

Turkey's New Foreign Policy Towards The Middle East And The Perceptions In Syria And Lebanon*

Türkiye'nin Yeni Orta Doğu Politikası Ve Suriye İle Lübnan'daki Algılamalar

Tayyar Anı** - Ferhat Pirinççi***

Abstract

The issues in the Middle East directly affect Turkey's interests from security to economy. However, during the Cold War, Turkey did not involve directly and influentially to the Middle Eastern affairs. The political atmosphere arose after the Cold War, especially in the beginning 2000s, gave some opportunity and/or encouraged Turkish decision makers to pursue a new policy. Turkey as it develops and continues its relations with the West and the rest of the World, tried to set a new model of relations depend on mutual respect, recognition of territorial integrity and constructing trust building relations with the regional countries in every level. This article focuses on Turkish new foreign policy toward the Middle East and reflects the perceptions in Syria and Lebanon. From these perceptions, the article claims that Turkish new diplomatic initiatives would likely to continue and will be appreciated by all sides as long as the search for stability in the region prevails.

Key Words: Turkey's Middle East Policy, Turkish Foreign Policy, Turkish-Syrian Relations, Turkey-Lebanese Relations, Perception of Turkey in the Middle East

Özet

Orta Doğu'daki gelişmeler güvenlikten ekonomiye Türkiye'nin çıkarlarını doğrudan etkilemektedir. Bununla beraber Türkiye Soğuk Savaş döneminde Orta Doğu'daki gelişmelere doğrudan ve etkili bir şekilde müdahil olmamıştır. Soğuk Savaş sonrasında oluşan yeni siyasi ortam ve özellikle de 2000'li yıllar, Türkiye'nin farklı politikalar izlemesine olanak sağlamış ve/veya karar vericileri bu konuda cesaretlendirmiştir. Yeni dönemde Türkiye bir yandan Batı ve dünyanın diğer bölgeleriyle ilişkilerini sürdürüp geliştirirken, diğer yandan Orta Doğu ülkeleriyle hemen hemen her seviyede karşılıklı saygıya, toprak bütünlüğüne ve güvene dayalı yeni bir ilişki modeli oluşturmaya çalışmıştır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin yeni Orta Doğu politikası ve bu politikanın Suriye ve Lübnan'daki algılamaları üzerinde durmaktadır. Bu algılamalardan hareketle makale, Türkiye'nin bölgeye yönelik yeni diplomatik girişimlerinin süreceğini ve bölgede istikrar arayışı sürdükçe, bu girişimlerin bütün kesimler tarafından takdir edileceğini iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye'nin Orta Doğu Politikası, Türk Dış Politikası, Türkiye-Suriye İlişkileri, Türkiye-Lübnan İlişkileri, Orta Doğu'daki Türkiye Algısı

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Conference of International Studies Association – West, September 25, 2009.

**Prof.Dr.,Uludag University Department of International Relations, e-mail: atayyar@uludag.edu.tr

***Dr.,Uludag University Department of International Relations, e-mail: ferhat@uludag.edu.tr

görsel

Akademik
Bakış

1
Cilt 4 Sayı 7
Kış 2010

Introduction

For a long time, Turkey, especially during the Cold War years ignored the East or the Middle East due to some conjunctural and/or ideological reasons despite the fact that the Middle East and Turkey has historical, physical and cultural bounds. However the West and/or Westernization had been basic policy orientation for Turkey in terms of security and political considerations. In those years, the security situation stemmed from the structure of international system imposed Turkey to take the Western consideration in dealing the problems in the Middle East. Post Cold War developments gave some opportunity for Turkey and the Middle Eastern countries to reevaluate the political consideration and historical misperceptions and develop new types of engagements with each other. And still Turkey has strategic, political and economic reasons to construct intense relations with the region.

However, as a result of internal and external changes, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Turkish foreign policy has been reshaped by new political decision makers. Surely, the political conditions arose after 2003, gave some opportunity and/or encouraged the political leaders to pursue a new policy. In this atmosphere, Turkey tried to set a new model of relations depend on mutual understanding, mutual respect, recognition of territorial integrity and constructing trust building relations with the regional countries in every level.

In this article the basic principles of Turkish new foreign policy and the relations with Syria and Lebanon as well as the perceptions of new Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East will be analyzed.

I. Background of Turkish Engagement to the Middle East

Turkey has made an unchallengeable impression on the Middle Eastern countries as well as on the third parties with her active foreign policies and regional engagement in recent years. Turkey gave importance to the relations with Europe symbolized as "West" rather than the Middle East symbolized as "East" Even there were historical, religious and cultural links remained behind the demise of the Ottomans, the modern Turkey preferred not to involve and familiarize itself with the Middle East. On the other hand, the states, founded after the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire from the Middle East were not so independent: Syria and Lebanon were under the French mandate while Iraq and Jordan were under British. The political structures and identities of these states were mainly determined by the mandates and the "other" created to construct self consciousness depended heavily on anti-Turkish sentiments.

