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Turkey and the Middle East

Internal Confidence, External Assertiveness

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Summary points

- Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is determined that Turkey should be the leading player in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the light of the country's economic growth and healthy bilateral trade with MENA.
- Two foreign policy principles – 'strategic depth' and 'zero problems with the neighbours' – have been enunciated by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Creating commercial opportunities for Turkish businesses is central to Turkey's 'soft power'.
- Before the Arab Spring, Turkey succeeded in developing relations with Iran and Syria without sacrificing ties with Saudi Arabia. Since then it has moved closer to the US and Saudi position on Syria and Iran. A robust attitude towards Israel since the 2008 Gaza conflict has increased Erdoğan's popularity enormously on the Arab street, except in Gaza and Jordan.
- Three internal factors are preventing Turkey from acting as a model for this multicultural region: the Kurdish conflagration, a quasi-secular system of government and a fragile democracy.
- Although Turkey's attempts at leadership will be strongly resisted by other regional actors, in the longer term its influence can be maximized through variable coalition-building, careful public diplomacy, selective mediation interventions and further domestic political, economic and social liberalization.

Sayfa 11'deki Türkçe özeti içermektedir.

Introduction

Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has long sought to catapult Turkey into the premier league of influential players in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Celebrating his third successive general election victory on 12 June 2011, Erdoğan declared triumphantly: 'Beirut has won as much as Izmir. West Bank, Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem have won as much as Diyarbakır. The Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans have won, just as Turkey has won.'[1] He pointedly alluded to the geography of the defunct Ottoman Empire to relay this clear message.

> 'Turkey escaped the 2008–09 international economic crisis mostly unscathed because of its well-regulated banking sector. Little wonder that the Turkish government is brimming with self-assuredness'

To realize the cherished goal of regional leadership, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu articulated two foreign policy principles in the pre-Arab Spring period: 'strategic depth' (i.e. taking advantage of Turkey's strategic geography between Europe and Asia) and 'zero problems with the neighbours' (i.e. promoting good-neighbourly ties). Another fundamental element of this diplomatic activism and of 'soft power' was encouraging free trade with neighbouring Iran and the Arab countries to create opportunities for Turkey's exporters and business people.

As Arab uprisings shake a once stolid region, however, Turkey's idea of regional dominance is coming under severe strain in a volatile and unstable environment. Turkey's reliance on those two principles for outreach to the Middle East has been swept away by the upheaval and tumultuous events in its immediate neighbourhood.

Domestic circumstances

Turkey's political and economic accomplishments in a region characterized by turmoil have fuelled its ambitions in MENA. It is a paragon of relative tranquillity in the midst of choppy regional seas. Iraq is a barely functioning state, Syria is engulfed by popular protests and Iran is at odds with the West. Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (JDP) enjoys an enviable mandate from roughly half the Turkish voters. Its electoral sweep covers the broad landmass of this vast Eurasian country.

This situation did not emerge from a vacuum. Turkish voters rewarded the JDP for a decade of budgetary prudence, monetary stability and improving living standards. The statistics reveal the startling economic turnaround that took place between 2000 and 2010. Exports rose from $35bn to $134bn;[2] public debt levels plummeted from near triple digits to around 42 per cent of gross domestic product. Growth rates have averaged 4.62 per cent annually over the last ten years. As the seventeenth largest economy in the world and the sixth in Europe, Turkey is a member of the G20. Foreign direct investment (FDI) into Turkey averages $10bn per annum, compared with the annual average of $1bn in the 1990s.[3]

Turkey escaped the 2008–09 international economic crisis mostly unscathed because of its well-regulated banking sector. Little wonder that the Turkish government is brimming with self-assuredness. Erdoğan has set the ambitious target of tripling the size of Turkey's economy and joining the world's top ten by 2023, the centennial of the Turkish republic. Average Turkish per capita income will, he predicts optimistically, be $25,000 a year, not far below that of Spain today.[4]

1 Barçın Yinanç, 'PM poses as Mideastern leader rather than a European leader', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 13 June 2011, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=pm-poses-as-a-mideastern-rather-than-a-european-leader-2011-06-13.

2 David Gardner, 'Turkey: Eyes on a higher prize', *Financial Times*, 9 June 2011, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a71274e8-92c4-11e0-bd88-00144feab49a.html#axzz1cvUo6s52.

