

# TURMOIL IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS

*Turkey's Middle East policy under the AKP government – in particular, its stance on Syria and the fight against ISIL – has had a damaging effect on not only its 60-year-old alliance with the US, but also its regional standing. The author chronicles several of the government's blunders, arguing that they ultimately stem from a "fundamental miscalculation of Turkey's power and capacity to shape regional developments." From the government's misplaced confidence in Bashar al-Assad's regime and subsequent radical reversal in its Syria policy, to its sectarian approach to the region and support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, to its deteriorated relationship with Israel, the author contends that Turkey has succeeded only in further alienating itself.*

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**A**lthough the Middle East has traditionally been important in the relations between Turkey and the US, it gained unprecedented prominence in these bilateral ties during the first decade of the 21st century as a result of two major regional developments. The first was the 2003 Iraq War, which greatly increased instability in the Middle East by igniting ethnic, religious, and sectarian conflicts. The Iraq War also brought Turkey-US relations to their lowest level since the imposition of a congressional arms embargo on Turkey in 1974. The Turkish Parliament's refusal in March 2003 to support Washington's request for troop deployment through Turkey at the onset of the Iraq War had a poisonous impact on the 60-year-old Turkish-American alliance. Developments in Iraq following the ouster of Saddam Hussein, such as the detention and "hooding" of a Turkish special forces team by the US military in northern Iraq in July 2003 for allegedly plotting to assassinate an Iraqi Kurdish politician, the perceived American unwillingness to militarily remove the PKK's bases in northern Iraq, and the growing Iranian influence in Iraq further strained the relations between Ankara and Washington. The deterioration of Israeli-Turkish relations and Turkey's emergence as a leading critic of Israel added to these strains.<sup>1</sup>

The outbreak of the Arab Spring in early 2011 was the second major regional development that strongly affected the bilateral relationship. The uprisings against authoritarian regimes in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen facilitated progress toward democracy only in Tunisia. In the rest of MENA, popular insurrections resulted either in the reinstatement of authoritarian military rule after a brief interlude of elected civilian leadership, as in Egypt, or in civil wars, as in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Equally important, the growing regional instability resulting from the Arab Spring empowered radical Islamist forces, most notably the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a militant jihadist group that succeeded in rapidly establishing its control over large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria. Although both Ankara and Washington initially viewed the Arab Spring favorably, their policies and strategies later began to differ from each other, especially over Syria and the fight against ISIL. While Turkey gave priority to Syria and the removal of Bashar al-Assad from power, the US focused largely on defeating ISIL in Iraq. The polarizing differences in the policies of the two countries over Syria and the fight against ISIL have created new tensions in the Turkish-American alliance.

### ***The Unraveling of Turkey's Middle East Policy***

The unsettling outcomes of the Iraq War and the Arab Spring took place at a time when Turkey experienced major changes in its domestic politics and foreign policy.

<sup>1</sup> For details, see: Sabri Sayarı, "New Directions in Turkey-USA Relations," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 2 (June 2013), pp. 129-142.

The 2002 parliamentary elections marked the beginning of a critical power shift from secularist parties and political elites to a party with an Islamist pedigree led by pro-Islamist politicians. Under the secularist party governments, Turkish foreign policy had a pro-Western orientation that emphasized the maintenance of close military, political, and economic ties with the US and NATO's European members. Although Turkey's involvement in the Middle East gradually began to increase after the 1960s, Ankara generally chose to avoid entanglements in neighboring states and regional conflicts. In contrast, the pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - AKP) that came to power following the 2002 elections gave primacy to building up close ties with the Middle East through an activist regional foreign policy, with the goal of making Turkey a regional leader.

After its landmark victory at the polls in 2002, the AKP continued its political ascendancy by winning the 2007 and 2011 elections with comfortable parliamentary majorities. Its meteoric rise in Turkish politics had far-reaching consequences for Turkish society and foreign policy. At home, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government promoted the values and practices of Sunni Islam across a broad range of areas, most importantly in the country's education system. In the realm of foreign affairs, the AKP's efforts to engage closely with the Middle East and support Islamist political forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas underscored the growing role of religion in the formulation of Turkish foreign policy.

