

The New Turn in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities

by Meliha Benli Altunışık

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ABSTRACT

Turkey's Middle East policy has shifted recently in response to global and regional structural transformations as well as changes on the domestic political scene. The shifts in the US engagement with the region as well as Russia's growing role have forced Turkey to perform a difficult balancing act between the two. The AKP government, albeit mistrusting both parties and aware of the sharp divergence of interests with them on some issues, has tried to strike a balance in Syria as well as in Libya. Furthermore, Turkey has engaged in an intense competition with the Saudi Arabia-UAE axis throughout the region. As a result, Turkey's new Middle East policy is characterised by heightened threat perceptions, zero-sum competition with other regional powers, the increasing resort to the use of military force, risky behaviours and brinkmanship, and a preference for unilateral action.

Turkey's foreign policy | Middle East | Iran | Saudi Arabia | UAE

keywords

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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by Meliha Benli Altunışık*

Introduction

Turkey has conducted four military operations in Syria in the last four years and two in northern Iraq since May 2019, signed a maritime delimitation and military cooperation agreement with the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, engaged in intense competition with both the Iran-led axis and the Saudi–United Arab Emirates (UAE) bloc and engaged in a balancing game between its traditional US ally and Russia in Syria. All of this points to a significant shift in Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East.

While in the first decade of the 2000s Turkey focused on opportunities in the region rather than threats and engaged the Middle East through the use of soft power, economic interdependence, third party roles and soft balancing, in the post-2011 era Turkey began identifying more threats, and consequently demonstrated a greater propensity to use military means to deal with them, becoming part of the regional polarisation, both material and ideational.

The analysis will address the changing nature of Turkey's engagement in the Middle East since the Arab uprisings and especially after 2016, within an evolving geostrategic and domestic context. It focuses on the viewpoints of the political elite in Turkey about the changing security environment in the region, their perceptions of threats and opportunities, and how they have responded to them. Finally, there is a discussion on how to account for Turkey's new foreign policy in the Middle East.

The 2010–2011 Arab uprisings have been a major turning point for the whole region. In geostrategic terms, Turkey finds itself in a region rife with civil wars, intensification of violence as well as military interventions by regional and international actors, multi-layered and complex conflicts where states and non-

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state actors engage in a myriad of shifting alliances. Furthermore, this coincides with a period where Turkey's traditional alliances with the US and the EU have weakened. On the other hand, domestically, the Middle East policy pursued by the governing Justice and Development party (AKP) has been haunted by the collapse of the Kurdish peace process (2014–2015) and the increased concerns over regime security especially after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Against this strategic backdrop, the analysis argues that the frequent use of military power, risk-taking and an inclination for "standing alone"¹ – the constitutive elements of Turkey's "new foreign policy" – have become the preferred means for protecting Turkey's interests in the Middle East, redefining Turkey's role vis-à-vis partners and adversaries alike while maintaining regime security and alliances domestically. Thus, the AKP's new foreign policy doctrine is a product of shifts occurring both in Turkey's geostrategic neighbourhood and parallel changes at the domestic level. Yet it also reflects the way the AKP political elite has read and understood this new environment, which in turn has reflected its ideological inclinations as well as its transformation.

1. Turkey's perceptions of its evolving neighbourhood

The Arab uprisings initially increased hopes in Ankara for the possibilities of extending Turkey's influence in the region. After all, Turkey, and particularly then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, had been popular in the "Arab Street" for some time² and the AKP itself had links and affinity with the Muslim Brotherhood movements that were well organised in the opposition in many post-Arab uprising countries. Therefore, it was hoped that expansion of participation and more democratic governance in the Arab world would mean the coming to power of governments that would establish closer ties with Turkey. The government was quick to support the uprisings in general and then the transition in Tunisia and Egypt through economic aid, transfer of expertise and political support. After the election of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammed Morsi as the president of Egypt, Turkey began to talk about establishing a "strategic partnership" with that country,³ something that had never been possible before and if realised could have changed the balance of power in the region in important ways. Thus, Turkey's expectations about its future active role in a transforming region were quite high.

¹ Soner Cagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire. Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2019, p. xvii.

² Several opinion polls conducted during that period showed this popularity. See, for instance, Turkish think tank TESEV's opinion polls conducted in the Middle East: Mensur Akgün and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2013*, Istanbul, TESEV, January 2014, <https://www.tesev.org.tr/?p=14492>.

³ Anthony Shadid, "Turkey Predicts Alliance with Egypt as Regional Anchors", in *The New York Times*, 18 September 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/world/middleeast/turkey-predicts-partnership-with-egypt-as-regional-anchors.html>.

It soon became clear however that rather than leading to a transformation towards more democratic and participatory governance, the uprisings, with the exception of Tunisia, would lead to either re-imposition of authoritarian rule or worse still to civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, while triggering external interventions and intensifying competition among regional powers. These post-uprising developments exposed Turkey's limitations in its quest for regional leadership and its ability to influence events to its liking. Especially after the 2013 toppling of President Morsi in Egypt and the rapid evolution of the Syrian uprising into a prolonged civil war involving regional and extra-regional powers, Turkish political elites started to perceive developments in the Middle East as largely presenting new threats to Turkey's national security and regional aspirations. Turkey also suffered from instability along its borders with Syria and Iraq, including large-scale terrorist attacks and massive refugee flows. In the process, Turkey became directly involved, including militarily, in ongoing civil wars in Syria and Libya.

