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Matching Ambitions with Realities: Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East

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Summary

This paper aims to explore Turkey's new foreign policy in the Middle East. It is argued that under the AKP administration Turkey's Middle East policy has undergone a significant reconfiguration due to a number of concurring factors. This is partially linked with the strategic vision of Turkey's foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, as well as changes in the regional balance of power. While it is true that transformative visions of Turkish foreign policy have been coined in the recent past, it was only under the AKP administration that Turkey's relations with most of its Middle Eastern neighbours have undergone significant changes. Major improvements have been noted regarding relations with Iran and most Arab states, while serious deterioration has been observed with respect to Israel. This reflects both the new regional strategic environment, as well as an increasing ambition on the side of Turkey to play a leading role in the Middle East. As one of the G-20 members and displaying a relatively strong economic performance, Turkey aspires to join the club of the new emerging middle powers. On the other hand, this may lead to the destabilisation of some of the cornerstones of Turkish foreign policy and even to the reconfiguration of its strategic relations with the West. While Turkey is indeed gaining in regional strategic weight, moving too fast might lead to significant turbulences and setbacks.

Key Words

Turkey, foreign policy, Davutoğlu, Erdoğan, Middle East, Iran, United States, European Union, Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, Syria

Matching Ambitions with Realities: Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Introduction

The foreign policy of republican Turkey was shaped by the country's decisive shift towards the West. The promotion of Turkey's relations with the United States and Western European countries was underlined by the country's Westernisation campaign as well as its membership of Western security organisations. Turkey's NATO membership in 1953 highlighted its commitment to the Western security camp and consolidated its Western orientation. Similar were the consequences of Turkey's quest for membership of the European Economic Community (EEC)/European Union (EU). In that respect Turkey's Islamic identity was suppressed by the secularist nature of the regime. Despite century-old historic and cultural links and the potential of economic cooperation, no significant cooperation occurred. Improving relations with Middle Eastern countries was not deemed to be a priority. Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to recognise the state of Israel in 1949. It also comprised one of the key Western security assets in the Middle East during the Cold War. The establishment of the short-lived Central Treaty Organisation (or Baghdad Pact) in 1955 between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and the United Kingdom was an example of the pivotal role the West recognised Turkey in order to promote its security in the Middle East. This contradicted the strategies of Arab nationalist movements which saw Turkey as a collaborator of the West opposing their anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles. Turkey's stance in the Algerian war only reinforced these views. To these grievances one had to add territorial and water disputes which aggravated Turkey's relations with key Middle Eastern states. Syria, one of the leading Arab states, claimed the Hatay province which had been ceded by France to Turkey in 1939, as well as vehemently objected to the building of water dams in southeastern Turkey which would allow Turkey to limit the downstream flow of the Euphrates to Syria. Turkey's territorial claims on the *vilayet* of Mosul and the presence of strong Kurdish populations in northern Iraq and eastern Turkey complicated relations with Iraq, Turkey's other Arab neighbour.

Moreover, nation-building on both sides posed additional obstacles. Turkish nationalism depicted Arabs as underdeveloped, ignorant and inept who had betrayed the Ottoman Empire through the collaboration with Entente forces during the First World War and greatly contributed to its demise. In fact, one of the reasons that republican Turkish nationalism identified for the decline of the Ottoman Empire was its alleged Arabic influences, which originated from Islam. Hence one of the main aims of republican Turkish nation-building was the purification of all these Arabic elements from Turkish culture and identity. On the other hand, Arab nationalists turned the Ottoman Empire into a scapegoat for all the social, economic and political problems which the Middle Eastern states faced. The Ottoman Empire was seen as an early colonial force, not very different from the English and French, which strapped Middle Eastern provinces from their resources and did not allow for their economic and social development. The identification of republican Turkey with the West and the United States only reinforced this image and made Turkey unpopular in Arab public opinion. Most Arab states opted for close relations with the Soviet Union, which meant that they stood in opposite camps with Turkey throughout the Cold

War.

Meanwhile, the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran led to Turkey's further alienation in the region. Through the collapse of the Pahlavi regime, whatever had remained from the Baghdad Pact, an US-driven Cold-War attempt to coordinate its regional allies in the Middle East, collapsed, Turkey lost a secularist regional ally and had to confront an Islamist state in its eastern borders, which -at least in the early years of the revolution- professed the expansion of its revolutionary message throughout the Islamic world. As a result, Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East focused on the development of relations with Israel. This was tantamount with a gradual but countervailing shift regarding the role of Islam in Turkish public sphere.

The first signals of a change in this approach were observed in the 1980s and were linked with the increasing role of Islam in Turkish society. The adoption of the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" (*Türk-İslam Sentezi*) by the 1980-1983 military regime restored Sunni Islam as an essential element of Turkish national identity (Grigoriadis 2008, pp. 101-02). Religious courses became again mandatory in public education, while Islam was hoped to act as deterrent against the two threats which the military regime had identified as critical for republican Turkey: Kurdish nationalism and communism. This policy allowed for the gradual reintroduction of Sunni Islam into the public sphere and the rise of an Islamist elite (Göle 1997, pp. 53-57). During the administration of Turgut Özal and the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi-ANAP*), relations with the Middle East entered a new phase. While relations with Israel were improving, promoting economic cooperation with Middle Eastern countries also became an item in Turkey's foreign policy agenda. Turkey maintained a cautious neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war.

