

**ON THE NEW PRIORITIES OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY
AND ACTIVENESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Almost for one hundred years the West, namely Europe and the US and orientation towards them was in the centre of attention, interest and the national political priorities of Turkey. In 1923, Atatürk put his rationale for this succinctly: “The West has always been prejudiced against the Turks ... but we Turks have always and consistently moved towards the West ... In order to be a civilized nation, there is no alternative”¹.

Kemal Atatürk had no interest in pursuing an active Middle East foreign policy. He rejected the Ottoman heritage in favour of secularism. Distancing the republic from the Middle Eastern affairs was also congruent with the Turkish-Arab mistrust that had originated in the first 2 decades of the 20th century. From the Turkish perspective the Arab revolt, which helped the West destroy the Ottoman Empire during the First World War had represented an unforgivable stab in the back². From the Arab perspective, the Ottoman imperial domination hampered Arab national development³.

During the latest times, it was somehow normal to view Turkey as a Western/European country during the Cold War era, when Turkey assisted the West in its efforts to contain and defeat the Soviet threat⁴. In its turn during the Cold War NATO provided Turkey its national security guarantee, whereas Turkey contributed to the policy of credible deterrence by its pivotal status in NATO’s southeastern flank⁵. However, when the Cold War came to an end and Turkey’s European partners within NATO adopted a Europe-limited strategic outlook, the credentials of Turkey’s Western/European identity became somehow diluted⁶. Along with that, Turkey was still trying to demonstrate activity in relations with NATO, and acted jointly with the transatlantic community in the Balkans, as this partnership was seen as an effective instrument for containing the threat of ethnic nationalism and instability in Southeastern Europe. Likewise, Turkey was eager to serve as a “pivotal” country to facilitate Western penetration into the Black Sea, Caucasus and Central Asia⁷.

During the Cold War years, the Middle East did not have much weight in Turkish foreign policy. In this period when Turkey was active in the region, the Middle East was considered as an extension of Turkey’s relations with the West, as in the 1950s, or Turkish involvement in the

Middle East was determined by its desire to further its economic relations with the region, as in the 1970s after the oil crisis or in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War. Yet even when it was involved, Turkey did not consider itself as part of the Middle East regional system. This perception was due to Turkey's Western historical orientation and the definition of its identity⁸.

As majority of Middle East are Arab countries, the relations of Turkey with the Middle East may be partially, if not even greatly evaluated by the level of ties between Turkey and the Arab countries. There were many factors souring Arab-Turkish relations in the twentieth century. Chronologically, scholars divide Arab-Turkish relations into several periods: 1923–45–alienation; 1945–65–estrangement and clash; 1965–75–improving relations; and 1975–95–the start dramatic change for the better⁹. Since the mid-1980s, there have been signs that negative images are beginning to erode, though they still have not disappeared entirely¹⁰. Erdal Afak wrote that Turkey's new status in the Arab League (that of a "permanent guest") means "the end of Turkey's 80-year policies amounting to 'an Arab can't be a friend'"¹¹.

Various political factors, including Turkey's place in world affairs, contributed to the fluctuations in relations. The Cold War—when Turkey was member of NATO and the Western camp, while some major Arab countries, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, either were allies of the Soviet Union or adopted a neutral position in world affairs—pitted the Turks against the Arabs. The fact that Turkey established diplomatic relations with Israel in the early 1950s constituted another factor adversely affecting Turkish-Arab relations. At times, Turkey found itself locked in inter-Arab rivalries, as was the case with the Baghdad Pact in 1955, when Turkey allied with Iraq in a Western-led defence organization against the Soviet Union, triggering the formation of an opposite Arab coalition consisting of Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia¹².

The post-cold war situation sparked off an unprecedented debate about where Turkey's international future lay, in which a variety of views were expressed. It was mostly argued however that NATO will lose its importance and will be replaced by alternative security structures¹³. A long row of political evolutions in the world, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unprecedented and permanent developments in the Middle East, such as the crisis in the Gulf in 1990-91, the war in Iraq and which is more important the new vector of the Turkish government in face of AKP have contributed to the shifts and reorganization of the main priorities of the Turkish foreign policy, giving a more significant importance to the Middle Eastern region. Turkey's role in a changing Middle East environment is a

function of what it represents in this volatile geography as a European, democratic, and special country that is attached firmly to the principles of a free-market economy and has valuable and unique experience in implementing reforms, modernity, and regional cooperation¹⁴.

