdish and Armenian issues, and see Turkey’s peace initiatives as reinforcing their efforts at implementing democratic reforms internally.



The power of the army

Many analysts diverge on the assessment of the army's real influence. Although some consider that the military-bureaucratic complex, with the army at its centre, still holds vast and excessive powers, the army has seen some of its prerogatives and privileges clipped by the AKP-sponsored reforms implemented in the context of the EU accession process. The popularity of the army has also dropped among the public. The cascade of revelations on dirty tricks, the exposé of the "Ergenekon" conspiracy network, and the denunciation of preparations for a coup in 2003, have tainted its reputation.

However, despite recent setbacks the army still retains great autonomy from effective civilian oversight and "wields considerable influence far beyond national security issues",⁸ in particular through its huge holdings in industrial companies and pension funds.

Turkey's soft power is discredited if its army remains too powerful.

The analysis of the army's real power and doctrine is essential, since the military are involved in key areas of Turkey's peacebuilding initiatives. In order to serve its foreign policy objectives, Turkey must highlight the capabilities of its armed forces – the hard power behind its soft power – and, at the same time, demonstrate that this is an army for peace, respectful of the democratic order. Indeed, the soft power of a country is irremediably discredited if its hard power is perceived to be too strong. The Turkish army, however, is not totally opposed to the AKP. Some observers even think that the new foreign policy gives the military a bigger regional role.

⁸ Stephen J. Flanagan, Samuel Brannen, Turkey's Evolving Dynamics. Strategic Choices for US-Turkey Relations, Washington, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2009, p xii, <http://csis.org/publication/turkeys-evolving-dynamics>, accessed 1 December 2010.

Diverse philosophies

From inside the corridors of power or from outside, a diversity of ideological and foreign policy schools of thought try to frame the philosophy of Turkish diplomacy. "Underlying Turkey's foreign policy formulations and recalibrations", writes Joshua Walker, "is a domestic power struggle to redefine the real parameters of Turkish politics."⁹

Nationalists

Nationalism is at the heart of Turkey's political identity and foreign policy. Nurtured in the defeats that slowly reduced the territorial size of the sprawling Ottoman Empire, but also in the victory of Atatürk against what was seen as a Western and Soviet conspiracy to carve up the country after the first world war, this faction – in a constant reminder of the 1920 Sèvres Treaty – sees Turkey as threatened by foreign forces.

Having accepted Nato because it was a guarantor of Turkey's independence against the USSR and communism, the Turkish nationalists have grudgingly discovered that the EU integration process, originally seen as a confirmation of the modern and Western status of the country, had deep implications for Turkey's national sovereignty. It meant downsizing the army's influence, a settlement with non-Muslim and non-ethnic Turkish minorities, and the "concession of prerogatives" to Brussels.

They form a powerful faction, not only because they largely control the army, the bureaucracy and the judiciary, but also because their nationalism has a significant base of popular support.

Europe-firsters

Mostly represented among the top echelons of the corporate world – symbolised by the industrial lobby, Turkish Industry and Business Association (TUSIAD), and among the liberal demo-

⁹ Joshua W. Walker, "Turkey's Changing Internal and International Dynamics: From 'Where' to 'What'", Policy Brief, Ankara, SETA, 2009, p 6, http://setadc.org/pdfs/SETA_Policy_Brief_No_40_Changing_Dynamics_Joshua_Walker.pdf, accessed 1 December 2010.

cratic and intellectual circles, these promoters of a “Europe-first” policy have received the support of major sections of the AKP. There remains, however, a lurking ambiguity on the part of the AKP, as certain sectors have used the EU accession process to weaken their major rivals (in the military and judiciary) and have trouble accepting some of the reforms involved in the EU agenda. These AKP sectors are particularly at odds with European concepts of secularism, religious neutrality and freedom of expression.