Two seminal events, the end of the Cold War and the first Iraq war reshaped Turkey's approach towards the Middle East (Hale 2002). The collapse of the Soviet bloc meant that a vacuum was created in the Middle East which would be filled with a reconfiguration of regional alliances. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 shattered the regional balance of power and led Turgut Özal to involve Turkey to the US-led UN military operation to eject Iraq from Kuwait. Meanwhile, the escalation of the Kurdish conflict within Turkey meant that Turkey had to carefully watch developments in the Middle East and their impact on its own Kurdish question. When Necmettin Erbakan, the historic leader of Turkish political Islam, became the first avowedly Islamist Prime Minister in the history of republican Turkey, one could expect that Turkey would aim stronger ties with Middle Eastern states (Robins 1997, pp. 88-94) Erbakan paid official visits to several Middle Eastern capitals. The first natural gas deal was then signed with Iran, which provisioned the construction of a natural gas pipeline from Iran to Turkey, the supply of the Turkish market with Iranian natural gas with the potential to further access European markets. However, this Middle East overture did not comprise a breakthrough in regional politics. Middle Eastern states were not willing to acknowledge Turkey the leading role Erbakan had envisioned. Some openings in fact backfired rather nastily. The visit to Libya, in particular, turned into a debacle when the rather unpredictable Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi scolded publicly Erbakan for Turkey's stance on the Kurdish question and urged Turkey to recognise the independence of a Kurdish state in its southeastern territories.¹

While Erbakan took pains in promoting Turkey's relations with the Arab world, relations with Israel also flourished. Military and intelligence cooperation reached their

¹ At that time, Turkish security forces were fighting an all-out war against the forces of the Kurdish Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan-PKK*) in the eastern and southeastern provinces of the country.

peak in the mid 1990s (Altunışık 2000) An alliance between Turkey, Israel and the United States was seen as a fundamental element of Turkey's security strategy. Even Erbakan himself as Prime Minister did not pose any obstacle to the further consolidation of Turkish-Israeli relations. The fall of the Erbakan government in 1997 led to the removal of the increased interest in the Middle East and reconfigured Turkish foreign policy on more conventional lines. Yet Turkey's relations with Israel continued to flourish unabated. The improvement of EU-Turkey relations since 1999 and Turkey's prospective EU membership also meant that the bulk of Turkish diplomacy would be interested in the improvement of EU-Turkey relations.

The AKP Era - A Strong Interest in the Middle East

Turkey's Middle Eastern policy changed drastically with the advent of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) to power in November 2002. While EU-Turkey relations continued to improve and Turkey underwent between 2002 and 2005 the most comprehensive political reform process since the Atatürk years, a novel, as well as strong, interest in promoting relations with the Middle East was articulated (Taşpınar 2008). This new foreign policy bore the imprint of Ahmet Davutoğlu (Uslu 2009). A professor of international relations, Davutoğlu was the chief foreign policy advisor of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, until he became himself Foreign Minister in May 2009. In his books and other publications, he had early outlined his vision for Turkish foreign policy. Under his guidance, Turkish foreign policy would develop on multiple levels and directions. Davutoğlu had early outlined his vision for Turkey's strategic mission and foreign policy in his book "Strategic Depth" (*Stratejik Derinlik*) (Davutoğlu 2001). According to Davutoğlu's view, Turkey is classified due to its history and cultural heritage among the "central powers" which possess "strategic depth."² This also means that Turkey should no more render its regional strategies and policies subservient to those of its Western allies, in particular the United States. On the contrary, it had to establish its own strategic agenda and priorities, which would not necessarily be parallel with these of the United States or Europe (Oğuzlu 2009, p. 49). Davutoğlu argued that Turkey had to undertake a multi-fold and multi-level foreign policy strategy aiming to establish its position as a pivotal state between Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East (Murinson 2006, pp. 951-53). The strategic vision which Davutoğlu articulated following the rise of the AKP to power, differed from the vision typically geopolitical approach which dominated his earlier writings. It included the resolution of all long-standing bilateral disputes between Turkey and its neighbours ("zero-problem policy with neighbours"), as well as a leading role in regional conflict resolution (Evin *et al.* 2010, p. 12). In other words, Turkey should dispose of these "petty" conflicts which comprised a handicap for the development of its global strategic potential. In a much publicised speech towards Turkish high-level diplomats, Davutoğlu noted that by the centenary of the Republic of Turkey in 2023, Turkey should be one of the ten leading states in the world (Bozkurt 2010). This required good relations with the United States and the European Union, as well as with the Islamic world. While relations with Muslim states significantly improved, this was largely the result of a rather pragmatic approach to foreign policy (Idiz 2009) quoted in (Kramer 2010, p. 19). Turkey was developing relations with countries like the United Arab Emirates, Syria or Malaysia, not simply because they were

² For more on this, see (Davutoğlu 2005).