Although the consequences of the World War II created a new atmosphere different from the past; Turkey still did not involve necessarily to the Middle Eastern affairs. Even one consequence of the new era for the Middle East was the breaking off the relations with the mandatory powers, the bipolar

Gazi

system and the Cold War determined the basic structures of the relations. Taking side with the Western bloc, Turkey evaluated its security policies through the Soviet expansionism and pursued its foreign policy through the perspectives of West. Even the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli wars as well as the Iran-Iraq war which lasted eight years, Turkey maintained to pursue the policy of non-interference and non-involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts. So, in the Cold War era the main attitude that underlined the relations is the bipolar system not the self interests. But with the end of the Cold War there were systemic and geographical changes that Turkey and regional countries had to re-evaluate their positions.

In the early years of the post-Cold War era, still *the Cold War discourse* has taken the minds of the regional countries as hostage and some specific developments drove the attention of the region to the security related topics. In other words, Turkey and other regional countries had to resume the relations mostly on security basis and this prevented to enhance the relations not only in political dimension but also economic and cultural bases. For Turkey, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the developments thereafter is closely linked with the terrorist activities of the separatist PKK and in the 1990s, Turkey had to give most of its energy on this issue. In this era Turkey preserved to continue its traditional reactive policy to the regional developments and did not take active steps and made initiatives to change the structure of the game for its own interest by employing diplomatic and/or other necessary instruments.

II. Turkey's New Activism in the Middle East: Basic Features and Causes

The issues of the Middle East directly affect Turkey's interests from security to economy. The relative costs of traditional policies were so high that in the beginning of 2000s Turkey can no longer pursue a non-involvement policy. Regarding the Middle East that once known very well, Turkey has the potential to drive the regional trends and establish friendly relations among the regional countries in order to solve the existing problems while protecting its interests. First of all, it should be noted that Turkish foreign policy goals towards the region are mainly strategic and depend on to develop mutual trust and mutual respect. In other words, Turkish policy makers are focusing on some certain points as *maintaining regional stability, protecting national unity and territorial integrity, expanding trade relationship, developing friendly and peaceful relations built on trust rather than mutual suspicions.*

In order to understand new characteristics of Turkish policy, the main principles should be analyzed. These principles can be summarized under five headlines.

First, Turkey started to pursue a multi-dimensional diplomacy. In the Cold War and early years of the post-Cold War the ideological factors and mutual suspicions determined the limits of the engagement. Namely, Turkey pursued a foreign policy that serves bloc interests even it was controversial

Gazi

Akademik
Bakış

3

Cilt 4 Sayı 7
Kış 2010

to its own. But with the end of Cold War effects, Turkey started to develop diplomacy on mutual and multilateral basis. This means not only taking part with one side but developing the diplomatic relations with almost all actors. Regarding Lebanon, Turkey established diplomatic contacts with all groups notably Shiites and Sunnis that all appreciate Turkish peace efforts and welcome the Turkish troops in UNIFIL after the Israeli attacks in 2006¹ On the multilateral level, conclusion of a Framework Agreement with the Arab League to institutionalize the relations and cooperation through the establishment of a *Turkish-Arab Cooperation Forum in 2007 and improve the Strategic Dialogue with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)* into a structured framework in 2008 are both examples of the new era². Thus, multi-dimensional diplomacy enables Turkey to complement the issues with each other and bring peaceful approaches to the tough problems.

Second feature of the new active foreign policy is the positive engagement. This principle has two aspects. First, with its outstanding military power in the Middle East regional balance Turkey, initially uses and insists diplomatic means to solve the problems. But the diplomatic means to find solutions to the issues sometimes accompanied with coercion or deterrence. May be the last example of this attitude was in 1998 when Turkey achieved to stop the Syrian support of PKK after amassing 10,000 additional troops to the border. In the new era, threatening the use of force gave its privileged place to the positive engagement. This wouldn't mean that Turkey quit its deterrent force. Rather, this would mean a positive attitude taken towards all sides even it has a problematic past. According to the second aspect of this kind of policy principle, Turkey pursues positive engagement not only with neighboring but all the countries wherever the world that is to say even with the geographically and politically remote and marginal ones. For example the political and economic relations of Turkey with the countries such as Oman, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Yemen so developed that was never dreamed before. This situation provides Turkey to be kept informed about the concerns and worries of the each country even it has a minor role in the regional context. Also this enables engaging to the problems with acceptable solutions for each part.

Third, Turkey develops sincere and long standing relations. During the Cold War years as well as in 1990s the relations fluctuated due to the systemic and political factors. But in the new era Turkey establishes communication channels and trust building relations to reduce misunderstandings and change current prejudices with all partners if there exists. The deep relations are not supposed to construct by only official networks but also unofficial means.

- 1 Also during a visit to the UNIFIL-Turkish military unit in southern Lebanon, Turkish military staff noted that they were very welcomed and received grateful attitudes from all groups including Shiites.
- 2 Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/synopsis-of-the-turkish-foreign-policy.en.mfa>. (retrieved 09/02/2009).

The high level visits and speeches in the press conferences of the Turkish politicians and counterparts indicated that personal relations have been facilitating the establishment of good relations and mutual trust. Also the relations founded are not limited on governmental level governments. Besides Turkey engage to all domestic groups in each country without any discrimination and imperialistic or irredentist aims. Even though the democratic structures of the Middle Eastern countries make hard the change of the governments, Turkey has developed relations with the most of the domestic factions depending on respect.