As a result, Turkey's new Middle East policy began to show the following characteristics: (i) increased threat perceptions and a securitisation of issues, elevated to national security threats; (ii) embedding in the geopolitical polarisation of the region and engagement in zero-sum competition with other regional powers; (iii) increased use of military power, engagement in risky behaviour and brinkmanship; and (iv) a preference for unilateral actions, reluctance to rely on traditional alliances, balancing policy between major powers while seeking autonomy.

1.1 Increasing threat perceptions and securitisation

Developments in Syria, which shares with Turkey a border more than 800 km in length, were considered of paramount interest. In the early years of the Syrian crisis, Turkey's main objective was the toppling of the Bashar al-Assad regime and thus Ankara engaged to organise and support an opposition force, politically and militarily. However, especially after 2016, Turkey's strategic priorities in Syria changed. The declaration of a "federal democratic system" called Rojava by the Syrian Kurdish group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its allies in northern Syria in March 2016⁴ led to a shift in Turkish policy. Turkey was already concerned about the consolidation of the PYD's control over the Kurdish population and the elimination of its rival Kurdish groups in Syria as early as 2012. AKP officials were publicly complaining about the PYD and its ties with the outlawed Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) of Turkey, threatening to use force if necessary. At that time the government's aim was mainly to convince its NATO allies, particularly the US, to support Turkey's idea of creating a buffer zone along the border.⁵

⁴ "Syria Conflict: Kurds Declare a Federal System", in *BBC News*, 17 March 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35830375>.

⁵ Özlem Demirtas-Bagdonas, "Reading Turkey's Foreign Policy on Syria: The AKP's Construction of a Great Power Identity and the Politics of Grandeur", in *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2014), p. 142.

What made matters more complicated for Turkey was that the PYD and its armed group, the People's Protection Units (YPG), had become the main US and European ally in the war against the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), fighting on the ground as part of US President Barack Obama's "surrogate war doctrine".⁶ As a result of this cooperation, the PYD/YPG had been able to expand its control beyond the three Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria bordering Turkey, namely Afrin and Kobane in the Aleppo province and Jazira in the Hassakeh province, all of which the PYD/YPG had already declared "autonomous administrations". Yet the newly declared "Rojava region" announced in March 2016 extended even further, including also those newly acquired, mainly Arab and Turkmen areas that the YPG had captured from ISIS.

Erdoğan's government, perceiving these developments as a direct threat to Turkey's national security, made thwarting the PYD's aspirations in northern Syria the number one priority of its Syria policy.⁷ Turkey was also disturbed by the independence referendum held by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq in September 2017. These developments, which seemed to indicate increased movement on the Kurdish quest for political autonomy/independence, took place against the backdrop of the breakdown in Turkey-PKK peace talks in 2015 and the consequent re-securitisation of the Kurdish issue domestically in Turkey. Since then, and similar to the 1990s, Turkey's policy in its immediate neighbourhood has been primarily driven by the Kurdish issue.

1.2 Zero-sum regional competition

Before the Arab uprisings, the AKP government was careful to cultivate relationships with all regional actors and especially reluctant to be part of the main rivalry in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Assertive strategies of all regional powers after the Arab uprisings, however, led to intense competition among them for power and influence and this time Turkey also became a party to this regional polarisation. Turkey's sponsorship of Muslim Brotherhood movements in the region and its quest for a regional hegemonic role led to a deterioration of relations with the Saudi-led axis,⁸ which includes mainly the UAE and Egypt. The competition between the Saudi-Emirati axis and Turkey has been playing out in different parts of the region but particularly in the civil wars in Libya and Syria, with regard to Turkey-Qatari cooperation in the Gulf and polarisation in the domestic politics in Tunisia. The two sides also engaged in a competition to increase their presence in the Horn of Africa, through a policy of economic aid and

⁶ Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War: the Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (January 2016), p. 103-107, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/19627>.

⁷ Ayşegül Sever, "Regional Power Role and Intervention: The Turkish Case Over Syria in the 2000s", in *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (June 2020), p. 143-164.

⁸ Nuri Yeşiltaş, "Whither Inter-Sunni Relations in the Middle East? Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council", in *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (March 2018), p. 19-35.

political support in return for basing rights.⁹

While Turkey's competition with the Saudi-Emirati axis has expanded to the whole region, its struggle with Iran, the leader of another pole, has been limited to Syria and to some extent Iraq. In Syria, Ankara and Tehran respectively backed the opposition and the regime. Yet, they did not let competition in Syria result in a total breakdown of existing ties. However, in the post-2016 period, new areas of contention emerged. Iran became uncomfortable with Turkey's military operations in Syria, whereas Turkey was disturbed by the increasing activism of Iran and its militias in support of the regime in areas close to Turkey. Nevertheless, despite these problems, the two countries became part of the process initiated by Russia in December 2016, the Astana process, and the related mechanism of leadership summits, the Sochi process, that aimed to coordinate relations between the three powers in Syria. In Iraq as well, despite the existence of divergent interests and competition for influence, the two countries managed to avoid direct and open confrontation. Turkey considered the Trump administration's May 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or Iran nuclear deal, as an "unfortunate step" and continued its dialogue with Iran even though the two countries came face-to-face militarily on the ground in Idlib in Syria in 2020. Ultimately, Turkey's relations with Iran continued along the old path of competition and cooperation, and thus did not turn into a zero-sum game as was the case regarding Turkey's relations with the Saudi-Emirati axis. However, parallel to the developments on the ground in Syria, tensions with Iran recently mounted again around Idlib in 2020.

