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Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

Turkey's perception of the Levant has been hazy in modern times and the country has not constructed a holistic approach towards the region until recently, despite the fact that Turkey has sought closer cooperation with the Levantine countries since the late 1990s. In addition to Turkey's willingness to open up to the region, recent international developments, such as the discovery of hydrocarbons off the coast of Israel, Egypt and Cyprus, the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and changes in the regional balance of power have provided momentum for Turkey's engagement with the region. This paper argues that although these factors have provided space for Turkey to play a more assertive role in the region, the country has thus far failed to present a successful region-wide strategy or carve up an influence zone.

Keywords: Turkish Foreign Policy, the Levant, Eastern Mediterranean, Energy Resources, Arab Spring.

Türk Dış Politikası'nda *Levant*

ÖZET

Türkiye'nin *Levant* bölgesine yönelik algısı değişkendir. Türkiye, 1990'ların sonundan itibaren bölge ülkeleriyle yakın işbirliği arayışında olmasına rağmen, hertz bölgeye yönelik bütüncül bir yaklaşım geliştirememiştir. Türkiye'nin bölgeye açılma isteğinin yanı sıra, son yıllarda Doğu Akdeniz'de hidrokarbon kaynaklarının keşfi, Arap Baharı'nın patlak vermesi ve bölgesel güç dengesindeki değişimler gibi uluslararası gelişmeler Türkiye'nin bölgeyle etkileşimine ivme kazandırmıştır. Bu çalışma, söz konusu gelişmelerin Türkiye'nin bölgede daha iddialı bir rol oynamasına imkan sağlamasına rağmen, Türkiye'nin bugüne kadar bölge geneline yönelik etkili bir strateji sergileme veya bir nüfuz alanı oluşturma konusunda başarılı olmadığını vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Dış Politikası, Levant, Doğu Akdeniz, Enerji Kaynakları, Arap Baharı

Introduction

Modern day Turkey has not seen itself as part of the Levant and has not looked at the region as an integrated unit of analysis until recently, and thus has not taken a holistic approach towards the region. Turkey's perception of the Eastern Mediterranean was restricted to Cyprus, and the rest of the Levant was construed as part of the wider Middle East.¹ Accordingly, the Turkish academic literature does not refer to the Levant, except on rare occasions where it actually discusses the Cyprus problem.²

Regardless, as one of the most powerful states in the region, Turkey has been an important actor in Levantine politics and played an active role in the region during the 1930s in response to Italy's expansionist tendencies towards the Eastern Mediterranean. The 1936 proposal to create Mediterranean Pact was one such example. But by the outbreak of the Second World War, these sporadic ideas had not yet transformed into a full-fledged regional policy and then after the war, the region was perceived only within the context of the emerging East-West rivalry.³

The end of the Cold War allowed Turkey to redefine its priorities in international politics. Prompted by its growing economic needs after the liberalization program of the early 1980s, Turkey prioritized its economic relationships in its neighbourhood rather than focusing on global security concerns. This transformation into what Kirişçi referred to as a "trading state" saw Turkey increase its focus on its neighbourhood.⁴ The Levant, however, with the exception of Israel, remained rather insignificant in most of the early post-Cold War era. Only after the rise of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) to power in 2002 did the wider Middle East, including the Levant, attract increased attention from Turkey.

While the JDP emphasized the importance of economic prosperity and stability in Turkey's neighbourhood, the country's regional policies shifted in several aspects. Rather than focusing on long-standing problems such as the Cypriot imbroglio, the JDP preferred new policy tools to improve Turkey's relations with its neighbours such as visa-liberalization, mediation, building industrial zones and free trade areas, and joint cabinet meetings. Thus, a new policy line, formulated as 'zero problems with neighbours', was spearheaded by Ahmed Davutoğlu, the then Chief Foreign Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister and later the Minister of Foreign Affairs.⁵

In addition to the new policy approach, the country's political transformation and the emergence of new political classes with different preferences as well as the problems in accession

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- 1 İler Turan, "Turkey and the Mediterranean: Balancing Geopolitics and Geo-Economics", *German Marshall Fund Mediterranean Policy Program Policy Brief*, 2011, p.1; Kemal Kirişçi, "Comparing the Neighbourhood Policies of Turkey and the EU in the Mediterranean", Meliha Benli Altunışık, Kemal Kirişçi and Nathalie Tocci (Eds.), *Turkey: Reluctant Mediterranean Power*, Washington D.C., German Marshall Fund, 2011, p.23.
 - 2 Turan, "Turkey and the Mediterranean", p.1-6; Kirişçi, "Comparing the Neighbourhood", p.21-44; Ebru Oğurlu, "Rising Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy", *Instituto Affari Internazionali Working Paper*, No.1204, 2012, p.1-15.
 - 3 Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey as a 'Mediterranean Power'", Altunışık, Kirişçi and Tocci (Eds.), *Turkey: Reluctant Mediterranean Power*, p.9.
 - 4 Kemal Kirişçi, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No.40, 2009, p.29-57.
 - 5 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik* [The Strategic Depth], İstanbul, Küre, 2001; Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.10, No.1, 2008, p.77-96; Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy", Conference Speech at SETA Foundation Washington D.C. Branch, 8 December 2009; Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Perspectives on Turkish Foreign Policy", Speech at the Brookings Institution, 29 November 2010.

negotiations with the EU triggered a transformation in Turkish foreign policy. Especially after JDP's second electoral victory in 2007, Turkey began to focus more closely on what it deemed its neighbourhood, an area that encompassed the Levant, the Near East (including Iran and the South Caucasus), and North Africa. As a result, Turkey's relations with the countries of the region have increased considerably and reorientation of its foreign policy has become discernable.

