

TURKEY'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

The Middle East of present faces a myriad of problems – from the ongoing Syrian crisis and the jihadist threat of DAESH to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the situation in Yemen. The author argues that Turkey is well positioned to help restore stability to the Middle East by deepening regional cooperation and dialogue, but that has to be part of a collective effort that rises above the ethnic and sectarian differences which have led to the multiple crises engulfing the region. Increased efforts in support of peaceful and all encompassing solutions are needed if the inherent potential of the region for harmonious co-existence, prosperity, and development is to be realized.

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The Middle East is blessed with a rich heritage, is the birthplace of world's three great monotheistic religions, and has contributed a great deal to humankind's scientific, philosophical, and cultural progress throughout history.

However, for those of us who grew up in the second half of the 20th century and who witnessed the recent devastation and human suffering in the region, the Middle East is mostly associated with crisis, conflict, and turmoil.



Most of the tensions we are witnessing today in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) originated in the popular uprisings for freedom, dignity, and prosperity that began four years ago. Despite some setbacks, the Arab Spring has in fact shown us that the potential for change and progress inherently exists in the region. The inspiring determination of the masses to take their destiny into their own hands constituted the best answer to Orientalist views, which claimed that the region and its people were doomed to lead lives of deprivation under authoritarian rule.

The quest for a better life characterized by good governance, accountability, freedom, and democracy has always been universal. Thus, it was only natural for such legitimate aspirations to come to the fore in this part of the world too, albeit with a considerable lag. Peoples of the Middle East have demonstrated to the world that such desires are not exclusive to a certain culture and religion.

Yet, four years after the first spark in the streets of Tunisia that triggered the waves of change in the MENA region, the transformation process is far from over. It continues unabated, presenting us with massive new challenges.

The process has taken one of its bloodiest turns in our neighbor Syria. From the start, Turkey maintained that Bashar al-Assad was mistaken in thinking that he could force down the peaceful protests of the Syrian people against the Baathist regime with violence.

Unfortunately, the lack of resolute action by the international community has emboldened the regime to escalate its campaign of violence against the Syrian people.

It has committed acts of violence on a systematic basis: indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, persistent use of chemical weapons, “surrender or starve” tactics, intentional targeting of schools and hospitals, mass execution of the detainees, and institutionalized, widespread torture.

The result has been one of the deepest humanitarian crises in the history of mankind. More than 300 thousand people have died, around 1.5 million have been wounded, and half of the Syrian population are uprooted. Immense suffering reigns as the conflict rages on.

But Assad not only betrayed his own people – he has also cynically encouraged and supported extremists, with the hope that they would eliminate the democratic opposition. It was the regime’s sectarian policies that helped create one of the most horrendous terrorist threats of our time: DAESH. So, it should not be too difficult to discern that as long as Assad clings to power, stability cannot be reinstated in Syria. The fight against extremism cannot be won with Assad in Damascus.

Turkey is part of the international coalition against DAESH and has mobilized its resources for the coalition’s success. This is partly so because DAESH poses a direct threat to Turkey’s national security. This was clearly demonstrated during the siege of Ayn al-Arab/Kobani, which did not fall in the end;

the situation there improved, much to the credit of Turkey’s efforts. Turkey provided safe passage to the *peshmerga* forces and has kept resupplying them. On the humanitarian side, we received more than 200 thousand people from the region over a weekend and offered a wide range of support.

However, as I have been emphasizing in all my contacts with my counterparts, the international coalition’s air operations will not suffice in countering DAESH. What we need is to drain the swamp with the help of a genuine political solution in Syria. Such a political solution will come about through negotiations between the regime and the Syrian National Coalition, which is recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by 114 countries.

However, the Assad regime has shown time and again that it will only engage in meaningful negotiations for political transition if it feels enough pressure. To this end, the international community must fulfill its “responsibility to protect” by setting up no-fly zones and safe areas in Syria.

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Otherwise, if the inaction continues, the steps we do not take today will be needed tomorrow, but with a much higher price. We owe it to the people of Syria to demonstrate that international law and order still matter, and that peace and security are not a distant dream for their country.

Political, security, and humanitarian crises have also struck our other neighbor to the south, Iraq. The oppressive and sectarian policies of the previous Iraqi government marginalized certain components of Iraqi society and enabled them to be exploited by DAESH. Since the underlying problem was political, the long-term solution should also be a political one.

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While there has recently been some good news concerning the military successes on the ground, it is too early to tell the end of this story. What is clear is that unless the government repairs the lack of confidence with its own people irrespective of their ethnic and sectarian

identities, the DAESH mentality will continue to find fertile ground in Iraq under other names and forms.

Turkey has been making significant contributions to the efforts aimed at creating a strong, democratic, and prosperous Iraq. Our vision for Iraq encompasses an environment where none of the groups dominates the others. Only in such an environment will a common national identity prevail and the ethno-sectarian cleavages be left behind.

It is obvious that status quo ante is not an option for the future of Iraq. Its highly centralized system should evolve into a functioning federalism. In this sense, Turkey will continue to support the Iraqi government and its politicians in their quest for national reconciliation through concrete actions.

As a responsible member of the international community upholding humanitarian considerations before all others, Turkey has extended a helping hand to all those who have been affected by the humanitarian crises in Syria and Iraq. The number of Syrians and Iraqis residing in 25 shelters in 10 Turkish cities has already reached 274 thousand, and the total number of Syrians in Turkey has exceeded 1.7 million.

