TURKEY´S CHANGING MIDDLE EAST POLICY

Meliha Benli Altunışık[1]
Middle East Technical University, Ankara

Abstract:
This article aims to discuss recent developments in Turkey's Middle East policy. After a brief historical background of Turkey's relations with the region, it focuses on understanding the change in terms of both the level and nature of involvement in the region. Within that context, the article looks at systemic/structural as well as ideational and domestic politics explanations. Then the current policy is discussed through its three elements: improvement of relations with neighbors, characterized as "zero problems with neighbors policy"; eagerness to play third party roles in regional conflicts; attempts to increase economic interdependence with the region. Through the discussion of these cases the article attempts to discuss the possibilities and limitations of Turkey's new engagement.

Keywords: Turkey´s Middle East policy, improvement of relations, "zero problems with neighbors policy", regional conflicts, economic interdependence.

Resumen:
Este artículo tiene como objetivo considerar los desarrollos más recientes en la política de Oriente Medio de Turquía. Tras un breve repaso de los antecedentes históricos de las relaciones de Turquía con la región, se centra en la comprensión del cambio en términos tanto del nivel como de la naturaleza de la implicación en la región. En este contexto, el artículo recurre a explicaciones sistémico/estructurales así como a aquéllas centradas en políticas domésticas. Tras ello la política actual es discutida a través de sus tres elementos: mejora de las relaciones con los vecinos, caracterizada como "política de cero problemas con los vecinos"; deseo de jugar un papel de mediación en los conflictos regionales; intentos de aumentar la interdependencia económica de la región. Discutiendo tales casos, este artículo intenta determinar las posibilidades y limitaciones de la nueva política de implicación de Turquía.

Palabras clave: *Política de Oriente Medio de Turquía, mejora de las relaciones, "política de cero problemas con los vecinos", conflictos regionales, interdependencia económica.*

[1] Meliha Benli Altunışık is Professor in the Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.

1. Introduction

During the Cold War years the Middle East did not have much weight in Turkish foreign policy. In this period when Turkey was active in the region, the Middle East was considered as an extension of Turkey's relations with the West, as in the 1950s, or Turkish involvement in the Middle East was determined by its desire to further its economic relations with the region, as in the 1970s after the oil crisis or in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War. Yet even when it was involved, Turkey did not consider itself as part of the Middle East regional system. This perception was due to Turkey's Western historical orientation and the definition of its identity.

Since the late 1980s several external and internal developments required a rethink in Turkish foreign policy towards the region and eventually led to more active involvement, either reluctantly or enthusiastically. The Gulf Crisis of 1990-1991 occurred at a time when Turkey was uncertain about its place in the newly emerging post-Cold War international system. Thus, Ankara hoped to reiterate its strategic importance by supporting Washington's Iraq policy. Yet the developments in Iraq after the war posed further security challenges for Turkey as they were articulated with the rise of the Kurdish nationalist challenge to the state. The emergence of northern Iraq as an area out of the control of central government and the consolidation of Kurdish rule there under US protection was seen as a threat to Turkey's interests. Ankara was not only concerned by the possible spillover effects of these developments for Turkey, but also by the presence of the militant Kurdish organization, the PKK, which started to launch its attacks from northern Iraq. The Kurdish issue was also very much affected by the support given to the PKK, especially by Syria until 1998 and Iran sporadically in the 1990s. Thus, due to the implications of Middle Eastern developments on Turkey's own Kurdish issue, Turkey felt the need to be engaged in the Middle East. In fact in the mid-1990s Turkey revised its national security document and identified the Middle East as its main source of threats. Throughout the 1990s Turkey became heavily involved in northern Iraq by using different tools, including military means, and through its cooperation with the US. In the same decade Turkey's relations with Iran and Syria deteriorated mainly due to the Kurdish issue. Turkey also engaged in an alignment with Israel and signed two agreements for military cooperation mainly to balance the threats it perceived from its Middle Eastern neighbors. These policies marked a change in Turkey's involvement in the Middle East.[2]

In 2002, once the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - hereafter AKP) came to power, Turkey's involvement in the Middle East clearly started to go beyond the Kurdish issue and took a more opportunistic turn. The AKP called for more active Turkish involvement in this region and advocated a "zero problem with neighbors" policy. In this perspective, Turkey's soft power capabilities and economic opportunities were emphasized, rather than its military capabilities. Thus the AKP coming to power emphasized historical and cultural ties with the Middle East and increased Turkey's engagement with this region. This policy could be implemented due to the changes in the region. The region faced an acute crisis in the 2000s: the collapse of the Arab-Israeli Peace Process in 2000 and the deterioration of the Palestinian conflict; the US invasion of Iraq in 2003; Iran's rise to regional power; intra-Arab divisions; for some states, like Syria, the danger of collapse led to a sense of weakness in the region. The socio-economic problems in the Arab world as documented by the UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports and the persistence of

