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TURKEY'S CHANGING NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

GENCER ÖZCAN

Turkey's relations with its neighbors have been steadily improving. The tense relations of the mid-nineties were in stark contrast to the good neighborly relations that Ankara has succeeded in cultivating with its contiguous as well as with its second-belt neighbors for the last five years. The improvement of relations with Russia, Syria and Iran, former rivals for several reasons, is exemplary. The successive Turkish governments seem to have held the common policy that relations should be governed by the principles of good neighborliness. Trust, engagement and dialogue, rather than confrontation and containment, appear to be the leitmotifs of the present rhetoric. In order to grasp the reasons that paved the way for such an overall improvement, one has to look at two aspects of Turkish foreign policy: Success in putting down the Kurdish insurgency and increasing prospects for accession to the EU.

This paper will take a closer look at the reasons of the amelioration of relations with a number of troubled neighbors (Russia, Iran, and Syria) and to delineate the main elements of this transformation.

1 A Changing Environment

The end of the Cold War did not improve Turkey's security environment. New threats and challenges generated a broader security agenda for Ankara. Despite initially positive expectations, disintegration of the Soviet and Yugoslavian federations and, not the least, the *de facto* partition of Iraq fueled increased insecurities in the vicinity of Turkey. Moreover, the great disintegration exacerbated Turkey's own Kurdish separatism, and the PKK's armed insurgency gained momentum after Baghdad's authority broke down in northern Iraq. Among the threats Ankara had to cope with, Kurdish separatism created by far the greater insecurities for Turkey. It remained the epicenter of Turkey's security concerns for the rest of the decade following the Cold War.

Although it reached its climax after the Gulf War, the armed Kurdish insurgency had already begun to undermine the premises of the classic inside-outside national security dichotomy in the late 1980s. As the PKK began to operate more effectively within and outside Turkey, the military gradually assumed a greater role to engage in curbing the armed insurgency. The "asymmetrical" and "non-conventional threat" required the army to change its mindset, force structure, operational codes and even its inventory. In August 1989, the General Staff had delivered a landmark statement indicating that the threat was coming from within as well as outside Turkey. The decisions taken in the National Security Council's March 1990 meeting heralded a new era in the struggle against the PKK. Accordingly, a governmental decree went into force in April 1990 taking extra measures to deal with separatist threat. In 1992 the *National Security Policy Document* pinpointed Kurdish separatism as the major source of threat.

Notwithstanding the increased troop deployment in the southeast of Turkey and active collaboration with the KDP to uproot the PKK in Northern Iraq, the army had considerable difficulty to contain the armed insurgency until it changed its overall strategy in July 1994.¹ The *Area Superiority Strategy* required the army to have special training, different force structures and relevant equipment in dealing with the insurgency. By the middle of the decade fighting

the PKK went another step further when the TAF increased the scale of operations inside Iraq and began to deploy troops in the security belt formed along the border.

Given security measures tightened by the first half of the decade, political issues pertinent to identity issues were rapidly securitized. Thus, having precipitated the imposition of extra legal measures, the PKK insurgency eventually contributed to the further consolidation of security sector in Turkey. Throughout the nineties, the military had retained and expanded its central place within the security sector and its *de facto* authority over security and foreign policy issues (SFP). Its influence became even more conspicuous when issues were concerned with the armed forces' operational engagement. So the more Turkey's security agenda widened, the greater became military's involvement in SFP issues. The military's role therefore became more perceptible, and in some cases uncomfortably coexists with the role of the elected government and its foreign policy. Moreover, this occurred at a time when the EU was becoming more sensitive to human rights issues as well as to what was called the shortcomings of democratic control of the militaries in candidate countries, and did so at a time the sources and agents of the SFP were becoming more pluralistic across Europe. Over-securitization of Turkey's political system and transgressions of human rights were therefore bitterly criticized by the EU. Against this backdrop, Ankara was not included among the new list of candidates for eventual membership at the Luxembourg summit of 12 December 1997.

2 Assertive Diplomacy: 1995-1999

By the second half of the nineties, Turkey's FSP seemed to have been guided by two strategies: the „2 ½ Wars Strategy“ and, less formally, the peripheral strategy. The former stipulated a new force structure to deal with two-pronged conventional contingencies on the Greek and Syrian fronts, and simultaneously the Kurdish insurgency at home. Formulated by a veteran diplomat and well-known expert on FSP issues, Sükrü Elekdağ's strategy guided the establishment and shaped the mindset of the security sector for the latter part of the decade. Although articulated less formally, the latter strategy produced more palpable outcomes as far as Turkey's relations with its outer belt neighbors were concerned. Turkey's growing relations with Israel, Jordan,

¹ "TSK Bölgede 'Alan Hakimiyeti' Konseptini Uygulamaya Başladı," *Cumhuriyet*, 28 Temmuz 1994.

