

İlter Turan

Istanbul Bilgi University¹

ORCID: 0000-0001-7196-3566

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: EVOLUTION AND TRANSFORMATION

Türkiye is increasingly identified as a major country with multiple roles in the politics of the Middle East. These roles include being a peacemaker, a contestant, a military actor and sometimes an intruder in the politics of the region. Although as a big and relatively strong country in the region, its important role played in regional politics may be viewed as being natural, in terms of history, but this is rather new. What characterized the foreign policy of the Turkish Republic established in 1923 was not its involvement in regional politics but, until recently, its aloofness from it. In examining the role of Türkiye in the current conflicts in the Middle East, it may be useful to examine, if only briefly, how this policy evolved from basically non-involvement to assuming a variety of roles in regional politics².

■ THE EARLY REPUBLICAN PERIOD – THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Ottoman Empire lost the First World War, a struggle which it had entered along with Germany in the hope of recovering some of the lost territories of the rapidly declining empire. Much of the territory that was under Ottoman rule including those that constituted the Turkish heartland of the Empire was conquered by the Allies, notably England and France. Britain's encouragement of Greece to conquer the western parts of Anatolia (Asia Minor) constituted a critical step inviting the formation of the National Liberation Movement that defeated the Armenians in the East, the French in the South and the Greeks in the West, thereby also inviting British withdrawal from Istanbul, opening the way to a new peace conference in

¹ ilter.turan@bilgi.edu.tr

² The historical part of this paper has benefited in large part from the report on foreign policy I had prepared for the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association. Cf. <https://www.tusiad.org/tr/yayinlar/raporlar/item/10895-kuresel-siyaset-forumu-makale-dizisi-no-1-dis-siyasete-i-liskin-gozlemler>.

Lausanne to replace the Sevres Treaty that had been imposed on the defeated Ottoman Empire. When it was also invited to Lausanne although it had not been a part of the liberation movement, the Sultan's government was abolished. Soon after the signing of the Lausanne Treaty, on October 29, 1923, a republic was declared.

The territories that the Nationalists aimed to liberate were covered in the so-called National Pact. This document depicted that all territories that were under Ottoman rule at the time of the signing of the armistice at Mudros marking the end of the Empire's withdrawal from the World War belonged to the Turkish state. Yet, some of those territories in Syria and Iraq, occupied by Britain and France after the signing of the armistice, remained in their hands. Rather than initiating a major military action against colonial powers to recover those areas, the Nationalist Government chose to end the war, sign a peace treaty and then try to settle the border issues through diplomatic means. Türkiye failed to get Mosul-Kirkuk area from the British, but succeeded in forcing the French in 1938 to make the Sandjak of Antioch and Alexandrietta independent (from Syria). The Sandjak voted in 1939 to join Türkiye. On another front, Türkiye also achieved full sovereignty over the Turkish Straits by the Montreux Convention of 1936 which replaced the Straits Convention in Lausanne that had left them to the international control.

The newly founded republic ruled over a territory and population that had been exhausted through a string of wars, the last of which was the national liberation struggle. The government of the republic chose to focus on reconstructing the economy at home rather than pursue costly external goals, especially those of a territorial nature. Furthermore, the republican regime that had been established to replace the Sultan's empire needed to consolidate its rule, directing it to expend its resources and energies mainly on domestic politics. These constraints led the government to formulate a foreign policy based on using instruments that would not rely on expending material resources. The Nationalist Government turned to international law, the International Court of Justice and the League of Nations as instruments it would rely on in running its external affairs. And finally, the government, trying to keep its distance from those against whom it had fought the war of liberation and to avoid joining those that had been defeated in the First World War and were therefore clamoring for revisionism, chose to pursue a neutralist foreign policy. This choice, understandably, led to a lower level of involvement in international affairs.

During the First World War much of the land inhabited mainly by Arabs had been occupied by Britain and France. Shortly after the war ended, these areas were accorded to them as mandates by the League of Nations. Iraq was placed under British and Syria under French mandates. The mandatory powers were presumably responsible for preparing the mandated country for independence but apart from establishing ineffective national governments, these lands were run like as if they

were colonies. Palestine, on the other hand, remained in British hands. Britain also continued to prevail in the Arabian Peninsula. The Gulf had come under British domination earlier. Egypt, while preserving the appearance of independence, had already come under British domination toward the end of the nineteenth century.

Türkiye did not take deep interest in the politics of the Arab Middle East for several reasons. First, as already indicated, it was not interested in developing a conflictual relationship with Britain and France. Second, also as indicated, Türkiye was interested in focusing on its own internal development. Third, as part of establishing its own authority and its secularizing reforms, Türkiye had abolished the Caliphate, a move that was not welcomed by the Sunni Muslim population in the region. This helped reduce warm feelings toward Türkiye. Fourth, during the war, cooperating with the British, the traditional Arab leadership had initiated a revolt against Turkish rule. Turks felt this was nothing less than stabbing them in the back. Therefore, neither the republican leadership nor the Turkish public harbored warm feelings toward the Arabs. Finally, the republic was a nation state. To transform the population of the republic of various imperial origins into a community in which all citizens felt that they belonged to the Turkish Nation necessitated establishing a sense of distinction from other peoples of the region, mainly the Arabs. Everyone knew that the Turks were not French or German but often failed to distinguish them from other peoples in the region. National identity, in other words, had to be built mainly against the Arabs with whom a common religion, another major source of identity, was shared. These factors came together leading to the pronouncement of a foreign policy principle attributed to Kemal Atatürk that Türkiye should not get involved either in inter-Arab politics or in the domestic politics of any Arab country. As we shall see later, this principle has given direction to Turkish foreign policy until recently.

In contrast to relations with the Arab countries, Türkiye's relations with Iran had always been stable. The Persian and the Turkish Empires had discovered as early as the 17th century that natural barriers among others, did not allow them to expand at each other's expense. The border became more or less stabilized after 1638 with the signing of the Kasr-ı Şirin Treaty. While mutual relations contained both elements of cooperation and competition, an outward appearance of friendliness was always maintained. The Kadjars of Iran were deposed in 1925 by the commander of the Shah's Cossack guards Reza Pahlavi who, after toying with the idea of declaring a republic, had made himself the Shah. He tried to set the country on a path of modernization modeled after Atatürk's Türkiye. This choice made for friendly relations between the two countries.

The Second World War did not produce changes in Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East. Türkiye's major concern was to stay out of the war. It shied away from getting entangled in conflicts between the Allies and the Axis that included competition to dominate various parts of the Middle East. At the end of

the Second World War, the strong wave of decolonization that emerged also affected the Middle East. Starting with Iraq and then Syria in 1946 and ending with Kuwait in 1961, all mandates and colonies became independent. The decolonization of Palestine, however, proved problematical, leading to a war between Jewish forces backed by settlers and the neighboring Arab countries (Syria, Jordan and Egypt). The latter were defeated. The war culminated in the founding of the state of Israel and its declaration of independence in 1948. Türkiye was one of the first countries to recognize Israel, but in line with its „traditional” foreign policy, it avoided in getting involved in Arab-Israeli conflicts.

