

# TURKEY'S CHALLENGE TO THE REALIST WORLD ORDER

*This paper analyzes Turkish foreign policy activism in recent years with reference to transformations at global, regional and societal levels. By dint of these changes, the paper argues that Turkey has become more able to pursue a value-based foreign policy which prioritizes values over interests. Focusing on a set of policy issues, the paper also makes an assessment of sustainability of value-based Turkish foreign policy in a realist world order.*

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**T**he pro-active foreign policy pursued by Turkey in recent years ignited attempts by researchers to conceptualize the country's foreign policy behavior. The perception that recent foreign policy choices of Turkey diverged from those of its Western allies has placed Turkish activism under closer scrutiny. In this context, recent bold initiatives launched by Turkey were associated with the concepts of "shift of axis" and "neo-Ottomanism" by some circles. It is a fact that on one hand, Turkey has been adopting a multidimensional and omnipresent foreign policy in comparison to previous periods in its history. On the other hand, the lack of a comprehensive look at the underlying dynamics affecting Turkish foreign policy behavior would result in erroneous judgments. With this in mind, it is imperative to cover the new tendencies in Turkish foreign policy within the context of transformations and interactions underway at global, regional and societal levels.

This paper explores recent Turkish foreign policy behavior, putting a set of policy issues under the spotlight, with the aim of establishing a conceptual basis for recent Turkish activism in its region and beyond. Within this framework, it will be argued that Turkey has been recently pursuing a "value-based foreign policy" to attain its objectives: one that prioritizes values over interests and puts emphasis on cooperation and dialogue rather than confrontation. Finally, the extent to which Turkey can pursue a value-based foreign policy in a realist world order is examined.

### ***Underlying Dynamics of Turkish Foreign Policy Activism***

An analysis of ongoing transformations at global, regional and societal levels will help us better comprehend new tendencies of Turkish foreign policy. From a global perspective, the changes underwent particularly after the Cold War in political, economic and cultural realms had serious repercussions for all states as well as for Turkey. The discussion that the world political stage has been evolving into a multi-polar or non-polar<sup>1</sup> character has started to be pronounced more in political and academic circles.<sup>2</sup> The same goes for the economic sphere. The global financial crisis of 2008-2009, which obviously differed from the previous crises has sparked a new debate on the "economic shift of axis" at a global level.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it was not emerging economies, but the Western economies which suffered the consequences of the recent economic crisis the most. When it comes to the cultural sphere, it is possible to enumerate a number of success stories of alternative

<sup>1</sup> Richard N. Haass, "The Age of Non-Polarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance", *Foreign Affairs*, (May-June 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of the Rest", *Newsweek*, 3 May 2008 <http://www.newsweek.com/2008/05/03/the-rise-of-the-rest.print.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ziya Öniş, "Multiple Faces of the "New" Turkish Foreign Policy: Underlying Dynamics and a Critique", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13 No. 1, (January-March 2011), p. 55.

modernities (such as Japan and China) rather than those of Western style. Given this background, transformation at the global level not only enables but also necessitates Turkey to pursue a multilateral foreign policy.

Transformations at regional and societal levels and interaction between these two layers have also been performing a crucial role in Turkish foreign policy activism. Deep cultural and historical ties enjoyed with the neighboring countries lay groundwork for Turkey to cooperate with its close vicinity. Nevertheless, up until recent times, lack of mutual trust and close dialogue between regional actors, which were triggered by past experiences dating back to the First World War, impeded comprehensive cooperation opportunities. Given the multicultural structure of Turkey, this negative atmosphere caused some drawbacks in the domestic sphere as well. This climate has not only decelerated the process of cooperation of Turkey with the neighboring countries, but also caused ethnicity-based tensions (such as the situation of the Greek Orthodox community in Turkey) to take root gradually in the domestic sphere. This obviously resulted in a vicious circle between domestic and foreign policy-making processes. What is evident in recent years is the breaking of this vicious circle and its transformation into a virtuous one.

