

From Distance to Engagement: Turkish Policy towards the Middle East, Iraq and Iraqi Kurds

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ABSTRACT

Turkey's Middle East policy has witnessed revolutionary changes since 1999. The changes in the attitude of Turkey towards the region can be easily grasped by examining its policy towards Iraq. Today Ankara is an active player in the region using non-military means of diplomacy, such as economic tools and international conferences. This paper analyzes the changes in Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq through a framework of processes, means and outcomes. The article covers approximately the last ten years and looks at three turning points that triggered change. These turning points are the capture of the PKK leader Öcalan in 1999, Turkey's refusal to allow the transfer of US soldiers to Iraq in March 2003, and the Turkish responses to the PKK attack on the Aktütün military post on the Turkish-Iraqi border in October 2008. The article contends that as a result of the transformations in Turkey's foreign policy, it has become an indispensable actor in Middle Eastern politics.

Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East since 1999 has witnessed revolutionary changes. Turkey's traditional policy in the region aimed for the country to be as distant as possible from the region, but currently Turkey is very much engaged in regional politics and today it is one of the countries that is considered as a mediator in regional problems. The term engagement here refers not to military interventions but to engagement in regional politics. It can be argued that Turkey was also engaged in the Middle East during the 1990s because of its military operations against the PKK in Iraq. However, today Ankara is an active player in the region using non-military means of diplomacy, such as economic tools and international conferences, and Turkey has become an indispensable actor in Middle Eastern politics. The change in the attitude of Turkey towards the Middle East can be easily grasped by examining its policy towards Iraq.

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In this article, I will analyze the changes in Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq through a framework of *processes, means and outcomes*. I look to the processes by which policymakers have interacted with domestic and international actors in terms of regional politics. For this, the changes in the domestic process of making foreign policy and the international reasons for this change and the responses from actors to this change are analyzed. Means refer to the tools employed by the policymakers in realizing their objectives. Results refer to the outcomes of the new policy and the differences from the previous attitudes. The period covered in the article is approximately 10 years and *three* turning points should be mentioned to allow for the change. These turning points were the capture of the PKK leader Öcalan in 1999, the refusal to allow the transfer of US soldiers by the Turkish parliament before the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and the Turkish responses to the PKK attack on the Aktütün military post on the Turkish-Iraqi border in October 2008. Apart from these, we should also keep in mind another important development that affected Turkish policy towards Iraq: Turkey's status as a candidate to the European Union (EU) since 1999. In relation to these developments, the relationship between the Turkish authorities and the Kurdish authorities in Iraq has grown in recent years. As a sign of these improving relations, the Turkish foreign minister has visited President of the Iraqi Kurdish Region Barzani, and Barzani visited Ankara, and Turkey has also opened a consulate in Irbil.

During the 1990s, the Kurdish question mainly determined Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. In terms of foreign policy, this issue dominated Turkish policy options and led to security-dominated policy preferences with international actors and neighboring countries.¹ The Gulf War and the resulting power vacuum in the Kurdish region of Iraq enabled the PKK to use this area for its activities. As a result, military issues dominated Turkish policy towards Iraq in the 1990s. In order to eliminate the threat of terror, Turkey cooperated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) to fight the PKK militants. It is generally accepted that the attacks of 9/11 had profound impacts on the international system and also regional systems, including that in the Middle East. In relation to these developments, each actor re-evaluated its foreign policy objectives and tools. In accordance with this transformation, Turkey abandoned its position as a "neutral observer" and became a "proactive regional player".² Here the invasion of Iraq by the US and its allied forces represents another important date since this development dramatically changed the balance in regional politics.

The transformation in Turkish policy towards Iraq began after 1999 but the change in the Turkish attitude towards the Middle East became more visible dur-

ing the rule of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which came to power in 2002. In the early years of JDP rule, as a result of the invasion of Iraq, the government had to deal with the repercussions of this for Turkey and the region along with the issues of the EU and Cyprus. After overcoming the negative outcomes of the crisis in the region, Turkey has tried to follow a pro-active policy since 2005. Since 2005, the main principles of foreign policy have been defined by Foreign Minister Davutoğlu as follows: a delicate balance between security and democracy in domestic politics; zero problems with the neighbors; close contacts with the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus; a complimentary policy with global actors such as the US and the EU instead of competition; and a diplomatic approach which is active in international organizations and peace-building efforts.³

Some of these principles represent important deviations from Turkey's traditional approach towards the Middle East. The "zero problems with the neighbors" principle refers to the desire of Turkey to eliminate problems with neighboring countries, generally interpreted as the problems with Iraq, Syria, Greece and Armenia. After building confidence among the policymakers of neighboring countries within the framework of this principle, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu argued that this principle would be transformed to "maximum cooperation with the neighbors"⁴ And the comprehensive cooperation agreements with Iraq and Syria might be interpreted as a materialization of this principle. This principle is helpful in the transformation of the security-dominated foreign policy of the country and not only contributes to overcoming the problems between Turkey and its neighbors but also to Turkey's mediation efforts between regional countries.⁵

Before analyzing the changes in a framework of processes, means and outcomes, I want to stress that the changes in Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq are generally in line with the changes in Turkish foreign policy in general and the Middle East in particular. The changes in Turkish policy towards Iraq did not come suddenly, but instead have evolved over the years and has been shaped by several factors. However, there are certain points that have acted as turning points in the policy.