3 Index Mundi, 'Turkey – Country Profile – 2011', http://www.indexmundi.com/turkey/.

4 Gwynne Dyer, 'Will Turkey grant Erdogan's Dreams?', *Winnipeg Free Press*, 11 June 2011, http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/westview/will-turkey-grant-erdogans-dreams-123678784.html.

Turkey's expanding trade with MENA has further powered Turkish self-confidence as the region now accounts for approximately a fifth of Turkey's external trade and for $12bn or 7.5 per cent of FDI into Turkey since 2003.[5]

This trade is not solely driven by the usual sectors: construction, vehicles, foodstuffs and textiles. Increasingly lucrative defence deals are in the offing. Just $200m five years ago, global defence exports (including to MENA) will reach $1.5bn in 2011.[6] Thanks to Turkey's flexibility on sharing sensitive technology and source codes, Egypt is negotiating to purchase the Turkish *Anka* (Phoenix), its medium-altitude unmanned aerial vehicle.[7]

Pre-Arab Spring dynamics

Encouraged by its domestic achievements, Turkey projected new-found foreign policy independence. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu rejected the Cold War notion of Turkey as a frontier state as outdated and anachronistic.

Rather, he stressed, it was a flexible actor maximizing geographic and historical ties with the Middle East without compromising its traditional alliances with NATO and the United States. Davutoğlu highlighted Turkey's new 'strategic depth', underpinned by a web of political, economic and social links with neighbouring regions, and portrayed this forward-looking foreign policy as distinctive and immutable.

Davutoğlu set out Turkish foreign policy thinking in a 2009 speech.

> The geographical uniqueness of Turkey is … right at the centre of Afro-Eurasia … through this geographical continuity … you can have an access to many regions at the same time. This is what I call 'strategic depth'. Is it an asset? From my perspective, it is a great asset … [We] tried to develop a zero-problem policy with our neighbours. We cannot afford continuous tensions with our neighbours …
>
> We have to keep our channels open to everybody. In the Middle East, for example, there are certain compartmentalizations: Shiites, Sunnis, radical-moderate states, problems between Arabs and Israel or Israel and Iran, problems between individual countries, problems inside countries like Shiites-Sunnis in Iraq, or Fatah-Hamas in Palestine or Hezbollah and Hariri in Lebanon; but there is one country that has channels open to everybody and that has good relations with everybody. It is Turkey. And we will keep this position.[8]

Thus the transformation of Turkey's ties with Iran and Syria since 2002, manifested by dramatic rises in trade volumes and multiple official visits, reflected the policy of 'zero problems with the neighbours'. And Ankara, no less, mediated Israel–Syria peace negotiations until the December 2008 Israeli military operations against Hamas in Gaza. Turkish decision-makers also opened a dialogue with Hamas, and engaged with Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite groups in Iraq.

To a certain extent the vision outlined by Davutoğlu was enabled by Egypt's foreign policy under former President Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak adopted a staunchly pro-Washington line of close relations with Israel, and opposition to Hamas and Iran. His foreign policy therefore created a regional vacuum that Turkey was able and willing to fill.

At the same time, Turkey managed to navigate between Iran and its Arab enemies in the Gulf, and strengthened relations with Syria without adversely harming ties with Saudi Arabia.

5 Robin Wigglesworth and Delphine Strauss, 'Turkey focusses on Gulf for two-way ties', *Financial Times*, 21 June 2010, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a61898ac-7d57-11df-a0f5-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1cvUo6s52.

6 Fadi Hakura, 'Turkey and the Defence Sector; The Roaring Anatolian Tiger', *AeroSpace and Defence Industries of Europe (ASD),* Special edition: ASD Annual Convention, Issue 7, October 2011.

7 'Turkey, Egypt Discuss Possible Export of Anka UAV', Defence Update, 23 September 2011, http://defense-update.com/20110923_turkey-egypt-discuss-possible-export-of-anka-uav.html.

8 Ahmet Davutoğlu, 'Turkey-US relations: A Model Partnership, Global and Regional Dimensions', Speech delivered at the 28th Annual Conference on US–Turkish Relations Organized by ATC-DEIK, Washington DC, 2 June 2009, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/minster_s-speechat-the-28th-annual-conference-on-us-turkish-relations.en.mfa.