Meanwhile, several regional and international developments provided momentum for Turkey's engagement with the Levant. First, the discoveries of hydrocarbon resources off the coasts of Israel, Cyprus and Egypt (Tamar field in 2009, Leviathan in 2010, Aphrodite in 2011, and Zohr in 2015) presented opportunities not only for the littoral states, but also for international actors. While the newly found reserves, with an estimated 122 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas in the Levant Basin, sparked a debate over the region's potential to become an additional source of energy for European markets,⁶ it also encouraged Turkey in its strategy aimed at turning it into an 'energy hub' in the Eastern Mediterranean. As it is at the centre of the most direct and economic transport route from the region to Europe, Turkey is uniquely positioned to benefit from the development of Levantine energy resources. However, new challenges emerged as a result of these discoveries in terms of ownership of the resources, delimitation of territorial waters, maritime borders, and exclusive economic zones under conflicting atmosphere.

Secondly, the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings in late 2010 created additional security problems for regional and international actors. Like others, Turkey was caught unprepared by the widespread political instability of the region, which subsequently has had a serious impact on Turkey's domestic stability as well as its relations with the regional states. While Turkey had earlier managed to establish somewhat workable political and economic relations with the existing regimes in the region, the chaos that followed the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings has disrupted these relations. Whereas Turkey previously faced an "ethics versus interest" dilemma in its connections with the autocratic regimes,⁷ its policies of supporting pro-democracy actors, providing aid to opposition groups, and aiming for regime change in neighbouring countries has resulted in short-term problems and long-term uncertainties.

Finally, various developments in the surrounding region over the last few decades, such as the instability wrought by United States' invasion of Iraq to the continued stagnation of the Arab-Israeli peace process, have continued to fuel region-wide turmoil, increasing political instability, slowing economic development, and affecting the balance of power. While the region's full potential could only be unleashed with the onset of stability, history demonstrates that stability can only be established when the region is controlled by a hegemonic power,⁸ or an agreement is achieved among the paternalist states.⁹

6 "Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas Resources of the Levant Basin Province, Eastern Mediterranean", *U.S. Geological Survey*, March 2010, <http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2010/3014/pdf/FS10-3014.pdf> (Accessed on 12 February 2014).

7 Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.19, No.2, 2014, p.6.

8 Volkan Ş. Ediger, Balkan Devlen and Deniz Bingöl McDonald, "Levant'ta Büyük Oyun: Doğu Akdeniz'in Enerji Jeopolitiği [Great Game in Levant: Energy Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean]", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol.9, No.33, p.80.

9 Mustafa Aydın and Damla Aras, "Political Conditionality of Economic Relations Between Paternalist States: Turkey's Interaction with Iran, Iraq, and Syria", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol.27, No.1-2, 2005, p.21-43.

This paper will first look at the recent history of Turkey's relations with the Levantine countries. Then, it will focus on the regional and international developments that influence Turkey's policies towards the region. It will argue that developments in recent years have provided space for Turkey to take a more active role in the region, but that Turkey's own limitations, policy choices, and regional dynamics have restricted its ability to do so.

Recent History of Turkey's Levant Connection

Since late 1990s, Turkey's engagement with the Levant, and more broadly with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, has become increasingly noticeable. In the absence of a clearly defined Levant policy, the sum of Turkey's bilateral relations with regional countries encapsulates its overall Levant policy.

After decades of tense relations with some of the regional countries, primarily the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and Syria, Turkey became eager in early 2000s to solve or at least move beyond these problems. Modification of its foreign policy away from security concerns towards an economic focus originally appeared as a result of Turkey's move from import-substitution development strategy to an export-led growth strategy in the 1980s. The liberalization of the Turkish economy prompted the country to focus on nearby markets. Economic considerations would become paramount during the 1990s when Turkey "became increasingly concerned with ... striking deals with foreign governments" in an effort to sell its goods and generate foreign direct investment.¹⁰ By the time JDP came to power in 2002, the economic consequences of foreign policy were already weighing heavily on decision-making and the main policy motto of the time, i.e., "zero problems with neighbours", was mainly built upon the pre-JDP perspective of developing closer relations with neighbours to further economic prosperity.

Accordingly, a new line of policy, designed to benefit from Turkey's central location and historical connections was put forward by the JDP during the 2000s.¹¹ One of the earliest examples was Turkey's Cyprus policy, where the first JDP government implemented a major policy shift when it supported the peace plan brokered by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2004. This move could be seen within the wider context of Turkey's changing Levant policy and moving away from exclusive determinacy of security concerns.¹²

In its first term (2002-2007), the JDP focused mainly on Turkey's approximation with the EU law and the related domestic reforms, eventually leading the country to begin accession negotiations with the EU in October 2005. These negotiations would have significant implications on the future course of Turkish foreign policy. The reforms in general improved the country's political stability, supported economic growth, enabled major strides towards democratization, decreased the role of military in political life, and helped change the foreign policy decision-making process. As a result,

10 Mustafa Aydın, "Twenty Years Before, Twenty Years After: Turkish Foreign Policy at the Threshold of the 21st Century", Tareq Y. Ismael and Mustafa Aydın (Eds.), *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: A Changing Role in World Politics*, New York, Ashgate, 2003, p.12.

11 Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", p.78.

