

# Turkey between Syria and Israel: Turkey's Rising Soft Power

Bülent ARAS\*

## Summary

Turkish policymakers exhibit a high degree of self-confidence and willingness to pursue intensive diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East. Turkey pursues a multi-dimensional policy line to foster peace and stability in the region, and has already enjoyed some degree of success. Turkish policymakers seek to utilize Turkey's good relations with Syria and Israel to wield an influence on these countries to facilitate Israeli-Syrian negotiations. The increasing level of trust to Turkey's new image of civil-economic power in the Middle East and the U.S. support for Turkey's potential contribution to chronic problems of the region have made Turkey a potential mediator in the decades-long Syrian-Israeli conflict.

In late December 2004, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid an official visit to Syria that abounded with optimistic prospects for future bilateral relations. The visit came after Syrian leader Bashar Assad's visit to Turkey in January 2004. Assad summarized his official visit to Turkey as follows: "We have together shifted from an atmosphere of distrust to trust."<sup>1</sup> Until the end of the 1990s, official Turkish policy toward Syria could be defined as one of conscious alienation and controlled tension. The changing nature of the relationship, however, is highly commendable if one considers the problematic nature of international relations in the Middle East and the remarkable shift in Turkish foreign policy behavior. Turkey's two major problems with Syria, particularly during the 1990s, centered on water issues and the activities of the former PKK. Turkey guaranteed a water flow of 500 cubic meters per second to Syria in a protocol signed in 1987. Interestingly, the flow was raised to above 900 cubic meters in the aftermath of Turkey's crisis with Syria over PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in October 1998 (when Turkey demanded that the PKK leader be expelled from Syrian territory). During Erdoğan's visit in December 2004, the Turkish Prime Minister indicated that Syria could make further use of the Tigris waters, which may help put the water problem behind both countries.

Another source of tension between Syria and Turkey was Turkey's accusation that Syria provided help and shelter to the PKK, which has been at war with the Turkish state for the last two decades. Before the October 1998 crisis, there were suspicions in Turkish policy circles that Syria sought to exploit the Kurdish

\* Professor of International Relations, Isik University. abulent@isikun.edu.tr

<sup>1</sup> Mehmet Ali Birand, 'Nihayet Karşılıklı Doğru Yolu Bulduk' [At Last We Found the Right Path], *Posta*, 6 January 2004.

problem as a leverage against Ankara in the dispute over water and other minor regional issues. At that time, the escalation of nationalist sentiment in Turkey, domestic uncertainties in Syria, Russia's withdrawal from Middle Eastern politics, and the suitability of the international environment provided Turkey with an opportunity to take action. As tension between Syria and Turkey escalated, Ankara openly began to talk about a military operation against Syria to capture Öcalan and his associates. Egyptian officials engaged in shuttle diplomacy between the two countries. This initiative, and the constructive engagement of other countries in the region such as Jordan, led to the acceptance of Turkish terms by Syrian president Hafez Assad, which was formalized by the signing of the Adana Accord in 1998. Even before acquiescing to Turkish demands, Assad had deported Öcalan.

Prior to signing the Adana Accord, Turkey and Syria had been locked in a relationship shaped by historical enmity, the prevalence of hostile establishment ideologies, and attempts by policymakers to "externalize" certain domestic problems. However, the more recent changes in Turkey's domestic politics and international orientation have brought with them a greater degree of political maturity, helping to push the country's national security apparatus to the background. Meanwhile, although change has not occurred in Syria to the same extent that it has in Turkey, Syria has also undergone its own transformation. Moreover, Turkey's new policy line has begun to make a different sense of Syria in the foreign policymaking process, and its former problematic agenda has given way to cooperation prospects. Turkey, seeing itself – albeit gradually – as part of the EU, has adopted a more self-assured attitude towards its neighbors. The new attitude, which is no longer shaped merely by security concerns, emerged thanks to a favorable sequence of developments including the capture of the PKK leader and a diminishing level of separatist terrorism as well as the ongoing process of EU membership. In the eyes of Turkish political elites, close relations between Turkey and Syria are highly meaningful from both commercial and security standpoints. President Bashar Assad has pursued a more pragmatic line in Syria's relations with the West, particularly after the September 11, 2001 attacks. However, particularly after the Hariri assassination, Syria was forced out of Lebanon under strict scrutiny. There has been increasing pressure on the Syrian administration to undertake political reform at home and to adopt a more constructive line in regional politics.

