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Learning from the ‘Arab Spring’: Turkish Foreign Policy in Flux*

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Summary

Turkish foreign policy has been reconfigured in recent years, in order to address the rise of country into the group of "second-tier BRIC" states. Exaggerated expectations have, however, met with reality checks. Turkey's involvement in the "Arab Spring" has already taken a toll on the country's soft power potential, but it has also initiated a learning process for Turkish diplomacy. The potential as well as the limits of Turkey's ability to influence regional developments and undertake a leadership role have become clearer, while the negative effect of the Kurdish issue on Turkey's regional leadership potential appears to have been well understood. The re-launch of a negotiation process with Turkey's Kurds shows that the AKP government is aware of the damage inflicted to Turkey's capacity to act as arbiter and promote a human rights and democracy-based agenda in transition states in the Middle East. Otherwise, instead of becoming a crisis mediator and stability factor, Turkey may end up in the rather unhappy position of importing instability from the Middle East.

Key Words

Turkey, foreign policy, Arab Spring, soft power, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Kurdish Issue, BRIC, Middle East

LEARNING FROM THE "ARAB SPRING": TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN FLUX

Since the outbreak of the series of revolts in the Middle East that came to be dubbed as the “Arab Spring,” Turkish foreign policy in the region has attracted increasing attention. This was not only linked to a burgeoning literature on Turkey’s “new” foreign policy and renewed ambitions to develop an agenda commensurate with the country’s rising strategic weight. It was also due to Turkey’s increasing interest in the Middle East and its multi-fold involvement in the region’s economic, political and social affairs. Under the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) administration, a long era of relative neglect came to an end, and the Middle East occupied a central place in the new foreign policy agenda. This rising interest was reciprocated in the region. It was less than two years ago that Turkey’s star in the Middle East appeared to be on a steady rise. Turkey’s stellar economic performance and democratization steps in the last decade garnered appreciation across the globe. Particularly attracted to the Turkish achievements was the Middle East. Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan enjoyed spectacular popularity rates in the Arab public opinion, while his Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu advocated a “zero problems policy with neighbours” and argued in favour of Turkey’s “order-constituting role” in the region.

Nevertheless, this ambition came to face doubts, as the “Arab Spring” reshuffled the regional balance of power in the Middle East. Turkey’s ability to lead the region or even improve its strategic weight has been questioned. Relations with countries like Iran, Iraq and Syria have become increasingly strained, while Turkey has been accused of taking an increasingly sectarian approach to regional conflicts. Developments on the domestic front have not been forthcoming, either. The failure to achieve a lasting democratic solution to Turkey’s own Kurdish issue and renewed escalation of violence by the Kurdish Workers Party (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*-PKK) have brought to the fore Turkey’s own shortcomings in addressing minority rights and ethnic diversity, key issues in the context of the “Arab Spring” and democratic transition in the Middle East. Under these circumstances, Turkey’s soft power and potential to contribute to conflict resolution in the region appear curtailed. In particular, Turkey’s growing involvement in the Syrian crisis has exposed it to unprecedented risks both regarding its regional status as well as its domestic stability. In view of these, the latest initiative of the Turkish government with respect to the resolution of the Kurdish question, while probably linked with domestic political calculations, can also be viewed as an attempt to unlock Turkey’s regional potential by containing the negative effect of the unresolved Kurdish issue. The “Arab Spring” has proven to be a learning experience for many international actors, and Turkey is one of these.

The “Davutoğlu Doctrine” and the New Middle Eastern Reality

Turkey’s ambitions for a pivotal role in the Middle East and its emergence as a global actor were associated with its Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Being an academic, who had outlined his vision about Turkish foreign policy in his writings, Davutoğlu was given the rare privilege to move from theory to practice. According to what came to be known as “Davutoğlu Doctrine,” Turkey was more than a “bridge” between the West and the Muslim world; it was a “central power.” It professed multiple regional identities and was bound to develop a “multidimensional, proactive

foreign policy commensurate to its historic and geographic significance, underwritten by its Ottoman legacy.” Resolving Turkey’s bilateral problems with its neighbours would unlock its unrealized strategic potential. In his own words,