Muslim, but rather because of the unexploited strategic and economic potential. In Davutoğlu's view, Turkey had to dissociate itself from its established militaristic and firmly pro-Western image and foster a new image in which Turkey's soft power, translated into economic, cultural and political clout would prevail (Çandar 2009). According to that view, Turkey should claim a leading intermediary role in all regional conflicts in the Middle East, resolve all pending bilateral disputes and build strategic cooperation with its neighbours. In addition, it should promote regional economic cooperation and integration. The increase of the volume of bilateral trade was seen as a key instrument in promoting Turkey's regional role (Kirişçi 2009)

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to purport that Davutoğlu's foreign policy vision was unique in its emphasis on a multilateral and assertive approach. In fact these views were in continuity with visions expressed by other Turkish politicians. Turgut Özal was the first to argue in the late 1980s that Turkey should follow a more assertive foreign policy and claim a leading regional role. About ten years later, Ismail Cem, Turkey's Foreign Minister at the time, also argued along similar lines. This showed that the core of Davutoğlu's views had been in fact shared by influential political actors across the Turkish political spectrum (Kramer 2010). Yet the congruence of a set of favourable domestic and international conditions which emerged following the rise of the AKP to power, allowed for the stronger articulation of these views. What was really different in Davutoğlu's foreign policy thesis was his attempt to project Turkey's image as a "soft power" and promote the resolution of domestic and bilateral conflicts due to their obstructive role to Turkey's transformation into a global actor.

Structural Reasons for this Change

The AKP's largely pragmatic foreign policy can -at least partially- be attributed to the impact of globalization on Turkish political Islam (Öniş 2006). The radical economic reform programme introduced by Turgut Özal during the 1980-1983 military regime set the ground for the opening of Turkish society to global economic and social trends. A large part of Turkish political Islam underwent a transformation process. It reconciled itself with globalisation and was able to benefit from the changes which Turkey's integration into the world economy and exposure to global social and political trends entailed. Becoming a globalisation winner also meant the gradual abandonment of religion-based ideological approach towards politics. This is not to say that religion disappeared at the symbolic level. The Ottoman legacy has often been referred to as a strong cultural and religious bond bringing all these regions together. Religious links with countries of the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa and Asia have been invoked in order to popularise a series of foreign policy initiatives. Nonetheless, in most cases these decisions were more importantly based on pragmatic grounds, namely the improvement of economic and diplomatic relations. Increased use of religious rhetoric is linked in the case of Turkey with the democratisation process and the increasing need of governments to consider public opinion preferences on a number of key foreign policy issues (Grigoriadis 2010, pp. 65-66). Improving relations with Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbours did not primarily have to do with religion but rather with mutual, underexploited interests. Within a few years, relations of Turkey with its Middle Eastern neighbours improved dramatically (Larrabee 2007). On the other hand, a religious underpinning in several foreign policy initiatives of the government could be observed. While the base of this policy shift was primarily pragmatic, there appeared to be

deviations in some cases, such as Sudan. These undermined the normative base upon which the AKP administration claimed to have based Turkish foreign policy.

Relations with Egypt

Egypt is a country which appeared as the natural leader of the Panarabist movement. Its brief union with Syria in 1958 signalled the apex of the project, while its sound defeat in the 1967 Six Day War dealt the first blow against the leadership of Egypt in the Arab world. The signature of a peace treaty in Camp David in 1978 and the recognition of Israel meant that Egypt would cease to spearhead Arab nationalism. While Egypt's regional clout is far from what it used to be, this has allowed for other actors to attempt to fill the "vacuum" left, to Egypt's chagrin. Turkey's Middle East strategy -in particular its increased interest in the Palestinian question- has necessarily engaged Egyptian strategies in the region. In particular the improvement of Turkey's relations with Hamas has raised significant concern in Egypt, given the links of Hamas with the Egyptian Islamic Brotherhood and the anxiety with which Egypt sees any legitimisation of the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip. In January 2010, strains in Turkish-Egyptian relations were revealed when an international convoy, including many Turkish citizens and aiming to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza clashed with Egyptian security forces on the checkpoint with the Gaza Strip. On the following day, a demonstration held by Hamas on the other side of the checkpoint led to turmoil, the death of an Egyptian soldier and the injury of numerous Palestinians. The attempt of the Turkish Foreign Minister to mediate between the group and the Egyptian government met with failure. The group's leading figure, British MP George Galloway was declared *persona non grata* and deported from Egypt. Shortly thereafter, he stated that "It is a badge of honour to be deported by a dictatorship....I wish that Egypt and Britain had leaders like [Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan." His point may have resounded with the view of the activists and the public opinion in Egypt and many Arab countries; yet, it made clear why the Egyptian government was becoming concerned about Turkey's stronger involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, in particular attempts to emerge as the "true defender" of the Palestinian cause (Idiz 2010).

Relations with Gulf States

Relations with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States also flourished under the AKP administration (Aras 2005). Personal relationships played some role. Several leading members of the AKP had spent part of their career in Gulf states, including President Abdullah Gül who had worked in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. Yet security and economic considerations formed the basis of Saudi-Turkish relations. The future of Iraq following the 2003 US invasion was naturally a key security interest for both states. Preventing a rise of the Shiite influence in post-war Iraq was a primary security concern for Saudis, while Turkey was primarily concerned with the prevention of Kurdish independence in northern Iraq.