Turkish-Syrian relations create a channel for the Syrian administration to get out of this vicious cycle. Turkey is considered a gateway to Europe and a country that knows how to accommodate differences within international society. The deliberate establishment and strengthening of ties between the two countries holds promise for both. In 2007, the total volume of Turkish trade with Syria increased to 1.2 billion USD, up from 797 million USD in 2006. The signing of a free trade zone in 2007 between Syria and Turkey would further increase the trade volume. There is a decisive will on both sides to overcome obstacles in the interest of improving trade and business relations. The agreement on strengthening bilateral economic relations during President Bashar Asad's visit in October 2007, and talks about coordinating joint investments in a subsequent visit by Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Dardari are signals indicating the good will of the officials on both sides. During the latter visit, every aspect of bilateral economic relations were discussed with a view to overcoming any pending obstacles. Turkey's south and southeastern regions have a new

orientation toward the Syrian economy and there is a promising tourism prospect in the near future. Turkey's civil-economic and soft power is visible in Syria and both sides see the benefit of improving political and economic relations.

### **Turkey's New Foreign Policy**

Turkey's new foreign policy orientation has opened new horizons in its relations with neighboring states and is closely linked to its transformation in the domestic landscape.<sup>2</sup> Turkey has achieved considerable progress in its move toward EU membership and has gained enough confidence to emerge as a civil-economic power in the Middle East. The emergence of a new policy line paved the way for a change in the perception of this geography; Turkish policymakers are trying hard to prepare the ground for a more active Turkish role in the region. The Turkish case exemplifies proven ways of reforming politics, improving welfare and contributing to regional security. There is enough evidence to show that Turkish policymakers exhibit a high degree of self-confidence and willingness to get involved in regional issues and even to pursue extensive and intensive diplomatic initiatives that go beyond the region.

Furthermore, Turkey's new regional policy projects different assumptions about the regional countries in the minds of policymakers. The new regional rhetoric and imagination is being shaped under the changing nature of the nation-state whose frontiers have expanded beyond the homeland in the cognitive map of policymakers. The Turkish area of influence goes beyond its national borders under the impact of the new geographic imagination. The territorial limits to Turkish involvement in the Middle East have disappeared. Specifically, the relationship between 'bordering and othering' lost its meaning after the removal of the strains of domestic threat perceptions in regional policy. The new policy has already had a wide-spread impact on the culture of national security and of geopolitics, which in turn has meant a continued widening of the horizons of policymakers and the emergence of certain new attitudes in foreign policy.

The domestic transformation brought about new political attitudes that paved the way for decreasing the range of geographic 'others' and redefining friends and enemies in the region. These are not temporary responses to emerging situations but instead long-lasting policy choices that will weather the stresses of both domestic and structural factors. One piece of evidence supporting the organic and sturdy nature of the new direction of Turkish domestic politics is the way in which societal forces are increasing their influence in Turkish foreign policy making and competing with the old, and in some cases, outdated bureaucratic-authoritarian tradition. Turkey's increasing self-confidence at home changes the threat perceptions in the region and creates a more positive attitude for providing peace and stability. At the same time, foreign policymakers are paying more attention to international legitimacy, values, and norms. The flexibility and adaptability of the new policy line seems greater than that of Turkey's previous policy attitudes, probably as a result of considerations regarding dynamic harmonization with the EU foreign policy line.

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy Vision," *Insight Turkey*, vol.10, no.1 (2008), pp. 77-96.

Turkey's transformation has already put an end to the Cold War-style security-state apparatus that ruled the country for half a century and has changed the framework of the country's domestic and foreign policy. Of prime importance is the fact that Turkey's transformation changed the regional rhetoric of its policymakers. There is a belief among Turkish foreign policy elites that the Middle East is now more likely to be receptive to constructive Turkish involvement.