This can be observed in the changing character of the Turkish foreign diplomatic missions in the Middle East. Before, they were used to be seen as ordinary missions that execute the regular official foreign relations. But recently the Turkish diplomats established so effective network that are keep in touch with almost every group in that country. For example through these efforts, Turkish diplomats easily manage the evacuation of Turkish citizens from Beirut during the Lebanon crisis in 2008 while other foreign diplomats had had some difficulties.³

Fourth, Turkey develops an independent foreign policy. Nevertheless, under the shadow of Cold War Turkey exaggerated the threat perception and without any precondition, gave full support to Western foreign policy approaches. Therefore, for a long time, Turkey was perceived in the Middle East as a "gendarme of the West" and the USA in particular. This perception did not disappeared immediately despite the end of the Cold War. But some foreign policy initiatives caused the total removal of this perception. In this context the divergence between U.S. and Turkey regarding Iraq pinned the new perception towards Turkey.⁴ And of course Turkish reactions towards Israel in the light of Gaza war and storming out of the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan after a heated debate with Israeli President Shimon Peres in the Davos Summit in January 2009 burnished this perception. So, acknowledging of the Middle Eastern countries that Turkish initiatives are free from American or European interests make their approach more positive towards Turkey.

Fifth, Turkey started to evaluate the problems in "**win-win strategy**". Deriving from game theory the win-win strategy means that both sides would have benefits from cooperation. Emphasized many times by the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, the issues are taken on a win-win basis. In this context the old hostilities as well as the new ones tried to be overcome not by power or intimidation but compromise. With this strategy in mind, Turkey emphasizes

3 Interview with Turkish Ambassador Serdar Kılıç, Beirut, 08/26/2008.

4 Even the rapprochement between Turkey and some Middle Eastern states started before, rejection of Turkish Parliament the motion to allow American troops to use Turkish territory on March 1, 2003 was more appreciated in the Middle East. In the field research, almost everybody from politicians and academicians to ordinary people consider this event as the starting point of Turkish new stance in the Middle Eastern affairs.

Gazi

Akademik
Bakış

5

Cilt 4 Sayı 7
Kış 2010

that regional stability is on behalf of everyone and with the solution of the problems from bilateral to multilateral including the key problems like Palestine issue, the region would benefit whole.

At the same time, soft power of Turkey accompanied and facilitated Turkish new stance in the Middle East. In fact, it can be argued that the Turkish dramas and films as soft power elements changed the Turkish image and influenced perceptions toward Turkey in the Arab Middle East. Before the field research the authors of this paper can only make some simple assumptions about the popularity of these series and admiration of "*Turkish way of life*" in the region by observing the Arab online media and thought that these would facilitate to improve relations.⁵ Cards and posters of the artists of these series are being sold in the streets of the whole Arab cities. Even it's difficult to find these ones in Turkish cities, you may see the posters not only in Damascus and Beirut but also in Hums, Hama, Tripoli, Saida or Latakia.⁶

Moreover, some other features of new Turkish activism accompanied the principles mentioned above. Among these are zero problem with neighbors, independent approach to the dependent cases, avoiding from irredentist aims and not making discrimination among the countries and groups whether on ideological, ethnic or religious basis.

All these features enable Turkey to become the most prominent actor of the region. It is defined as the "*major regional power*" or "*regional super power*" in most of the interviews made in the Middle East and there are a lot of articles emphasizing Turkey's active regional role as a mediator not only Israeli-Syrian case but also in Lebanon crisis, Iraq-Syrian crisis, Iran's nuclear efforts, Hamas-PLO dispute...etc.⁷ So that, especially after the Davos Summit, Mshari Al-Zaydi from the London based Asharq al Awsat wrote an article which emphasizes the new Turkish activism in the Middle East with the title of "*The Return of the Ottoman Empire*". In his article Al-Zaydi wrote "*Turkey is now turning towards its Ottoman past after neglecting it for so long; ... to establish an effective presence for the Turkish state that suits its historical, political and economic significance in the region.*"⁸ Stephen Larrabee a Turkey specialist from the Rand Corporation quoted "...a significant shift in the country's foreign policy has gone largely unnoticed: After decades of passivity, Turkey is now emerging as an important diplomatic

5 For example see Asharq al Awsat, "Turkish Drama Series Gain Popularity in Arab World", <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=7&id=12568>, (retrieved 04/27/2006); Rana Moussaoui, "Subversive' Turkish TV Series Takes Arab World by Storm", <http://www.france24.com/en/20080825-subversive-turkish-tv-series-takes-arab-world-storm>, (retrieved 09/14/2008); Lebanon Daily Star, "Turkish Soaps Revive Arab Interest in the Capital of the Ottomans" http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=4&article_id=105477, (retrieved 08/22/2009).

6 Observations in Lebanon and Syria in Summer 2008 and 2009.

7 For example see Simon Tisdall, "Turkey's Decisive Role", *The Guardian*, January 19, 2009.

8 See Mshari Al-Zaydi, "The Return of the Ottoman Empire", Asharq Alawsat, 02/05/2009, <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=15618>, (retrieved 02/08/2009).