[2] For Turkey's policy towards the Middle East in the 1990s see, for instance, Robins, Philip: "The Foreign Policy of Turkey", in Hinnebusch, Raymond and Ehteshami, Anoushirvan (eds.) (2002): *Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, London, Lynne Reinner.

authoritarianism underlined the deepening legitimacy problems for the regimes. On the other hand, the main regional dynamic that emphasized Turkey's third party role has been the intensification of intra-Arab divisions and the emergence of a vacuum in regional politics. The fragmentation of the Arab world not only weakened the states' capacity to tackle the problems of the region, such as the Palestinian issue and the Iraqi crisis, but also led to other powers intervening in pursuit of their interests. The second vacuum in the region was left by the US. The failure once again of the Bush administration to create a Middle Eastern order became starkly clear after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The power vacuum, coupled with an ideological one, created by the decrease in US power and credibility in the region, was filled again by regional powers such as Iran and Turkey. Unlike Iran, however, Turkey, due to its position, was able to talk to all the parties in the region and emerged as a credible third party. The perception of Turkey as a fair interlocutor strengthened Ankara's position. Thus, the new strategic, political and socio-economic context created new opportunities and Turkey became more involved in the region and increased its appeal as well.

2. *"Zero Problems with Neighbors"*

As stated above Turkey had several problems with its immediate neighbors during the 1990s. An important aspect of Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East in recent years has been the improvement of its relations with its immediate neighbors. This policy was summed up by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in the phrase "zero problems with neighbors". The attempts to improve ties with neighbors predate the current AKP government, like in the case of Syria, but such attempts became fruitful only more recently due to the shifting regional landscape and the AKP's ability to use it to push Turkey's ties with the regional countries further.

2.1. Turkish-Syrian Relations

The most dramatic example of change has been the successful transformation of conflictive relations with Syria into very cooperative relations.[3] Syrian-Turkish relations were poor historically. For many years the common Ottoman heritage constituted an important obstacle to the development of closer relations. The Arab nationalist narrative which has been quite dominant in Syria portrayed the Ottomans as colonizers that were responsible for the backwardness of the Arab world in the modern era. In the case of Syria in particular the incorporation of Hatay (Alexandretta) to Turkey in 1939 was considered another manifestation of a colonial design to divide the "historical Syria". On the Turkish side the feelings swung between moving away from the Ottoman heritage to a sense of "betrayal" given the Arab Revolt. Although the recent historiography disputes these neat categories of suppression and betrayal in particular, Syrian-Turkish relations have been developed within this negative historical memory kept alive through schoolbooks and cultural representations.

During the Cold War the two countries aligned themselves with rival blocs. This fact further contributed to the problematic relationship. Thus, while Damascus perceived Turkey as a stooge of the United States, Ankara considered Syrian actions to be directed by the Soviet Union. In the late 1980s two additional problems were added to the already overcrowded list of grievances. After Turkey launched its extensive GAP program (Southeastern Anatolian

[3] Altunisik-Benli, Meliha and Tür, Özlem: "From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations", *Security Dialogue*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2006), pp. 229-248.

Project) to utilize the waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates by building an extensive irrigation network, Syria protested on the grounds that this would affect the amount and the quality of the water it received from these rivers. Thus a disagreement over water supplies from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers started. Fueled by the ideology of self-sufficiency, Damascus perceived the building of the GAP as "Turkish control of its waters" and turned it into a Pan-Arab issue by bringing it to the agenda of Arab League meetings in the 1990s. From Turkey's perspective the main issue was Syrian support for the PKK and the residence of its leader in Damascus. Turkey's security concerns with regard to Syria's policies further contributed to the crisis between the two countries. As a result, the climate of mutual suspicion and mistrust increased. Turkish-Syrian relations hit rock bottom when Turkey threatened Syria with the use of force in October 1998 if it did not cut its support to the PKK. The crisis was resolved with the signing of the Adana Agreement on October 20, 1998. Syria undertook a commitment to end its support to the PKK.

Since 1998 relations between the two countries have been transformed. Up to 2000, there was a period of trust building, particularly through security cooperation. During this period regular meetings were held by the Joint Security Committee comprised of military officials from both sides, and there was an increase in diplomatic visits at various levels. Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's attendance at Hafiz al-Asad's funeral ceremony in June 2000 symbolically enhanced the relations between the two countries. Then in 2004 Bashar al-Asad became the first Syrian President ever to visit Turkey. Relations between the two countries have taken off, especially in the last five years. A new phase characterized by deepening cooperation started as the two countries began to develop ties in all areas: economic, political, and cultural in addition to security.

In December 2004 a Free Trade Agreement was signed and was ratified on January 1, 2007 and the Turkish-Syrian Business Council was established to explore the possibilities of expanding economic relations between the two countries. As a result, the volume of trade reached two billion US dollars by 2008. Border trade also flourished, contributing to economic development and employment on both sides of the border. The elimination of visa requirements in 2009 is expected to further contribute to the expansion of trade as well as tourism.