The Turning Points in the Transformation of Policy

Following this background, I will continue by briefly analyzing the impacts of the turning points mentioned above. The year 1999 represented the beginning of a real breakthrough in Turkish attitude towards the Middle East and Iraq. In 1999, with the capture of Öcalan, the security threat against Turkey started to

Despite the earlier reluctance to develop relations with Kurdish authorities after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, in the last couple of years, the contacts between Turkish and Kurdish authorities have increased

diminish and factors other than security concerns began to have their place in the formulation of Turkish policy towards Iraq. Between 1999 and 2003, security threats against Turkey emanating from northern Iraq were low and there was a kind of stability there. Although Turkey had concerns about the intentions of the Saddam Hussein administration in Iraq, the containment of Kurdish demands

by his administration was perceived positively by Turkey. Turkey was contacting authorities in Baghdad to overcome some of the negative effects of the UN sanctions in terms of economic issues, and relations with the Kurdish figures in the north of the country were very limited.

Another important development that signified that Turkey was distancing itself from its traditional policy and embracing a new approach, which was based on democratic legitimacy, was the well-known decision of the Turkish on March 1, 2003. With this decision of the Turkish parliament, Turkey started to act as an independent actor in foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. The US was asking Turkey to deploy around 60,000 of its soldiers on Turkish territory and to transfer some of them via Turkey to Iraq. The rejection of the transfer of US soldiers by the Turkish parliament seriously affected the Bush administration's plans and also represented an important turning point in Turkish policy towards Iraq. As a result of this long relationship, the general expectation in the world was that Turkey would not say 'no' to the US despite the opposition of the Turkish public to the stance of the US on this issue. The decision on March 1 showed that democratic processes will be influential in the formulation of the foreign policy. Traditionally the role of the parliament in foreign policy making was limited in Turkey; elite state institutions, not the masses, determined foreign and security policies.⁶ Other actors, like the parliament and NGOs, were accepted only as secondary actors in the foreign policy decision-making process regardless of alternating governments.⁷

Just a few months before the decision of the parliament, Turkey ended the state-of-emergency rule in the South-Eastern Anatolian region to meet the EU democratic criteria. The government was caught in a very difficult situation. On the one hand, Turkey did not want to alienate the US by refusing its demands; on the other hand, allowing the transfer of soldiers might have required a new state-of-emergency declaration to prevent any security concerns in the southern part of the country. Caught between these two bad options, the JPD government tried

to delay the process and wanted to convince the US administration to find other ways. After the EU summit in Copenhagen in 2002, the main objective of Turkey in its foreign policy was to secure a date for the start of accession negotiations with the EU and therefore the government needed to focus on democratic reforms to meet the political criteria. In order to focus on the issue of democratization, Turkey needed to avoid the war.⁸ Consequently, EU conditionality had its impact on the decision of Turkey in saying 'no' to the US.

It is generally accepted that the position and opinions of Germany and France, which were opposed to the policies of the US administration, affected Turkey's decision. In this respect some commentators have argued that covert threats from Germany and France to Turkey, from the point of view of EU membership, against participating in the Iraqi coalition with the US affected the Turkish decision.⁹ In fact, the French president of the time, Jacques Chirac, criticized some European countries that signed a declaration supporting the US policy on Iraq just before the invasion and said that "Romania and Bulgaria could not do anything better to decrease their likelihood of membership".¹⁰ Although the government sent the motion to the parliament, it allowed the members of the ruling JDP "to act in accordance with what their conscience tells them to do".¹¹

The decision on March 1, 2003 showed that democratic legitimacy had become a determining factor in foreign policy making and that Turkey had started to act as an independent actor. This development could be interpreted as a sign that Turkey may deviate from its traditional policy of following its US alliance in formulating its regional policy. As a result, the perception of neighboring countries towards Turkey started to change. As a matter of fact, Vladimir Putin said that "until the decision on March 1, Turkey did not deserve to be accepted as an independent actor and in case of a need, instead of talking to Turkey, it was better to talk to the US. But, after this decision of the parliament, he says, Turkey has become an actor."¹²

Eventually the US-led coalition invaded Iraq without the participation of Turkey. The decision of the Turkish parliament was in conformity with public opinion, but this decision had negative implications for Turkish-American relations and the Turkish struggle with the PKK. For example, just a few months after the invasion we witnessed a very serious crisis between Turkey and the USA. On July 4, 2003, Turkish special forces members were disarmed, hooded and detained by US troops on charges of conspiring to assassinate local elected officials in the city of Sulaymaniyah. Most of the people in Turkey saw this act as a clear sign that the US favored the Iraqi Kurds over its NATO ally.¹³