Turkey enjoys multiple regional identities and thus has the capability as well as the responsibility to follow an integrated and multidimensional foreign policy. The unique combination of our history and geography brings with it a sense of responsibility. To contribute actively towards conflict resolution and international peace and security in all these areas is a call of duty arising from the depths of a multidimensional history for Turkey.¹

Turkey’s rising role could be viewed in the context of the rising global influence of emerging economies. These have been referred to with the acronym BRIC, referring to Brazil, Russia, India and China. As a “second-tier BRIC state,” Turkey has enjoyed a stellar economic performance, which was linked to a sharp rise of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), single-digit inflation and growing trust in the national currency. These achievements underwrote its ambitions for a key regional and emerging global role, in line with the concomitant reconfiguration of strategic and diplomatic balances.

The political underpinnings of this success were also not negligible. In the early 2000s Turkey went a long way into improving its democratic record and bringing its Kurdish question close to a solution. This improved both its appeal in the region as well as its self-confidence. Finding a balance in the “democracy vs. security” dilemma that has haunted policy analysts in the Middle East allowed Turkey to appear as a model state in the region and source of inspiration for Arab reformists.

Meanwhile, the normative aspect of Turkish foreign policy was thought to make a big difference. Accusing the West of double standards when dealing with international conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, Erdoğan claimed that Turkey would bring a higher moral standard to global governance and politics and achieve a harmony of *Realpolitik* and norms-based foreign policy. He also enjoyed appearing as the defender of the dispossessed and the oppressed in the Middle East and beyond. In his words:

The communities that perceive themselves as the crushed, worn, propelled, victimized, and downtrodden, and the communities that have no belief in justice and sincerity, make it impossible to establish peace and stability on a global scale. This is what we have emphasized in our foreign policy. We defend justice, peace, law, and democracy in every area. We, as a conservative and democratic party, are struggling to hold both real and normative policy together.²

What would be the endgame? The stated aim was to turn Turkey into one of the ten biggest economies in the world by the year 2023, which is the centennial of the Republic of Turkey. In Davutoğlu’s words,

By 2023 when the country will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the republic, I envision a Turkey which is a full member of the EU after having completed all the necessary requirements, living in full peace with its neighbours, integrated with neighbouring basins in economic terms and for a common security vision, an effective player in setting orders in regions where our national interests lie, and active in all global affairs and among the top ten economies in the world.³

The Aircraft Carrier Project

One of the clearest manifestations of Turkey’s heightened ambitions has been the decision to

¹ Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkish Foreign Policy and the EU in 2010”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 8, no. 3 (2009), p. 12

² Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “The Changing Balances and the Rising Importance of Turkey”, *Paper presented at the Lecture delivered at the International Strategic Research Organization (USAK)* (Ankara, 3/2/2010)

³ Abdullah Bozkurt, “Davutoğlu Sees Turkey among Top 10 World Players by 2023”, *Today’s Zaman*, 5/1/2010

commission the construction of Turkey's first aircraft carrier vessel. While the project was not really new, it only became realistic due to Turkey's changing economic fortunes and strategic priorities. Following the November 2012 in principle approval of the aircraft carrier project by Turkey's Higher Military Council (*Yüksek Askeri Şura-YAŞ*), three Turkish companies submitted their bids for the construction of the first Turkish aircraft carrier. While press reports and estimates about the size, specifications and estimated cost of the vessel varied, the project remained a clear indication of Turkey's determination to enhance its regional clout and develop a global agenda.⁴ If the project comes to fruition, Turkey would become only the eighth country in the world to possess an aircraft carrier. This decision fitted well the expressed ambitions to play a major regional and emerging global role. It was expected to boost Turkey's capacity in dealing with humanitarian crises abroad and also becoming an actor in security crises, far from its borders.