In order to establish a long term strategic partnership and to expand and solidify their cooperation on a wide range of areas of mutual concern and interest the two sides decided to establish a higher institutional mechanism, the Syrian-Turkish High Level Strategic Cooperation Council. The First Ministerial Meeting of the Council was convened in Aleppo and Gaziantep on October 12-13, 2009. During the meeting the parties worked on almost 40 protocols and agreements. One of the protocols envisaged the expansion of the Free Trade Agreement to include trade in services. Among the new areas of cooperation energy was in particular emphasized. The most important project in this regard is the natural gas pipeline project, connecting an Arab pipeline with a Turkish pipeline, to be carried out in the next 18 months. There has been some progress even in one of the most problematic areas in bilateral relations: the water issue. The two countries seem to be working for the collaborative management of the Euphrates water resources. They also agreed in principle on a dam project on the Asi River, called the "Asi Friendship Dam".

These areas of cooperation were taken up in the first meeting of the Syrian-Turkish High Level Strategic Cooperation Council in Damascus, which was convened under the chairmanship of the Prime Ministers of the two countries. The two Prime Ministers also addressed the Syrian-Turkish Business Forum, which brought together around 350

businessmen, investors and company representatives from both countries with a view to enhancing economic and commercial relations, and promoting investments and joint projects in the two countries. The two sides expressed their common interest and determination to exert all efforts to preserve regional security and stability, and to find peaceful solutions to all questions in the region. At the conclusion of the meeting 50 agreements and cooperation protocols were signed in various fields. The two sides agreed to hold the Second Meeting of the Council in Turkey in 2010.

Despite the enormous pace of improvement, the future development of Syrian-Turkish relations will still have to face several challenges. The way these challenges are dealt with is critical for the sustainability of this relationship. Particularly two traditional issues of conflict between the two states, namely the Hatay and water issues, largely remain intact. In the course of the development and deepening of these relations, Syria assured Turkey that it wanted to resolve the border issue, but stressed that time would be needed to explain this to the Syrian people. In fact, the Hatay issue was dropped from the official lexicon as well as disappearing in the media. Yet Hatay continues to be shown as part of Syria on many Syrian maps. There have been also some positive developments in the water issue, making an effort to de-politicize this issue and tackle it more as a technical one. A joint protocol was signed in August 2001, calling for cooperation in training, study missions, technology exchange, and stating new projects. Nevertheless, the worsening of environmental conditions and the increasing drought in the region are putting pressure on these countries and straining cooperation. In short, although the language of water politics is changing, the problems are becoming more complicated as both Syria and Turkey are having problems with Iraq on this issue.

2.2. Turkish-Iraqi Relations

Historically Turkish-Iraqi relations have been more cooperative. During the reign of pro-Western monarchy in Iraq, right after independence, the two countries cooperated closely and institutionalized this cooperation under the Baghdad Pact, which was established in 1955. When the Arab nationalist regime that toppled the monarchy came to power it decided to pull out of the Pact, but relations between the two countries did not deteriorate. Ankara and Baghdad shared a common interest in containing Kurdish nationalism. Like Syria, Iraq was also critical of Turkey's GAP project, but the water issue did not come to the surface as Iraq was dependent on Turkey for its connection to the world during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). The Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, which was opened in 1977, was expanded by building a parallel pipeline in the 1980s and became Iraq's largest crude oil export line. Such an outlet was very significant for Iraq, which has an extremely narrow coastline in the Gulf. Furthermore, Turkish trade with Iraq boomed in the 1980s.

The developments in Iraq since the Gulf Crisis, however, have transformed Turkey's relations with this country. Iraq has become one of the most difficult cases for Turkey as the developments there had a direct bearing on Turkey's Kurdish problem. Thus Turkey's Iraq policy was a subject of intense debates in Turkish domestic politics.[4] Furthermore, after Turkey's decision not to support the US war effort in Iraq, Turkey for some time ceased to have any effective influence in that country. In this new context its relations with the Kurdish leaders in the north of Iraq deteriorated amid a "war of words." Despite these negative

[4] For the difficulties of Turkey's Iraq policy see Altunisik-Benli, Meliha: "Turkey's Iraq Policy: The War and Beyond", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 14, no.2 (2006), pp.183–196; Cetinsaya, Gokhan: "Turkey and the New Iraq", *Insight Turkey* (April-June 2006), pp. 105-116.

conditions Turkey has been able to change its policy towards Iraq, starting in 2008, and has begun to play increasingly constructive roles. Even before that, Turkey had brokered a meeting between Iraqi Sunni groups and the US ambassador in Iraq and thus made it possible for them to participate in the 2005 elections, a significant step for the effectiveness of the political process in Iraq.