Events nevertheless soon overtook Davutoğlu's vision. Deteriorating relations with Israel eventually became a vital cause of Prime Minister Erdoğan's popularity on the Arab street. Erdoğan benefited from the sequence of events: the Israeli military campaign against Hamas in Gaza in December 2008 (just a few days after former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had visited Ankara for Israel–Syria peace mediation talks); the interception by Israeli commandos in May 2010 of the Gaza-bound Turkish aid ship, the *Mavi Marmara*, and the death of eight Turks and one Turkish-American in the ensuing confrontation; and Israel's refusal to apologize for the incident, especially since the UN Panel of Inquiry report on the incident accepted the legality of the Israeli naval blockade.[9]

In retaliation, Turkey has downgraded diplomatic representation to the level of second secretary, and has suspended defence contracts and joint military exercises. It has also threatened to pursue a legal case at the International Court of Justice. Tellingly, however, it has not imposed non-defence-related economic or trade sanctions against Israel.

Bilateral reconciliation became a prickly ordeal since both governments put a premium on honour and national pride.[10] Yet resolving the impasse is not impossible if cooler heads prevail. Egypt, for instance, successfully secured an apology from Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak over the killing of five Egyptian border guards in August 2011. Similarly, Israeli President Shimon Peres thanked Turkey for agreeing to host eleven expelled Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Hamas' release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in October.

Post-Arab Spring complexities

Turkey's stand-off with Israel is a mere drop in the ocean relative to the ongoing turbulence in the region – the so-called Arab Spring. As youth-led protests brought down the autocracies in Tunisia and Egypt and swept through Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria, Erdoğan's instinctive approach to foreign policy has paid dividends. Eight days into the Egyptian uprising, he called on Mubarak to relinquish power, a move facilitated by Erdoğan's reported hostility to the ex-president and his yearning to be seen as on the 'right side' of history.

The response to Libya was somewhat more complicated owing to the award of 214 building projects to Turkish contractors worth $15bn by the former regime of Muammar Gaddafi.[11] Initially, Erdoğan vacillated; he condemned Western military action against Gaddafi and proposed a negotiated solution. He then rapidly fell into the Franco-Anglo-American line by recognizing Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC) and breaking ties with the Gaddafi regime. Turkey also rushed to provide $200m of aid to the NTC to secure commercial interests in the oil-rich post-Gaddafi Libya.

> 'Events in Syria are testing Turkish foreign policy to the limits … violent disturbances have resulted in Turkey pitting itself against the once-friendly Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his allies Iran and Russia'

Events in Syria, however, are testing Turkish foreign policy to the limits. Damascus rejected the stark warnings and ultimatums from Ankara on reforms to forestall street protests. These violent disturbances have resulted in Turkey pitting itself against the once-friendly Syrian

9 Geoffrey Palmer and Alvaro Uribe, 'Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Inquiry on 31 May 2010 Flotilla Incident', United Nations, July 2011, http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/middle_east/Gaza_Flotilla_Panel_Report.pdf.

10 Tulay Karadeniz, 'Egypt's Islamists warn Turkish PM over regional role', Reuters, 14 September 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/14/us-turkey-egypt-idUSTRE78D2TD20110914.

11 'Turkish PM Erdoğan arrives in Libyan capital', Associated Press, 16 September 2011, http://cnsnews.com/news/article/turkish-pm-erdogan-arrives-libyan-capital.

President Bashar al-Assad and his allies Iran and Russia. Al-Assad mistrusts Erdoğan's sympathies for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and fears that Turkish reform proposals will hasten the end of his regime. His scepticism will have been heightened by Turkey's sponsorship of the Syrian National Council – an umbrella group of Syrian opposition figures – and the Free Syrian Army, a shadowy organization of breakaway Syrian soldiers headed by Colonel Riad al-As'aad which is purportedly carrying out an armed campaign against President al-Assad.[12]

Complicating matters is that Turkey's cultural diversity roughly mirrors that of Syria. Large Alawite (a heterodox and syncretic offshoot of Shia Islam) and Kurdish populations live close to the borders with Iraq, Iran and Syria. Ankara is, predictably, worried about a potential flood of Syrian refugees – or 'guests' as it prefers to call them – into Turkey and the spill-over effects, particularly into its restive Kurdish-populated southeastern region.[13]

With the removal of Mubarak, one of the important cornerstones of Turkish foreign policy disappeared. Egypt is gradually re-emerging as a principal interlocutor on the Israeli–Palestinian issue, as demonstrated by its critical contribution to the release of Gilad Shalit, as noted above. More broadly, Turkey's ties with Iran and Syria – which exemplified the 'zero problems with the neighbours' policy – are now in tatters. These relationships of convenience can no longer pass for a strategic alliance.

