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TURKEY IN THE REGIONAL TURMOIL: WALKING ON A DANGEROUS PATH

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Today Turkey is more and more engulfed in the Middle Eastern quagmire. In a region in turmoil it is no longer considered to be a facilitator in regional crises as well a stabilizing player. The security vacuum produced by the conflict in Syria and, more recently, by the establishment of the self-proclaimed Caliphate by the Islamic State have had a destabilizing impact on Turkey, challenging both its internal security and its regional ambitions and role. At this stage, Ankara seems to lack the constructive vision for the region it had when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002.

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What role for Turkey in today's Middle East (dis)order? This question has strongly re-emerged since the setting up of a US-led "coalition of the willing" to counter the expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), renamed Islamic State (IS) after the self-proclaimed Caliphate was established last June. Turkey's decision not to play a front line role in the US coalition and not to allow the use of its territory and air bases for military operations against the IS have raised questions about its agenda and interests in the Middle East. In spite of the US pressure to involve its NATO ally, Ankara's priorities do not seem to converge with Washington's. While the fight against IS has become the main goal of the US and its Arab allies in the Middle East, the Turkish government aims, first, at removing Bashar al-Assad's regime, and second at preventing the empowerment of Kurds in Syria. A self-rule of Syrian Kurds, who are strictly linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), at the Turkish border is a scenario that Ankara intends to avoid.

From 'zero problems with neighbours' to isolation

Over the past three years Turkey's stance in the Middle East dramatically changed. While in the wake of the Arab Spring Ankara tried to seize the opportunity to extend its influence and regional prestige as a "model" for Arab countries in transition, the outbreak of crisis in neighbouring Syria has represented a turning point for Turkey's Middle East policy, until then based on the principle of "zero problems with neighbours". In a deteriorating context this policy, which was aimed at creating an area of stability and economic integration in the Middle Eastern neighbourhood, became unsustainable and waned.

Having failed in any attempt to persuade Assad, a key regional ally, to start a domestic reform process, the Turkish government called for regime change in Damascus, aligning itself with Western countries and the Sunni Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This change was explained by miscalculations that in summer 2011 the Syrian regime was on the brink of collapse, and this time Ankara intended to be on the right side of history, after hesitating in Libya. After all, Syria's crisis showed the limits of Turkey's soft power and mediation ability¹. However, supporting Sunni opposition groups against the al-Assad regime, Turkey ceased to be the neutral and *super partes* player in regional crises that it was before, and got involved in the Syrian conflict. The Turkish government hosted

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¹ V. TALBOT, "Turkey in the New Mediterranean: Challenges and Opportunities", *Telos*, Vol. VI, December 2013. pp. 40-50.

Syrian opposition groups on its territory, allowing them to set up headquarters in Istanbul, and supplied logistical and financial support to rebels, in some cases without paying much attention to whom its aid flowed². Although the government denied backing jihadist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Turkish authorities turned a blind eye to illegal traffics across its southern border, as well as to the passage of foreign fighters into Syria. In doing so, Ankara appears to share some responsibility in contributing to the current disorder in the Middle East, particularly in its southern neighbourhood.

Furthermore, Turkish foreign policy in the region has been perceived as increasingly influenced by a sectarian logic. First because Ankara, deciding to break its important ties with Damascus, *de facto* aligned itself with the Sunni Gulf monarchies in the Syrian conflict. This later turned into a proxy war between the main regional players – Saudi Arabia and Iran – for influence in the Middle East and at the same time has been considered as the main fault line of the Sunni-Shia divide. Secondly, because Ankara, along with Qatar, has supported the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab countries, especially in Egypt.

As a result, Turkey's regional alliances and relations have completely reversed over the last three years. Nowadays Ankara does not have resident ambassadors in three important Middle East capitals: Cairo, Damascus and Tel Aviv.