The pro-Europeans have been losing ground since the start of EU-membership negotiations, which revealed a strong current of hostility toward Turkey’s accession among European public opinion and part of its establishment. They have also been weakened by the concerns of their own public about the EU challenging core principles of the Kemalist political traditions of national sovereignty and state-controlled official Islam.

Pan-Turkists

This school of nationalist thought believes that Turkey has a legitimate claim to play a leading role in all the countries that have a Turkic heritage, from the Balkans to Central Asia and the province of Xinjiang in China. The Pan-Turkists had a certain appeal just after the fall of the Berlin wall, but their attempts at guiding countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have mostly failed. There is nevertheless a “Turkic” streak in Ankara’s foreign policy that relays Pan-Turkism (previously known as Touranism) at some cost. The flare-up between China and Turkey after the violence in the Turkic-Muslim region of Xinjiang in 2009, demonstrates the risks of this Pan-Turkist approach for a rational and effective Turkish foreign policy.

Neo-Ottomans

Turkey strives to play a distinctive role within the Muslim world. AKP strategists see this Muslim diplomacy as a lever for Turkey’s national interests, but also as a way of reinforcing their own legitimacy internally. The refer-

ence to the Ottoman past is a double-edged sword for Turkey: although it refers to a common past rooted in religion and customs, it also re-awakens sombre memories of conflicts and domination.

Political culture, foreign policy and peacebuilding

The ambition of playing a mediation and peacebuilding role is not necessarily conditioned on a country’s democratic credentials or human rights record. However, these factors are generally considered to be part of the soft power equation. In other words, can a semi-authoritarian country, a country characterised as “partly free” by Freedom House,¹⁰ that has not solved its own internal problems of equal citizenship or peaceful settlement of disputes, become a credible and reliable actor in conflict mediation and peacebuilding?

Authoritarianism

Over the past years Turkey has substantively improved its human rights record. However, the country is still failing on many counts (freedom of expression, minority rights and religious freedom). Besides, many of the reforms that have been enforced are often described as the result of, or even as grumbling concessions to, the EU accession process. According to many observers, the dominant political culture that prevails in most political parties, as well as the army, bureaucracy and other sectors, is still profoundly moulded by authoritarianism, intolerance and exclusion of the “other”. This might hamper the legitimacy and sophistication of Turkey’s peacemakers abroad.

Internally, the statist and authoritarian influence of Kemalism has suffocated, and often directly repressed, the expression of civil society through independent associations and organisations in Turkey. Yet, “especially since the mid-1990s”, says Freedom House, “Turkey has

Turkey has improved its human rights record but is still failing on many counts.

10 Freedom House, “Map of Freedom”, New York, 2009, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=15>, accessed 10 December 2010.

witnessed a significant increase in the number and strength of NGOs. The EU integration process has had a significant impact on multiple fronts, including funding opportunities, capacity/skills, and the reduction of legislative restrictions, as well as increased influence in decision-making spheres.”¹¹ Still, externally Turkey is not in the vanguard of human rights activism. Its policy of pursuing engagement with authoritarian regimes and even massive human rights abusers, like Sudan or Iran, weaken its soft power potential and might also taint any country that works with Ankara on peace or other initiatives.

Turkey’s foreign policy is a powerful demonstration of the interaction between internal and external affairs. Foreign minister Davutoğlu has indeed constantly emphasised the need for consistency between Turkey’s national and international agendas. The Kurdish issue has been one of the most significant examples of this challenge. The engagement of Turkey with Iraq, in particular with the Kurdish autonomous region, and with Syria and Iran, has involved a “Kurdish factor”. Although the “Kurdish opening” sponsored by the AKP was meant to weaken support for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), it also aimed at confirming internally the external strategy, by bringing peaceful solutions to the Kurdish issue.