Turkey has also been able to develop more cooperative relationships with all the communities in Iraq, including the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Turkey was able to come to a point of cooperation on PKK issues with the US and Iraq in 2008. The central Iraqi government was already more inclined to eliminate the PKK as a negative factor in Turkish-Iraqi relations. The Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri el-Maliki reiterated this position during his visit to Ankara in December 2008 and said the "PKK's actions are designed to create problems in Turkish-Iraqi relations"[5]. Nevertheless, there were limitations to what the central government could do as long as the KRG refused to cooperate. Thus it was quite significant that Turkey and the KRG were able to develop a working relationship on this issue. Faced with the reality of US withdrawal and the increasing power of the central government under Maliki, the KRG realized that it would no longer gain by using the PKK against Turkey. On the contrary, it needed Turkey as an outlet to the world. Thus, the KRG ended its hostile rhetoric against Turkey and started to limit the PKK's room for maneuver in its region.

Despite improvements in Turkish-Iraqi relations, they remain fragile. The political process in Iraq is wrought with instabilities. The country faces the challenges of the planned US withdrawal, formation of a government after the elections in March as well as the effects of regional struggles. These instabilities also threaten Turkish-Iraqi relations.

2.3. Turkish-Iranian Relations

Turkish-Iranian relations have been quite complex and characterized by geopolitical and ideological competition as well as a level of pragmatism that fosters cooperation. Balance of power considerations have been a significant element in bilateral relations. Thus any attempt by one of the countries to alter the balance to its own advantage disturbed the other. During the Pahlavi era Iran and Turkey generally enjoyed close relations. They were then two important pro-Western states in the region and shared an interest in containing the Soviet Union. Within the context of the Cold War they became regional allies as members of the Baghdad Pact, Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD). However, Ankara became suspicious when in the 1970s Tehran embarked on an ambitious militarization program and an assertive foreign policy fuelled by the oil boom and supported by the US Twin Pillars Policy.[6]

After the Iranian Revolution the relations became more complicated as ideological rivalry became an important part of the bilateral relationship. Although the revolutionary zeal that propagated the 'export of the revolution' lost some of its steam and Tehran largely turned towards pragmatism in its foreign policy, the ideological element never completely disappeared. Particularly in the 1990s relations deteriorated, given Turkey's accusations against Iran for supporting the PKK and Islamic radicalism in Turkey. Furthermore, the two countries also engaged in geopolitical competition over Central Asia and the Caucasus as well as in Iraq.

[5] *Hürriyet*, 19 December 2008.
[6] Calabrese, John: "Turkey and Iran: Limits of a Stable Relationship", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1998), p. 77.

In the 2000s two factors particularly affected Turkish-Iranian relations. First, the new strategic context that emerged in the wake of the 2003 Iraq War. It helped to create common threat perceptions and contributed to a rapprochement on security issues. Second, the general evolution of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East under the AKP government led to an improvement in relations with Iran as well. The AKP government's comprehensive policy on the Middle East included the desire to have "zero problem with neighbors" as well as an emphasis on diplomacy and economic interdependence. Thus, Turkey started to adopt a policy of engagement and dialogue with Iran. Efforts were also made to improve economic relations. As a result, by 2008 Turkey's exports to Iran reached two billion US dollars.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 once again changed the political and strategic context of Turkish-Iranian relations. The developments in Iraq after the invasion, particularly the increasing role and autonomy of Iraqi Kurds, had strong implications for both countries. In Turkey the PKK ended the unilateral ceasefire it had declared after the capture of its leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1998 and started its attacks in 2004. In the same year an Iranian branch of the PKK, the Party of Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), was created. In fact the Kurdish population located in northwest Iran became more restless, starting in early 2005[7]. In response to these developments Iran and Turkey intensified their cooperation against the PKK and PJAK. The first signs of the changing Iranian attitude became clear in July 2004 during the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Tehran. At the end of that visit the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Security Cooperation. One visible consequence of the new level of cooperation was the revitalization of the Turkey-Iran High Security Committee, which was established in 1988 but largely remained ineffective in the following years. The statement issued after the meeting declared that: "The increase in some terrorist movements in the region damages both countries, and the most influential way to battle this outlawed problem is the exchange of intelligence and security cooperation"[8]. To further explain the Iranian position the head of the Iranian delegation, the Iranian Deputy Interior Minister Abbas Mohtaj stressed that "the two countries fight against terror and cooperate with each other, and Iran looks at the PKK and the PJAK as a single terrorist organization under two different names. We want to increase cooperation with Turkey against the terrorist organizations"[9].

In the meantime, Turkey and Iran started to deepen their energy cooperation. There was already a natural gas pipeline from Tabriz to Ankara that had become operational in 2001. As a palpable result Iran has become Turkey's biggest supplier of natural gas after Russia, 20 percent of its gas imports come from Iran. Later, in May 2007 Turkey and Iran agreed in principle the construction of a dam and a power station and electricity trade. In July 2007 the two countries signed a deal to use Iran as a transit for Turkmen gas and also agreed to develop Iran's South Pars gas field to facilitate the transport of gas via Turkey to Europe as part of the Nabucco project[10]. In August 2007 the Turkish Energy Minister visited Iran and concluded a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the establishment of a joint company to carry up to 35 cubic meters of Iranian gas to Turkey and the construction of three thermal power plants by a Turkish company in Iran[11].