Diplomatic relations remain at a low level with Israel. Attempts to revive ties, downgraded following the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, vanished after Israel launched operation "Protective Edge" in Gaza last summer. Since the operation "Cast Lead" at the end of 2008, Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has strongly criticized the government in Tel Aviv, in the nineties Ankara's only ally in the Middle East, becoming the champion of the Palestinian cause. Erdoğan's tough anti-Israeli rhetoric, accusing Tel Aviv of committing 'genocide' in Gaza and comparing its intervention in the Strip to the action of Nazis, not only increased tensions but also prevented Turkey from playing a mediator role in the last Gaza crisis³. However, beyond the official rhetoric, economic relations are flourishing as bilateral trade rose to \$5bn in 2013⁴. In a deteriorating regional context

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² See S. ULGEN - F. DORUK ERGUN, *A Turkish Perspective on the Rise of the Islamic State*, EDAM Discussion Paper Series 2014/6.

³ S. WILLIAMS - D. GUNDOGAN, "Erdogan chooses anti-Israel diatribes over Gaza mediation", *Agence France Presse*, 22 July 2014.

⁴ TurkStat, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr>.

Turkish-Israeli rapprochement could bring benefits for both countries, although room for convergence looks difficult to find in the short-term.

As for Egypt, since the removal of Islamist president Morsi from power, considered by the former prime minister Erdoğan an ‘unacceptable coup’⁵, and the end of the Muslim Brothers’ rule in July 2013, diplomatic relations between Ankara and Cairo stalled, reversing the cooperation both countries had intensified in the wake of the Arab Spring to boost trade and investment. Indeed, Egypt was considered an important economic partner, being in 2011 the main destination of Turkish exports – reaching \$2.6 billion – and the major source of imports, \$1.4 billion, among the North Africa countries⁶. At that time, in the light of deteriorating relations with Syria, Egypt was also considered a crucial alternative route for Turkish exports to Jordan and the Gulf region as well as an important access to other Arab and African markets.

The Turkish stance vis-à-vis the conflict in Syria created also tensions with Iran, Damascus’ main regional ally, but at the same time Turkey’s major hydrocarbons supplier (together with Russia). Indeed, energy cooperation has been a key factor in the rapprochement between the two countries over the last decade⁷. In 2000s, relations with Iran, along with Syria, were the cornerstones of Turkey’s Middle East strategy. Mutual economic and energy interests, along with cooperation in containing Kurdish nationalism and in counterterrorism, drove this rapprochement⁸. Although Ankara and Teheran remain on opposing positions about the conflict in Syria, the signature of the interim agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme in November 2013 was seen as a new opportunity to reset strained relations⁹. Indeed, both countries would share an interest in improving bilateral ties, as the exchange of high level visits during the last year show. During the visit of the Iranian President Rouhani to Turkey last June the importance of cooperation between Ankara and Teheran for the resolution of regional conflicts was highlighted. However, no concrete steps in this direction have been undertaken so far.

⁵ S. IDIZ, “Egyptian Coup Shakes Turkey”, *Al Monitor*, 5 July 2013.

⁶ TurkStat, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr>.

⁷ In 2011 the Islamic Republic was the main oil supplier – covering 51% of Turkish oil imports – and the second gas supplier, behind Russia, providing 19% of Turkish gas needs⁷. Iran became Ankara’s top trade partner in the Middle East, with trade increasing from \$2.4 billion in 2003 to \$16 billion in 2011 TUIK, Turkish Statistical Institute, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/Start.do>.

⁸ V. TALBOT, *Turkey and Iran: resetting relations?*, ISPI Analysis No. 224, December 2013.

⁹ Ibid.

Therefore, Turkey has remained with no friends in its neighbourhood, with the exception of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, which surprisingly has become its best partner. Indeed, just a decade ago authorities in Ankara viewed Masoud Barzani, the KRG's leader, as a sponsor of PKK. Economic and energy interests are the backbone of this 'marriage of convenience' since a detente process begun in 2008-09. On the one hand Turkey needs increasing oil supplies for its growing economy, on the other it represents the way out for the landlocked oil-rich KRG. From a Turkish perspective, the KRG's energy resources would allow Turkey to increase its energy security and to become an energy corridor between the Middle East and the European market. Furthermore, around 2,200 Turkish firms are present in Iraqi Kurdistan, which absorbs over 70 percent of the \$12 billion of Ankara's trade with all of Iraq¹⁰. However, Turkey's search for new energy supplies provoked strains with the Shia-led central government in Baghdad. Broadly speaking, since the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq at the end of 2011 relations with this country went from bad to worse. Ankara was hostile to al-Maliki's sectarian policy, considered to be destabilizing and divisive of Iraq, and at the same time did not look favourably on the extent of Iran's influence in Baghdad. On its side, the Iraqi central government was irritated by energy deals that Turkey autonomously negotiated with the Erbil.

