

TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST

*Sarah Akram **

Introduction

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. 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. The Turkish government under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP, from its Turkish name: Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi) defines its foreign policy as one of having "zero problems with neighbours".

Turkey's primary stakes in the Middle East can be categorised as economic, diplomatic and geopolitical. That the Middle East is becoming a foreign policy priority for Turkey is

evident from its willingness to mediate in the Arab-Israeli conflict, active interest in the Arab League, contribution to U.N. 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. However, 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 Washington.

Turkey was also quick to recognize the Palestinian Authority, and has evinced interest in the plight of the Palestinian people. At the same time, 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 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 occasionally 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, relations between Turkey and Syria have now 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 may end up creating an independent Kurdish State.

Another reason behind Turkish-Syrian cooperation is the problems faced by Damascus within the Middle East and the state of its relations with Lebanon, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Turkey's cordial relations with countries of the Middle East, which are often locked in disputes 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 reportedly sending jihadis into Iraq, Ankara continued to improve its economic and diplomatic ties with Damascus, thus angering the United States.

Nevertheless, on 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 those ties have become somewhat tense.

That is due to perceptions in certain circles in Israel that the present AKP government 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, however, 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 gain 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.

As already pointed out, 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 has led to a boost in exports of manufactured goods, and also an inflow of tourists from the Middle Eastern countries. Currently, Turkey engages in 3 billion dollars of annual trade with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan collectively, which is 10 per cent of Turkey's trade volume with the Arab world. Less than one quarter of Turkish

exports is destined to Arab markets, whereas Europe accounts for 50 per cent of exports and 90 per cent of foreign investments.

The recent signing of a free trade agreement between Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan during a Turkish-Arab forum in Istanbul envisages the dropping of all trade and visa restrictions between these countries. This move reflects Turkey's will to strengthen cooperation within the region and the promotion of regional cooperation. Although much of Turkey's foreign policy in the region is dictated by geostrategic and economic imperatives, it still 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. However, this is not enough to explain Turkey's future role and importance in the region; there are a number of factors and choices for Turkey, which need to be taken into account before outlining the opportunities and stakes in the region for Ankara.

New directions in Turkish foreign policy

Developments in the Middle East in the post-9/11 era led to many changes in Turkish foreign policy towards the region, and the invasion of Iraq changed much for Turkish-U.S. relations. As mentioned above, Turkey's refusal to fulfil the U.S. demand for the use of its military bases and territory for the Iraqi invasion in March 2003 also affected relations between the two countries. The U.S. carried on the invasion with the help of other partners, and the Kurds in northern Iraq constituted one of the groups that provided significant support to America, thus increasing the distance between Ankara and Washington. Turkey's reservations were based on the U.S. support for the Kurds which, Ankara feared, would lead to separatist tendencies in Turkey. Meanwhile, even as Turkey expressed concern about the Kurds and problems regarding the PKK attacks, the United States demanded cooperation and support from Turkey regarding the new regime in Baghdad. This clash of interests marked the low point in relations between the two allies.

The period following the U.S. invasion of Iraq forced Ankara to rethink its Middle Eastern policy; the changing dynamics in the region being a catalyst for change. The shift in policy placed a priority on bilateral relations with countries in the region and also an improvement in ties. It may be noted that countries in the Middle East also had a cautious approach when it came to Turkey. Therefore, the changing perceptions can be attributed to the changing circumstances and political crises in the region. The AKP government's overtures towards the Middle East can also be attributed to Ankara's new and more proactive stance on Middle Eastern policy. This assertive stance is viewed in the Middle East by some as a consequence of AKP's Islamic roots; especially as some had believed that the secularisation of the Turkish republic had resulted in a loss of its Islamic identity.

The AKP came to power in 2002, and since then has been working towards a transformation in Ankara's domestic and foreign policies. The AKP has been instrumental in changing the structure of society by allowing public manifestations of Islam, and has also dedicated itself to the previously controversial issues like the right of women to wear headscarves in universities and other public places. However, the AKP's attempt to lift the headscarf ban, which is prohibited at present, created some trouble for the party as it was challenged in the Constitutional Court in 2008 by the State prosecutor for challenging the country's secular constitution. The party has also tried to reduce the influence of the military in order to deter future coups and has brought about legal changes that constrict the military's power over politics. It can be seen that the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan pushed aside the military's effort to prevent Abdullah Gul, a leading AKP member, from assuming the presidency in 2007. Apart from this, Erdogan brought civilians to the National Security Council which was previously dominated by the military. It can be said that Turkey, a country known for military coups, is now less likely to have them.