We had indeed witnessed a decline in the terrorist activities of the PKK after the capture of Öcalan in 1999. Between 1999 and 2003, a relatively calm situation in terms of PKK terrorist activities led to more stability in Turkish-Iraqi relations. As a result of Turkey's EU candidacy there were several constitutional and legal reforms to meet European political standards. The abolishment of death penalty, the end of emergency rule in the southeast, and the increasing role of civilians in the making of domestic and foreign policy contributed to this stability. The success of the newly founded JDP in the general elections in November 2002 and the political and economic reforms of the single-party government helped to change the domestic atmosphere in the country in terms of the Kurdish issue. A peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey caused concerns in some circles inside and outside of Turkey. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the PKK renewed its attacks on Turkish territory. Some of these terrorists were based in northern Iraq and used this area as a safe heaven and the chaotic atmosphere in Iraq benefited the PKK. The US was not happy with the decision of the Turkish parliament not to allow the transfer of US soldiers before the invasion of Iraq and as result the Turkish public believed that the US was not cooperative enough in the struggle against the PKK. Increasing attacks of the PKK caused problems not only with the US, but also in relations with the Iraqi authorities.

The attitude of Turkey after the attacks of the PKK on the Dağlica military post in October 2007 and on the Aktütün military post in October 2008 represented a new approach and these dates can be seen as turning points in terms of understanding the basic parameters of the new approach of Turkey on this issue. After these two attacks, we can say that Turkey has mostly relied on diplomatic tools along with military tools. With these attacks, terrorist activities emanating from northern Iraq had characteristics similar to the attacks in the 1990s. However, different from the policies applied in the 1990s against these threats, Turkey has refrained from large-scale military operations and has employed a policy in which diplomatic contacts with the officials in Iraq has been crucial. The aim of the PKK here was to force Turkey into a large-scale military operation and to create a serious crisis between Ankara and Iraqi officials (both the central administration and the Kurdish authorities). There were also some calls from public figures for the Turkish government to resort to military means against the authorities in northern Iraq.¹⁴ Despite the calls and pressures for an outright military solution, Turkey has employed a balanced strategy with different tools. Here we should remember the pressure on the government before the elections in July 2007 to create a negative atmosphere in the southeast of Turkey, but again the government avoided a military operation against northern Iraq.



Photo: AA, Yasin Aras

The change in the attitude of Turkey towards the Middle East can be easily grasped by examining its policy towards Iraq.

Although Turkey carried out military operations against the PKK bases in northern Iraq, Ankara has used means other than just military ones in its policy towards Iraq. For example, while Turkey conducted a military incursion into northern Iraq in February 2008 after some PKK attacks from this part of Iraq, the duration of the operation was short and the criticism from regional and international actors was weak. This was because Turkey informed the Iraqi authorities about the intention of the operation and convinced their counterparts that Ankara respected the sovereignty of Iraq. As a result of these diplomatic efforts, just a week after this operation Iraqi President Talabani visited Turkey. Two weeks after this visit, Turkey's special representative for Iraq, Ambassador Özçelik, visited Baghdad for discussions on various bilateral issues.¹⁵ In fact, in reference to the policy followed by Turkey in this period of time, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu said during his visit to Irbil in October 2009 that they “generated a new approach from this attack and initiated a new policy by breaking the vicious cycle”.¹⁶ Despite the calls for an outright military operation and the scenarios presented about a possible Turkish-Kurdish war, Davutoğlu said that Turkey responded to these attacks in a different way and initiated a process of engagement with the Kurdish

authorities in Iraq.¹⁷ Here the main characteristics of the policy can be summarized as resorting not only to military means but engaging with every party to the question, diversifying the policy options, informing the counterparts about Turkey's concerns, and expecting to find a solution of the problem.

Although the suspension of the PKK's activities ended after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the terrorist activities in the early years were mostly concentrated on mining roads and these attacks can be defined as defensive in comparison with the 1990s. But during 2007 and 2008, the PKK increased its attacks and, similar to the 1990s, this time the attacks concentrated on military posts to give the image that it was still powerful. The political divisions and debates within Turkish society have prevented reaching a consensus on the policy to be followed against the PKK. There are different opinions in society about the nature of the problem and consequently the remedies. The line between the Kurdish issue and terror is blurred and policies (economic, political, military, and social) to be followed by the government have been sources of contention.¹⁸ Beside these, Turkey has had disagreements with the Iraqi Kurdish authorities and the US and there has been a feeling that neither of these actors would respond to Turkish demands. The negative repercussions of the decision of the Turkish parliament in 2003 resurfaced in 2007 and 2008 in relations with the USA. While in the 1990s, when the PKK constituted a serious threat against Turkey, Ankara carried out several military operations against northern Iraq with the green light of the USA, after the invasion of Iraq there was more limited room for maneuver for Turkey.

