

## THE POLICY OF TURKEY IN THE GCC AREA. A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Turkey no longer views the Arab world as a unified ethnic collective, developing its relations with certain countries on a bilateral basis according to its permanently changing interests. Similarly, the Arab states tend to pursue their own state interests regardless of the nature of Turkey's relations with Israel and the West. In light of these developments, it is clear that no unified Arab consensus regarding Turkey's role in the area has emerged. In fact, it is possible to discern several voices within the Arab world based on some realistic and economic considerations<sup>1</sup>. Still in the mid-1990s Turkish parliamentarians and Foreign Ministry officials, discussing Turkey's relationship with the Gulf and the Middle East, would often refer to the last period of the Ottoman Empire and the Arab "stab in the back." Preferring a posture of neutrality in Middle Eastern affairs, they would emphasize Turkey's commitment to modernization and the West. By contrast, a dozen years later such discussions would focus on Turkey's active participation in Middle Eastern politics.<sup>2</sup> And after those years relations between Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are generally positive, avoiding the problems associated with competing agendas and on the track of fast development and high potential<sup>3</sup>.

Several authors have discussed the growth of Turkey and GCC relations during the last 20 years. They attributed the increase in Turkey and GCC relations to several factors: Turkey's European Union membership process, the threat of international terrorism and al Qaeda, the United States – led Wider Middle East Initiative (WMEI), increasing business and trade relations, Turkey's increased profile in the Organization of Islamic Congress meetings, and issues concerning the wider Muslim world.<sup>4</sup> Turkey's relations with the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)<sup>5</sup> are continually recalibrated by events in the region. Recently, shared threat perceptions between Turkey and the GCC have brought the countries closer.<sup>6</sup> One of the events was the changed geopolitical projection of power of the GCC countries due to the war in Iraq, especially, as a result of US inability to stabilize the situation, to contain increased sectarian fighting among the Arabs of Iraq, or to slow the increasing autonomy of regions of northern Iraq controlled by the Kurds.<sup>7</sup> Turkey was very active in discussing the problems of Iraq with the GCC countries and has initiated meetings with the Gulf States to discuss Iraq, including a March 2008

meeting organized by the AK Party on the Middle East with representatives from government, think tanks, the Arab League, and the European Parliament<sup>8</sup>. On the issue of Israel and Palestine, Turkey has joined the Gulf States in increasing sympathy to the Palestinians, as well as a willingness to work with the elected Hamas government. Still, it is fair to say that most Gulf States continue to see Turkey as too close to Israel, and they are especially suspicious of the Turkish military and its uncompromisingly secularist views.<sup>9</sup>

The security of the region has had an important contribution in the developments of ties between the GCC states and Turkey. Prior to September 2008 Turkey refrained from any public demonstration of direct interaction with the GCC with respect to the security issues in the Gulf. It was content to provide security support through its NATO network. Turkey takes part in NATO's force combating the Taliban in Afghanistan. As such, Turkey demonstrated solidarity with the GCC states that also fear terrorist attacks by radical Islamists.<sup>10</sup> The GCC has not proved capable so far of providing its six member states with collective security. The Gulf Peninsula Shield force is still only of a token size. The individual Gulf monarchies have looked primarily to the United States for security guarantees and have entered into bilateral military cooperation agreements to obtain them. On the other hand, the US invasion of Iraq has created great antipathy to the United States within the Arab world. Still, there is a clear split among the GCC states on how much to depend upon the United States for their security guarantees. That is why the countries of the Gulf have recently been searching for alternatives of security provision and Turkey started playing an extremely significant role in this case.<sup>11</sup> Forming a closer alignment with Turkey for security should be very attractive to the Gulf monarchies for a number of reasons. The moderate Islamist government of the AKP under Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership, and with former AKP Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül now as President of Turkey, is a more comfortable diplomatic partner for the Gulf states than the strictly secularist governments that preceded it. Moreover, Turks are by and large Sunnis, as are the monarchic regimes in the Arab Gulf.<sup>12</sup> There is a shared fear among Turkey and the Gulf States of Iran becoming a nuclear armed power and the proliferation of weapons that may ensue. Like Turkey, most Gulf States also want to see a peaceful resolution and work toward containing Iran.<sup>13</sup> Besides all that Turkey fears Kurdish separatism, and the Gulf States fear the growing Islamist awakening and militarization of the Shi'ite world.<sup>14</sup> These concerns have been addressed at various ministerial summits with Iraq and its neighbours.<sup>15</sup> Another very factor was the greatly increased amount of funds available to the GCC states due to the increase in oil prices, especially