■ THE COLD WAR

As the Second World War was coming to a close, two rival blocs with North America and Western Europe on one side and Eastern Europe and Russia on the other, separated by ideology as well as the operating economic and political order, had begun to take shape. Their highly competitive relationship that appeared to preclude an armed conflict in Europe came to be referred to as the Cold War.

Türkiye had stayed out of the Second World War despite various efforts, particularly on the side of the Allies, to become involved. As the War was coming to a close, the Soviets announced that they would not renew the Friendship and the Non-Aggression Treaty they had signed with Türkiye in 1925 until the Montreux Convention of 1936 that gave full sovereignty to Türkiye on the Straits was modified so as to give the Soviets a role in their administration. The Soviets also expected some revisions in their favor on Türkiye’s Eastern border. The unfriendly Soviet position was probably in part a reaction to Türkiye’s refusal to join the war on the side of the Allies, but it caused a deep concern in Ankara that interpreted these demands as a return of Czarist expansionism toward the South, now in Soviet garb. Türkiye began to look for ways to join the emerging Western Bloc under American leadership as a way of countering the Soviet threat. After incessant efforts that included sending troops to Korea in 1950 to fight the Chinese, it managed to join NATO along with Greece in 1952.

Türkiye’s attention, particularly during the early stages of the Cold War, was almost exclusively focused on preventing the Soviets from expanding in their direction. The Soviet „threat” was not seen as only one of a military challenge but also one of an ideological penetration. Therefore, a very strict anti-Communist line that often took the form of anti-Soviet and more explicitly, anti-Russian internal policy was pursued with vigilance. Furthermore, Türkiye accepted the American doctrine that to contain the USSR, it had to be encircled by a network of connected alliances. Accordingly, in addition to NATO, it became a leading force in the Baghdad Pact along with Iran, Pakistan and initially with Iraq.

Türkiye’s strong pro-NATO and anti-Soviet policy offered a marked contrast to the policy preferences of the Arab Middle East. Having constituted a target of

the Western imperialism, having been either under colonial domination or some kind of western tutelage, many Arab countries moved to developing closer relations with the USSR to counter western European attempts to retain their domination through economic and other means. The anti-western proclivities of Arab governments became more evident after traditional governments were toppled by military juntas in almost all countries. In Iraq, for example, the Kingdom was ended by General Kassem in 1958 who also took the country out of the Baghdad Pact. The succeeding military governments all maintained an anti-Western outlook. Egypt moved closer to the Soviets after Britain and France tried to invade Egypt as a response to its nationalization of the Suez Canal. The new friendship got another boost when the Soviets promised that they would support the construction of the Aswan Dam although they failed to do so in the end, inviting Egypt to change sides. Syria developed closer relations with the Soviets especially after al-Assad consolidated his power. In this way, the distance between the Arab Middle East and Türkiye grew. An interesting early symbol of the growing distance was Türkiye's siding with France on the issue of Algerian independence so as not to disturb its western connection. Similarly, during the Arab-Israeli wars, it kept its distance. On the other hand, it maintained active relations with Israel.

■ THE SEARCH FOR CLOSER RELATIONS

Türkiye's deep commitment to the Western alliance did not mean that all was well on the western front. In fact, starting in the mid-1950's, Türkiye had been drawn into the Cyprus conflict in order to protect the interests of the Turks of the island when the island's Greek population wanted to gain their independence from the British. Britain, the United States and Türkiye's European allies all seemed to be sympathizing with the Greek side. In fact, Türkiye's plans to intervene on the island to protect the Turkish community was rudely prevented in 1964 by the American president Lyndon B. Johnson. Under the circumstances, Türkiye thought it might turn to its co-religionists in the Middle East to find some support for its position. In retrospect, such transactional hopes appear to have been misplaced in part because Türkiye itself displayed considerable hesitancy in taking part in the meetings and the activities of the Islamic Conference Organization because its constitution required it to be a „laïque” state. Liel notes that the 1969 Rabat conference was the first time that Türkiye participated at the level of a prime minister³. More generally, sharing a religion was only one of the various variables on which states based their foreign policy, and not necessarily the most important one. Furthermore, Türkiye itself was reluctant to employ religion as the common element on which external policy should be based.

³ A. Liel, *Turkey in the Middle East*, Boulder, Co., 2001, p. 138.

Nevertheless, other developments led Türkiye to search for ways to link up with Middle Eastern actors. In 1973, the sudden rises in the price of oil with the emergence of the OPEC cartel posed exceptional external payment problems for Türkiye. The crisis intensified in the following years such that Prime Minister Demirel volunteered at one point that Türkiye was in need of 70 cents. Türkiye again hoped that this time Saudi Arabia might come to its relief, but to no avail.

Closer economic relations had to wait economic reforms. On 24 January 1980, the government of Süleyman Demirel made a number of critical decisions which, taken together, defined a major shift in Türkiye's economic policies. More specifically, Türkiye moved from an import-substitution oriented economy to one driven by export led growth. The new policy guided Turkish businesses to find markets to export goods and services. Not surprisingly, the Middle East offered itself as one of the main targets of expansion. Türkiye's hopes to improve its economic presence in the Middle East was facilitated by the fact that the Cold War had lost its intensity. The two Germanies were drawing closer, there were mutual reduction of arms and agreements on the limitation of strategic arms between the two camps. Under such circumstances, Türkiye's intensifying its economic relations with countries of the Middle East appeared as nothing more than normal⁴. The end of the Cold War shaped by the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the demise of the Soviet Union only opened even greater space for economic relations to flourish.

■ THE COMING OF THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY

Political change of a fundamental nature took place in Türkiye with the elections of 2002 with the Justice and Development Party achieving an impressive electoral victory. This party represented the religiously and socially more conservative electorate that had historically been more cautious in the modernization cum westernization policies of the Republic. It was also the case that such a political movement had never been in power by itself. There were questions as regards how the new government team would approach matters of foreign policy. Interestingly, initially the new government attached deep importance to Türkiye's advancement toward membership in the European Union. But it also turned to developing close relations with Türkiye's Middle Eastern neighbors⁵.

⁴ Ö. Tür, *Türkiye'nin Irak ve Suriye İlişkileri*, in: F. Sönmezoğlu et al., XXI. Yüzyılda *Türk Dış Politikasının Analizi*, İstanbul 2012, p. 593–618, but esp. p. 595, emphasizes that Turkey has generally pursued a pragmatic approach in establishing relations with countries of the Middle East.