The “Arab Spring” Litmus Test

Ever since the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor on 17 December 2010 resulted in the series of uprisings throughout the Arab world that were collectively called the “Arab Spring,” the seemingly impeccable authoritarian regimes of the Middle East have started crumbling. This historic moment provided a rare opportunity for the realization of the promises set out by the “Davutoğlu Doctrine.” Turkey could prove its leadership claims in the Middle East, at a time when leadership was more necessary than ever, and act as a catalyst in democratic transition in the region least affected by previous democratization waves. Nevertheless, its record has hitherto proven rather mixed. Relations with key states in the Middle East have sharply deteriorated, while Turkey has been accused of taking sides on sectarian grounds in regional conflicts rather than promoting peace, conflict resolution and democratic transition. Public comparisons between Syria and Kerbela made by Prime Minister Erdoğan in September 2012 have reinforced such allegations.⁵

Turkey and the Arab Spring-Official Views

Turkey's official policy towards the “Arab Spring” was outlined in a paper, authored by Foreign Minister Davutoğlu himself. This was said to consist of the following guiding principles:⁶

- a. “Support for the people who rise to demand such basic human rights”

This appeared to be in line with the new normative dimension in Turkish foreign policy which aimed not to sacrifice human rights or justice for *Realpolitik* interests.

- b. “Emphasis on the fact that transition towards stable and legitimate democratic political structures can only be achieved via a balance between security and freedom”

Turkey appeared thus to seek a fine balance between its interest in regional stability and security and the need to address the reality that regime change in the Middle East could be realized even through violent means.

⁴ Mümtaz'er Türköne, “Uçak Gemisi ile Dünyaya Açılmak”, *Zaman*, 3/1/2013

⁵ Merve Arkan, “Erdoğan: Suriye, Yeni Kerbela”, *Radikal*, 8/9/2012

⁶ Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring* [Center for Strategic Research, Vision Paper No. 3] (Ankara: SAM, 2012), pp. 7-8

- c. “No contradiction between emphasis on democratic demands, which in some cases required confronting repressive regimes and foreign policy principle of zero problems with neighbours”

In this rather ambitious statement, Davutoğlu claimed that Turkey could maintain friendly relations with its neighbouring states while simultaneously promoting regime change in some of them.

- d. “Opposition to foreign intervention because this region’s future has to be decided by its people”

In view of this, Turkey categorically opposed direct or indirect interventions by Western or other actors which could have a catalytic effect on the outcome of the Arab Spring.

- e. “All people of the region are Turkey’s “eternal brothers” irrespective of their background and saw it our duty to dampen sectarian tensions”

This was a clear pledge about Turkey opposition to sectarian politics and commitment to support the peaceful coexistence of diverse religious and ethnic groups in the Middle East. While these bold statements set a rather high bar for Turkish foreign policy, their operationalization has not always been successful.

The Early Phase of the Arab Spring

Turkey was caught by surprise when the “Arab Spring” broke out and was not alone in that. While regime change in Tunisia proved easier than expected, the course of events in Libya and Egypt was different. Turkey had strong economic interests in Libya and was apprehensive of regime change. Initially it opposed any foreign intervention, which appeared to imply continued support for the Qaddafi regime. Nonetheless, the Turkish government gradually aligned its position with Western states and withdrew its support for the Qaddafi regime. An attack by a Libyan mob on the Turkish Consulate in Benghazi in April 2011 indicated that Turkey’s position was becoming increasingly unpopular and unsustainable. Meanwhile, Turkey’s reaction to the Egyptian uprising was equivocal. Taking a firm position against the Mubarak regime and promoting regime change took some time given concerns that a new Egyptian regime might attempt to challenge Turkey’s regional influence. In the case of Bahrain, Turkey opted not to clash with Saudi determination to quell an uprising that threatened to move the country away from the bloc of Sunni Gulf monarchies and bring it closer to Iran. Such moves were understandable given Turkey’s regional interests and security concerns. Yet they were in disharmony with the normative role that Turkey aspired to play in regional and global politics. Turkey appeared to fall into inconsistencies which underlined that *Realpolitik* was Turkey’s main compass in the “Arab Spring,” despite lofty statements in the opposite direction.⁷