The performance of the AKP in many areas has been a harbinger of change, and one such area which warrants attention is the Turkish policy towards the Kurds. Previously, the Turkish government treated the quasi-independent Kurdistan Regional Government as a danger to Iraq's unity and also an instigator of Kurdish separatism in Turkey. However, the AKP has embarked upon a policy of engaging the Kurdistan Regional Government in order to win the confidence of the Iraqi Kurds on a number of issues. Coming to the issue of Kurds living in Turkey, some success has been made to ease problems, and the present government has very enlightened views about granting civil liberties to this ethnic minority. Promises have been made to allow the Kurds to express their cultural identity more freely and to also ease restrictions on the use of Kurdish language.

Despite domestic and foreign policy changes on various fronts, Turkey has not given up on Europe, while pursuing the East. Although there has been a recent rise in Turkey's Middle East trade, it is important to view the overall scenario of Ankara's interests in the region and beyond. Turkey's trade with the EU has been significant, and nine-tenths of Turkey's foreign investment in 2008 came from the EU. Moreover, there are also a large number of Turkish residents and visitors in Europe, compared to the very small number in the Middle East. Similarly, the majority of Turkey's foreign visitors also come from Europe. Ankara's efforts to revitalize relations with the Middle East are seen in its efforts in the improvement of bilateral relations, trade and the easing of private travel between residents of some Middle Eastern countries and Turkey.

Other than trade, Turkey's interests also revolve around energy politics and access to cheap energy from the planned Nabucco trunk pipeline. Growing energy needs have compelled Turkey to sign an agreement with six countries to build a pipeline that would bring natural gas from the Caucasus and Central Asia through Turkey to Europe. The future of the Nabucco pipeline is still uncertain, but the pipeline project has already raised Turkey's importance in the eyes of EU's energy-starved countries.

There may be numerous reasons behind Turkey's active involvement in the region, but two important factors are said to be what Western analysts often call "neo-Ottomanism" and the Kurdish challenge. The Kurdish challenge is seen as an existential threat to Turkey's territorial integrity and the regional security environment, whereas neo-Ottomanism is inclined toward Turkey's "soft power". Although neo-Ottomanism does not rely on imperialist expansionism as far as its geostrategic vision is concerned, its determination is built around promoting a high-profile diplomatic, political and economic role in the Middle East as well as Europe. This quest of the Turkish republic is not disturbed by its multiple identities, but is idealistic and ambitious in promoting and projecting Turkey as a regional superpower.

Dealing with the Kurdish question and the Middle East is indeed difficult as that requires a highly balanced approach; and for Ankara the Kurdish question remains the central factor in the formulation of its regional security policy. It is the Kurdish question which makes Turkish foreign policy reactive to a certain extent. There are diverging views within Turkey as far as the Kemalist and neo-Ottoman identity of Turkey is concerned. The Kemalists lay emphasis on nationalist assimilation and strongly oppose multiculturalism, whereas those supporting neo-Ottomanism are open to cultural rights for Kurds.

Apart from that, issues of Turkey's Islamic identity and religious freedoms are a source of friction between neo-Ottomans and Kemalists. These differences have major ramifications for Turkish foreign policy as they lead to diverging perceptions of the Middle East and the West at large. From the secular establishment's point of view, the West is on the wrong side of the Kurdish issue and also political Islam. The formerly pro-West Kemalist circles have thus increasingly turned anti-American and anti-EU, whereas former Islamists have increasingly become supporters of good relations with the EU and the United States.

Changes at the regional level have indeed been instrumental in giving the Turkish government more incentives to pay increased attention to regional relations, even if they are at the expense of American interests. With the Iraq war being a factor in undermining America's moral position, it has become difficult for the Turkish government to balance relations with the Middle East and America. The Arab-Israeli rapprochement in the early 1990s which is also attributed to the Madrid Conference in 1991, helped create an environment in which Turkish-Israeli ties could develop without much criticism in Turkey. Later, when this rapprochement dissolved, following the Al-Aqsa Intifada 2000 and also the Israeli-Lebanese war in 2006, it became difficult for Turkey to balance relations with Israel, America and the Arab world.

Turkey's role in the changing regional environment

As mentioned above, Turkey has been conducting its foreign policy under conditions that encourage a multi-dimensional approach. The happenings in the region have posed numerous challenges for Ankara; the Iraq war being a significant cause behind volatility in the region and also increased instability across the border in northern Iraq. The prospect of West's possible confrontation with Iran is also an obvious source of risk for Turkey and security in Turkey's neighbourhood. Besides these factors, Turkey has had many new opportunities for activism, and its relations function well with the West in key areas, despite foot-dragging by the European Union on membership issues together with deteriorating relations with the United States. As for the Middle East, the AKP government has greatly enhanced and expanded Turkey's engagement with the Arab and Muslim world, and is, therefore, looking east and south as well.

