

## Turkey's Role in the Middle East: An Outsider's Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

*Owing to a changing geopolitical environment and a new foreign-policy approach, Turkey's policies towards and role in the Middle East have undergone substantial changes since 2003. The most important facets, from a European perspective, are Turkey's efforts to improve relations with its direct Middle Eastern neighbors, and to play a mediating role between different, sometimes quite difficult, players in the Middle East. In general, Turkey has been more successful in improving its relations with proximate neighbors than in settling disputes between other states and non-state actors in the Middle East. As long as Turkey maintains good relations with all players in the Middle East and understands the limitations to its role, it can substantially contribute to positive change in the Middle Eastern landscape. This will also allow more coordination and cooperation between Turkey and the EU with regard to their overlapping Mediterranean and Middle Eastern neighborhoods.*

Turkey specialists, a group the author does not belong to, have realized that Turkey's policies towards the Middle East and its corresponding role have been changing considerably over the last eight years. Already, certain changes began during the tenure of Foreign Minister Ismail Cem (1997–2002), as he improved relations with Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbors, and put in place the foundations on which the AKP government has continued to build upon. However, the most dramatic changes occurred as of 2002/2003.

The context in which this transformation has taken place is shaped by three factors. First, and in this author's judgment foremost, there has been a rapid change in the geopolitical environment of the Middle East. We can speak of a geopolitical revolution triggered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. This intervention not only toppled Saddam Hussein's regime, it also weakened Arab nationalism and the states and actors that used to represent it, such as Syria

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and the PLO. Also, there was a shift in power within the region, leading to relative gains by the three non-Arab states: Israel, Iran, and Turkey. In addition to this, George W. Bush's administration failed to act as a mediator in the Middle East, which opened a space for diplomacy that Turkey, as well as other players, was

ready to fill. Second, there have been domestic changes in Turkey, which without going into detail, can be characterized as political reform and democratization. Third, there is the new foreign policy approach of the AKP. From an outsider's perspective, Turkey's new foreign policy, centred on Ahmet Davutoğlu's idea of "strategic depth," seems to be a self-confident re-interpretation of Turkey's geographic role and policies. Turkey is seen as an emerging 'great' power or, more realistically, as an "historically conscious" regional super power. The key principle of "zero problems with neighbors" appears as a re-interpretation of Atatürk's motto "peace in the country, peace abroad." In a sense, the architects of Turkey's new foreign policy have been trying to prove that they can implement this motto better than the Kemalists. They have understood that in order to solve problems with Turkey's neighbors as well as being accepted as a mediator abroad, Turkey needs to solve its conflicts at home. The "democratic initiative" towards the Kurdish population, while yet to be completed, certainly was an important first step.

In what follows, I will first try to evaluate the success or lack of success in Turkey's foreign policy initiatives towards the Middle East. Second, I will touch upon some problems and dilemmas in these policies. Lastly, I will make a few remarks about the opportunities of Turkey's Middle East policies from a German and European perspective.

### **Keeping All the Balls in the Air**

Turkey's foreign policy initiatives towards the Middle East under the AKP government are directed towards achieving two main goals. First, Turkey is resolved to finding solutions to regional problems and building stronger relations with its immediate neighbors, i.e. Syria, Iraq and Iran. Second, Turkey plans to mediate and thereby reduce tensions between various, sometimes quite problematic, players such as Syria, Israel, various Lebanese factions and their external backers, Hamas, Fatah, Iraq, Iran and the United States. Thus far, Turkey's efforts to improve bilateral relations with its immediate neighbors in the Middle East have been largely successful – and generally more successful than its mediation efforts in its wider

neighborhood or between regional and international players. Progress has been particularly visible in Turkey's relations with Syria. The policy of opening borders, clearing the borders of mines, and initiating a broad range of economic cooperation as well as societal contacts have really made for a qualitative change in a long, complicated 'neighborhood' relationship. If carried out successfully, this development could become a prime example of how long-standing enemies can actually become friends, perhaps comparable, if on a different scale, to the case of Germany and France.

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With regard to Iraq, Turkey's new approach has been primarily an enormous accomplishment for its business sector. It has also led to substantially improved political relations since Turkey began to undertake radical shifts in its policies towards the Kurdish Regional Government in 2009, including the opening of a consulate in Arbil and ending attempts to use Iraq's Turkmen minority as a fifth column. However, the long-term success of Turkey's policy toward Iraq depends to a large degree on the domestic political stability and unity of Iraq after the US withdrawal. In addition, there are still some unresolved disputes, mainly concerning water, which may negatively impact the implementation of the economic and political agreements between Ankara and Baghdad.