12 Altunışık, "Turkey as a 'Mediterranean Power'", p.15.

the influence of the military in decision-making decreased significantly and the policy-shaping role of the National Security Council diminished.¹³ As the military had played a decisive role throughout the 1990s on Turkey's international relations, the decline of its influence also had a profound affect on the country's foreign policy.¹⁴

In the meantime, the emergence of a new Anatolian bourgeoisie also had an impact on Turkey's policies in its neighbourhood. Through their closer connection with the government, the newly established Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (MÜSİAD) of small to medium sized businesses from Anatolia pushed for closer economic relations with the countries in the wider Middle East.¹⁵ Using Turkey's geographical proximity and their cultural affinity, these businessmen enthusiastically penetrated into the Levant,¹⁶ forcing the foreign policy establishment to follow them. As a result, until disrupted by the Arab Spring, JDP governments expanded Turkey's relations with neighbouring countries using new tools such as visa-liberalization, free trade-zones, and joint cabinet meetings.

The most dramatic change was seen in the transformation of relations with Syria. After the signature of the Adana Agreement on 20 October 1998, following a near-war crisis, relations between Syria and Turkey began to improve. The two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in December 2004, and simultaneously established the Turkish-Syrian Business Council.¹⁷ Free trade agreements were also signed with Egypt in 2005, Lebanon in 2010, and Jordan in 2011. To increase the dialogue with these countries, High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils were established and visa requirements were lifted for citizens of Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon in 2009. Moreover, at Turkey's initiative, the Close Neighbours Economic and Trade Association Council was established in July 2010 with Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, and a call was issued to establish the East Mediterranean Four: Levant Business Forum to encourage greater economic integration among these states.¹⁸ With these moves, Turkey's economic relations with the Levant expanded steadily and its volume of trade increased significantly.

The closer relations with Israel established during the second part of 1990s mainly on the basis of security cooperation not only continued during the first term of the JDP, but also expanded with

13 Mustafa Aydın and Sinem Akgül Açıkmeşe, "Europeanization through EU Conditionality: Understanding the New Era in Turkish Foreign Policy", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol.9, No.3, 2007, p.269.

14 Ümit Cizre, "The Anatomy of the Turkish Military's Political Autonomy", *Comparative Politics*, Vol.29, No.2, 1997, p.151-166; Gencer Özcan, "Facing its Waterloo in Diplomacy: Turkey's Military in Foreign Policy-Making Process", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No.40, 2009, p.83-102; Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu, "Transformation of Turkey's Civil-Military Relations Culture and International Environment", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.12, No.2, 2011, p.253-264.

15 Özlem Tür, "Economic Relations with the Middle East under the AKP-Trade, Business Community and Reintegration with Neighbouring Zones", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.12, No.4, 2011, p.589-602.

16 Mustafa Kutlay, "Economy as the 'Practical Hand' of 'New Turkish Foreign Policy': A Political Economy Explanation", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.13, No.1, 2011, p.76.

17 Meliha Benli Altunışık and Özlem Tür, "From Distant Neighbours to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations", *Security Dialogue*, Vol.37, No.2, 2006, p.229-248; Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey's Changing Middle East Policy", *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, No.23, 2010, p.152.

18 Kemal Kirişçi, "Arab Uprisings and Completing Turkey's Regional Integration: Challenges and Opportunities for US-Turkish Relations", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol.15, No.2, 2013, p.193; Tür, "Economic Relations with the Middle East", p.597.

Turkey's attempt to play a facilitator role between Israel, Syria, and Palestine.¹⁹ However, relations have since deteriorated with strong criticism of Israel coming from Prime Minister Erdoğan after Israel's 2008 'Operation Cast Lead' in Gaza.²⁰ While the criticism of Israel increased the popularity of the JDP in Turkey and in the Arab Middle East, it led to worsening relations between the two countries. Another contributing incident occurred with the verbal skirmish between Prime Minister Erdoğan and Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009.²¹ The turbulent relations finally led to a breaking point with the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010, when Israeli troops attacked an international flotilla sailing towards Gaza with the intent to break the Israeli siege. The Israeli attack on the flotilla resulted in the death of eight Turkish citizens. While diplomatic relations ended with the withdrawal of Turkish Ambassador to Israel, thanks to the Free Trade Agreement signed in 1996, economic relations continued to expand and trade volumes grew with the sole exceptions being 2009 and 2012.

Turkey also contributed to international efforts to bring peace to the region. When the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon was established in 2006 after the Israel-Hezbollah War, Turkey contributed one frigate and allowed the interim force to use the Mersin Port. Working with Qatar, Turkey played an instrumental role in brokering the Doha Agreement on 21 May 2008 that ended the political stalemate in Lebanon. Similarly, Turkey played a mediator role between Israel and Syria, which would lead to the May 2008 announcement that Israel and Syria had been talking to each other indirectly through Turkey.²² In a similar vein, Turkey launched the 'Industry for Peace Initiative' in 2005 and established the Ankara Forum to enable a tripartite dialogue mechanism between Turkish, Israeli and Palestinian business communities.²³ All these initiatives collapsed, however, with the 'Operation Cast Lead' in December 2008.

Taken together, Turkey's engagement with the Levant, though started in the late 1990s, increased gradually during the 2000s. With the new policy line and the tools connected with it, Turkey succeeded in establishing good political and economic relations with most countries in the region.