Relations with Iran

Turkey’s relations with Iran have been a key contention point in its relations with the West. In particular with reference to Iran’s nuclear program, Turkey saw an opportunity to signal its ambition to distance itself from the Western camp. Underlining Western double standards regarding the nuclear armament of Israel and Iran, Turkey defended in principle the right of Iran to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes and appeared willing to lend a considerable amount of trust to Iranian assurances that there was no intention to develop infrastructure for the production

⁷ While irrelevant to the “Arab Spring”, Turkey’s consistent support for the al-Bashir regime in Sudan, despite the International Criminal Court prosecution of the Sudanese president due to genocide crimes committed in Darfur, has been presented as another contradiction to the high moral standards set by the Turkish government.

of nuclear warheads. As the West took Iranian statements with a grain of salt, and speculation rose about a possible Israeli attack against Iranian nuclear plants, acrimonies rose in Turkey's relations with the United States and other key Western actors. Turkey and Brazil took distance from the United States and other Western states on the question of Iranian nuclear ambitions. In May 2010, they brokered an abortive "compromise agreement" and voted against a UN Security Council resolution regarding the Iranian nuclear enrichment program. The compromise deal was then hailed by the Turkish Prime Minister and the Brazilian President Lula as a turning point. Yet they failed to convince the rest of the members of the UN Security Council. The UN Security Council resolution, taken against the dissenting votes of Brazil and Turkey, raised speculation regarding Turkey's alignment with the West and the degree of its closeness to Iran. Following that highpoint, Iranian-Turkish relations have significantly cooled, and this trend has accelerated following the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Turkey and Iran found themselves on opposite sides in key confrontations, most importantly in Syria. While Turkey sided with opposition forces, Iran remained the single most important supporter of the Assad regime. As the crisis went on, Iran intensified its support for the Assad regime and turned its survival into a primary foreign policy objective. Meanwhile, after long hesitations, Turkey agreed in September 2011 to the installation of a NATO anti-ballistic missile defence system against a potential Iranian attack near the eastern city of Malatya. Turkey's decision to allow this installation manifested rising alienation and mistrust in bilateral relations. Mutual accusations of interference in Syrian domestic affairs in the context of the escalating Syrian civil war only added more tension to an increasingly strained relationship. As Turkey indexed its Syrian policy to the success of the opposition forces and Iran remained the strongest and most committed supporter of the Assad regime, Turkish-Iranian confrontation on the Syrian front reached unprecedented levels. The resurgence of the Kurdish issue as a result of the Arab Spring-related reconfiguration of the Middle East became an additional thorn. It was widely speculated that Iran alongside Syria could be willing to once again play the PKK card against Turkey. To maintain leverage against Turkey, Iran was also suspected of sabotaging any reconciliation attempts between Turkey and the PKK. The January 2013 assassination of three female PKK activists in Paris raised speculation in the Turkish press about a potential Iranian connection. Iran's steadily deteriorating relations with Israel also posed an additional challenge to bilateral relations. Last but not least, the possibility of an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructure posed a formidable risk factor to Turkey's Middle Eastern policy.

The Syrian Stalemate

Until the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in January 2011, Syrian-Turkish relations appeared to be the best example of the "zero problems with neighbours" policy. While the two countries had come to the brink of war in 1998, they later developed an ever closer economic and diplomatic relationship. Nevertheless, following the failure of Turkey's repeated attempts to mediate a compromise solution in the Syrian uprising, relations with the Syrian regime deteriorated sharply. Turkey turned into a key supporter for opposition forces which found safe haven in its adjacent to the Syrian border territory. In July 2012 Syrian forces shot down a Turkish aircraft offshore the Eastern Mediterranean coast under disputed conditions which indicated how damaged bilateral relations were. In September 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan came to the point of calling Syria a "terrorist state" and comparing what has happened in Syria with what happened in Kerbela, a direct reference to the bitter battle that sealed the division of the Muslim world into Sunni and Shiite.