Rebalancing Turkey's foreign policy

Turkey is siding increasingly with the United States and Saudi Arabia on Iran, Syria and Bahrain, where a Shiite majority population has clashed with the Sunni leadership. More significantly, it agreed to station a US-made, NATO-supported early warning radar system in south-eastern Kürecik in Malatya province, about 700 kilometres from the border with Iran. Fifty US soldiers will protect the sophisticated radar system, which is meant to neutralize the Iranian missile threat, and the intelligence gathered will be 'shared with allies, including Israel'.[14]

"Erdoğan, a devout Muslim, is a solid partner for the United States in a region that could see more Islamist-influenced governments in Egypt and Tunisia while Washington withdraws forces from Afghanistan and Iraq"

Turkey's decision marks a swing from a balanced position between Iran and its opponents to a more pro-Western and, more specifically, pro-US inclination. For its part, Washington is content to cooperate closely with Ankara on influencing the Arab Spring and isolating Tehran.

Erdoğan, a devout Muslim, is a solid partner for the United States in a region that could see more Islamist-influenced governments in Egypt and Tunisia while Washington withdraws forces from Afghanistan and Iraq. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger rightly anticipated that Turkey will fill part of the regional void left by the US withdrawal. Although Kissinger advised Ankara not to 'run across interests that the US considers imperative', he expects bilateral relations will be 'constructive'.[15]

12 Liam Stack, 'In Slap at Syria, Turkey Shelters Anti-Assad Fighters', *New York Times*, 27 October 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/world/europe/turkey-is-sheltering-antigovernment-syrian militia.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2.

13 Such developments are not surprising in the light of the Arab Spring. One of its visible implications is exacerbating Syria's Sunni–Alawite fragmentation, which Erdoğan acknowledged to the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Shourouk*: 'I fear that matters will end with a civil war breaking out between the Alawites and the Sunnis': 'Turkish PM warns of "sectarian civil war" in Syria', Agence France Presse, 13 September 2011, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jE8bucn9ybeMuCVe_VHPChDE9-8g?docId=CNG.1e459e20bd0257072dac77599408e5c5.481.

14 Tom Shanker, 'US Hails Deal with Turkey on Missile Shield', *New York Times*, 15 September 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/16/world/europe/turkey-accepts-missile-radar-for-nato-defense-against-iran.html.

15 'Kissinger Sees Greater roles for Turkey', *Wall Street Journal*, 12 October 2011, http://blogs.wsj.com/emergingeurope/2011/10/12/kissinger-sees-greater-role-for-turkey/.

A good illustration of the US–Turkish partnership in operation was the joint launch in September 2011 of the 30-nation *Global Counterterrorism Forum*, which aims to bring together 'traditional allies, emerging powers and Muslim-majority countries' to combat transnational violence in the Muslim world.[16]

> 'Turkey has also opted for a more pugnacious diplomacy … Whether this more muscular foreign policy will be any more effective than the 'zero-problems' approach is open to question'

As expected, Ankara's efforts to curry favour with Washington have caused consternation in rival Tehran. Turkey's animosity to the Syrian president and decision to deploy the NATO radar system has rankled with Iran, which views the decision as favouring Israeli interests. A senior Iranian military adviser, Major-General Yahya Rahim-Safavi, slammed Erdoğan's invitation to Arab countries to adopt Turkish-style democracy and threatened economic sanctions.

Nevertheless Ankara and Tehran seem determined not to allow mutually beneficial relations to fray beyond repair. Officials in both countries have reaffirmed plans to deepen bilateral trade and expand investments. Turkey is, additionally, keenly aware of its dependency on Iran for 20 per cent of its natural gas imports[17] and for $15bn of its foreign trade.[18] It also opposes any military action against Iranian nuclear facilities.

Tougher diplomacy

Turkey has also opted for a more pugnacious diplomacy. Its abandonment of the 'zero-problems' policy necessitated a quick replacement. Forceful rhetoric has thereby become a staple of Turkish diplomats.[19]

Whether this more muscular foreign policy will be any more effective than the 'zero-problems' approach is open to question. Turkey's rhetoric – including threats to deploy Turkish warships nearer to Israel and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean – has so far not prompted an Israeli apology over the *Mavi Marmara* incident, nor led to the removal of Israel's blockade of Gaza, nor thwarted Cyprus on gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean,[20] nor changed the behaviour of President al-Assad.