Energy Dimension

The discovery of offshore hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean added a new dimension to Levantine politics. Despite the region's potential as an additional energy supplier to Europe, existing disputes over maritime borders and sovereign rights posed significant barriers. As the maritime

19 Meliha Benli Altunışık and Esra Çuhadar, "Turkey's Search for a Third Party Role in Arab-Israeli Conflicts: A Neutral Facilitator or a Principal Power Mediator?", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.15, No.3, 2010, p.371-392; İlker Aytürk, "The Coming of an Ice Age? Turkish-Israeli Relations since 2002", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.12, No.4, 2011, p.675-687.

20 "Gaza and Strains in Israeli-Turkish Relations", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 January 2010, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/gaza-and-strains-israeli-turkish-relations>, (Accessed on 15 December 2017).

21 "Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel", *The New York Times*, 29 January 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html>, (Accessed on 15 December 2017).

22 "Assad confirms Turkish mediation with Israel", *The Guardian*, 24 April 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/24/syria.israelandthepalestinians>, (Accessed on 6 May 2018).

23 "TEPAV Hosted the Three Presidents", *TEPAV*, 13 November 2007, <http://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/1101>, (Accessed on 8 February 2014).

borders between the regional countries had not been demarcated before the energy discoveries were made, national claims on the resources overlap and have created a rather tense political environment in the eastern Mediterranean.²⁴

Turkey's concerns mainly relate to its and the Turkish Cypriots' sovereign rights in sea. Since 2003, the RoC has been negotiating delimitation agreements with coastal countries, excluding Turkey, and has granted licenses for exploration and production. Turkey first criticized the RoC because it was not included in these negotiations, though geographical features of the region require multilateral approach. Turkey's second criticism was centred on its argument that the RoC does not have a legitimate claim to represent the entire island of Cyprus. Turkey insists that RoC is not entitled to negotiate and adopt agreements in the absence of the Turkish Cypriot community, and that any resources exploited in future should belong to all Cypriots. Turkey further argues that, in the absence of an agreement between the two sides on the island on how to use potential natural resources, the appropriation of resources has to wait until a comprehensive solution is found. Even if the two sides on the island agree on a solution, Turkey argues, there is a need for negotiation between Turkey and the future state of Cyprus to delimit the sea between them.

Nevertheless, the RoC signed exclusive economic zone (EEZ) agreements with Egypt on 17 February 2003, Lebanon on 17 January 2007, and with Israel on 17 December 2010. In response, Turkey made several demarches with these countries and protested its exclusion from the negotiations, though was not able to prevent the signatures. The RoC adopted a law in February 2007 to identify 13 oil exploration fields around the island and launched its first international tender for offshore exploration on 15 February 2007, prompting Turkey to warn all interested parties to act responsibly and not harm the prospects for a comprehensive Cyprus solution.²⁵ Finally, a US-registered company, Noble Energy, began drilling in the RoC's Aphrodite field on 19 September 2011. In response, Turkey concluded a continental shelf delimitation agreement with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) on 21 September 2011²⁶ and in April 2012 authorized Turkish Petroleum Company to begin offshore exploration off the coast of the island in areas that overlap with six exploration fields also claimed by the RoC.

In addition to the discoveries on the Aphrodite field, another Noble Energy led consortium had earlier discovered Tamar field in January 2009 off the coast of Israel, with estimated reserves of 9 tcf of gas, and Leviathan field in December 2010, with estimated reserves of 16 tcf of gas.²⁷ Finally, in August 2015, ENI of Italy discovered Zohr field off Egypt with more than 30 tcf of potential gas in August 2015.²⁸ These discoveries raised hopes for possibility of exporting energy to Europe after meeting local demand.

24 Walid Khadduri, "East Mediterranean Gas: Opportunities and Challenges", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.17, No.1, 2012, p.111.

25 *Statement of the Spokesman*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 August 2007, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/_p_qa_32--statement-of-the-spokesman-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-of-turkey-in-response-to-a-question-_unofficial-translation___p_en.mfa, (Accessed on 14 February 2014).

26 *Press Statement No.216*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 September 2011, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-216_-21-september-2011_-press-statement-on-the-continental-shelf-delimitation-agreement-signed-between-turkey-and-the-trnc.en.mfa, (Accessed on 14 December 2014).

27 Khadduri, "East Mediterranean Gas", p.113-114.

28 "Eni begins producing from Zohr, the largest ever discovery of gas in the Mediterranean Sea", *ENI*, 20 December 2017, https://www.eni.com/en_IT/media/2017/12/eni-begins-producing-from-zohr-the-largest-ever-discovery-of-gas-in-the-mediterranean-sea, (Accessed on 8 March 2018).

It was hoped that a pipeline connecting the regional countries might offer strategic opportunities, such as thawing relations between Israel and Turkey, reaching an agreement on Cyprus, and re-energizing Turkey's efforts to join the EU.²⁹ Although it initially served as a catalyst to revive the negotiations on the island on 11 February 2014 after a two-year break, the on-going competition in the disputed areas has overshadowed the prospects of solution, and turned into another obstacle in the way of finding a solution for Cyprus. Since then, any attempt to enter the disputed area by RoC authorized companies has elicited a response from the Turkish side, sometimes in the form of Turkish warships blocking drilling ships and declaring immediate area as unsafe for navigation.³⁰

Although it is still early to know the final impact of these gas reserves on regional peace and co-operation, the discoveries have already affected regional alliances and altered Turkey's energy strategy. First of all, the alignment between the positions of Israel, the RoC and Greece, arguing that a pipeline from the region would provide cheaper natural gas to Europe and contribute to EU's quest for diversifying its sources of supply, has shifted the regional balance of power. In addition to an agreement between Israel and Egypt in February 2018 on exporting Israeli gas to Egypt, the leaders of Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece have met on several occasions to boost cooperation among the three countries.³¹ This rapprochement would no doubt add a layer to the on-going dispute between Turkey, the RoC and TRNC over territorial waters and EEZs.