Azerbaijan and Ukraine, primarily in security-related areas, led some analysts to label this active policy as the '*Turkish peripheral strategy*.' It aimed to contain or counterbalance the contiguous neighbors with whom Turkey had troubles.

In the second half of the decade Turkey stepped up its efforts on the diplomatic front to cut off the PKK's logistics. By early 1996, Ankara had dropped its policy of critical dialogue with Syria calling for end of its sponsorship of the PKK's activities within Syria and Lebanon. In a note delivered on 23 January 1996, Ankara bluntly warned Damascus that its current policy would draw retaliation in kind. Given the continuing Syrian indifference to continual Turkish warnings, the following months witnessed a great leap forward towards the improvement of bilateral relations with Israel in military affairs, which had already taken off in 1993. The Military Training Cooperation Agreement of 23 February 1996, the Defense Industry Cooperation Agreement of 28 August 1996, strategic dialogue forums attended by the top FSP elite of respective countries, joint air and naval exercises, and large scale modernization projects made the alignment the keystone of Ankara's peripheral strategy. Although the alignment, claimed Turkish authorities, had never been geared to take joint measures to check Syria, the agreements were perceived by the Arab countries as a classic alliance forged against Syria in particular. So it became another source of irritation for Syria and Iran, whose efforts, however, to form a counter alliance proved futile for the rest of the decade.

3 Syria

Historically speaking, Turkey's relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors were poisoned by a variety of issues. Yet for Ankara the regionalization of the Kurdish issue after the Gulf War stood out as the most burning issue for several reasons. Its regionalization caused controversial outcomes/windfalls for all neighbours. While the creation of the state of Kurdistan in Northern Iraq brought these countries together in search of countermeasures, they, almost with no exception, played the Kurdish card against each other for a variety of purposes. Providing shelter, transportation and training facilities to the PKK and hosting its leader in Damascus for almost

two decades, Syria's war by proxy against Turkey remained an excellent case.

Turkish-Syrian relations remained soured, particularly after 1984 when the PKK intensified its activities within Turkey. However, Ankara's policy was a critical dialogue with Damascus involving carrots rather than sticks. The protocols of July 1987 and April 1992 assuring Syria of a regular downflow of the Euphrates were Turkish efforts of the kind, yet with no tangible result. However, after 1996, as a result of frustration with the Syrian indifference to Turkish demands, Ankara changed its policy and began to pressurize Damascus to stop its support for the PKK. Turkish policy was twofold: It stepped up its efforts to contain the Syrian policy first by forging closer diplomatic military relations with Israel, second, by resorting to the threat of use of force more often unless Damascus ended its support for the PKK. In a note to Damascus delivered on 23 January 1996, Ankara made it clear that it retained the right to resort to self-defense measures if Damascus failed to revise its policy as regards the PKK.² In May 1996, both countries were reported to be massing troops along the border on the heels of bombing that shook Damascus and Latakkiya. In September 1996, the tension increased further with Turkey's involvement in the Kurdish civil war in Northern Iraq, assisting the KDP in its struggle against the PUK. In the meantime, Ankara suspended high level diplomatic contacts, and the meetings of the joint security committees were discontinued until the final showdown in September 1998, when Turkey launched its '*detering pressure policy*' against Syria. It called on Syria to cease hosting Abdullah Öcalan in Damascus. After the offer Egyptian and Iranian good offices, Syria bowed to the pressure and swiftly deported Öcalan, immediately after the conclusion of the Memorandum of Understanding signed on 20 October 1998 in Adana.

After the Adana Memorandum of Understanding was signed, Ankara pursued a policy of cautious optimism towards Damascus. However, diplomatic contacts were gradually upgraded, and when Syria expressed its intent to take confidence-building measures, Turkey reciprocated

² Hasan Cemal, *Kürtler* (Istanbul: Dogan Kitap, 2003) p.444.

positively. In this regard, the signing of military training cooperation agreement in June 2002 with Syria was a remarkable event displaying the military's changing perception of Syria.³ Since then, the improvement has gained further momentum and developed at an unprecedented pace.

The improvement was marked by high-level visits as well. Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül visited Damascus in April 2003, his Syrian counterpart, Farouq al-Shara in January 2003, and Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Mustafa Miro, the first Syrian premier to visit Turkey in 17 years, came to Ankara in July 2003.⁴ The most important visit of the year, however, was Asad's 68 January 2004 trip to Turkey, the first ever by a Syrian head of state. Although the Syrian leader carefully avoided addressing controversial issues such as Hatay, - a province transferred by the French to Turkey in 1938 but still claimed by Syria on its official maps - he openly stated that "the PKK has no presence and activity in Syria."⁵

In April 2003 Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara called for a regional consultation mechanism between Turkey, Syria and Iran on Iraq.⁶ In April 2003 Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul conferred with Syrian leaders in Damascus on bilateral relations and post-war developments in neighboring Iraq, in a sign of flourishing ties despite signals of unease from the United States. In Damascus, he said Turkey was determined to develop relations with the United States further, but added that this should not be an obstacle to maintaining good relations with Russia, Syria and Iran.⁷

Most probably, the improvement was in line with the revision of the National Security Policy

Document in August 2002. Displaying a change of heart in Ankara for its neighbours, the revision reportedly maintained that bilateral relations with Iran, Iraq and Syria would be improved, bearing in mind that Turkey's policies towards the Middle East should not be under an Arab mortgage, obviously referring to the continuing alignment with Israel.⁸

4 Iran

Throughout the decade, ideological tensions and border security issues complicated bilateral relations. During the first half of the decade relations went through continual crises due to a number of issues. Allegations of Iranian involvement in political assassinations claiming lives of leading Turkish intellectuals were raised throughout the decade. However, by the second half of the decade, Iranian support for the PKK eclipsed other thorny issues. Turkey's SFP establishment accused Iran of providing transportation facilities and shelter for the PKK. On the Iranian side, Turkey's rapprochement was followed warily. However, interdependence dictated by geography, growing trade volume and convergence of views over Northern Iraq helped the countries push negative aspects into the background.

However, the tensions turned into a crisis in February 1997, when the Iranian ambassador Muhammad Bagheri attended and addressed an Islamist gathering called the *Night for Jerusalem*, expressing critical views in public on Turkey's rapprochement with Israel and close relations with the US. It caused a diplomatic disaster and triggered a crisis, with both countries recalling their ambassadors. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss details of motivations that played a decisive role in shaping foreign policy towards Iran in the period of 1996-1999. However, one would maintain that Turkey's policy of confrontation during the period was driven by internal factors. Relations started to show signs of gradual improvement after 1999. In the 2002 revision of the NSPD, in comparison to the way it was mentioned in the 1997 NSPD, Iran was covertly referred to as a source of threat given its aspirations to develop nuclear power and WMDs

³ Serkan Demirtas, "Ortadogu'da Yeni Süreç," *Cumhuriyet*, 21 June 2002.

⁴ "Turkey, Syria Open a New Page in Ties," *Turkish Daily News*, 30 July 2003.

⁵ Soner Cagaptay "A Turkish Rapprochement With Middle East Rogue States?," *Analysis Of Near East Policy From The Scholars And Associates of the Washington Institute*, *Policywatch* No. 825, 9 January 2004.

⁶ "Controversial Visit Cancelled," *Turkish Daily News*, 12 April 2003.

⁷ "Turkey, Syria Eye Closer Ties", *Turkish Daily News*, 30 April 2003.

⁸ Lale Sariibrahimoglu, "Military Prepares New National Security Policy Document," *Turkish Daily News*, 8 August 2002

and its continued support for the PKK. Both countries realized that they could not afford to sustain the policy of tension during the period in which prospects of a US intervention in Iraq were looming large. The rapprochement was marked by the opening of pipeline construction to carry Iranian natural gas to Turkey, which raised concerns and reactions in Washington.

Relations between Turkey and Iran improved noticeably in 2003, during which four high-level visits took place from Turkey to Iran. Throughout 2003, Iran claimed to be cracking down on PKK terrorists within its borders. In early July 2004, in the aftermath of skirmishes between the Iranian security forces and the PKK in the vicinity of Urumiyeh, Tehran handed over a number of militants to Turkish authorities. In early 2004, the two countries also settled the issue of overpricing of Iranian natural gas.

In April 2003, Iran's First Vice President, Mohammad Reza Aref, was also in Ankara for talks dominated by economic cooperation.⁹ In the cultural sphere, there were also advances. A December 2003 treaty on educational cooperation between Turkey and Iran stipulated mechanisms for Turkish students to study in Iran, paved the way for the two countries to share curricula and provided for reciprocal scholarships.¹⁰

5 Russia

By the first half of the decade Ankara's relations with its ex-foe-neighbor remained soured. The transition period after the collapse of the Soviet Union was dominated by contending approaches to a variety of regional issues. They were mostly articulated through a zero-sum mentality addressed in the context of geostrategic rivalry. However, the second half of the decade saw bilateral relations evolving into a different context, and living through a substantial transformation of the mutual perceptions. Two issues are of relevance to the transformation: First, in retaliation to Turkey's stance over the Chechen, which

war broke out in 1994, Russia vigorously played the Kurdish card. As the Chechen leaders were given a high level reception in Ankara, Russian authorities increasingly tolerated the PKK's activities in that country. Second, Turkey's will to foster special relations with Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan caused uneasiness in Moscow. The route of the main energy pipeline that would carry their crude oil and natural gas turned to be a bone of contention putting these two countries at loggerheads. The *Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline* issue therefore soon after became the symbol of Turco-Russian rivalry. Later, the two countries had diverged on views on the Turkish Straits' security. Turkey's efforts to provide security for its largest city were perceived negatively by the Russians, who accused Turkish authorities of gearing the 1994 regulations to closing off the waterway to the Russian tankers for crude oil and LNG.

However, just as was the case with Iran, FSP elites in Moscow and Ankara realized that zero-sum game approaches would bring about detrimental results for both countries. The turnabout occurred in the aftermath of Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's visit to Turkey on 16-17 December 1997. The visit concluded the \$30 billion natural gas deal called the *Blue Stream* envisaging Russia supplying large amounts of natural gas through an underwater pipeline in the Black Sea, and capturing the lion's share of Turkey's growing natural gas market. It signaled the new period that Turkey desired, noted Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz, "to cooperate rather than compete with its great neighbor." In this positive atmosphere, the Russian government resisted pressure from nationalist circles calling for asylum for Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's leader, who came to Russia after he was extradited from Syria in October 1998, and then deported him. Turkey also contributed to the rapprochement by lifting some of the limitations imposed by the 1994 Traffic Regulations. Moscow accepted the new regulation that was put in effect in 1998.

Prime Minister Ecevit's visit of November 1999 bolstered the atmosphere of cooperation and displayed the level of importance that Ankara attached to the improvement of bilateral relations. It aimed to foster cooperation against international terrorism, completion of technical

⁹ "Turkey, Syria Eye Closer Ties," Turkish Daily News, 30 April 2003.

¹⁰ Soner Cagaptay "A Turkish Rapprochement With Middle East Rogue States?," Analysis Of Near East Policy From The Scholars And Associates of the Washington Institute, *Policywatch* No. 825, 9 January 2004.

formalities of the *Blue Stream*, and reinvigoration of economic relations.¹¹ More importantly, the visit took place on the heels of the Russian army's new offensive in Chechnya, provoking opposition within Turkey. On this occasion, Ankara adopted a different approach than did it during the first Chechen war of 1994-1996, underscoring its support for the territorial integrity of Russia. Two respective governmental decrees of 26 September 2000 and 3 October 2000 were put in effect to sever the activities of the '*Caucasian Chechen Solidarity Group*', an umbrella organization coordinating a wide range of activities of Caucasian diaspora organizations active in Turkey. Although the complaints on behalf of Russia have continued since then, the tone and frequency of complaints have been far lower than they were before.¹² In addition to mutual political will on both sides, diversified relations as a result of an increasing trade volume, construction activities by Turkish firms in Russia and a growing number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey had a stabilizing impact on bilateral relations, compelling both countries not to take harsh stances over the disputed issues. Recent developments are noteworthy in this respect. In April 2004, when the Ajaria crisis broke out, Turkey and Russia swiftly consulted each other and refrained from any intervention that could escalate tensions. In the following months both countries displayed mutual understanding and reached compromise over the issue of pricing the natural gas coming through the Blue Stream.

Among these positive steps, the amelioration of relations between the security establishments is the most remarkable. The Turkish and Russian navies pioneered the forging of a multinational *Search and Rescue* [SAR] unit called *BLACKSEAFOR* with the participation of all the Black Sea riparian countries in April 2002. In the same month they signed the *Document of Black Sea Confidence and Security Building Regime*.

Another development was the conclusion of Turco-Russian Military Training and Cooperation Agreement in 2003. However, the signals that Moscow is considering taking a more constructive approach to the BTCP are also noteworthy as far as the future course of relations is concerned. In December 2001, the Russian giant oil company *Lukoil* called for dismissal of parochial approaches towards the BTCP stating that the Turkish straits were not be suitable for heavy tanker traffic, and expressing its interest taking part in the project or connecting BTCP with the existing Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline. It would be overoptimistic to assume that the views of the two countries will no longer diverge on such issues. However, it is a good omen that the arguments based on geostrategic rivalry have been losing ground.

6 Changing Security Perceptions: *Post-Helsinki Zeitgeist*

The dynamics of Turkish politics have been transformed since Turkey received candidate status in December 1999. Increasing prospects of EU accession have been exerting a tremendous impact on Turkish foreign policy. One can contend that the impact stemmed from different roots. First, in accordance with the EU's inclination towards vertical integration, Turkey's SFP environment has been diversified at an unprecedented pace. Turkish society has become more receptive to open debate as interest groups develop, and they are now far better organized to transmit their demands across Europe through peer associations accredited with the Union.

Increasing involvement of non-state actors in the formulation process of FSP in Turkey has become one of the novel aspects of politics. As newly emerging yet strong actors begin to exert growing influence over SFP issues, the official apparatus has been losing its prominence in economic and financial affairs. 'Foreign policy from below' or 'grass-roots statecraft'¹³ has its own reflections in Turkey. Globalization, the EU integration process and customs union brought about their own grinding effects on the prominence of traditional statecraft in Turkey. A vast spectrum

¹¹ Duygu Bazoglu Sezer, "Russia: The Challenges of Reconciling Geopolitical Competition with Economic Partnership," Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirisci, (eds.) *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multi-regional Power* (Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, London: 2001), p. 157.

¹² For the texts of government decrees, see www.kafkas.org.tr

¹³ Pinar Bilgin, "Individual and Societal Dimensions of Security," *International Studies Review* (2003) No. 5, p. 216.

of civic organizations are involved in activities formerly pertinent to the security sector on a greater scale and are thus becoming the agents of a de-securitization process in Turkey. Their impacts are becoming visible in debates as to how the national interest may best be defined. While these new actors put their weight behind those who propagated revisions in outstanding national issues, as was the case with Cyprus, traditional circles have failed to mobilize large sectors of society to support their own position.

It was therefore not a coincidence that debate over national interest undermined the state's position on one of the issues that was traditionally considered a major national cause, namely Cyprus. To put it in a nutshell, by the second half of the nineties the debate over Cyprus dramatically shifted the main argument that the TAF was keeping its troops there for the sake of Turks living on the island. The revised version of the argument, however, put asserted that Turkey's presence there had been required for the sake of Turkey's own security needs. So the new paradigm required the issue be further oversecured. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delineate the details of the Annan Plan, yet the end result was an impressive compromise among contending agents of the SFP. The compromise removed stumbling blocks, giving more freedom of maneuver to the new AKP government. A diplomatic initiative taken by the AKP government led to what happened in the April 2004 referendum, redefining all the para-

meters of the Cyprus imbroglio and freeing Turkey from the role of scapegoat for the post-1974 stalemate on the island.

Second Ankara would definitely like to avoid any conflict with its neighbors because such a contingency would obviously butter the bread of those who claimed that Turkey's accession should be delayed on the grounds that its neighborhood was still perilous. Obviously, the way certain sections of the Turkish polity stood against US unilateralism as regards the in Iraq issue was bolstered, if not inspired, by the EU's stand on the issue. The Turkish position on Iran and Syria also seems influenced by Brussels. With EU accession in mind, observed an expert, Turkey wanted to treat its Middle Eastern neighbors à la Europe.¹⁴

So truly, given that both Iran and Syria became de facto neighbors of the United States after the occupation of Iraq, *the treatment à la Europe* has paid more dividends in return. Therefore, the possibility of Turkey's unilateral intervention in regional affairs will be limited by further Europeanization of its SFP sector.

On the author:

Gencer Özcan is professor for political science at the Department of Politics and International Relations, Yildiz Technical University, Istanbul. His main research interests are in security policy and the relationship between Turkey and Israel/the Arab countries.

¹⁴ Soner Cagaptay "A Turkish Rapprochement With Middle East Rogue States?" Analysis of Near East Policy From The Scholars and Associates of the Washington Institute, *Policywatch* No. 825, 9 January 2004.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Hiroshimastrasse 17
10785 Berlin
Germany
Tel.: ++49-30-26-935-914
Fax: ++49-30-26-935-959
Roswitha.Kiewitt@fes.de
www.fes.de/globalization

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Cihannuma Mahallesi
Mehmet Ali Bey Sk.
No:10/5
34353 Besiktas - Istanbul
Turkey
Tel. +90 (212) 258-7001
Fax +90 (212) 258-7091
fesist@superonline.com