

ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK: SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN RECENT TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

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Turkish Foreign Policy: An Overview

During the years of the Cold War, the study of Turkey's foreign policy hardly generated interest in the international arena. This was neither unique nor surprising. In a highly polarized environment, the members of each camp had to subscribe, in the final analysis, to the preferences of the superpower who led it and who provided for their nuclear defense. Turkey, it may be noted, was more observant of the expectations of the US who led the Western Bloc than some other members for two reasons. First, Turkey had long land and sea borders with the USSR and other members of the Warsaw Pact such as Romania and Bulgaria. Furthermore, it was in possession of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, briefly referred to as the Turkish Straits, a narrow waterway controlling access of the Soviets to the Mediterranean. Hence, it saw itself as a front line state with more intense security concerns than many other members of the alliance. These concerns were intensified by dependence on allies, naturally headed by the US, for the provision of arms to maintain a credible military. Second, as a country with a poorly developed economy that had opted for import substitution oriented industrialization, Turkey relied on its more prosperous allies to come to its assistance in order to cope with the periodic crises Turkey's economy encountered since its external earnings often failed to meet its import needs. When balance of payments difficulties emerged, arguments emphasizing Turkey's indispensable contribution to the security of

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the Western Bloc were usually mobilized to ask the allies to help the Turkish economy to regain its health.

The conditions under which Turkish foreign policy was made began to change after 1980. Particularly after the oil crisis of 1973, it became increasingly difficult to sustain the policy of import substitution oriented industrialization. Such a policy required large and continual inflow of loans and grants from abroad which were not forthcoming. As a result, Turkey had to bring about a major shift in its economic policy to increase its external earnings. Change came in January 1980 in the form of doing away with the complex of regulations that had come to be referred to as “Rules and Regulations for the Protection of the Value of the Turkish Lira.” This step was no more than liberalization of the foreign exchange regime, making it attractive for Turkish industries to export. Quickly, Turkish industrial exports began to increase and the Turkish economy began to become integrated to the world economic system.

Becoming more reliant on exports for the prosperity of its own economy constituted the background condition against which a process of gradual change in Turkish foreign policy was initiated. In contrast to earlier times when maximizing military and economic assistance from its allies was the major concern of Turkey’s policymakers, finding new markets and forging new relationships in which economic factors prevailed became the order of the day. These efforts were clearly facilitated initially by the thawing in the East-West relations and then the end of the Cold War marked by the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and then the demise of the Soviet Union.

In retrospect, the change of Turkey’s economic policy appears to have been well timed. The painful process of Turkey’s integration to the international economy had already advanced to a certain level by the time the Cold War ended such that Turkey could retain a functioning economy without any longer having to resort to “contribution to western security” arguments whose powers of persuasion had rapidly declined. Furthermore, under the widely transformed political and security environment, previously existing barriers to engaging in trade with former “adversaries” had now been removed. Turkey’s economic relations with Russia and the countries of the Former Soviet Union rapidly expanded as well as those with countries of the Middle East while the country

continued its efforts to find new markets in Africa, East Asia and even Latin America.

Background to Departure from Traditional Foreign Policy

Despite a rapidly changing environment, initial changes in Turkish foreign policy were modest, reflecting the cautious approach that had characterized Turkey's diplomacy under the republic. After its founding in the heartland of the Ottoman Empire, The republican governments had initially pursued a policy of neutrality and balancing pressures of the major European powers on the country. Such a policy enabled Turkey to stay out of the Second World War. The rapid rise of the bipolar world after the Second World War produced an equally rapid response when Turkey chose to associate itself with the Western Bloc and pursued efforts that led to its becoming a member of NATO. This was a manifestation of a more general approach that guided post-war Turkish foreign policy: do not stay out of the major institutional developments in the Western World. Accordingly, Turkey joined the Council of Europe, the OEEC (later OECD) and sought immediate association with the European Economic Community (later the European Union) when it was established. Finally, when Turkey's economy came to rely on export-oriented growth and later when the Cold War came to an end, there was a gradual broadening of relations with others while maintaining close ties with both the US and Western Europe.

In this context, the rise of the Justice and Development party (AKP) to power in 2002 was initially met with concern that this party which represented a more religious orientation than other parties in Turkish politics might depart in major ways from the main direction of Turkish foreign policy. Such concerns were prompted, among others, by the behavior of the pre-2002 Felicity Party and its predecessors that had worked with limited success to move Turkey from the Western Bloc to a yet non-existent Islamic Bloc, in the construction of which Turkey would presumably play a leading role.

The refusal in 2003 of the Turkish parliament to allow US troops to go through Turkey in their plans to invade Iraq might have been seen as evidence of a major departure. Yet, the incident did not constitute the watershed event

marking a clear departure point from Turkey's foreign policy. The government, it is to be remembered, had undertaken to secure the parliament's approval for such passage and managed to achieve a parliamentary majority, but the procedure failed by one vote in view of some defections that the government was unable to control. Both sides tried to mend fences afterwards. Furthermore, in 2004, after much hesitation deriving from what Turkey might be asked to concede on Cyprus, the AKP government accepted EU's invitation to commence with accession negotiations, a process that began in 2005.

