



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

POLICY ANALYSIS

# Change in Turkish Foreign Policy: Reassessments and New Trends

Emad Y. Kaddorah | January 2016

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Series: Policy Analysis

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### **Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies**

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

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## Introduction

A gradual shift in Turkish foreign policy has been underway since 2012. In view of Turkey's complex regional problems as well as growing domestic challenges over the last four years, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has undertaken both intellectual and political reviews of its foreign policy, which had been in effect unchanged since the party came to power in 2002. The key change lies in Turkey's effort to work effectively with Western alliances in its immediate proximity, and to avoid undertaking unilateral action. This contrasts with Turkey's previous efforts to play an independent regional role and set the region's agenda. Ankara is also seeking to revive its regional role in preparation for a security and military intervention, aiming to show its power and capacity for deterrence in coordination with its allies.

The new approach was formed based on thinking that developed in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions, a period that saw negative implications for Turkey. The first review, in 2012, looked at the need for NATO intervention as a way to bring about change in the Middle East, especially in view of the worsening crisis in Syria. It emphasized the important role Turkey could play as a key member of NATO. The second review, in 2013, discussed an approach of "humanitarian diplomacy," which gave priority to humanitarian action and focused on expanding Turkey's activities on the international stage. This was developed in the midst of worsening problems, in particular an increase in tensions with many states in the region. The third review, in 2014, affirmed the need for a "Turkish restoration" by strengthening the nation's democracy, economy, and renewed diplomatic activism in the region. This could be achieved through strategic international alliances.

The results of the parliamentary elections in November 2015 gave renewed momentum to the AKP and added both political and moral support to its foreign policy positions, which had until then been subject to considerable domestic and foreign criticism. After its victory, the AKP followed a policy of "consensus politics" in order to ensure domestic peace. This enabled the party to fulfill a regional role based on agreement with Turkey's allies over common goals and collective international action against new threats. This re-assessment, then, can be seen as very much in line with the previous reviews.

This paper discusses the changes underway in Turkish foreign policy in the post Arab Spring period through an analysis of the intellectual and policy reviews of the AKP and

the extent to which these have contributed to the new approach. It further assesses the extent of influence that the decisive parliamentary election results of November 2015 had on such approach. With these points in mind, the paper goes on to discuss Turkey's national security priorities in light of growing regional threats, with a focus on the creation of a "safe zone" in northern Syria, which Turkey and the United States have agreed to turn into an ISIL-free zone. It questions how much such a zone will diminish Turkish concerns about ISIL, the Kurds, and refugees. Given the increasing influence of international and regional players in Syria, the paper considers Turkey's options, particularly following Russian military intervention, and the likelihood of Turkey resorting to military intervention in conjunction with its allies. This is considered within the frame of Turkey's desire to display its capabilities and preserve the balance of power in the region.

## The New Approach: Action via International Alliances and Political Consensus

According to the International Relations concept of the balance of power, states that are at a disadvantage in the balance of power will (or at least should) form an alliance against a potentially hegemonic state, and generally adopt measures in order to boost capabilities so long as the balance is not in their favor. Such states may also opt for a self-conscious balancing role, changing sides as necessary to preserve the equilibrium, because its absence will have serious ramifications.<sup>1</sup> This means that rational states monitor their wider regional environment and any developments in their sphere, keeping track of the rise and decline of regional and international roles and the effect of this on their future power, role, and status. Whenever shifts take place, states outside the balance of power change or adjustment strategic orientations, as a way of defending the position of the state and to preserve the equilibrium.

Turkey, whose regional role has been weakened, has begun to look for alternatives to correct the balance of power and so confront growing regional threats. A new Turkish foreign policy approach started to crystallize in 2012 with a series of consecutive intellectual and political reviews, which developed gradually, as regional conditions changed and challenges grew in severity, in particular alongside the events of the Arab

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Griffiths et al., *International Relations: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, third edition, 2014), p. 19.

Spring and its aftermath. The process of change can be traced according to the four themes below:

### **1. The Regional Role with Allies**

At first, the success of a number of the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011 seemed as though they might bolster Turkey's regional role. They gave Turkey opportunities to promote the AKP model of democratic change and economic growth. Once obstacles to real change in the region began to appear, especially with the dwindling chances for the success of the Syrian revolution, Turkey's policies came under internal and external criticism. This sparked the first review of foreign policy approach, in Spring 2012, by AKP leader Ahmet Davutoglu, who realized the extent of the difficulties obstructing the success of the Syrian revolution, and the extent of the international and regional support for the Syrian regime. This presented a threat to Turkey's role, and therefore raised the possibility of rival powers in the region becoming dominant.

