

# TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY AND IRAN

*This article elaborates upon Turkey's foreign policy with a specific focus on relations with Iran. Turkish foreign policy is predicated on its unique historical experience and geography which endows it with an added sense of responsibility which Turkish policy makers must acknowledge and wholeheartedly embrace. Accordingly, Turkish policymakers are trying to overcome differences between countries in conflict through confidence-building measures and by acting as a mediator and facilitator to find solutions to chronic regional problems. And within this process, a particular importance is attached to the Middle East and to Iran.*

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**A**round a dozen years remain until 2023, which will mark the centennial of the Republic of Turkey. As Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, I am particularly proud to witness that Turkey's presence and influence is increasingly felt worldwide.

A number of contributing factors have enabled my country's voice to be heard at the global level. Turkey is the only United Nations Security Council member that is simultaneously a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Islamic Conference Organization (ICO), G-20, ECO<sup>1</sup>, D-8<sup>2</sup> and a candidate to the European Union<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Turkey is currently the chairman-in-office of the South East European Co-operation Process and will take over the chairmanship of CICA<sup>4</sup> and the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe this year.

Turkey's emergence on the global stage is due as much to its pro-active diplomatic style as to its domestic reforms and successful economic performance. With a total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of around 915 billion U.S. dollars, Turkey has the 15th largest economy in the world and the sixth largest in Europe. In 2009, our foreign trade amounted to around 242 billion U.S. dollars. (of which respectively 102 and 140 billion dollars are Turkish exports and imports) With its dynamic and fast growing economy, Turkey is also acting as a catalyst for regional economic cooperation, integration and transformation.

Turkey is increasingly more active in international fora. I sincerely believe that within a decade, our standing on international affairs will be even greater.

Turkey is keen to preserve its "national interests". In my opinion it is not easy to define this term. This appears to be result of the fact that the core interests of a country are intangible, perceptual and normative. Notwithstanding this ambi-

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<sup>1</sup> The Economic Co-operation Organization has ten member states. (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan)

<sup>2</sup> The Developing 8 (D-8) group consists of Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey. The group was established after an announcement in Istanbul, Turkey on 15 June 1997.

<sup>3</sup> As Turkey's relations with the EU and its accession to the EU have been one of the subjects of the article by H.E Prof Dr Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, in *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Volume 8, No. 3, pp. 11-17, I will not refer thereto.

<sup>4</sup> The Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia has twenty members states (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Palestine, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan) and seven observer states. (Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Qatar, Vietnam, Ukraine and the U.S.)

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guity, “national interest” is essential for any foreign policy and the intent of the decision-makers that employ it.

A country’s objective interests are those that it seeks to protect through its foreign policy. The preservation of its territorial integrity, the defense of its population, resources, values and identity, promoting and preserving its economic and trade relations can be given as some leading examples. Furthermore, a country’s foreign policy varies according to the balance of power and national interests. Among the factors that determine foreign policy, political pressure stemming from public opinion is also significant.

Foreign policy issues are being debated in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. This is necessary since it enables parliamentarians to express their opinion about the conduct of our foreign policy.

As representatives of our people in the parliament, we do voice and echo the concerns of the Turkish people. One of our main tasks is to devise new mechanisms and new initiatives in order to find lasting, sustainable and fair solutions to challenges faced by our country.

Against this background, it is worth mentioning the main dominant factors which characterize Turkey’s standing in the world today.

In this framework, Turkey’s deeply rooted attachment to the universal values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights; our democratic and secular state tradition; our active participation in Euro-Atlantic as well as regional organizations; our critical location along major waterways, North-South/East-West trade and transportation flows; our close proximity to deeply-rooted conflict regions as well as rich energy resources are inevitably shaping our foreign policy.

Bearing all these elements in mind, Turkey pursues a multi-faceted, far-reaching and pro-active foreign policy. Nowadays, six principles are shaping our foreign policy.

The first principle consists of striking a balance between freedom and security. In our opinion, security should not be pursued to the detriment of freedoms or vice-versa. Therefore, we believe that an appropriate balance has to be found between them.

The second principle envisages the integration of Turkey with countries in its vicinity in order to implement regional policies more efficiently. To facilitate and expedite this process we are following a policy of “zero problems” in our neighborhood. Since Turkey does not have the luxury of waiting for crises to resolve themselves, we have embarked on a proactive peace diplomacy in the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus.

The third principle foresees an effective diplomacy towards neighboring regions. In this framework, we aim to maximize cooperation and mutual benefits with all of our neighbors. For that purpose, we base our relations with our neighbors on the principles of “security for all”, “high-level political dialogue”, “economic interdependence” as well as “cultural harmony and mutual respect”.

As a member of the United Nations Security Council for the period 2009-2010 and as a responsible member of the international community which has to deal with a wide range of issues, the fourth principle of our foreign policy is to seek “complementarity” with global actors.

The fifth principle of our foreign policy is the effective use of international fora and new initiatives in order to galvanize action on matters of common concern.

Based on these principles, the sixth and final principle of our foreign policy is to create a “new perception of Turkey” through an increased focus on public diplomacy.

As I believe all this makes clear, our foreign policy strategy envisages maximizing Turkey’s contributions to peace, stability and security on both regional and global levels.

Accordingly, Turkish policymakers are trying to overcome differences between countries in conflict through confidence-building measures and by acting as a mediator and facilitator to find solutions to chronic regional problems. We attach a particular importance to the Middle East and to Iran in this framework.