Nevertheless, developments have pointed toward the intrinsic nature of the Syrian conflict. The Assad regime did not quickly collapse as the Qaddafi one and was able to attract considerable support from a segment of the Syrian population. As the uprising was turning into an open civil war, Turkey was accused of getting involved in sectarian activities through its support for the Syrian

Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey's increasing convergence with states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar as far as its handling of the Syrian crisis was concerned, questioned its commitment to democratic transition and respect for human rights in post-Assad Syria. It also reinforced the views of those who argued that Turkey drifted towards a sectarian policy and supported the emergence of a Sunni Islamist regime. Moreover, the tactical retreat of Syrian government forces from the northeast of the country also allowed local Kurdish groups affiliated with the PKK to claim control. This came as a shock to many in Turkey, as it appeared that Kurdish nationalists were benefiting from the havoc wrought in Syria by the civil war and the process of an independent Kurdistan. As there was no clear end in sight, Turkey was increasingly seen as a party in the Syrian conflict rather than a part of a solution.

What made the situation even more complicated was the lack of common position within the international community which contributed to the development of a stalemate on the battlefield. Iran, Russia and China stuck to their support for the Assad regime. Regarding the Western powers, their recognition of the Syrian opposition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people dealt a heavy diplomatic blow against the Assad regime. Yet the United States, the European Union and other Western actors were not ready to fully endorse the opposition forces and provide full military support. The existence of radical Islamist groups among the opposition forces alarmed many Western governments, as it became clear that several of the fighting groups in the Syrian civil war were not interested in Syria's transition towards democracy. The declaration of one of the strongest members of the opposition forces, the "Jabhat al-Nusra Front" as a terrorist organization by the United States underlined that Western states were not willing to fully endorse the Syrian opposition and were apprehensive about the situation after the prospective fall of the Assad regime. While there was growing consensus about the need to remove Assad from power, there was no consensus about the steps to the establishment of the post-Assad regime. The prospect of a long and protracted civil war in Syria loomed, as both sides seemed to enjoy significant popular support and to lack in the short term the means for a decisive military victory.

The involvement of the Kurdish question in the Syrian civil war was an additional complicating factor in the relations between Turkey and Syria. The withdrawal of Assad forces in the context of the Syrian civil war from Kurdish-inhabited provinces in north-eastern Syria was meant to reinforce the position of Kurdish groups affiliated with the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), such as the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*-PYD) and increase the cost of the AKP government's support for Syrian opposition. As PKK flags were flying opposite the Turkish border posts, the ensuing chaos in Syria appeared to complicate the dynamics of Turkey's own Kurdish question. As Turkey was clearly supporting opposition in the Syrian civil war, the Assad regime implied that it could help export instability and violence from Syria to Turkey. A bomb attack on the police department of the Turkish border city of Gaziantep in August 2012 was just one manifestation of such a spillover.

Relations with Iraq

Turkey's relations with post-Saddam Hussein Iraq were inevitably affected by the March 2003 surprise decision of the Turkish Parliament not to allow the use of Turkish territory by invading US troops. Turkey ended up without any military presence and strong influence in post-war Iraq and became increasingly apprehensive of any developments that led to rising legitimacy of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. While eventually relations with Iraqi Kurds and the KRG substantially improved, those with the Baghdad Shiite-controlled government deteriorated. Turkey was viewed as promoting sectarianism and decentralization in Iraq by promoting Sunni political parties and the KRG. Turkey's relations with the Nuri al-Maliki government in Baghdad have turned increasingly sour in recent months, and Turkey has been

accused of meddling in the domestic affairs of Iraq. Ankara appeared to take the side of the KRG against the Shiite-controlled Baghdad administration in such critical issues such as oil export and internal borders. The August 2012 visit of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu to northern Iraq and the city of Kirkuk, a city whose status remains disputed and has been claimed by the KRG and the federal government has added more tension. Accusations of involvement in Iraqi domestic affairs were amplified with the flight of the Sunni former Iraqi Prime Minister al-Hashimi to Turkey in April 2012, following accusations of having organized death squads to foment sectarian violence. While al-Hashimi was tried *in absentia* in Iraq and sentenced to death in September 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared his determination to provide al-Hashimi safe haven in Turkey. This added one more obstacle to the already difficult relations between Iraq and Turkey. The perception that Erdoğan's decision to back al-Hashimi was influenced by their common Sunni faith remained strong both in Iraq and Turkey. While al-Hashimi eventually left Turkey for Qatar, more incidents underlined the deterioration in bilateral relations. In December 2012 a visit of the Turkish energy minister Taner Yıldız to northern Iraq aimed to promote energy cooperation had to be cancelled following the refusal of the Iraqi federal authorities to grant landing permission to his airplane.