Gazi

actor in the Middle East.” in Foreign Affairs and named the new Turkish activism as “Rediscovering the Middle East”.⁹

New Turkish activism in the Middle East is not a spontaneous and independent action from the facts. In other words, there are domestic, regional and global factors lying behind this new policy. Dealing with the domestic ones, some argue that the new Middle East engagement stems solely from the policies of Justice and Development Party (AK Party -Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) which has a conservative background.¹⁰ Thus with the AK Party coming into power it can be said that the religious sensitivity of the people increased. Turkish people became more engaged in the Middle Eastern politics especially the Palestine issue. However it's believed that this is not the only case. Because even more conservative governments like Refah (Welfare) Party came in to power before, there wasn't any engagement like this. However it can be argued that political stability created a much more distinctive era for foreign policy. For instance, while there were more than ten governments changed during the 1990s, the ruling AK Party elected first in 2002 is still in power and this stability enable the continuity in foreign policy as well as in economic policies.¹¹

In this context strategic and geopolitical changes caused this Turkish posture towards the Middle East as well. As mentioned above with the re-discovering the possible negative consequences of the new strategic landscape, the regional actors especially Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, and also Iraq realized that cooperation through bilateral and multilateral channels would serve best on behalf of their interests. For Turkey, especially the instability stemming from Iraq is vital. Because the chaos broke out after the American invasion of Iraq would cause dissolution and in this case the delicate regional balance would break down. Even some sort of stability assured in Iraq, the ambiguity about the consequences of the power struggles still prevails.

Consequently, the change in the official and unofficial perceptions of the region facilitated the Turkish engagement. During the interviews, most of the intellectuals and decision makers “unofficially” quoted their disturbance towards American policies and they also made a deliberate distinction with these policies and the Turkish stance.¹² In this sense, the divergence of the policies of Washington and Ankara not only helped the transformation of perceptions towards Turkey but also created an independent room to maneuver for Turkey in the Middle East. This assumption is more meaningful when you consider that the regional issues would be solved by the initiatives and wills

9 Stephen Larrabee, “Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East”, Foreign Affairs, July/August 2007.

10 Interview with Anat Lapidot-Firilla, Jerusalem-Israel, 06/10/2009; Ofra Bengio, Tel Aviv-Israel, 06/11/2009.

11 For the changing nature of Turkish governments see <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/hukumetler/hukumetler.htm>, (retrieved 07/15/2009).

12 Especially Syrian, Palestinian, Iranian and Lebanese intellectuals share this view while some of the Egyptian and Jordanians and none of the Israelis do.

Gazi

Akademik
Bakış

7

Cilt 4 Sayı 7
Kış 2010

of the region first just because regional powers may regard the sensitivities of each actor more. The critical situation of some regional countries also positively affected the Turkish activism in the region. The possible negative consequences of Iraq plus the isolation and problematic relations of Syria and Iran with the U.S. caused these countries to be more open to regional cooperation. Thereby, Turkey did not have to endeavor to gain support of these countries for regional and bilateral cooperation.

Moreover, the economic factors inspired Turkish new engagement to the Middle East. Even though Turkey had economic relations with some neighboring countries especially with Syria, Iraq and Iran, these were largely characterized through the border trade and could not be compared with the share of Turkey's other trade partners.¹³ But in the new era the needs for Turkish economic growth stimulated to search new markets and it's seen that there were nearly nothing invested in the Middle East market. So, the rapid growth in Turkish economy brought the new investments in the Middle East and the trade volume with the region so increased that never can be compared with the past. The improving economic relations and the political ones sometimes reciprocally accompanied and facilitated the engagement and encouraged each other.

III. Turkish – Syrian Rapprochement: Old Foes, New Friends

Relations with Syria were one of the most problematic issues for Turkish foreign and security policy in the pre WW-II as well as in the Cold War era. The creation process of “self” in both countries against “other” and accession of Hatay (Alexandrette- a sanjak in Ottoman era) to Turkey in 1939 were the main sources of hostility in the pre-WW-II period. The Turkish recognition of Israel and the Cold War included new ideological problems for reviving the relations. Also the water issue was one of the most problematic issues for Syria. For a long time, in order to balance the Turkish power Damascus had used the water and PKK issues as a political leverage against Turkey.¹⁴ Beyond the terrorist bases located in Bika'a valley, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan lived in Damascus with the approval of Hafez Assad regime until 1998. When the terrorist attacks of the PKK became intolerable, Turkey started to make pressure upon Assad regime. At the last resort in order to deter the Syrian government harbouring PKK and its leader, Turkish government threatened to use military power. Ankara government transferred certain amount of Turkish soldier to Syrian border to acknowledge and increase the credibility of political stand.

¹³ This can be truly understood when the data in the Turkish Undersecretary of Foreign Trade examined. See. <http://www.dtm.gov.tr>, (retrieved 07/15/2009).

¹⁴ Syria also gave support to Armenian terrorist organization ASALA and some leftist terrorist groups (i.e. Dev Sol) from Turkey in the 1980's.