*“The AKP’s Middle East policy has seriously undermined Turkey’s national interests, and has created problems both with regional states and Turkey’s Western allies.”*

Since 2003, the AKP government has spent enormous diplomatic energy and capital in pursuit of its goals in the Middle East, including raising Turkey's political and economic profile, building friendly ties with predominantly Sunni Arab countries, and elevating Turkey to regional leadership. The AKP also expected to reap electoral benefits through its religion-based foreign policy since it appealed to a sizeable segment of the voters. The AKP's strategies initially produced generally favorable results: economic and trade relations with the Middle East expanded impressively, Turkey's image improved significantly on the “Arab Street,” and many observers viewed Turkey as a rising regional power.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For example, see: Meliha B. Altunışık and Lenore G. Martin, “Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East under AKP,” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 12 (December 2011), pp. 569-588.

The most notable example of Turkey's growing engagement with the Middle East under the AKP was Syria. The two countries had a strained relationship dating back to the Cold War period when Turkey and Syria maintained close military and political ties with the US and the Soviet Union, respectively. In addition, the Syrian regime's support to various radical groups fighting the Turkish state, and most notably the PKK, as leverage in its disputes with Turkey over territory (Hatay province) and water rights (the Euphrates) deepened the rift between Damascus and Ankara. The two countries came to the brink of war in 1998, when Turkey massed its troops near the Syrian border to force Hafez al-Assad to expel PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria.

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Although there was a thaw in relations after this crisis, which ended with Öcalan's expulsion, bilateral political and economic ties began to blossom in full force after the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000 and the AKP's landmark electoral victory two years later. The chief architect of Turkey's new Middle East policy, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as the government's chief foreign policy advisor until he became foreign minister in 2009, saw the trans-

formation of the Turkish-Syrian relationship as an important showpiece of his so-called “zero problems with neighbors” policy.

Syria's new leader, Bashar al-Assad, supported the rapprochement with Turkey in his drive to break Syria out of its regional isolation. The honeymoon period in Syrian-Turkish relations witnessed the rapid exchanges of official visits, the mutual lifting of visa requirements, the holding of joint governmental cabinet meetings, and an impressive increase in Turkey's exports to Syria from 729 million dollars in 2000 to 2.5 billion dollars in 2010.<sup>3</sup> The growth of close relations between the two countries was also evident at the top leadership level: when President Assad and his family visited the Aegean resort town of Bodrum for a short vacation in 2008, he was hosted by Prime Minister Erdoğan and his wife. The fact that the Assad dynasty in Syria had one of the worst human rights records in the region and that it had brutally repressed its political opponents for more than three decades did not seem to present a problem to the Turkish leaders in their courtship of Assad.

<sup>3</sup> Özlem Tür, “Economic Relations with the Middle East Under the AKP-Trade, Business Community and Reintegration with Neighboring Zones,” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 12 (December 2011), p. 595.

However, the Arab Spring led to a surprisingly quick reversal and deterioration in Turkish-Syrian relations. When the anti-government protests began in 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan urged President Assad to launch political reforms and liberalize his regime. Much to Erdoğan's anger, however, Assad chose to suppress the protest movement through the use of blunt force. Toward the end of 2011, Turkey's Syria policy that had been in place for over a decade underwent a radical change when Turkey began calling for Assad's ouster. The downfall of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen through mass protests had convinced many countries, including Turkey and the US, that Assad's days in power were also numbered. Turkey soon became the home of the Syrian opposition and began providing it with logistical and military support. The radical shift in Turkish policy toward Syria reflected both Erdoğan's anger at Assad for ignoring his advice and the AKP's expectation that the dismantling of the Baath regime in Damascus would be followed by the establishment of a new government in Damascus under the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

In addition to Syria, the Arab Spring also seriously strained Turkey's relationship with Egypt. Erdoğan was the first leader to call for Mubarak to step down, since Turkey's Islamist movement had traditionally maintained close ties with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Consequently, the AKP's leadership welcomed the ouster of Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi's election as the new president of Egypt in June 2012. President Morsi visited Ankara in September, where he was the guest of honor in the AKP's General Congress.