While there had no official visit of a Saudi king to Turkey for decades, King Abdullah visited Ankara twice in 2006 and 2007, signing a series of economic agreements (Olson 2008, pp. 76-82). The Turkish-Saudi rapprochement was also mirrored in the advancement of Turkey's role in key international Islamic organisations. Turkey was awarded an observer status to the Arab League, while a Turk, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu, was elected in 2004 for the first time

to the General Secretariat of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), an organisation based and supported by Saudi Arabia. While previous Turkish efforts had failed to bear fruit, the rise of the AKP government apparently changed the calculus of Saudi diplomacy, as well as removed concerns about the Muslim identity of the Turkish leadership (Foley 2010, p. 32). Improvement of relations expanded to the rest of the Gulf. Major investment projects in Turkey were financed by Abu Dhabi or Dubai holdings. Given that some of the Gulf States have been indeed among the biggest global investors and Turkey has been one of the most favoured destinations of foreign direct investment, this match was natural. The AKP government spent considerable efforts on the consolidation of these economic relations. Turkey-Gulf summits were organised aiming to promote economic and political cooperation with the Gulf States. In fact, the attraction of Gulf investment capital had wider implications. Apart from serving the growth of Turkish economy, it also enabled the AKP government to appeal to its Islamist clientele, by showing that investment capital was flowing to Turkey from the West, as well as from the Islamic world. Investment from Islamic countries was equally welcome to Turkey and significantly contributed to the country's economic development. By inviting Gulf investors the AKP was able to relate Turkey to the world in such a way that its constituency could claim some ownership of Turkey's interaction with the world. Besides, AKP-friendly entrepreneurs took the opportunity to leverage their Islamist credentials in the Gulf which enjoyed high liquidity, due to rising oil prices, and actively sought investment opportunities (Grigoriadis and Kamaras 2008). On the other hand, the prospect of advancing Turkish-Iranian relations caused considerable concern among Gulf states, especially those which had long-standing bilateral disputes with Iran (Martin 2009). This became all the more clear, as Gulf States were among the most concerned by the prospect of development of nuclear weapons by Iran. Turkey's attempts to mediate between the West and Iran on the question of Iran's nuclear programme were often seen as tilting towards the Iranian side.

Relations with Syria

Relations with Syria were arguably those to improve the most since the advent of the AKP administration. This happened against a very difficult historical and diplomatic backdrop (Hale 2002). The Syrian Republic never recognised the secession of the Alexandretta province (Hatay in Turkish) from French-mandate Syria in 1939 and its annexation to Turkey and has claimed the province back ever since its independence in 1946. In addition, water comprised a source of serious conflict. The construction of gigantic dams in the upstream flow of Euphrates in southeastern Turkey was met with wrath by Syria, which heavily depended on the Euphrates water supply for its own agriculture. The rise of the Kurdish question and the intensification of the activities of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*-PKK) gave Syria an additional lever in its relations with Turkey. Even the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was living in Damascus under Syrian protection. This came to an end in 1998, when Turkey openly threatened Syria with war, and Öcalan was forced to flee the country. Relations improved dramatically with the rise of the AKP administration. Syria saw in Turkey a major regional actor which could help her escape international diplomatic isolation. Turkey found in Syria a partner with which it would develop strong economic relations and through which it could engage in almost all the major regional disputes (B. Aras and Karakaya Polat 2008). A free trade agreement was agreed in 2004 and came into force three years later. Intensified bilateral contacts led to

booming economic relations,³ the lifting of visa requirement for touristic visits of citizens of the two countries⁴ and the establishment of a minister-level “Strategic Cooperation Council” which aimed to promote multilevel cooperation. Long-standing bilateral disputes were silently put aside. Although Syria did not *de jure* recognise the annexation of the Alexandretta province, it appeared ready to do so *de facto*.

Things went even further in June 2010 with the announcement of an “economic union” between Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan was an additional step towards that direction. Turkey had already signed bilateral agreements with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan which mutually abolished the visa requirement for touristic visits of their respective citizens. Now the expansion of this regime was announced, so the touristic visa requirement would be completely abolished for the citizens of all four states. In addition, the proclamation of an “economic union” of an area with a combined GDP of 1.13 billion USD echoed like an attempt to imitate the examples of the European Economic Community or NAFTA, ASEAN or Mercosur in the Middle East (Istanbul Office 2010). Yet what remained unclear is how the potential development of this union would be compatible with Turkey’s European integration process and adoption of the European *acquis*.

Relations with Iraq

Relations with Iraq have also enjoyed a major improvement (Hale 2009). Despite its heavy involvement in the 1991 Gulf War, Turkey considered itself to be among the losers in its aftermath. At the economic level, it suffered heavy economic losses due to the UN embargo on Iraq, which were never compensated. On the other hand, the rise of a *de facto* Kurdish entity in Northern Iraq following the 687 and 688 UN Security Council resolutions and the Provide Comfort operations caused major concern in Turkey. As PKK units attacked Turkish security forces after entering Turkish territory from Northern Iraq, Turkey often retaliated by attacking PKK camps within northern Iraq. Unlike in the first Iraq War, Turkey abstained from active involvement in the 2003 war which led to the occupation of Iraq and the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime (Hale 2007). While the control of post-war Iraqi developments was among the main reasons for supporting Turkey’s direct involvement in the second Iraq war, the 1 March 2003 vote of the Turkish Parliament meant that the role of Turkey in post-war Iraq would be rather limited and that the role of Iraqi Kurds, the most important allies of the United States in the war, would be consequently significant. In the first years after the war, Turkey was extremely anxious about the emergence of a Kurdish political entity within Iraq. Despite the emergence of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) on Turkey’s borders and the existence of major disputes such as the final status of the oil-rich Kirkuk province in northern Iraq, relations have considerably improved (International Crisis Group (ICG) 2008). The visit of the Turkish President Abdullah Gül in March 2009 to Baghdad highlighted a major change. Gül was reported to use the term “Kurdistan” twice during his statements to Turkish journalists. This was the first time a Turkish official used a term whose use has been an anathema for many years and could be considered as a symbolic opening towards the establishment of smooth relations between