Even the relations came to the edge of a war, Syrian side retreated and with the signing of the Adana Accords on October 20, 1998 a new era for the relations started.¹⁵

Adana accord was the first turning point for Turkish-Syrian relations but the second one was the attendance of former Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer to the funeral of Hafez Assad in 2000. The last one also influenced the Syrian public opinion but, these were not perceived immediately as the signs of a radical change of Turkish foreign policy toward the region. Its impact was not seen as a positive change for Turkish foreign policy; however, this gesture has attracted the Syrians so much that during the interviews, most of the intellectuals take Sezer's attendance to the funeral as the starting point for rapprochement. In response, Bashar Assad paid a visit in 2004. This visit reflected a turning point for the bilateral relations. Thus, Bashar is the first Syrian president who visited the neighboring country, Turkey since the creation of Syria. Actually the first visit by a Syrian President made in 2004 shows the background of the relations in an ironic way. But under the shadow of Iraqi invasion and its possible negative effects, both sides took mutual steps to strengthen the relations.

In the interviews made, it's obvious that Turkey's support for Syria in 2005 was also a crucial step which cemented the rapprochement. However Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan paid a visit to Damascus in late 2004, Syrians perceive Sezer's visit as a breaking point for the isolation of Syria. Because the visit was made while Syria was under heavy pressure for the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Refiq Hariri and its involvement in Lebanon affairs as well as in Iraq and despite the American criticism.

Certainly Turkish support for Syria is not only for Syrian interests. Thus, the situation in Iraq was becoming worse and Turkish-American relations also became tense due to the American support to Iraqi Kurds. Americans were supporting Kurdish groups in order to stabilize Iraq on the one hand; but were reluctant to give support to Turkey in order to fight against PKK terrorism on the other hand. Under the shadow of these developments putting heavy pressure on Damascus would mean giving way to another intervention to the regional balance. That's why Turkey showed solidarity with Syria in order to stabilize the situation and send U.S. a message. But whatever the Turkish aims are the fact is that Syrians are very grateful for the support. Talking about the rapprochement, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Abdel Fatah Ammura quoted "*Syrians would not forget Turkish support gave in rough times.*"¹⁶

15 For the background of relations see Malik Mufti, "Turkish-Syrian Rapprochement: Causes and Consequences", *Policy Watch*, No. 630, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 21, 2002; Sami Moubayid, "Turkish-Syrian Relations: The Erdoğan Legacy", *SETA Policy Brief*, No. 25, October 2008, pp. 1-3.

16 Interview with Abdel Fatah Ammura, Damascus, 08/19/2008.

Gazi

Akademik
Bakış

9

Cilt 4 Sayı 7
Kış 2010

After than the mutual visits took place consecutively and the political as well as economic and cultural relations improved. In the end of first decade of 2000s, there is nothing seen to mention as a problematic issue between two countries. For instance talking about Hatay, however the Turkish province Hatay is still shown in some Syrian maps as a part of Syrian territory it's claimed that Damascus implicitly recognized the current borders but couldn't declare it loudly due to the Israeli efforts to create similarity between Hatay and Golan.¹⁷ Actually the Hatay issue has never mentioned by the Syrians during the intense interviews made on Turkish-Syrian relations. When the Syrian Ministry of Tourism's website examined, it can be seen that a "practical" solution found in order not to undermine the ongoing relations.¹⁸

Improvement in the political relations accompanied the economic ones and Turkish-Syrian trade volume increased as well. According to Turkish Undersecretary of Foreign Trade data while in 2004 the official trade volume was about \$ 0.75 billion, it exceeded \$ 1.750 billion in 2008. Also cooperation in the oil field started with the Turkish state owned TPIC and Syrian counterparts. Beside the willing cooperation in 2006-2007 TPIC began importing and exporting various oil products as well as crude oil since 2008. Adil Beyatli, TPIC representative in Damascus quoted that Turkish and Syrian companies are working on new projects that would facilitate the economic cooperation.¹⁹

Certainly some events show the level of cooperation between two old foes. One of them is Turkey's mediation effort in Syrian-Israeli indirect peace talks. This initiative was held secretly first and then publicized with both sides' content. However the process failed due to the Israeli attack on Gaza, Beshar Assad stated that "two sides never came so close for a settlement before even in 1990". After this process, on the face of new negotiation attempts Syria is insisting for the Turkish mediation. Just before a special visit to Turkey, Assad said²⁰:

"Turkey's role is a very fundamental one. There are many reasons for this. As a country in this region, Turkey is more concerned with every aspect of this land than any other country. Turkey is a very skillful country both in its efforts to solve problems and in removing obstacles that lead to problems. Secondly, there is unconditional trust between Syria and Turkey both at the political level and between the peoples, and this is very important for us. There is no mistrust on any issue. Furthermore, Turkey has proven in a short period of eight months how skilful and rational it is in mediating, although this was Turkey's first effort concerning the Arab problem." Assad concluded his words as "...we always want to shift to direct meetings once we reach a certain point through indirect meetings with Turkey's mediation".

17 See Hurriyet, "Secret Solution to Hatay", 01/10/2005.

18 Syrian Ministry of Tourism put a touristic image on the Turkish-Syrian border. In the map it's not clear if it's a Turkish or Syrian territory. See <http://www.syriatourism.org/index.php?newlang=eng>. (retrieved 08/14/2009)

19 Interview with Adil Beyatli Head of TPIC Damascus Branch Office, 08/23/2008.

20 <http://www.champress.net/index.php?q=en/Article/view/44473>, (retrieved 09/16/2009).

