

IDENTITY & TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST

Dr. Enver Gülseven

The relationship with the Middle East has been one of the key dimensions of Turkish foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. During the past two decades, Ankara aimed to become an active player in the regional affairs of the Middle East. Nevertheless, the formulation of policies towards this region has been complicated with the rise of identity politics in the country. This article will examine the relationship between different conceptions of Turkish identity and the variation in Turkish attitudes towards the Middle East.

Until the end of the Cold War, Ankara formulated its policy towards the Middle East from a non-regional approach in order to secure its self-ascribed Western identity.¹ In the initial decades of the republic, interaction with this region was maintained at a minimum level and Turkey promoted stability in its Middle East policy. For example, the Sadabad Pact signed between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan in 1937 only aimed to guarantee non-interference of members to each other's domestic affairs.² Similarly the Baghdad Pact signed between the UK, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan in 1955 was merely an extension of Turkey's role within the NATO. Towards the end of the Cold War, rising debates over Turkish identity, both in Turkey itself and in the wider world, affected its Middle East policy as well. During 1980s, Ankara started to pursue a much more active foreign policy in its own region by promoting economic and cultural co-operation with its Middle Eastern neighbors.

The end of Cold War further intensified identity debates in Turkey and empowered actors who challenged the Western orientation of Turkish foreign policy. Particularly in 1990s, an intense debate emerged between the vision of isolation and the vision of engagement in regards to the Middle East. In other words, relations with the Middle East have become another source of polarization between Turkey's conflicting identities. When the Welfare Party came to power in 1996, the government signaled the re-orientation of Turkish foreign policy by proposing a hegemonic relationship with the Islamic world and the establishment of several international institutions between Islamic countries. Prime Minister Erbakan's visits to Iran and Libya also indicated a potential change in the axis of Turkish foreign policy. Nevertheless, this attempt was halted by the Turkish military who forced

¹ Robins, P., *Turkey and the Middle East*, (London: Thomson Learning, 1991), p.25

² See Criss, B. and Bilgin, P., "Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Middle East", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.1, No.1, (1997)

Erbakan to resign on 28 February 1997. In the context of rising identity insecurity, the military has sought to overcome Turkey's isolation within the Western world, manifested with the EU's refusal of its candidacy in 1997, through the new alliance with Israel. Turkish military elite and Ashkenazi Israeli elite shared a collective identification with the West. Therefore, relations with this country were seen in terms of Turkey's Western orientation in foreign policy. While deepening its relationship with Israel, Ankara cooled its relations with its Muslim neighbors. Indeed Turkey and Syria came to brink of war in 1998 when the Turkish government threatened to use force in case of the continuation of Syrian support to PKK.

Nonetheless, the parameters of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East changed after the recognition of the country's EU candidacy in 1999. The principle of conditionality that the union employs with its candidates has allowed Ankara to develop a new "soft power" foreign policy towards its neighborhood. This transformation was accelerated after the establishment of the Justice & Development Party (AKP) government in late 2002 which developed the "strategic depth" doctrine based on the policy of "zero problems with neighbors". This new understanding was not only a result of Turkey's Europeanization process. But it also reflected the view of its new political elites who perceived Turkey's Muslim identity and Ottoman legacy as sources of the country's "soft power".³

In this context, Ankara developed closer political ties with Syria and Iran and enhanced its economic cooperation with the rest of the region. During the US-led invasion of Iraq, the Turkish government refused the passage of coalition forces from its territory. Following the end of the war, Ankara initiated the platform for Iraqi neighbors who shared common interests on the territorial integrity of Iraq. The autonomous policy of Turkey and its pro-active diplomacy during the war boosted its prestige in the Arab world and enabled Ankara to play a mediator role in the Arab-Israeli conflict as well. Between 2007 and 2008, Ankara mediated in the indirect talks between Israel and Syria. Moreover, it also has attempted to mediate between Israel and Hamas. Nonetheless, Turkey's regional mediator role has been challenged since 2009 considering the election of the hardliner Netanyahu government in Israel and the increasingly sensitive public opinion in Turkey. Democratization of Turkey in the EU context, made the government more accountable and sensitive to public

³ See Murinson, A., "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42(6) (November: 2006): 945-964

opinion while Israel's excessive use of force against Palestinians created a strong resentment against Israel in the Turkish public.⁴ The relations between the two countries particularly deteriorated following the 2009 Gaza War and the 2010 Gaza flotilla raid.

In addition to the deterioration of its relations with Israel, the "Arab Spring" also created new opportunities and challenges for Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East. In this new context, Ankara welcomed the rise of democratizing movements in the region who perceived Turkey as a model for political and economic development. Supporting opposition in countries like Yemen, Tunisia and Egypt were relatively easy for Ankara. However, when the "Arab spring" spread to its own neighborhood, most notably Syria, Turkey was careful due to its economic links and improved relations with this country.⁵ Initially, the Turkish government encouraged the Syrian regime to implement reforms and accommodate the demands of the opposition. However, when Damascus ignored such calls and started using excessive force against the opposition, Ankara began fully supporting the Syrian opposition despite its "zero problems with neighbors" policy. Even though supporting democratic change in Syria was in line with Turkey's aim to become a "soft power" in the region, the painful transition and instability at its borders posed many security threats for the country. As the Syrian civil war continues, millions of refugees have flocked to Turkey and further deepened the country's identity problem regarding its own Kurdish minority. The politicization of sectarian identities, namely Sunni-Alevi divisions, is also an important destabilizing factor for Turkish politics.⁶

To conclude, identity concerns since the establishment of the republic have prevented Turkey to be an effective player in the Middle East despite its strong historical and cultural links with the region. Even though Ankara recently enhanced its influence in the region, the deepening of identity problems complicates the definition of its interests, brings an ambivalent foreign policy in Syria and also undermines its willingness for more engagement against the newly-emerged threat from non-state actors, most notably the "Islamic State of Iraq & the Levant". In brief, Turkey's capacity to exercise "soft power" and contribute to stability and democratization in its region is still constrained by its insecure identity.

⁴ Tocci, N., "Switching Side sor Novel Force? Turkey's Relations with Israel and the Palestinians", *Debating Security in Turkey*, edited by Ebru Canan Sokollu, (Lexington Books, 2013), p.150

⁵ Sümer, F., "Turkey's Changing Foreign Policy & the Arab Spring", *The Innovation Journal*, Vol.18, Issue1, (2013) 20

⁶ Kardaş, Ş., "Turkey & the Arab Spring", *Caspian Report Spring*, (2013), 122