The event marking Turkey's beginning to act more independently in foreign policy came much later (2010) in the form of voting along with Brazil in the UN Security Council regarding the adoption of sanctions against Iran for its failure to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency. This had been preceded by two months by a major confrontation with Israel, America's major ally in the Middle East, over the shipment of humanitarian aid to Gaza. The incident marked the beginning of the deterioration of relations with Israel that continues today. What were the circumstances that promoted the shift in foreign policy, directing it to unusual activism uncharacteristic of earlier times and why?

Structure and Agent in the Making of Foreign Policy

Those analyzing foreign policy usually turn to one of two types of explanations commonly known as structure-based and agent based, to explain what is done and why. Those that are structure-based refer to the conditions that generate pressures for change such as shifts in the relative power of other states, major developments in technology, and considerations of economic need and advantage. The second, i.e. agent-based explanations, on the other hand, focus on the ideas, ideologies, cognitive maps and also the psychologies of policymakers as sources of explaining policy shifts. It is reasonable to argue that a comprehensive analysis would have to incorporate both modes, although it is clear that a shift in only one of the domains may also produce changes. More likely is a situation, however, in which both structural and agent based forces are at work.

In the preceding description of the evolution and changes in Turkish foreign policy, the explanation has relied on structural elements. It has been

argued that the post WWII order directed Turkey to side with the Western Bloc and that change in the Turkish economy and the end of the Cold War were important in initiating change during the last two decades of the last century. Prior to the emergence of more independent activism in foreign policy, two additional developments of a structural nature also occurred. First, in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won an overwhelming victory in the national elections, ending a prolonged period beginning in 1991 during which Turkey had been ruled by unwieldy coalition governments. These governments, characterized by major internal rifts were, for the most part, incapable of producing often even minor policy decisions, external affairs not excepted. With the subsequent victory of the AKP in the elections of 2007 and 2011, Turkey entered a period of governmental stability which made it easier for the government to formulate and implement changes in foreign policy. Second, after going through a major economic crisis in 1999-2001 during which major institutional reforms and policies were introduced to prevent a recurrence, the Turkish economy entered a period of sustained economic growth that continues to this day. Such growth not only reduced the reliance of the prosperity of the Turkish economy to support from other friendly countries in order to overcome its difficulties but also generated resources that could be used in the implementation of foreign policy. That fact that Turkish economic and humanitarian assistance to Somalia tops that of any other country is a case in point.

Now, let us introduce the agents into our analysis. After the victory of the AKP in 2002, Turkish foreign policy was initially guided by Abdullah Gül, the current president of Turkey, who was first the prime minister until the legal hurdles could be cleared for the election of Tayyip Erdoğan, the head of AKP, to join the parliament by winning a by-election and become the prime minister. After the ascent of the latter to the premiership, Mr. Gül assumed the command of Turkish foreign policy. Mr. Gül continued the cautious change tradition in Turkish foreign policy. He was the foreign minister when Turkey was invited to become a member of the European Union.

Mr. Gül left the foreign ministry in 2004. Since that time, Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu has been a critical figure in the shaping of Turkish foreign policy. Currently the foreign minister, he did not actually assume that position until

2009. Serving as the chief foreign policy advisor to the prime minister, however, his determining input into the making and implementation of Turkish foreign policy is widely acknowledged. His role appears to have been enhanced particularly after the elections of 2007, and reinforced with his becoming the foreign minister in 2009 and then his election to the parliament in the 2011 elections underscoring a major victory for the AKP.

Coming from an academic background, the essence of Mr. Davutoğlu's thinking is expressed in a book he wrote in 2001 entitled *Strategic Depth*. The book identifies geography, history, culture and the Turkish economy as elements that make Turkey a candidate for regional leadership. Turkey can build a zone of stability and prosperity by helping solve regional problems. The book defines a framework or a broad goal for Turkish foreign policy but does not prescribe specific courses of action. Over time, it has constituted the source of inspiration for the challenging goal of "zero problems with neighbors," another idea of the foreign minister.

It seems that Mr. Davutoğlu, judging that the power balances in the world was shifting and that Turkey's fortunes were on the rise, set out develop a greater say in world governance as well as to strengthen Turkey's claim to regional leadership. With regard to his first goal, his line of logic was reasonable. The system of world governance had been devised at the end of the Second World War and had failed to adjust to the realities of the contemporary world. This led him to turn to policies that tried to expand Turkey's space for independent action in the world system and to cooperate with other countries that found themselves in a similar situation. With regard to his second goal, his aspirations were understandable. As claimant to regional leadership, Egypt was deeply embroiled in its own economic and political problems at the time. The other claimant, Iran, was not only unacceptable to the Western World but also too closely identified with the minority sect of Shia Islam for its leadership claims to be recognized by a majority of the regional states. Furthermore, Turkey seemed to be highly popular on the Arab Street, demonstrating that a society with a majority Muslim population could be reasonably democratic and achieve economic prosperity.

