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Turkey's regional policy in the shadow of the Gaza War

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Having won in May the most challenging elections since he first rose to power two decades ago, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gravitated, once again, toward the Middle East. In fact, during the last decade his attention was mostly focused on the Kurdish regions of Syria and Iraq.

However, the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas and the Israeli declaration of war on Hamas and its partners in the Gaza Strip shifted Ankara's attention toward the dramatic events that were unfolding at the heart of the Middle East.

Turkey's position in the region is currently based on the implementation of a two-sided regional policy. One side is the long-term policy in north Syria and Iraq, characterized by a perpetual low-intensity conflict with the Kurdish forces of the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). The other side focuses on the wider Middle East, and is shaped by multilateral diplomatic negotiations and a series of economic deals. However, both policy aspects are influenced, in different degrees, by Erdoğan's domestic agenda, and also by the abrupt geopolitical convulsions of the region.

Turkey's policy in Syria and Iraq

On October 17, the Turkish Grand National Assembly voted to extend the mandate to Turkey's armed forces for the conduct of military operations inside Syria and Iraq for another two years. In the Assembly, Erdoğan highlighted the "terrorist threats and security risks that are posed by the terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria."¹ The bill was passed with 357 votes in favor and 164 against. It was supported not only by the parties of the ruling coalition, but also by opposition parties, including the nationalist Good Party (İyi Parti) and the center-right Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA Partisi), thus creating a rift within the opposition.² This was the second consecutive time that the Assembly had authorized a two-year extension for the conduct of military operations inside Syria and Iraq. In fact, the October 2021 two-year extension was an unprecedented authorization because until then, all mandates by the parliament for the conduct of military operations abroad had been limited to a one-year duration.³

It was a clear indication of the continuing importance and weight that Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) have been infusing on Turkey's military incursions inside Syria and Iraq. In Syria, after three separate military invasions between 2016 and 2019 -Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), Operation Olive Branch (2018) and Operation Peace Spring (2019) respectively - the Turkish Armed Forces occupied a large area in northern Syria, adjacent to the Turkish territory that extended from the northwest of Aleppo to the east of the Euphrates. In Iraq, where Ankara has established a number of permanent military outposts, Operation Claw Lock (2022) followed Operation Claw (2019) against the PKK.⁴

The parliament vote of October 17 came on the heels of the terrorist attack that was carried out by an offshoot organization of the PKK in front of the Interior Ministry on October 1. The bombing attack injured two police officers and led to the targeting by Turkish jets and drones of various YPG and PKK positions in Syria and Iraq.⁵ Turkey's permanent military presence in northern Syria and Iraq, and the periodic airstrikes with the use of military jets, drones, and artillery, have transformed these military operations into conflicts with no resolution in sight.

The importance of the AKP's policy in northern Syria and Iraq lies in its close integration with Erdoğan's domestic agenda. Since August 2016 and the launch of the first major military incursion west of the Euphrates, Erdoğan and the AKP have used their policy in northern Syria as a process for the transformation of Turkey's domestic politics and the prolongation of their political

dominance. In the president's narrative and through his policies, the military operations in northern Syria against the YPG have been merged with an organized de-legitimization campaign against the pro-Kurdish HDP, as well as against other liberal domestic political opponents, leading to the constant reshaping of the Turkish political system to his advantage.⁶

Therefore, Ankara's policy over the past eight years in the immediate region of Syria and Iraq has been inseparable from Erdoğan's domestic agenda. Consequently, Turkish policy in Syria and Iraq has acquired, at least since 2016, a sustained form that stems from the AKP's domestic political needs and also from the less volatile conditions in the northern regions of Syria and Iraq.

Turkey's policy in the wider Middle East

Ankara's current policy in the wider region of the Middle East is also driven by Erdoğan's domestic agenda. However, its implementation is more prone to the various geopolitical convulsions and the regional realignments and ruptures that these provoke. Despite the fact that, for the largest part of the civil wars in Syria and Libya, Ankara had locked horns with most regional actors, during the last few years it has been mending relations with the Arab Gulf monarchies, as well as with Egypt and Iran. The rulers of the Middle East, among them Erdoğan, have opted to decrease the tension in the region and to shift gears, in an attempt to contain the maladies of radicalism and sectarianism, which could transmit their ideological fervor and instability into their authoritarian republics and monarchies and unsettle their centers of power.