It is important to remember that Turkish foreign policy is predicated on its unique historical experience and geography which endows it with a sense of responsibility that Turkish policy makers must acknowledge and wholeheartedly embrace.

Such a historical responsibility motivates Turkey's interests in a neighborhood which spans the Caucasus, the Caspian basin, the Black Sea, the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East from the Gulf to North Africa. In this context, I want to elaborate in more detail on Turkish-Iranian relations.

The Eurasian dimension occupies an important place in our foreign policy. Developing our relations and cooperation with the regional countries, linking Europe and Asia through energy and transportation corridors, and creating new dynamics for regional cooperation figure among the main objectives of our Eurasian vision. In this framework, our neighbor Iran holds a prominent place among our Eurasian partners.

Turkish and Iranian peoples enjoy deep historical and cultural ties. The two countries also share a common border established about 400 years ago, which is a noteworthy symbol reflecting the nature of our relationship.<sup>5</sup>

Despite its occasional ups and downs, Turkey has had good neighborly relations with Iran based on the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. In many ways, the Turkish and Iranian economies are complementary. Turkey is a transit country for Iranian goods to the West, while Iran is a gateway for Turkish exports to the East. Every year more than 90,000 Turkish trucks enter Iran. Over one million Iranian citizens visit Turkey, annually.

As founding members, Turkey and Iran attach special importance to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). We consider ECO as a multinational economic platform which can contribute to the establishment of economic stability and increasing welfare in our region and beyond. In addition to ECO, Turkey and Iran are also co-operating in the framework of the OIC, D-8 and CICA.

Turkey is an energy importing country while Iran is an exporting one. Around 11 percent of Turkish natural gas and almost 36 percent of oil imports are acquired from Iran. In 2008, the total volume of Turkish-Iranian trade reached ten billion U.S. dollars (approximately two billion dollars for exports and eight billion dollars for imports). In 2009, this figure was 5.5 billion U.S. dollars (approximately two billion dollars for exports and 3.5 billion dollars for imports). The decrease registered last year in trade was mainly due to the global financial crisis, but we are confident that the negative effect of the global financial crisis on our bilateral trade will be gradually overcome.

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<sup>5</sup> Minor modifications have been made to the border but this did not change the common border significantly.

We have intensive contacts with Iran. Prime Minister Erdoğan paid a visit to Tehran in October 2009 and held extensive talks with the Iranian leadership including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Ahmedinejad and Vice President Rahimi. The Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (COMCEC) Economic Summit in November in Istanbul was another occasion where meetings with President Ahmedinejad and Foreign Minister Mottaki took place. Our Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu has also met his Iranian counterpart on many occasions during the past several months.

We have taken the opportunity provided by these recent high level meetings coupled with intensive exchanges of delegations at lower levels with Iran not only to explore possibilities for further developing our relationship but also to discuss a number of regional and international issues of common interest.

Iran is directly affected by the pace of events in the region. It has a stake in regional stability and is in need of stable markets in the surrounding geography. Iran has a vibrant society and looks for development and greater engagement. Iran is able to do more to regain the confidence of the international community, as well as the regional players, in the sincerity of its efforts for stability and increased regional security. We advocate diplomatic and economic engagement of Iran rather than isolationist policies as a more effective way to address the challenges that we are facing in the region. We will continue to encourage all our counterparts to take a conciliatory approach in order to better tackle the problems in the Middle East.

Turkey has been encouraging dialogue in order to overcome the disagreements on the nuclear dossier. I continue to believe that a diplomatic solution can and should be found to this issue. In fact, a diplomatic solution is the only viable and lasting solution. On various key regional issues, we need Iran's cooperation to address existing problems. On the other hand, I should emphasize that we are in favor of a nuclear free Middle East and against Iran developing nuclear weapons. Iran should comply with its international obligations. Any solution to the nuclear issue, while observing the right to make peaceful use of nuclear energy, should also be strictly in line with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations, transparency and verification work conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Concerns of the international community regarding the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction should also be addressed. The region can not handle further conflagrations.

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In order to push the diplomatic process forward, we also need to be mindful of the domestic political context. There is strong suspicion on all sides that has to be taken into account and overcome. Domestic political balances and pressures weigh heavily on all parties. Despite all efforts, disagreements prevail. Again, the remedy is to be found in greater engagement and dialogue.

Within this framework, I would like to underline two major points:

First, as it has been observed in many countries, international sanctions and measures always affect ordinary people more than the ruling elite. This is valid for Iran as well.

Turkey has deep-rooted historical, cultural and religious ties with Iran. In other words, Iranians are not only our neighbors but also our friends and brothers. Not a single Turkish citizen can accept that his/her friends or brothers/sisters suffer from unfair treatment by the international community. Indeed, compared to other countries in the region, Iranians live under poor economic conditions. They do not have access to latest technology in general and are deprived of basic infrastructure facilitating daily life. There is no reason to degrade the existing life standard but enough reason to increase it.

Secondly, I do believe that the future of Iran should be in the hands of Iranian citizens. For more than 2,000 years, Iran has had a notion of statehood and a well-established cultural heritage. Iranian people have enough experience to govern themselves. Any interference from the outside world will have a boomerang effect and will be counter-productive. Therefore, the international community should refrain from any attempt to interfere in Iran to the detriment of the social and political fiber of Iran.