*“The unraveling of the AKP's Middle East policy stemmed from a fundamental miscalculation of Turkey's power and capacity to shape regional developments.”*

Four years after the beginning of the Arab Spring, Turkey's expectations and ambitions regarding the Middle East remain mostly unfulfilled. More importantly, the AKP's Middle East policy has seriously undermined Turkey's national interests, and has created problems both with regional states and Turkey's Western allies. In Syria, Ankara's predictions about a quick end to Assad's rule turned out to be based more on wishful thinking than on a realistic assessment of the Syrian regime's strength and the realities of regional and international politics. A number of factors including the disunity of the Syrian opposition, Iran's military support to Damascus, the diplomatic backing given by Russia and China to the Syrian government, and the West's unwillingness to intervene militarily have enabled President Assad to remain in power.

Prime Minister Erdoğan's repeated calls for his ouster through a military intervention and the establishment of a no-fly zone near the Turkish-Syrian border have received no regional or international backing. Despite the obvious failure of its Syria policy, Turkey has so far refused to change its stance. The AKP leadership's fixation with Assad has led Turkey to support a variety of radical Islamist groups such as the al-Nusra Front, a branch of Al Qaeda operating in Iraq and Syria. Until 2014 Turkey did not enforce strong border controls to prevent the entry of thousands of foreign jihadists into Syria to join ISIL and other radical Islamist groups. The AKP government's Syria policy has also created serious economic and social problems for Turkey. Turkey is faced with a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions, as it has been forced to accept nearly 1.5 million Syrian refugees since 2011. In addition to its economic cost, the inflow of the predominantly Sunni refugees from Syria into Turkey has led to problems between the refugees and the mostly Alevi inhabitants of the cities bordering Syria.

Turkey's Sunni-driven policy toward Egypt and Ankara's enthusiastic support of the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power similarly turned out to be based on false expectations. Turkey denounced the removal of Mohamed Morsi from the Egyptian presidency in a military coup in July 2013 and his replacement by Field Marshall Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Prime Minister Erdoğan reacted angrily to Morsi's ouster and strongly criticized the new government in Cairo. In response, Egypt recalled its ambassador from Ankara, and Turkey followed suit shortly afterwards by recalling the Turkish ambassador in Cairo. Turkey's support to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere in the region also proved to be an irritant in its relations with Saudi Arabia, since Riyadh has been weary of the Muslim Brotherhood's influence in the Middle East. The sectarian drift in Turkey's approach to the region, which became more pronounced toward the latter part of the decade, was also evident in the deterioration of Turkey's relations with Iraq. The AKP government increasingly lent its support to Iraq's Sunni politicians in their opposition to the Shiite-dominated Nouri al-Maliki government in Baghdad. The cooling of relations between Iraq and Turkey intensified following Ankara's decision to bypass the Iraqi central government and purchase oil directly from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq.

By 2015, it has become evident that Turkey's growing engagement with the Middle East under AKP rule failed to produce its anticipated results. Instead of closer political relations, Turkey now faces regional isolation. This much was admitted when an AKP official recently defined Turkey's position in the region as one of "precious loneliness," which can best be described as "double-speak" intended to justify policy failure.<sup>4</sup> The unraveling of the AKP's Middle East policy stemmed from a