The growth of Islam

The demographic growth of Muslim lower middle classes, their installation in key urban centres like Istanbul, the development of the Anatolian Muslim bourgeoisie (the so-called “Muslim Calvinists”) and the rise of the AKP as the majority and ruling party, have increased the power of Islam in Turkish politics. This development has led to two apparently contradictory trends: on the one side, the emerging Muslim “counter-establishment” has decisively pushed for European integration (understanding that the EU process would undermine the old military secularist

establishment); on the other side, the European option, on the economic and political levels, has coincided with a rejection of Westernisation on the cultural and religious levels.

Islam has become more prominent in Turkish politics.

This re-emergence internally of the religious factor partly explains the Eastern orientation of Turkey’s foreign policy and its attempt to turn the Muslim character of the AKP government into an asset for regional diplomacy, particularly with Afghanistan and Pakistan. After all, this particular form of Turkish secularism is an asset in the context of Turkey’s European accession, and in its relations with Central Asian states which struggle to establish an official and highly-controlled state religion against more radical forms promoted by independent Islamist groups. It also appeals to modernist sectors in Muslim countries that try to imagine an alternative between two “evils”: the current authoritarian secular states and the emergence of more radical Islamic movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The US foreign policy establishment in particular sees this religious factor positively, in the context of fostering a “dialogue of civilisations” between the West and East. It is, however, a liability when dealing with countries like the Gulf states or Saudi Arabia, which practise more traditional or fundamentalist forms of Islam, and resent the limits imposed by the Turkish state on the expression of the faith (for example, the ban on the headscarf) or its discrimination of non-official Muslim groups (such as the Alevis and Shia).

However, there is a limit beyond which Turkey cannot insist too much on its Muslim character, in particular if it wants to enhance its chances of becoming a full member of the EU. In any case, many observers tend to nuance the part played by the religious factor in Turkey’s foreign policy, insisting instead on the rational and realist choices made by Turkey. “Let’s not exaggerate the Muslim connection or agenda,” says TASAM researcher Oguzhan Köse. “Turkey does not follow an emotional foreign pol-

¹¹ Nigar Göksel, “Turkey in Transit. Democratization in Turkey”, New York, Freedom House, 2008, p 14, http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/65.pdf, accessed 1 December 2010.

icy. Russia has become a big partner for Turkey and it is not Muslim. We have developed our relations with the Arab world, not because they are Arab or Muslim, but because it makes sense, in particular because of our economic stake in the region.”

Zero problems policy

Drawing from these internal characteristics, taking stock of its geopolitical identity¹² and breaking with the Bush administration’s strategy of using military force to mould the region, Turkey has been developing a series of initiatives that strive to underline its role as a reliable and fair partner when it comes to conflict resolution and international cooperation.

Distancing himself from a vision that tended to see enemies everywhere, foreign minister Davutoğlu has been looking abroad for partners that can help enhance Turkey’s ambition for regional leadership. “Following this line of thought,” writes Bülent Aras of the pro-AKP Ankara-based think tank SETA, “Turkish foreign-policy makers have gained a new self-confidence and political will to pursue peace attempts in the neighbouring regions. Turkey now... facilitates platforms for the solution of conflicts in various geographies. Turkish policymakers try to overcome differences between countries in conflict through confidence-building measures and by acting as a mediator and facilitator to find solutions to chronic regional problems.”¹³

The Turkish government believes that it masters the traditions and customs of the region better than the West and has striven to develop personal relations

Turkey has become more peaceful, but there are still question marks over its record.

with the most important players by making the most of this alleged cultural proximity. Independent and liberal analysts admit that Turkey has become a more peaceful force, but they caution against too high and premature expectations. Many observers have pointed out that, despite the professionalism of Turkey’s diplomats, the foreign ministry lacks expertise on the methodologies and approaches of peacebuilding, as well as in regions like Africa.

Turkey’s foreign role is also limited by the suspicions it raises due to its Muslim and ethnic accents, or by the alleged risk of Turkish hegemonic and neo-Ottoman ambitions. Iran, for instance, welcomes Ankara’s diplomatic approach to the nuclear crisis with the West, but is wary of Turkey gaining too much influence in the region, at the expense of Iranian interests, particularly in Syria with Hezbollah or in Palestine with Hamas.