Turkey's regional security environment has been affected by the August 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia. A number of important changes have occurred which include the reality of a resurgent Russia that may look for assertiveness around the Black Sea and Central Asia. Similarly, Turkey's relations with Syria are also an important aspect of this whole change, as Russia has proposed to upgrade air defences with Syria. Changing Turkish foreign policy in the region, if viewed in the current regional context, can be attributed to several factors. Turkey no longer shares a border with what once was the Soviet Union, and Turkey's previously crucial position for NATO has now been reduced. Prior to the end of the Cold War, Turkey's relations with the Middle East had always been of secondary importance to its NATO membership. This situation has been changing for several important reasons.

The first is the Kurdish dissidence in Turkey which is affecting relations with its neighbours, mainly Iran, Iraq and Syria. The second is the growing problem of water and its likelihood to generate disputes with Syria and Iraq. Thirdly, new economic opportunities for Turkey in the region are also an important factor. Moreover, some countries in the Gulf are beginning to see the importance of a strong and stable Turkey as a balance to threats from less stable regimes. Importantly, Turkey's continued stability is also a very important factor which is critical to the region's political future.

The Kurdish rebellion also compels Turkey and its neighbours to deal with each other more seriously, as that can be a cause of serious friction. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that cautious and guarded relations on both sides are undergoing a certain degree of change as a result of frequent political crises in the region and also a new, proactive and assertive stance on Middle Eastern policy by the AKP government. This change is also attributed to the party's Islamic roots, and that has had a very positive effect on Muslim Arabs who believe that the secularization of the Turkish Republic had resulted in a loss of its Muslim identity.

Turkey's foreign policy dilemmas in the Middle East

As already noted, Turkish foreign policy in the region has been affected by certain factors; the most important being the Kurdish issue. During the late 1980s, the Kurdish question gained an international dimension, and also it emerged as a very important factor influencing Turkey's bilateral relations with Syria, Iraq and Iran.

i) Syria

In its relations with Syria, Turkey shares some converging interests as well as some diverging interests. The converging interests are of an economic nature, whereas the diverging interests are political. The Kurdish issue and water problems have been the most significant in terms of hostility between the neighbours. Discord between the two countries increased in the 1970s when the Turks started the construction of the GAP (South eastern Anatolia Project), the large dam project on the Euphrates River, and eventually the Tigris, which, when completed, restricted the water flow into Syria. Another point of conflict has been the entrenched dispute over the Hatay Province.

Relations between the two countries worsened due to Turkish claims that the Syrian government was providing safe havens to PKK members and also the PKK leadership. Damascus was indeed supporting the PKK leadership and had given refuge to PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. Turkey has many stakes in the above-mentioned GAP project which aims at providing hydroelectric power as well as irrigation to the underdeveloped southeast. The GAP project is instrumental in bringing prosperity to the southeast where most of the Kurds reside, and the positive impact of the project can be instrumental in overcoming Kurdish separatist appeals. The Syrians as well as Iraqis have intensely opposed Turkish control of the Euphrates and Tigris waters by means of the GAP project. On the other hand, Turkey considers Euphrates and Tigris as trans-boundary watercourses.

The negotiations over the water issue have not been very successful, mainly due to the inflexibility of the disputants. The Syrians sought to strengthen their bargaining position over the water issues by supporting the PKK. As a result, relations between the two countries worsened. In October 1998, Turkey massed troops at the border with Syria and threatened war. As a result, Syria expelled Ocalan, the PKK leader, and met all of Turkey's demands to cease support of the PKK. Previously, Syria had tried to increase pressure upon Turkey by signing a Defense Cooperation Agreement with Greece in 1995. This move by Syria was not fruitful as the agreement helped stimulate Israeli cooperation agreements with Turkey. After the high tension period in 1998, the neighbours have sought to improve relations through increasing cross-border trade, encouraging transportation and energy links and also tourism.

As a result, there has been a significant improvement in relations, and although there has been no formal settlement of the water dispute or the dispute over the Hatay

Province, the upward trend in relations, with improved trade ties, is a welcome change from the past.

ii) Israel

Turkey's relations with Israel are of prime importance and had greatly deepened in the 1990s when a unique alliance was forged between the two countries. Their close ties with the United States created a new triangular strategic alliance in the post-Cold War era, and high-level political visits, intelligence sharing and joint military exercises became a permanent feature of this relationship. It is noteworthy that Turkey was the first Middle Eastern State to recognise Israel diplomatically, in 1949, soon after its creation. In the 1950s, Turkey entered into a secret strategic pact with Israel, intending to pose a counterweight to growing Arab nationalism.