Overall therefore, Turkey has engaged in competition with two power blocs in the region. The only country with which Turkey developed closer ties during this period has been Qatar. The two countries supported Muslim Brotherhood movements across the region following the Arab uprisings. Turkey's military base in Qatar, established in 2015 more as a highly symbolic gesture than anything else, expanded considerably after the so-called Qatar crisis of 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf States placed Qatar under a political and commercial embargo due to its support for Muslim Brotherhood parties and relations with Iran. This crisis led to an overall improvement in military relations between Qatar and Turkey, including "official visits, expanding defense industry bonds, and joint training and military exercises".¹⁰ Intensifying relations between Turkey and Qatar have in return contributed to increased threat perceptions in Saudi Arabia and the UAE with regard to Turkish regional policies. Thus, Turkey and other regional powers have been locked into a security dilemma during this period.

⁹ Zach Vertin, "Turkey and the New Scramble for Africa: Ottoman Designs or Unfounded Fears?", in *Brookings Reports*, 19 May 2019, <https://brook.gs/2HzNSSc>.

¹⁰ Murat Yeşiltaş (ed.), *SETA Security Radar. Turkey's Geopolitical Landscape 2020*, Ankara, SETA, 2020, p. 26, <https://www.setav.org/en/?p=12667>.

1.3 Increasing use of military power

Up until 2011 Turkey prioritised soft power and economic and political engagements in the region. However, more recently and especially since 2016 Ankara has increasingly begun to use military power to pursue its objectives. This has particularly been the case in Syria, where the Turkish military launched several military operations as Ankara started to perceive direct threats to its national security. Developing Turkish-Russian relations allowed Turkey to launch its first military operation, Operation Euphrates Shield, in August 2016, with the aim "to push back Kurdish and ISIS forces from the border" and thus "form a wedge between Syria's Kurds to prevent any territorial connection between the cantons of Afrin and Kobane, thus ensuring the territorial continuity of Rojava".¹¹

This was followed by another military operation, the January 2018 Operation Olive Branch, this time against Afrin, which the government claimed had become a source of more than 700 attacks against Turkey.¹² Finally, in October 2019 after negotiations with Washington Turkey launched another military operation, Operation Peace Spring, in north-eastern Syria. All these military operations aimed to pre-empt the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria. While Turkey's military operations were able to prevent a PYD-controlled contiguous area across its border, they could not achieve the full extent of Turkey's planned buffer zone. Indeed, it became clear that "neither the U.S. nor Russia seem to be willing and capable of answering Turkey's demands for a full withdrawal of the YPG".¹³

In parallel, also in October 2019, the government started a military operation in northern Iraq in pursuit of the PKK, where airstrikes targeted areas in the Hakurk region. This was made possible when Ankara and Erbil started a rapprochement after a period of cooling of relations due to the KRG independence referendum in September 2017.¹⁴ In mid-June 2020, Turkey also launched an extensive air and ground military campaign, the Claw Eagle and the Claw Tiger operations, in northern Iraq, particularly in the Qandil Mountains, the Sinjar District and Makhmur, against the PKK.

Turkey has recently become involved in the civil war in Libya. As part of its competition with the Saudi-Emirati axis, Turkey was already supporting the UN-recognised GNA against forces aligned with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's so-called Libyan National Army, which is backed by the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Russia

¹¹ Ayşegül Sever, "Regional Power Role and Intervention...", cit., p. 157, 156.

¹² Ibid., p. 157.

¹³ Murat Yeşiltaş (ed.), *SETA Security Radar. Turkey's Geopolitical Landscape 2020*, cit., p. 15.

¹⁴ The referendum led to the cooling of relations between Turkey and the KRG for about two years, although recently there has been a thaw which led to a revitalisation of economic relations and possibly cooperation against the PKK. Ali Mohamed, "Ties with Turkey Important, Strategic: Iraq's KRG", in *Anadolu Agency*, 29 April 2019, <http://v.aa.com.tr/1465481>.

and France. But Turkey's interest in the Libyan civil war increased in parallel to the emergence of the Eastern Mediterranean as an important focus for Turkey's foreign and security policy, where the interlocking of energy politics and maritime sovereignty rights with old problems like the Cyprus issue have combined to make this area a new geopolitical hotspot. Over the last few years, Ankara was disturbed by energy and security developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is perceived as challenging Turkey's and Turkish Cypriots' rights, as well as by efforts to contain Turkey particularly by Israel, Greek Cypriots, Greece and Egypt.¹⁵ Deciding to adopt a proactive policy against these developments, rather than a reactive one as it had pursued before, the AKP government signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean between Turkey and the GNA government led by Fayeze al-Sarraj in Tripoli. This was followed by a security agreement that made "possible [the] deployment of Turkish Army personnel to Libya".¹⁶ Turkey's military support has shifted the balance of power in Libya and helped the GNA government push back the advances of General Haftar's forces. In the meantime, Turkey began exploring for natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean with its newly acquired vessels, including in contested waters off the coast of Cyprus with the support of its navy, which has increased the possibility of military escalation in the region. Furthermore, due to its policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and its participation in the Libyan conflict, Turkey has also come in opposition with the US and the EU – especially France – as well as Russia. The whole saga thus aptly demonstrates many elements of Turkey's new foreign policy in the Middle East: readily opting for military solutions, engagement in risky behaviour as well as unilateralism.