Initiatives and achievements

Syria: The normalisation of relations with Syria is seen as a major achievement. “Ten years ago, we were on the verge of war,” says Oguzhan Kose, “because of the PKK presence, the water issue, Turkey’s support for Israel, etc. Now we have solved the PKK problem with Damas, established a visa-free policy and have been involved for a time in mediating between Damas and Jerusalem.” Some Western analysts view this rapprochement as confirmation of a turn towards a more pro-Arab policy. Or it could be a shrewd move to pry Syria away from its connections with Iran and move it closer to the West, or at least to a more neutral alignment.

Iran: Turkey is opposed to Iran’s alleged development of nuclear weapons, as this would upset the regional power balance at the expense of Turkish interests. However, it is convinced that putting more pressure on Iran is not the best way to stave off proliferation. In May 2010, recognising Tehran’s right to develop its civilian nuclear potential and totally opposing a military strike scenario, Turkey, together with Brazil, brokered a deal with Tehran which formalised its mediation role on

12 E. Fuat Keyman, “Turkish Foreign Policy in the Era of Global Turmoil”, Policy Brief, no. 39, Ankara, SETA, 2010, http://setad.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=196:turkish-foreign-policy-in-the-era-of-global-turmoil-by-fuat-keyman&catid=48:policy-briefs&Itemid=91, accessed 1 December 2010.

13 Bülent Aras, “Davutoglu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy”, Policy Brief, no. 38, Ankara, SETA, p 7, http://www.stratim.org.tr/files/downloads/reports/rapor_seta.pdf, accessed 10 December 2010.

the nuclear issue. Although not welcomed by the US and the West in general, this agreement revealed the scope of Turkey's attempts to carve out its own space in the complex "grand game" of the region. Turkey also has major trade and investment interests in Iran, and more generally it wants to dissociate itself from Western concerns in order to confirm its foreign policy objectives in the region.

Iraq: Turkey cannot afford to see the US withdrawal from Iraq turn into chaos or civil war. The stakes are too high, geopolitically and economically. The situation in northern Iraq is particularly delicate: the developments in the quasi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region are a factor in Turkey's intractable Kurdish problem. Although it has given its army the right to intervene in Iraq against the PKK, Ankara has developed significant business relations with the Iraqi Kurdish region and hopes that these "weapons of peace" will help stabilise the region and undermine the PKK's sanctuary.

Turkey is also directly involved in the resolution of the Kirkuk conundrum. Initially Ankara actively intervened in support of the Turcoman minority against the Arabs and Kurds. Now it is trying to assume a more impartial role as a peacemaker. The success of Turkey's initiatives in Iraq depends, however, on its will and capacity to solve its own Kurdish problem internally and to sustain its opening with the Kurdish-Turkish minority.

The Balkans: Since the collapse of communism, Turkey has been actively present in the Balkans, following to some extent on its historic Ottoman links. Long identified with the Muslim Bosniaks, Turkey increasingly tries to be seen as an impartial actor interested in stabilising the region and in particular in defending the unity of Bosnia. The Turkish army has trained soldiers from Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo and Macedonia.

Afghanistan/Pakistan: Turkey has several assets in its relations with Afghanistan. Both countries have been linked for decades and the Turkish Republic has had a major role in helping create the Afghan army, and establish the

education and health systems. Religion is another common bond, as too, to some extent, is ethnicity. Turkey has sent forces to the country to show its commitment to Nato, but has refrained from engaging its troops in military operations. This decision might give Ankara the space to act as a negotiator in the conflict, especially by acting as an honest broker between the Afghan government, on the one side, and factions of the Taliban on the other.

Turkey has also acted to promote dialogue and connections between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Ankara Trilateral Cooperation Process (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkey) was launched in 2007. It has brought together parliamentarians from the three countries, as well as high government officials, with a major focus on promoting coordination between intelligence and military agencies in order to fight terrorism. Turkey has also organised trilateral meetings in advance of major international forums on this regional crisis, in particular before the London Afghan summit in February 2010.