Turkish authorities made their concerns public about the arms supplied during the invasion of Iraq to pro-American groups, especially to the Kurds, and increased their criticisms when the PKK used these kinds of weapons against Turkey.¹⁹ The anti-American sentiments in the Turkish public were on the rise because of the feeling that their long-term ally was not supporting Turkey and also that US-made arms were used by the PKK against Turkey. Many Turks believed that the US's attitude in the Middle East did not consider the interests of Turkey, and according to opinion polls, only 9% of the Turkish public supported the US policy in the region while 86% supported the removal of US forces from Iraq, according to 2007 figures.²⁰ The increase in the number and extent of the attacks of the PKK against Turkey was one of the reasons of friction between Turkey and the US. The attacks of the PKK against the Dağlica and Aktütün military posts came in such an atmosphere.

The aims of the PKK with these attacks was to create panic in the Turkish public and then the state would be forced to introduce harsh military measures;

in other words, instead of engaging with the local actors, the state would resort to military means and thereby create an environment in which violence would escalate. But contrary to these expectations, and in accordance with the basic premises of its new approach in order to reach a solution, Turkey has refrained from solely employing military means but has contacted every actor at different

levels and expressed its concerns. In the early months of 2007, as a result of increasing attacks from the PKK, the military commanders Büyükanıt and Başbuğ urged the government to take unilateral military action against northern Iraq, but this was opposed both the Turkish government and the US administration.²¹ Instead, Turkey contacted the central Iraqi authorities and Kurdish groups and constructed a new approach by dealing with every actor.²² For example, during the visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki to Turkey in August 2007, the two countries signed a protocol concerning the struggle with terrorism and the two sides agreed to work together to end all terrorist activities in Iraq. Although there were several disagreements among the parties during the meetings, the protocol has contributed to the Turkish struggle against the PKK.²³ The Turkish prime minister's visit to the US on November 5, 2007, and the participation of the deputy chief of the general staff in this visit, was a sign of the sensitivity of this issue for Turkey.²⁴ With this, the tension between the two countries started to decrease and the USA promised to support Turkey with instant information about the activities of the PKK and modalities of cooperation against terrorism between Turkey and the USA are determined.²⁵

Similar to contacts with the US authorities, contacts with the Iraqi authorities, not only in Baghdad but also in the Kurdish region, increased dramatically after 2007 in comparison to earlier periods. After the PKK attack on the Dağlica military post on October 21, 2007, while the government ordered preparations for a military attack against the PKK on the one hand, on the other hand the government continued its diplomatic efforts. Foreign Minister Babacan paid a visit to Baghdad and voiced Turkey's expectations from the Iraqi side on the issue of terrorism.²⁶ In the context of this diplomacy, at the Conference of the Iraqi Neighboring Countries in Istanbul on November 2, 2007, Turkey's demands and concerns were presented to US Secretary of State Rice and UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. One of the important topics discussed during the meeting

In the EU's progress reports the most positive comment about Turkey's performance concerns foreign policy and here Turkey's constructive role in areas like Iraq has been welcomed by European officials

were the measures to be taken to prevent Turkey from making military incursions into northern Iraq.²⁷ Formerly, Turkish authorities generally refrained from direct contact with the Kurdish authorities. However, Turkish policymakers realized that without the contribution of the Kurdish groups Turkish policy towards Iraq would have difficulties, especially in eliminating the threat from the PKK. In order to overcome the security problems emanating from northern Iraq, Turkish policymakers and politicians contacted Kurdish leaders and this new atmosphere contributed to the improving security situation in the region.²⁸ As a result of these contacts, mutual visits, like the visit of Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu in 2009 and President of Kurdish Regional Administration Masud Barzani in 2010, heralded a new era, in which increasing cooperation between Turkey and Kurdish officials in Iraq has strengthened Turkey's fight with the PKK. The Turkish government's Kurdish opening in domestic policy was also welcomed by Barzani and he signaled his support for Turkey's new approach.²⁹

The transformation of Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq with the above mentioned turning points can be analyzed through a framework of *processes, means and outcomes*. The change in Turkish attitude towards Iraq did not come suddenly, but gradually. Different aspects of the change can be grasped in various processes in this decade. In order to understand this transformation, we should look to several means which were employed by Turkish policymakers. In this process of policy transformation, the means available to policymakers were diversified and these means have also helped to change the nature of Turkish policy towards Iraq. Turkey has not only used military action but also several other tools. At the end, the outcomes of this transformation have been beneficial for Turkey, especially in the economic and diplomatic spheres.