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4 Nuray Mert, "'Precious loneliness' of Turkey or sublimation of a failure," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 19 August 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/precious-loneliness-of-turkey-or-sublimation-of-a-failure-.aspx?page-ID=449&nID=52765&NewsCatID=406>

fundamental miscalculation of Turkey's power and capacity to shape regional developments. This was best demonstrated in Syria, where Turkey failed to attain its goal of a major regime change. Turkey's inability to project its power beyond Turkish borders contrasted sharply with Iran, which has managed to exert its influence directly or through its proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and most recently, Yemen. Another major miscalculation was the AKP's expectation that Turkey's aspirations for regional leadership would be welcomed by other countries. This naïve assumption also turned out to be based on wishful thinking. The traditional contenders for leadership in the Middle East such as Iran and Egypt opposed Turkey's ambitious efforts to play the role of the region's leader. Moreover, the AKP government's sectarian turn to the Middle East threatened to engulf Turkey into the raging Sunni-Shiite conflicts in the region and the power struggles between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

### *The US's Middle East Fatigue*

The volatility that had characterized US-Turkey relations in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War has increased following the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The last four years have witnessed greater divergence than convergence between Washington and Ankara on a number of issues related to the growing turmoil in the Middle East. In contrast to the AKP government's search for greater involvement in regional affairs, the Obama administration sought a risk-averse policy that aimed, first and foremost, at the avoidance of direct military interventions in regional conflicts. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq took a heavy toll on the US in terms of lives lost and money spent. The US public's opposition to new military campaigns in the Middle East was reflected in the adoption of such policy slogans as "no boots on the ground" and "leading from behind." The so-called "Middle East Fatigue" that prevailed in Washington following the uncertain outcomes of the US's costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has figured prominently in the US response to the ongoing instability and conflict in the region. Since 2011, US policy in the Middle East has focused largely on the fight against ISIL in Iraq and negotiations with Iran over its nuclear development program.

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However, the Obama administration has been unable to develop a coherent policy given the complexities of the power struggles between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a result the US “finds itself trying to sustain an ever-growing patchwork of strained alliances and multiple battlefields.”<sup>5</sup> In Yemen, the US is supporting Saudi Arabia’s military campaign against the Houthi rebels backed by Iran, while it cooperates with Iran in the fight against ISIL in Iraq. Moreover, Iran and the US appear to be near to signing an agreement on Iran’s nuclear development program. But Israel and Saudi Arabia, the US’s two closest allies in the Middle East, strongly oppose the lifting of sanctions on Iran and a possible rapprochement between Tehran and Washington.

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The Syrian civil war and the threat posed by ISIL have been the main sources of the divergence in Turkish and American policies in the Middle East. As noted earlier, Turkey’s priority is the removal of the Assad regime in Damascus while the US is primarily concerned with the fight against ISIL. When the demonstrations against the government in Syria began in 2011, Turkey and the US agreed on

the importance of dismantling Assad’s authoritarian regime through a united effort. Consequently, Ankara and Washington sought to coordinate their Syria policies, and took steps to secure the unity of the Syrian opposition. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Turkey several times during 2012 for lengthy talks aimed at coordinating American and Turkish policies in Syria. At that point, both countries anticipated that the Assad regime would come to an end before too long. When Assad demonstrated his staying power, cracks began to appear in the mutually agreed policies of the two countries. Washington seemed increasingly reluctant about a joint military intervention in Syria, and did not support the Turkish requests for no-fly zone in northern Syria. The issue of the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government further increased the tensions between Ankara and Washington. The Obama administration had declared that it would not tolerate the use of chemical weapons by Assad. Yet when it became known that the Syrian regime had launched attacks against the opposition using chemical weapons, Washington chose not to respond militarily.