Relations with Iran seem to be more of a mixed success story. Some confidence has been built at the political level, but concrete results have yet to materialize. Iranian politics and the interplay of interest groups within Iran have undermined Turkish investors' hopes for a successful business engagement with Iran. The Iranian leadership, while on the one hand appearing to have a friendly disposition towards Turkey, is on the other hand exhibiting a circumspect and skeptical attitude towards Turkey's role in their shared neighborhood. This is especially so with regard to Turkey's potential role as a counterweight to Iranian influence in Iraq, a role which is certainly appreciated not solely, but most openly, by representatives of Iraq's Sunni community.

Regarding Turkey's role as a mediator and its attempts to solve conflicts in the Middle East or between Middle Eastern and Western states, the record is mixed. In my opinion, Turkey, along with others, has undoubtedly been successful in helping the Lebanese parties overcome their latest domestic crisis in 2008. Turkey has also been largely successful in mediating and bringing about indirect negotia-

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today, however, whether Turkey would then be able to resume its mediating role between Damascus and Tel Aviv.

Regarding Iran, Turkey's role as a mediator could also still bring about tangible results with regard to the Iranian nuclear issue. Turkey will not be able to solve this issue but it could help to create the diplomatic space to keep the May 17, 2010 agreement alive. Turkey also will have to play an essential role in the implementation of an agreement to exchange Iranian low enriched uranium against fuel rods for a research reactor in Tehran.

Turkish mediation efforts were less successful when Ankara tried to mediate between Hamas and Israel (over the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit), between Fatah and Hamas, or between Syria and Iraq. This observation does not belittle Turkey's efforts. Successful mediation does not depend on the mediator alone. Occasionally, American or European observers need to be reminded that Turkey is not the only power whose mediation efforts in the Middle East often did not bring about the intended results. However, there may be specific limitations and challenges that Turkey faced and will probably continue to encounter in pursuing its self-defined proactive diplomatic role in the region.

### Dilemmas and Limitations

From an outsider's perspective, Turkey's policies and diplomatic efforts in the Middle East face three major limitations. The first limitation is that Turkey primarily plays a supportive role and would have difficulty bringing to fruition a deal in tough cases, such as those involving Israel and its neighbors. Turkey is aware of this limitation, and Turkish diplomats have integrated it into their approach. Turkish diplomacy can play a key role in preparing the groundwork, as was when it initiated and helped to conduct the indirect negotiations between Syria and Israel. Turkey's engagement would have been successful enough if the two parties, following the indirect phase of negotiations, had asked Washington's involvement in subsequent direct talks aimed at reaching a comprehensive agreement. Similarly, with regard to Iran and the conflict over Tehran's nuclear program, Turkey can at best help to advance the diplomatic process. The May 17, 2010 agreement modi-

fied Iran's position. However, it is now up to the United States, Russia, France, the IAEA, and Iran to finalize and implement the agreement.

Turkey's role in Middle Eastern conflict resolution is similar to that of individual EU states which have attempted to move things forward in the Middle East. The core problem lies in that Turkey or individual EU states cannot give security guarantees to Israel, Iran or other states in the region. Only the United States can. Once Turkey accepts this limitation, namely that eventually the United States has to be brought in to guarantee a deal which Turkey or others may have brokered and prepared, its contribution can be enormously helpful. In order to make the best use of its own comparative advantage of establishing good relations even with difficult players in the Middle East, Turkey must cultivate and maintain excellent working relations with and a strong bond of trust between Ankara and Washington.

The second limitation, which Turkish leaders may or may not fully recognize, is that an increased Turkish activism in the Middle East is not seen as entirely positive by other regional players. Turkey acting and defining itself as a major regional power in (or even of) the Middle East is certainly not to the liking of other regional powers, notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Even if these other Middle Eastern states and Turkey agree upon the content of the issues at hand and Turkey's approach towards these regional problems, they do not want to see Turkey's regional influence increase at their own expense. More specifically, Iran does not necessarily want a mediator between itself and the United States, nor does it want its influence in Iraq and other Arab states to be "balanced out" by Turkey's involvement. Furthermore, the Arab states do not really want Turkey to play a role in inter-Arab affairs, such as in the conflicts between Iraq and Syria.

The third dilemma came to light during the "Gaza flotilla" incident in May 2010. However, it has been emerging since the Gaza war of December 2008/January 2009. The more Turkey involves itself in the Middle East, the more it runs the risk of taking positions in these regional conflicts or crises. Domestic policy considerations as well as popular sympathies seem to reinforce the tendency of taking sides. Yet, if Turkey wants to play the role of a mediator, it needs to have good relations with all parties in the region. If it loses access to and the trust of Israeli decision makers or the Israeli elite at large, it will definitely lose its ability to mediate effectively or even be involved in the mediation process.