Gazi

Other event is the joint military exercise staged on April 27, 2009. However the scope was limited; this exercise was so significant that it was the first military engagement of both sides. More importantly on the same day Turkey and Syria signed a technical military cooperation agreement to deepen collaboration between the national defense industries.²¹ Another important development was held on September 16, 2009. During Syrian delegations' visit headed by Assad, an agreement for canceling entry visas and another one for establishing High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council is signed. The latter is very wide including not only political, diplomatic, and economic aspects but also transportation, energy and water sources, environment, culture, education, and science issues.²²

In this context, the second High Level Strategic Cooperation meeting was held on October 2-3, 2010 in Latakia with the attendance of Syrian and Turkish cabinet members including the foreign and interior ministers as well as ministers of energy, foreign trade, environment, agriculture, transportation, health and housing. This meeting has shown the increase of the scale of relations so that, it's not easy to find such active cooperation mechanism neither in the region nor in the world. As Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs told during the meeting, "*Our relations are beyond what existing models of cooperation offer. This is the first time that two countries are engaging in a cooperation mechanism of this level that sets no boundaries to improving their relations*"²³ As the participants of the meetings show, politics is not the only issue discussed. In the meetings several agreements were signed from agriculture to transportation including for the foundation of a joint venture oil company to search oil in Syrian soil.²⁴

To sum up, the relations on the edge of a war in 1998 transformed to a strategic cooperation which stems from Turkish active policies and Syrian response. In ten years both countries became aware of their mutual interests. But it must be stated that in this relationship, Syria needs Turkey more than Turkey needs. In other words Syria needs Turkey in order to solve its individual problems as well as enjoying the regional stability. Dr. Samir al Taqi, Director of the Orient Center for International Studies in Damascus quotes that "*when the Syrians think about war, they turn to Iran but when they think peace and opportunities they turn to Turkey*"²⁵ However, Syrians officially state that the relations is yielding for both sides. According to Abdel Fatah Ammura, "*while Syria finds opportu-*

21 Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak defined the exercise as a "*disturbing development*" See <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3707314,00.html>, (retrieved 05/30/2009).

22 <http://www.champress.net/index.php?q=en/Article/view/44490>, (retrieved 09/16/2009).

23 "High-Level Turkish-Syrian Meeting Kicks off in Latakia", <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=high-level-turkish-syrian-meeting-kicks-off-in-latakia-2010-10-03>, (retrieved 10/10/2010).

24 The first clue of this initiative was pointed out by Adil Beyatlı in an interview made on 8/28/2008. See "TPAO Suriye'de Petrol Arayacak", <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25137670>, (retrieved 10/07/2010).

25 Interview with Samir al Taqi, Damascus, 08/22/2008.

Gazi

Akademik
Bakış

11

Cilt 4 Sayı 7
Kış 2010

nity to reach West through Turkey; Turkey also finds opportunity to reach the rest of the Arab world through Syria.”²⁶ Whether this assumption is true or not, it’s obvious from the interviews that Syrians are sincere towards Turkey and believe that the cooperation would bring benefits for each side. For their part, besides uniting Syria to the West, the economic profits of this relation are also regarded. Thus, perception of Syrians toward Turkish way of economic development is also an important attractive factor which accelerates all other processes.²⁷

IV. Turkish – Lebanese Rapprochement: A Sample of Turkish Activism

Turkey’s engagement to Lebanon is a good example of Turkish activism in the region. Thus, Turkish engagement in Syria, Iran and Iraq is understandable due to the fact that these are neighboring countries and they have a potential as buffer zones for blocking the instability derived from the region. Also Turkish engagement in the countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt may be understandable due to the fact that these are other major powers of the region. But the engagement in Lebanon needs more explanation. Because of its geographically remote location, Lebanon wasn’t perceived as a vital area for Turkish foreign and security policy. But with the 2000s there is a transformation in this perception and Turkish concern over Lebanon steadily increased.

Lebanon can be seen as a “*micro Middle East*” with its complex political, social and cultural structure. And because of this complexity the major powers in the Middle East as well as in the global order take side with one or more of the ethnic or religious factions in order to influence and gain profit in the local power struggle.²⁸ This process has started in the late years of the Ottoman Empire and after its demise, modern Turkey had never taken part in these power struggles. Even in the early years of the post-Cold War era, Turkish-Lebanese relations were executed on official and conventional basis just as with the other countries like Yemen, Sudan or Morocco.

However with the start of Turkish activism, Lebanon is also considered as an important area for the regional stability. Thus, the struggle among the regional and global actors through Lebanese groups has seen as a big source of instability for the region. In this context an intervention to Lebanese affairs on behalf of one group usually balanced or responded with an intervention by another regional/global actor and the process transform itself from local to regional power struggle. This situation could not be acceptable for Turkey. In Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s words “*stability in Lebanon will affect whole Middle East*”.²⁹ The other way around is also a prevailing assumption.

26 Interview with Abdel Fatah Ammura, Damascus, 08/19/2008.

27 Interview with Mervan Kabalan, Damascus University, 08/24/2008.

28 For the power struggles in modern Lebanon see Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, London: Pluto Press, 2007.