Processes

In the transformation of Turkish foreign policy from distance to engagement, several processes have played important roles. First of all, we have seen a change in the foreign policy making process. Different from the 1990s, the role of civilian authorities has increased due to reforms to meet European political standards. With the modification of Article 118 of the constitution, adopted on October 17, 2001, the role and function of the National Security Council in policy making in general, and in foreign policy in particular, changed. The new version of the text was that "The Council of Ministers shall *evaluate* decisions of the National Security Council concerning the measures that it deems necessary for the preservation of the existence and independence of state, the integrity and indivisibility of the country and the peace and security of society".³⁰ In this respect, the role

and functioning of the National Security Council was transformed and the influence of the secretary general of this Council was curtailed.³¹ The changes in the law of National Security Council resulted in an increase in the number of civilian members of the Council and also made the role of the Council into an advisory one. This change represented a new era in the foreign policy making process with implications on its Iraq policy as well.

Beside the legal changes, Turkey constructed a new language in its Middle East policy after the capture of Öcalan. Beside the security factor, new factors have also started to play an increasing role in the formulation of policy towards this region. In this era, in addition to the fulfillment of mutual legal obligations, a process of confidence building was initiated among foreign policymakers in the region in order to find common solutions to regional problems that have emerged following the invasion of Iraq in 2003.³² In the formulation of this policy, the aim of Turkey was to prevent the terrorist activities of PKK and to become an important actor in Middle Eastern developments. In this respect, Turkey changed its focus on Iraqi politics which had previously relied on security issues and Turcomans. Especially after the failure of the Turcoman political organizations in the elections in 2005, Prime Minister Erdoğan voiced his dissatisfaction with their performance.³³ In this new era, Turkish policymakers have tried to establish contacts even with the smallest groups in Iraq.³⁴

In this period of transition, another important characteristic of the policy is that Turkey has seemed ready to take risks in its foreign policy. In deviating from its traditional policy of distancing itself from the Middle East, refraining from taking risks, and formulating policy according to the currents of the international society, Turkey has initiated new and riskier policies.³⁵ The first example of this approach was Turkey's contact with Hamas after its election in the Palestinian elections when other actors followed a policy of isolation. According to some commentators like Stephen Larrabee, this new approach represents an important deviation from the traditional policy of Turkey towards the region.³⁶ Although Turkey's increasing activism in the Middle East and its role of mediation among different actors in the region have resulted in some criticism from Israeli commentators, other Israeli political figures have described this stance of Turkey as a search for a balance between its eastern and western heritage.³⁷ Despite earlier criticism, Turkey's contribution has lately been praised by the US and EU member states.

The same risk was taken by not participating in the US's isolationist policy towards Syria thereby gaining the trust of Syria and by Turkey acting as a media-

tor between Syria and Israel. The US responded by softening its opposition to the Turkish attitude and tried to benefit from Turkey's position.³⁸ A similar risk was taken when establishing contacts with different actors in Iraqi politics.

In this process another important factor was the change in the perception of the Turkish public about the Middle Eastern region. Traditionally, the region had represented cultural backwardness and, because of the political instabilities there, the public thought that Turkey should refrain from interfering in the region.³⁹ This negative perception has only changed gradually. This transformation was true not just for the elites but also for the rest of the population as can be seen in the increase in the number of Turkish citizens visiting Middle Eastern countries and the number of Arab tourists coming to Turkey during this period.⁴⁰ Beside the positive change in the attitudes of the Turkish public about the region, the perception of Turkey in Middle Eastern countries has also improved. For this change, in addition to the increasing actual contacts among the people, the role of the media was an important factor. Turkish sit-coms aired on Arab channels have increased the interest of the Arab people in Turkey.⁴¹ Turkey's increasing profile in foreign policy has been increasingly debated among Arab intellectuals and commentators and, besides foreign policy, Turkey's economic performance and its ability to attract foreign direct investment has been praised.⁴²

Another factor which was influential in making Turkey more engaged to the region was that Turkey has used its activism in the Middle East as an asset in its negotiations with the EU. Formerly, engagement with Middle Eastern problems like Iraq or Palestine had been interpreted as setbacks for Turkey's European identity. However, in the last couple of years this engagement in the region has been stressed as a possible contribution of Turkey to the EU in terms of foreign policy. A constructive and successful foreign policy has been regarded as an asset for Turkey in its relations with the EU and Turkey's initiatives in several problem areas such as Lebanon, Georgia, Iran and Syria were strategic advantages for the government.⁴³ Especially, Turkey's efforts of mediation between different Iraqi groups, between the Palestinian factions, and between Israel and Syria were praised by several international actors.⁴⁴

Beside these mediation efforts, Turkey's identity, with its combination of eastern and western values, and Turkey's positive contribution to the solutions of the problems between the Islamic world and the western world after 9/11 has positively affected Turkey's international standing. Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has several times stressed the positive effect of Turkey relations with different areas in its EU efforts by using an example of a bow and arrow and argu-

ing that Turkey's increasing relations with the countries in the east will contribute to Turkey's relations with the west; the extent to which Turkey draws a bow in Asia will determine the extent that Turkey can shoot an arrow in Europe.⁴⁵ In this process, Turkey's relations with Middle Eastern countries are less and less interpreted as being against Turkey's European identity.