⁵ Gürpınar argues that it took time for the AKP to free itself from the yokes of the western centered foreign policy. See D. Gürpınar, *Foreign Policy as a Contested Front of the Cultural Wars in Turkey: The Middle East and Turkey in the Era of the AKP*, „Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi” 2020, 17, 65, p. 3–21.

In retrospect, it seems that the ideas of Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu who authored the book *Strategic Depth* was influential in shaping the foreign policy thinking of Abdullah Gül who served as the foreign minister until 2007 after Mr. Erdoğan became the prime minister in 2003. Mr. Gül was elected president in 2007. Davutoğlu argued that Türkiye's geographical location and historical experience blessed it with the resources to expand its major role in its region⁶. It was generally thought that the territories he had in mind were those where the Ottoman Empire had prevailed and where Islam had often constituted some kind of uniting force. His thinking appears to have been influential in governmental circles, exceeding that of an advisor to the government. In fact, he was made the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009 although he had not yet been elected to the parliament, being elected only later in 2011. Davutoğlu developed the doctrine of „zero problems” with neighbors to complement his grand vision. Until the outbreak of the Arab Spring, this doctrine did not end all of Türkiye's issues of contention with its neighbors but allowed Türkiye to assume a role of trying to build peace with and among them⁷.

It may be argued that Davutoğlu's thinking was well received by his party mainly because it was in line with the thinking that already prevailed in it. For example, the relations with Syria had been transformed in 1998 after the commander of the Turkish Land Forces General Atilla Ateş had threatened that the Turkish Army would march into Syria if Assad continued to support the Kurdish separatist terror organization the PKK on its soil and host its leader Abdullah Öcalan in Damascus. Assad, appreciating that he might be dragged into a military conflict with Türkiye in which he was unlikely to emerge as the victor, changed policy, signing Adana accords in 1998 thereby terminating his links with the PKK. Relations continued to improve afterwards, upon which Davutoğlu built more comprehensive ties such that the Erdoğan's hosted the Assads in an Aegean resort town in August 2008. A „strategic partnership” was formed between the two countries by 2009. During this interim, Türkiye succeeded in helping Syria and Saudi Arabia settle their

⁶ Ali Bakir and Eyüp Ersoy offer an excellent evaluation of the concept in their *The Rise and Fall of Home Grown Concepts in Global IR: The Anatomy of Strategic Depth in Turkish IR*, in: „All Azimuth” 2022, 11, 2, p. 257–273. An excellent evaluation is also available in N.F. Onar, *Democratic Depth: The Missing Ingredient in Turkey's Domestic/Foreign Policy Nexus*, in: K. Öktem A. Kadioğlu, M. Karlı (eds.), *Another Empire: A Decade of Turkey's Foreign Policy Under the Justice and Development Party*, Istanbul 2012, p. 62–64.

⁷ Cengiz Çandar offers an excellent analysis of Strategic Depth interpreted as neo-Ottomanism, saying that initially it was a way of building bridges with Middle Eastern societies using historical-cultural heritage but later evolved into seeing neighbors as former dependencies rather than as nation states. See his *Turkey in Syria: A Neo-Ottomanist or a Nationalist Movement for Erdoğan*, in: N. Christofis (ed.), *The Kurds in Erdoğan's New Turkey: Domestic and International Implications*, New York 2022, p. 203.

differences and even came close to affecting a *modus vivendi* between Syria and Israel⁸.

Similarly, Türkiye and Iraq had developed a working relationship after 1992 that would allow Turkish forces to pursue PKK terrorists even after they had escaped into Iraq. The Turkish public and many members of parliament were ambivalent, however, about allowing American forces to go through Türkiye in their planned invasion of Iraq. Although the Turkish government accepted the idea after long negotiations and bargaining⁹, the Turkish parliament rejected the motion to allow passage of American forces, causing an erosion of trust in the commitments of Turkish government, but the decision appears to have been in line with the later pronounced Strategic Depth doctrine.

If one were to summarize Türkiye's foreign policy in the early years of Justice and Development Party (JDP) rule, one could say that there is a gradual intensification of getting involved in Middle Eastern politics although closer relations based on economic linkages had already been growing. What distinguished the JDP foreign policy was that while Türkiye continued to abstain from intervening in the domestic politics of other countries, it departed from an earlier practice of staying away from being involved in the relations between the countries of the region and actually aimed to help facilitate better relations among them. However, in this endeavor, it took care to maintain an equal distance between countries and retain the confidence and trust they extended to Türkiye.

■ THE ARAB SPRING AS A TRANSFORMATIVE EVENT

Observers of the Turkish foreign policy, for the most part, failed to predict that the Turkish government would come to view the Arab Spring as an opportunity to assume the protection of Muslim Brotherhood movement in the region. Such a course represented a fundamental break from the policy that Türkiye had followed until then. The only major development preceding the Arab Spring that had deviated from the traditional policy was the deterioration of relations with Israel. The problems with Israel, however, were generally attributed to the behavior of the Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert who had agreed to a peace arrangement with Syria with Türkiye's mediation, asking that he return to Israel to get it approved by his government. Surprisingly, instead of coming back, he had initiated a major bombardment of the Gaza Strip. Feeling betrayed, the then Prime Minister Erdoğan insulted the Israeli president Shimon Peres harshly before

⁸ There was a general perception globally that Türkiye was becoming a regional leader. See K. Öktem, A. Kadioğlu, *Introduction*, in: K. Öktem, A. Kadioğlu, M. Karlı (eds.), *Another Empire: A Decade of Turkey's Foreign Policy Under the Justice and Development Party*, Istanbul 2012, p. 1–15.

⁹ The extensive negotiations are elaborated in C. Mumcu, *Türkiye-ABD İlişkilerinde Irak'a Askeri Müdahale' Müzakereleri*, „Öneri” 2006, 7, 25, p. 175–191.

walking out at the Davos Conference in Switzerland in January 2009. Relations experienced a deeper blow in May 2010 when Israel commandos boarded a ship in open seas destined to deliver aid to Gaza, killing eleven Turkish citizens. Diplomats were called back and the relations were put into the deep freezer.

The Arab Spring began in early 2010 in Tunisia where a street vendor set himself on fire as an act of an economic desperation. Protests against the Tunisian government and the departure of the authoritarian leader Zein-al-Abidin encouraged similar developments in neighboring countries with authoritarian governments that were insensitive to the plight of the masses. Within a year, major protest movements had challenged the governments of Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain where civil strife commenced. Anti-government demonstrations also raged in Algeria, Morocco, Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait, Oman and Sudan¹⁰. The Turkish government judged that change would sweep the region. It saw the Muslim Brotherhood not only as a movement with whose goals it sympathized, but also as the best organized opposition that would gradually take over governments. In Tunisia, the Brotherhood achieved power. In Egypt, the government of Mubarak fell, elections were won by the Brotherhood, bringing Muhammed Morsi to power. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu traveled to Syria a number of times, trying to persuade Bashar al-Assad that he should also hold free elections in which the Brotherhood should be allowed to compete freely. While al-Assad agreed to holding elections, he was not willing to allow the Brotherhood to take part in them.