29 <http://www.trt.net.tr/trtinternational/en/newsDetail.aspx?HaberKodu=16ba126f-8341-426e-9d3a-27480f62eacc>, (retrieved 07/19/2009).

Gazi

Hence, in 2000's Turkish-Lebanese relations accelerated with the invitation of assassinated Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2004. But the turning point for Turkish active engagement is the Israeli attack to Lebanon in 2006. Turkey while criticizing loudly the Israeli attack also tried to find a solution for a ceasefire. Since then, in the post-war period Turkey contributed UN peace force (UNIFIL) with an engineering corps unit located in the south Lebanon near Tyre (Sur). Also Turkey provided humanitarian aid during and after the crisis totaling \$ 20 million worth and committed additional \$ 30 million in the Stockholm and Paris conferences for the reconstruction of Lebanon. Turkish efforts of reconstruction did not centralized in a specific geographic or factious location instead scores of schools have built in different parts of Lebanon.³⁰ Beyond reconstruction efforts, several high level visits made and Turkey took part on important mediations efforts during the presidential elections and other political crisis between the Lebanese groups.

In the interviews made in Lebanon, it's observed that most of the Lebanese intellectuals from different factions appreciated Turkish efforts in order to stabilize the country and are welcoming the new engagements. This is an interesting thing when the same intellectuals usually criticize at least one actor for their support to the rival group.³¹ Serdar Kılıç, Turkish Ambassador in Beirut said that *"they own this appreciation for their neutral engagement with all groups without any discrimination"* and further defined this policy as *"honorable neutralism"*.³²

The Lebanese perceive Turkey as one of the most important actors in political, economic and military sense. Some argue that Turkey should take more steps to engage and balance the external interventions. For example Jamil K. Mroue editor in chief of the Lebanon Daily Star insisted that *"Turkey should be more active in Lebanese affairs"*. Mroue went further by claiming that *"it's difficult to expect the external powers with different interests may bring a just solution to the crisis"* and emphasized the importance of contribution of Turkey with its potential power and neutral stance.³³

Pointing out the growing concern to Turkish diplomatic demarches in the Middle East as well as to Turkish domestic politics is not an extreme observation for Lebanon. Thus, after the Turkish diplomatic maneuvers, major media corporations assigned journalists solely to observe Turkish diplomatic initiatives in particular and Turkey in general. One of them was Ernest Khoury a Palestinian journalist from the Lebanese Al Akhbar Newspaper. While given

30 As of July 2009, while Turkey have built 41 schools and five children parks, two health clinics and a rehabilitation center is still under construction. See Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey Strives for a Better Common Future in the Middle East", *Daily Star*, 07/31/2009.

31 For example during the interviews, Shiites criticized Saudi and American intervention while the Sunnis criticized Iranian and Syrian influence and both complained about Israeli policies; none of them criticized Turkish role in Lebanon.

32 Interview with Turkish Ambassador Serdar Kılıç, Beirut, 08/26/2008.

33 Interview with Jamil K. Mroue in Beirut, 08/27/2008.

Gazi

Akademik
Bakış

13

Cilt 4 Sayı 7
Kış 2010

his appreciation to Turkish diplomatic rise in the Middle East and its place among the Lebanese, Ernest Khoury emphasized the negative consequences of Turkish initiatives for the Palestinians. Namely, Khoury underlined his hesitations of a possible success of Turkish mediation efforts on Syrian-Israel negotiations and claimed that a “successful” process wouldn’t mean the same for the Palestinian refugees especially living in Lebanon.³⁴

In the sectarian strife between the pro-Western government and the opposition on May 2008, Lebanon became on brink of a civil war like the one 1975-1990. Turkey at this stage played an active role with Qatar to find a solution to the conflict and to prevent to deepen the crisis. Through these efforts Doha agreement was signed and a national unity government was formed in order to maintain stability. The journalists as well as some of the politicians, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, stated that without Turkey’s efforts the solution could not be achieved even though Turkish role did not underlined enough in the process. But almost all interviewees also acknowledged that they perceive Turkey as a stability maker not only for Lebanon but also for the whole region.³⁵

To sum up, improvement in Turkish-Lebanon relations and the perceptions of Lebanese reflect the success of Turkish activism in the Middle East. Because Turkish engagement and relations of both countries came to an important stage that in the 1990s and early 2000s there would be nothing to mention about except the official and superficial dimension of the relations. This Turkish diplomatic engagement is accompanied with the economic sector that the trade volume of both countries is steadily increasing. For instance, the trade volume did not exceed a quarter million dollars in 2003; but exceeded a billion dollars in 2008. It can be argued that, under these circumstances the Turkish-Lebanon relations will steadily improve and will reflect a good example of objective engagement and use of political, economical, historical, cultural and religious links.

Conclusion

As long as the underlying causes of new Turkish activism in the Middle East, especially the search for stability prevails, Turkish new diplomatic initiatives would likely continue. The characteristic of Turkish engagement which differs itself from the others is certainly its nature. In other words, it’s obviously different from the engagements of Iran or other regional powers. Thus, Turkish activism is constructed on the desire for regional stability and never aimed to change regional balance by using military power. However there are some worries of regional decision makers and analysts about the new Turkish activism.