Turkey’s expenditures in this regard have surpassed 5.6 billion dollars. A number this high is enough testimony that Syria’s neighboring countries, including Turkey, continue to assume an unfair share of the humanitarian burden of the recent crisis.

The situation in other countries experiencing the tremors of transformation presents a mixed record.

In Libya, we are at a decisive moment, with all sides in the country gathered around the table to have a say in the future of their country. UN-facilitated political dialogue offers an invaluable opportunity to pull Libya back from the brink. The formation of a consensus-based national unity government will be the short-term priority for Libyan stakeholders.

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With such a government in place, Libya will be able to retain the capabilities necessary to perform its core tasks, as well as fighting effectively against terrorism. At this critical juncture, it is important that all sides act responsibly in compliance with the spirit of dialogue. Meddling by outside actors and foreign military intervention will only disrupt the process.

Ever since the de facto takeover of Sana, the capital of Yemen, by Houthi militias, Turkey has been advocating a peaceful political solution to the problems of this country. Our call on all parties, and particularly the Houthis, is to respect the legitimate state authorities, avoid violence, and abide by the relevant UNSC resolutions and agreements governing the political transition process.

A lasting solution in Yemen can only be possible through an inclusive peaceful dialogue and reconciliation among all Yemeni parties and segments of population.

Across the Red Sea, Egypt has historically been a cornerstone of peace and stability in the Middle East. Today, however, it constitutes a potential risk for stability in the region. Our hope is that the Egyptian leadership will realize, sooner rather than later, that pushing discontented people underground and towards radicalism will not generate stability in the country. Egypt's deep and structural problems can only be tackled in an inclusive and free political environment. A country like Egypt deserves to have a liberal and inclusive political system: a system where all segments of the society can find their voice.

On the brighter side, the last four years of Tunisia represent a showcase of how the legitimate aspirations of people may rightfully be addressed. Tunisia is an example of how things can turn out differently when all stakeholders remain committed to the principles of democratic governance. Tunisia's success in building a democratic system is a real source of inspiration in the wider region. My strong belief is that Tunisia will be able to clear all the economic and security-related hurdles on its path towards democracy and development in the period ahead.

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Another piece of good news for the region is undoubtedly the political understanding recently reached between the P5+1 and Iran in Lausanne concerning Iran's nuclear program. Turkey has always advocated diplomacy as the only possible option for a solution to this issue. We have also actively pursued efforts in this regard. As such, we welcome this milestone with the hope that it will contribute to peace, stability, and security in the region.

Turkey and Iran share a 560-km-long border that has remained unchanged for almost five centuries. Therefore, our friendship is mature enough to stand the test of differences of opinions or positions that occasionally arise. We remain committed to maintaining a meaningful dialogue with Iran at all levels, because such dialogue and cooperation can only increase the chances for peace and stability in the region.

Nowadays, “the elephant in the room” of the Middle East seems to be the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conflict remains a core challenge that stands in the way of achieving lasting peace and security in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, the continuing Israeli occupation and its practices in contravention of international law on Palestinian territory such as settlement expansion, the blockade on Gaza, and violations against the sanctity of Haram Al-Sharif and other holy sites in Jerusalem hamper the efforts for peace in the region.

As long as Israel's unconstructive approach vis-à-vis the peace process remains in place, prospects for achieving a two-state solution look dim. Thus, the need for changing the dynamics of the conflict is becoming more pressing.

In this regard, Turkey will continue to support Palestinian initiatives, including the adoption of a UNSC resolution that will lay down the parameters for the settlement of the conflict. It is high time for the Security Council to fulfill its responsibility in reaching a just and lasting peace in the region.

In the meantime, the prevailing trend in Europe towards the recognition of the State of Palestine is promising. We can only hope that this trend will also contribute to international efforts towards a two-state solution.

One may argue that all these challenges leave little room for optimism in a region besieged by bloodshed, chaos, and uncertainty.

However, Turkey chooses to stand with those who see the glass half-full. The region might indeed be going through the darkest hour just before dawn. Hence, the period ahead is critical for defining a different future for the Middle East. Steps taken in the right direction can change the current picture drastically, allowing the region to transform itself into something very different than the Middle East we know today.

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Sectarian divisions and policies have proven to be a recipe for disaster in the region, as elsewhere. Therefore, Turkey will continue to make a strong case against sectarian policies and struggles, which can only lead to a “no-win” situation for everyone, including those who advocate and practice such policies themselves.

The time has come for the people of the region to rise above ethnic, religious, and ideological differences and to find a way to invest in the common good.

In this regard, Turkey stands to do its part based on a vision of deepening regional cooperation and dialogue.

The High Level Cooperation Councils, formed with nine countries from the MENA region, were designed to serve specifically this purpose. So far, we have had 14 joint cabinet meetings and signed 181 agreements with the countries of the region to facilitate the free flow of goods, services, and people.

The steep rise in our trade figures with the region gives us reason to be hopeful for the future, showing us what can be achieved by continuing our investments in regional cooperation.

Turkey is determined to maintain its efforts toward reinvigorating mutually beneficial political, economic, and social ties in the region.

The Middle East still possesses a vast potential. However, the chances of realizing it in full will depend on our ability to end the current tensions that deplete the region's resources and energy.

Instead, we should bring back a culture of moderation, respect, reconciliation, dialogue, and cooperation, which has eluded this region for far too long. And collectively, we need to do this without further delay.