### **Turkey's Role as a Mediator**

Turkish politicians began to favor the idea that a constructive Syrian policy line in the Middle East would help get rid of the suspicions directed at Syria, in addition to easing tension in the region. In the new regional rhetoric of Turkish policymakers, Syria is now a potential ally and friend. From their perspective, as former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah Gül expressed, Turkey and Syria have legitimate concerns about the future of Iraq and should cooperate in every possible way, as they already have started doing, to enhance peace and stability.<sup>3</sup> During Erdoğan's visit to Syria in December 2006, Assad expressed the Syrian leadership's positive perception of the new Turkish attitude, stressing the fact that, "Turkey and Syria have common views on regional issues and [that] his country appreciates Turkey's efforts to restore peace in the Middle East."<sup>4</sup> Syria and Turkey signed a free-trade agreement with the understanding that the agreement should be expanded to the regional level to catch the spirit of the times, namely cooperation and interdependence for enduring peace and stability, which would provide an exemplary pattern for other neighboring countries to follow. The shift in the Turkish stance toward Syria is remarkable. While Turkey was blamed for cooperation with Israel and accused of forming a coalition against Syria in the 1990s<sup>5</sup>, a new, cooperative vision now obtains. As Syrian leader Bashar Assad remarked, "Turkey became one of the friendliest countries toward Syria in the region, one which pursues not only good relations at a bilateral level but also cooperates with Syria on a number of regional issues."<sup>6</sup>

Turkish policymakers now try to utilize their developing relations with Syria to wield an influence on Syrian policy with the aim of promoting peace and stability. The increasing levels of trust on both sides have made Turkey a potential mediator in the decades-long Syrian-Israeli conflict. Turkey pursues a multi-dimensional policy line, in part, to foster just such a role in the region, and has already enjoyed some degree of success. For example, in light of Israeli and Palestinian assertions that Syria's intervention would help bring about a solution to the Lebanon crisis in August 2006, which escalated after Palestinian militants captured the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, Erdoğan sent his chief advisor Ahmet Davutoğlu to Damascus. Davutoğlu conveyed to the Syrian president Turkey's position, including concerns about the escalation of violence and the spread of the crisis to the whole region.<sup>7</sup> Turkey's involvement in this crisis is unique if one remembers Turkey's former stance of deliberate alienation toward Syria's regional affairs and Middle Eastern conflicts in general.

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<sup>3</sup> *Milliyet*, 2 February 2007.

<sup>4</sup> *Radikal*, 6 December 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Prof. Abboud Sarraj of Damascus University, Istanbul, 25 May 2006.

<sup>6</sup> *CNN Türk*, 'Esad ile Özel Röportaj' [Exclusive Interview with Bessar Assad], 06 April 2005.

<sup>7</sup> *CNBC-E*, "An Interview with the Prime Minister," 07 November 2006.

This demonstrates the trust of Turkish policymakers that Turkish-Syrian relations were in such good standing that Syria would respond positively to Turkish demands in regional matters.

The most promising period for Israeli-Syrian negotiations was the era following the Madrid Framework signed in 1991. The framework provided channels for bilateral dialogue and the resolution of regional issues along multi-lateral tracks. Despite its promise, however, this framework did not produce any improvement between Syria and Israel. The U.S.-sponsored talks in 1996 at the Wye River and in 2000 in Shepherdstown likewise produced no result, nor did the secret diplomacy initiative of 1998. The following Arab plans, the U.S. led "road map" and the recent Annapolis initiative did not draw much attention to Israeli-Syrian negotiations, as priority was given to the Palestinian question. The U.S. attitude toward Syria, Syrian involvement in Lebanon and the Hariri assassination decreased international society's trust in Syria and lowered expectations for settlement of the Israeli-Syrian dispute.