Armenia: The Turkish-Armenian relation has been one of the most complex and tense that Turkish diplomacy has had to confront. It is indeed not only a question of geopolitics, but also of memory and history. The AKP government has tried to normalise relations with its neighbour, and reopen the border that was closed in retaliation to Armenia's occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. A first agreement was reached in 2009 through Swiss mediation, but it soon collided with Azerbaijan's opposition (a close ally of Turkey and a major oil producer). It was also met, less crucially, with the reluctance of the Armenian diaspora.

The refusal by Turkey to qualify the Armenian 1915-17 deportations and massacres as genocide remains a key stumbling block. The AKP government has been a little more flexible on this issue than previous governments, although it has strongly reacted to the adoption of genocide bills by the Swedish Parliament and the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs in early 2010. The way Turkey addresses this issue re-



flects its current internal political order, with its emphasis on the exclusionary concept of Turkishness. A small but growing part of the Turkish population questions the official policy of denial and the penalisation of genocide recognition that has been applied to writers and academics, like Orhan Pamuk, Taner Akcam and Elias Shafak, under article 301 of the Penal Code that protects “Turkishness”. The launch of the “We apologize” campaign by prominent Turkish intellectuals is also a sign that there is a small but growing constituency for a new approach to the genocide controversy.

A growing number of Turks question the official policy of denying the Armenian genocide.

Central Asia/Caucasus: Turkey has toned down its Turkic approach in the region, except to some extent with Azerbaijan which still has the capacity to activate a large and influential Azeri lobby in Ankara. The main focus of Ankara’s relations to the region is economic and linked to oil and gas strategies. Turkey takes great care to put its Central Asian policy in the context of its relations with Moscow, which it considers much more fundamental to its strategic interests (see below).

Russia: Russia under the Tsars and during Soviet rule was considered Turkey’s principal enemy. The mood has changed since the 1990s, when Ankara was allegedly supporting Chechen separatists and competing for hegemony in the new Central Asian republics. Economic relations are booming between the two countries and there is growing convergence on some international issues, like the approach to Iran’s nuclear challenge or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This Moscow-Ankara connection is observed with some concern in Brussels and Washington because of its huge geostrategic and energy implications.

Israel: Turkey had seemed well-placed to play an active peacemaking role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As the first Muslim country to recognise the state of Israel, it had developed intense political, economic and military relations with the Jewish state, especially within the context of its US alliance in the region. And

thanks to its new foreign policy strategy, it had “entry tickets” to Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. In fact, Turkey seemed to be able to supplant most moderate Arab states in the region – in particular Egypt – in their declared support for a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Yet, in the past there had been differences between Israel and Turkey, for instance on the recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). And in recent years the contradiction between a traditionally pro-Israeli elite and the pro-Palestinian “Turkish street” has started to show with the AKP in government, which is much more attentive to the feelings of the Muslim community than its predecessors. The recent succession of acrimonious controversies between Turkey and Israel – for example, the naval attack against the Gaza-bound “humanitarian flotilla” – have also taken their toll politically, and threaten to undermine the web of economic and security relations between the two countries. Turkey is no longer considered an honest broker by Jerusalem and Ankara has not the necessary leverage to move Hamas towards the negotiating table.

Recommendations for Norwegian-Turkish initiatives

The growing influence of Turkey on the international scene, and its specific characteristics, make this country a potentially interesting partner for Norway. In particular, Norway could work with Turkey to reinforce this country’s contribution to and participation in UN institutions and mechanisms, from peacebuilding to climate change, and from non-proliferation to international justice. The recent Turkish-Brazilian mediation in the Iranian nuclear controversy in particular indicates that there is room for joint work between Oslo and Ankara on non-proliferation and denuclearisation issues.