İbrahim Kalın, foreign policy adviser to Erdoğan, is right to argue that the Turkish prime minister is 'almost an idol for the Arab masses because he takes them seriously, speaks their language and stands up for justice on a global scale'.[21]

Arab public opinion has, obviously, taken strongly to Erdoğan. A Zogby poll, *Arab Attitudes,* published in 2011, shows his popularity ratings standing at 80 per cent in Morocco and above 90 per cent in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.[22]

16 'US and Turkey launch new effort to combat global terrorism', *Haaretz,* 10 September 2011, http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/u-s-and-turkey-launch-new-effort-to-combat-global-terrorism-1.383587.

17 Meliha Benli Altınışık, 'Turkey's Changing Middle East Policy', UNISCI Discussion Paper, No. 23, May 2010, http://www.ucm.es/BUCM/revistas/cps/16962206/articulos/UNIS1010230149A.PDF.

18 Ladane Nasseri, 'Turkey, Iran trade to Reach $15 Billion in 2011, Press TV Says', Bloomberg, 23 October 2011, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-10-23/iran-turkey-trade-to-reach-15-billion-in-2011-press-tv-says.html.

19 President Abdullah Gül, the normally soft-spoken counterpoint to the outspoken Erdoğan, has argued that by annoying interlocutors Turkey gets what it wants. He declared: 'I have intentionally and consciously adopted this [forceful] tone. Because I know that the more you assume a humble attitude, the more they treat you like that. You need to irritate them a bit': Daniel Dombey, 'Turkey looks to punch above its weight', *Financial Times*, 27 September 2011, www.ft.com/cms/s/0/39f83f1a-e912-11e0-ac9c-00144feab49a.html.

20 Jay Solomon and Marc Champion, 'U.S. Ties to Turkey Face New Strains', *Wall Street Journal*, 8 October 2011, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204294504576617282941472812.html.

21 İbrahim Kalın, 'Erdogan's Middle East agenda', *Zaman Daily*, 21 September 2011, http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-257524-erdogans-middle-east-agenda.html.

22 James Zogby, 'Arab Attitudes, 2011', Arab American Institute Foundation, 2011, http://aai.3cdn.net/5d2b8344e3b3b7ef19_xkm6ba4r9.pdf.

Those results mirrored findings by Pew Research showing Erdoğan's favourability ratings as 78 per cent, 72 per cent and 64 per cent in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon respectively. He is undoubtedly the most respected figure in the region.[23]

Nevertheless, riding the crest wave of approval ratings rarely translates into lasting influence in the absence of concrete results. Crucially, the Pew survey and the Zogby poll hint at that very possibility.

Only 35 per cent and 45 per cent of Palestinians in Gaza and Jordanians respectively expressed 'confidence' in Erdoğan. That is a surprising finding given the *Mavi Marmara* incident. Of all places, Gaza and Jordan should have been warmest to Turkey's confrontational attitude to Israel.

> "When Erdoğan made Gaza a personal *cause célèbre*, expectations among Gazans and Jordanians shot through the roof but then went largely unmet. Disappointment replaced euphoria as action failed to match Turkey's declarations of support"

This finding is not very difficult to explain. When Erdoğan made Gaza a personal *cause célèbre*, expectations among Gazans and Jordanians shot through the roof but then went largely unmet. Disappointment replaced euphoria as action failed to match Turkey's declarations of support.

Even Islamist-rooted groups could undermine Turkish attempts at regional leadership, if overdone. For instance, Essam El-Erian, deputy leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, criticized Erdoğan's promotion of Turkish-style secularism and argued that 'he or his country alone should [not] be leading the region or drawing up its future'.[24]

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood need not panic over the popular appeal of Erdoğan's message. According to a September 2011 poll by the Cairo-based Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, 41.4 per cent of Egyptians chose Saudi Arabia as the best model for their country to follow. Turkey ranks merely fourth, at less than 10 per cent, coming right after the United States and China, which have 10 per cent each.[25]

Not necessarily the right model

Precisely because the current Turkish model cannot adequately accommodate the kaleidoscopic ethnic and sectarian diversity in the Middle East, three factors closer to home are hindering Turkey from playing the full role it wishes in the Arab world.