Under Mr. Davutoğlu's steermanship, three impulses have been important in the shaping of Turkish foreign policy: Remaining within the general framework of the Western alliance including the US and the EU;

challenging the global distribution of power and the global system of governance; and becoming the regional leader, peacemaker and the builder of a regional order. Each of these impulses has carried greater weight at different points in time and they have harbored contradictions that have caused tensions with allies, neighbors and rivals. Mr. Davutoğlu appears to have persuaded the Prime Minister that his line of thinking and the policies he recommended were sound and ought to be implemented. Therefore he has enjoyed the full support of the Erdoğan government.

Building up to Regional Leadership

From 2004 until 2010, the particular way the three impulses were molded into policy involved cooperation with the Western World but expanding room for independent action, keeping sustained economic development on course, and achieving regional leadership by trying to broker good relations and peace between feuding parties in the region.

Maintaining good relations with the Western allies included both cooperating with the US and advancing relations with the EU. With the US, Turkey not only worked to help build a stable Iraq, but it also contributed non-combat troops to the NATO operation in Afghanistan as well as in the Balkans. However, there were many sources of discord in the relationship. Kurdish terrorism directed to Turkey from bases in Northern Iraq was a constant source of irritation. The US discouraged Turkey from directing incursions into Iraq even if these might be in the nature of hot pursuit. It offered to give Turkey satellite based intelligence but the information provided was found to be not “actionable,” i.e. put to immediate use to capture or disable terrorists. It is only after much negotiation that the provision of more “actionable intelligence” began to flow. There were occasional unfriendly incidents between American military personnel involved in logistical activity in Turkey and Turkish soldiers as well as Turkish military delegations in Northern Iraq.

As regards the EU, the accession negotiations did not progress smoothly. Specifically, Turkey did not recognize Cyprus and open its ports to Cypriot vessels. Cyprus, in return, prevented several chapters from being opened in the accession negotiations. But there emerged a more general problem

of will on both sides, but first originating in the EU. It seems that the end of the Cold War and the expansion of the EU to include the countries of Eastern Europe radically transformed the conditions under which Turkey was seen to be an indispensable component of the EU. First, the security considerations that had figured heavily in the inclusion of Turkey in the future plans of the EU were no longer compelling. Second, there were concerns that it would be difficult for the EU to digest a very large and relatively poor country after a major wave of expansion that had already restrained its resources. Third, Turkey's entry would clearly challenge the existing distribution of power in the EU that could best be characterized currently as a Franco-German condominium. This was probably one of the main motives behind the French objections to Turkish accession under Nicholas Sarkozy. Finally, there was a general rise of cultural conservatism in Europe that conceptualized the EU as a Christian club that naturally excluded Turkey whose population is almost exclusively Moslem. The leadership of both France and Germany kept alluding to an undefined "special relationship" that would replace Turkey's full membership in the Union. The change of heart in the EU dampened Turkey's enthusiasm for membership since that appeared to be an increasingly elusive prospect. Strong economic ties with more than 50 percent of Turkey's exports going to the EU (currently 34 percent and declining) and significant EU member investments in Turkey, however, helped prevent a serious rupture in the relationship.

While trying to maintain good ties with its traditional allies, the 2004-2010 period was also a time when Turkey tried to expand its ties with other countries and regions of the world. Turkey initiated diplomatic relations with numerous new African countries, as well as forging new ties and strengthening existing ties with Latin American and Asian countries. This is a period during which Turkish embassies opened in new capitals, Turkish external aid agency TIKA assumed an activist posture in many an underdeveloped country and after an energetic campaign, Turkey was elected as a temporary member of the UN Security Council.

With regard to its neighboring region, Turkey adopted a facilitator role in enhancing better relations among the countries in the area. Within this framework, Turkey managed to get the Saudi's and Syrians to talk to each other, help Iranians and Saudis to communicate, bring the feuding factions of

Palestinians together and most importantly came close to getting the Syrians and the Israelis reach an accommodation on the status of Golan heights. In all of these endeavors, Turkey managed to stand equidistant to all sides, acquire their trust and be recognized as an impartial neighbor in the region.