Another example of risky behaviour and brinkmanship occurred more recently, in early 2020, in Syria's Idlib, where a de-escalation zone had been created as a result of a 17 September 2018 agreement between Russia and Turkey in Sochi which established twelve Turkish observation outposts in the area. For Turkey, Idlib is important for two main reasons. First, as part of its aspirations to be a regional power and more recently due to its threat perceptions vis-vis Syria and the Syrian Kurds, the AKP government wants to have a say on Syria's future when the time comes for a political solution and perceives itself as the only power supporting the Syrian opposition. By late 2019, Idlib had become the last safe haven in Syria for the myriad of opposition forces battling the Assad regime and its allies, many of which had been relocated to the Idlib zone from other parts of Syria following the re-capturing of most of Syrian territory by Damascus. The AKP government wanted Idlib to remain as such until the time comes for a political solution to the Syrian crisis. Secondly, Ankara wanted to prevent another wave of refugees that would cross the border if the attacks of the Syrian regime continued. Such developments would put the government in a difficult position due to mounting domestic pressure to limit new arrivals and ensure the return of at least some of

¹⁵ Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean Quagmire", in *MEI Policy Analysis*, 18 February 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/node/80885>.

¹⁶ Murat Yeşiltaş (ed.), *SETA Security Radar. Turkey's Geopolitical Landscape 2020*, cit., p. 10.

the 3.5 million Syrian refugees presently in Turkey. These objectives put a wedge between Turkey and its Astana partners, Russia and Iran, and exposed how Turkey's understanding of the Sochi agreements differed from those of the key external backers of the Assad regime in Syria. While Turkey perceived the agreement as a status quo until a political solution to the Syrian crisis is reached, Russia saw it as an interim solution until the Assad regime eventually consolidates its control over the province.

After re-establishing control over much of Syria, the Assad regime with the help of its Russian and Iranian allies began to advance in the north-west in the second half of 2019. The developing situation in Idlib led to a dramatic escalation when on 27 February 2020 airstrikes killed 33 Turkish soldiers. In response, Turkey immediately launched a military incursion in Idlib, Operation Spring Shield. This offensive ended with a ceasefire agreement signed in Moscow between Turkey and Russia in a set of deals called "additional protocols" to the Sochi agreement on 5 March 2020. Central to the additional protocols is the redefinition of the battle lines per its current standing and the creation of a 6 km buffer zone on either side of the much-contested M4 highway, which would be jointly patrolled by Turkish and Russian forces. The agreement put a temporary end to escalation.

Parallel to this military activism, Turkey's investment in its defence sector has also increased significantly in recent years. The Turkish defence industry, in terms of both research & development and production, has been supported by the government. This was presented by the AKP political elite as part of their efforts to achieve autonomy.¹⁷ Further, according to the Presidency of Defence Industries, which came directly under the President's office in the new presidential system, Turkey has started to export about one-third of its production.¹⁸

¹⁷ Turkish Presidency, *Our Goal Is to Entirely End Our Foreign Dependency in Defense Industry by 2023*, 29 September 2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/109882/-our-goal-is-to-entirely-end-our-foreign-dependency-in-defense-industry-by-2023->.

¹⁸ "Defense Industry Focuses on Quality and Quantity to Step-up Turkey's Exports", in *Defence Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 70 (September 2016), <https://www.defenceturkey.com/en/content/defense-industry-focuses-on-quality-and-quantity-to-step-up-turkey-s-exports-2424>. According to SIPRI, between 2009–13 and 2014–18 Turkish arms exports increased by 170 per cent making Turkey the 14th largest arms exporter in the world. Between 2014 and 2018, the UAE (30 per cent), Turkmenistan (23 per cent) and Saudi Arabia (10 per cent) constituted Turkey's first three clients. Pieter D. Wezeman et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018", in *SIPRI Fact Sheets*, March 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/node/4766>. It is reported that after the Qatar crisis in 2017 both the UAE and Saudi Arabia cancelled some contracts. Yet, it is still interesting to note that in the first 9 months of 2019, the UAE still appeared on the list, this time as the 5th exporter behind the United States, Germany, Oman and Qatar. The numbers for 2019 include defence and aerospace exports. "Turkey's Defense, Aerospace Exports See 37.7% Rise in 9 Months", in *Daily Sabah*, 8 October 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/defense/2019/10/08/turkeys-defense-aerospace-exports-see-377-rise-in-9-months>; "Savunma Sanayi İhracat rekoru kırdı" [The Defence Industry Broke the Export Record], in *Sözcü*, 5 October 2019, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/ekonomi/savunma-sanayi-ihracati-rekor-kirdi-5371940>. Between 2015 and 2019, Turkey's first three clients were Turkmenistan (25 per cent), Oman (12 per cent) and Pakistan (12 per cent). See Pieter D. Wezeman et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019", in *SIPRI Fact Sheets*, March 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/node/5075>.