Regional isolation, that the then foreign policy advisor to the prime minister, Ibrahim Kalin, preferred to call 'precious loneliness'¹¹, limits Turkey's capacity to influence Middle East dynamics. Deteriorating relations with Middle Eastern neighbours have eroded Turkey's ability to contribute to regional stability and to become an effective regional player¹². In addition, over the last years the positive perception of Turkey in the Arab countries has also deteriorated. After the Gezi Park demonstrations in 2013, Erdoğan's government decision to censor the Internet, and with internal developments after corruption investigations, the 'Turkish model' no longer looks as appealing as before. The percentage of Arab people having a positive view dropped to 59% compared to 78% in 2011¹³. This was particularly evident in Syria and Egypt, due to the AKP government's stance towards the regimes in Damascus and Cairo.

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¹⁰ P. ZALEWSKI, "Kurdistan has rewards and dangers for its neighbor", *Financial Times*, 22 September 2014.

¹¹ *Today's Zaman*, 25 August 2013.

¹² T. OGUZLU, *Turkey's Foreign Policy Challenges*, BILGESAM Analysis, No. 119, 3 March 2014.

¹³ "Turkey losing positive perception in the Middle East", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 4 December 2013.

Strains also have a negative impact on Ankara's economic and trade relations, and in general on the Turkish economy based on the export-oriented model. Over the past decade trade with Middle Eastern countries has increased enormously, from \$12.1 billion in 2004 to \$63.8 billion in 2012, and the area has become the second destination for Turkish exports after Europe. However, 2013 witnessed a fall in Turkish exports towards the region, which passed from \$42.4 billion in 2012 to \$35.5 billion¹⁴. The deteriorating situation in Iraq, which has become its main regional trade partner, is likely to impact more on trade exchange. After Mosul was seized by IS in July 2014, Turkey's trade with Iraq witnessed a 35 percent drop compared to the same period of the previous year¹⁵. Finally, regional isolation and shrinking influence were also reflected in a decline in Turkey's international standing, as the recent failure to secure a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council election highlights¹⁶.

The emergence of IS and the Kurdish factor

The establishment of the self-proclaimed Caliphate and the rapid advance of IS has added a new element of instability in Turkey's neighbourhood. By hesitating to actively take part in the anti-IS coalition led by the US and to engage in helping Syrian Kurds in Kobane besieged by the Islamic State, Turkey's stance raised questions about its role and priorities in the Middle East. From a Western perspective, Ankara looked to be more concerned about defending its own interests than facing the jihadist threat. It was also criticized for having an ambiguous stance towards jihadist groups in Syria. Domestically, the opposition leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, openly accused the AKP government of supporting IS by providing logistical, military and medical aid¹⁷.

In mid-October Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that "Turkey will not embark on an adventure [in Syria] at the insistence of some other countries, unless the international community does what is necessary and introduces an integrated strategy"¹⁸. Ankara made clear that its priority in Syria was regime change, that it would see Assad replaced by a Sunni-led government looking at Turkey as reference point, and

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¹⁴ TurkStat, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr>.

¹⁵ *Hurriyet Daily News*, 23 July 2014.

¹⁶ "UNSC failure a strong message to Turkey on its faulty foreign policy", *Today's Zaman*, 17 October 2014.

¹⁷ *Today's Zaman*, 14 October 2014.

¹⁸ "Turkey won't embark on adventure in Syria: PM Davutoğlu", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 15 October 2014.

conditioned its involvement against IS on the establishment of a no-fly zone and a buffer area in Syrian territory along the Turkish border¹⁹. However, not only does Turkey's vision not converge with US aims, but it also does not seem to fit the current situation in its neighbourhood, where today Ankara has very little influence.