Zero Problems with Neighbors

Regarding its own problems with neighbors, a “zero problems with neighbors” approach was adopted. Such an approach did not imply, as is sometimes suggested, that no problems would be left between Turkey and its neighbors, but rather that Turkey would work at settling its disputes with its neighbors through peaceful means rather than ignore them. Historically, Turkey had a highly problematical relationship with Syria that entertained claims on the Turkish province of Hatay and supported the Kurdish PKK terror to prevent Turkey from building dams on the Euphrates, fearing that Turkey would eventually use much of the water and not release sufficient quantities for Syria to meet its needs. This policy was changed by Hafez al Assad (the father) only after Turkey threatened to intervene militarily. Beginning in 1999, relations had started to improve, gaining new momentum after 2004. Syria went quiet on its claims to Hatay and its challenges regarding Turkey’s construction of dams on the Euphrates. One by one, border restrictions were removed, a project to clear the border region from mines was developed, visa requirements were lifted, trade began to expand rapidly, Turkish investments began to trickle in, and finally, a strategic partnership was announced. Turkish and Syrian ministers would hereafter hold periodic joint meetings. Relations appeared to have reached an ideal state that hardly any observer would have imagined as possible a few years ago.

After the US intervention, relations with Iraq too seemed on the whole to develop in a satisfactory direction. Turkey was committed to maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq and the evolution of a regime that would bring peace and stability to that country. Turkey had an interest in preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish entity in Iraq’s north which it judged might develop separatist linkages with Turkey’s predominantly Kurdish Southeast, a position that suited the government in Baghdad well. Turkey

looked forward to expanding economic relations in a market that generated sizable demands for goods and services. Furthermore, Turkey thought that it was a natural transport route for the oil and gas that Iraq would be exporting to the world markets. A pipeline from Kirkuk to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Yumurtalik already existed and it could certainly be expanded.

Turkey's relations with Iran also improved during this period. Turkey expanded its economic relations with Iran and became a major customer of Iranian gas and oil. In contrast to western leaders that shunned from developing close relations with Iran, Turkey's leaders were warm and receptive to their Iranian counterparts. Turkish foreign policy leadership tried to restrain western governments, especially the US in pursuing a non-compromising line against Iran, and argued for engagement and communication. Again Turkey saw Iran as a major economic partner and Turkish trade with Iran was constantly growing. Turkey also attracted a respectable number of Iranian tourists who found in Turkey a liberal society in which they could enjoy food and drink without having to worry about gender and dress codes. It is to be remembered that the Turco-Iranian relationship has always harbored both competitive and cooperative elements. While the competitive elements did not disappear during the period in question, clearly a more cooperative mood characterized the relationship.

Syria, Iraq and Iran all had bad relations with Israel. Turkey, on the other hand, had developed reasonably close relations with Israel despite its unhappiness regarding the latter's failure to accommodate the aspirations of the Palestinians. Turkey viewed the Israeli relationship as being important for two reasons. First, Israel was a reliable partner in defense items which Turkey sometimes had difficulty getting from other allies including the US. Furthermore, military and non-military wares and technologies imported from Israel were cheaper than those acquired from Western partners. Second, Israel had a strong lobby in Congress whereas Turkey did not. This lobby often came to Turkey's support on issues before the Congress where they constituted a counterweight to Armenian and Greek lobbies that displayed strong anti-Turkish proclivities. In return, Israel was insured of the support of a moderating influence in regional politics and got access to using Turkish territory for air force training exercises. Trade between the two countries flourished and Turkey was a popular destination for Israeli tourists.

It is interesting to note that the Turkish government tried also to improve relations with Armenia. The Armenian state has insisted that Turkey should assume responsibility for the alleged genocide of Armenians in 1915 under Ottoman rule. It also calls much of Eastern Turkey “western Armenia and which it judges to be rightful Armenian territory. Turkey rejects Armenian claims and argues that Armenia should withdraw from Nagorno-Karabagh and several Azeri provinces that it occupied in a war with Azerbaijan. The Turkish-Armenian conflict is of broader interest than just the bilateral relations since the Armenian diaspora in France and the United States, in addition to many other parts of the world, lobby governments to recognize the events of 1915 as genocide, an act which the Turks consider to be inaccurate, unfair and downright insulting. The practical outcome is that Armenia and Turkey do not have diplomatic relations and the border is closed.

Both the US and European allies encouraged the parties to settle their differences. A process of conciliation was initiated in September 2008 with the Turkish President Gül traveling to Armenia, ostensibly to attend a soccer game between two national teams in a European championship match which provided an opportunity for him to talk with the Armenian president. These initial acts were followed by the preparation of an agreement that involved the initiation of diplomatic relations and the opening of the border. The agreement was signed in Geneva in September 2009. The Turkish side believed that there was a tacit understanding that Armenia would begin to withdraw from some of the provinces of Azerbaijan that it was occupying, but this did not materialize. Azerbaijan with whom Turkey shares a common culture and language as well as substantial economic interests the most important of which the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, protested vehemently, arguing that it had been betrayed. Under the circumstances neither Turkey nor Armenia felt ready to implement the agreement. A unique effort to terminate a state of hostile relations with a neighbor failed.