³ Bilateral trade volume grew 729 million USD in 2000 to 2,754 million USD in 2008. See (Hale 2009).

⁴ The liberalisation of Turkey’s touristic visa regime has been one of the most innovative tools of Turkey’s new policy towards its neighbours. For more on this, see Devrim and Soler I Lecha. 2010).

Turkey and the KRG.⁵ In October 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Baghdad heading a delegation of nine ministers. Following a joint ministerial meeting of Iraqi and Turkish delegations, no less than forty-eight bilateral agreements were signed ranging from security and cooperation against the PKK to trade, energy, education, culture, health, transportation, agriculture and water management and sharing. The opening of two additional border-crossing points was also agreed. This signalled that Turkish-Iraqi economic relations were poised to reach -and exceed- levels not seen since the 1980s. These agreements also involved projects in the KRG. A few days later, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu paid a visit to Erbil, the *de facto* capital of the KRG. This was the first time a Turkish minister paid a visit to Kurdish-controlled Northern Iraq. Davutoğlu met the President of the KRG Massoud Barzani as well as Prime Minister Nehcirvan Barzani and announced the opening of a Turkish consulate in Erbil. Davutoğlu stated that this visit should have taken place long time ago. Noting that he found Erbil very developed, Davutoğlu added

All of us will contribute to the even further development of Erbil. This will become a bridge between Iraq and Turkey. We are the gate of Iraq to the European Union. And Erbil is our gate opening to Basra (Keneş 2009).

This visit was the corollary of a rapprochement which has reshaped the bilateral relations between the KRG and Turkey. Yet improvements remain fragile due to uncertainty in a number of key issues which pervade the relations between Turkey and the KRG. The future status of the disputed city of Kirkuk, control of oil resources and revenues are some of the disputes which could lead to serious complications (Barkey 2009, pp. 15-29).

Relations with Iran

Relations with Iran also improved considerably. Despite the increasing isolation of Iran under the administration of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, Turkey maintained close economic and good diplomatic relations. In fact, economic cooperation in the field of energy went deeper. The cooperation, which had begun in the mid 1990s through the construction of a pipeline for the export of Iranian natural gas to Turkey has been consolidated and included Turkish investment in the Iranian natural gas upstream sector. Bilateral trade reached 10.2 billion dollars in 2008 from just above one billion USD in 2000, with the aim to reach 20 billion by 2013. Yet there was a heavy bilateral trade deficit on the Turkish side, due to Turkey's energy imports from Iran. The volume of Turkey's exports to Iran was just over 2 billion USD worth of goods to Iran, while its imports amounted to 8.2 billion USD (Hale 2009, p. 153) Yet there was much more than mutual economic gains in Turkish-Iranian relations. A series of official visits highlighted the level of mutual understanding at the top level, and public opinion of both countries seemed to agree. During his official visit to Turkey in August 2007, Iran's President Mahmud Ahmadinejad was cheered by Turkish citizens when he went to pray in the historic Sultanahmet mosque in Istanbul. This was all the more important given Iran's increasing alienation at the international level. The Iranian nuclear program has caused fear and concern about the true intentions of the Iranian regime. Iran's potential interest in developing nuclear weapons has worried not only the United States, Israel and Europe, but also Arab states,

⁵ The official Turkish view purported that the term "Kurdistan" was fictitious and was thus a tool of Kurdish nationalism aiming to partition Turkey.

most notably Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. While Iran's nuclear ambitions and alleged hidden agenda for the development of nuclear weapon capabilities raised serious concerns globally and in the Middle East, Turkey seemed to be least concerned of all neighbouring states. It even attempted to play a mediating role between Iran and the West on the burning issue of Iran's nuclear programme.

This allowed for a reconfiguration of Turkey's relations with Iran, which should not be a function -or even hostage- of US- or European-Iranian relations. In a recent article, Davutoğlu stated that

....our allies should take into consideration Turkey's unique position. As a growing economy and surrounded by energy resources, Turkey needs Iranian energy as a natural extension of its national interests. Therefore, Turkey's energy agreements with Iran cannot be dependent upon its relationships with other countries (Davutoğlu 2008, p. 91).

Turkey's new Iran policy has comprised a clear attempt to achieve its emancipation from US Middle Eastern policy (International Crisis Group (ICG) 2010, pp. 16-18). Ever since the rise of AKP into power in 2002, Turkey has increasingly taken distance from US strategies and policies in Iraq, Israel and other Middle Eastern states. It is also indicative that Davutoğlu in his writings includes Iran to his privileged group of states which due to their history and geography have a "central power" status and enjoy "strategic depth." Hence he prioritizes the development of strong Turkish-Iranian strategic relations. Iran and its energy resources are more important for Turkey than its Western allies might consider.