1.4 Turkey's newfound unilateralism: The search for autonomy and balancing efforts with major powers

Turkey's new Middle East policy has developed in the context of an increasingly problematic relationship with its traditional allies. Turkey–EU relations had already been at a standstill for some time and were taking place mostly within the context of the refugee deal of 2016 and continuing economic ties. The EU continued to criticise Turkey for slipping towards authoritarianism, whereas the AKP government increasingly chose to ignore the EU and focused on its relations with individual EU states that fluctuated based on the realpolitik considerations of the time. More significantly for Turkey's Middle East policy, Ankara's policies have also become increasingly divergent with Washington's. Turkey failed to convince the US to cut its support for and cooperation with the PYD,¹⁹ and thus faced the reality of a US-supported Kurdish entity with links to the PKK along its southern border. The AKP political elite was already upset by what they saw as US indifference to Turkey's fight against the Gülenist network, which they accused of staging the coup attempt in July 2016. From their perspective, the US was slow to come out in support of the Turkish government and failed to extradite Fethullah Gülen, a cleric with extensive ties in Turkey's military, judiciary and bureaucracy and who resides in Pennsylvania.²⁰ This contributed further to the lack of trust on the part of the AKP political elite vis-à-vis the US.

Yet, the AKP government was aware of the necessity to continue cooperation with the US as far as (and when) possible. Thus, Turkey hoped that by more actively joining the US-led coalition against ISIS and by allowing the US's use of Turkey's Incirlik airbase, it could not only deal with the increasing ISIS threat on its border and in Turkey but also increase its room for manoeuvre in Syria. Similarly, AKP circles continued to refer to a special rapport between US President Donald Trump and President Erdoğan, which they hoped could help deal with some of the problems they were facing, particularly in Syria.²¹

In the meantime, after 2016 the AKP political elite moved to develop closer relations with Russia. This was seen as crucial after Russia's direct military intervention in the Syrian conflict in 2015, which for the first time gave the upper hand in the civil war to the regime. Immediately after the Russian military intervention in Syria, however, relations between Moscow and Ankara deteriorated significantly. Russian bombing soon began to also target Turkey-supported Syrian opposition close to border areas, which eventually led to the downing of a Russian bomber jet by a

¹⁹ "USA has been reluctant to accept any connection between the YPG/PYD and PKK and has regarded the YPG as a reliable partner against ISIS". Ayşegül Sever, "Regional Power Role and Intervention...", cit., p. 156.

²⁰ Kemal İnat and Mustafa Caner, "Türk-Amerikan İlişkilerinde 'Eksen' Sorunu" [The 'Axis' Issue in Turkish-American Relations], in Kemal İnat, Ali Aslan and Burhanettin Duran (eds), *AK Parti'nin 15 Yılı: Dış Politika* [15 Years of the AK Party: Foreign Policy], Ankara, SETA, 2017, p. 109-134.

²¹ Hakan Copur, "Ups, Downs in Turkish-American Relations in 2019", in *Anadolu Agency*, 31 December 2019, <http://v.aa.com.tr/1688926>.

Turkish F-16 on 24 November 2015. As a result, Turkey–Russia relations hit rock bottom. In addition to the cutting of economic and tourist ties, Moscow started a policy of engaging with Kurdish groups in Syria as well as in Turkey, which further contributed to Turkey's threat perception.²²

Aware of Russia's crucial role in Syria and eager to balance against the US, the AKP political elite responded to the emerging geostrategic environment by trying to develop better relations with Moscow despite all odds. The downing of the Russian jet was blamed on the Gülenists who were accused of trying to create a rift between Turkey and Russia, a claim which seemed to convince Moscow. Also, for Russia, this provided an opportunity to drive a wedge between Turkey and its NATO allies, mainly the US, as well as to balance its alliance with Iran in Syria. It also provided Turkey with an opportunity to use Russia "as a balancer to realize Turkey's interests in Syria".²³ The result was the creation of the Astana process between Russia, Turkey and Iran as well as the Sochi leaders' summit, where these countries aimed to coordinate their policies in Syria and ultimately to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis. The process was strengthened by frequent meetings and phone calls at the leadership level between Turkey and Russia. Yet, ultimately the AKP political elite has always been aware of the limitations of this partnership as the relations between the two countries continued to be characterised by divergent interests and underlying mutual mistrust.²⁴

Thus, particularly in the attempt to achieve its objectives in Syria, Turkey has become part of a difficult balancing game between two major powers, namely the US and Russia. This allowed Turkey to engage in military operations in northern Syria to establish a "safe zone", yet at the same time has put Turkey in the dangerous position of being used by both parties in their struggle against each other. Especially with the escalation of competition between the US and Russia in the Mediterranean, Turkey's policy of balancing becomes even more difficult.

2. Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine

Turkey's new Middle East policy was accompanied by a doctrinal change. The doctrine behind the earlier policy was provided by Ahmet Davutoğlu, who had served in AKP governments in different capacities, initially as the chief foreign policy advisor to the prime minister from 2002 to 2009, then as foreign minister from 2009 to 2014, and finally as prime minister from 2014 to 2016. Yet after a group of anonymous party supporters published a harsh criticism of Davutoğlu and his policies online under the title "The Pelican File",²⁵ Davutoğlu resigned in May 2016.