A similar experiment also failed in Cyprus. In 2005, Mehmet Ali Talat got elected the president of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. He represented a line of thinking that argued that it was possible to negotiate with the Greek side to bring about the unification of the Island. This change provided a window of opportunity for Turkey to address a problem that had

proven insoluble in the past. Bilateral negotiations, however, proved fruitless. The Greek Cypriot government not only felt that in the long run both Turkish Cyprus and Turkey would have to yield to their position because of Turkey's interest in becoming a members of the EU, but it had also become enslaved in the hands of its own public whom Cypriot political parties had led to believe that it would be possible to unify the Island without making any concession to the Turks. The negotiations under the auspices of the UN delivered little progress. The solution of the problem was therefore laid to rest.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey's relations with Russia had grown rapidly. Freed from the adversarial perception produced by the bipolar global politics, there was a rapid expansion of economic relations. Russia became the major supplier of natural gas to Turkey while led construction services in Russia. Consumer goods from Turkey filled Russian shelves while Russian tourists filled hotel rooms on the Turkish Mediterranean coast. Relations were further facilitated by the personal chemistry between Mr. Putin and the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan. Eventually references to a strategic partnership (a loosely employed word by Turkish policymakers) began to be used to describe the relationship. Russia undertook to build Turkey's first nuclear plant. Mainly through Turkish efforts, visa requirements for short term travel were removed between the two countries.

From the very beginning, Turkey worked also to develop sound relations with the former Soviet states and broadly succeeded in this endeavor. Lively economic and/or cultural relations were established with the Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. But these were understandably overshadowed by size and the significance of the Russian relationship. Turkey's efforts to develop a special relationship with the Turkic speaking republics in Central Asia, on the other hand, have been reasonably successful but not advanced as much as Turkey has hoped for. The ruling elites, generally apparatchiks from the days of the USSR maintained a strong orientation toward Russia. Furthermore, economic dependencies developed during the Soviet times cannot be undone easily. Close relations, on the other hand, were established with Georgia and Azerbaijan. This has culminated in the construction of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline and later a parallel natural gas line, both originating in Baku and going across Georgia into Turkey. Recently, it has been agreed to develop the gas pipeline into the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline, intended to be the beginning leg of

system that will transport Azeri and possibly Kazakh and Turkmen gas into Europe, serving Turkey's aspirations to become a global energy hub.

Turning to Turkey's West, although a number of unsettled issues connected with Aegean airspace, continental shelf, territorial waters and economic zone, Turkey's relations with Greece were good. The two societies had learned to live with problems and did not allow them to undermine a peaceful relationship between them. Beyond Greece, in the Balkans, Turkey that hosts significant immigrant populations from Balkan countries, was active in contributing to peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts cooperating with the UN, NATO and the EU. It was also an economic actor that offered both economic assistance and conducted trade. It enjoyed the trust of contesting parties in the region and used this confidence to broker better relations even between the Serbs and the Bosnian Moslems.

If one were to describe where Turkey stood in terms of its foreign policy in 2009, it may be said that the country had been moving toward becoming a regional leader. It was perceived as an honest broker among countries of the Middle East and the Balkans, its economic performance and the ensuing prosperity impressed others; its secular, liberal atmosphere and democratic politics led publics of neighboring countries in its South to aspire to be like Turkey. For them, Turkey was a neighbor, but it belonged to a different world of more industrialized, more democratic countries of the west. More broadly, Turkey appeared to have succeeded in building a zone of prosperity around it, it was a trusted neighbor and an honest broker. It was an important economic partner. It was a country tourists from the region wanted to visit at their first opportunity. Hardly anyone would have predicted that this idyllic state of affairs would unravel in such a short time.

Experiment in Going Independent

What had happened, what had gone wrong? One incident appears to have had a clear contribution to triggering the change- the Israeli attack on Gaza in December 2008. The attack came a few days after the then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak had returned to Israel from Turkey with a proposal to reach an accommodation with Syria on the status of Golan Heights. The

Turkish Prime Minister had invested time and effort to bring this about. The end of hostilities between Syria and Israel would have constituted a huge step in converting the Middle East into a zone of peace and hopefully prosperity. Turkey would be a leading political and economic beneficiary of this development. Ehud Barak had gone back to Israel, leaving the impression that he would put some finishing touches on the proposal and get cabinet approval. Instead came the attack on Gaza. Mr. Erdoğan felt betrayed and thought that he had been duped by Israel to gain time in preparing the attack on Gaza.

It is probably after this incident that the prime minister concluded that Israel had no intention of making peace and it was out to take more territory from the Palestinians. He appears further to have judged that Israel's recalcitrance derived from insufficiencies in the world system of governance which prevented international action to stop Israel. He began, ever more frequently, to utter critical remarks about Israel. He soon discovered that such talk made him very popular in the Arab streets since Arab leaders were generally more reserved in their remarks about Israel.