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. Turkey has been on the path of realizing that the Middle East, the political situation there, the developments, and the main religion of the area-Islam constitute an important part of Turkey's cultural and political heritage¹⁵. This is not to suggest, as some observers tend to argue, that Turkey has begun to turn its face away from the West towards the East but rather that there is a strategic calculation that such a course of action will simply increase Turkey's bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the West. The old equation that "the more Turkey renounces its Eastern identity, the more chances it will have in the confirmation of its Western identity" has been replaced by a more pragmatic equation in that "the acceptance of Turkey's placement in the West will be more likely through the strengthening of Turkey's links to the East". Turkey is increasingly capitalizing on its Eastern identity with a view to securing its place within the West¹⁶.

The events in the international sphere as well as intrastate changes of Turkey made many academicians state that Turkey's foreign policy has been Middle Easternized¹⁷. The growing negative impact of political developments in the Middle East-particularly Iraq-on Turkey's feeling of security at home and abroad have been the primary reasons. Along with that rather than culminating in a breakup with the West, this Middle Easternization process has resulted in the adoption of a more pragmatic/rational than an emotional/romantic approach towards the European Union and the United States¹⁸.

There is a special need to regard what the EU-Turkey relations looked in the meantime. Even though the EU's decision to offer Turkey candidacy status in 1999 and to start officially accession talks in late 2005 brought Turkey closer to the EU, Turkey's approach to the EU has increasingly become "realistic" and "instrumental". Paradoxically, the closer Turkey has come to the EU in an institutional sense, the louder the Turkish people have started to discuss what the EU accession process would entail in terms of their lives and Turkey's national interests. More internal discussions in this regard have taken the romantic and ideational cloud off Turkey's approach to the EU¹⁹. Moreover the EU's institutional crisis in the wake of the May 2004 round of enlargement and the rejection of the European Constitution

in the national referenda in France and the Netherlands have alerted the Turkish elite to the idea that despite Turkey's increasing Europeanization attempts at home, Turkey's accession to the EU will remain a distant possibility unless the EU resolves its own problems²⁰.

Coincident with growing U.S.-Turkey tensions over Iraq, Turkey has greatly expanded its ties throughout the greater Middle East. The 1st quarter of 2003 brought new events into the stage of international relations, basically an unimaginable happened and the worst case scenario came true: Turkey seemed to depart from its Western vocation and lose its track. Its prospects with the US started deteriorating. Turkey was considered to be a strategic partner of the world's sole superpower²¹. The Iraq War not only damaged U.S.-Turkey cooperation in the region, it also diminished Turkey's confidence in NATO when France sought to block Ankara's request for deployment of NATO missile defence assets consistent with allied collective defence (Article V) commitments. This inaction reinforced the belief of many Turks that the NATO allies are not serious about its security, especially when the threat emanates from the Middle East. Without a reliable multilateral security framework, Turkey has sought to strengthen its security along its longest land borders, with Syria, Iraq, and Iran through unilateral means and diplomatic openings²². Developments since the war in Iraq have demonstrated that Turkey's relations with the United States can no longer continue on the basis of the Cold War-era parameters. Neither the "alliance" type of relations of the Cold War era nor the "strategic partnership" kind of relations of the late 1990s can adequately define the essence of Turkish-American relations. The idea that the United States can be considered as both an ally and a potential security threat has increasingly been heard, as US-led developments have had a tremendous impact on Turkey's national security interests. From now on, the nature of Turkey's relations with the United States will be affected more by developments in the Middle East than Europe²³.

Even at this moment so many years after 2003, U.S.-Turkish relations still have not fully recovered from the refusal of the Turkish Parliament to allow U.S. troops to use Turkey for the March 2003 Iraq campaign. The reaction of the Turkish Parliament accurately reflected Turkish public opinion toward Iraq's invasion. Although the current soft power policies of the Obama administration and President Barack Obama's choice of Turkey as the site for his first foreign visit to a Muslim country have improved relations between the countries, the current adventures of Turkish foreign policy and efforts at the U.S. House of Representatives to officially

acknowledge the 1915 genocide of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire have strained them once again²⁴.

The Middle Easternization of Turkey's foreign policy might also be attributed to the rise of cultural and historical factors. In fact, this process dates back to the early years of the post-Cold War era. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey tried to develop closer economic and political relations with the newly established states in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. In doing this, the Turkic and Islamic aspects of Turkey's identity were considered by many as crucial assets²⁵. The fact that a Turk, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, was chosen to lead the OIC could be a positive development for the Muslim world. Perhaps opportunities for constructive developments in the Muslim world can now be exploited²⁶.

The events and situations described above played an extremely significant role in the evolution and direction of the Turkish foreign relations. Along with that there is a special need to address the change of the government in Turkey and victory of AKP party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) in the Turkish elections and its relation to the process of the new political orientation of the Turkish republic. 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. AKP won the November 2002 elections with a landslide victory, repeated its success with an even larger percentage of the vote (almost 47 per cent) in 2007, and is serving its second term as a one-party government. This in itself is an achievement in Turkish politics, which have been historically characterized by minority and coalition governments with a few exceptions²⁷.