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One could certainly argue that the example of the United States shows that even a biased mediator is sometimes accepted. Has the US not generally tended to the Israeli side? And have not actors like Syria or the PLO still sought to get

Washington involved in negotiations or agreements with Israel? Indeed, Arab actors have always wanted the United States to be on board in this role because they realized that no one but Washington would be able to reassure Israel and probably deliver Israeli concessions. Power allows a certain bias. Turkey, as mentioned above, somewhat like individual EU countries, is in a different position than the US. Its supportive mediator's role requires that it be regarded as an honest and neutral broker.

### **Turkey and the EU: Similar Approaches towards a Common Neighborhood?**

Finally, from a European perspective, what role could and should Turkey play in the Middle East? And which opportunities, if any, can Turkey's role in the region offer for Europe? Despite some reservations, EU policy makers see Turkey's engagement in the Middle East as largely positive. In contrast, it appears that following the Gaza-flotilla incident, the United States has become more critical toward Turkey and watches its regional policies with growing skepticism. The EU seems more favorable than Washington with regard to Ankara's approach to trying to involve difficult players such as Hamas and Hizbullah. The US has also been very clear in showing its displeasure with Turkey's cold-shoulder approach towards Israel – most recently by calling off an annual common air force drill following Turkey's cancellation of Israel's participation in the exercise.

From the distance of Berlin, our recommendation to Turkey and its leadership is not to be over-confident with regard to its abilities and possibilities in the Middle East, to realize the limitations of its role, not to de-emphasize NATO membership as much as it currently does in its public discourse, and certainly not to totally ruin its relationship with Israel. Even if the Netanyahu government has been responsible for most (not all) of the damage, the principle of talking to all parties, which the Turkish government has so consistently applied in its relations with Tehran or with the Hamas government in Gaza, should not be abandoned when it comes to dealing with Israel. If Ankara can speak to Hamas without tying its own hands to unrealistic demands, why should it then pre-condition contacts with Tel Aviv on demands which the current Israeli government is very unlikely to meet?

Many observers in the EU see Turkey's policy towards the Middle East as an opportunity also for the EU. It would be wrong to perceive Turkey's greater involvement with the Middle East as Ankara "turning its back to the EU." One should rather emphasize the commonality of interests and seek to explore the chances for EU-Turkey cooperation in the region.

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Turkey's policy towards its direct Middle Eastern neighbors (Iran, Iraq and Syria) relies on similar instruments to those of the EU in its Neighborhood Policy (ENP). One could probably say that Turkey has learned from the EU's approach and is even trying to emulate it. Turkey, like the EU, is using trade, investments, or easing travel restrictions as instruments to not only promote its own economic interests, but also to build trust, to stabilize the geopolitical environment, and even try to transform the neighboring countries by getting them to see their respective interests through a "win-win" lens, and, thus, improve their comparative behavior. At least in the economic realm, Turkey's opening to its neighbors offers many opportunities for trilateral cooperation. An example of this is the increased Turkish-German business cooperation in Iraq.

Such cooperation seems more realistic than farther-reaching ideas about an actual involvement of Turkey, on the EU side, in the ENP: Turkey's and the EU's respective "neighborhood" overlap only partly, and most of the partner countries that participate in the ENP would not necessarily appreciate to see themselves as objects of a common EU-Turkey policy. Concrete cooperation on projects or processes can certainly be expanded, however.

Given its own domestic transformation and political modernization, Turkey also, in many respects, represents a model that Middle Eastern societal elites would like their countries to follow. This applies particularly to elites in Syria and Egypt, and also in Iran who not only see Turkey's involvement in terms of Turkish influence, but also look towards Turkey for its experience in accommodating democracy, secularism, and a conservative Muslim society simultaneously. Furthermore, Turkey is also a model in the region for its new 'soft power approach,' whereby the influence of the military over domestic and foreign policies has been gradually reduced.

Turkish foreign policies towards the Middle East could also contribute to a changing political culture in the Middle East. In this, it corresponds to the

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transformative goals that the EU tries to achieve with its own Mediterranean policy. Opening borders and applying other confidence building measures, unrestricted trade, investment and inter-societal contacts can support those forces in societies that want to cooperate with the rest of the world. It can help to

strengthen the middle classes, and probably even promote the rule-of-law. For the political culture of the region, it is very important that Turkey has begun to define strength not only in terms of military capabilities and military power but also in terms of its ability to bring about diplomatic solutions. If this approach took root in the region, it could really change the Middle East.

There are good reasons for Turkey to continue its new foreign-policy approach towards the Middle East. Turkey has a role in helping to mediate and solve crises that could otherwise rapidly escalate. “Zero problems with neighbors” is a wise policy principle, not only with regard to Turkey’s relations with its immediate neighbors but also – and this should not be forgotten – to all relevant actors in its wider Middle Eastern neighborhood.