The Meeting of Iraq's Neighbors, which was initiated by Turkey just before the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and which continued afterwards with increasing participation, has also been another important development in Turkey's policy towards Iraq in the last decade. Despite the reservations of some actors about this process in the beginning, it has continued and developed with time and become a vehicle for the countries of the region to find local solutions to problems. Because of its success, the secretary general of the UN and the US secretary of state have also attended some of these meetings.⁴⁶ As a result of these meetings, the interior ministers of Iraq's neighbors came together to find common solutions to the problems emanating from terrorist activities. The Meetings of Iraq's Neighbors can be defined as a success for Turkey since Turkey accommodated its foreign policy objective with that of the region and presented its needs in combination with the needs of the countries of the Middle East. These meetings have been an important policy tool for Turkey and also other international and regional actors, especially when the future of Iraq was bleak between 2005 and 2007.

Means

The means that have been employed in the above-mentioned processes of transformation of the Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East in general and towards Iraq in particular can be listed as commercial tools, foreign aid, international organizations, media and reciprocal humanitarian contacts.

When we look at the commercial means, we see that Turkey's economic and commercial relations with its neighbors dramatically increased in the last decade and this change can be grasped best in the Middle East. We also notice that the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Trade have been cooperating in the formulation of a common approach on this issue. In order to increase the volume of trade with neighboring countries, the Ministry of Foreign Trade developed a Strategy of Trade with Neighboring Countries in 2001 and members of the government have paid special attention to developing commercial ties within Turkey's environ. The prime minister and members of the cabinet have acted as guardians of the interests of Turkish companies and an increasing number of businessmen have accompanied the foreign visits of the prime minis-

The stress on economic factors has contributed to a diversification of relations with Iraq and we have witnessed a transition from the security-dominated policy of the 1990s to a policy dominated by economic considerations

ter. As a result of this strategy and support from the politicians, Turkey's trade with its neighbors increased four times in nine years.⁴⁷

The government has politically supported Turkish companies in their bids in international tenders in different countries.⁴⁸ The attitude of the government in its foreign policy has been described by some academics as "the rise of the trad-

ing state."⁴⁹ This development paved the way for a re-definition of national interest in foreign policy. Beside the free trade agreements with Syria and Egypt, Turkey's economic relations with other Middle Eastern countries have also increased. Turkish economic activity in the Kurdish region of Iraq has started to affect the policy towards this region. Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Baghdad with nine members of the cabinet, and Turkey and Iraq concluded memorandums of understandings on 48 issues including education, health, trade, transportation, energy, and environment. In the same visit, a joint meeting of cabinets between the two countries was carried where the two sides discussed several economic issues.⁵⁰

Another vehicle which has been influential in foreign policy in the last decade has been foreign aid. Foreign aid, especially that provided by TİKA (the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency), has become an important tool of foreign policy. This aid, which was also used to strengthen Turkey candidacy to the UN Security Council, has strengthened Turkey's international standing. In order to coordinate this aid, an increasing number of TİKA offices have opened in the Middle East and elsewhere. Aid for projects on infrastructure, education, culture, health, etc., has contributed to the improved image of Turkey both to politicians and also to the general public. Beside the aid provided by the Turkish state to different projects, the aid provided through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and relief foundations to the Middle East in general and to Iraq in particular has also played an important role in Turkish policy. With the relief work of different Turkish NGOs in different parts of Iraq, especially in relation to helping orphans and widows, the perception of Iraqi people about Turkey has changed for the positive.⁵¹

Another vehicle in the increasing engagement of Turkey in Middle Eastern and Iraqi developments has been international organizations. The election of a Turkish professor as the secretary general of the Organization of Islamic Confer-

ence (OIC) for two consecutive terms, the election of Turkey for a temporary seat in the UN Security Council, and the invitation for Turkey to join Arab League meetings as an observer have all been contributing factors to Turkey's increasing engagement with the Middle East. The OIC Secretary General İhsanoğlu has mediated between different groups in Iraq for national conciliation and these efforts were fruitful in reducing tensions among the different religious groups.⁵² Turkey's increasing use of these international platforms to deliver its priorities, increasing contacts with the countries, and in helping to solve problems of the region has meant that Turkey's involvement and engagement to the Middle East has increased.

An important factor that has contributed to the change in the foreign policy outlook towards the Middle East and Iraq has been the media. The news about Turkey in the Arab media has increased with the active policy of Turkey in the region and the number of representatives from Arab media in Turkey has also increased. Beside the growing number of news about Turkey, Turkish productions, especially sit-coms, have been aired on Arab televisions and this has increased the Turkish cultural impact in the region. Turkish sit-coms, especially about the mafia, have been very popular among the different groups in Iraq.⁵³ This development has also positively affected mutual humanitarian contacts and contributed to Turkish tourism.