Many suspect religion to be one of the main reasons for the affinity between Ankara and Tehran. The AKP, Turkey's government party since 2002, comes from the ranks of Turkish political Islam, and this was perceived to be sufficient reason for a close relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Religious affinity was indeed the reason why Turkey's first Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan aimed to improve bilateral relations and signed the first natural gas deal with Iran in 1996. Nevertheless, it was more strategic considerations and less religion behind the determination of the AKP government to upgrade relations with Iran and claim a key role in its nuclear controversy. The Iranian nuclear crisis provided a golden opportunity -as well as a litmus test- for Foreign Minister Davutoğlu to implement his vision about Turkey's proactive foreign policy and autonomous strategic role. Distancing itself from the United States and the European Union, Turkey claimed a leading mediating role in the Iranian nuclear dispute. It has refused to side with Western pressure aiming to stop Iran's uranium enrichment program, objected to the imposition of any sanctions against Tehran and defended Iran's right to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. In accordance to this vision, Turkey has aimed to spearhead international mediation for a compromise solution. In his visit to Tehran in February 2010, Davutoğlu attempted to broker a deal for the enrichment of uranium necessary for Iranian nuclear power plants under conditions which would preclude the possibility of developing nuclear weapon capabilities. Turkey's interventions aimed further than minimizing the risk of developing nuclear fuel for Iranian power plants. Turkey's independent approach to the Iranian nuclear question was crystallised in its mediating effort on solving the Iranian uranium enrichment conundrum. Joining forces with Brazil and following intensive negotiations, a compromise agreement was triumphantly on 17 May 2010 in Tehran. Yet it bore little fruit, as far as the crux of the crisis was concerned. Failing to win Iran's abolition of its domestic uranium enrichment program meant that the international community would not consider the agreement satisfactory. The 10 June 2010

decision of the UN Security Council to impose additional sanctions on Iran due to its nuclear program was a consequence of this and was made despite the dissenting votes of Turkey and Brazil. Turkey's vote rekindled discussions on whether Turkey was gradually distancing itself from the West (Turan 2010b) and turning into a *de facto* unaligned actor.

These arguments were often enriched by Turkey's novel approaches on the issue of nuclear proliferation. In a speech in Washington DC in December 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan defended a nuclear-free Middle East and accused the Western states of double standards when dealing with issues of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. This was a skilful implication of Israel, a country which is not a signatory of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty but is believed to possess nuclear weapons, in Iran's nuclear controversy. Turkey attempted to reshape the agenda of nuclear non-proliferation in the Middle East in a way that did not only include Iran but also Israel. In a nutshell, Turkey criticized the non-proliferation system as a whole because it gave strong privileges to the states which controlled nuclear weapons before the introduction of the system (Turan 2010a). These states were also accused of turning a blind eye to Israel's efforts to develop its own nuclear arsenal. Erdoğan voiced a popular argument throughout the Middle East regarding Iran's nuclear program, namely that it would be unfair to demand from Iran to freeze its nuclear program, while Israel has faced no criticism for its violation of nuclear proliferation treaties and development of nuclear weapons. This criticism of the non-proliferation system implied that Turkey would not firmly oppose any attempts of Iran to develop its own nuclear capabilities despite the prohibitions of the non-proliferation system. This would entail a clear divergence from Western strategic interests.

Relations with Israel

Nonetheless, there was a notable exception to the rule of Turkey's improving relations with its neighbours. A major shift was the rapid deterioration of Turkey's relations with Israel. The two countries had long enjoyed strategic partnership under the auspices of their strategic alliance with the United States (Hale 2002) Turkish-Israeli cooperation peaked in the 1990s with the signature of a series of military, intelligence and diplomatic accords (Sayari 1997, pp. 49-50) The Turkish and Israeli military forces, the region's most formidable, often exercised together, and Israeli aircraft often used Turkish airspace for their manoeuvres. These relations were not put into question by the Erbakan government in the mid 1990s (Altunışık 2000). Despite his fierce anti-Israeli and often anti-Semitic rhetoric, Erbakan did not deviate from the policies of his predecessors regarding Israel. Nevertheless, relations with Israel suffered a gradual but constant deterioration following the rise of the AKP government into power in 2002. While Turkey used to take a neutral or mildly pro-Israel stance in the Palestinian question and the rest of Israel's disputes with its Arab neighbours, a radical departure was noted under the AKP administration. The reconfiguration of Turkey's Middle Eastern policy implied that Turkey's national interest in the region would no longer be identical with that of the United States or Israel. Bilateral relations began deteriorating, when Ankara attempted to mediate in the crisis between the Palestinian Fatah and Hamas groups which further complicated the resolution of the Palestinian question. The Turkish government ignored Israeli calls to the international community for the isolation of the Gaza-based Hamas government and invited a delegation of Hamas to Ankara for talks in February 2006. Its attempt to mediate between the West Bank-based Fatah authorities and the Gaza-based Hamas authorities complied with Turkey's new vision of its role in the Middle East which required a working relationship with all