in 2005 and in 2006 when oil prices rose to \$70 per barrel, before declining in late 2006. In late 2007 oil prices nearly hit \$100 per barrel before slightly declining by the end of the year. In 2006 alone it was estimated that the GCC countries had oil revenues of more than \$400 billion, and 2007 revenues were expected to climb to \$500 billion. With large amounts of funds available to invest after taking care of domestic needs and debts, the GCC countries began to look increasingly for markets other than the United States or Europe. Turkey was an obvious choice for such funds, with a population of 75 million, a dynamic and fairly well educated young generation, and annual growth rates of 5 to 6 per cent during the years 2003 to 2007, the appeared to be an attractive state to invest in. However despite this outlook for the economy and financial sector, Turkey urgently needs an injection of foreign capital to cushion the effects of the crisis. The government has been reluctant to sign a credit agreement with the IMF, because it would impose stringent conditions on government spending. There have been constant talks in Turkey about attracting petrodollars, or Gulf capital as a way to finance Turkey's economic development. Turkish businessmen have hoped that Turkey might be able to attract Gulf capital leaving the Western banking system, especially after September 11. Lately, it has often been said that Gulf capital might make Istanbul a worldwide financial center, and end Turkey's dependence on the IMF. As a matter of fact, although the AKP government has been successful in boosting the volume of Arab investments in Turkey, it could not raise it to a level that would reduce Turkey's dependence on money borrowed from western financial institutions.<sup>16</sup> In this sense the rich and fast developing countries of the Persian Gulf can be regarded as an extremely important asset for Turkish development.

Turkey became the first country outside the Gulf to be given the status of strategic partner of the GCC, in 2008 as AKP government has increasingly referred to Turkey's Islamic identity in an instrumental way to attract as much Arabic capital as possible<sup>17</sup>. There is no doubt that Turkey would benefit from increasing its economic relationships with the Gulf Arab states. The vast accumulation of oil wealth gives the OPEC members of the GCC considerable latitude in directing funds for trade and investment into countries like Turkey where there are additional political benefits to be gained from such investments.<sup>18</sup> Turkey is seeking to take on the role of a regional power, and therefore, the Gulf region occupies an important place in its calculations. In order to reach this goal, Turkish entrepreneurs are being used as a tool to spread influence, and to exploit the huge opportunities available in the GCC states in regards to exports, joint investments and contract services. The aim of Turkey is

to further diversify the opportunities for mutual commercial and economic cooperation, thus expanding the market shares of Turkish companies.<sup>19</sup> Turkish construction companies, which have an excellent, worldwide reputation for building good, solid, cost-effective buildings, were attractive for the GCC states, especially Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which were experiencing construction booms. Turkey was an obvious choice for GCC investments.<sup>20</sup> There are significant numbers of Turkish workers in various GCC countries, with about 100,000 Turks in Saudi Arabia. In addition, 200,000 Turks travel to Saudi Arabia each year for the Hajj and to visit the holy places. Turkey is a natural tourist destination for GCC countries, and Kuwaiti and Saudi citizens have bought property in Yalova and Bursa in western Turkey. In addition, there are 17 Kuwaiti companies operating in finance, trade.<sup>21</sup> As a result of the Turkish economy's recent upswing, economic ties between Turkey and Middle Eastern countries are rapidly improving with investments pouring in from Dubai, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.<sup>22</sup> Banks from Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, and other Gulf centres are all the time expanding into Turkey.<sup>23</sup> An emerging economic powerhouse in Europe, Turkey currently exports an estimated \$130 billion worth of mainly industrial goods into the Gulf region every year.<sup>24</sup> Ankara is planning to build a railway linking Turkey with the Gulf, a venture which will definitely enhance international status of the Gulf states.<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Turkish elites recently have increasingly become aware of the fact that the pronunciation of the Eastern aspects of Turkey's national identity, namely, the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, might accrue her more benefits than costs. The democratic seizure of power by AKP has been steadily commemorated by changes inside Turkish as well as serious changes in the Turkish foreign policy. Unlike previous Turkish governments, the AKP government has been putting more emphasis on Turkey's Islamic and Middle Eastern characteristics. Islamic identity has been one of the basic points for the AKP, and even the party program concluded with a religious phrase. The world is currently witnessing a new Turkey, eager to be a major player all over the world, and the Middle East in this case has become an extremely important priority. In the framework of this new Turkish foreign policy orientation the country has become extremely active in the Gulf area trying to seize the opportunities of cooperation with the monarchies in numerous spheres. Turkey and GCC as it can be clearly seen cooperate closely in the field of security as GCC has not been fully capable of providing security to its members. Gulf Monarchies are eager to cooperate with the AKP government of Turkey in the security matters. In its turn Turkey is

doing everything for attracting the funds from the Persian Gulf in the way of investments for its economy, while GCC countries find Turkey as an obvious choice for cooperation and mutual collaboration as the country has had an unprecedented economic growth and has a great potential in terms of the human resources, geographic position and other factors.

