Turkey’s Shifting Relations with its

Middle East Neighbors during the Davutoğlu Era:

History, Power and Policy

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| **Abstract**: Turkey’s relationship with its Middle East neighbours has undergone a significant evolution over the last decade and is now being put under unexpected strain by the Arab uprisings of 2011. With the country’s new economic dynamism making it a leading regional power, understanding this relationship has became of increased importance. While Turkish economic rapprochement with its Middle East neighbours can be traced back to political developments throughout the latter 20th century, particularly the Özal era, this rapprochement has been accelerated and taken on new diplomatic and cultural dimensions under the AKP administration thanks to Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu’s new foreign policy doctrine. This article analyses three key relationships in Turkey’s Middle East policy: those with the semi-autonomous Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, the Syrian government, and the Iranian government. It concludes that key elements of Davutoğlu era policy must be maintained in order to safeguard Turkey’s new economic, political and cultural power in the Middle East. **Key Words**: Davutoğlu, Turkish Foreign Policy, Middle East |

**Introduction**

In recent decades, the Turkish state and the Turkish business community and civil society have engaged ever more proactively with the country’s Middle East neighbours. Much analysis of Turkey has focussed on the significance of this shift, the role of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and what it means for the future of Turkey and its place in the region.

For all the significance of the rise of the AKP within Turkish politics, the party might not have received such international scrutiny were it not for its strikingly proactive foreign policy. The policy framework that Ahmet Davutoğlu, the current Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs designed in his book *Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye’nin uluslararası konumu* (Davutoğlu, 2001) has been a fundamental influence on the foreign policy of the AKP administration. The key to Davutoğlu’s thinking was that Turkey should be exploiting its position as a “central country” (Hale, 2009: 144) within a vital region of the world, something he felt it had thus far failed to do. This was achievable by developing ‘strategic depth’, essentially meaning the development and diversification of ties with the Middle East, Asia and Africa to complement those already entrenched ties with Europe and the USA. A central feature of this policy has been the concept of ‘zero problems with neighbours’ (Kirişci, 2011: 43; Öniş, 2011: 50; Kirişci et al, 2010: 3). Though this concept bears a striking resemblance to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s foreign policy mantra – ‘Peace at home, peace in the world’ (Mango, 1999: 526) – it is a striking departure from the reality of the state’s foreign relations throughout much of the 20th century, in which problems with neighbours has been a recurring theme. Indeed, for significant periods Turkey has been “locked into intense conflict” with its immediate neighbourhood (Kirişçi, 2011: 43). Davutoğlu (2008: 81) has written of a, “mutual psychological barrier”, that has held back Turkey and the Middle East from engagement in the past. In this, he is primarily highlighting the complex self-perceptions of Arabs, Iranians and Turks and a mutual vilification of one another rooted in the ethnic nationalisms of the 19th and 20th centuries. The term Davutoğlu suggested to guide this new Turkish foreign policy – “proactive peace” (Fuller, 2008: 79) – perhaps reveals its key divergence with Kemalist foreign policy, for Atatürk’s vision was one of inward-looking nation building, not proactive engagement abroad (Renkliyıldırım, 1985: 104).

Davutoğlu’s vision, however, is not uniquely his own. Fuller sees a shift occurring from the early 1960s, as policymakers became aware of the pitfalls of an exclusively Western orientation in the years following the Democratic Party’s opening up of the Turkish political space (Fuller, 2008: 39). More overt was the change ushered in by the government of Turgut Özal in the 1990s. Under Özal’s leadership, the Turkish private sector moved into Iraq, Iran and the Gulf States as well as signing “large scale construction contracts” in Libya (Larrabee & Lesser, 2003: 128).

This paper will explore how Turkish foreign policy towards its immediate Middle East neighbours has evolved under the AKP administration, with particular reference to the thinking of Ahmet Davutoğlu, a key ideologue within the ruling administration. Though not the sole source for the construction of AKP policy within this area, Davutoğlu’s ideas are of considerable interest due to his role until 2009 as senior adviser to the AKP Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his appointment within the Erdoğan cabinet as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009. In the light of an analysis of Davutoğlu’s thinking on foreign policy, this paper will consider the evolution of Turkish soft and hard power within the Middle East, and analyse specific policy towards Turkey’s three key Middle East neighbours: the semi-autonomous Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, the Syrian state, and the Iranian state.

**The History-Foreign Policy Connection**

**from Davutoğlu’s Perspective**

Davutoğlu’s vision for Turkish foreign policy is a development of his wider vision of Turkey and its neighbourhood. It has been termed by both his supporters and critics as ‘neo-Ottoman’ (Danforth, 2008; Murinson, 2006), a phrase first used by Cengiz Çandar to describe the more engaged foreign policy of the Özal government of the 1990s, and reflecting the imperial legacy of Ottoman rule in the Middle East, Anatolia and the Balkans. This analysis came from various articulations by Davutoğlu of his new policy direction, such as a speech he gave in Sarajevo in 2009, where he referred to an edict issued by an Ottoman Sultan on 28 May 1463 guaranteeing religious freedom within Ottoman domains (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, 14 December 2009) and a speech he gave in 2010 that considered how, “traditional geographical regions are re-emerging in a cultural, political and economic senseî (Davutoğlu, 2010). Davutoğlu himself has refuted the claim of ‘neo-Ottomanism’, suggesting rather that his vision merely acknowledges an existing cultural depth and common history shared by the people of former Ottoman lands (*Balkan Insight*, 26 April 2011). Though it is a history with both positive and negative aspects, Davutoğlu has suggested that the positive should be emphasised in this shared history, and indeed has suggested that the Ottoman period represented a “golden age of peace” for the people of the region (*Balkan Insight*, 26 April 2011). Falk (2009) has portrayed Davutoğlu’s policy orientation as “a corrective to a narrowly conceived nationalism that never looked back further than the ideas and guidance of the founder of the modern Turkish state, Kemal Atatürk.”

This analysis, in suggesting that Turkish nationalism did not engage with pre-republican history, simplifies the reality. The Turkish nationalism espoused by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the Kemalist regime was constructed around a specifically Turkic reading of history, such as in the development of the Sun Language Theory, which suggested that Turks and Turkish were the roots of all civilisations and language (Lewis, 2002: 435). Prior to the emergence of European concepts of ethnic nationalism, however, the Ottoman Empire placed a far greater emphasis on religion in the formation of identity than ethnicity, as is evident in the *millet* system by which the empire was governed (Lewis, 2002: 334-5). The history of the Turkish Republic in the 20th century was one of a Turkish nationalism that specifically rejected this Ottoman Islamic history of the Turks. A re-consideration of the collective Ottoman past in a more positive light is a characteristic of Davutoğlu’s regional foreign policy vision.

Davutoğlu has further suggested key principles that underpin AKP foreign policy towards the Middle East region: namely, promoting security with and through democracy, zero problems and the development of deeper relations with neighbours, and a consciously visible engagement with multiple actors and international bodies across the region (Davutoğlu, 2008). These principles demonstrate a belief in the interdependence of stability and democracy, but also a belief that Turkey will gain security in the region through engagement rather than disengagement. According to Davutoğlu’s assessment, Turkey “cannot define itself in a defensive manner” (Davutoğlu, 2008: 78), an attitude that had been the overriding policy of the Kemalist state towards its Middle East relations.

In order to understand how Davutoğlu’s vision has been adopted in practice, it is necessary to analyse the evolution of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP government. A key component of this evolution has been the increased projection of Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East region, in some cases as a complement to the state’s hard power, and in others as an alternative. The following chapter will consider the projection of Turkey’s soft power and the ways in which proponents of the state’s hard power capacity have responded to these developments.

**Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East**

It has been suggested that Turks see the Middle East “more as a sphere of risk than as a sphere of opportunity” (Larrabee & Lesser, 2003: 127, with reference to a formulation by Alan Makovsky). The securitisation of foreign policy towards Turkey’s Middle East neighbours has, for much of the 20th century, meant interaction based on the threat of military, or hard power. A key element in Davutoğlu’s foreign policy agenda and in the policy of the AKP administrations since 2002 has been the increased use of other foreign policy levers, both economic and diplomatic, in the pursuit of Turkey’s objectives.

*A multi-level approach to foreign policy:*

*the path to the rise of economic and diplomatic power*

The ultimate goal of Davutoğlu’s concept of strategic depth is, this article argues, not merely Turkish economic and political success, but ultimately Turkish soft power projection, particularly within the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean region. Soft power is something that will come not from government policy but from the inevitable fruits of economic, political and cultural success. The concept of soft power was first expounded by Joseph S Nye, Jr. of Harvard University in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* and developed in his 2004 publication *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. He suggested that in the post-Cold War world order, increasing power could be exercised through an actor’s ability to attract other actors through its values, culture and institutions, rather than having to force acceptance through coercion (Nye, 1990: 167).

Turkey remained neutral throughout the Iran-Iraq War, dramatically improving its economic situation by continuing trade with both sides (Fuller, 2008: 40). It was a foreign policy approach that put Turkey’s national interests before ideological concerns, and was a significant departure from Cold War doctrine. However, it was reminiscent of Sweden’s economically successful political neutrality during the Second World War, and what it revealed were the benefits of tying foreign policy to economic realities.

Under Turgut Özal’s leadership, Turkey integrated economic imperatives into its foreign policy as never before (Fuller, 2008: 40), focusing on the Middle East as an area of potential growth. However, where Özal initiated economic rapprochement, the AKP would bring large-scale investment alongside increased political and cultural engagement.

In line with Davutoğlu’s vision of Turkey as a ‘central country’, the state has become an ever more important transporter of energy under the AKP administration. Turkey is “central to the East-West energy corridor”, as Davutoğlu (2008: 91) has termed it, and is presenting itself as a potential energy hub. While Turkey may not hold energy resources, it does hold the geographical position to be able to offer key transit routes out of the energy-rich Caspian basin and Iranian and Iraqi fields to the Mediterranean and the West.

Resources are becoming a greater factor in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey is somewhat unusual in the Middle East region in that it is a large country with barely any energy resources of its own. The need to import growing quantities of oil and natural gas in order to maintain the economic growth at the heart of Turkey’s emerging dynamism is a vital foreign policy concern. Much of Turkey’s natural gas comes from Russia, with whom Turkey has developed economic relations since the end of the Cold War. Turkey is also looking increasingly to the Middle East as another viable source of energy procurement. The diversification of energy sources will safeguard Turkey against reliance on a single country for its energy needs.

The South-eastern Anatolia Project (GAP) that has brought massive dam building to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Turkey is driven by the need for Middle Eastern energy resources (Machowski, 2010). The Middle East states are awash with oil, much less with water. The spectre of water conflict in the Middle East has been a recurring theme in recent years, with tensions over Israeli control of water in the Jordan valley (Cooley, 1984) and the use of water as a weapon by the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein against its Shia opponents in the draining of the southern Iraqi marshlands (al-Bayati, 1994: 141-146). Turkey’s control of water flows on the Tigris and the Euphrates – the two rivers that supply the bulk of freshwater flow into Syria and Iraq – gives it a significant diplomatic lever in its quest to maintain reliable oil and natural gas supplies from the Middle East states.

The 2010 TESEV survey on Turkey’s image in the Arab Middle East and Iran (Salem, 2010) found that respondents viewed the Turkish economy as second only to Saudi Arabia’s in terms of size, yet strongest in the region in terms of “economic influence”. This viewpoint was due to its integration in other countries, something seen as lacking in the oil economies, and reveals a link between Turkish economic success and perceptions of Turkey in the Middle East.

The policy of integration has also seen the development of bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements, visa free travel agreements and engagement with regional bodies. Turkey has permanent guest status at the Arab League with talk of a possible Turco-Arab forum, and now plays a key role in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) (Davutoğlu, 2008: 82-3). From July 2010 until the deterioration of the political situation in Syria, Davutoğlu had been proactive in developing a regional free-trade area encompassing Turkey, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon through the establishment of a quadripartite High Level Cooperation Council focusing on trade, cross-border investment and visa exemptions (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010). Turkey has also initiated specific co-operation agreements with its neighbours, the earliest of these being with the Iraqi state in the post-Ba’ath Party era. In 2008, Turkey signed a High Level strategic Cooperation Council agreement with Iraq (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008), an Iraq in which the Kurdish minority now had a far greater stake than previously under the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Through these and other initiatives, Davutoğlu’s policy of strategic depth seeks to gain Turkey “optimal regional and global independence and influence” (Kirişci et al, 2010: 12) by creating multiple alliances in multiple regions and international bodies, reflecting Turkey’s unique intersection of a number of different cultural, geographical and political worlds. As Davutoğlu (2008: 85) has put it, “order in the Middle East cannot be achieved in an atmosphere of isolated economies”. Even on questions of sectarianism, Davutoğlu (2008: 82) has maintained that, “Turkish policy is to remain outside the Shia-Sunni division”, offering a potential role as a neutral arbitrator between the Iranians and the Arab states. This policy of playing the good neighbour, combined with changes inside Turkey, has begun to seriously impact upon Turkey’s image in the region, something that may well be of far greater long term benefit than all the pipelines and trade deals put together.

The AKP administration has been eager to engage with the debate on democracy in the Muslim world, often putting itself at odds with authoritarian regimes in the region. This has at times, however, been an uncomfortable situation for the AKP, for while its growing soft power relies on its support for democratic reform, regional re-engagement efforts have naturally led to closer relationships with some of the very authoritarian regimes it criticises. This is perhaps most pointedly true of the close relationship the AKP administration developed with the Assad regime in Syria. This ambiguous policy position is illustrated by Davutoğlu’s suggestion (*Talk to Jazeera*, 2011) that Turkey supports “change and stability” as dual conditions that must be maintained in tandem. This is a policy with obvious pitfalls. Being friends with everyone is not always a feasible option in international affairs, as the administration has discovered during the Arab uprisings, where its position on relations with the Libyan and Syrian regimes has had to be modified to keep up with fast-moving events. Prime Minister Erdoğan initially rejected plans by the West to intervene in Libya (*Middle East Online*, 2011). The Turkish government was also slow to cut its ties with the Assad regime in Syria when the crackdown began in March 2011. We shall now examine how the exercise of Turkish soft power has been received in the Middle East region and consider examples where Turkish soft power has proved both highly effective as well as a source of friction with other actors.

*Questioning Turkey’s role model in the Middle East*

It has been claimed that Turkey will continue to integrate with the Middle East regardless of the health of its EU accession bid (Ozkan, interview, 2011), yet the importance of the bid in perceptions of the country for the general populace of the Middle East is telling. Turkey is seen as a model for the region precisely because of the reforms it has instituted as a condition for EU membership, something that has been termed the “strong demonstration effect” (Öczan, 2007: 95). Indeed, Davutoğlu has argued that the Middle East integration drive is merely an extension of the EU accession process, bringing the same principles of economic interaction and free movement of people and ideas that have been applied in Europe, to the countries of the Middle East (Kirişçi, 2011: 49).

As Kirişci et al (2010: 14-5) have observed, “Openness at home has spilled-over into policies abroad”. One could see the new AKP policy approach as a move from the Kemalist ‘peace at home, peace in the world’ to ‘openness at home, openness in the world’. In 2007, Altunışık (2007: 195) wrote that: “At a time when almost all Arab governments have been facing a crisis of governance and legitimacy…Turkey’s recent reform experiences have been largely seen as a source of inspiration especially by the reformers in the region.” The events of 2011 clearly reveal how far that inspiration has been put into action. Turkey has the opportunity, perhaps more than any other country regionally or globally, of emerging from the crises of the Arab uprisings as a credible, regionally popular and powerful player in the Middle East equation.

The transformation of Turkey’s soft power potential is revealed in the shifting results of the annual Arab Public Opinion Poll 2010 (University of Maryland in conjunction with Zogby International). Turkey is regarded as playing the most constructive role in the region of any Arab or non-Arab country, other than France. Turkey’s rise to prominence is illustrated by the fact that while Prime Minister Erdoğan did not even figure in a poll of the most admired world leaders of 2008, and had negligible support in 2009, he became significantly the most admired leader in 2010.

Similarly, a 2010 survey of Turkey’s image among Arab Middle East countries and Iran by Istanbul-based think-tank TESEV (Salem, 2010) returned between 80-90 per cent very high positive associations of Turkey, something that was unthinkable a decade ago. The information revolution is precipitating a dynamic shift in Middle Eastern societies. Davutoğlu has spoken of this shift, saying that, “with this huge change of networks, telecommunicational links…there is an emerging regional awareness, everywhere in the region, that there is a need of change”, adding that: “advice is sometimes by a word, sometimes by a good example, and Turkish democracy…is the best advice for everybody” (*Talk to Jazeera*, 2011). In the TESEV survey (Salem, 2010), 66 per cent felt Turkey could be a model for other Middle Eastern countries. Perhaps telling in this assessment is the fact that 78 per cent of respondents in both the Arab world and Iran had watched Turkish soap operas and that it was the most popular (35 per cent) tourist destination in the region.

Turkey’s re-engagement with the Middle East region is closely tied to the re-emergence of a sense of both Middle Eastern and Muslim identity into positions of power in Turkey through the rise of the class represented by the AKP. In recent regional events, this has seen the Turkish state challenging its neighbour Iran – a self-appointed spokesperson for the Muslim community in the Middle East – on the question of who speaks for Muslims. This challenge is not necessarily a conflict, yet it is undeniable that the two states offer models for the political application of Islam that markedly diverge. This has become acutely apparent in the differing reaction of the two states to the events of the Arab uprisings. While Turkey has ultimately concluded that they present an opportunity for the expansion of Turkish influence and a brand of political Islam that has been successful in Turkey, the Iranian state has viewed the uprisings ambiguously from country to country, applauding the fall of US ally, Mubarak, in Egypt, while maintaining support for its own ally, Assad, in Syria. Iran is only too aware that these have been uprisings for democracy, or perhaps Islamic democracy, but not theocracy.

Turkey has become an increasingly confident spokesperson on the issue of the plight of the Palestinians, which has earned it considerable popularity among other Muslim populations. This foreign policy position predates the AKP administration. Turkish governments have long taken a supportive line towards the Palestinians, in response to widespread Turkish public solidarity. Prime Minister Ecevit of the coalition government prior to the AKP victory was strongly critical of Ariel Sharon’s leadership in Israel, describing his actions as “genocide” towards the Palestinians (Dismorr, 2008: 179). However, there has also been a military alliance between Turkey and Israel since 1992, an alliance with specifically anti-Syrian objectives for both states (Gresh, 1998). Since the AKP took power, that alliance has been severely tested. Both Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have expressed displeasure with Israel, most recently over the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* flotilla to Gaza, in which Israeli security forces killed nine Turkish protesters (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2010). The Israeli government is yet to offer the apology demanded by the AKP administration. Despite the increased focus on soft power projection within AKP foreign policy in the Middle East, it has not eclipsed hard power, and in fact in some cases has been used in concert with hard power under the umbrella of international institutions. Hard power has not only been used in tandem with soft power, however, but is still used unilaterally by Turkey on certain issues, revealing tensions within the Turkish body politic about the role of the military and of hard power in government policy.

**Turkish hard power projection**

**in the Middle East from the 1990s until today**

In 1996, former Turkish ambassador and deputy undersecretary of the Foreign Ministry, Şükrü Elekdağ, said that Turkey was “besieged by a veritable ring of evil” (Kirişci et al, 2010: 3). This extreme and emotive assessment of Turkey’s neighbours was illustrative of a wider attitude in Turkish society. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern state, never suggested a ‘ring of evil’, yet he instilled in the Turkish body politic a sense that the country’s future lay with the European world, and that it should not be preoccupied with its Middle East neighbours. Since that time, questions of foreign policy have been “almost the exclusive preserve” (Larrabee & Lesser, 2003: 31) of the Kemalist military and bureaucratic elite, leading to diplomatic neglect and securitisation of relations with Turkey’s immediate Middle Eastern neighbours.

This situation has been exacerbated by the Turkish state’s conflict with its Kurdish minority, a conflict that has been running, off and on, since the founding of the modern republic. It can be traced from the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925 and the Ararat Revolt of 1930 to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) conflict of the 1980s to the present day. The Kurdish lands within Iran, Iraq and Syria have often provided a safe haven for Kurds fleeing the repression that has followed failed uprisings in Turkey, and the governments of these states have at times lent support to those Kurds. This has been most evident in Iranian and Syrian support for Kurdish separatists working against the Turkish state, and it was only the Turkish threat of military invasion that persuaded the Syrian regime to drop its support for the PKK and expel its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1998.

Unlike the Iranian and Syrian states, there was tacit agreement between Saddam Hussein’s Baathist state and the Turkish state over the mutual need to suppress Kurdish separatism. The understanding between Iraq and Turkey – both US allies – played into the larger geopolitical stand-off between the US and Iran, in which Iran supported Syria against the threat from Israel and against Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi regime. Not only has the new reality in Iraq led to a reassessment of the Turkish position towards Kurdish northern Iraq, but also towards its dealings with Iran. Both Turkey and Iran have been strengthened regionally by the weakening of the Iraqi state. Both now have a stake in exercising their hard and soft power in Iraq. While Iranian power is most pronounced among the Shia population, Turkish engagement with the Sunni Arab and, perhaps surprisingly, the Kurdish Iraqi populations has been substantial.

However, while Turkey’s engagement with the Middle East region has become more nuanced, it still involves the exercise of military power, as is evidenced by the continuing aerial bombardment of PKK targets within the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq (*Al-Arabiya News*, 2011). Though the Turkish parliament rejected a request for American troops to launch the invasion of Iraq in 2003 from Turkish soil, this rejection actually went against official AKP policy and revealed the tensions within the Turkish body politic. The Turkish army still exercises considerable power despite the significant curtailment of its control over politics, culminating in the resignation of the Chief of the General Staff and the heads of the army, navy and air force on 29 July 2011 in protest at the ongoing Ergenekon trials against key military and ex-military figures (Hakura, 2011). The war between the Turkish state and the PKK, which is now centred on the Qandil mountains of the Kurdish autonomous region of Iraq and Turkey’s extreme south-east, must be seen in light of the tensions between the military and the AKP government, and the need of the AKP government not to appear weak to its own constituencies within Turkey. This has resulted in a continuation – even an escalation – of the conflict with the PKK at a time when the AKP government, and Davutoğlu in particular, have been advising restraint in the use of hard power by others, notably the Assad regime in Syria.

The rejection of unilateral action is an important part of Davutoğlu’s foreign policy agenda, which holds that we have entered an era of “interdependence and global governance” following the Cold War era (Davutoğlu, 2010). As a result, the AKP government has worked hard at being seen to deal within the bounds of international institutions and legal frameworks. This has helped them gain legitimacy at home and abroad. The most overt example to date of such cooperative exercising of hard power has been the use of Turkish naval ships in the blockade of Gaddafi’s Libyan regime as part of a broader NATO alliance. This is in line with Davutoğlu’s insistence on foreign policy based on global institutional consensus. The tensions between Turkey’s hard power policy approach to its internal conflict with the PKK and its efforts at engaging in multilateral conflict resolution abroad are a continuing strain within the overall AKP policy framework.

**Turkey’s re-engagement with the Middle East in policy**

We will now turn to three specific examples of AKP foreign policy over the past decade, with a particular focus on the last few years when Davutoğlu has been most active in directing policy. The three examples are Iraq, Syria and Iran – immediate neighbours whose borders form the Turkish frontier with its Middle Eastern neighbourhood. In the case of Iraq, this article will focus particularly on the relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, which has been the de facto power in the region bordering the Turkish state since 2003.

*Turkish-KRG relations*

Nowhere is the shift from a security policy to one of multilayered diplomatic, economic and security priorities more pronounced than in relation to the Kurdish region of northern Iraq (Altunışık, 2007: 193). The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to a significant reaction in Turkish domestic politics. The Turkish parliament refused to allow US jets to attack from Turkish airspace, a decision motivated largely by public antipathy to the conflict and establishment concern about the fallout from the Iraq conflict in Turkey’s south-east Kurdish region.

The Kurdish insurrection that followed the Gulf War of 1991 had forced the US and its allies to maintain a No Fly Zone above the 36th parallel, in order to safeguard Kurdish civilians against the Baath Party regime in Baghdad. The Kurds declared a Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the region of Kurdish northern Iraq became a de facto independent zone. This development deeply alarmed Turkish security observers. By the end of the Iraq War, after the Baath Party was removed, the balance of power shifted still further: “apart from the US military – the most potent military force operating in Iraq today is not pan-Iraqi, nor Shi’i, nor tribal. It is Kurdish” (Stansfield et al, 2007: 3).

Turkish policy towards the KRG was uneasy, fearing the increasing importance of the Kurds as US allies in Iraq. Turkish armed forces conducted cross-border raids into KRG territory in pursuit of Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) fighters. This antagonism towards a US ally in Iraq inevitable put a strain on Turkish-US relations. However, the rise to legitimacy of a Kurdish power in northern Iraq presented the new AKP administration with a choice. It could either deal with the KRG as another security problem, or it could develop a broader strategy.

The multifaceted engagement with the KRG represents what has been termed a “watershed” (Çandar, 2009: 15) in Turkish policy towards the region, and has complemented a renewed Turkish engagement with the new Iraqi state as a whole. In July 2008, a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council was established between Turkey and Iraq (Kirişçi et al, 2010: 6), with a raft of bilateral agreements and since then, Prime Minister Erdoğan has made an official visit to the Kurdistan region of Iraq to meet with KRG President Barzani (Representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, Department of Foreign Relations, interview, 2011).

Iraq is a key export market for Turkey, its fourth largest foreign export market in June 2011, worth almost US$ 667 million (Turkish Statistical Institute, *Foreign Trade Statistics June 2011*). Turkey also transits oil through a pipeline running from the Kirkuk oilfields of northern Iraq to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Yumurtalık, an important element in the AKP policy vision of making Turkey a regional energy transit hub. It is predicted that Iraqi Kurds will become “major players in energy policies” (Çandar, 2009: 15) with their control of significant Iraqi energy resources and unexplored hydrocarbons beneath Iraqi Kurdistan.

Turkey has now become the single largest foreign investor in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq (Salem, 2010). A USAID report in December 2008 estimated the construction market within the KRG at US$ 2.8 billion, with 95 per cent of the market in the hands of Turkish companies (*Kurdistan Region Economic Development Assessment*,USAID Report, 2008: 26, cited in Kirişci, 2011: 38-39). Around 750 Turkish companies are active in the region, such as Makyol Cengiz, which has constructed the new Erbil International Airport, and Nursoy, which is building extensive housing complexes in both Erbil and Sulaimaniya. Turkish companies are also involved in other sectors – from Genel’s interests in the oilfields of Dohuk, Miran and Taq Taq to Home Istanbul’s first retail outlet in Erbil’s Family Mall (Representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, Department of Foreign Relations, interview, 2011).

Civil society contacts have developed with the opening of a new Turkish Consulate in Erbil issuing visas to Iraqi Kurds and providing assistance to more than 35,000 Turkish workers in the region. Iraqi Kurdish companies have even made tentative steps in the other direction, opening offices in south-eastern Turkey, though with only one land border crossing, at Ibrahim Khalil, the logistics of investment are complex (Representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, Department of Foreign Relations, interview, 2011).

Despite this positive picture of engagement, military incursions against the PKK continue to have the potential to undermine the pragmatic relations between the two governments. In 2008, Rabasa & Larrabee (2008: 101) presciently noted that, “there can be no stability on Turkey’s southern border over the long term without an accommodation with the KRG”. Whether this accommodation can be maintained in combination with Turkish military excursions remains to be seen.

*Turkish-Syrian relations*

The modern Turkish and Syrian states have a strained history characterised by an asymmetrical distribution of power in favour of Turkey and Syrian attempts to counteract what it perceives as “a threatening power” (Tschirgi, 2003: 108). Indeed, Turkey physically truncated the Syrian state in 1939, when the French mandatory authorities ceded the *sanjak* of Alexandretta (present-day Hatay Province) to Turkey against Syrian wishes.

Syria has been a safe haven for Kurdish nationalists exiled from Turkey since the early years of the republic, when the Bedr Khan brothers fled to Damascus and founded the Khoybun movement (Fuccaro, 2003). More recently, Syrian support for the PKK was employed as diplomatic leverage. With the development of the massive Turkish dam projects on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, seen as a threat to Syrian water supplies, support for the PKK was used as a way to bargain for water rights (Tschirgi, 2003: 108). However, Turkey succeeded in facing down Syria in 1998, signing the Adana Agreement against the backdrop of possible Turkish military intervention. With the removal of the PKK threat from Syria, Turco-Syrian relations had the opportunity for realignment. In 2003, Larrabee & Lesser (2003: 146) speculated that, “Turkey could be a beneficiary of any economic opening in Syria”.

A free trade agreement was signed between Turkey and Syria in 2007 and trade volume has increased from US$ 729 million in 2000 to US$ 2.2 billion in the first 11 months of 2010, with the aim of reaching US$ 5 billion in the near future (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Turkey-Syria Economic and Trade Relations*). The two sides have also formed a joint oil exploration company, set up a common cross-border electricity grid, and signed a bilateral visa-free agreement (Kirişçi et al, 2010: 7). Interaction on the human level has consequently increased, with Syrian tourists visiting Turkey increasing from 126,323 in 2002 to 899,494 in 2010, and Turkish tourism to Syria rising from 467,648 to 1.6 million in the same period (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Turkey-Syria Economic and Trade Relations*). During Bashar al-Assad’s visit to Turkey on 16 September 2009, the two countries agreed to sign a Turkish-Syrian High Level Strategic Cooperation Council to “expand and solidify their cooperation” (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Joint Statement of the First Meeting of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council Between the Syrian Arab Republic and the Republic of Turkey, Damascus*, 2009), and though the question of sovereignty over Hatay Province remained a point of disagreement, there were efforts to find a solution that would satisfy both sides (‘Hatay row complicates water talks’, *Today’s Zaman*, 24 December 2009).

Turkey’s new engagement with Syria allowed it to play new roles in mediation within the region. A sign of the change in the perception of Turkey within Syria was illustrated by the appearance of Turkish flags amongst the protesters in Syria in April and May 2011 (‘Syria charges protesters, Turkish flags in Banias’, *World Bulletin*, 04 May 2011). That demonstrators on the streets of Syria, so long Turkey’s antagonist and a bastion of Arab nationalism, were waving Turkish flags was a telling sign of the shifts that are occurring in perceptions of Turkey in the Arab world.

Nafi, (2009: 78) has suggested that: “In a very short period of time, the opening of the Syrian-Turkish border and the strengthening relations between the two countries have engendered economic vitality on both sides of the border and transformed the way Turks and Syrian Arabs view each other.” What is striking in Nafi’s declaration is that he is conspicuous in referring to Syrian Arabs and not Syrian Kurds. Kurds, however, are the people who reside closest to the Turkish border and potentially have much to gain from greater movement of people and economic activity.

These hopes are still very much alive for people on either side of the Turco-Syrian frontier, despite the fact that government relations between the two countries have been utterly destroyed by the Assad regime’s refusal to bow to international pressure to curtail a crackdown on the ongoing uprising in Syria. On 30 November 2011, Davutoğlu outlined a series of economic and diplomatic sanctions to be placed on the Syrian regime (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Press statement by H.E. Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, Regarding Measures Adopted vis-à-vis the Syrian Administration, 30 November 2011*). These included a suspension of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council until legitimate rule is established in Syria, a travel ban and asset freezes on members of the Syrian leadership, a halt on sale or supply of weapons to the Syrian military, suspension of relations with the Syrian central bank, and other financial sanctions. These were broadly in line with Arab League sanctions implemented on 27 November 2011. The future of Turco-Syrian relations is now irrevocably tied to the outcome of the Syrian uprising.

*Turkish-Iranian relations*

Prior to the rise of the AKP, Turkey was seen as having “drifted into an unproductive rivalry” (Aras, 2003: 194) with Iran based on the Turkish elite’s ideological rejection of the Iranian regime, rather than on pragmatic analysis of the Turkish national interest, with Iran being viewed as “Turkey’s feared and loathed ‘other’” (Kirişçi et al, 2010: 4).

According to Aras (2003: 182), the biggest obstacles in Turco-Iranian relations have been Iranian support for the PKK and the spread of Islamist movements, as well as competition in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The rise of the AKP can been seen as having significantly reduced the tension arising from perceived Iranian support for Islamist movements, since the AKP itself sprung from an Islamist movement. Recent Turkish gains against the PKK have also greatly reduced friction with Iran. Indeed, both sides have a common enemy in that the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), an offshoot of the PKK, is active in Iran against Iranian government targets. The potential exists for collaboration between the states against Kurdish groups.

In light of these developments, Turco-Iranian relations have altered significantly since 2002. Indeed, a Turkish initiative to broker a deal with Iran over its nuclear programme led to the signing of the Tehran Agreement between Turkey, Iran and Brazil in May 2010. The agreement sought to defuse the nuclear row between Iran and the West by allowing for a nuclear fuel swap between Turkey and Iran (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Joint Declaration of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Iran and Brazil*, 17 May 2010). It highlighted the potential for Turkey to play a mediating role in the Middle East.

Turkey’s rapprochement with Iran is largely motivated by economics. Trade between the two countries is a growing and significant factor for Turkey. In 2010, trade volume between the two ran at US$ 10.6 billion. However, the trade is asymmetric with Turkish imports from Iran accounting for US$ 7.64 billion of that trade (**Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) cited in ‘Iranian firms break into world markets via Turkey’, *Hürriyet Daily News & Economic Review*, 18 April 2011)**. This is due to Iran’s massive oil and natural gas resources. The AKP policy of engagement with Iran is part of the wider policy of becoming a regional energy transit hub. In 2007, they signed a Memorandum of Understanding to transport 30 billion cubic metres of Iranian and Turkmen natural gas to Europe (Rabasa & Larrabee, 2008: 87). The Nabucco pipeline also had the original objective of supplying Europe with natural gas from Iran’s South Pars gasfield in pipelines that would take Russia out of the equation (Hale, 2009: 153). However, European objections cut Iran out of the deal in 2010, which now sees only two feeder lines from Georgia and Iraq planned, and a corresponding reduction in potential Turkish economic yields (*Iraq Business News*, 23 August 2010).

The tourism sector is also expanding, with a visa free entry agreement between the two states bringing both countries some of their highest visitor numbers. In 2010, 1.9 million Iranians visited Turkey (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Turkey-Iran Economic and Trade Relations*), equivalent to the total number of visitors from the Arab Middle East (T.C. Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü cited in Kirişçi, 2011: 45).