Another vehicle that has helped to create a new atmosphere has been the increasing number of contacts between the people of Iraq and Turkey. In order to facilitate the movement of people, Turkish Airlines started flights to Baghdad on October 26, 2008, flights it had stopped 17 years ago due to the first Gulf War.⁵⁴ Since other European airlines did not begin to fly to Iraq because of the security situation until later, European and American passengers also benefited from this operation. In addition to air transport, the railway between the two countries started again after nearly 100 years when a train started running between the southern city of Gaziantep and Mosul in Iraq on February 16, 2010.⁵⁵

Outcomes

With the help of the means mentioned above and the processes defined earlier in this article, there has been a change in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East and Iraq. The outcomes that have emerged from this change can be analyzed as follows: First of all, we see an increasing political activism on the part of Turkey in the Middle East and in Iraq. The initiatives to improve relations between Turkey's neighbors in the Middle East began during the early period of

Turkey does not reject the use of military tools completely; however, its reliance on these tools has decreased dramatically in the last couple of years and Turkey has increasingly resorted to non-military means in its policy towards Iraq

JDP rule, as recognized and compared to earlier policy initiatives in the region by scholars.⁵⁶ Over the years, Turkey has started to reap benefits from its engagement in the region. Several commentators have argued that Turkey is now a regional actor and that policymakers in other countries should keep this in mind. For example, when asked about pressuring Turkey over issues of regional politics by the Greek lobby in the US, Deputy

Foreign Minister Philip Gordon argued that Turkey has become a regional power and that pressuring Turkey will not bring about the desired outcomes.⁵⁷

Another sign of Turkey's increasing importance in the region was the invitation to attend meetings about the Iraq, Syria and the Palestinian-Israeli disputes. Moreover, Turkey's signature on high-level strategic cooperation agreements with Iraq and Syria in October 2009 when Turkey and Iraq signed 48 agreements concerning commerce, domestic issues, health, infrastructure, agriculture, transportation, water and energy was an important indicator of Turkey's rising regional profile.⁵⁸ These kinds of meetings and agreements not only help to prevent crises but also represent the beginning of sovereignty sharing similar to examples in other parts of the world.

An important result of Turkey's increasing engagement with Iraq has been rising trade figures. Developing political relations has enabled increasing economic relations, which have started to affect policy. Both the prime minister and the foreign minister have stressed the importance of economic factors in the making of policy towards the region, and Iraq in particular. The stress on economic factors has contributed to a diversification of relations with Iraq and we have witnessed a transition from the security-dominated policy of the 1990s to a policy dominated by economic considerations. These economic factors have positively affected domestic developments in Turkey and have contributed to a decrease in security concerns. As a result of these developments, and despite the global economic crisis, Turkey's exports to Iraq increased by 30 percent in 2009 and reached 5.1 billion dollars.⁵⁹ The economic interests of businessmen have resulted in demands for policies from the governments to protect their interests. An increasing economic interdependence has affected the attitude towards Iraq, and businessmen on both sides of the border have sometimes raised their voices against a security-based approach.⁶⁰

I stressed in the first part of the article the importance of the EU candidacy on Turkey's policy towards the Middle East and Iraq. In this respect, the European Commission's progress reports on Turkey as a candidate country covers the issue of foreign policy. If we analyze these yearly progress reports, we see positive comments on the role of Turkey in decreasing regional tensions in areas such as Iraq, Syria and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.⁶¹ Until the late 1990s, Turkey's policies regarding the Middle East had very much in common with those of the US and Israel. In recent years, however, the situation has started to change and Turkey's Middle East policy has become closer to that of the EU. The end of support from some European countries to the PKK, the unilateralist attitude of the Bush administration, government changes in Israel and the policies of Israeli governments in Palestine and regional politics, and differences between Turkey and US about the future of Iraq have all brought Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East closer to that of Europe.⁶² In the EU's progress reports the most positive comment about Turkey's performance concerns foreign policy and here Turkey's constructive role in areas like Iraq has been welcomed by European officials.

Another outcome of Turkey's engagement with the Middle East and Iraq can be seen from the change in the attitude of the US towards Turkey. Although the Turkey's initiatives were initially seen as negative by some US academics and policymakers, beginning in 2008 the attitude of these people started to change. For example, Graham Fuller criticized the policies followed by the Bush administration and the negative implications of these policies in the Middle East and described Turkey's attitude towards its neighbors in a positive way and argued that Turkey's better relations with Russia, Iran, Syria and Hamas were beneficial for Washington, despite the fact that the US government was not fully aware of this benefit.⁶³ The change in the attitude of the US can also be seen in the visit of US President Obama within the first 100 days of his term. Contrary to the attitude of the Bush administration, the Obama administration did not criticize Turkey's regional policy preferences and introduced the term "model partnership" to define future relationship between the US and Turkey.⁶⁴ The visit of President Obama to Turkey in the very early days of his term was interpreted as a positive outcome of Turkey's foreign policy and also as a desire to benefit from the activism and influence of Turkey in the region.⁶⁵ Here the aim of the Obama administration to have a smooth withdrawal from Iraq has played its part. Since Turkey has followed a policy of engagement for the last decade, we can say that the US has changed its stance from criticizing this approach to praising it. International observers have also recognized the change in the Turkish attitude towards Iraq and have evaluated this policy in a positive way.⁶⁶