Developments took different turns in each society but in none did the Brotherhood prove to be particularly successful in achieving power or retaining it in the long run. In Egypt, the Brotherhood managed to have its candidate Mohammed Morsi elected president. A period of turmoil during which Morsi tried to change the constitution ensued, along with pro and anti-government manifestations in which some extremist religious groups also took part. The military that had maintained a dominating role in Egyptian politics under the Minister of Defense Abd-el-Fattah al-Sisi whom Morsi had appointed to restrain the military in his attempts to transform the Egyptian system, took over the government approximately a year after Morsi's ascent to the presidency. A military dominated system was restored while Morsi and many in his entourage were imprisoned¹¹. Türkiye, having extended extensive support including economic assistance to the Morsi government, immediately rejected cooperating with al-Sisi. The Turkish President Erdoğan referred to him in insulting terms. Relations between Egypt and Türkiye came to be characterized by mutual hostility.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_Spring.

¹¹ For an account of developments and analysis, see the article by E. Trager, G. Wenig, *Sisi the Invincible: Why Egypt's Next President Won't Fear a Revolution* in: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2014-02-18/sisi-Invincible?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=dsa_middle_east_tfd&gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCCQj.

In Syria where anti-government demonstrations became frequent, after failing to persuade al-Assad to allow the Brotherhood to take part in an election, the Turkish government chose to support armed opposition to his regime. As the more moderate opposition forces failed to achieve results, more radical religious movements appeared to benefit from receiving tacit or open support from the Turkish government. Türkiye's intervention soon also assumed an anti-Kurdish character. Initially, the Kurdish population near the Turkish border were invited to join the struggle against the Assad government. When they refused to take arms against Damascus, they became targets for the Turkish military that argued that they extended support to terrorism which presented a separatist threat to Türkiye. Turkish armed forces engaged in operations to establish control over parts of Northwest Syria.

Türkiye's intervention in Syria was fraught with problems. Russia had come to the support of the Assad regime. Care had to be exercised not to engage Russian forces, but rather cooperate with them. Russia exercised control over airspace, and this restricted Türkiye's ability to extend aircover to possible land operations¹². Problems also arose with the United States that had decided that Türkiye would not support its efforts to stop the expansion of the Islamic State. The Americans chose instead to work with the Kurds which they euphemistically named Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in their war against the IS. These forces were closely linked with the PKK that Türkiye identified as a terrorist organization that challenged its territorial integrity. The Americans, on the other hand, while agreeing that the PKK was terrorist, defended SDF as a different organization that had nothing to do with terror. As a result, Türkiye became increasingly suspicious that what the Americans really aimed at was nothing less than establishing a Kurdish state by uniting the Kurds of Iraq and Syria, that would extend along the Turkish border all the way to the Mediterranean. Such a state would be at American mercy for its existence and therefore serve as an instrument of American interests in the region, including extending support to Israel if needed. Although one may find Turkish concerns exaggerated, how the United States would leave the area and sever its ties with the Kurds remains an open question.

In almost all Arab societies, there was turmoil. In some like Libya this took the form of a civil war; in others, it was more in the nature of domestic political struggles characterized by turmoil and political instability. By siding with the Muslim Brotherhood as the wave of the future, Türkiye appears to have made a major error of political judgment for several reasons. To begin with, in most societies, although there might have been unhappiness with the ruling authoritarian cadres, there was a widespread reluctance to allow the Muslim Brotherhood to take over the reins

¹² For Turkish and Syrian relations in Syria see İ. Ruma, M. Çelikpała, *Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater*, „Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi” 2019, 16, 62, p. 65–84.

of government. They were viewed as potential extremists whose basis of support derived from groups that challenged the values and the style of living that had characterized the middle classes prevailing in society. They were also branded as being divisive since they wanted everyone to conform with their vision of society in which Sunni Islam prevailed. Be it in Egypt, in Syria or elsewhere, the anti-Brotherhood coalition of social groups, in the final analysis, preferred to support the existing arrangement against the challengers.

Second, the traditional regimes in the region, mainly those in the Gulf such as Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates perceived a danger that if the Brotherhood were allowed to succeed in countries like Egypt, Syria and Libya, they would come under the challenge of a political change by their own masses. Save Qatar, these countries formed a united anti-Brotherhood front and extended material and financial support to those regimes that were fighting the Brotherhood rule. In fact, this support assumed questionable dimensions as Egypt and UAE supported the adventurer General Haftar in his attempt to take over all of Libya that was stopped by Turkish UAVs that destroyed Haftar's tanks¹³. Türkiye was supporting the internationally recognized government of Libya.

Third, Türkiye underestimated the international support the anti-Brotherhood governments would enjoy. By way of example, the Syrian government managed to get the full backing of Russia that was looking for a way to return to the Eastern Mediterranean to fill the space that had been left void by the withdrawal of the Soviet Union. The Russians returned to using the Tartus naval base and also developed a number of air force facilities. Iran was equally interested in extending support to Syria as well as the Hezbollah in Lebanon presumably to deter Israeli encroachments. America also entered the picture using the fight against the IS as a reason or a pretext for its presence in Syria. Similarly, Egypt became the recipient of extensive Saudi, UAE and more significantly, American economic and military assistance. In Libya, France and Britain got involved in domestic fighting to bolster the position of pro-Western groups.

Türkiye's misjudgments deriving from its misreading of who would do what did not mean that its relations with all countries were bad. Qatar pursued a pro-Brotherhood policy, a reason for developing good relations with Türkiye. In Iraq, good relations were developed with Kurdish Regional Government controlled by the Barzani family that also felt that the PKK constituted a challenge for it. In Libya, Türkiye sided with the internationally recognized government of Dibeibe against the military adventurer General Haftar. Despite these links, Türkiye felt isolated in the region. Politically, it had bad or no relations with the major countries; economically, it was kept off from some of the lucrative markets. At one point,

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-52936620#:~:text=Erdo%C4%9Fan%20ve%20Sarrac%C4%B1n%20g%C3%B6r%C3%BC%C5%9Fmesi,Ankara%20Haftar'i%20ma%C4%9Flup%20etti.>

when some Turkish foreign policy analysts expressed criticism that Türkiye had become isolated in the region, İbrahim Kalın, currently head of Turkish Intelligence but an advisor to President Erdoğan at the time, volunteered that the country might well have become isolated but it was an „honorable isolation”.