Turkey's increasing alignment with the KRG administration pointed at an unprecedented situation in which Turkey appeared to lend support for the positions of Iraqi Kurds against the Baghdad government. It was only a few years ago that Turkey vehemently opposed the partition of Iraq or even its federalization and considered *casus belli* any attempt to change the status quo in Kirkuk, let alone cede its administration to the KRG. Due to Kirkuk's control over sizable oil and natural gas fields, its control by the KRG had been perceived as critical to the self-sufficiency and the feasibility of potential secession plans of the KRG. Despite all these, Turkey appeared willing to implement a radical shift in its Iraq policy. Blossoming relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds were manifested in 2012, when the once despised in Turkey President of the KRG Massoud Barzani was one of the highest ranking foreign representatives and addressed the September 2012 congress of Turkey's government party, the AKP. Turkey appeared ready to lend legitimacy to the KRG by negotiating and signing lucrative energy deals, thus side-lining Baghdad, at a time when relations between Baghdad and Erbil, the capital of the KRG, were increasingly strained because they could not agree on the control and administration of the KRG energy wealth. While strong economic interests between Turkey and the KRG were building up, it remained unclear whether Baghdad could veto this rapprochement and what Turkey's leverage could be in a looming conflict between the Iraqi federal government and the KRG. On the other hand, this relationship also affected Turkey's own Kurdish conflict, due to the existence of PKK strongholds in northern Iraq. The presence of PKK administration and bases on Iraqi territory and recurrent operations of the Turkish armed forces inevitably implicated the KRG and Iraqi federal government in Turkey's Kurdish issue. Rising tensions between Ankara, Baghdad and Tehran meant that the PKK could rely on a lack of common policy regarding bringing an end to its operations and could even capitalize on existing discords.

The “Achilles Heel” of the Kurdish Issue-Conflict Resolution Efforts

While “Arab Spring” developments often posed challenges to Turkish foreign policy, a key problem re-emerged within the Turkish borders. The escalation of the Kurdish conflict threatened a key precondition set by the “Davutoğlu Doctrine” for the realization of Turkey's strategic potential and questioned one of the biggest successes of the AKP administration. In the first years of its rule, the AKP government had played a key role in promoting recognition of Kurdish rights and introducing a conflict resolution process. These peaked in November 2009, when thirty-four PKK members were allowed to return to Turkey, following an agreement with the government. This was the most courageous attempt by the Turkish government to promote reconciliation and possible amnesty for

PKK members who would be willing to give up violence and return to their ordinary lives.

Yet the reaction of Turkish public opinion against the images of triumphant Kurdish celebrations during the repatriation of the PKK militants led to a government U-turn. Returnees were eventually arrested, while state pressure on Kurdish and pro-Kurdish political activists increased. Hundreds of Kurdish local leaders and intellectuals were prosecuted according to anti-terrorism legislation for being members of the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan-KCK*) and were detained for months before standing for trial. The pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi-DTP*) was closed following a decision of the Constitutional Court in December 2009, while requests for primary education in Kurdish and decentralization expressed by its successor Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi-BDP*) have met with the opposition of the Turkish government. Kurdish political activists requested bilingual state primary education in the Kurdish-inhabited provinces of Turkey. While Prime Minister Erdoğan was demanding the same right for Turkish immigrants in Germany and warned against the threat of assimilation, he appeared unwilling to grant this right to his own citizens of Kurdish descent. Eventually the key elements of the “democratic opening” were abandoned and replaced by a policy that undermined conflict resolution steps and favoured a security-based approach of the Kurdish issue. The toll of this policy shift has been dismal: More than 750 people were killed in clashes between Turkish government forces and the PKK within the last fifteen months. The escalation of PKK violence and state operations is reminiscent of the pre-AKP period which has been remembered as one of the most violent and bloody periods in republican Turkish history.