Although there are divisions among European countries about the foreign policy to be followed in the Middle East, it is generally accepted that European countries mostly rely on soft power instead of hard power, and consequently Turkey is getting closer to the EU than the US.⁶⁷ Turkey does not reject the use of military tools completely; however, its reliance on these tools has decreased dramatically in the last couple of years and, similar to European countries, Turkey has increasingly resorted to non-military means in its policy towards Iraq. Booming trade figures with Iraq show that economic issues are becoming more important and the increasing economic interdependence has affected its approach towards security. Turkey's increasing contacts with different actors in Iraqi politics is a sign of this new approach. Turkey has played an important role in convincing several Sunni groups, that were sidelined after the invasion, to participate in elections and party politics in Iraq. Also, in relation to its stance of having contacts with every actor, Turkey has contacted Shiite figures and other religious and ethnic leaders in Iraq. Formerly, it was unthinkable for Turkey to contact Shiite religious figures in the making of its foreign policy. However, in the last couple of year, important Shiite figures such as Sadr and El Hakim have visited Turkey and met with the prime minister and the foreign minister. These contacts have made Turkey a player in Iraqi politics given the country's unsettled political structure.

In this respect, Turkey has played an important role during and after the general elections in Iraq in 2010. Similar to its efforts before the elections in 2005 to convince the Sunni political groups to participate in the electoral process, this time Turkey contributed to the formation of the *Irakiyye* bloc, a cross-sectarian and cross-ethnic group. Here the preferences of Turkey and the US were in conformity since the US was also in favor of a political group to represent different parts of Iraqi society. Although Turkey has tried to be neutral, it was known that Turkey was in support of the *Irakiyye* group and the success of this list in the elections was also a success of Turkey's policy of Iraq.⁶⁸

Conclusion

In the light of all of these developments, we see that there has been a transformation in Turkish policy towards Iraq in the last decade. Formerly, Turkey was distant from Iraq despite it being a neighboring country. And if there were any interests, these were related to security. In a gradual way over the last decade, Turkey has moved to another position. Today Turkey is very much engaged with Iraqi developments. Turkey has contacts not only with Turcomans but also with several other (ethnic, sectarian, etc.) actors in Iraq and contributes to the political and economic stability of Iraq. In this respect, Turkey's advice and encouragement

played an important role in supporting the Sunni groups in their participation in the elections in 2005. In 2010, before and after the elections in Iraq, Ankara also contributed to the negotiations among different actors in Iraqi politics to help form a government. This new policy not only deals with security or political aspects, but also with the economy and human contacts (like easy visa regulations, transportation facilities, etc.) that provides a more stable and durable base for bilateral relations. These aspects show that Ankara has been keen to employ soft power instruments in its policy towards Baghdad.

Not only security bureaucrats, but diplomats and businessmen have increasingly played a role in Turkish policy towards Iraq

Given the persistent political problems after the elections and the failure to form a government, the role of neighboring countries has become crucial for the future of Iraq. Here, Turkey tries to contribute to the efforts of forming a government by contacting different Iraqi actors either in Turkey or in Baghdad via its embassy there. The weight of Turkey has increased given the deadline for the redeployment of US troops. Especially because of the increasing role of Iran in the new environment of the Middle East after the invasion of Iraq, many observers see Turkey as the only power to balance the power of Iran. Despite some differences between Turkey and the US about the future of Iraq, Ankara is still an important ally for the US in the region. Beside the regional and international players, several political actors in Iraq have also requested that Turkey be an actor on their side.

In the transformation of Turkey's policy on Iraq, the change in the attitude of Turkey towards the Kurds in Iraq is dramatic. Despite the earlier reluctance to develop relations with Kurdish authorities after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, in the last couple of years, the contacts between Turkish and Kurdish authorities have increased. Economic and diplomatic ties have been strengthened and Turkey has opened a consulate in Irbil and direct flights between Istanbul and Irbil and Sulaymaniyah have started to operate. For the first time, the Turkish foreign minister visited the head of the Kurdish Regional Administration and the actors have started to speak a different language. Formerly, the main issue was security and discussions centered on mutual threats. Currently, however, beside the security issues, relations also include economics and culture. Along with the changing nature of relations, we have seen a change in the making of Turkish foreign policy. Not only security bureaucrats, but diplomats and businessmen have increasingly played a role in Turkish policy towards Iraq. Nowadays, Turkey and Iraq are not distant neighbors and Turkey is engaged in Iraq diplomatically, militarily, economically and culturally.

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