In terms of Turkey's energy strategy, the possibility of a new pipeline through Turkey to Europe would contribute to its goal of becoming an energy hub in the region. As Turkey is situated at the centre of the transport routes from Levant to Europe, it hopes that any gas from the Levant will pass through Turkey en route to Europe. The fact that these gas discoveries occurred at a time when Turkey's relations with Israel were deteriorating helped pave the way for the rapprochement between Israel, the RoC and Greece. Furthermore, the tension between Turkey and the RoC over exploration and drilling rights will likely to continue blocking any possibility that a pipeline will be built through Turkey anytime soon.³²

Outbreak of Arab Uprisings and Regional Instability

The chain of events that triggered popular quests for good governance and better living conditions throughout the MENA at the end of 2010 has created serious challenges for the entire region, including Turkey. They also have effected Turkey's relations with the other countries in the region.

29 Matthew Bryza, "Israel-Turkey Pipeline Can Fix Eastern Mediterranean", *Bloomberg Business*, 20 January 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-01-20/israel-turkey-pipeline-can-fix-eastern-mediterranean> (Accessed on 15 March 2014); Also see Ayla Gürel and Laura Le Cornu, "Can Gas Catalyse Peace in the Eastern Mediterranean?", *Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.49, No.2, 2014, p.11-33.

30 See for example *MiddleEastEye*, 8 October 2014; *BBC*, 15 May 2015; *Hurriyet Daily News*, 10 February 2018.

31 "Energy, peace focus of Tripartite Summit", *Cyprus Mail*, 21 November 2017, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2017/11/21/energy-eu-relations-focus-tripartite-summit/> (Accessed on 10 February 2018).

32 Gareth M. Winrow, "The Southern Gas Corridor and Turkey's Role as an Energy Transit State and Energy Hub", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.15, No.1, 2013, p.157.

Turkey was unprepared for the momentous changes in the region when the uprisings began. During the previous decade, Turkey had successfully developed closer economic and political relationships with the existing ruling regimes. The uprisings disrupted these relationships. When confronted with a choice between supporting the regimes or emerging opposition movements, Turkey faced a dilemma of 'ethics versus interest'.³³ It soon became clear that supporting autocratic regimes could in the long run undermine Turkey's ambition for regional leadership, while providing support for the opposition would also jeopardize its interests in the long term if the expected change did not occur. This dilemma was evident early when Turkey came out with a strong support of the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, but was quite reluctant to support the opposition in Libya and Syria due to deeper economic and political involvement.

In Egypt, Turkey almost immediately welcomed the collapse of the regime and supported the interim government and then the subsequent government of President Mohammed Morsi. However, his ousting within a year as a result of a military coup adversely affected Turkey's position and the strong language used by Turkish leaders in their condemnation of the military takeover led to the expulsion of the Turkish Ambassador on 23 November 2013. In response, Turkey declared Egyptian Ambassador to Ankara *persona non-grata* and downgraded its diplomatic relations with Egypt.³⁴ Since then, having taken a strong position against the military intervention, and despite various attempts to restore ties, Turkey failed to improve its relations with Egypt to its previous level.³⁵

In Libya, Turkey was initially cautious, mainly due to its economic interests. As the situation deteriorated, Turkey's top priority became the evacuation of the almost 25,000 Turkish workers residing in the country. At this point, Turkey did not support international intervention, with Prime Minister Erdoğan arguing that "military intervention by NATO in Libya or any other country would be totally counter-productive". Yet after Turkey successfully evacuated its citizens and the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1973 on 17 March, approving the creation of a "no-fly zone" as well as authorizing member states to take "all necessary measures" to protect civilians in Libya, Turkey changed its position, and called for Gadhafi's resignation on 3 May. Turkey then supported the NATO operation with naval and air forces.

However, by far the most intricate challenge the Arab uprisings have created for Turkey was the unrest in Syria, which quickly metastasised into a civil war. The Syrian Civil War has become a litmus test for the JDP policies in the Levant in general. The fact that Syria shares an 899 km border with Turkey, with ethnic Kurds and Arabs living on both sides, and considering the chequered history of the relationship between the two countries, the government initially hesitated. Prime Minister Erdoğan had earlier believed that his personal rapport with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, developed over a

33 Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions", p.6.

34 *Press Release No. 310*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 23 November 2013, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-310_-23-november-2013_-press-release-regarding-the-relations-between-turkey-and-egypt.en.mfa, (Accessed on 14 December 2014).

35 For instance, with the mediation attempt of Saudi Arabia, in which King Salman travelled to Ankara following his Cairo visit in April 2016, and as a result, Turkey invited Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el Sisi to Istanbul for the summit of the Organization for Islamic Conference in April 2016, though finally Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sameh Shoukry attended it on behalf of President Sisi. Moreover, the two countries' foreign ministers met during the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Venezuela in September 2016. See *MiddleEastEye*, 17 October 2016; *Hurriyet Daily News*, 6 April 2016; *Daily News Egypt*, 19 May 2018.

decade-long political and economic investment and cultivation of friendship, would provide him with a leverage to convince al-Assad to behave in such a way to ease tensions and avert the disturbances through reforms. However, the regime did not respond to the pleas and reacted with force when faced with popular demands.