It has become clear these days that Muslim Brotherhood is no longer a major force in the politics of the region while Türkiye has begun to see that it is being pushed away from exercising influence in the region even in matters that it considers important to its own national interest. It experiences more and more problems with the United States and its European allies in NATO. It feels more intensely the economic deprivations the country suffers because of its pro-Brotherhood sympathies. In conclusion, the country has felt the need to reconsider and revise its policy. This is a slow and painful process and target countries do not always respond with excitement to the prospect of improving relations with Türkiye, but this is where things stand now. And we shall now turn to Türkiye’s role in the region and how it relates to ongoing conflicts.

■ THE DETERMINANTS OF CONTEMPORARY TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

As the Turkish foreign policy of supporting the Brotherhood is being abandoned and Türkiye is trying to break out of the isolation that its policies have led the country, it may be appropriate to look at the basic concerns that give direction to the Turkish foreign policy as well as how this change is reflected in the relations between Türkiye and specific countries. Three considerations appear to be influential in the shaping of the Turkish foreign policy. First and foremost, Turkish thinking in the field of external relations is highly security oriented. While security is a guiding principle in the foreign policies of all countries, it occupies a very critical place in the Turkish mind since it is accompanied by a basic feeling of a lack of trust in other countries, a disposition that has been shaped by the historical experience. To be more specific, the country was founded by conducting a war of liberation against the imperial powers of Europe. In the period that preceded the end of the Ottoman Empire, its territories piece by piece were wrested from the empire by European powers that extended support to separatist nationalist movements. As a result, Turkish policymakers, suspect the ulterior motives of even allied countries, want to be sure that territorial integrity may be maintained even when outside powers, including friendly powers, are working to undermine it.

Second force directing the foreign policy have been economic benefits. The ascent in the importance of economic considerations in the formulation of the Turkish foreign policy is rather recent. While recognizing that economic benefit is a prime variable in shaping state behavior, the rise of its relative importance can be traced to a fundamental shift in the economic policy from import substitution

orientation to export led growth. As long as a strategy of import substitution was pursued, the goal was to be self-sufficient. If one were to translate this into foreign policy terms, one would conclude that the aim was to move economic factors as a major consideration from external affairs. Such an aspiration is unrealistic and costly. It is unrealistic in the sense that no country, particularly a middle-sized country like Türkiye could ever meet all its economic needs from domestic sources. It is costly, on the other hand, because by insisting on producing everything locally, the country is deprived from the benefit of international trade which allows a country to export goods it produces at an advantage and import those that it would produce more expensively. Türkiye became integrated to the international economy after 1980 and moved to newly industrializing and eventually to the group of middle-income countries. At that stage, it became important for elected governments to perpetuate the increasing economic prosperity that export led growth produced. In this way, economic factors began to play a shaping role in the foreign policy. But again, historical consciousness enters the picture. Retaining the memory of capitulations, the exclusive economic privileges the European powers enjoyed in the Ottoman Empire and the struggle they pursued to maintain their privileges when the republic was being established, has given way to a suspicious mindset that perceives the economic actors as being in search of ways of exploiting Türkiye, getting something in return for giving nothing.

Finally, Türkiye perceives itself as a regional power and a descendant of an empire that should wield influence as a regional leader. After 1980, gradually developing closer economic and eventually political links with the region, Türkiye began to perceive itself as a regional power, a position it initially shared with Egypt and Iran. It perceived itself, however, as being strategically more critically located than its rivals and also as being economically more advanced. Such feelings of being in a superior position were enhanced by the fact that Iran was treated as an outcast in the international system while Egypt had to cope with domestic economic and political difficulties. And as indicated above, there was a period when Türkiye was involved in the politics of the region as a mediator in conflicts, as a provider of goods and services for other countries in the region. This is a time when Türkiye expanded its reach to other parts of the broader Middle East such as North Africa and the Gulf. The misreading of the Arab Spring, the changes it would bring and the opportunities it would offer to Türkiye, led to its isolation in the region, a status from which it has recently been trying to break out¹⁴. This leads us to the question of the role of Türkiye in current conflicts in the Middle East.

¹⁴ For the evolution of Turkish foreign policy and recent changes under AKP rule, see M.B. Altunışık, L.G. Martin, *Turkey and the Middle East and North Africa under the AKP: A Three Level Analysis of Foreign Policy Change*, „Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi” 2023, 20, 78, p. 79–96.

■ TÜRKİYE AND THE CURRENT CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In discussing Türkiye's role in the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, it may be useful to distinguish between those in which Türkiye is itself actively involved and those in which it is not involved militarily but takes a position.

CASES OF ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT

Syria

The major conflict in which Türkiye is an active participant is the domestic strife in Syria. This is a multi-dimensional involvement, one part of which is connected with the Kurdish terrorist organization, the PKK, while the other part is Türkiye's support for forces that are engaged in a struggle to replace Bashar al-Assad with a „more democratic” leader. Regarding the Kurds in Kobane region along the Turkish frontier, Türkiye asked the leadership to join it in fighting the Assad forces, a request that they declined, thereby becoming opponents of a Turkish vision for the region. There were, on the other hand, Kurdish populations in Afrin, neighboring the Turkish province of Hatay that had offered accommodation to the PKK in the past. Türkiye's negative approach to the Kurds of Kobane led it to group them with the PKK, creating a self-fulfilling prophesy. Türkiye has used its own military force along with local cooperants to achieve control some border areas with a certain degree of success. The local cooperants have included the Turcoman populations as well as other Sunni Arabs.

The Turkish foray into Northern Syria has run into difficulties¹⁵. On the one hand, to the South, Russian forces have come in to support al-Assad. This has put not only limits to how far Turkish forces could advance, but also because the Russians have established control over Syrian air space, the Turkish air force can operate only in areas not challenged by the Russians. To the East, the Americans have chosen to cooperate with Syrian Kurds to fight the forces that are tied to the Islamic State. Türkiye has opposed this American-Kurdish cooperation, arguing that the PYD/YPG is but the name of the local PKK connected organizations. The Americans, as already indicated, who have euphemistically named the Kurdish forces Syrian Democratic Forces, have argued that while they have designated the PKK as a terrorist organization, the SDF is a legitimate organization with whom cooperation is limited to terminating the IS presence in the area¹⁶. Many Turkish observers have judged that the aim of the Americans is to develop a Kurdish state

¹⁵ For a critical view of Türkiye's Syrian policy, see E. Başaran, *Frontline Turkey*, London 2017, passim.

¹⁶ For the effect of SDF on Turkish-American relations, cf, A. Mammadov, Riccardo Gasco, *Will US-Turkey Relations Survive the Wars in Gaza and Ukraine?* „The National Interest”, 18 March 2024; see also S. Çağaptay, *The Future of US-Turkish Ties: A New Relationship, Not a Reset*, „Policy Watch”, 3832, 26 January 2024.

stretching along the Turkish border all the way to the Mediterranean. It is feared that such a state that would have hostile relations with all its neighbors (Syria, Iraq, Türkiye and possibly Iran) and therefore highly dependent on the United States for its existence, thereby becoming an American pawn in the region. It is also felt that such a state would ease the Arab pressure on Israel.