Under these circumstances the AKP government has engaged in yet another peace effort aiming to achieve a breakthrough in the Kurdish issue. This latest initiative appeared to be in discord with a relapse of anti-Kurdish sentiment in Turkish public opinion. It expressed, however, the resolve of the AKP government to lead Turkish society on this issue. Hakan Fidan, the head of the Turkish intelligence service (*Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı-MİT*) was said to hold secret negotiations with the incarcerated historic PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, as well as with the PKK military leadership based in northern Iraq. Despite being imprisoned since 1999, Öcalan appeared to play a key role in the process, due to his recognition as an icon of the Kurdish struggle in Turkey. On the other hand, the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi-BDP*), that has represented Kurdish minority rights within Turkish political system was not claiming a key role in the process. On the contrary, while secret negotiations were taking place, BDP parliamentary delegates were facing threats for the lifting of their immunity, while hundreds of municipal leaders and other party members were facing charges of collaboration with the PKK. This paradoxical situation appeared not to undermine the dialogue *per se*, but raised concerns about the seriousness of the intentions of the parties.

The timing of the initiative was linked to both domestic and international conditions. Looking into Turkish domestic politics, the AKP government and Prime Minister had become alienated from the Kurdish minority, despite considerable inroads between 2002 and 2007. Disillusionment regarding the resolution of the Kurdish question, relapse of violence and persecution of Kurdish leaders contributed to that. As the critical election year 2014 was coming closer, domestic political calculations of Prime Minister Erdoğan had to take into account the Kurdish vote. The amendment of the Turkish constitution, the February 2014 municipal elections and most importantly the September 2014 first direct presidential elections would be turning points for the realization of Erdoğan’s ambitions. Engaging or at least not completely alienating Turkey’s Kurds appears to be one of the main reasons for the latest initiative.

Events on the international front were also conducive to a revival of the conflict resolution process. Turkey’s role as an exporter of stability, peace and norms was seriously undermined by the manifestation of its own shortcomings vis-à-vis the Kurdish question. The prospect of prolonged instability in Syria and the activities of PKK-affiliated Kurdish groups such as the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat-PYD*) in the northeast of the country raised concerns about a spillover effect within the Turkish territory. Rising tensions in Turkey’s bilateral relations with Iraq and Iran also meant that there was a high risk that the Kurdish issue could once again be used as

leverage against Turkey's regional interests at a time a reconfiguration of strategic balances was taking place in the Middle East.

While the AKP government appeared willing to re-launch a negotiation process, the prospects for a negotiated solution were not brighter than in previous opening occasions. As nationalistic discourses regarding the Kurdish issue had once again gained the upper hand following the failure of the "Kurdish Opening," two things remained unclear. First, whether the AKP government was willing to show greater determination and fend off against expected criticism and demonization of its latest initiative. As previous initiatives had unfolded, the AKP government had found it increasingly costly to continue with negotiations and resorted in mainstream nationalist mantras about the Kurdish issue that effectively derailed the process. Second, what the motives and power configuration within the other party, Turkey's Kurds were. The role and relations between the BDP, the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan remained a question of debate and speculation. It remained unclear which organization enjoyed the legitimacy among Turkey's Kurds to proceed with negotiations and come up with a binding peace agreement with the Turkish government. Meanwhile, the process remained sensitive to external shocks and sabotage. Several actors on both sides, as well as external actors taking a stake in the prolongation of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, were in a position to undermine the peace process. This also underlined how difficult conflict resolution and reconciliation could be. The January 2013 assassination of Sakine Cansız, a senior PKK functionary and two junior PKK members in Paris was evaluated as such an attempt to derail the already difficult dialogue process.