Turkey's mediating role was strengthened when Turkey moved ahead to bring Syria and Israel together. The current level of engagement is limited to conveying messages from each side and the process is extremely difficult. The Israeli administration wants to contain Syria, end the Syrian-Iranian alliance, and prevent Syrian support for Hezbollah and HAMAS. Syria wants the Golan Heights back unconditionally and demands Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese lands. The Syrian condition of Golan-for-peace means a return to the borders before the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Israel responds to this demand with conditions: the establishment of demilitarized zones in the withdrawn territories and border modifications based on security concerns.

Turkish policymakers have confidence that they may play a constructive role in the resolution of the Israeli-Syrian dispute. They are aware of the complicated nature of the problem and the difficulties of bringing the sides together. However, Turkey's new activism in the Middle East prioritizes regional stability and security, and Turkish policymakers aim to play a role in initiating Israeli-Syrian negotiations. Prime Minister Erdoğan, after a visit to Damascus in April 2008, confirmed Turkey's mediating role in the initiation of negotiations between Syria and Israel for a peaceful resolution of the dispute about the strategic Golan Heights. He further stated that he would attempt to restart direct talks between Syria and Israel.<sup>8</sup> Foreign Minister Ali Babacan evaluated the situation from a more realistic standpoint and stressed that resolution of this chronic dispute would require "strong political determination" from both sides. He also added that "we are still at the very beginning of the process."<sup>9</sup> As an initial success of Turkish mediation attempts, Israeli and Syrian authorities declared on May 21st that they started indirect talks under the supervision of Turkish diplomats in Istanbul.

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<sup>8</sup> *Radikal*, 30 April 2008.

<sup>9</sup> *Today's Zaman*, 30 April 2008

## Policy Recommendations

Turkish policymakers have no doubt that Turkey may play a mediating role in the dispute between Syria and Israel. Developing Turkish-Syrian relations, Turkey's good relations with Israel and U.S. confidence in Turkish attempts to move toward peace in the Middle East make Turkey a potential and qualified mediator in the region. We will therefore conclude with a number of issues which should be taken into consideration in order to facilitate Turkey's role as a mediator in this conflict.

- 1- In Turkey, foreign policy is an extension of the domestic political environment. Stability, security and democracy are necessary components of a flexible, constructive and peace-oriented foreign policy line. Any major setback in Turkey's democratization process may hinder its role in the region. Turkey's main asset in its role as mediator is its civil-economic and soft power image in the Middle East
- 2- Middle Eastern conflicts are connected to each other and any major instability has a tectonic impact on the others. Given the potentially escalating conflict between the U.S. and Iran, even a limited military operation could change all the balances in the region. Ethnic and sectarian differences are still source of instability and the new Iraq has now brought a Shia dimension to the fore. A marginalized Iran may spoil peace deals in the region. In short, the chaotic situation in the Middle East sets limits to peaceful initiatives in the region.
- 3- U.S. involvement in the region creates structural barriers, leaving local actors limited room for maneuvering. At the same time, U.S. policies in the region have reached a new level of unpopularity and any local actor that seems close to the U.S. is likely to be associated with these unpopular policies.
- 4- Turkey has always valued regional legitimacy but put a special emphasis on it over the last few years. The March 2003 motion and Turkey's critical attitude toward Israel have increased Turkey's popularity and credibility in the Arab streets. Turkey has a correct position in strategic and ethical terms and should preserve it by initiating active public diplomacy efforts.
- 5- The solution to the Syrian-Israeli dispute requires a long-term projection; Ankara should be ready to allow a long and difficult period of time for any final settlement.
- 6- The kind of mediation attempts in which Turkey is engaged requires, among others, a strong academic backing, and with it the production of policy options, papers, and alternative scenarios. There is need of support for academic programs, research centers and independent researchers. One expects conferences, workshops, educational programs in academic circles, in addition to op-eds and comments by Turkish scholars and experts on Turkey's mediator role in the Arab and Israeli media.
- 7- In order to enhance track II diplomacy, it may be useful to establish a Turkish-Syrian Forum which may be composed of experts, academics, journalists and NGO representatives. A Turkish-Syrian forum could serve to create channels for societal dialogue between Syria and Turkey. The forum could also open up new venues for person-to-person contact, and facilitate and complement official diplomatic activities.