During this phase, two key issues were identified which shaped foreign policy thinking: first, the need to resolve the Syrian crisis quickly so as to avoid negative repercussions and ensure the stability of the new regimes in the region; and second, the difficulty of changing the situation by unilateral Turkish effort or intervention. The alternative to this situation meant that Turkey had to rely on coordination with its allies to correct the disrupted balance of power.

Davutoglu initially thought that NATO was the best option. For one, NATO had successfully managed to lead a process of democratic change in Eastern Europe, and the fact that Turkey was a member and would be defended in case of a threat. Additionally, NATO had already intervened in the region, playing a military role in removing the Gaddafi regime in Libya shortly before.

In this first review, Davutoglu affirmed the need for action with allies: "In the face of a rapidly changing and complex security environment and the global financial downturn, no single actor alone is capable of providing security. In this regard, [a] comprehensive

approach is the name of the game."<sup>2</sup> He then expressed Turkey's newly formed desire to intervene by means of NATO specifically:

Concerning the developments in the Middle East and the response of NATO toward these events, I see parallels between Eastern Europe in the early 1990s and the current developments in the Middle East. It is generally accepted that NATO played an important role in the transformation of Eastern Europe, and this role has been praised by many commentators. NATO paved the way for peaceful changes in Eastern Europe, and we must keep in mind NATO's success in this respect. What we are witnessing today is the dissolution of Cold War political and economic structures in the Middle East, and NATO must play a constructive role in the ongoing transformations in our neighborhood ... Until now, old regimes in the Middle East have survived the tides of change ... the Middle Eastern region remained immune to the changes taking place elsewhere [at the end of the Cold War] ... NATO must side with the people of this region and support genuine demands for change ... Keeping in mind the background of the Arab Spring ... democratic transformation should be supported, results of the elections must be accepted - in other words, 'the right side must be supported.'<sup>3</sup>

Davutoglu's new comprehensive approach called for expansion of NATO action to cover the Middle East region; part of collective action in which Turkey would play a pivotal role:

The tragic events of 9/11, the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan and the following developments heralded a new era in NATO's history and the role of Turkey within the Alliance structure. Afghanistan was NATO's first 'out of area' mission beyond Europe, and the aim was to contribute to the stabilization and reconstruction of this country. In this era, along with the changing nature of the threats against the Alliance, NATO started to counter threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Unlike in the Cold War years, possible threats that NATO had to deal with were much more diverse,

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmet Davutoglu, "Transformation of NATO and Turkey's Position," *Perceptions*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12.



diffuse in nature and difficult to counteract. Turkey's geographical position and cultural characteristics made it a crucial ally in combatting the threats of the contemporary world ... With Turkish troops and assets deployed in on-going NATO missions and operations in three continents, and extensive contributions - in soft security terms - reaching out to Central Asia, Caucasus, Middle East and Northern Africa through NATO's partnership mechanisms, Turkey has proven to be a staunch member of the Alliance, and a net contributor to both regional and global peace and security. Due to her geographical proximity as well as cultural and historical ties with the Balkans, Caucasus, Central, Asia and the Middle East, Turkey plays a special role in the Alliance's outreach to its partners in these regions. Turkey will continue to be an asset and an influential actor within NATO if future needs arise for further NATO involvement in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Turkey's Humanitarian Approach to International Relations**

Turkish foreign policymakers faced a very difficult year in 2013. Not only did they have to deal with challenges on the regional level in the Arab region, but also the sweeping doubts and criticisms of the foundations of Turkey's entire foreign policy, which amounted to accusations that they were architects of a plan based on idealistic dreams. The AKP also began to face internal challenges, perhaps a reflection of the external crises. Tense relations with a number of states in the region presented an opportunity for the Turkish opposition to launch a campaign against the AKP, accusing the party of causing rather than solving problems. The opposition took to the streets, notably with the Gezi Park protests in the summer of 2013. These protests were accompanied by accusations of corruption leveled against a number of ministers and officials following the rupture with the Fethullah Gulen movement in December 2013.

At this sensitive time, the lack of response from Turkey's allies to its repeated calls to contain the Syrian crisis had serious consequences. Since NATO declined to intervene, Turkey felt that the West had undermined Ankara's role in the region. Former Turkish president Abdullah Gul expressed this at the time, saying: "Turkish mediation efforts early on in the war were not supported and were even undermined by western

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.

powers.”<sup>5</sup> Turkey seems to have concluded from this incident that it was not possible to rely on NATO to play a role in the region, and that events in Libya would not be replayed in Syria. The situation was made worse by the ousting of President Mohammed Morsi in Egypt and the military takeover there. Similarly, the security vacuum and instability in Libya increased Turkey’s isolation and threatened its regional role with premature eclipse.