When faced with an intractable autocratic regime in Damascus and what seemed to be a strong uprising in the north of the country, Turkey reversed its policy and started to support the opposition groups. It seemed that Turkey, having seen the regime changing capability of the earlier uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen, underestimated the power of Assad regime in Syria. Turkey also may have underestimated the determination of outside powers, such as Russia and Iran, to support the regime in Syria.³⁶ While Turkey initially tried to persuade the international community to launch an intervention, as it did in Libya, this time global actors were not willing to get involved. This would lead to a situation where Turkey found itself on the same side with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in aiding opposition groups, yet its inability to organize them into a workable alternative to the Assad regime contributed to the reluctance of other countries to get involved. Moreover, Turkey's active involvement in the Syrian crisis has created a rather negative narrative and has impacted its international image, with accusations that it pursued a sectarian foreign policy and supported radical Islamists associated with al-Qaeda.³⁷

Humanitarian concerns related to the crisis have also become important, as Turkey has received more than 3.5 million refugees from Syria. Besides the obvious difficulties involved in caring for such large numbers of people, the border between the two countries has, at times, ceased to function and has allowed illicit movements of radical Islamists going to fight in Syria. Moreover, the threat level for Turkey in connection with radical groups operating in the region increased considerably after the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2011. The threat posed by such groups would continue to rise as northern Syria turned into a multi-front conundrum with fighting occurring between ISIL and Kurdish groups, between opposition groups and the al-Assad regime, and sometimes between ISIL and the opposition forces for control of areas near the Turkish border.

The destructive impact of the conflict also extended into Turkey, as seen by the terrorist attacks in Reyhanlı (May 2013), Diyarbakır (June 2015), Suruç (July 2015), Ankara (October 2015), İstanbul (January and March 2016), and Gaziantep (August 2016) by ISIL-affiliated individuals. Moreover, when ISIL forces, coming out of Iraq and occupying a sizeable chunk of northern Syria, clashed with Kurdish groups over the control of the town of Ayn al-Arab (*Kobane* in Kurdish), Turkey found itself under heavy international pressure to assist the Kurds, while no other international actor was willing to send ground forces. Although Turkey eventually allowed support units of Iraqi Kurds to be deployed from northern Iraq through Turkish territory to Syria,³⁸ the fighting between Kurdish

36 Jonny Hogg and Tülay Karadeniz, "Assad's staying power leaves Turkey frustrated and exposed", *Reuters*, 27 May 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/27/us-syria-crisis-turkey-idUSKBN0E710G20140527> (Accessed on 15 December 2014).

37 Seymour M. Hersh, "The Red Line and the Rat Line", *London Review of Books*, Vol.36, No.8, 2014, p.21-24.

38 "Turkey to Let Iraqi Kurds Cross to Syria to Fight ISIS", *The New York Times*, 20 October 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/21/world/middleeast/kobani-turkey-kurdish-fighters-syria.html>, (Accessed on 10 December 2014).

groups and ISIL would spark unrest inside Turkey in October 2014 when Turkey refused involvement on behalf of the Kurds.³⁹

Furthermore, on 11 June 2014, after ISIL seized the city of Mosul in Iraq, it took 49 Turkish Consulate staff as hostages. In response, Turkey began to gradually align itself with the US-led coalition against ISIL. After months of negotiations, on 19 February 2015, Turkey and the US reached an agreement to 'train and equip' Syrian opposition forces. A few days after the agreement, Turkey conducted an operation inside Syria to evacuate the remains of Süleyman Shah, the supposed grandfather of the first Ottoman Sultan, and to rescue the soldiers guarding the tomb in order to avoid another hostage situation. This operation, along with the 'train and equip' agreement temporarily provided manoeuvring space for Turkey and intensified its contribution to the US-led coalition forces by allowing the use of Incirlik and Diyarbakır airbases in Turkey for the airstrikes against ISIL.

The intervention of Russia into the Syrian Civil War in late September 2015 on behalf of the al-Assad Regime also impacted Turkey's strategic interest in the region. Turkey's geopolitical positioning in Syria was weakened considerably thanks to Russia and Iran's support for Assad, as well as the substantial support provided by the US and Russia to Kurdish groups. Finally, Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet when it violated Turkish airspace on 24 November 2015 led to suspension of Turkish military flights over Syria. The thaw in Turkish-Russian relations after June 2016 would change the equation again,⁴⁰ allowing Turkish Air Force to return to Syrian theatre. Since then, Turkey has taken an active role in Syria through direct military operations, such as the *Euphrates Shield* operation from August 2016 to March 2017 and the *Olive Branch* from January 2018 to May 2018.

Similarly, when the US chose to cooperate with Kurdish groups on the ground against ISIL from autumn 2015 onwards, Turkey's relations with the US became strained. In the end, as a result of the combination of factors such as regional dynamics, Turkey's threat perceptions, disagreements with its Western allies, as well as the thaw in Turkish-Russian relationship, Turkey's insistence on the removal of al-Assad has softened and Turkey has become an active member of the Russian-led Astana process, which is paving the way for establishment of "de-confliction zones" in parts of Syria.

In retrospect, it seems that Turkey made a number of miscalculations, over issues such as its own leverage in Syria, the endurance of the Syrian regime, the power of opposition forces, and the intentions of outside powers. Although it has gained some manoeuvring space following its *Euphrates Shield* and *Olive Branch* operations, this may not provide the results Turkey had initially hoped. Thus, the Syrian imbroglio has become quicksand for Turkey, erasing the progress it had made over the course 1990s and 2000s in improving its political and economic ties to the Levant.