regional actors, including Hamas. Relations further deteriorated during the 2006 Lebanon War when Turkey took an overtly anti-Israeli position and accused Israel for the brutality of its operations. The bombing of cities and civilian targets was widely covered by Turkish media and outraged public opinion, while Turkish officials repeatedly employed aggressive rhetoric against Israeli policies. Some of them came to the point of accusing Israel of “genocide” against the Palestinians. At times opposition to anti-Israeli policies was translated into anti-Semitism. At the popular culture level, movies and TV series replete with anti-Semitic messages gained wide publicity and popularity.⁶ The deterioration of bilateral relations did not prevent Turkey from attempting to play a mediating role between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Significant progress was said to be made in Turkey-brokered negotiations between Turkey and Syria in 2007, which fell however short of a resolution of the Golan Heights question. Bilateral relations deteriorated, however, even further, to the point that the very viability of the initiative was questioned. Israel ceased viewing Turkey as an impartial actor. The decline of Israeli-Turkish relations was underlined by a major diplomatic episode during the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2009. In a panel discussion on “Peace in the Middle East,” Prime Minister Erdoğan had a row with Israeli President Shimon Peres. Erdoğan told Peres that “you know well how to kill” and furious abandoned the panel, as well as Davos. He was greeted as a hero some hours later by thousands of cheering Turks at the Istanbul Airport. In January 2010, a major diplomatic crisis erupted when following new anti-Semitic scenes in Turkish TV serials, the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon publicly humiliated Turkey’s Ambassador. The withdrawal of the Turkish Ambassador from Israel was only averted through a formal apology letter from the Israeli government. These led several analysts to question whether there was anything left from the once formidable Israeli-Turkish alliance (Rubin 2009).

Relations hit an all-time bottom on 31 May 2010, when a flotilla aiming to disembark humanitarian aid at the port of Gaza defied Israeli orders and was intercepted by Israeli armed forces at the international waters off the shore of Gaza. Clashes ensued on board one of the ships, and nine Turkish citizens were killed. The incident caused a shock; Turkey withdrew its ambassador from Israel, while anti-Israeli sentiment soared. The incident attracted the attention of the global media, and Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan demanded that Israel issued a formal apology for the events, something which Israel singlehandedly refused. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu made several rather unusual statements in the aftermath of the attack stating that this event was “Turkey’s own 9/11” or that “he would soon pray with Palestinians in the Al-Aqsa mosque.” Some weeks later, Turkey refused an Israeli military aircraft access to its airspace. Interestingly the AKP government stance was popular not only among its core Muslim constituency but also among secular Turks. While such events helped the popularity of the AKP government at the domestic front and raised Turkey’s prestige in the “Arab street” even further, they questioned even more Turkey’s ability to act as a mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, they risked a radical shift in the stance of the powerful pro-Israeli lobby in the United States. Organizations such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Anti-Defamation League which had historically supported Turkish positions in the US Congress and State Department appeared to reconsider their positions in light of the new circumstances. The recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Anti-Defamation League in 2007 was a prime early example (O’Brien 2007).

⁶ An example of this was the “Valley of the Wolves (*Kurtlar Vadisi*)”, a blockbuster movie which was later turned into an equally successful TV series.

Relations with Sudan

Meanwhile, Turkey's relations with Sudan, one of the peripheral Arab Middle Eastern states, has drawn a lot of public attention and led to questioning the normative base of Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP government. An Arab Muslim-majority state on the frontier between the Mashreq and sub-Saharan Africa, Sudan hosts large religious minorities, Christian and animist in the south. The attempt of the Muslim-controlled government to impose the Sharia law throughout the country has met with the armed opposition of Sudanese minorities. While a ceasefire has brought relative peace in the southern front, the situation in the west, in the Darfur province has reached the dimensions of a humanitarian catastrophe. The international community has almost unanimously held the Sudanese government responsible for numerous atrocities against the civilian population of Darfur. These led the International Criminal Court (ICC) to issue in 2008 an arrest warrant against the President of Sudan Omar Hassan al-Bashir, due to alleged war crimes and genocide perpetrated under his instructions by the Sudanese army against the civilian population in Darfur. In contradiction to its rather sensitive stance on the rights of Palestinians, Turkey has refrained from condemning the acts of President al-Bashir at the Western Sudanese province of Darfur. While al-Bashir has avoided visiting European capitals due to the fear of his arrest on the grounds of the warrant, he has maintained cordial relations with the AKP government. Economic cooperation between the two countries thrived. In fact al-Bashir was planning to visit Istanbul for a summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in late 2009. Turkey is not a signatory of the Treaty of the International Criminal Court, so it would be under no legal obligation to arrest al-Bashir and hand him to The Hague. Moreover, several Turkish officials had declared their solidarity to the Sudanese government and President al-Bashir. However, due to domestic and international public outcry, al-Bashir had to cancel his Istanbul trip. What was noteworthy however was the attempt by several Turkish politicians to defend against the accusations of the ICC. Prime Minister Erdoğan himself argued that he was comfortable with al-Bashir's visit because "a Muslim cannot commit genocide" (Özkan and Akgün 2010, p. 7). The attitude of the AKP government toward al-Bashir and the Darfur crisis shed doubts on the sincerity of the normative base of the approach towards Israel, as well as the pragmatic nature of the AKP foreign policy. While Turkey appeared to consider respect for human rights to be a key factor in its foreign policy, in particular in the Middle East, this seemed to wither away when it came to the case of Sudan and Darfur.