After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Turkey began to tilt towards the Arab side and, in 1969, started attending the newly-constituted Organisation of Islamic Conference. The 1970s marked the beginning of Turkey's increased attention towards building relations with the Arab Middle East. As a result, Ankara's pro-Palestinian sympathies began to affect its relationship with Israel. However, despite periods of unease, Turkey continued its cooperation with Israel in the military and economic spheres.

Strategically, the Turkish-Israel alliance sent a powerful message to their potential Middle East adversaries, like Syria, Iran and Iraq. Specifically, Turkey's military cooperation with Israel was intended to discourage Greek and Syrian relations, concluded in 1995. The close alliance between Turkey and Israel also affected intra-Arab alignments to a certain extent, and at the same time made it difficult for Turkey to resolve its problems with its other Middle Eastern neighbours, such as Iran and Syria, both of which remained hostile towards Israel. It may be noted that Israel has been a supporter of Turkey's EU integration.

The ascendance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in 2002 has marked an important turning-point in Ankara's relations with Middle Eastern neighbours as well as Israel. Recently, a number of factors have been instrumental in increasing the distance between Turkey and Israel. Some critics point to the Islamist roots of the AKP government as a reason behind cooling relations between Turkey and Israel. Ankara's

improving relations with the Arab world come in tandem with its cooling relations with Israel. The present Turkish government has been extremely critical of Israeli actions vis-à-vis Palestinians and has been a harsh critic of Israeli actions in Gaza in the winter of 2008 and has also criticized illegal Israeli settlements.

The Turkish government has time and again criticised Israel on the latter's using disproportionate force against the Palestinians, and has also called on the UN Security Council to put some pressure on Israel regarding nuclear arms as it does on Iran. A number of incidents between Turkey and Israel have been a source of continued tension between the two problematic allies.

In January 2009, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan staged a walkout from the World Economic Forum Summit in protest against Israel's Gaza policies, and later, also excluded Israel from a multinational air defence exercise. These incidents marked a low point in relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv. Similarly, a recent incident, during which a Turkish diplomat faced humiliation at the hands of Israel's deputy foreign minister, is an example of the rift, and Israel has also been criticising a Turkish television series in which Israeli soldiers are portrayed killing Palestinian children ruthlessly. Therefore, it is seen that Turkey is a notable exception these days, as far as Israeli policy towards the Palestinians is concerned.

c) Iran

Turkey and Iran did not enjoy cordial relations when each was the centre of an empire: the Ottoman and the Persian, respectively. However, as the empires dissolved and each country took an independent course, there seemed to be no rivalry between the two, as Iran, under the Shah, was pro-West and so was Turkey under the republican leadership of Kemal Ataturk. Later, the Islamic Revolution in Iran made Turkey somewhat sceptical about Iran's future agenda in the region and beyond. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union increased competition between the two countries for influence in the regions of the former Soviet Union. At present, Turkey shares some converging economic interests with Iran, as well as some diverging interests. The mutual economic interests include trade, and for Turkey, Iran is a source of energy such as gas and oil. In December 2001, Iranian gas began to flow into Turkey which was the direct result of the 1996 long-term supply agreement between the two sides.

Apart from energy politics, Turkey and Iran have a common problem, which is tackling Kurdish nationalism. Their political interests diverge when it comes to ideological issues, and Turkey has in the past accused Iran of supporting radical Islamist groups. Diplomatic relations between Ankara and Tehran hit an all-time low in 1997 when the Iranian ambassador to Turkey called for the adoption of the Islamist Sharia system in Turkey, in a speech in Turkey.

Relations improved, however, with the coming into power of the AKP, and Iran and Turkey continue to hold high-level diplomatic talks to discuss their mutual concerns over the problem of Kurdish nationalism and how best to avoid the establishment of an autonomous Kurdistan in northern Iraq. Similarly, after Iran, Turkey is the second Muslim country which strongly criticised Israeli actions in Gaza. Turkey's improving relations with Iran are also evident from the nuclear swap deal between Turkey, Iran and Brazil and its cool reception in the west. Moreover, Turkey has also been a strong opponent of UN sanctions against Iran.