Then in May 2009, Mr. Davutoğlu became the foreign minister. Although he had been an influential foreign policy advisor to the prime minister, being made a minister, he was now at the helm of foreign policy. The prime minister showed great confidence in him, a fact that enhanced his input into policymaking. Whether his promotion to ministerial position reflected the prime minister's desire to bring about changes in foreign policy or whether Mr. Davutoğlu formed policy and persuaded the prime minister that policy should be changed is difficult to establish, but it is clear that within a year Turkish foreign policy turned more independent and assertive. The landmark event, of course, is the negative vote that Turkey cast along with Brazil against the imposition of sanctions on Iran for failing to submit its nuclear program to the review of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Although the US government may have led Brazil and Turkey to believe that the deal they brokered with Iran was acceptable to the Obama administration and that the US was in fact reneging on its promise, not abstaining but voting against an ally, was not received kindly by the Americans. Turkey accepted to observe the sanctions depicted in the decision of the UN Security Council but made clear that it would not observe additional measures that would be introduced by the US or the EU.

The UN vote was on June 9, 2010. This had been preceded a few days ago by an incident on the high seas in which Israeli commandoes had attacked *Mavi Marmara*, a boat carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza as the flagship of an international flotilla, killing eight Turks and one American of Turkish origin. There were concerns that Turco-Israeli relations would take a sharp turn for the worse and indeed they were severely damaged, still waiting to be repaired.

Putting these developments together, it seemed Turkey had now become interested in pursuing an increasingly independent foreign policy. Challenging Americans and Israelis enhanced the public admiration for Prime Minister Erdoğan among Muslim populations in the Middle East, a phenomenon which he found gratifying. Turkey's traditional western Allies found Turkish behavior puzzling, the EU felt relief that Turkish attention was turning elsewhere while the Americans did not want a rupture since Turkish cooperation was still needed in insuring a smooth exit from Iraq.

The Turning of the Tide: From Regional Leader to Regional Actor

The outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring in the December of 2010 did not initially arouse major interest in Turkish foreign policy establishment. Turkey had limited relations with Tunisia though AKP had some linkages with the Islamic opposition movement in that country. Then came Tahrir Square. Again, while the government might be sympathetic to the demands for change and had relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, they kept their distance. Libya, however, constituted a turning point. Turkey had construction contracts totaling 25 billion USD there and more than 20000 citizens working in those projects. When Turkey's western allies suggested that NATO should stage an intervention to stop bloodshed, the initial reaction of Prime Minister Erdoğan was to ask "What business does NATO have there?" When it became evident that France and Britain were going to intervene anyhow, Turkey affected a major turnaround, returned to the fold, and extended naval support to the operation and helped evacuate foreign nationals.

The developments in Libya demonstrated to Mr. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu that Turkey did not have the means to implement a regional policy and shape events by itself and that it had to make difficult choices. The decision

to take part in NATO operations was an earlier example. But it had already been preceded by another example in the November 2010 NATO summit when the US proposal to build an ABM radar system was adopted. Although no adversary against whom the system was designed was ever specified, it was understood that the primary target would be Iran and a subsidiary target Russia. The missiles would not be deployed on Turkish territory, but a radar station needed to be built in Southeastern Turkey. Saying no to the proposal would cause a serious and may be an irreparable rift with NATO allies, especially the US. Saying yes, on the other hand, would be unwelcome by Iran and to a lesser degree by Russia.

Syria: The Pivotal Case

A rather difficult choice also emerged with regard to Syria. The Arab Spring reached Syria late. When demonstrations in various cities of Syria started, both the Turkish Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister visited Bashar Assad to persuade him to accede rather than to stand against the tide demanding political reforms and liberalization. The Syrian president pretended to be accommodating, made promises for change but never delivered on his promises. This put the Turkish leadership in an embarrassing position since they had been trying to convince their allies to pursue moderation and engagement toward Syria. Prime Minister Erdoğan who values personal relationships highly, also felt personally betrayed and turned into an opponent of the Syrian leader.

As the domestic strife in Syria continued, the Syrian government escalated the means it employed to include tanks, field guns and fighter-bomber jets to put the opposition down. The internal strife also produced a wave of refugees that flooded into Turkey. If hesitantly at first, Turkey joined its Western allies in a condemnation of the Syrian leadership conservative Arab regimes, becoming an active promoter of Syrian opposition. It has hosted meetings of the Friends of Syria that extends support to the opposition. It has allowed the political opposition to hold meetings in Istanbul. Newspapers have reported that light arms and ammunition as well as volunteers from other countries have transited through Turkey to make their way to the Syrian opposition forces. And most recently, it has been alleged that Turkey has been offering training to members of the Free Syrian Army whose headquarters are

located in the province of Hatay on the Syrian border. The Turkish Prime Minister has made it clear that Assad must go. Inadvertently, Turkey has become a party to Syrian domestic politics.