Turkey's fragile relations with Israel had also been improving during the last two years, a process that culminated in the September 20 meeting in New York between President Erdoğan and the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The first face to face meeting between the two leaders signified an important thaw in the Israeli-Turkish relations, severely ruptured since the 2008/2009 Gaza War.⁷ The Israeli-Turkish thaw was facilitated by the warming up, within the context of the Abraham Accords, of the relations between Israel and the Gulf monarchies. The Turkish presidency had criticized the Emirati monarchy for establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel in 2020 and had threatened to sever diplomatic relations with the Gulf state.⁸ Nevertheless, Ankara could not ignore the political and economic influence of the Abraham Accords, particularly in light of the deteriorating condition of Turkey's economy.⁹ It is in this context that the eruption of the new war in Gaza has created another convulsion across the geopolitical landscape of the

Middle East. The war in Gaza has led to a fresh rupture in the fragile Israeli-Turkish relations, reversing much of the progress that had been made during the last two years.

Moreover, the Gaza War has readjusted Turkey's regional perspective and has shifted it closer to that of Iran. Until 2016, Ankara's and Tehran's regional objectives had been colliding across the Syrian battlefield, initially about the fate of the Assad regime and subsequently about the political and ideological future of the Levant. After Ankara's understanding with Moscow, which eventually led to the Astana process, Turkey and Iran settled on their respective interests within Syria's fragmented lands. Turkey focused on countering the Kurdish expansion across the Euphrates in northern Syria, while Iran tried to entrench its paramilitary presence from the Syrian-Iraqi border all the way to Lebanon and the Golan. Moreover, the rising domestic challenges to the political dominance of President Erdoğan and Supreme Leader Khamenei were met by both leaders with deepening authoritarianism and violence. During this era of domestic turmoil and suppression of dissent, Ankara and Tehran found themselves seeing eye to eye more often.

After the eruption of the new Gaza War, the common ground between Turkish and Iranian policies has expanded. Both Turkey and Iran view the renewed US military presence in the Middle East as a very negative repercussion of the Gaza War and as a setback for their common objective of pushing US forces out of their respective areas of interest. While Ankara and Tehran might want to reduce the American military presence in the region, Ankara sees America as a limiting force, while Tehran sees America as an actual enemy.

For Turkey, this means the withdrawal of US forces from north Syria and the termination of their ties with the Kurds. For Iran, it means the US exit from Iraq and particularly from the strategic border crossings to Syria.¹⁰ Considering this, both Turkey and Iran see the US military presence in the Middle East as an obstacle to their regional policy and as a factor of potential military escalation, whether purposefully or unintentionally. Recent incidents, such as the downing of an armed Turkish drone by an American fighter in northern Syria in October and the US strikes on pro-Iranian positions in Syria in November have enhanced further this view in Ankara and Tehran.¹¹

Beyond the defeat of Hamas, an ally of both Turkey and Iran, a second major concern for Ankara and Tehran is the ripple effect of the Gaza War, particularly in Lebanon and Syria. A total war between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Hezbollah in the Israel-Lebanon border would put

the Iranian regime in a very difficult position, especially in light of the recently strengthened US naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey, on the other hand, is more concerned about the ripple effect of the Gaza War in Syria. Ankara remains relatively comfortable with the frozen conflict in Syria and the gradual, even if unclear, easing of tensions with the Assad regime. Although the situation remains precarious, it currently provides Erdoğan with enough latitude to follow his policy in northern Syria without having to worry about a major aggravation. The expansion of the war across the Levant could destabilize this fragile condition and thrust Syria into another round of violence, threatening the Turkish position in the country's north.

Turkey is also apprehensive about the possible diplomatic and economic repercussions of the Gaza War.¹² The reverberations from the Gaza War have been felt from the Gulf area to the North African states and Turkey's pursuit of foreign capital, investments and trade deals are heavily dependent on a number of regional diplomatic breakthroughs that have been completed over the past two years. As the Gaza War is undoubtedly a very serious political test for most Arab capitals, Ankara is worried about the extent of the possible damage that could be inflicted on this recently formed diplomatic landscape.

The end result is that Turkey's regional policy is susceptible to the ripple effect of the Gaza War. The two aspects of Ankara's policy in the Middle East – a sustained policy of low-intensity conflict in Syria and Iraq and a policy of diplomacy and trade deals in the rest of the region remain relatively intact for the moment. But the Gaza War threatens to pull Turkey deeper into another Middle Eastern vortex and to unravel, in the process, Erdoğan's complex and yet fragile regional policy.

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Notes

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 - ² “Suriye-Irak tezkeresinin süresi 2 yıl uzaldı: İyi Parti ‘hayir’ oyu kullanan CHP’yi elestirdi“, *BBC*, October 17, 2023.
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 - ¹¹ “US Shoots Down Armed Turkish Drone After it Came Too Close to US Troops in Syria“, *Associated Press*, October 6, 2023; “US Announces Fresh Strikes on Iran-linked Sites in Syria“, *Guardian*, November 13, 2023.
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