d) Iraq

Turkey's relations with Iraq have best been influenced by the Kurdish issue and continue to do so. The two countries have always cooperated on the Kurdish issue to the extent that, in the 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq conflict, Iraq allowed Turkey to carry out cross-border actions against PKK supporters who had fled to Iraq. Relations with Iraq deteriorated when Turkey sided with the United States during the 1991 Gulf War. Prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Turkey remained marginally comfortable with the regime of Saddam Hussein, as Iraq provided security on Turkey's southern border, and the fact that the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein was very effective against the Kurds was satisfying enough for the Turkish government.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, changed much for Turkish foreign policy in the region and beyond. Firstly, the rift between Turkey and the United States surfaced, because of Turkish refusal to cooperate with Washington, and secondly, Turkey began to view the post-Saddam Iraq with scepticism with respect to the future of Kurds. Military cooperation between the Americans and Kurds, along with their joint build-up in Kurdistan, raised many eyebrows in Ankara. The uncertain future of Iraq remains a dilemma for Turkey, and as long as there is some form of American presence in Iraq, it

becomes difficult for Ankara to take direct action to subdue the Iraqi Kurds without undermining its vital strategic relations with the United States. Ankara fears that a loosely federated and unstable Iraq could possibly rekindle Kurdish separatism in Turkey and lead to an irredentist movement for Turkish Kurds in Southeast Anatolia.

It can be said that Turkey's Iraq dilemma stems from many factors; and mainly from the convergence and divergence of interests. The convergence, mostly, comes in economic interests and energy sources; whereas the divergence stems from Turkey's desire to be able to cross over the Iraqi border to root out the PKK safe havens. Therefore, the fear of an independent Kurdistan cannot be ignored by Turkey. The situation in the region compels Turkey to maintain a very delicate balance in its relations with the United States, while pursuing a policy in the region that does not undermine its interests as far as the Kurdish issue is concerned.

Conclusion

Turkey's increased engagement in the Middle East and its multi-dimensional foreign policy towards the region is a break from the past as Turkey had earlier remained a passive player in the Middle East. However, Turkey's active involvement in the region reflects its desire to become an important regional player as Ankara is making efforts to improve bilateral ties with countries in the region. While EU's foot-dragging on Turkish membership continues, Ankara remains on the path to reorientation of its foreign policy priorities in the region and beyond. Turkish facilitation of Arab-Israeli rapprochement and, among others, the indirect mediation in talks between Syria and Israel in 2008, reveal a new Turkey.

Similarly, the cooling of Turkey-Israel relations says a lot about how Turkey views its relations with its strategic partner. This tension with Israel surfaced specifically after the Gaza war, and Ankara has been a strong critic of Israeli actions towards the civilian population. Apart from the Middle East, certain Turkish foreign policy initiatives are making Western governments uncomfortable. These are mainly, Turkey's closer relationship with Russia, which is largely driven by expansion in Turkish-Russian trade. Similarly, Turkish initiatives in favour of Iran are making Israel uncomfortable, with whom relations have hit a rocky path since the Gaza war in 2008-2009, and relations have further deteriorated after the attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla by Israeli commandoes, killing several Turkish peace activists in May 2010.

The Turkish Prime Minister was one of the few leaders who congratulated Mahmoud Ahmedinejad on winning Iran's presidential election in 2009. Similarly, the AKP government also opposed the appointment of former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, as chief of NATO as he, being the Prime Minister of Denmark had defended a Danish newspaper's decision to publish cartoons that offended Muslims. For the West and specifically the EU, this was a case of being sensitive to Muslim sensibilities.

Although Turkish-U.S. relations have experienced a new set of problems in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, mainly due to opposing objectives, Ankara still views the United States as a valuable ally and would not like any major damage to relations between the two. Even though Turkey has embarked upon an improvement in relations with Armenia, tensions could escalate as Western governments rattle that the killings of 1915 amounted to genocide. It is likely that relations with the United States will remain complex and may become tense at some point.

The thaw in relations with Syria, an improvement in relations with Iran and harsh criticism of Israel reflect that Turkey has embarked upon a very ambitious foreign policy agenda which aims to optimize relations with neighbours, while continuing its quest for EU accession. Some of Turkey's foreign policy overtures in the Middle East seem to raise eyebrows in Washington but, nonetheless, Ankara is determined to carry on with the assertiveness. Turkey's efforts towards peace and stability in the region and beyond are evident from the fact that Turkey has hosted several presidential level trilateral summits with Afghanistan and Pakistan to ease tensions between the two neighbours.

It is clear that Turkey has redefined its identity in clear terms and, given its complex identity, it does not want to side with any one camp, but instead wants to balance its role with a network of intricate alliances. Therefore, Turkey is asserting itself as a new global force in international politics with its ambitious leadership, which is trying to chart an independent path, while not giving up on the EU, and at the same time continuing its endeavours of becoming an influential power in the Middle East.

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* The writer is Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.

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