²² İnan Rüma and Mitat Çelikkpala, "Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater", in *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 16, No. 62 (2019), p. 78, <https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.588930>.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁴ Murat Yeşiltaş (ed.), *SETA Security Radar. Turkey's Geopolitical Landscape 2020*, cit., p. 16.

²⁵ Mustafa Akyol, "How Mysterious New Turkish Blog Exposed Erdoğan-Davutoğlu Rift", in *Al-*

The removal of Davutoğlu opened the way for those around Erdoğan to blame the foreign policy failures on him and to reset Turkey's foreign policy doctrine, now in the context of changing global and regional realities as well as rising populist nationalism at home. This new doctrine not only became the reason for shifts in Turkey's Middle East policy but also its justification.

Based on the writings of those political figures who work in the President's office as well as academics close to the AKP, the new doctrine starts with the argument that a new, multipolar global order is emerging and this requires Turkey not only to redefine its place in it but also to act independently. The AKP elite perceives the transformations in the global and regional structure as providing Turkey with both opportunities and constraints. They believe that in a context where the old world order is disappearing and a new one is in the making, Turkey cannot just rely on traditional alliances to pursue its national interest. As Ibrahim Kalın, one of Erdoğan's chief advisors and government spokesperson, states, "The world is bigger than the US and Europe. Thus, trying to only remain in the Europe-centred global order is a concept we should avoid".²⁶ After all, Turkey's alliance with NATO did not provide Ankara with the Patriot missiles it requested, nor did it convince the US or France not to cooperate with the PYD/YPG in Syria.²⁷ These arguments meant that Turkey should not try to harmonise its policies in the Middle East with the US or the EU, as it attempted to do in the early 2000s, with the notable exception of Ankara refusing to back the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Similarly, Burhaneddin Duran, an academic who heads the pro-government think tank SETA and sits on the Security and Foreign Policy Council of the Presidency, has argued that although Turkey has recently aligned itself with Russia on many issues, this does not prevent Turkey from criticising Russia on Syria, or Idlib specifically.²⁸ It is interesting to note here that although the AKP government officially did not blame Russia for military strikes against Turkish soldiers in Idlib, opinion makers close to the government have not been shy in criticising Russian policy in Syria in general and Idlib in particular. Despite close cooperation with Russia on some issues and Moscow's and Ankara's success in managing their differences and thus compartmentalising their Syria-related competition, mutual distrust remains and, in a way that is similar to Turkey-US relations, crises frequently erupt (although each time they are somehow resolved). Thus, balancing between the United States and Russia has become one of the most important aspects of Turkey's Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean policy. This reality has become a constant theme in the writings of those close to the AKP government. More specifically, they argue that

Monitor, 3 May 2016, <http://almon.co/2nhi>.

²⁶ Zeynep Rakipoğlu, "Cumhurbaşkanlığı Sözcüsü Kalın: Dünya, Avrupa'dan ve ABD'den daha büyüktür" [Presidential Spokesperson Kalın: The World Is Bigger than Europe and the USA], in *Anadolu Agency*, 3 March 2019, <http://v.aa.com.tr/1407898>.

²⁷ Burhanettin Duran, "The Sole Axis of Turkey's Foreign Policy", in *Daily Sabah*, 11 February 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/duran-burhanettin/2020/02/11/the-sole-axis-of-turkeys-foreign-policy>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

in this evolving global order, Turkey can cooperate with any of these global actors based on its interests, but none of these relations should be considered as fixed. Turkey, according to this view, cannot rely on international institutions, one bloc of states or even its traditional allies. Instead, there are shifting alliances.

In addition to the uncertain global environment, the AKP stresses that the regional context also presents new threats where more and more countries are now eager to use military means to resolve rivalries, which easily trigger new conflicts and exacerbate old ones.²⁹ In such an environment, Turkey should adopt robust strategies to deal with threats. Duran, for instance, has argued that those politicians who call for Turkey to return to its old soft power policies are in fact operating according to faulty understandings that date back to the pre-Arab uprising era, calling on Turkey to be "dependent and passive"³⁰ in its foreign policy decisions.

Thus, AKP political elites argue that only now, with the implementation of a new foreign policy doctrine, has Turkey become more autonomous and independent. To quote President Erdoğan: "Turkey is independent in its foreign policy and does not seek permission from others (to launch) operations for its own security".³¹ The title of the winter 2019 special issue of the foreign policy journal *Insight Turkey*, which is published by the pro-government think tank SETA, is in this sense quite telling: "Turkey's New Foreign Policy: A Quest for Autonomy".³²

The AKP political elite thus explains the shift in Turkey's policy in the Middle East as mainly a response to structural shifts, both regional and global. Middle East politics since the Arab uprisings has indeed significantly transformed, presenting important challenges to all actors. However, explanations based solely on such structural factors, while ignoring individual and collective agency, would be inadequate. These choices have been largely influenced by worldviews as well as domestic political considerations. As Michael Barnett wrote when analysing Israeli foreign policy, "a cultural basis exists for a foreign policy that is quintessentially realist".³³ The way the AKP political elite has responded to geopolitical shifts in the region has been highly influenced by how they have interpreted the opportunities and challenges these developments presented. These choices have been clear in three instances: supporting the Muslim Brotherhood movements everywhere,