Kurdish conflagration

First is the still unresolved and festering Kurdish issue, which so far has claimed the lives of over 40,000 people. There is a widening polarization between Kurds and Turks driven in part by an overly centralized state attempting to impose a singular national identity. A survey in early June 2011 by Konda, a Turkish polling company, revealed that 57.6 per cent of ethnic Turks would not marry a Kurd, while 47.4 per cent did not want a Kurd as a neighbour. In comparison, 26.4 per cent of Kurds would not marry a Turk, while 22.1 per cent did not want a Turk as a neighbour. Furthermore, a similar deep chasm separates Turks and Kurds on the stipulations of a new constitution for Turkey.[26] In a break with past attitudes, many Turks seem to conflate

23 Pew Research, 'On the Eve of Elections, a More Upbeat Mood in Turkey', 7 June 2011, http://pewglobal.org/files/2011/06/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Turkey-Report-FINAL-June-7-2011.pdf.

24 Karadeniz, 'Egypt's Islamists warn Turkish PM over regional role', Reuters, 14 September 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/14/us-turkey-egypt-idUSTRE78D2TD20110914.

25 Barçın Yinanç, 'Talking about secularism when Egypt looks to Saudi Arabia as a model', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 October 2011, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=talking-about-secularism-when-egypt-looks-to-saudi-arabia-as-a-model-2011-10-17.

26 71.7 per cent of Turks were opposed to any mention of Kurdish language in the new constitution and 59.2 per cent were opposed to education in Kurdish. By contrast, 73.7 per cent of Kurds maintained that a reference to Kurdish identity should be included in the new constitution, while 87.2 per cent wanted education in Kurdish and 70.9 per cent supported the decentralization of power: Gareth Jenkins, 'Fading Hopes, Rising Demands: Kurdish Problem Moves to the Point of No Return', *Turkey Analyst*, Vol. 14, No. 13, 27 June 2011, http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2011/110627A.html.

the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) with Kurds as a people. Kurdish-Turkish altercations have already become more commonplace in Istanbul and other relatively prosperous western parts of Turkey.[27] Current poisonous trends point to an intensified danger of worsening communal relations between Kurds and Turks. In recent months, many activists and politicians of the Peace and Democracy Party – affiliated to the PKK – face criminal prosecution. The familiar pattern of PKK violence and the Turkish response, including the air bombardment of, and land incursions into, the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, has resumed.

Quasi-secularism

Second is the vital issue of secularism. Contrary to widespread perceptions, Turkey is at most a quasi-secular country. On the one hand, the Turkish constitution, unlike those in most of the Muslim world, does not declare that Islam is the state religion or stipulate that Islamic jurisprudence or Sharia is a source of law for personal status issues or any other matter. On the other hand, the state and Sunni Islam are so integrated that religion classes based primarily on Sunni Islam are obligatory in schools. Diyanet, the Religious Affairs Department, under the prime minister's firm control, regulates and provides an exclusive subsidy to Turkish Sunni Islam. It employs more than 106,000 civil servants, including 60,000 imams and 10,000 muezzins with a budget of $1.5bn.[28]

If the 2011 Pew Research report on global restrictions on religion is any guide, Turkey demonstrates that quasi-secularism is an insufficient framework to protect the rights of religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East. According to this survey, Turkey's record on government restrictions on, and social hostility towards, religion (especially minority religions) is below that of non-secular Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. Countries with the best scores on both criteria tend to have a strong secular tradition.[29]

It follows that only a fully-fledged secular system equidistant from all beliefs can guarantee the entitlements of various ethnicities and sectarian groups and, above all, of women. According to the United Nations Development Programme and the World Economic Forum, respectively, Turkey is positioned 101st out of 109 countries for gender empowerment[30] and 122nd out of 135 for gender equality.[31] At 23 per cent, its female labour force participation rate – the proportion of working-age women in employment – is less than half the OECD average[32] of 58 per cent.[33]

Fragile democracy

Third, the quality of democracy in Turkey is still a work in progress. Perceptions of a growing clamp-down on the press, increasingly politicized criminal trials of military officers, judges, business people, academics and journalists for alleged coup plots, and the extensive use of powers of patronage are causing concern within and outside the country. These perceptions call into question Turkey's claim to lead from the front on political reform in the Arab world. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkey 138th out of 178 countries in its '2010 World Press Freedom Index'

27 Hugh Pope, 'Preparing for Peace in Turkey', *Wall Street Journal*, 4 October 2011, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204612504576608500553825500.html?mod=googlenews_wsj; Işıl Eğrikavuk, 'Turkey heads to more ethnic polarization', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 24 July 2011, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkey-heads-to-more-ethnic-polarization-2011-07-24.