Conclusions

Turkish foreign policy has been reconfigured in recent years, in order to address the rise of Turkey into the group of “second-tier BRIC” states. New ambitions and aspirations have been frequently linked with the vision of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and have been best highlighted with Turkey’s decision to commission an aircraft carrier. Nevertheless, exaggerated expectations have already met with tough reality checks. In the case of the Middle East, Turkish foreign policy has faced formidable challenges since the outset of the “Arab Spring.” Its support for “Arab Spring” revolts has not been unequivocal, and in some cases, it took long before Turkey switched from cautious regime support to outright support for the opposition. In other cases such as in Bahrain, Turkey remained silent until the final suppression of the uprising. While Foreign Minister Davutoğlu stood for the compatibility of its support for regime change with the “zero problems with neighbours” policy, one cannot ignore the sharp deterioration in Turkey’s relations with all its Middle Eastern neighbours, Syria, Iraq and Iran. While opposition to external intervention was coined as a key principle of Turkey’s “Arab Spring” policy, Turkey itself joined -albeit late- the NATO camp in Libya and has actively supported the armed insurgency of Syrian opposition. Finally, as far as Turkey’s cordial relations with all ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East were concerned, this was also a hard position to defend, given that Turkey has been increasingly perceived as a supporter for Sunni political actors in the region. Turkey has been accused of taking a sectarian shift and allying with non-democratic forces in its foreign policy. These have taken a toll on the country’s soft power potential, which has been painstakingly accumulated after years of political reform and starring economic performance.

In view of these, Turkey’s ambition to play a major independent role has been compromised. In fact, a learning process for Turkish diplomacy has been initiated. The limits of Turkey’s ability to influence regional developments and undertake a leadership role have become clearer. Instead, Turkey has appeared more willing to seek common understanding with Western states and with the United States in particular. This entertains the opportunity of a rehabilitation of Turkish foreign policy within the Western strategic environment. On the other hand, relations with Iran maintain a strong deterioration potential. This is linked on the one hand with the Syrian civil war, the regional instability it has generated and the prospect of a protracted stalemate of a conflict in which Turkey and Iran have held opposite sides. Even in the case, however, of a breakthrough in the Syrian civil war, it is likely that in the short term bilateral relations may deteriorate. Developments with respect to the Iranian nuclear question can also lead to further complications. If Iran does develop nuclear weapons capabilities, Turkey will be among the losers in terms of regional influence and will have to investigate a whole new set of policy tools to avert a potential Iranian threat.

On the other hand, the negative effect of the Kurdish issue to Turkey’s soft power potential appears to have been well understood. The re-launch of a negotiation process with Turkey’s Kurds shows that the AKP government is aware of the damage inflicted to Turkey’s potential to act as arbiter and promote a human rights and democracy-based agenda in transition states in the Middle East. Nevertheless, in order to resolve the conflict more is required than resuscitating the peace process. Lessons from previous failed negotiations must inform the conduct of the new negotiation process which cannot be an end in itself. Creating the impression of an imminent solution may create a short-term positive effect. It may, however, backfire, if this is not followed by determination to come to the end of the process by supporting a compromise solution that would not be perceived as “defeat” by any of the parties. Recognizing Kurdish cultural rights, not far from what Turkey demands from the German government for its own immigrants, would be a useful starting point. This could help improve its relations with Kurdish groups throughout the

Middle East, following the hitherto successful example of the KRG in northern Iraq. Otherwise, instead of becoming a crisis mediator and stability factor, Turkey may end up in the rather unhappy position of importing instability from the Middle East.

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Το ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ (ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ) ιδρύθηκε το 1988 και λειτουργεί ως ένα ανεξάρτητο, μη κερδοσκοπικού χαρακτήρα ερευνητικό και επιμορφωτικό ίδρυμα. Μέσω του πολυετούς έργου του έχει αναδειχθεί σε σημαντικό φορέα πληροφόρησης, μελέτης και σχεδιασμού θεμάτων εξωτερικής πολιτικής, και θεωρείται ένα από τα πιο έγκριτα σε διεθνές επίπεδο κέντρα μελετών της Ελλάδας στον τομέα των Ευρωπαϊκών υποθέσεων και των διεθνών σχέσεων.

Το ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ δεν εκφράζει, ούτε εκπροσωπεί συγκεκριμένες πολιτικές απόψεις. Επιχειρεί μόνο να λειτουργήσει ως θήμα ελεύθερου διαλόγου και ως κέντρο παραγωγής και ανταλλαγής ιδεών.

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