The Turkish government discovered that the moderate forces it tried to develop within Syria had low fighting competence, guiding it to cooperate with more militant religious groups. Despite difficulties, however, Türkiye has managed to achieve effective control in a section of Syria neighboring Hatay. It has organized local government along the lines of Turkish public administration, it has been building public facilities and housing so that some who have left their homes can return to the region. The Turkish lira is used as the legal tender. How this area will be integrated into a future Syria, is a matter of speculation¹⁷.

The Syrian imbroglio for which Türkiye, by opposing al-Assad, bears some responsibility, has produced continual waves of immigration into Türkiye. The size of the Syrian immigrant community in Türkiye is thought to approximate four million. Such a large presence has transformed the demographic composition of some border towns generating local tensions, it has imposed significant costs of maintenance on the national budget inevitably resulting in deprivations in some public services, the assistance given to the refugees have prompted negative reactions among the poor that have judged that the refugees are taken care of by the government while they are not. Equally importantly, a significant portion of the refugees have viewed Türkiye as a temporary passage point to other countries in Europe although there is little desire on the part of the European Union member countries to accommodate them. Türkiye has come under pressure of the EU to prevent this massive emigration. Agreements have been reached whereby the EU has offered modest compensation for harboring this immigrant population. Despite Turkish efforts to prevent emigration, some refugees have managed to find ways to leave the country, some among them meeting the dramatic end of drowning in the waters of the Aegean. Some are also caught in national territorial waters while some are returned to Türkiye in line with international agreements. The refugees will constitute a source of irritation between Turkey and its affiliates to the West while also generating local tensions that may erupt into difficult to control anti-refugee manifestations.

Iraq

Another area where there is active Turkish involvement is Iraq where again the conflict is multi-dimensional involving the use of armed forces as well as harboring political dimensions. When the PKK found that it was difficult to organize and

¹⁷ Aslı Aydıntaşbaş questions whether Türkiye has the ability to control this area or pursue broader goals in Syria, *New Gaza: Turkey's Border Policy in Northern Syria*, „Policy Brief: European Council on Foreign Relations” 2020, quoted in C. Çandar, op. cit., p. 199.

conduct an armed struggle against the Turkish government within the country's national borders, it moved its activity into Iraq. It started conducting operations in Türkiye, but returned to Northern Iraq afterwards. Turkish forces often crossed the border in hot pursuit. Eventually, during the rule of Saddam Hussein, a *modus vivendi* in the form of a Hot Pursuit agreement was reached. To the unhappiness of the Iraqi government, Turkish forces established bases in Northern Iraq to prevent the PKK from penetrating into Turkey. Despite changes in the government of Iraq, Türkiye has continued its hot pursuit activity as well as maintaining its bases there.

After the fall of Hussein, the Iraqi government has accepted the idea that Northern Iraq is inhabited mainly by Kurds and agreed to the setting up of a Kurdish regional government (KRG) there with its capital in Erbil. This area is Kirmanchi speaking and its politics have historically been dominated by the Barzani family. The Barzanis themselves are opposed to the PKK, possibly perceiving them as a threat to their traditional rule and do not oppose the Turkish government's fight against the PKK. Further to the South in Suleymaniya, the politics is dominated by the Sorani speaking Talabani clan. A number of Iraqi presidents such as Calal Talabani and Barham Salih have come from this area. They are of friendly disposition to the PKK earning Türkiye's wrath. The central Iraqi government in Baghdad have in recent years kept its distance from the intra-Kurdish rivalries, but it has also abstained from interfering with PKK activities in part because its relations with Türkiye were distant but also in part, because it simply was not capable of bringing the PKK under control. Of particular difficulty for all is establishing control in the Qandil Mountains, where the military command center of the PKK is located. This is an area where it is next to impossible to conduct a military operation owing to the nature of the terrain, further complicated by the fact that part of it is located in Iran.

Changing military technology over the years, has provided Türkiye with means nowadays to monitor effectively PKK forays into Türkiye. A combination of sophisticated UAVs and hard intelligence has also given the national Intelligence Organization the capability to hit and neutralize both local agents and top PKK leaders in Iraq and Syria. Despite its successes, the Turkish government continues to maintain its vigilance against the PKK, because it also possesses a comprehensive network of supporting organizations in EU countries. Türkiye wants to be sure that it will not grow stronger and hopefully be eradicated. The Turkish President Erdoğan visited Baghdad on 22 April and Erbil on 23 April, agreeing to set up a strategic command control center whose mission, apparently, will be to bring the PKK fully under control.

Recent developments suggest that the Iraqi government may now take a greater interest in bringing an end to the PKK presence on its soil. A pipeline to transport Iraqi crude to world markets was built in the 1970s and had operated successfully for some time. The PKK had challenged the security of the pipeline starting in the early 1990s. After the first American war with Iraq, the amount shipped was

limited to meet only the emergency economic needs of the Saddam regime. Later, the pipeline operated off and on depending on political developments in Iraq. After the KRG was established, Türkiye struck an agreement with it to send oil to the international markets. The consent of the Iraqi central government was not secured. The Iraqi government took Türkiye to mediators in London who ruled in its favor and penalized the former. But recent changes in Iraqi government have made it possible for the three governments to agree on shipping Iraqi oil through the pipeline to the Turkish port of Yumurtalik. All actors agreed that the safety of the pipeline must be guaranteed and that the PKK creates a security challenge. Especially Türkiye has insisted that all governments must work to suppress the PKK. Since all parties aim to benefit from this project, it is expected that the Iraqi actors will cooperate to allay Turkish concerns.

The potential of cooperating with Iraq on other projects have recently gained new ground. In view of the difficulties that have been experienced in shipping goods and fuel through the Suez Canal, a search has begun for finding new ways for products to reach European markets. In this context, a project of connecting Basrah on the Persian Gulf (port of Great Faw) through Türkiye to Europe through railroads, highways and pipelines seems promising. Much of the needed infrastructure in Türkiye already exists and what is needed in Iraq can be constructed with speed provided that sufficient credit is found. The project referred to as the „Development Road” has attracted international attention in addition to the respective countries that will be involved¹⁸.

As the opportunities for economic cooperation between Iraq and Türkiye multiply, it is expected that all parties will have good reason to fight against actors like the PKK that may aim to sabotage such cooperation. As a gesture to promote further cooperation and show the rewards it will bring to Iraq, the Turkish government has indicated that it is willing to negotiate with a view to making more water available from the Tigris River to Iraq to help it meet its needs better, particularly in light of the fact that Iran has been reducing the water the Tigris receives from Persian rivers emanating from the Alborz mountains. While a similar gesture is not totally impossible regarding the Euphrates, since that river crosses Syria before entering Iraq, it necessitates a different way of handling than the Tigris which, for all practical purposes (there is a small portion of it that forms the Syrian border with Türkiye) enters Iraq from Türkiye.