Turkey's increasing involvement in Syria in favor of the opposition has not been without its costs. To begin with, it has strained Turkey's relations with Iran and Russia who are supportive of the current Syrian regime for different reasons. Russia, in trying to restore the power position that was once enjoyed by the Soviet Union, has had an interest in refurbishing the naval base in Tartus through which it can project its naval prowess to the Eastern Mediterranean. Whereas in earlier times, Soviets had a number of friends on the Eastern half of the Mediterranean including Libya and Egypt or even Cyprus, none of those are available now. Iran, on the other hand, tries to prevent the emergence of regimes to its West that are favorably disposed to the US and the western alliance. Furthermore, it desires to project its power toward the Mediterranean in which Syria constitutes a critical link. Of the two neighbors, Iran has been more open in its criticism of Turkey's position on Syria and its increasingly pro-western disposition.

A second negative outcome of the worsening relationship with Syria has been possible return of the support of the Syrian government to Kurdish terrorism of the PKK. Although the extent of such support is difficult to establish, particularly in light of the fact that the regime is fighting for its own life, the removal of controls by the Syrian government and its promotion of terror is a discomfiting thought for Turkey. Turkish anxieties are further exacerbated by the takeover of some local governments by Kurdish groups in towns bordering Turkey. Though these towns are disparate and do not constitute a unified region, their assertions of autonomy, it is feared, would reinforce similar demands on the Turkish side of the border.

A third problematical outcome has been the identification of Turkey as a pro-Sunni force in the region. A pro-Sunni designation clearly undermines Turkey's claim to be equidistant to all parties in the region; a trusted partner, a mediator among rival parties and a builder of peace. This identification has been the outcome of Turkey's close collaboration with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in supporting the Syrian opposition to bring about the downfall of the Ba'athist Assad regime. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has denied the allegation vigorously

but other evidence also suggests that the Turkish government may in fact have introduced a sectarian filter to its policymaking in the region. For example, Tariq Hashimi, the Iraqi vice premier representing the Sunnis has escaped to Turkey after allegations by Prime Minister Maliki that he is involved in a plot to assassinate him. Turkey has not only refused to return Mr. Hashimi to Iraq but also given him asylum and the freedom to conduct political activity. It is difficult to judge the truthfulness of the accusations against Mr. Hashimi in a society where politics is characterized by sectarian rivalries and where “unorthodox” methods of dealing with opponents are not uncommon. But it is understandable that extending liberties to a political fugitive is seen as taking the Sunni side in Iraqi politics.

A fourth outcome is that the Syrian episode is that it has tested Turkey’s capabilities in its perceived new power position and shown its limits. It has become clear that Turkey by itself cannot play a determining role in the region or even in the fate of a neighbor such as Syria and has to work with allies and other regional forces. Additional evidence for this observation comes again from Iraq where Turkey’s efforts to cooperate with certain domestic forces in Iraq to bring down the government of Nuri al-Maliki and replace it with Iyad Allawi have not just failed but made relations with the current Iraqi government more problematical.

Finally, the Syrian developments have had direct and indirect negative economic effects. Turkey’s trade with Syria has been reduced to a trickle. This is particularly hard on the economies of provinces that border Syria where the local economy had come to rely on trade with Syria including the purchasing power of large numbers of Syrian tourists. The negative economic effects have been reinforced by the fact that Syria is Turkey’s major truck route to eleven other countries further South, particularly in the Gulf. Alternative shipping routes exist but not only are they in need of development, but they also increase the costs of shipping significantly.

Problems with Iraq and Iran and Israel

The “Syrian Spring,” it has become evident, has had negative effects not only on Turkey’s relations with Syria but with other neighbors such as Iraq, Iran

and Russia. With Iraq and Iran, other problems have surfaced as well. In Iraq, as the ability of the Baghdad government to exercise authority over the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has waned, Turkey has begun to deal with the regional government in Erbil. Turkey feels that in bringing PKK terror under control, enlisting the cooperation of the KRG as opposed to that of Baghdad is more critical. In addition, Turkey has developed a lively trade with Northern Iraq that is rapidly expanding. Finally, as the government in Baghdad and the KRG fail to reach an agreement on how to share the oil and gas wealth of Northern Iraq, Turkey along with other major countries, have chosen to work with the KRG to develop these resources to the unhappiness of Baghdad which says that it will not recognize arrangements that have not obtained its approval.