The divergence between the stands of the AKP government and the Obama administration over Syria remains unabated as the Syrian civil war enters into its fourth

<sup>5</sup> Mark Mazzetti and David D. Kirkpatrick, “A Policy Puzzle of U.S. Goals and Alliances in the Middle East,” *The New York Times*, 26 March 2015.

year. The US and Turkey signed an agreement in February 2015 to train and equip “moderate” Syrian opposition fighters. But they seem to have different expectations about the goal of this program: while Ankara believes that this new force would be used against the Assad regime, Washington expects it to be part of its campaign to defeat ISIL. More importantly, the Obama administration’s commitment to the removal of Assad from power appears to have weakened substantially. The US has become increasingly concerned

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about the possibility that his ouster might lead to the formation of a radical Islamist government under the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the US now supports a peaceful political transition in Syria that might involve a role for Assad. Turkey, on the other hand, has not changed its position, and continues to insist on the dismantling of the Assad regime. Unlike the US, the AKP government would welcome a Muslim Brotherhood dominated new government in Damascus.

As noted earlier, the fight against ISIL and other radical Islamist groups represents a major item on the agenda of Washington’s Middle East policy. However, Turkey has not given it the same priority as the US. Turkey did not join a US-led effort in 2014 to form a coalition of regional states against ISIL. The Obama administration has provided military assistance to the Iraqi army in its campaign to recapture territory that has been under the control of ISIL for more than two years. The differences between Turkey and the US on the ISIL problem became further evident in Kobani, a Syrian Kurdish town near Turkey’s borders that was captured by ISIL. The US military airdropped weapons and supplies to the Kurdish forces, namely, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), an affiliate of the PKK, and Masoud Barzani’s Iraqi *peshmerga*, fighting ISIL in Kobani. President Barack Obama’s decision to provide aid to the Kurds apparently angered now-President Erdoğan, who claimed that the US President had informed him of his decision about the airdrops in a telephone conversation shortly after Erdoğan had told journalists that Turkey was opposed to such assistance.<sup>7</sup> Turkey’s reluctance to permit the US to use the Incirlik airbase to launch attacks against ISIL was another sign of the discord between Ankara and Washington over the US’s anti-ISIL campaign.

<sup>6</sup> See: “US-Turkish Cooperation Toward a Post-Assad Syria,” *Bipartisan Policy Center, National Security Program*, Washington, D.C., April 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Liz Sly, “For Turkey and U.S., at odds over Syria, a 60-year alliance shows signs of crumbling,” *Washington Post*, 29 October 2014.

In addition to Syria and ISIL, the divergence between Ankara and Washington over the removal of Mohamed Morsi from the Egyptian presidency and his replacement by Field Marshall Sisi has been another irritant in the bilateral relationship. Then-Prime Minister Erdoğan denounced the military coup and the Morsi's ouster. The Turkish leader was equally critical of the Obama administration for its unwillingness to call the military intervention in Egypt a coup d'état. Moreover, the US established friendly ties with Field Marshall Sisi's new government, and resumed its military assistance program to Egypt after putting it on hold for several months. The Obama administration's policy toward Egypt differed sharply from that of Turkey, which resulted in the breakup of diplomatic ties between Ankara and Cairo.

### *Conclusions*

The bilateral relationship between Turkey and the US has experienced serious strains in recent years, especially after the increase of instability, turmoil, and conflict in the Middle East since the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The policies and strategies of the two countries have differed significantly over a number of issues, most notably the Syrian civil war and the campaign to eradicate ISIL. Turkey's Middle East policy, based on an unrealistic assessment of its power and capacity along with an increasingly sectarian approach to regional affairs, has undermined Turkey's role and national interests in the region. The fact that Ankara no longer has diplomatic relations with Syria, Egypt, and Israel is a stark testament to the failure of its overambitious policies based on a series of miscalculations.

Turkish-American relations have entered a new phase. The management of the alliance has become increasingly difficult due to the divergence between Ankara and Washington over some of the most critical regional problems. Erdoğan's inflammatory rhetoric against the West and his tendency to frequently criticize the US on the basis of some ill-conceived conspiracy theories – as he famously did during the Gezi Park events in 2013 – have seriously undermined the bilateral relationship. Had it not been for Turkey's strategic location and its close proximity to Iraq and Syria, Washington probably would have been much more openly critical about the AKP government's conduct of Turkish foreign policy in recent years.