34 Interview with Ernest Khoury, Beirut, 08/28/2009.

35 Interviews made during August 2008.

Görüş

Some made their hesitations about the imperial desires of Turkey by calling the new policy as neo-Ottomanism.

Nevertheless it must be stated that the character of Turkish activism has not imperialistic desires. The basic motive behind this policy can be explained with: "...if there were something happening in the world that affected Turkey, then Turkey had a right to speak out and would always exercise this right."³⁶ Exercising this right of course needs a strong infrastructure which Turkey likely to acquire. For instance if the elections for the non-permanent Security Council membership regarded, Middle Eastern countries supported Turkey's membership.

Dealing on the reflections of Turkish activism, it's observed that Turkish new stance is mostly supported in the cases of Syria and Lebanon. In the regional context, this support would be higher in the streets than the government bureaucracies however the decision makers of Syria and Lebanon are welcoming and supporting this activism. During the interviews, it's observed that neither side confront to the activism, instead they are waiting for additional steps in order to solve their individual problems.

As a consequence Turkey's new stance in the Middle East is welcomed and likely to improve as long as the strategic landscape is not changed or Turkey doesn't retreat itself from the process.

References

- AL TAAQI Samir, Interview, Damascus, 08/22/2008.
- AL-ZAYDI Mshari, "The Return of the Ottoman Empire", Asharq Alawsat, 02/05/2009, <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=15618>, (retrieved 02/08/2009).
- AMMURA Abdel Fatah, Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Interview, Damascus, 08/19/2008.
- ASHARO AL AWSAT, "Turkish Drama Series Gain Popularity in Arab World", <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=7&id=12568>, (retrieved 04/27/2006).
- BENGIO Ofra, Interview, Tel Aviv-Israel, 06/11/2009.
- BEYATLI Adil, Head of TPIC Damascus Branch Office, *Interview*, Village of Khaldur, 08/23/2008.
- DAVUTOĞLU Ahmet, "Turkey Strives for a Better Common Future in the Middle East", *Daily Star*, 07/31/2009.
- <http://www.champress.net/index.php?q=en/Article/view/44473>, (retrieved 09/16/2009).
- <http://www.champress.net/index.php?q=en/Article/view/44490>, (retrieved 09/16/2009).

36 Quoted in Semih İdiz, "FM Davutoğlu Should Choose His Words Carefully", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 09/10/2009.

<http://www.dtm.gov.tr>, (retrieved 07/15/2009).

<http://www.trt.net.tr/trtinternational/en/newsDetail.aspx?HaberKodu=16ba126f-8341-426e-9d3a-27480f62eacc>, (retrieved 07/19/2009).

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3707314,00.html>, (retrieved 05/30/2009).

HURRIYET DAİLY NEWS, "High-Level Turkish-Syrian Meeting Kicks off in Latakia", <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=high-level-turkish-syrian-meeting-kicks-off-in-latakia-2010-10-03>, (retrieved 10/10/2010).

HURRIYET, "Secret Solution to Hatay", 01/10/2005.

İDİZ Semih, "FM Davutoğlu Should Choose His Words Carefully", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 09/10/2009.

KABALAN Mervan, *Interview*, Damascus University, 08/24/2008.

KHOURY Ernest, *Interview*, Beirut, 08/28/2009.

KILIÇ Serdar, Turkish Ambassador in Beirut, *Interview*, Beirut, 08/26/2008.

LAPIDOT-FIRILLA Anat, *Interview*, Jerusalem-Israel, 06/10/2009

LARRABEE Stephen, "Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007.

LEBANON DAILY STAR, "Turkish Soaps Revive Arab Interest in the Capital of the Ottomans", http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=4&article_id=105477, (retrieved 08/22/2009).

MOUBAYID Sami, "Turkish-Syrian Relations: The Erdoğan Legacy", *SETA Policy Brief*, No. 25, October 2008.

MOUSSAOUI Rana, 'Subversive' Turkish TV Series Takes Arab World by Storm", <http://www.france24.com/en/20080825-subversive-turkish-tv-series-takes-arab-world-storm>, (retrieved 09/14/2008).

MROUE Jamil K., *Interview*, Beirut, 08/27/2008.

MUFTI Malik, "Turkish-Syrian Rapprochement: Causes and Consequences", *Policy Watch*, No. 630, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 21, 2002.

NTVMSNBC, "TPAO Suriye'de Petrol Arayacak", <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25137670>, (retrieved 10/07/2010).

SYRIAN MINISTRY OF TOURISM, <http://www.syriatourism.org/index.php?newlang=eng>, (retrieved 08/14/2009)

TBMM, <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/hukümetler/hukümetler.htm>, (retrieved 07/15/2009).

TISDALL Simon, "Turkey's Decisive Role", *The Guardian*, January 19, 2009.

TRABOULSI, Fawwaz *A History of Modern Lebanon*, London: Pluto Press, 2007.

TURKISH MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/synopsis-of-the-turkish-foreign-policy.en.mfa>, (retrieved 09/02/2009).

Görüş

Akademik
Bakış

16

Cilt 4 Sayı 7
Kış 2010