One thing is clear for this moment: the new foreign politics orientation of Turkey regards the oil-rich monarchies as extremely important countries and will be trying to develop the cooperation to be a bigger extent in the nearest future.

## References

1. Various articles in Henri J. Barkey (ed.), *Reluctant Neighbor: Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, Washington, DC: *US Institute of Peace*, (1996)
2. Lenore G. Martin, "Turkey and Gulf cooperation council security", *Turkish Studies* Vol. 10, No. 1, 75-93, (March 2009)
3. Bulent Aras, "Turkey and the GCC: An Emerging Relationship," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 89 - 97, (2005)
4. Fuat Keyman, "Turkiye ya da Kilit Ulke/Bolgesel Guc," *Radikal*, May 9, 2004
5. Christopher Blanchard et al., *Iraq: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, September 12, 2007
6. Alfred Prados and Christopher Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Current Issues and U.S. Relations*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 2, 2006
7. Olson R., *Turkey's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council from 2003 to 2007: New Paradigms?*, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2008)
8. "AK Party to Organize International Meeting in Antalya," *Ankara Anatolia*, March 13, 2008
9. Stephen J. Flanagan, Samuel J. Brannen *Turkey's Shifting Dynamics Implications for U.S.-Turkey Relations A Report of the U.S.-Turkey Strategic Initiative*, CSIS, June 2008
10. Lenore G. Martin, 2009
11. Ghazanfar Ali Khan, "GCC to Discuss 'Peninsula Shield' Expansion," *Arab News*, Nov.2, 2006
12. Lenore G. Martin, 2009
13. Greg Bruno, "Gulf States Hesitant on Iran Threat," Council on Foreign Relations, January 14, 2008, [http://www.cfr.org/publication/15258/gulf\\_states\\_hesitant\\_on\\_iran\\_threat.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/15258/gulf_states_hesitant_on_iran_threat.html), accessed on June 2, 2011
14. Bulent Aras, 2005
15. "Baghdad press highlights 2nd Iraq's neighbors conference," *Voices of Iraq*, September 11, 2007
16. Mustafa Kutlay, Istanbul as a center of Global Finance, *The journal of Turkish Weekly*, 28 February 2008
17. Turkish prime minister in Kuwait for security, business talks, *Earth Times*, 10 January 2011, <http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/news/361587.kuwait-security-business-talks.html>, accessed on 30 May, 2011
18. Lenore G. Martin, March 2009
19. <http://www.balkananalysis.com/turkey/2011/01/27/turkey%E2%80%99s-transforming-relationships-with-the-arab-world-the-impact-of-recent-turkish-high-level-visits-to-the-gulf-region/>, accessed on May 31, 2011
20. Olson, 2008
21. Bulent Aras, 2005
22. <http://www.turkey-now.org/Default.aspx?peID=545>, accessed on June, 2011
23. Al-Jazeera, November 4, 2005
24. "Turkey's Abdullah heads for Muscat", *Gulf News*, April 12, 2010
25. "Turkey fosters cooperation with GCC to foster peace", *Gulf News*, September 21, 2009

## **Թուրքիայի քաղաքականությունը ՊՕԱՊՀ-ն տարածաշրջանում.**

### **Ընդհանուր ակնարկ**

Տարիներ շարունակ արևմուտքը, մասնավորապես ԱՄՆ և Եվրոպան գտնվում էին թուրքական արտաքին քաղաքականության ուշադրության կենտրոնում: Սկսած հանրապետության ժամանակներից Թուրքիան փորձում էր հրաժարվել իր անցյալից և խուսափում էր Մերձավոր Արևելքի և արաբական երկրների հետ ակտիվ հարաբերություններից: Ներկա պահին, Թուրքիան սկսել է ակտիվ քաղաքականություն վարել արաբական երկրներում՝ օգտվելով բազմապիսի հնարավորություններից: Այսօր, չնայած բոտն տեմպով զարգացող Թուրքիայի և Պարսից Մոցի Արաբական Պետություններ՝ Համագործակցության Խորհրդի (ՊՕԱՊՀ-ն) հարաբերություններին, տվյալ երկրների կապերը Թուրքիայի հետ մեծ ուշադրության չեն արժանացել գիտնականների և փորձագետների կողմից: Սույն վերլուծությունը անդրադառնում է Թուրքիայի նոր քաղաքականությանը և ընդհանուր ակտիվությանը Պարսից Մոցում, ինչպես նաև Արաբական երկրների հետաքրքրությունը Թուրքիայի նկատմամբ: