

Change in Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Middle East

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Abstract

In the last two decades, Turkey has remarkably transformed its foreign policy towards the Middle East. Ankara with a neo-Ottoman and anti-Western approach has become more evident in the foreign policy practices of Justice and Development Party (known as AKP) government. This article identifies the religious geopolitical imagination of Turkey with civilizationalist and neo-Ottoman visions that have shaped its foreign policy goals and instruments during the AKP government era. The article argues that religious geopolitical imagination is a result of foreign policy change towards the Middle East, which may give a Turkey leading position in the region. Overall, however, the evolution of religious geopolitical imagination can be accounted for not only by foreign policy concerns, but economic interests and domestic political aims also matter. Turkey has applied both hard and soft power approaches to remain in the region, but more focused and balanced soft power capabilities. This rapid change may be the result of internal problems like soaring inflation, plummeting currency, and a decline in popularity of the AKP. This article will give more focus to contemporary developments in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East region.

Keywords: Foreign Policy; Religious Geopolitical Imagination; Neo-Ottoman; Turkey; Middle East.

1. Introduction

Turkish foreign policy mainly aims to protect its interests in a strained global and regional environment. Turkey always tried to create conditions for sustainable peace and development with neighboring and beyond states. Turkey has experienced different variants of its foreign policy, but a dramatic change in the past two decades under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule is noticeable. The AKP came in power in 2002 and until today, it has gone through three phases of foreign policy. First, an assurance to the universal values and particularly to the Europe Union; second, it has embarked on a pan-Islamist approach; and third is completely independent (it used to be considered as anti-western) and self-conceit foreign policy based on the religious geopolitical imagination, which is actually represents undue pride in oneself policy (Tan, 2021).

Ankara has become more involved and active in the Middle East. Some analysts are of the view that this change indicates Turkey is moving away

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from the West, as they observe Turkish confidence in the Middle East mismatched with its Western coordination (Tan, 2021). But, others believe that security, power projection, rational considerations, and a mix of national interests have forced the AKP to drive its foreign policy toward the Middle East (Dalacoura, 2021). The central point of that connectivity was based on pan-Islamist which has been considered as civilizationalist and neo-Ottoman approach. This approach remained the great ambition of Turkish identity with the Islam and Ottoman Empire, its dominant part was the first half of the 2010s, but after the Arab Spring of 2011, Turkey got some success to establish a cluster of relationships.

After the Arab uprising, regional geopolitics and security challenges opened new channels for Turkish foreign policy, which led Ankara to even get involved militarily in the region, and sent its forces to Syria, Libya, and Iraq. It also started humanitarian and economic engagements. It somehow engaged in a new competition of regional leadership with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran.

Ankara's involvement in the Middle East has extended and it has become the third party in the regional conflicts. The hard power and securitized methods are replaced with more focused and balanced soft power capabilities. This rapid change may be the result of internal problems like soaring inflation, plummeting currency, and decline in popularity of the AKP. Some observers believe that the change and new diplomatic activism of Ankara toward the Middle East is part of its current political and economic crisis (Almuedo, 2011). Others believe that it is all about changing regional and global scenario in which Turkey wants its share (Duran, 2022).

The current regional de-escalation approach of Turkey would provide a good opportunity for Ankara to switch from hard power to soft power and focus on its economic challenges. Therefore, normalizing ties with the Middle Eastern countries, especially with Saudi Arabia, UAE and Israel would open new channels for augmenting Turkey's diplomatic, strategic, and economic assets in its foreign policy. Tensed ties between leading regional actors have proven deleterious to understanding the true prospect of economic relations.

2. The Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy

The shift in Ankara's Middle East policy is a response to external factors – both regional and international, and domestic issues related to security and economy, Turkey has begun to change its positions and restart its relations, which had previously been based on hostility. The key idea of this new phase is 'realpolitik', (Cengiz, 2021) with the religious geopolitical imagination as Ankara seems determined to put all differences aside and emphasize on the economy for solid improvements to close an era of intense regional confrontation.

Washington has always remained a key player in the Middle East, but the US administration under President Joe Biden prioritized East Asia, focused

on its own domestic matters, and has pushed diplomacy in the Middle East, unlike the previous Donald Trump administration. In the meantime, the US has started reevaluating its military forces from the region. The US has made it clear that it will not be part of the Saudi intervention of Yemen, on the other way Washington may go back to the nuclear deal with Iran. These changes triggered and pushed Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and the UAE towards a de-escalation process (Kabalan, 2021). On the other hand, Russian growing influence and the US decreasing engagement in the region pushed Turkey to act it to balance between the two. The AKP do not trust both countries parties and have differences with them on some issues, but has maintained a good balance in Syria and Libya. As a result, Ankara's Middle East policy has shifted onto a new track to rebalance the region. .

Last year at the GCC Summit, Gulf countries signed the Al Ula Declaration and formally ended the dispute with Qatar (Vakil, 2021). This regional development created further encouragement for Ankara to take the plunge with Riyadh, Cairo, and Abu Dhabi. Since then, Turkey and Qatar have started negotiations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE for reconciliation. The other very important regional actor that set a motion for Ankara's interest was the growing tires between Greece, Egypt, Israel, and the Greek Cypriot administration in the Eastern Mediterranean (Guzansky and Lindenstrauss, 2021). For Ankara, collaboration with Cairo on issues associated with the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya are crucial.

In the domestic context, Turkey is in its worst economic crisis. It has been believed that President Erdogan is responsible for this situation by doubling down on unorthodox economic policies, by emphasizing on low interest rates in spite of rising inflation. It is also claimed that, he is not taking advice from economic advisors, rather working against their advice (Cookman, 2022).

Saudi Arabia is one key regional player in the Middle East region. Good relations between Ankara and Riyadh would prove to be a game changer for this region. The cooperation initiative has been started between Ankara and Riyadh, their relations have appeared in a positive dynamic after a phone conversation between President Tayyip Erdogan and Saudi King Salman bin Abdelaziz ahead of a G-20 Leaders Summit in 2021 (Taha, 2020). At present, President Erdogan is on a state visit of the United Arab Emirates for bilateral and economic cooperation with a flurry of agreements during his first visit to the Gulf state since 2013. It is also expected that President Erdogan may travel to Saudi Arabia. No doubt, Riyadh's also wants close relations with Ankara, which will help Saudi to counter rivals or disrupters.

The normal ties between Riyadh and Ankara would take preference over all regional reconciliation efforts. This move would be a good option for Saudi to get much needed space to enhance its capacity for political activity, connectivity, and cooperation with various other regional states which are perceived as Riyadh's rivals – like Iran. Better relations between both states would open new economic, political, and defense opportunities, where Saudi

may retain its traditional regional role and effectively deal with the security challenges.

Saudi Arabia is in a state of war with Yemen rebels (Houthis). Turkey has rich experience in Libya, Syria, and Azerbaijan and it also supported Riyadh's position in the 2015 war, with Yemen (France 24, 2015: March 26). Once trust is restored between both countries, Ankara would be helpful for Riyadh in terms of militarily and politically. Either Saudi goes for diplomatic engagement with the Houthis – or their sponsor (Iran), or extends military pressure; it would be able to move out from this far better position than the existing one. Furthermore, US-Iran talks on 'nuclear deal' are continuing; it seems that the two parties will eventually reach an agreement. It is also high time for Riyadh to be prepared to handle the outcomes scenario with the alternatives. It is one of the main issues where Ankara can probably play a positive role.

For Turkey, mutual investments are more desirable than counterproductive economic initiatives between both regional economies. Particularly, investment funds devising in Saudi Arabia would certainly play a part in the vitality and resilience of the Turkish economy, which is facing financial challenges (Bakir and Ersoy, 2021). In addition, agreeing on the unresolved commercial disputes between the two sides would encourage private sectors to restore bilateral trade and revive commercial performance.

Turkey has also started the reconciliation process with Egypt by maintaining contacts with foreign ministries and intelligence agencies to improve bilateral relations (Alhas, 2021). Both states are trying not to oppose each other on any regional or international platforms. They have shown their interest in working on a comprehensive roadmap to resolve their bilateral relations. On the other hand, Ankara desires to continue supporting the ongoing political process of ending the Syrian conflict (Yetim and Kaşıkçı, 2021). Likewise, it is expected that Turkey will support the political process and the legitimate Libyan government.

These are key features of change in Turkish Middle East policy:

1. Turkey felt insecure because of the development in Syria and Iraq, since both states are sharing a long border. The AKP government, perceived these developments as a direct threat to the national security of Turkey. Therefore, Ankara decided to involve itself with this problem and supported and organized an opposition force, militarily and politically especially with the Syrian National Council.
2. AKP government was careful before the Arab Spring, because the Middle East was the center stage of Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry. Turkey sensibly maintained good relations with both regional actors. After the end of the Arab Spring, the region became a battle ground for competition of influence. Turkey had all the capabilities to intervene, and tried to get its share.

3. When the global and regional powers were engaged in the Syrian crisis, and could not find political solution. The war started, Turkey which had prioritized with soft power, started to use military power to get more objectives.
4. The new Middle East policy was launched after the increased differences between traditional allies – Turkey and the EU. The EU criticized Turkey for authoritarianism, and Turkey had issue regarding the refugee deal of 2016 with EU (Dar, 2021). In this context Ankara started ignoring the EU and applied its unilateral policy with balancing to major powers in the region.

3. Economic effect of Turkish Foreign Policy

Turkey always considered as the economic giant in the Middle East, is facing a great economic recession since 2018. The economic growth rate is declining gradually, foreign investors are not much interested to investing in the country, and the rate of unemployment is also high (Sonmez, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has added an even worse burden. The major part of the Turkish economy is dependent on tourism and because of the pandemic, the tourism sites were closed and travel was banned. It has also increased the poverty rate, which can make the situation more problematic. Some critics believe that the reason behind this economic condition is the policies of President Erdogan. They believe that the autocratic style of AKP government led to the poor state of the economy (Bremmer, 2021).

In this situation, Ankara has opened all diplomatic option to come over from crisis. The signs of change in foreign policy have become visible. Turkey is ready to mend its relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Armenia for the sake of economic cooperation. In this same spirit President Erdogan during the speech at the virtual G20 Summit hosted by Saudi Arabia said that Turkey is a key actor in the Middle East. He emphasized that Ankara's commitment "to contribute to the stability, tranquility and domestic peace of our region". It was a clear signal that Turkey would be more involved in the new developments in the region by sitting with any traditional rival state.

In addition to regional and global developments, most of the regional states have different reasons to tone down their rivalries and compromise. The policies that mostly depend on hard power, conflicts, and proxy wars are expensive and problematic to maintain in the long run. It is one of the negative socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 pandemic and the decrease in oil prices, which have worsened already existing problems. These negative socio-impacts are not only holding true for Turkey, but for the rest of the Middle East which is also dealing with economic problems.

The normalization of economic cooperation of Turkey and Middle Eastern countries is not too easy but requires more time. Most of the regional and global developments are at work but remain uncertain. The Iranian nuclear talks are facing problems, and the future of Egypt, Syria, and Libya is fragile. Similarly, Turkey and Israel relations are also at delicate stage. Ankara's

constant support for the Palestine and the AKP's special ties with Hamas has created a more complex situation (Ceylan, 2021). Turkey has remained a good economic partner of Israel, but in the current situation it is hard for Israel to manage.

Turkey needs to take back its economy on the right path with long term policies, and the Middle East pivot economic policy is one of the great decisions of Ankara. It has to plan stable economic policies by maintaining good relations with all regional states. But unfortunately, it has been involved in controversies which are pushing Ankara into a precarious situation. The political adventurism of President Erdogan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by supporting Azerbaijan, creating a controversy with France over anti-Islamism movement, support for Kashmiris and Palestinians at international forums, and growing tense ties with the US has increased his popularity in the Muslim community was an ideal and brave leader (Dar, 2021). On the contrary, these all controversies could have put Turkey in a bad position in both political and economic terms.

The regional power game between the main stakeholders of the region is persistent strategic competition which will only destabilize their diplomatic positions, and create more economic cost than benefits. The current developments and the changing nature of their regional de-escalation approach is a sign of a reconciliatory drift in the region which will normalize the strategic and economic situation in the region.

4. Future Foresight

Turkey has started to change its foreign policy process to normalize relations with several Middle Eastern countries on both the regional and bilateral level. Ankara is very clear to find a way to build a common solution consistent with its win-win strategy in spite of having disagreements on regional and bilateral relations issues with all key stakeholders of Middle East, including United States, Russia, and the European Union.

As per changes in the Turkish Foreign Policy, one can expect that:

- Under the leadership of President Erdogan, Turkey has long desired to increase its international position and to take on a more important role in the regional and global system, which will continue.
- Turkey will try to adjust its foreign policy in Middle East to become a regional power.
- Turkey will try to continue regional alliances with its strategic approach. It will be evaluated within the coordination of Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt.
- Turkey will try it's best to form an important role as a mediator of regional and global crisis, but especially in Middle Eastern conflicts.
- The economic cooperation between Turkey, Israel and the United Arab Emirates would create new momentum in the region.

- Turkish economy may not stabilize with short term policies, but may worsen more.
- Turkish Middle East policy could a constant-sum game of balancing between Russia and the United States.

Recently, things have begun to change as several indications of reconciliation between Turkey and other regional actors have developed. The era of hard power politics that actually created crisis between regional states seems to have ended and a fresh beginning is on the horizon. In this context, Turkish government has become more functional diplomatically. It has been very keen to involve herself and play a mediation role for resolving regional conflicts. Because, Turkey has never occupied any prominent position in the conflict resolution process in the region. Its shift from soft power to hard power may be taken as frustration in Syria and Libya. Turkey's expected coalition with Saudi Arabia and the UAE may fulfill his desire to become a good mediator. It firmly believes that by being a facilitator or taken on a third party role would help her to develop ties with the Middle East. In this context, Turkey would like to become a peace broker in Israel-Palestine conflict. Saudi Arabia will never be involved, but after Abraham Accord, the UAE can play its role. The new reconciliation between Turkey and the UAE may open new options for Ankara to become a mediator of Israel-Palestine conflict, which will even give a big breakthrough to Saudi-Israel relations. This role will help Ankara to become the obvious player in the region.

4. Conclusion

Turkey is very keen to extend its power both in the regional and international systems. It has used its both soft and hard power capabilities to boost its ties at the bilateral and regional level. Turkey has or is blessed with an ideal geographical position, human resources, military power and a struggling economy which may create Ankara an important stakeholder in the surrounding regions like, the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Mediterranean, and the Balkans. However, the Middle East has become the only region where Turkey really wants to become an extensive regional power.

The shift of Ankara's foreign policy needs support from home. As, has been discussed, Turkey is in the middle of a period of economic and political turmoil, but the AKP government is paying more focus to change its foreign policy. It is very clear that this method may work only in the absence of an economic crisis.

To sum up, regardless of the problems in balancing Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel, the current change in foreign policy of the Middle East is a good option for Turkey to move forward with win-win cooperation. Certainly, Turkey possesses such capability to go with Middle Eastern countries for their collective cooperation.

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