[7] For instance there were reports of clashes in Kurdish regions in Iran that started over protests by Kurds on the anniversary of the capture of Abdullah Ocalan. *Turkish Daily News*, 20 February 2006.
[8] *Hurriyet*, 17 April 2008 cited in Sadik, Giray: "Iran and Turkey Move Closer on Counter-Terrorism Cooperation", *Global Terrorism Analysis*, vol. 5, no. 16 (22 April 2008), at http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374118 .
[9] *Hurriyet*, 15 April 2008, cited in *Ibid*.
[10] *Today's Zaman*, 20 August 2007.
[11] *The Economist*, 23 August 2007.

Deepening energy cooperation reflects the general ambiguities in Turkish-Iranian relations. On the one hand there are clear economic and political benefits for Turkey for engaging in these projects. The cooperation in the energy field helps Turkey to meet its energy needs, to diversify its natural gas imports and to increase its role as a transit country to the EU. Politically, closer economic relations also fit Turkey's policy of developing its ties with its neighbors as well as supporting strategic cooperation with Iran. On the other hand, however, there are limitations to this policy. First, Turkey's increasing dependence on Iranian gas increases Iran's leverage over Turkey. This was acutely observed when Iran stopped gas supplies twice in 2008. Turkey aims to balance this relationship by increasing Turkish investments in Iran but so far this has not been carried out. Secondly, the deepening of Turkish-Iranian energy cooperation meets the US opposition and thus makes it difficult for Turkey to balance its regional and global policy.

In the meantime, Turkey has been concerned about the growing influence of Iran in Middle Eastern politics in recent years. Turkey opted to deal with this not through a strategy of isolating Iran or balancing it by becoming part of counter alliances. In fact, Turkey crafted itself a position that is above the dividing lines in the new "Middle East Cold War" and worked to bridge differences in regional politics. Turkey's policy of engaging Syria, its mediation in the Israeli-Syrian conflict, its role in political reconciliation in Lebanon, its efforts to bring the leaders of Syria and Saudi Arabia together, attempts to mend fences between Iraq and Syria, can all be considered within this context. More importantly, the transformation of Turkish Iraqi policy which led to an opening with all the parties in Iraq, including the Shiite ones, aimed to introduce a balance in the new Middle Eastern power configuration in general and in particular in Iraq.

However, the possibility of a nuclear Iran imposes limitations on Turkish-Iranian relations. Turkey is disturbed by possible Iranian nuclear capability because it could completely disturb the bilateral and regional balance of power. This would also be against the Turkish position of having a WMD-free Middle East zone. However, Turkey is also concerned by the escalation of the conflict between its Western allies and Iran. The lack of diplomatic solutions and a possible military operation against Iran is a minefield from Turkey's perspective. All the possible scenarios, such as chaos in Iran or Iranian retaliation, would have enormous economic, political and strategic repercussions for Turkey and the region. Therefore, although Turkey feels threatened by the possibility of a nuclear Iran and is concerned about the altering of the balance of power between the two countries, it is equally threatened by the imposition of economic sanctions and/or the use of military force against Iran. Without a doubt, Turkey is concerned about Security Council sanctions on Iran.

First of all, Turkey, as a neighbor of Iran with extensive energy and trade relations, will suffer immensely from sanctions. This situation is like déjà vu for Turkey as it went through a similar ordeal with the imposition of years of sanctions on Iraq after the Gulf Crisis in 1990.

Secondly, Turkey is skeptical about the utility of sanctions. Again the Iraqi case is an example that demonstrates that sanctions rarely work. Although there is the talk of "smart sanctions" that would not hurt ordinary people as much, this is very difficult to achieve.

Finally, Foreign Minister Davutoglu complained after the Nuclear Security Summit that as a temporary member of the Security Council they were not informed about the proposed content of the sanctions regime and he said that Turkey cannot be expected to approve a sanction package in advance unless the details of the package are revealed. Turkey is even

more concerned about any possible military action against Iran. Turkey fears that this could spread the same chaos that was witnessed in Iraq to a number of countries in the region. This could also upset the already fragile political situation in Iraq, with direct repercussions in Turkey.

In order to resolve the crisis over Iran's nuclear program Turkey has been calling for the continuation of diplomacy before resorting to other means. Within this context Turkey has been calling on Iran to enter full and transparent cooperation with the IAEA. At the same time, Ankara has many times offered to mediate in this matter. Recently Foreign Minister Davutoglu once again visited Iran to discuss possibilities, such as a "fuel-swap", with the Iranian authorities.

