

TURKEY'S MIDDLE EAST FOREIGN POLICY

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Turkey's geostrategic location as a land bridge to the Middle East from Europe and Russia, along with its Islamic and secular identity, enables it to play a pivotal role in the region. However, since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the foundations of the Republic of Turkey's foreign policy remained deeply rooted in the legacy of its founder, Kemal Ataturk, who redirected it towards the West, making Ankara an important ally of the United States and Europe. Since the inception of the Republic of Turkey, given its official secularism and a West-oriented foreign policy, the country at best remained a marginal player in the Middle East.

Although Turkey has even in the past made efforts to optimize its policy options with neighbouring countries on the one hand, and with great power players on the other, its recent involvement in the Middle East is noteworthy and reveals a reorientation of its foreign policy. Turkey's geographical location makes it an important country for transportation and communication between Europe and Central Asia via the Caucasus. The passage of pipelines through its territory for the transportation of oil and natural gas from Iran, Iraq, the Caucasus and Central Asia to European markets holds great economic benefits for the country. Furthermore, Ankara's bid to become a member of the European Union, and at the same time making efforts to improve its relationships with Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Tehran and Riyadh, show the extent to which Turkey is trying to become an important player in the region.

During the Cold War years, Turkey remained exclusively a European and American ally. However, the post-Cold War era witnessed a change in Turkish foreign policy, as Ankara's interests lay in following a multidimensional foreign policy. Turkey's primary stakes in the Middle East can be categorised as economic, diplomatic and geopolitical. Therefore, the Middle East is becoming a foreign policy priority for Turkey, which is evident from its willingness to mediate in the Arab-Israeli conflict; active interest in the Arab League, contribution to UN forces in Lebanon and NATO forces in Afghanistan, the assumption of a leadership position in the Organisation of Islamic Conference and the establishment of closer ties with Syria, Iran and Iraq. The most important aspect of Turkey's involvement in Mideast peace diplomacy is its role as a mediator for Syrian-Israeli peace talks which is at the cost of fierce opposition from

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Washington. Despite the fact that Turkey has been a staunch ally of the West, it has got involved in the Middle East due to its geographical proximity with the region and also because of certain convergent interests.

Turkey was quick to recognize the Palestinian Authority; and Kurdish dissidence has been a major problem for Turkey as well as Iraq, and both the countries have shared a common policy towards the Kurdish population and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). The Kurdish issue also assumed an important role in Turkey's relations with both Iran and Syria beginning in 1991. Ankara was concerned that Damascus and Tehran might exploit the Kurdish issue to put pressure on Turkey to compromise on other issues over which there were deep disagreements. For example, although Turkey had enjoyed relatively close political and diplomatic relations with Iran for more than fifty years following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, these ties were strained after 1979 when the Iranian Revolution brought to power an Islamic theocratic regime.

Relations between Turkey and Syria remained tense during the 1990s. In 1998, Turkey massed troops on its border with Syria to force the regime of President Hafez Assad into giving up support for the Syria-based PKK. However, since Ankara is following a multidimensional foreign policy, relations between Turkey and Syria have considerably improved and both countries see convergent interests in the Middle East as an unexpected result of the war in Iraq. That is also because the Turks believe that current U.S. policies in Iraq will end up creating an independent Kurdish State.

Another reason behind Turkish-Syrian cooperation is the growing isolation of Damascus within the Middle East and its deteriorating relations with Lebanon, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Turkey's cordial relations with countries of the Middle East, which are often locked in conflict with each other, make it the ideal country to become a mediator between rivals in the region. Similarly, Turkish assertiveness in the region and beyond is evident from the fact that Turkish-U.S. relations hit an all-time low in 2003, when U.S. was denied permission from Turkey to launch attacks on Iraq from its soil. Just when Washington was trying to isolate Damascus after the latter's alleged involvement in the murder of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, and also for sending jihadis into Iraq, Ankara continued to improve its economic and diplomatic ties with Damascus, thus angering the United States.

Nevertheless, important issues ranging from Iran, Iraq to Middle East peace, Turkey's policies have generally been consistent with those of the United States. Looking at things from the U.S. perspective, Turkey's two most controversial relationships in the region are with Iran and Syria.

Turkey remains committed to supporting a dialogue with Iran on the nuclear issue, as stability in the region is important for Ankara due to economic reasons as well. It may be seen that Iran is the second largest gas supplier to Turkey after Russia. Turkey's relations with Israel have remained stable and consistent and both countries have enjoyed sound economic and military relations, but recent months show that relations have become somewhat tense.

That is due to perceptions in certain circles in Israel that the present AKP government in Turkey is inclined towards the Palestinian cause. However, it may be noted that Israel has full faith in Turkey as a mediator between Israel and Syria. The Turkey-sponsored indirect talks between Syria and Israel did not produce any concrete result and came to a standstill after Israel's invasion of Gaza in December 2008. Apart from these positive developments, the rift and uneasiness between Ankara and Tel Aviv stem from reports that Israelis are developing close ties with Iraqi Kurds and also an Organisation related to the PKK. Turkey remained opposed to Israeli offensive in Gaza in December 2008 which it believes was a factor in undermining the peace efforts by Turkey and other mediators as well.

The Kurdish question is a driving force in the formation of Turkey's regional foreign policy. The past years have witnessed the Kurdish issue gaining an international dimension and also an important factor influencing Turkey's bilateral relations with Syria, Iran and Iraq. Similarly, the interplay between Ankara and Damascus on the Kurdish issue is linked to the former's greater control over water resources, in response to which the latter used the Kurdish card. These inter-related issues between the two countries are instrumental in formulating Turkey's foreign policy which has largely been reactive, due to reasons mentioned above. Improvement in relations between Iran and Turkey can be attributed to both the countries' shared interest in containing Kurdish nationalism.

Apart from diplomatic and geostrategic concerns, Turkish foreign policy in the region can also be attributed to strong economic interests. Trade ties with Middle Eastern countries hold significant benefits for Turkey, as increased attention to these have led to a boost in exports of manufactured goods, and also an inflow of tourists from the Middle Eastern countries. Although much of Turkey's foreign policy in the region is dictated by geostrategic and economic imperatives, it remains a traditional ally of the West, and also a candidate for EU membership, while maintaining a rising profile in the region. Water issues, energy politics, economic stakes, the Kurdish challenge and its diplomatic role are the drivers behind Turkey's pursuits in the region.

It can be said that Turkey can play a constructive role in the region as it has gained the confidence of regional players on issues of great significance and, more specifically, because of its role as a mediator on contentious issues between rival countries. Turkey can thus go a long way in influencing the politics of the Middle East and its credibility as a peace broker can reap many benefits for the country in the years to come.