There are potential pitfalls, however. There is a special need to clearly understand Turkey’s long-term foreign policy strategy and objectives. The



intentions of its peacebuilding initiatives should be tested to ascertain whether they are pursued for their own sake, as a concrete expression of a peaceful diplomacy, or whether they are tactical moves in the build-up of Turkey's power in the region. The response to this essential answer is a key determinant of the potential for Norway-Turkey cooperation. The following considerations might serve as parameters for reflecting on possible partnerships.

Turkey's growing international influence makes it a potentially interesting partner for Norway.

1. Despite its reformulation under Davutoğlu, Turkey's foreign policy remains mostly anchored in traditional Westphalian concepts and shies away from the values-based philosophy that underpins Norwegian international relations.

- Norway could try to develop a constituency within the Turkish foreign policy establishment that would be favourable to values-based foreign policies and peacebuilding approaches. This could be reached by organising seminars, inviting young diplomats and students of international relations to Norway, and translating books on peacekeeping into Turkish.
- Norway could also help frame a media discourse that supports peacebuilding approaches by inviting Turkish foreign affairs columnists to workshops on the values of dialogue, negotiation and reconciliation, and on cooperation initiatives between government and civil society as well as with the UN system. Norway could also support the development of conflict resolution studies in Turkish universities and think tanks.

2. Turkey is a complex country that has not solved crucial internal issues, such as the status of non-Muslim and non-Turkish minorities, the influence of the military and limitations on key freedoms, all of which condition its foreign policy capacities. These factors makes any part-

nership vulnerable to internal and international backlashes as the internal correlations of forces within Turkey are not stabilised. The sectors attached to authoritarianism and opposed to the recognition of a secular, multi-ethnic and multi-religious state hold powerful positions within key state institutions (eg, the army, judiciary, and civil service), as well as in the media, academic centres and business.

If core issues such as the Kurdish question, equality between religious and ethnic communities, freedom of expression and the Armenian genocide are left unsolved, the potential for peace initiatives will be mostly illusory, or will mean the export of flawed approaches and the extension of Turkish problems beyond its borders. This situation might compromise Norway's international standing, if it is seen as cooperating with a country that does not abide by international standards or which follows a strict nationalist agenda. It might also undermine Norwegian citizens' support for joint Turkish-Norwegian initiatives.

- The consolidation of rule of law, as well as support for civil society institutions devoted to the attainment of a more citizen-based and inclusive state system, should be a major priority for Norway's informal diplomacy. Support for NGOs working on rule of law, citizen participation, and human rights should be strategically designed, and the resources devoted to these projects seriously increased.
- The promotion of interfaith dialogues could contribute to address the issues of religious rights and equality of treatment, as well as the question of secularism in the Turkish constitutional order and within society.
- Norway could take a more active role in the Armenian-Turkish issue because of its high symbolic value. In particular it could support civil society initiatives in Turkey and Armenia that strive to foster a normalisation, not only between the two countries, but also between the two peoples, based on shared interests and on core human rights values and principles.

3. Civil society’s international outreach and influence on foreign policymaking remains weak.

The foreign policy debate is mostly an insiders’ game, limited to diplomats, the army, political parties and some key columnists. Apart from a couple of think tanks that mostly cater to the needs of the foreign policy establishment, there are few civil society actors directly addressing the directions of Turkey’s foreign policy initiatives.

- There is a real need to help Turkish NGOs develop their international outreach/exchanges. This could be done by regularly inviting representatives of Turkish NGOs to international meetings, coaching NGOs on the management of international contacts, and helping establish programmes monitoring Turkey’s foreign policy.

4. Turkey’s army is at the same time a key actor in the peacebuilding agenda and an obstacle on the country’s road towards democracy.

- Norway could enhance its training partnership programmes with the Turkish army, particularly in the field of human rights and peacebuilding. In parallel, Norway could propose special programmes for the reinforcement of civilian capabilities in Turkey’s peacebuilding agenda.

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