It is possible to claim that one of the crucial factors that helped Turkey break this vicious circle and develop long-term strategic relations with its neighbors is its considerable success to surmount its psychological barriers inside. In this regard, bold reforms undertaken by Turkey, particularly on ethnicity-based matters, with a view of furthering democratic consolidation, laid a fertile ground for the mental normalization of Turkish public opinion.

In an atmosphere of mutual dialogue, Turkey has become more inclusive towards its minority populations. Given the fact that Turkey enjoys common cultural, social and historical ties with its neighbors, the more inclusive Turkey became within, the more cooperative it has been able to act outside. The interaction between domestic and foreign spheres has been working the other way around as well. Increasing cooperation with neighbors has been enabling Turkey to take inclusive steps within Turkish borders. As a matter of fact, globalization urges international actors to be more interdependent, therefore rendering foreign and domestic spheres more intertwined. Thanks to its historical and cultural ties with the adjacent regions, Turkey feels the effect of this interaction between foreign and domestic spheres deeper.

Further inclusive reforms underway in the domestic sphere will continue to contribute to Turkey's developing relations with its neighbors and vice versa. With this in mind, the reforms undertaken towards further democratization and improved human rights have been offering an opportunity to discuss ethnicity-based problems in a more

democratic and rational context. Reform progress expedited by the EU anchor renders the *raison d'être* of terrorist struggle of PKK/Kurdistan Workers' Party (the pretext of obtaining extended rights and liberties) void. This, accordingly, prevents the terrorist organization from gaining ground by misusing ethnicity-based sentiments. On the other hand, handling of this issue on a more rational and comprehensive basis has been helping Turkey broaden cooperation with the local administration in the north of Iraq. In return, closer regional cooperation with relevant authorities help root out PKK terrorism in the region. By dint of this mutually reinforcing process, Turkey not only contributes to the stability of this region but also overcomes possible negative repercussions to its national security.

Turkey's developing relations with Greece after a long period of tension is a case in point as well. Exploratory contacts regarding issues in the Aegean and regular political consultations at state level help foster mutual understanding. Even the positive climate provided at the state level lays a fertile ground for both sides to meet the expectations of Greek and Turkish minorities in their respective societies. To this end, Turkey has demonstrated willingness to meet the needs of Greek Orthodox community in Turkey. Turkey's positive attitude towards the Greek community also provides an incentive for Greece to follow suit for the Turkish minority in Western Thrace.

Similar to this precedent, Turkey is home to diverse ethnicities that have kinship ties to the societies of neighboring states. Likewise, a considerable amount of people of Turkish origin lives in neighboring states. Such an interaction between domestic and foreign spheres set Turkey a task to synchronize these two processes. Two mechanisms at state and societal level, namely High Level Cooperation Councils established in collaboration with various states, and agreements on the abolition of the visa regime are instrumental to this end. Besides all its political and economic returns, these two mechanisms offer a window of opportunity for the relevant parties to further cooperate with their adjacent regions. With this understanding, high level political dialogue and increasing interaction between the societies will help all the parties to discard fears which emanate from the 19th and 20th centuries.

### ***Conceptualizing Turkish Foreign Policy***

Recent activism in Turkish foreign policy is a natural consequence of realizing its potential in a changing global and regional context. In other words, due to a set of transformations and interactions at various levels, Turkey has developed multi-dimensional relations with other parties. Therefore, the thesis of "shift of axis" seems reductionist. The claim that Turkey has drifted away from the West because of EU's unwillingness seems problematic as well. Those explaining Turk-

ish activism particularly in the Middle East, with reference to the disappointment with the EU negotiation process, overlook Turkey's potential emanating from its close historical, cultural and social ties with its neighborhood. The role of the EU in helping Turkey to be more inclusive inside, so that it acts more cooperative outside, is substantial. In plain language, democratic reforms, backed by the EU anchor, have been helping Turkey cooperate further with its neighbors. Therefore, Turkey's bid to join the EU indirectly facilitates Turkey's cooperation process with neighboring countries. What is more, the "shift of axis" thesis falls short of explaining some issues such as the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement and Turkey's recent initiatives to establish High Level Cooperation Councils with its non-Eastern partners such as Greece, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