It has been suggested that the Turkish and Iranian states, with growing regional economic and political power, are likely to form a Turco-Iranian axis of power that will eclipse the Arab states (Ayoob, 2011). With its more balanced and engaged diplomacy and a foreign policy that is more in tune with the Arab uprisings that are bringing political Islamists to power in the Arab world, Turkey could become the key power in the Middle East region. This trajectory does, however, raise the potential for greater conflict with Iran, as already witnessed in the Turco-Saudi alignment over the Syrian uprising against the Iranian position (‘Saudi-Turkish cooperation and Syria’, *Arab News*, 29 November 2011).

**In lieu of Conclusion**

It is clear that an increasingly productive relationship was developed between Turkey and its Middle East neighbours – Iraq (particularly the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq), Syria and Iran – during almost a decade of AKP government. It is also clear that this was a continuation and accentuation of previous policy realignments in Turkey, particularly under the leadership of Turgut Özal. The intensification of Middle Eastern engagement has been a key mantra of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, as laid out in his political writings and demonstrated in his work as senior adviser to Prime Minister Erdoğan, and in office since 2009.

Fundamental to this realignment – or re-engagement, as Davutoğlu might see it – has been a commitment to democracy and the rule of law, both domestically and internationally, that has benefited the AKP at home and abroad. It has meant a commitment to EU-driven reforms within Turkey, and to active democracy promotion within the region. These reforms have in turn led to a need to engage more broadly with the Kurdish community within, and outside, Turkey. This has been most successfully achieved in relations with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. Turkey remains the largest investor in this semi-autonomous region despite the deteriorating conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK.

This delicate tightrope of reform coupled with the promotion of Turkey within the region was already coming under grave strain due to the deterioration of Turkey’s EU accession bid, and the corresponding slowdown in internal reforms. This strain has been greatly increased by events in 2011. The possible collapse of the entire EU project has all but extinguished hope of membership, and with it the broad-based consensus within Turkish society regarding reforms towards that goal. This had been a consensus that included Turks from across the political spectrum.

The events of the Arab uprisings of 2011, which are still in progress, have also tested the AKP’s policy within the region. For Davutoğlu’s vision of strategic depth to be maintained, it has been necessary to stay ahead of the game, or on ‘the right side of history’, whilst not entirely isolated longstanding diplomatic relationships. On Turkey’s immediate borders, the question of Kurdish enfranchisement is as important as it has ever been, as the AKP slides into greater warfare with the PKK. At the same time, relations with Syria’s current rulers have collapsed, requiring greater efforts towards facilitating some form of regime change in the country.

The opportunities for a successful development of Davutoğlu’s strategic depth vision are, this paper suggests, more numerous than ever, considering the potentially huge democratic openings in the Middle East region in the near future. The pitfalls for the AKP, both at home and abroad, are still many however, and it is far from clear whether the current AKP administration will have the capacity to overcome them.

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| **Türkiye’nin Davutoğlu Döneminde** **Orta Doğu'daki Komşularıyla Değişen İlişkileri:** **Tarih, Güç ve Politika****Özet**: Türkiye’nin Orta Doğu’daki komşularıyla olan ilişkileri son 10 yıl içerisinde büyük bir gelişim gösterdi. Ülkenin yeni ekonomik dinamizmi sayesinde önemli bir bölgesel güç haline gelmesiyle, bu ilişkileri anlayabilmek de oldukça önem kazandı. Türkiye’nin Orta Doğu’daki komşularıyla ekonomik alanda uzlaşma çabaları 20.yy’ın sonlarında, özellikle de Özal döneminde gerçekleşen politik gelişmelerde kaynağını bulsa da, bu uzlaşmalarAKP yönetimi altında hızlandılar ve yeni diplomatik ve kültürel boyutlar kazandılar. Yönelinen bu yeni politikanın mimarlarından biri Başbakan Erdoğan’ın eski baş danışmanı ve 2009’dan beri de Dışişleri Bakanı olan Ahmet Davutoğlu’ydu. Bu yeniden düzenleme çalışmaları Türkiye’nin iç işleriyle, özellikle de Kürt meselesi ile oldukça yakından ilişkili olmakla beraber 2011’deki Arap ayaklanmalarıyla sebebiyle şu an beklenmedik bir baskıylakarşılaşmış durumda. Bu makalede Türkiye’nin Orta Doğu politikalarıyla ilgili üç temel ilişkinin analizi yapılacaktır: Irak’taki yarı otonom Kürt Bölgesel Yönetimi, Suriye hükümeti ve İran hükümeti ile olan ilişkiler. Sonuç olarak da Türkiye’nin Orta Doğu’daki yeni ekonomik, politik ve kültürel gücünün muhafaza edilebilmesi için Davutoğlu dönemi politikalarının temel unsurlarının sürdürülmesi gerektiği çıkarımına varılacaktır.**Anahtar Kelimeler**: Davutoğlu, Türk Dış Politikası, Ortadoğu |

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