Concluding Remarks

Turkey's new Middle East policy has revealed a set of new opportunities which have emerged due to structural changes of the regional and global strategic environment during the last twenty years. Turkey is indeed becoming more important in the region and globally; this does not mean, however, that it has suddenly grown into a global actor (Sanberk 2010, p. 9). Turkey is still dependent on the West for its international security, political stability and economic growth. This means that it needs to maintain and even strengthen its strategic links with the West. On the other hand, this does not preclude capitalisation on its newly established bonds with numerous Middle Eastern states. A Europeanising Turkey, which is embedded in the Western camp, is a more appealing partner and more reliable negotiator for the Arab Middle Eastern states. What Arab states also need is a Turkey which is in good terms with Israel and could thus act as catalyst in their disputes. This point was made clear in a long statement by the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during his July 2010 visit to Madrid. In Assad's view,

We view the Turkish-Israeli relations from two perspectives...The first is Turkish role in the peace process which is built on the relationship between Turkey and Israel and the relationship between Turkey and Syria. Any mediator must have good ties with both parties. The second perspective is that the Israeli government's policies are not only the attack on Freedom Flotilla, but its non-response to the indirect Syrian-Israeli talks in Turkey in 2008 and the war on Gaza....All of these affected the Israeli-Turkish relations....As a result, these relations have not been back to normal and the Turkish role will be difficult to make these talks take place....Therefore, if Turkey's role in the negotiations process on the Syrian track recedes, this will affect regional stability (Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) 2010).

Al-Assad's statement was all the more interesting as they originated from a leader of a country considered Israel's archenemy in the region. They highlighted that the deterioration of Turkey's relations with Israel was an issue of concern for all these countries which hoped that Turkey's cordial relations with the Arab Middle East matched by good relations with Israel could contribute to the resolution of the region's long-lasting conflicts. While the Iranian nuclear crisis allows for the articulation of Turkey's regional leadership and autonomous strategic planning ambitions, one needs to question whether it has had any real impact on the crisis itself. The jury is still out on this. On the one hand, it has been argued that Turkish diplomatic efforts have widened diplomatic manoeuvring space. It would be hard to deny the importance of building dialogue and communication channels between the Islamic Republic and the West, especially as far as the prevention of sanctions and further escalation are concerned. On the other hand, Turkey is not alone in this role. The recent quick and successful involvement of Brazil, another emerging country with regional and global ambitions, in the mediation on the question of uranium enrichment underlined that Turkey's role in the resolution of the Iranian nuclear question was not considered indispensable by Iran. One also needs to add that Turkey's Iran strategy could involve significant risks, if Iran indeed develops nuclear weapons and rises as the second - after Pakistan- Muslim-majority state to join the nuclear league. In fact, Turkey's regional

security position could be seriously complicated in such a case (Lesser, I.O. 2010a). Turkey might even have to follow Arab Middle Eastern states, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt in a nuclear race aiming to counter Iran's regional leadership claims. The recent decision of the Turkish government to proceed with the construction of a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu despite years of deliberations and the opposition of environmental groups could also be understood as Turkey's decision to get deeper involved in nuclear affairs. Turkey's attempt to claim a mediating role between Iran and the West on Iran's nuclear program has so far failed to have a catalytic effect. The nuclear program conundrum persists, while no progress has been achieved in the question of how to safely enrich Iran's uranium for peaceful purposes. It has, however, comprised a clear case of Turkey's new strategic thinking and foreign policy, as well as its regional leadership ambitions. Turkey's regional interests have become too important to be subordinated to US, European or Israeli concerns regarding Iran and its nuclear ambitions. The endgame of the Iranian nuclear question will provide evidence on whether this reconfiguration is rational.

Turkey's growing regional ambitions have met with concern by European and US observers who fear that this could herald the shift of Turkey's orientation from the West towards the Middle East and the Islamic world. While Turkey has indeed become more assertive in setting its own strategic and tactical objectives, this does not necessarily mean a divergence of Western and Turkish strategic objectives in the Middle East. Turkey is still a NATO member and a candidate state for EU accession. Yet some of the recent overtures of Turkish diplomacy lend credit to opinions that Turkey might be also interested in pursuing the role of an unaligned middle power (Lesser 2010), possibly in collaboration with other emerging powers, such as Brazil. In a recent interview, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu argued that Turkey "could already set its own strategic axis" (Anatolia News Agency 2010). For Turkey to follow the latter path, this would entail considerable medium- and long-term risks which would question its strategic interests. Turkey still needs the West more than the West needs Turkey. A shift of Turkey's foreign policy so it can better reflect its changing role in the Middle East could be expected. The success of this shift, however, is incumbent upon its ability to maintain its impeccable Western credentials as a full member of NATO and a state aiming full EU membership alongside reinforcing its ties with the Middle East. While Turkey is indeed gaining regional strategic weight, moving too fast in the direction of de-alignment is likely to create formidable risks and lead to significant turbulences and setbacks.

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