*"One of the most important consequences of the possible success of Turkey's new approach will be the questioning of the prevailing realist paradigm."*

On the other hand, it is not hyperbolic to claim that the idea of neo-Ottomanism, which implies expansionist motivations, is a product of the interest-centric paradigm. As this paradigm tries to explain international relations with reference to realist concepts, those adopting such a point of view assess the steps taken by Turkey as maneuvers to gain regional influence, instead of dwelling on possible contributions of these steps to world peace. The crucial factor undermined is that Turkey has become more able to pursue a value-based foreign policy to attain its objectives. This approach finds its meaning in the principle "Peace at Home, Peace Abroad" set out by the founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. To what extent Turkey has been successful in putting this vision into practice is debatable. However, it is evident that transformations underway at various levels have been offering Turkey a window of opportunity to achieve success in this task.

The very reason of misinterpreting Turkish attitude towards a set of disputed issues is the lack of devising a proper perspective on the style of Turkish foreign policy making. Turkey's approach to Iran's nuclear program, Turkish-Armenian normalization process, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Gaza blockade as well as the Israeli raid against the Freedom Flotilla in high seas on 31 May 2010, are the cases in point. Turkey, sometimes taking into account all the possible side effects, has been adopting a value-based foreign policy in all these issues. With this understanding, while promoting the idea of a nuclear free zone in the Middle East, Turkey does not object that Iran develops its nuclear program for peaceful purposes.

The same logic works when it comes to relations with Israel. Historical relations exist between the Turks and the Jews. Turkey was among the first states to recognize Israel after its independence.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Syria and Israel started indirect peace talks under the auspices of Turkey in 2008. Nevertheless, Turkey reacted to flagrant violation of human rights in Gaza for only ethical concerns.

Turkey was among the first countries to recognize Armenia as well. What is more, Turkey extended a helping hand to Armenia when it was in dire need of humanitarian aid in the wake of its independence.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, closure of the border between Turkey and Armenia was a principled reaction of Turkey to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories. In order to reach a comprehensive and lasting peace and overcome all the boundaries in the Southern Caucasus, Turkey signed Protocols with Armenia on “Establishment of Diplomatic Relations” and “Development of Bilateral Relations” on 10 October 2009. Some circles questioning Turkey’s sincerity on this issue went so far as to claim that Turkey signed the Protocols with a view to preventing the Parliaments of third parties from passing resolutions recognizing the 1915 events as “genocide”. Indeed, these circles fall into the same trap of explaining the Turkish vision of peace with reference to ulterior motives and a concealed agenda.

The fact that Turkey’s new foreign policy activism opens up new horizons for further cooperation with its close vicinity should not imply that Turkey acts this way in order to exercise influence in its region and in the global fora. Being cognizant of the interaction that stability of neighboring states directly contributes to its own stability, Turkey earnestly strives for achieving just peace in the region, albeit runs the risks of being costly sometimes. At this juncture, recent divergences between Turkey and some of its strategic allies in various policy issues stem from the fact that Turkey’s value-based approach does not fully overlap with interest-based policies of other parties.

Certain researchers, adopting interest-centric perspective, have dwelled on the question of whether recent activism in Turkish foreign policy is a reflection of imperial aspirations.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the question to ask should be to what extent value-based foreign policy of Turkey is sustainable and to what extent this policy can contribute to just peace.

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<sup>4</sup> “Turkey’s Political Relations with Israel”, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-political-relations-with-israel.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-political-relations-with-israel.en.mfa).

<sup>5</sup> “Turkey’s Political Relations with Armenia”, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-political-relations-with-armenia.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-political-relations-with-armenia.en.mfa).

<sup>6</sup> For a critical analysis of skeptic approaches to Turkish foreign policy, see: E. Fuat Keyman, “Turkish Foreign Policy in the Era of Global Turmoil”, *SETA Policy Brief*, December 2009 <http://www.setav.org/Ups/dosya/7855.pdf>.