²⁹ Burhaneddin Duran, "Why Is Turkish Foreign Policy Under Attack?", in *Daily Sabah*, 22 February 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/duran-burhanettin/2020/02/24/why-is-turkish-foreign-policy-under-attack>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Turkey Is Independent in Its Foreign Policy, President Erdoğan Says", in *Daily Sabah*, 5 December 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/12/05/turkey-is-independent-in-its-foreign-policy-president-erdogan-says>; Yıldız Aktaş et al., "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Bugün dış politikası bağımsız bir Türkiye var" [President Erdoğan: Today we have an independent foreign policy of Turkey], in *Anadolu Agency*, 4 December 2019, <http://v.aa.com.tr/1664159>.

³² *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Winter 2019), <https://www.insightturkey.com/issues/2019/21/4>.

³³ Michael Barnett, "The Israeli Identity and the Peace Process: Re/creating the Un/thinkable", in Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett (eds), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 64.

including places like Syria where they were particularly weak; continuing to have problematic relations with Egypt after the 2013 coup; and involving Turkey in the so-called Qatar crisis. When seen from this angle, Turkey's new Middle East policy reflects some degree of continuity in terms of the worldview of the AKP government, yet it also includes changes in how this is implemented in a shifting geopolitical context in Turkey's neighbourhood.

As to domestic factors, there have been clear shifts in AKP alliances and domestic politics. This is not the place to engage with debates as to whether there has been a change in the AKP itself,³⁴ or if the AKP's true colours and ambitions simply emerged once the party consolidated power vis-a-vis the traditional power centres, mainly the military and the bureaucracy.³⁵ Suffice it here to say that the AKP in the last decade has left its former alliances first with the liberals and then with the Kurdish political movement. After the failed military coup in 2016, it formed the so-called People's Alliance with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and changed the political system to a presidential one with extensive powers. These developments have not only made Turkey's more militaristic, securitised and zero-sum foreign policy possible, but also helped to consolidate the new nationalist alliance between the AKP and the MHP. Overall, the discourse of an isolated Turkey surrounded by enemies and unreliable traditional allies, mixed with the claim that there is an international campaign specifically targeting President Erdoğan, emerged as the main pillar of Turkey's new foreign policy. This narrative resembles that of the 1990s and rests at least in part on a resurrection of old fears and animosities dating back even further, and specifically the discourse that Turkey's "enemies" are seeking to revive the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which had mandated the partition of modern-day Turkey into different protectorates, including a never-established Kurdish state, in the wake of World War I. It is also in this context that President Erdoğan has recently framed Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean policy as the "reversal of the Sèvres".³⁶

3. The Iran-Saudi rivalry and Gulf security: A view from Turkey

In line with the shifts in Turkey's general Middle East policy, Turkey's relations with the Gulf have also been transformed in recent years. In the first decade of the 2000s, as part of its activism in the Middle East, the AKP government developed close economic, strategic and political relations with individual Gulf states, especially

³⁴ See, for instance, Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2014), p. 203-219.

³⁵ See, for instance, Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Nebahat Tanriverdi Yaşar, "Populism and Foreign Policy in Turkey under the AKP Rule", in *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2018), p. 198-216.

³⁶ "Erdoğan: Security MOU with GNA Will Enter Into Force Upon Approval of Turkish Parliament", in *Al Marsad*, 16 December 2019, <https://almarsad.co/en/2019/12/16/erdogan-security-mou-with-gna-will-enter-into-force-upon-approval-of-turkish-parliament>; "Başkan Erdoğan: Sevr'in ters yüz edilmesi var" [President Erdoğan: Sevres has to be inverted], in *Sabah*, 15 December 2019, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2019/12/15/baskan-erdogan-sevrin-tersyuz-edilmesi-var>.

Saudi Arabia, as well as with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole. After the Arab uprisings, divergences began to emerge between the positions of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, yet this did not initially lead to the deterioration of bilateral relations.³⁷ Erdoğan cut a trip to Africa short to attend King Abdullah's funeral in January 2015. Then, the AKP government extended its support to the Saudi intervention in Yemen a few days after the start of the operation. Erdoğan also seemed to openly take sides in the Saudi-Iran rivalry and criticised what he described as Iran's expanding role in the region. For instance, in March 2015 Erdoğan said, "Iran is trying to dominate the region. Could this be allowed? This has begun annoying us, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf countries. This is really not tolerable and Iran has to see this."³⁸ Especially in 2016, contacts between Turkey and Saudi Arabia intensified. In addition to mutual visits at the leadership level, the two countries established a Strategic Cooperation Council and emphasised cooperation and coordination on Syria, particularly against Iran and ISIS. In September, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef visited Turkey, his second visit in six months. In October 2016, the GCC designated the Gülen movement as a terrorist organisation. In November 2016, the Security Dialogue with the GCC convened in Riyadh and approved a 38-point statement advocating stronger economic and military ties and expressing support for the current Turkish regime, a shared commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq and a determination to join in the fight against terrorism.³⁹ This was followed by Erdoğan's Gulf tour in February 2017, when he visited Saudi Arabia as well as Qatar and Bahrain. During this visit, which was touted by the AKP government as yet another example of "intra-regional solidarity",⁴⁰ the two sides focused on developments in Syria and on further developing economic relations.