Libya

When, shortly after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the question of how to deal with the Qaddafi regime came up, initially Türkiye did not favor change, but after

¹⁸ *Kalkınma Yolunda Tarihi İmza*, „Ekonomi”, 23 April 2024, p.1 and 18; see also mine *Türkiye's Relations with Iraq are on the Right Track*, published in the internet weekly TR „Monitor”, 26 April 2024, <https://outlook.office.com/mail/inbox/id/AAQkAGRjN2RmMzQ4LTU3MmMtNDhmNy1iMDUwLWRmN2Y0MTUzNGMzMgAQALNiwSt%2BD0i0if9LCko%2BjwQ%3D/sxs/A>.

the intervention of France and Britain to get rid of the Libyan leader, Türkiye did not engage in sustained opposition but rather tried to assume the role of an actor that would have a say in how the future of the country is shaped. As it is known, Libya harbors regional differences that have constituted the background of an internal armed struggle for power. On the one side there has been the government recognized by the United Nations which the Turkish government also recognizes. It was known that the government had more of a religious coloring. On the other side there has been a rebel government led by an adventurous ex-general who had previously worked for both the CIA and the KGB, but interestingly is also backed by the current parliament. Fearing the religious coloring of the UN recognized government, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have supported the rebel general while Türkiye has extended military support to the UN recognized government. Turkish assistance to the Dibeibe government (and its predecessors) was in the nature of offering training and supplying equipment. This aid that may have included Turkish military personnel that have helped operate UAVs that proved critical in fending off a sustained attack by General Haftar to take over Tripoli. The general's tanks were stopped by Turkish built UAVs and he was forced to terminate his campaign.

Türkiye has continued to offer training and sending material to forces loyal to the Dibeibe government. Nevertheless, recent Turkish attempts to break the isolation in which the country has found itself has led it to search for ways to improve relations with Egypt. Press reports have alluded to the fact that the impasse in Libya has come up in the conversations between Turkish and Egyptian officials, but at the time of this writing, no *modus vivendi* had yet been achieved. Türkiye attaches importance to having good relations with Libya as a source of oil, as a country that has often used Turkish contractors in the past to complete major public development projects, as a country that sends off large number of tourists to Türkiye who buy major consumer products, as a country with whom cooperation on the demarcation of the Exclusive Economic Zones in the Eastern Mediterranean is possible (more on this point later) and finally as an example of Türkiye's new policy of reaching out to the countries of the region as a regional leader.

Qatar, Somalia and other locations

As already indicated, shortly after the Arab Spring, many Arab regimes led by those possessing traditional leaders, engaged in an intense effort to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from achieving power in any country. Türkiye and Qatar, on the other hand, sympathized with the Brotherhood and extended support to it to achieve power or retain it where it might have achieved it, like Egypt. The sharing of a common orientation regarding the Brotherhood brought the two countries closer together, while Qatar's relations with its neighbors rapidly worsened. This coincided with the time that Türkiye was trying to expand its role as a regional leader in the Middle East. Qatari feelings of insecurity emanating from the hostile

position of its neighbors and Türkiye's desire to expand its influence led, in 2015, to the opening of a Turkish military base on the isthmus. This was intended, among others, to discourage Qatar's neighbors from coercing it to change policy. It appears to have worked since when in 2017 Qatar was excluded from regional cooperation mechanisms, a critical point was the Saudi request to close the Turkish base. In 2021, the exclusion of Qatar from common regional mechanisms was restored but the Turkish base, mainly used these days for training Qatari forces, has remained active¹⁹.

Türkiye has also sent military forces with a view to opening bases in other countries in the region. The most significant country is Somalia where Turkish forces have been helping military forces under the control of the central government to meet terrorist activity such as that coming from al-Shaab. The assistance is again in the nature of training and providing of equipment. There is also a modest military presence in Djibouti. During the rule of Omar al-Bashir, Türkiye had also rented from Sudan the Sewakin Island to develop a military facility there as a counter-weight to Saudi Arabia. The island was felt also to be important in terms of assuring safe passage for ships. After the turmoil in the Sudan and the outbreak of a civil war, the fate of this project remains uncertain.

CASES OF CONFLICT WITHOUT MILITARY INVOLVEMENT

We have so far examined cases in which Türkiye has been involved militarily. Military involvement does not mean being involved in fighting, it covers such activities as training, supplying of weapons, supporting local fighting units or conducting military exercises. There are a number of cases in which Türkiye is not involved militarily but is either in a conflictual relationship with another country or takes a position regarding a country's relations with others.

Egypt

We have already noted that after the al-Sisi takeover of Egypt, Türkiye reacted very negatively to the military intervention. Diplomatic relations were severed, Türkiye pronounced its displeasure openly in the international arena and used less than kind words in referring both to the country and its leader. Economic relations in particular suffered since prior to the al-Sisi takeover, Turkish businesses had begun to look at Egypt as a location they could move their production as labor and other costs were going up, but discovered that this market had suddenly closed to them.

To continue challenging the Egyptian government, the Turkish government offered a home to Muslim Brotherhood organization and allowed broadcasts against Egypt to be conducted from Türkiye. More broadly, the two countries

¹⁹ There is a good summary of the Turkish base and its contribution to Qatari policy in https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/01/21/how-qatar-and-turkey-came-together?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18.

competed with each other for dominance in the Middle East as was evident in the case of Libya where they were on the opposing sides. Countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, opposed to the rise of Muslim Brotherhood as a political force, joined Egypt in resisting Turkish efforts to achieve a dominant position in the region. To that end, they also closed their markets to Turkish products, stopped awarding contracts to Turkish construction companies or more broadly, they minimized their relations with Turkey.

Türkiye's recent efforts to reconcile with Egypt after it became clear that its pro-Brotherhood position had brought no benefits, were met with a cautious response from Egypt. There is little doubt that Egypt would also like to improve its relations with Türkiye, but still harbors doubts about the extent to which the latter has decided to part with the Brotherhood. While Türkiye has terminated unfriendly Brotherhood activity against Egypt emanating from its territory, it still maintains, for example, a close relationship with Hamas, calling it not a terrorist organization but one of national liberation, in contrast to both Egypt and traditional Arab regimes in the region that perceive it as a challenge to their rule.

It may be predicted that Turkish-Egyptian relations will advance to become more comprehensive, that the two countries will soon exchange ambassadors, that they will look for a mutually acceptable solution to the impasse in Libya and that they will advance their economic relations, but an element of mutual suspicion will still continue to characterize their relationship as long as the current Turkish leadership, which the Egyptians do not trust, continues to stay in power. In this context, there is no reason for Türkiye to expect that Egypt will undermine its relations with Greece and Israel, for example, that it developed during the period when relations with Türkiye were at an ebb.