## ***Turkey's Challenge to the Realist World Order***

In international relations lexicon, the existence of a realist world order in which nation-states strive for reaching a position that best fits their interests is a widely accepted assumption. What makes this order prevalent is the fact that the actors feel obliged to pursue interest-based policies to survive, under the supposition that other actors follow the suit. This implies that the realist world order is the result of mutually-perpetuating assumptions of nation-states. On the other hand, Turkey's value-based foreign policy, which constitutes a challenge to the existing system, could break the routine. It is only natural that Turkey will face a systemic resistance in such a world order. In this regard, the fate of this policy will mostly depend on two factors: Turkey's own capability and decisiveness to sustain this policy and the tendency of international actors to embrace this new understanding.

Turkey's capability to sustain its value-based foreign policy will be closely related to the country's domestic transformation. Though the global and regional conjuncture offers a set of valuable opportunities for Turkey, it will be able to take advantage of these opportunities as long as it puts its home in order. To this end, synchronization of above-mentioned policies in domestic and foreign spheres will help Turkey make great strides on both realms.

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This issue, which would have repercussions far beyond the region, will be one of many challenging tasks for Turkey in the period ahead. It is, therefore, possible to state that the EU anchor is still an essential instrument for further reform in the domestic sphere, though a considerable decrease recently in the EU enthusiasm among Turkish public opinion can be observed. At this juncture, instead of getting stuck in a debate over whether full membership will be realized, focusing on the negotiation process would be preferable for both Turkey and the EU. As a matter of fact, Turkey's further alignment with the EU *acquis* is even appreciated by actors in the EU who do not favor Turkey's eventual full membership. Moreover, continuous questioning of Turkey's full membership results in nothing but a considerable decrease in public enthusiasm.

In order for Turkey to achieve success in employing a value-based policy, this understanding should fall on receptive ears in the international arena as well. Indeed, relations based solely on interest are destined to deteriorate when the interest ceases to exist. Therefore, it is fair to state that international politics, if based

on values and ethics, is comparably long lasting. In addition, an interest-oriented nation-state does not refrain from violating universal values and norms when its interest is at stake. In this regard, a purely interest-based foreign policy is likely to prove incoherent in the long run. On the other hand, a large number of states assume that coherency or ethics is not a prerequisite as long as the policy serves the interests. However, new realities on the ground seem to urge states to take ethics into account more in the years to come. That is to say, ongoing advancement of communication technologies brings facts to light sooner or later. In such a transparent environment, governments will be more accountable both to their respective societies and to the international community. In an age of global turmoil, where trust is of crucial importance, transparency will play into the hands of those who pursue value-based foreign policy. On the other hand, being cognizant of the fact that truth will prevail in the long run, states are likely to care more for ethics.

Furthermore, today's world is shrinking at such an accelerating pace that international actors become inevitably interconnected to each other. In this world of interdependency, it is only natural that a state is likely to face a tradeoff between its contradicting interests in a particular policy issue. If the state employs a foreign policy on the basis of interest, it might be obliged to remain passive for the sake of preserving its interests. In contrast, a state prioritizing value over interest will enjoy a significant degree of independence. The fact that some interest-oriented actors, having a stake in both relevant sides, are not able to take a firm stance on some protracted conflicts sets a precedent to this dilemma. Given this background, it is possible to claim that the outcomes of globalization seem to be increasingly in favor of the ones pursuing value-based policies.

Given the aforementioned transformations at different levels, conditions seem to be ripe for Turkey to continue to pursue a value-based foreign policy, though the tide of events is an open question. One of the most important consequences of the possible success of Turkey's new approach will be the questioning of the prevailing realist paradigm. This would be a significant contribution of Turkey to the quest for a just international system. The future course of events on a set of policy issues such as Turkish-Israeli relations, the Turkish-Armenian normalization process, and Iran's nuclear program seem to be litmus tests of this understanding.