Since November 2002, there have been many changes in the situation and conditions inside Turkey. The economy of the country has been relatively stabilized, the inflation rate has been comparably decreasing, the process of integration with the EU has been accelerated, and, after having sufficiently fulfilled the Copenhagen Criteria, accession negotiations with the EU began on October 3, 2005²⁸. Turkey took some steps in the direction of democratic consolidation through a series of major reforms²⁹. Despite all this reforms, the administration of AKP was not able to solve the complicated Kurdish issue, which is still one of the most serious problems of Turkish politics and despite all the developments of the foreign and national politics is keeping the country away from being a totally secure place.

Some asserted that the landslide victory of the AKP was "the greatest challenge to the traditional concept of Turkish secularism" because of the party's Islamic roots³⁰. Turkey has had a secular orientation—part of the

Kemalist ideology—since the establishment of the Republic in 1923; nevertheless, increasing support for Islamist movements around the world influenced Turkey as well. Unlike previous Turkish governments, the AKP government has been putting more emphasis on Turkey's Islamic and Middle Eastern characteristics³¹. Islamic identity has been one of the basic points for the AKP, and even the party program concluded with a religious phrase³².

In their turn, some international circles have also expressed their optimism for Turkey's capacities to reconcile Islam and democracy under the AKP rule³³. While seen by most political observers through the dichotomous lenses of democracy versus secularist authoritarianism and Islam versus democracy, the special political relevance of the Turkish case resides in its efforts to reconcile factors that have tended, also in Turkey's history, to be exclusive of one another in that country's political evolution in the last decade. Those factors have existed in parallel and have actually conditioned much of the history of Republican Turkey³⁴. Turkey's serious and sustained development in the field of diplomacy becomes evident if we look at the international meetings and organizations it has hosted since 2003. The NATO Summit and the OIC Summit are just two examples: clearly, Turkey has gained more influence in international organizations. Interesting developments in this regard took place in 2007. For instance, Turkey now has an observer status in the African Union; a natural result of Turkey's opening to Africa in 2005³⁵. It is also of great importance that AKP figures have continuously counselled the leaders and people of Islamic countries to give priority to democratization, liberalization, and development. The institutional platforms of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the Organization of the Arabic Union provided Turkish statesmen with such opportunities³⁶.

The change of orientation by the AKP government has led to the formation of new political pictures and understanding of Turkey in a different way. The Islamic characteristics of the AKP party played an extremely role in the process of the rapprochement between Turkey and the Middle East, namely the Arab countries in the region. One of the motivating factors in this regard is the commonly held belief that Turkey, as the inheritor of the Ottoman Empire, holds a particular responsibility for the nature of international relations in this region³⁷. The AKP government behaves as such not only to increase the country's leverage *vis-à-vis* the West but also to help allay Turkey's security concerns emanating from this region³⁸.

Ever since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it has been a generally accepted judgment that Turkey is in the Middle East, but not fully part of it. Turkey has long ignored its Arab neighbors, often having no relations and only a modest volume of trade. To some extent Turkey and other countries in the Middle East, including the Arabic countries of the Persian Gulf have tended to follow separate paths politically and culturally³⁹ Under the AKP government, Turkey has taken positive and constructive steps with its relations towards the Arab countries and has been developing its relations on both bilateral and multilateral platforms. Most of today's Arab countries were included within the geographical extent of the former Ottoman Empire over long periods, except the inner Arabian Peninsula and its Eastern part. Turkey has always enjoyed deeply rooted historical, cultural, social and religious ties with the Arab world; now, the new priorities in foreign policy-making make are making Turkey much more proactive here as well⁴⁰.

Eagerness to play third party roles is a relatively new aspect of Turkey's Middle East policy and contrasts with Turkey's long-held policy of not getting involved in regional conflicts. Again, the changing geostrategic environment and increasing instability in the region began to have repercussions for Turkey and forced Ankara to become more involved in the management of region and its problem⁴¹.

The AKP has had both the domestic support to rethink radically Turkish foreign policy and the intellectual depth to do so under Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, who started as chief advisor to Erdogan in 2003 and has been foreign minister since 2009. Davutoglu has argued that Turkey needs to have "zero conflict" with all of its neighbours and must develop "strategic depth" in all of its relations by using soft power and the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East⁴².