28 Susanne Gusten, 'Turkey's Elephant in the Room: Religious Freedom', *New York Times*, 29 September 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/29/world/europe/turkeys-elephant-in-the-room-religious-freedom.html?_r=1&ref=global-home.

29 Pew Research, 'Rising Restrictions on Religion', 9 August 2011, http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Issues/Government/RisingRestrictions-web.pdf.

30 United Nations Development Programme, 'New Horizons: UNDP Turkish Monthly Newsletter', Issue 47, November 2009, http://www.undp.org.tr/Gozlem2.aspx?WebSayfaNo=2196.

31 Nicole Pope, 'Balancing Act', Al-Arabiya News, 10 November 2011, http://english.alarabiya.net/views/2011/11/08/176047.html.

32 'Turkey's gender inequality 'bad apple' in OECD bushel', *Zaman Daily*, 9 March 2010, http://www.todayszaman.com/news-203757-105-turkeys-gender-inequality-bad-apple-in-oecd bushel.html.

33 Several credible studies have identified social conservatism as a chief barrier to female employment; see, for example, Ersin Kalaycıoğlu and Binnaz Toprak, 'İş Yaşamı, Üst Yönetim ve Siyasette Kadın (Women in the Job Force, Top Administration and Politics)', *TESEV Yayınları*, Istanbul, 2004; İdil Göksel, 'Conservatism and Female Labour Force Participation in Turkey', *Job Market Paper*, Bocconi University, January 2010, http://iue.academia.edu/IdilGoksel/Papers.

– a decline of 40 spots since 2005.[34] In addition, the UK-based Economist Intelligence Unit's 'Democracy Index' rates Turkey 89th of 167 countries, classifying it as a 'hybrid regime', only five places above the Palestinian Authority and eight above Venezuela.[35] Freedom House accords Turkey a score of only three out of seven on both political rights and civil liberties, with a rating of 'partly free'.[36]

Revisiting 'Strategic Depth' and 'Zero Problems'

Will Turkey be more successful with a combative diplomacy? Is there an alternative? The answer to the first question is a resolute 'no' and to the second 'maybe'.

Turkey is only one of a multiplicity of players; to borrow Davutoğlu's language, it is a 'reference country' whose attitudes 'will shape the future of the region'.[37] Yet, Turkey is not the only 'reference country' in the region; other key actors, such as Egypt, Iran, Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States will not necessarily be amenable to Turkish attempts at regional leadership.

Moreover, Turkey has to compete with Egypt and Tunisia in defining political, economic and social changes in Arab countries. True, Arabs admire Turkish soap operas and take vacations in Istanbul and at the Black Sea in growing numbers. Moderate Islamists do view the JDP as inspirational in terms of electoral appeal, statecraft and fusing economic prosperity with Islamic piety; but those in Tunisia[38] and Egypt do not favour Turkish quasi-secularism. As Egypt and Tunisia represent the epicentre of the Arab Spring, changes within their Islamist movements will arguably be more likely to determine the dynamics of Islamism in the region.

Even though Turkey is not the dominant regional player, its significance cannot be denied. Geography, NATO membership, its functioning democracy and vibrant economy ensure that its role is essential.

In order to realize that role Turkey needs to adjust its foreign policy agenda. Improving relations with difficult neighbours is a worthy goal, one that needs patience and quiet diplomacy. It is imperative that Turkish foreign policy returns to Davutoğlu's 'strategic depth' and 'zero-problems' approach.

To start with, Turkey is most influential when building issue-based and variable coalitions. MENA is notoriously bereft of sturdy alliances. Turkey assumed that its friendship with Syria's al-Assad was durable and stable, but recent events have proved that wrong.

> 'Coalition-building requires Turkey to act as an honest broker, without falling into any particular camp. With skill – and luck – it can bestride the multiple regional fissures … and achieve a distinctive and powerful position'

Coalition-building requires Turkey to act as an honest broker, without falling into any particular camp. With skill – and luck – it can bestride the multiple regional fissures, whether between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the United States and Iran, or Israel and the Arab countries, and achieve a distinctive and powerful position – one that is unoccupied and incapable of being occupied by any other country.