However, after the visit relations between Ankara and Riyadh began to deteriorate rapidly due to the Qatar crisis erupting in June 2017. Saudi Arabia and the UAE presented a 13-point list of demands to Qatar, one of which was closing the Turkish military base and halting joint military operations inside Qatar. Turkey's response to the crisis was to upgrade its ties with Qatar by expanding military and economic relations. Since then Saudi Arabia and the UAE have started to publicly criticise the AKP government's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and portray

³⁷ For Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia, see Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey's Relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia: From Hopes of Cooperation to the Reality of Conflict", in Gönül Tol and David Dumke (eds), *Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals. Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the New Middle East*, New York, The Middle East Institute, 2019, p. 17-39, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/aspiring-powers-regional-rivals-turkey-egypt-saudi-arabia-and-new-middle-east>.

³⁸ Humeyra Pamuk, "Turkey's Erdogan Says Can't Tolerate Iran Bid to Dominate Middle East", in *Reuters*, 26 March 2015, <http://reut.rs/1HMytJJ>.

³⁹ Hussein Ibish, "GCC-Turkish Relations: Gulf Arab Perspectives", in Steven A. Cook and Hussein Ibish, *Turkey and the GCC: Cooperation Amid Divergent Interests*, Washington, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), 28 February 2017, p. 7-8, <https://agsiw.org/cooperation-amid-diverging-interests>.

⁴⁰ Ibrahim Kalın, "Turkey, the Gulf and Regional Ownership", in *Daily Sabah*, 2 February 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ibrahim-kalin/2017/02/18/turkey-the-gulf-and-regional-ownership>.

Turkey as a destructive force in the region.⁴¹ The brutal killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul led to a further deterioration of relations as Turkey claimed that the murder was planned at the highest levels in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, in the current context the Gulf has also become part of the geostrategic competition between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other.

Within this context, the Trump administration's close relations with the Saudi-UAE axis was seen with concern in Ankara. The US proposal for a Middle East Strategic Alliance, the so-called Arab NATO, was perceived within this light. The AKP government also has been objecting to such alliances that aimed to target Iran, due to its complex relationship with this country that combines highly competitive but also cooperative elements. Recently both Iran and Russia have advanced their own proposals for regional security in the Gulf. Iran's Coalition for HOPE initiative, aiming to exclude all extra-regional powers and achieve normalisation between Iran and the Arab Gulf states through respect for Westphalian principles, aimed directly at ending the rivalry between Iran and the Saudi-led bloc and thus was a response to the US proposal. The Russian Security Concept for the Gulf, on the other hand, could build on this normalisation but aimed for a far-reaching regional security framework with the external actors playing the guarantor role. Interestingly, there were no official responses from the AKP government to these proposals. This is probably not because the government was not interested, but rather because Turkey was never to be found in these frameworks, which instead mainly focused on tackling the Saudi-Iran rivalry that is seen by the United States, Russia and Iran as one of the main sources of instability in the region. Yet, from Turkey's perspective all the conflicts and rivalries in the region have become interrelated and a "comprehensive approach" to regional security tackling only the Saudi-Iran rivalry not only would not bring stability to the region but would also not solve the problems Turkey perceives to be related to its national security or its own rivalry with the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis.

Conclusion

Since the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings, but especially after 2016, there have been important shifts in Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East, in terms of both discourse and practice. These shifts have occurred in the context of global, regional and domestic transformations that have reinforced each other. In some ways Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East has come full circle as the discourses and policies of the 1990s, focusing on threats, zero-sum mentality and mistrust, have returned. What is different is the ideology behind these policies. This largely explains different sets of policies pursued by the AKP government. Whereas Turkey's military operations in northern Syria or the Eastern Mediterranean

⁴¹ "Saudi Prince Says Turkey Part of 'Triangle of Evil': Egyptian Media", in *Reuters*, 7 March 2018, <https://reut.rs/2FnziuK>.

reflect some continuity with the 1990s, Turkey's developing relationships with its Arab partners, and particularly with Qatar and Muslim Brotherhood affiliates, as well as its policies vis-à-vis Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia or Israel reflect the new ideological bent. Another continuity is related to Turkey's relations to Iran. Although the nature of competition between the two countries has shifted mainly to Syria, the existence of mutual interests for cooperation in some issue areas continues to mean that both sides are still being successful in compartmentalising issues on which they are at loggerheads, thereby avoiding direct confrontation.

A new element in Turkey's Middle East policy is a constant game of balancing between the United States and Russia, which the AKP government uses to increase its room for manoeuvre. Finally, the EU has become less relevant for Turkey's regional policy during this period, whereas individual EU member states have begun to factor more in Ankara's policies vis-à-vis the Middle East. In that context, while Turkey's relations with France have deteriorated amid the latter's increasingly strategic partnership with the UAE, Ankara has found opportunities to work with Germany in the context of Syria and the refugee crisis as well as in Libya or with Italy in the case of Libya. Overall, Turkey has become a more assertive player in the Middle East and more sceptical about regional cooperation schemes.

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