Thus although Turkish-Iranian relations have improved in recent years, they face serious challenges, mainly because of the nuclear crisis. As there is a growing convergence between the US and the EU on this issue, the divergence of Turkey's position with its allies will create problems in Turkey's relations with the EU and the US. Turkey's temporary membership in the Security Council further complicates the situation and forces Turkey to take a clear position. What is more important is that at times Turkey also seems to be not totally convinced that the Iranian nuclear program is in fact a military one. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's speeches and interviews in recent months clearly demonstrate this. This different approach constitutes the most important divergence between Turkey and its Western allies.

3. Turkey´s Third Party Roles in the Middle East

Eagerness to play third party roles is a relatively new aspect of Turkey's Middle East policy and contrasts with Turkey's long-held policy of not getting involved in regional conflicts. Again the changing geostrategic environment and increasing instability in the region began to have repercussions for Turkey and forced Ankara to become more involved in the management of conflicts. The protracted conflicts led to radicalization and a constant threat of war in the region. The continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict also allows some states to exploit the conflict to increase their power and influence in the region. For instance, the Palestinian conflict has allowed Iran to increase its power and influence beyond its immediate neighborhood and made it effectively a Mediterranean power. These developments upset the regional balance of power and thus are issues of concern for Turkey. In addition, the current AKP government has also been particularly eager to play third party roles in the region. The government believes that due to its historical ties with this region, Turkey cannot be indifferent to what happens there. The involvement in the resolution of such conflicts was seen as a way to ease Turkey's re-entry into the Middle East as well as to help building prestige for Turkey in the Middle East and in the West.

The examples of Turkey's third party roles are many. The involvement in the Israeli-Syrian situation as well as in the Palestinian issue will be discussed in detail below. Yet Turkey has also been involved in Lebanon. Turkey is participating in UNIFIL II, which was created after the Lebanon War in 2006. Together with Qatar, Turkey was also instrumental in brokering the Doha Agreement that ended the political stalemate in Lebanese politics. Similarly, as mentioned above, Turkey has been trying to facilitate the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue.

Turkey also tried to play constructive roles in Iraq. In 2003, Turkey initiated Iraq's Neighbors Forum, which later was expanded to include Iraq. The Forum met at the level of Foreign and Interior ministers and aimed to tackle the Iraqi issues on a regional basis and to foster confidence building measures in this sub-region. Similarly Turkey organized a meeting in Istanbul with the participation of Sunni leaders from Iraq to convince the Sunnis to participate in the 2005 elections.

3.1. Mediation between Israel and Syria

Following the gradual improvement of its relations with Syria after the October 1998 crisis Turkey began to pass messages to both Syria and Israel that it would be ready to bring them together if they were ready to do so. After the collapse of Syrian-Israeli talks in 2000 and the deterioration of US-Syrian relations under the Bush administration, the US was not on the scene to restart the negotiations. Turkey was the only country in the region with good ties with both sides that could play such a role. Ankara believed that the resolution of the Israeli-Syrian conflict would not only bring peace and stability to the region, but also engage Syria more constructively into regional politics. Thus, with these considerations in mind, the Turkish government had been announcing its willingness to play the role of a mediator when the parties were ready. These efforts started as early as 2004. It is said that Prime Minister Erdogan was personally involved in this rapprochement and had conveyed messages to both sides.

However, Turkey's efforts in this regard were frustrated at that time, as was corroborated by then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul in 2004 when he said that Turkey would not play the role of a mediator between the two sides for now. Ankara continued to search for a possibility of mediation and these efforts began to bear fruit in the second half of 2007 when the situation for both sides became ripe. Syria proposed indirect talks with Turkish mediation. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert finally decided to take up the offer and informed the Turkish side during his visit to Turkey in February 2008. It is clear that Olmert, with the support of the security establishment in Israel, perceived engagement with Syria as critical for regional strategic reasons. Israeli talks with Syria were going to include the cutting of Damascus's ties with Hamas and Hezbollah as well as moving away from Iran. Such a combination was seen as of major importance for Israel. Prime Minister Olmert also got the acquiescence of the Bush administration which declared that it would not stand on the way of talks. In Israel, however, there was some criticism from those who did not believe that Israel should negotiate with Syria, including members of the government. Olmert was also accused of trying to divert attention from several charges of corruption he was facing. In any case, with Olmert's interest the time was ripe to start indirect negotiations between the two sides.

In February 2008 a secret mini-conference was held in Istanbul to establish the framework of the negotiations and its content. In May 2008 a public statement announced that Israel and Syria had begun indirect peace talks under Turkish auspices. The third and the fourth round of negotiations followed in June and July respectively. The continuation of negotiations increased hopes for a breakthrough. During the indirect talks Turkey encouraged the two sides to restart direct negotiations. In the meantime upcoming elections in the US and a possibility of a Democrat Party victory, led the parties, particularly Syria, to wait for a future US involvement in direct negotiations.