Israel

In the past, Türkiye tried to have good relations with Israel not only because it was the only other country in the region with a strongly Western orientation but also because this was a way of ensuring that the Jewish lobby in the United States came to its assistance in the face of strong anti-Turkish challenges from the Greek and Armenian lobbies. As noted earlier, under the AKP government, the Turkish-Israeli relationship began to deteriorate after 2009–2010. Incessant efforts on the part of the United States proved ineffective in restoring them to their earlier closeness. The Jewish lobby, on the other hand, dropped its support for Türkiye and occasionally joined others in influencing the American government against Turkish concerns, as exemplified in the decision of the American government after many years to recognize the fate of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as genocide as opposed to calling it the Great Disaster.

Along with the general thawing of relations between the various Arab regimes and Israel, Türkiye had also begun to reconstruct its relationship with Israel when

the most recent Gaza crisis came. This development has served to slow down the regional warming of relations with Israel but in contrast to the cautious way other countries in the region have approached the emergency, recognizing that the entire process was triggered by Hamas possibly to arrest the rebalancing of relations with Israel, the Turkish government gave Hamas unconditional support, calling it, as implied before, a national liberation movement. This will not only render repairing relations with Israel more difficult, even after the departure of Mr. Netanyahu, but it will also undermine Türkiye's credibility in its efforts to make a comeback to regional politics after the long isolation it suffered as a result of its commitment to Muslim Brotherhood.

Interestingly, despite denials by the government, trade with Israel continues to thrive, tourism is open, but it is clear that the normalization of relations may take some time²⁰. Türkiye will likely continue to maintain its pro-Palestinian stance until some kind of solution is found to alleviate the plight of the Palestinians. This appears to be a national position that may not be affected in a major way by the change of those in power.

A REGIONAL QUESTION

The search for energy sources in the sea has produced unexpected results. Search in the Eastern Mediterranean has led to the discovery of major gas deposits in Israeli and later in Egyptian economic zones²¹. Further discoveries followed in the Greek Cypriot economic zone. Türkiye also began exploration in the areas which it considers either to be its own or Turkish Cypriot economic zones. Two types of problems have merged in this process. First is the delineation of economic zones over which there is significant disagreement between Türkiye and Greece and in particular Greek Cyprus. Second, there is the question of how the gas should be shipped to European markets. On both questions, during the time Türkiye had been enjoying its „splendid” isolation, other countries developed a consortium to work together, excluding Türkiye as a partner.

It seemed that the cheapest way to ship gas to Europe might be to connect to the Trans-Anatolian pipeline that runs through Türkiye transporting Azeri and hopefully Iranian and maybe even Kazakh and Turkmen gas to Europe. Yet, not trusting Türkiye as a reliable partner for shipping particularly the Israeli gas to Europe, Israel, Egypt, Greece and Greek Cyprus have joined forces to search for other ways that would exclude Türkiye. It has become increasingly evident that some

²⁰ The Turkish government has announced that it is determined to stop trading with Israel. This seems to be a direct response to criticism by the opposition and it remains an open question to what extent the government will follow this decision.

²¹ For a review of the gas findings and potential see https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/10/13/middle-eastern-countries-are-sitting-on-an-ocean-of-natural-gas?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=.

of the routes envisioned like one that goes from Cyprus to Greece is unjustifiably expensive given the nature of the bottom of the sea, while collecting the gas in Egypt and rendering into LPG might be somewhat more attractive although not nearly as inexpensive as the Turkish route. Yet, none of the actors have sufficient confidence in working with Türkiye. The question of shipping routes is still an undecided issue, but the search for keeping Türkiye out will continue.

A more interesting situation has developed in the demarcation of exclusive economic zones. Egypt, Israel, Greece and Greek Cyprus had agreed on the demarcation of exclusive economic zones. Their designation of economic zones ran into conflict with Turkish claims. A Turkish Admiral, using a different map projection than the Mercator projection that the above mentioned countries had used but more in line with the curvature of the earth, came up with a different map which not only made Turkish zone connect with a Libyan zone, but it also promised to expand the area designated for Egypt²². The Libyan government has signed an agreement with Turkey on the demarcation of exclusive economic zones that runs into conflict with the existing arrangement. While it is expected that Egypt, Israel, Greece and Greek Cyprus will continue their cooperation regarding gas production, the situation will be unsettled and open to contestation. There appears to be no immediate urgency to address this issue and there is no reason to expect that the disagreement among the various actors will escalate into a major conflict.

■ CONCLUSIONS

In terms of its earlier history, Türkiye kept its distance from the politics of the Middle East. Economic imperatives, changes in the global system as the Cold War came to an end, the difficult relations with the European Union, the ideological proclivities of the current government that has been ruling the country for the past twenty years and the outbreak of the Arab Spring each contributed to the emergence of an aspiration for Türkiye to become a regional leader. The country has been involved in armed conflicts to retain its territorial integrity and to assert its regional leadership. Aspirations to become a regional leader built on success of the Muslim Brotherhood appear to have been ill founded, leading to the country's isolation. Attempts to return to the region through reconciliation with others proved only partially to be successful since Türkiye is still suspected of retaining its Brotherhood sympathies. Its reintegration into the region has been rendered more difficult by the recent developments in Gaza where Türkiye has expressed a clearcut sympathy for Hamas. Despite such difficulties, however, Türkiye continues to be a major actor in the region, with a large population, a more developed economy and technology

²² C. Yayıcı, *Türkiye'nin Denizlerdeki Misak-ı Millisi*, İstanbul 2023.

and a more modern society that is ruled by an authoritarian system, but where political competition is still possible as demonstrated by the recent local elections²³.

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²³ On 31 March 2024 local elections, the total vote of the leading opposition party exceeded the votes received by the government party candidates. The major opposition party, the People's Republican Party, won the mayoralty of almost all major metropolitan areas.

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İlder TURAN

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: EVOLUTION AND TRANSFORMATION

After its founding, the Turkish Republic kept its distance from Arab affairs. During the interwar period, Türkiye worked to develop its own national identity while maintaining a balance between imperialist and revisionist powers. After WWII, Türkiye, threatened by Soviets, joined NATO whereas the newly independent Middle Eastern states viewed Russia as an anti-colonialist friend. The coming of *détente* and changes in Turkish economic policy toward export-led growth, guided Türkiye to develop closer economic relations with its neighbors. Its clear foreign policy rule, however, was not getting involved in the politics of any Arab country or in inter-Arab matters. The Arab Spring led the religiously oriented AKP to judge that Türkiye could lead Sunni-majority countries. Facing total failure, Türkiye is trying to restore former relations with regional countries but lacking trust, this is a slow and only partially successful process.

Keywords: Turkish foreign policy; the Middle East; the Arab Spring; the Justice and Development Party (AKP); Sunni majority states