Furthermore, Turkish public diplomacy should not bolster expectations throughout MENA that risk remaining largely unfulfilled. Erdoğan's repeated ultimatums to

34 Reporters Without Borders, 'International Press Index', 2010, http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html.

35 Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Democracy Index 2010: Democracy in Retreat', 2010, http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy_Index_2010_web.pdf.

36 Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World', 2011 edition, http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw11/TableofIndependentCountriesFIW2011.pdf.

37 'Turkish FM Davutoglu briefs BDP', Anatolia News Agency, 7 October 2011. http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkish-fm-davutoglu-briefs-bdp-2011-10-07.

38 İpek Yezdani, 'Tunisian Islamist in favor of mild Shariah', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 7 October 2011, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=tunisian-islamist-in-favor-of-mild-shariah-2011-10-07.

al-Assad created the impression that Turkey could resolve the Syrian popular uprising swiftly and effortlessly. Ultimately, al-Assad's obstructionism exposed the limitations of Turkey's influence.

Turkey should also be selective in mediating disputes, and only do so when the circumstances are ripe. It will benefit from greater patience, waiting for the right timing for intervention. Turkey's tactics in the aftermath of the 2006 Israel–Hizbollah war is a case in point. Erdoğan coordinated with Israel, Iran, Lebanon, Syria and the United States, and in doing so won plaudits for his skilful manoeuvring before contributing UN peacekeeping forces.

Last, but definitely not least, the ruling JDP should focus on nurturing the only secular and liberal democracy in the Middle East. Resolving the Kurdish issue, widening the scope and impact of secularism, strengthening human rights and gender equality, and pursuing additional economic restructuring will make Turkey the envy of the region and be the true source of its regional 'soft power'.

Such a concoction of variable coalition-building, more careful public diplomacy, selective mediation interventions and profound internal reform is not necessarily headline-grabbing, and its implementation requires the regional dust to settle. But the measure of an effective policy is its outcomes. Turkey will, with the right foreign policy mix, be in a stronger position to utilize its geopolitical resources to further advance its interests in the region.

Türkiye ve Orta Doğu

İçte öz güven dışarıda inisiyatif sahibi ve iddialı

Türkçe özet

- Türkiye'nin ekonomik büyümesi ve Orta Doğu ve Kuzey Afrika ile gelişen sağlıklı karşılıklı ticaretin ışığında Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Başbakanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Türkiye'nin Orta Doğu'da ve Kuzey Afrika'da öncü bir rol oynaması gerektiği konusunda kararlı.
- İki dış politika ilkesi – 'stratejik derinlik' ve 'komşu ülkelerle hiçbir sorun yaşamama' – Türkiye Dış İşleri Bakanı Ahmet Davutoğlu tarafından ifade edilmiştir. Türk iş dünyası için ticari olanaklar yaratma, bu diplomatik etkinliğin ve Türkiye'nin 'yumuşak güç' olmasının merkezini oluşturmaktadır.
- Arap Baharı'ndan önce Türkiye, Suudi Arabistan ile bağlarından fedakarlık etmeksizin İran ve Suriye ile ilişkileri geliştirmekte başarılı oldu. O zamandan beri Suriye ve İran konusunda Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Suudi Arabistan ile daha yakınlaştı. Gaza'da 2008 yılındaki çatışmalardan bu yana İsrail'e yönelik güçlü ve dirençli tutum, Gaza ve Ürdün dışında Arap ülkelerin sokaklarında Erdoğan'ın popülerliğini son derece arttırdı.
- Üç iç mesele Türkiye'nin bu çok kültürlü bölgede model olarak hareket etmesini engellemektedir: Kürt sorunu, devletin kısmi laik sistemi ve kırılgan bir demokrasi.
- Türkiye'nin lider olmadaki girişimlerine bölgede rol oynayan diğer ülkeler direneceklerine rağmen, uzun vadede ülkenin etkisi, değişken koalisyon yapıları, dikkatli halk diplomasisi, titiz arabulucuk girişimleri ve bundan öte yurt içinde politik, ekonomik ve sosyal liberalleşme aracılığıyla en üst noktaya getirilebilir.

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