The fifth round of talks that was planned in September was postponed due to the resignation of the Israeli prime minister's top diplomatic aide, who had been involved in the negotiations. Although this was the official reason there were concerns about some difficulties

in the process. In order to ease the process the French President, Nicholas Sarkozy, also got involved. A summit meeting in Damascus was convened with the participation of Sarkozy, Erdogan and the Amir of Qatar, Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. Finally the fifth round took place in Istanbul during Olmert's visit. The meeting lasted four hours and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan called the Syrian President Assad to relay messages to and from Olmert. After Olmert's return to Israel, the Turkish side then began to wait for an explanation of the discussion from the Israeli side. Four days later, however, Israel began its offensive in Gaza. The Turkish Prime Minister felt betrayed by Olmert and Israel. The Gaza crisis ended the Turkish-mediated peace talks and led to a deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations due to the harsh criticism of the Israeli operation by the Turkish government.

3.2. Israeli-Palestinian Issue

Historically Turkey has been concerned about the Palestinian problem and for long argued for a negotiated settlement based on a two-state solution. Thus Ankara supported the Peace Process that started with the Madrid Conference in 1991. Turkey headed the ACRS (Arms Control and Regional Security) multilateral group within that context and became part of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron which was formed in 1997. Turkey has also been providing development and humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. Since the Paris Protocol of 1996 Turkey has provided a total of 10 million US Dollars in the fields of health, education, public administration, institutionalization, security, tourism and agriculture.

In terms of capacity and institution building activities, Turkey has supported the political reform process and Turkish experts participated in the constitutional and administrative reform efforts made by the Palestinian Authority. Similarly the Turkish Foreign Ministry conducted the Young Palestinian Diplomats' Training Program. Another such attempt has been the TOBB-BIS Industry for Peace Initiative, which has been led by the Turkish Chambers and Commodity Exchanges. Part of this initiative is the Ankara Forum, consisting of the representatives from the Chambers of Commerce of Israel, Palestine and Turkey, based on the understanding that private sector dialogue is good for confidence building. The Forum has so far had five meetings. Another aspect of this initiative is to focus on the specific project of the Erez Industrial Zone. After Hamas's takeover in Gaza it was decided to move the project to the West Bank. This project also is based on the understanding that there is a close correlation between economic development and peace and thus aims to contribute to the Palestinian economy by creating up to 7,000 jobs. The project also offers profit for the Turkish companies and security for Israel on its borders. Thus it is a win-win project for all the parties involved. However, the implementation of the project has been slow, due to the worsening security situation in the area and the problems of signing a security protocol with Israel. In addition to the TOBB Initiative, projects for pipelines for energy, water and power supply are also under discussion.

With the eruption of the al-Aqsa Intifada and increasing violence and instability in the region Turkey has supported activities to end the hostilities. Former President Suleyman Demirel was part of the Mitchell Commission, which was formed after the eruption of violence in 2000. Turkey formed the Jerusalem Technical Committee to investigate whether the excavation works by Israel are detrimental to Haram al-Sharif. Turkey also supported the Quartet and its Road Map.

After the victory of Hamas in the legislative elections Turkey also took a bold step in its role as a third party in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and invited Khaled Mishal, the Hamas leader who is currently residing in Damascus. The Turkish government later

announced that Mishal was called to convey the message that now that it had won the elections it should act in a reasonable and a democratic way. However, Mishal made no announcement of moderation or change in policy while he was in Turkey and thus the whole saga served only to give legitimacy to him. The visit thus created a debate in Turkey and raised doubts about the previous involvement of the Foreign Ministry in the whole affair. The visit of Mishal on the other hand demonstrated how far the AKP government was ready to go in its third party role. In this case Turkey was walking a very fine line that could hurt its longstanding role as an honest broker. More than the idea of talking to Hamas, which could be a valuable third party role for Turkey, it was a question of form. The way it was done was problematic.

Disappointed by post-Annapolis inaction and the negative impact of the embargo on the Gaza population, the Turkish government emphasized the volatility of the situation throughout 2008. Prime Minister Erdogan referred to Gaza as an open prison and apparently asked the Israeli government to lift the blockade. When the cease-fire between Hamas and Israel ended, Ankara supported Egypt's efforts to extend it.

The Israeli attacks against Gaza created a harsh response from the Turkish government. Prime Minister Erdogan immediately started a regional tour, where he paid visits to Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. He also had talks with the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. Then the Turkish diplomats got involved as brokers in shuttle diplomacy to achieve a ceasefire.

The government's response to the Gaza attack, however, seemed to tarnish Turkey's image as an honest broker in the conflict. The Prime Minister's approach to the issue was quite emotional. Erdogan was very critical of Israel and yet silent on Hamas's share of responsibilities in the whole saga. The overall Turkish attitude during the crisis gave the impression that Turkey acted as a spokesperson for Hamas. Although this attitude has become popular in Turkey and in the Middle East, it has created tensions in Turkish-Israeli relations. Relations were strained further when Erdogan clashed angrily with Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos and stormed out of the meeting.

On the other hand, the new setting also created some opportunities for Turkey to be influential over Hamas and to convince it to behave as a legitimate political party. Turkey has also been active in reconciling Fatah and Hamas, which seems essential for any progress in the peace process. However, so far this new mode of facilitation has not borne any results.