39 Murat Yetkin, "Control Issues in Ankara", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 11 October 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/control-issues-in-ankara.aspx?pageID=449&nID=72829&NewsCatID=409>,

(Accessed on 10 December 2014).

40 "Ankara-Moscow pivot: a new era begins", *DW*, 8 July 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/ankara-moscow-pivot-a-new-era-begins/a-19456985>, (Accessed on 10 May 2018).

Changing Balance of Power

The developments in the Levant over the last decade, i.e. the failure of Arab-Israeli peace process, the US invasion of Iraq, discovery of offshore hydrocarbons, the Arab uprisings, and the emergence of new players including non-state actors, have had a serious impact on the regional balance of power. In addition to regional countries, extra-regional powers, chief among them are the US and Russia, have been seeking to maintain and/or increase their influence throughout the region via military presence and political alignments. The US has had strategic advantages in the Levant since the days of the Cold War, and was able to consolidate its status after it ended.⁴¹ In contrast, the military presence of the Soviet Union was almost eliminated after the end of the Cold War, and Russia has been trying to re-establish its presence in the region. The Syrian crisis has provided an opportunity for Russia to achieve that aim.⁴²

At the same time, as Turkey's relations with Israel developed in the post-Cold War era, a Turkey-US-Israel triangle has emerged as one of the cornerstones of the US policy in the Levant.⁴³ The emergence of disagreements within the triangle and its changing geometry over the last decade, sometimes caused by independent moves from Turkey and Israel clashing with US priorities, has affected both the US policy in the region and Turkey's position in the Levant.⁴⁴ The bilateral relations between the US and Turkey were severely damaged by the refusal of the Turkish Parliament in 2003, prior to the US invasion of Iraq, to grant permission to US troops to pass through Turkey en route to Iraq, and then the internment of Turkish soldiers in Sulaymania, in northern Iraq, by the US forces. The latter incident froze the relationship and led to rise of persistent anti-American sentiments in Turkey.⁴⁵ Though tension between the two countries was eased somewhat after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, the divergent policy lines remained, and has again deteriorated following the 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey.⁴⁶

Along the way, the rise of ISIL and its rapid advance in Iraq and Syria from summer 2014 onwards had created a dangerous security vacuum at the core of the region and induced a US-led coalition to begin airstrikes against the group in early August 2014. While the US hoped for Turkish military contribution to this effort, in addition to access to Turkey's İncirlik airbase, Turkey demurred, insisting that the coalition prioritize the removal of al-Assad and the creation of a buffer zone in northern Syria, and initially allowed İncirlik to be used only for logistical and humanitarian support. The alignment of positions between Turkey and the US took some time to achieve. The countries

41 Derek Lutterbeck and Georgij Engelbrecht, "The West and Russia in the Mediterranean: Towards a Renewed Rivalry?", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.14, No.3, 2009, p.392.

42 Ibid., p.393.

43 Another triangle that the US based its Levant policy has been the US-Egypt-Israel triangle. See Jon B. Alterman and Haim Malka, "Shifting Eastern Mediterranean Geometry", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.35 No.3, 2012, p.111.

44 Alterman and Malka, "Shifting Eastern Mediterranean Geometry", p.118.

45 Füsün Türkmen, "Turkish-American Relations: A Challenging Transition", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.10, No.1, 2009, p.123; Alan Makovsky, "U.S. Policy towards Turkey", Morton I. Abramowitz (Ed.), *Turkey's Transformation and American Policy*, New York, The Century Foundation, 2000, p.230.

46 Kostas Ifantis, "The US and Turkey in the fog of Regional Uncertainty", *Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe*, No.73, 2013, p.15; Tolga Tanış, "10 Soruda Darbe Sonrası Washington-Ankara İlişkileri", *Hürriyet*, 19 July 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/10-soruda-darbe-sonrasi-washington-ankara-iliskileri-40154897> (Accessed on 22 August 2016).

signed a protocol for the 'train-and-equip' program of the Syrian opposition on 19 February 2015 and an agreement that allowed coalition forces to use of Incirlik and Diyarbakır airbases for airstrikes on 23 July 2015. Despite these agreements, the two countries' goals continue to diverge, especially concerning the priority of operations and the ideal final outcome.

Finally, the US cooperation with the PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG from autumn 2015 onwards, which turned the Kurdish groups into de-facto US ground forces in its war against ISIL, would put the two allies at loggerheads.⁴⁷ The US reliance on Kurdish groups in the region, in accordance with its "no American boots on the ground" policy, has triggered Turkey's survival instinct as the country has been struggling with the terror challenge posed by the PKK since early 1980s. This fear of an emboldened PKK, in addition to already existing ISIL threat, would motivate Turkey's two consecutive operations inside Syrian territory to fend developing PKK-related threats in border areas.

The Turkey-Israel part of the triangle has also suffered heavily since 2010. After Israeli soldiers killed Turkish activists in the *Mavi Marmara* raid, Turkey recalled its ambassador, cancelled joint military exercises, called for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, and, shortly after the release of the UN Palmer Report in September 2011, expelled Israel's ambassador. Despite several attempts to patch up relations, a gridlock remained until US President Obama brokered an apology from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Prime Minister Erdoğan on 22 March 2013. The rapprochement between the two countries, though, had to wait the signing of an agreement on 26 June 2016 to normalize diplomatic relations.⁴⁸ Since then, while political relations between the two countries have suffered from occasional flare-ups, economic cooperation has continued unabated.