Defining accurately the substance and boundaries of Turkey's new foreign-policy activism is a task still to be accomplished. Irrespective of the label, Turkey aspires to play a role beyond its nation-state borders. Some current discussions concern whether Turkey is pursuing "neo-imperial" policies in order to reclaim the Ottoman legacy. The AKP's growing involvement in the former Ottoman realm leads many observers to dub its foreign-policy doctrine "neo-Ottomanism". Some understand this term as a metaphor for creating a sphere of influence, while others believe it connotes an Islamist agenda. Davutoğlu and other Turkish leaders supply ammunition to those who accept the neo-Ottoman interpretation. They frequently refer to historical and geographical imperatives that force Turkey to adopt proactive policies and assume a leadership role. For instance, Davutoğlu has increasingly referred to Turkey's "order-instituting" role in the surrounding

regions. Nonetheless, he and other AKP leaders reject the neo-Ottoman term, preferring less controversial ones, such as the above mentioned “zero-problems” or “limitless cooperation” with neighbours⁴³.

According to the multidimensional approaches of the Turkish foreign policy, the latter is no longer perceived as a series of bilateral relations or foreign policy moves but as a series of mutually reinforcing and interlocking processes. In this respect, Davutoglu argues that in order to formulate a long-lasting strategic perspective one needs to take into account “historical depth”, which provides a sound assessment of the links between the past, present, and future, as well as a “geographical depth”, penetrating into the intricate dynamics of the relations between domestic, regional, and global factors⁴⁴. This kind of approach to the foreign policy means that while Turkey should pursue EU membership and continue its ties with United States and NATO, it will also talk to Middle Eastern states, as well as non-state actors like Hamas, to solve all regional disputes including the never-ending Armenia and Cyprus issues. The foreign minister envisions a proactive Turkey that will be a mediator, guarantor, and stabilizing force in the region⁴⁵.

The new political orientation gives an opportunity for the growth in the economic relations between Turkey and the countries of the Middle East. Before the 1970s, Turkey’s economic interaction with the Middle East was relatively minor, which meant there were few areas of economic policy seen as mutually beneficial⁴⁶. Interest in expanding economic ties with the region has become an important element of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East in recent years. Kemal Kirisci has argued that economic motivations have influenced the desire to have “zero problems with neighbours” as Turkey increasingly becomes a “trading state”⁴⁷.

However, with the beginning of the economic growth in the Middle East, especially oil and gas exporting Arab states, Turkey was very slow to respond to the new potential. In 1973 Turkish exports to the Arab countries stood at just \$162 mln⁴⁸. Toward the end of 2005 Turkey’s multipronged economic and trade policies had been humming along, especially with regard to its neighbours. One of the driving forces behind this expansion was the Trade Development Strategy of Turkey, which affected relations with its neighbouring and surrounding fifty countries. In 2005 trade with these countries rose to \$45 billion, up from \$19.9 billion in 2000⁴⁹.

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 institutions⁵⁰. 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 no longer views the Arab world as a unified ethnic collective, developing its relations with certain countries on a bilateral basis according to its 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 realist and economic considerations⁵¹.

Conclusion

Until the last decade starting with the times of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk the Turkish elites have been rejecting the Ottoman heritage, turning their look away from the Middle East. During the Cold War NATO provided Turkey its national security guarantee, whereas Turkey contributed to the policy of credible deterrence. Thus, the Turkish orientation towards the West was out of objective and historical reasons. Along with that as it is possible to mark the new Turkish foreign politics is in the process of making. There have been a lot of motives and reasons for reorientation, from inside as well as externally. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the unexpected developments in the Middle East, such as the crisis in the Gulf in 1990-91, the war in Iraq and which is more important the new vector of the Turkish government in face of AKP have contributed to the shifts and reorganization of the main priorities of the Turkish foreign policy, giving a more significant importance to the Middle Eastern region.

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.

**ԹՈՒՐԶԻԱՅԻ ԱՐՏԱԶԻՆ ՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՆՈՐ
ԱՌԱՋՆԱՀԵՐԹՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԸ ԵՎ ՄԵՐՉԱՎՈՐ ԱՐԵՎԵԼՔՈՒՄ
ԱԿՏԻՎՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՀԱՐՑԻ ՇՈՒՐՁ**

Վեջին տարիներին Թուրքիան արագ տեմպերով զարգացնում է իր հարաբերությունները Մերձավոր Արևելքի երկրների հետ: Սակայն այս նոր քաղաքականությունը անհրաժեշտ ուշադրության չի արժանացել մասնագետների կողմից: Սույն հոդվածը անդրադարձ է այդ նոր քաղաքականությանը և Թուրքիայի ակտիվությանը Մերձավոր Արևելքում: Քննարկվում են այդ քաղաքականության դրդապատճառները, ինչպես նաև 2002 թ.-ից Թուրքիայում կառավարող Արդարություն և Չարգացում կուսակցության արտաքին քաղաքականության առաջնահերթությունները: Մասնավորապես հատուկ ուշադրության է արժանացել արաբական երկրների հետ Թուրքիայի համագործակցության ընդլայնումը:

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