In sum, Turkey has increasingly been involved in the management and resolution of conflicts in the Middle East, and its role has been accepted by different regional and external actors. However, it is clear that Turkey needs to study and think more about its goals and the suitability of its various methodologies. In doing so, Turkey must assess its own capabilities and connections to the conflicts, as there is a danger of having an expectations-abilities gap. There is also the danger of overextension, as Turkey remains eager to play third party roles. Another lesson from the Turkish experience as a third party so far has been the issue of impartiality. Studies in third party intervention generally show that the mediator's perceived impartiality is of the utmost relevance to its chances of success. This is particularly important for non-power mediators like Turkey. Turkey was quite close to Israel in the 1990s, which damaged its image as an impartial third party to some extent. Now Turkey is trying to reintroduce some balance to its relations with Israel and the Palestinians. However, this time Israel seems to have doubts as to the AKP's policy in the region and about its impartiality. Thus official policy in Israel is not very eager about the political involvement of Turkey and

its role as an actor in between. Turkey has to effectively deal with this problem of perception if it wants to act as an effective third party. Here the important thing is not to be necessarily neutral about the issues, and yet act in an impartial manner in terms of principles and involvement.

4. Turkey´s Booming Economic Ties with the Region

Interest in expanding economic ties with the region has become an important element of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East in recent years. Kemal Kirisci has argued that economic motivations have influenced the desire to have "zero problems with neighbors" as Turkey increasingly becomes a "trading state"[12].

The Turkish economy has developed considerably in recent years. Two trends particularly became apparent. First, there has been the spread of industry throughout Anatolia together with diversification and regionalization. Second, before the recent world economic crisis, Turkey had rapid growth in its industrial and service sectors[13]. These developments meant the increasing importance of regional trade. As a result the geographical composition of Turkey's trade has started to change: in 1996 the share of the EU in Turkey's trade was 56 percent; in 2008 it dropped to 44 percent. In 1996 the share of Turkey's trade to the Middle East was almost 9 percent; in 2008 it increased to 19 percent. Turkey's trade with the Middle East became critical in the wake of the world economic crisis and helped Turkey to ease the negative impact of the crisis on its trade balance. Furthermore, apart from Qatar and Iran, Turkey's trade balance with the Middle Eastern countries is all in Turkey's favor. At the same time "Turkey is both partner and a model to the development of the private sector in the region"[14].

The idea to promote economic interdependence with Turkey's neighbors, including the Middle East, has been institutionalized in Turkish bureaucracy. In addition, the business community in Turkey has become a vocal advocate of development of economic ties with the region. Business interest groups, such as the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD), which represents mainly Istanbul-based businesses, the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (MUSIAD), which represents the Anatolian-based businesses, and the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB), became influential in foreign policy. Moreover, chambers of commerce in border cities to the Middle East openly lobbied for increasing contacts with the Middle Eastern countries [15].

On the other hand, an increasingly expanding group of states in the Arab world became interested in developing economic relations with Turkey. Among these are Syria and Iraq, in particularly the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which perceives Turkey as not only an economic partner, but also as a gateway to the world. Turkey is also considered as a source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the neighboring countries. Turkish investment in Egypt also has become quite important recently. Many Turkish textile factories have been

[12] Kirisci, Kemal: "The Transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, vol. 40 (2009), pp. 29-56.
[13] Sak, Guven: "TEPAV presentation in Arab-Turkish Dialogue Forum", *Global Political Trends, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Arab Democracy Foundation*, Istanbul (21-22 November).
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] Kirisci, Kemal; Tocci, Nathalie and Walker, Joshua: "A Neighborhood Discovered: Turkey's Transatlantic Value in the Middle East", *Brussels Forum Paper Series* (2009), pp. 21-22.

relocated in Egypt and have contributed to job creation. On the other hand, Turkey has also increasingly been seen as a target for FDI as well, particularly in the Gulf countries. Turkey has signed Free Trade Agreements with Egypt, Syria and Jordan. As a result of these developments, in addition to the states, a burgeoning business community in the Arab world has an interest in developing ties with Turkey.

5. Conclusion

In recent years the level and the importance of Turkey's involvement in the Middle East have changed. Turkey gradually improved its relations with its neighbors, undertook several third party roles in regional conflicts and expanded its economic relations with the region. These developments can be explained partially by the ruling AKP's attempts to develop a comprehensive Middle East policy and its interest in the region. The AKP is interested in being actively involved in the region due to its emphasis on historical and cultural ties with the Middle East as well as to the expectations of economic and political benefits. The AKP policy, however, only partially explains Turkey's recent involvement in the Middle East. The structural factors, especially in terms of new opportunities, provided the context of Turkish engagement in the region. In fact, some of the policy initiatives of the AKP government were developed by earlier governments but could not be implemented, mainly due to the domestic or regional environment. The sustainability of current policies will largely depend on the continuation of this environment.