In general, Turkey's Syria policy is not supported by public opinion, which, following the traditional foreign policy principle of non-intervention, is not in favour of involvement in other countries' internal affairs.

Although at the beginning of October the Turkish parliament authorized the deployment of Turkish armed forces for cross-border operations as well as the deployment of foreign troops in Turkey in response to regional instability, it is unlikely that Ankara will send its troops to Syria, unless a concerted ground operation will be agreed on. Even if Turkish conditions regarding its military engagement would be met, there is a strong domestic opposition to cross-border interventions that would drag the country even more into regional chaos. This is a very sensitive issue for the AKP in view of 2015 parliamentary elections in which the governing party aims to win an overwhelming majority.

In this volatile context, the Kurdish factor plays a major role in Turkey's foreign policy calculations not only in Syria but also in Iraq. Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict Turkey has been concerned with preventing the empowerment of Kurds who, under the guidance of the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), have established a certain degree of self-rule in northern regions of Syria. The siege of Kobane by the Islamic State has brought into the spotlight once again the importance of the Kurdish issue for Ankara as well as the tight interconnections between its domestic and regional dimensions. While today Turkey could not oppose to the independence of KRG in northern Iraq²⁰, it is deeply concerned about the same scenario in Syria, that could have an impact on its own Kurds (around 15-20% of the population, the largest non-Turkish ethnic group in the country), reviving separatism's calls. Indeed, PYD is considered a branch of PKK – the military group listed as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the US and the EU – which has been fighting Turkish security forces for three decades. In this perspective, the Turkish government fears that weapons provided by the international community to Kurds in Iraq and Syria could go to the PKK. It also aims to prevent the PKK from

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¹⁹ M. YETKIN, 'Erdogan furious with the US, adds al-Assad conditions', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 21 October 2014.

²⁰ "Turkey's AKP Spokesman: Iraq's Kurds Have Right to Decide Their Future", www.rudaw.net, 13 June 2014.

obtaining a sort of ‘international rehabilitation’ due to its military performance in fighting against the advance of the Islamic State in northern Iraq. In Ankara’s view, this could challenge the fragile peace process that the AKP government engaged in at the end of 2012 to push forward the Kurdish issue. This dialogue process would aim not only at recognizing Kurdish identity and cultural rights for Turkish Kurds but also at stopping the long-lasting fight against the PKK, which caused 40,000 victims.

Erdoğan has been the first Turkish leader to recognize that Turkey has a Kurdish problem, starting an ‘opening process’ in summer 2009, while the conflict in Syria and the autonomy acquired by Syrian Kurds on the Turkish border made it clear that, unless Ankara tackles its own domestic Kurdish issue and engages with PKK, Kurds will continue to represent a destabilizing factor at both the domestic and regional levels. In this perspective, the negotiation process was also the result of regional pressures and evolving dynamics. However, although for the first time the government publicly recognised the dialogue with the PKK leader in jail, Abdullah Öcalan, the negotiation process has witnessed many difficulties and setbacks. In March 2013 Öcalan called for a ceasefire and PKK militants were instructed to retreat from Turkey. The withdrawal was suspended in September 2013 as the PKK claimed Turkey did not do its part. Recent developments in the wake of the Kobane siege, including Kurds’ demonstrations in Turkey and airstrikes against PKK targets, have added further strains to a stalled process that risks collapse.

Conclusion

It seems that the successful cycle that witnessed Turkey as an assertive regional player and a model for Arab countries in transition has come to an end. Today Turkey is deeply involved in the Middle East disorder and its current isolation does not allow Ankara to deal effectively with the new instability. However, Turkey remains an important player that could contribute to regional stability, if it regains its regional leverage, soft power and a mediator role. In this perspective, it is important for Ankara to rethink its foreign policy approach taking into account new realities in the Middle East. Keeping on track the peace process with the PKK and favouring the solution of the Kurdish issue would be a major step in reordering domestic affairs as well as in contributing to security at Turkish borders and in its surroundings. Furthermore, putting on track other domestic issues – i.e. the democratic process and political reforms – that have derailed in the last few years, including the negotiation process for EU membership, may also help Turkey in regaining a prominent regional role.

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