The problems in the US-Turkey-Israeli triangle have naturally affected the decision making in the region. While Israel had previously closely allied with Turkey on many international issues, with the downturn in the relations, it moved to cultivate closer relations with Greece and the RoC in an attempt to transfer the region's newly discovered offshore energy resources to Europe, bypassing Turkey.⁴⁹ But the realignment went beyond a simple cooperation to find a way to transfer regional riches. Thus, Israel and Greece conducted a joint military exercise in 2008, Israeli pilots were allowed to practice in Greek airspace, and the two countries signed a security cooperation agreement in 2011. The cooperation opened the way for Greece to attempt to fill the vacuum left by Turkey.⁵⁰

As the US-Israel-Turkey triangle experienced troubles, Russia has been trying to increase its military presence in the Levant. While the military balance in the Levant favoured the West overwhelmingly, the hands-off policy of the Obama administration in Syria gave Russia a chance to return to the Middle Eastern to counter-balance western dominance in the region.⁵¹ Although Russia

47 Mustafa Aydın, "Operation Olive Branch", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 25 January 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/mustafa-aydin/operation-olive-branch-126248> (Accessed on 9 April 2018).

48 "Turkey, Israel Sign Deal to Normalize Diplomatic Relations", *NBC News*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/turkey-israel-sign-deal-normalize-diplomatic-relations-n600186> (Accessed on 9 April 2018).

49 Oğurlu, "Rising Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean", p.6.

50 Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The Eastern Mediterranean: Back to Power Politics", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 8 October 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=the-eastern-mediterranean-back-to-power-politics-2011-09-08> (Accessed on 4 February 2014); Oğurlu, "Rising Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean", p.7.

51 Lutterbeck and Engelbrecht, "The West and Russia", p.394.

had been aligned with the Syrian regime since the outbreak of the crisis, supporting Syrian diplomatic manoeuvres and supplying the regime with arms, the active involvement of Russia in the conflict, first evident in its military build-up in September 2015, has changed the equilibrium not only in Syria but also in the wider region. Intense Russian airstrikes halted the advance of both rebel groups and ISIL forces and eventually strengthened the regime. Furthermore, Turkey's downing of a Russian jet in November 2015 provided Russia with an opportunity to reinforce its forces with missiles and an additional airbase in Hmeimim. While its military presence and initiatives in Syria have provided Moscow a permanent foothold in the Levant, its pragmatic partnerships have also enhanced Russia's global posture.⁵²

In the energy arena, too, Russia has tried to create an area of influence in the region by supporting the arguments of the RoC over exploration and licensing rights, as well as its unilateral declaration of EEZ. As a result, the Russian firm Novatek was among the companies bidding for the exploration licenses in the RoC's second tender in May 2012.⁵³

The emergence of new non-state actors, such as ISIL, has also affected regional politics. The combined effect of the Arab uprisings, the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, the sectarian policies of the then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and the civil war in Syria have all facilitated the emergence of ISIL as a key player. While several moves in different parts of the region by ISIL militants revealed its capacity to threaten wider regional and global security, organizing a suitable ground force to fight against it proved difficult and would eventually strengthen the role of Kurdish groups in northern Syria, providing them with leverage in the region. The involvement of other regional actors such as Iran and Saudi Arabia with their sectarian views has also complicated the regional politics. While the US-led international coalition's operations against ISIL both in Iraq and Syria have steadily weakened its position in the region, the continuing political instability of the region creates a fruitful space for the emergence of new non-state actors, affecting the policymaking abilities of all of the countries in the region.

Conclusion

Turkey's relations with the Levant started to develop in late 1990s and have improved significantly during successive JDP governments. The political transformation of the country and the emergence of new business communities, eager to operate in the region, have supported such change. As a result, the government developed innovative tools such as visa-liberalization, conflict mediation, jointly established industrial zones, free trade areas, and joint cabinet meetings to develop Turkey's relations with the region.

However, the emergence of new challenges following the Arab uprisings has limited Turkey's reach in the Levant. While the increased instability in the region affected Turkey's political relations with the countries of the Levant, sustained crises have also undermined its economic relationships.

52 Mustafa Aydın, "Putin Reloaded", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 8 March 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/mustafa-aydin/putin-reloaded-128401> (Accessed on 20 May 2018).

53 Mehmet Ögütçü, "Rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean: The Turkish Dimension", *Mediterranean Policy Program*, Washington D.C., German Marshall Fund, 2012, p.4.

In the wake of the popular uprisings in the region, Turkey, despite its initial confusion, took the side of the masses against the existing regimes. However, as popular uprisings finally failed to gain the upper hand, especially in Egypt and Syria, Turkey's activism during the Arab uprisings has since led to weakening of Turkey's position in the Levant.

Moreover, Turkey's attraction to local populations and the countries had mainly stemmed from its democratic features and close relationship with the EU. As its democratic credentials increasingly came under suspicion in recent years and its relationship with the EU undermined, Turkey's appeal and leverage in the region has weakened. So much so that Turkey's political relations today with the Levant countries are not even as strong as the pre-Arab uprisings era, with the country maintaining only a decreased diplomatic representation in Syria, Egypt, and Israel. This diplomatic and political disconnect has undermined Turkey's economic connections as well. Under such conditions, while its geographic position at the centre of transportation routes for the region's recently discovered offshore natural resources might in the future assist Turkey in its ambition to become an energy hub in the Eastern Mediterranean, existing tensions with the regional countries hinder the realization of this goal. It is clear that, in order to affect regional developments to favour its long-term interests, Turkey needs to recalibrate its disorganised policies in the Levant.