



TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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Vol. 3, No. 12, September 2019

Time for route re-calculation for Turkish foreign policy

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Ten years ago, then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu came to a crossroads in their Middle East policy. Erdoğan's first term as head of government (2003-2007) had not yet definitively strayed from the legacy left by İsmail Cem, who had served as foreign minister in the Bülent Ecevit government. Cem's foreign policy reflected the principle of "zero problems," especially with Greece and Middle Eastern countries, to include Israel.

A number of events led Ankara to carve out a new path in its foreign policy. These included the acrimonious dialogue between Erdoğan and then-Israeli President Shimon Peres at the Davos Summit in January 2009, the Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010, and finally the 'Arab Spring' and the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

This new foreign policy was popularly dubbed "neo-Ottomanism." It is necessary to briefly mention the period prior to 2009 to be able to analyze how this approach brought results for Middle East policies and, especially, for Turkey's interests in Israel, Syria, and the Mediterranean. Immediately after coming to power, Erdoğan's government famously engaged in close and intense relationships with both the EU and Middle Eastern countries. In 2005, then-foreign minister Abdullah Gül¹ maintained efforts at negotiations with the EU for full membership, while Erdoğan concurrently made a historic visit to Israel with a plane full of business executives in the same year.² This was the first visit to Israel at the prime ministerial level, following former Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz's 1998 visit. Turkey also assumed the role of mediator between Israel and Syria, in an ostensible effort to promote stability and peace in the region. This role also carried benefit for Turkey, which was thus able to underline its unique soft power ability. It was striking that Erdoğan and Assad visited one another to promote this initiative.³

After the infamous Davos summit, Turkey distanced itself gradually from İsmail Cem's meticulously implemented policies of being "multifaceted," "a mediator," "a moderator," and "balanced." The 2011 Syrian Civil War became the most important milestone of this policy change. Davutoğlu's unrealistic, emotional, neo-Ottomanist foreign policy vision was

manifested in his public statements, to include an expressed desire to perform Friday prayers at the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus. Taken together, this period can be acknowledged as an important and almost irreversible inflection point.⁴

Can Turkey keep Israel, with whom it once had close relations, on its side as it pursues its various interests in the region, especially in northern Iraq? Again, the answer is not anymore. By implementing its partisan neo-Ottoman policy, Ankara endangers its own economic interests - including in the exclusive economic region of the eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, Turkey's antagonistic stance towards Israel and other countries in that region has motivated four of these countries (Israel, Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt) to cooperate in opposition. Turkey now seeks to limit these four countries' power in the eastern Mediterranean through use of the Turkish Navy and seismic and drilling ships.⁵

One important clue as to the mere instrumentality of increased Turkish critical rhetoric against Israel is this: no matter the level of public enmity, behind-the-scenes economic and commercial cooperation between the two countries has continued apace. In fact, the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) noted in March 2019 that Turkey's exports to Israel have grown more than those to any other country. Moreover, the volume of Turkish-Israeli trade in 2018 reached 6 billion USD, making Turkey's commercial relationship with Israel more significant than those with Saudi Arabia or Qatar.⁶ Thus, in sharp contrast to the diplomatic rhetoric between the two countries since 2009, the volume of trade between Turkey and Israel has in fact increased.

So what has Turkey achieved by publicly distancing itself from a regional power such as Israel? At present, can Turkey speak "with every country at the same time" in the Middle East, as it once claimed to be able to? The answer is clearly negative. Moreover, in this sense it has been largely replaced by Russia, who can now forcefully retain relations with Iran, Israel, Egypt and other regional actors. Indeed, Russia has been the major beneficiary of recent regional developments, especially since deepening its military presence in Syria.

Russia's armed forces now not only share a maritime border on the Black Sea with Turkey, but also a land border within Syrian territory to Turkey's south. The militaries of both countries have engaged in much-publicized cooperation, which has caused some to question Turkey's continued commitment to the NATO alliance.⁷ While the development of relations with Russia have suited Turkey's intrinsic "multifaceted and balancing" foreign policy, Turkey must realize the fact that the warming ties between the two nations were not translated into Russian ostracization of either Israel or Syria on Turkey's behalf.

Ultimately, Turkey must face significant choices. How far should it distance itself from those two countries? Can it recover the ability to conduct a multilateral foreign policy with all nations in the region, or will it continue its current policy of brinksmanship? Given the current situation, it seems that Turkey will not achieve its goals in the short run unless it implements a radical shift in its foreign policy. It must not be forgotten that international relations are primarily conducted to benefit and reflect "constant interests," and not a particular state of "friendship" or "hostility" between nations.

On these grounds, Ankara must regain the capability to engage with Jerusalem and Damascus –as well as Cairo, Tehran, and Riyadh – much as Putin’s Russia does. Today more than ever, Turkey needs to return to its pre-2009 diplomacy, which was based upon soft power. Unless Turkey will change its orientation towards the Middle East in general, and towards Israel and Syria in particular, no one can speak about a stable national security environment for Turkey. Therefore Turkey's "Precious Loneliness" should come to an end in order to maximize immediate Turkish interests in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

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Notes

¹ Between 2002-2003 Abdullah Gül acted as Turkey's Prime Minister while in 2007, he was elected as country's 11th president (2007-2014).

² Alon Liel and Can Yirik, *Turkish-Israeli Relations (1949-2010)*, (Istanbul Kültür University, 2010), p: 186-188.

³ "Suriye-İsrail görüştü, Türkiye arabulucu", BBC Türkçe, January 16, 2007,

http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2007/01/070116_syria_israel_tr.shtml [Accessed: July 22, 2019]

⁴ "Bir gün Kudüs'te namaz kılacağız", Yeni Şafak, July 10, 2010, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/bir-gun-kuduste-namaz-kilacagiz-267397>[Accessed: July 22, 2019]

⁵ Mustafa Kemal Erdemol, Doğu Akdeniz'de Türkiye'yi ne bekliyor?, Cumhuriyet, May 12, 2019,

http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/1388517/Doğu_Akdeniz_de_Turkiye_yi_ne_bekliyor_.html , july 8, 2019 [Accessed: July 22, 2019]

⁶ "0.5'lik mart rekoru", Hürriyet, April 5, 2019, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/0-5lik-mart-rekoru-41172872>[Accessed: July 22, 2019]

⁷ Dorian Jones, "Turkish-Russian Military Cooperation Deepens Amid US-Turkish Tensions," VOA, 12 March 2019. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/europe/turkish-russian-military-cooperation-deepens-amid-us-turkish-tensions>. Last accessed 19 August 2019.