It has already been pointed out that the construction of an ABM radar base in southeastern Turkey has aroused Iran's ire. In addition, regarding Iran's nuclear program, the US has insisted that economic sanctions it has adopted be applied against Iran, indicating that the countries that violate these sanctions would be sanctioned by America. Within that context, Turkey has been asked to reduce the amount of oil it imports from Iran, a request that Turkey has had to accede to, however reluctantly. Nevertheless, mutual dependence constitutes an effective check against a significant rupture in relations. Turkey serves as Iran's gateway to the West; Iran serves as one of Turkey's gateways to Central Asia. Turkey gets Iranian natural gas for heating in its Eastern provinces, while Iran is a major export market for Turkey. In the confusing power structure of Iran, some government agencies make highly critical and even threatening remarks toward Turkey while others offer conciliatory remarks and extol the virtues of good relations. The competitive mood that characterizes the Turkish-Iranian relationship, however, cannot be concealed in shroud of words. Recently, for example, the Turkish prime ministers announced that Turkey was working on the incorporation of long range missiles into its stockpiles, explaining that since other countries in the vicinity (i.e. Iran) were developing them, Turkey also ought to have its own.

Turkish-Israeli relations continue to be cool. Despite intense pressure from the US, they have not improved. In fairness, this failure cannot be credited to the Turkish side alone. Some members of the Netanyahu coalition

have absolutely refused to accept responsibility for the death of nine persons on the *Mavi Marmara*, the boat raided by Israel on the high seas, and to offer Turkey an apology and indemnity to the families of the deceased, thereby tying the hands of the Netanyahu government to open the way toward improving relations. Rather, Israel has turned to developing closer relations with Cyprus and Greece as a way of sidelining Turkey as a key friend in the region. The new friendship with Cyprus has now been cemented by the discovery of natural gas in the exclusive economic zone of Israel and in the Turkish-Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus contested zone of Cyprus. Israel has offered Cyprus to provide for the security of production and joint plans to develop a LNG plant on the island to ship the gas to world markets.

From Zero Problems with Neighbors to Zero Neighbors without Problems?

To conclude, what started out as a rise of Turkey to the level of the regional power has ended with Turkey as a regional actor, far from its aspirations of bringing about change in the global system of governance and building a zone of peace and prosperity under Turkey's stewardship. While it is true that Turkey is an economically stronger country than before, that it now reaches corners of the world where it was not present before, partly the developments in the Middle East over which Turkey had little control and partly the choices of the Turkish political leadership, especially Mr. Erdoğan and Mr. Davutoğlu, Turkey now finds itself slowly being reduced to just one of the many actors in the region. Its initial moves to challenge the international system of governance have now been replaced by a reluctant return to the fold of the Western Bloc, especially the US. Yet the earlier experimentation that reflects overjudging Turkey's enhanced capabilities and its failure to keep a neutral stance toward different countries of the region and different interpretation of religion, has done damage to Turkey's international standing. Turkey is becoming identified more and more not as a part of the West bordering on the region, but as a part of the region itself. Turkey's inability to solve its own domestic Kurdish problem not only reinforces this impression but also reduces Turkey's capacity to project its power in the region.

Quo Vadis?

The Turkish government had invested much prestige in changing the Assad government in Syria. If the Assad government survives against all odds, it will be taken as an indicator of Turkey's impotence. For this reason, Turkey has been trying to persuade its allies that a more active intervention is needed against a brutal dictatorship. Russia and China are actively opposed to this. Western allies going through economically difficult times (and in the US the presidential election is approaching), shy away from military engagements. Turkish public also seems not to support a Turkish military intervention in Syria. Nevertheless, Turkish military action against Syria should not be fully ruled out. Complaining that Turkey is having difficulty in accommodating tens of thousands of refugees, the Turkish foreign minister continues to insist that a security zone should be established within Syria itself. The only way that is possible is using military force.

The downfall of the Assad regime will not assure comfort either. Syria is a highly fragmented society where ethnic, tribal and religious cleavages run deep in society. It is feared that the country will go into a long lasting and bloody internal struggle that will have destabilizing effects on the neighboring countries, Turkey not excepted.

Turkish newspapers have turned more and more critical of Turkey's foreign policy and the foreign minister Davutoğlu who is seen as its architect. Yet a major turnaround does not seem to be around the corner. There will be difficult days ahead. Sadly, the success of Turkey's foreign policy has come to hinge upon what happens in Syria. It is certain that the makers of Turkish foreign policy did not intend to get themselves into this position, but this is where Turkey is now

ABSTRACT

Turkey's growing economy and the end of the Cold war have interjected a dynamism into Turkish foreign policy. It has meant reaching new countries and parts of the world as well as expanding and deepening existing ties. Three motivations appear to have guided Turkish foreign policy: maintaining good relations with the traditional allies; affecting changes in the global system of governance favoring rising powers; and becoming a regional leader. During the 2004-2010 period, Turkey has managed good relations with allies and advanced in regional leadership. Its efforts to bring change in the global system of governance through voting against sanctions for Iran have not proven successful. The Arab Spring has forced Turkey to work with its allies while the crisis in Syria and the way Turkey has become involved in the crisis has undermined Turkey's claim to regional leadership and produced other undesirable outcomes. Turkey appears to be losing its status as a regional leader and becoming only a regional actor.

KEYWORDS

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