Turkey was pushed onto the defensive and at times adopted the traditional political discourse of isolation.<sup>6</sup> This position, however, contradicted the AKP’s dynamic nature and diplomatic activity, and also weakened its influence both at home and abroad. The suggestion, moreover, was met with broad criticism and gave the opposition the chance to demonstrate its opinions of the AKP and its policies.

Turkey was at a crossroad at this point, a position that was reflected in Ahmet Davutoglu’s second policy review in 2013:

There are three positions that can be taken vis-à-vis the accelerating pace of the flow of history. This first position is to resist the change, withdraw into domestic confines and remain stuck in the status quo, due to the fear of change. Generally, the pace of this fast-moving stream overtakes those who take this first position. The second position is to float in this flux as far as possible, believing that one lacks the power, and hence the will, to initiate change. The third position is to take an active stance, based on a sound awareness that one is a subject that affects the dynamic flow of history, rather than an ordinary and passive component of it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Simon Tisdall, “In exclusive interview, president Abdullah Gul says Syria risks becoming ‘Afghanistan on the shores of the Mediterranean’,” *The Guardian*, November 3, 2013, at: <http://bit.ly/1NsjWXX>.

<sup>6</sup> “Turkey not ‘lonely’ but dares to do so for its values and principles, says PM adviser,” *Turkish Weekly*, August 26, 2013, at: <http://bit.ly/1PhEAKq>.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmet Davutoglu, “Turkey’s humanitarian diplomacy: objectives, challenges and prospects,” *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 41, no. 6 (2013), p. 865.

These words formed the introduction for Turkey's new humanitarian diplomacy. In his review, Davutoglu explain the need for Turkey to find new ways of thinking that would allow the country to overcome its current impasses:

Actors who try to endure in the face of rapid history need to adapt to the new developments and changing environments. Turkey's foreign policy, in its regional and international dimensions, is a reflection of this adaptation to the new global environment. In order to understand Turkey's active and multi-dimensional foreign policy, we must look at new analytical approaches and concepts to overcome stasis and dead ends. One of the main interpretive principles of Turkish foreign policy, perhaps the most important one at this time, is humanitarian diplomacy.<sup>8</sup>

The three dimensions of humanitarian diplomacy defined by Davutoglu distinguish it from current foreign policy that gives priority to Turkey's involvement in the neighborhood to deal with regional problems and states. The new diplomacy has top priority to local issues in order to solve the problems of Turkish citizens and facilitate their livelihoods, by finding opportunities for them both at home and abroad. The second dimension concentrates on relief work. This was first of all because of the crises arising from the unrest in Iraq and Syria and the flow of refugees to Turkey, but it also covers the provision of humanitarian aid to Africa, Central Asia, and the Balkans as part of soft Turkish power in these regions, which it sees as forming a wider belt of Turkish interests and influence. The third dimension of policy was related to the UN, beginning with work to reform its structure and make it representative of all the world's states, and extending to action with international organizations to influence their decisions and mobilize support for issues which Turkey sees as just, as well as efforts at international mediation and conflict resolution.<sup>9</sup>

On the basis of that review, the active regional role is depicted as having been Turkey's choice over the previous decade. The new policy, instead, puts the emphasis on humanitarian roles in areas of Turkish interest, and participation in international efforts. This implies an expansion of the horizons of foreign policy and its reorientation that

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 867-8.

transcends its previous focus on active involvement in the Middle East in particular, unless it is to confront direct threats.

### **3. “The Restoration of Turkey”: The Priority of Democracy, Economy, and an International Role**

Regional problems continued to worsen and became entrenched throughout 2014. New and potentially more dangerous threats emerged. Some of the most significant points of concern were the ceaseless tide of refugees flooding across the Turkish border, the complexities of the Syrian crisis, the disintegration of Iraq following the ISIL expansion after the fall of Mosul, the formation of an international coalition against ISIL, and the increased possibility of the establishment of a Kurdish entity in northern Syria.

In fact, the rapid pace of events and the growing number of threats was too much for the states of the region to cope with, and new policies could not be created fast enough to address the problems. For Turkey, the internal challenges faced by the ruling AKP made it more difficult to take decisive decisions. In addition to protests and accusations of corruption, and the confrontation with the so-called “parallel state” – Fethullah Gulen’s movement – the government was under pressure not to lose votes in three important elections (municipal, presidential, and parliamentary from March 2014 to June 2015). This made Turkey seem unable to take initiative abroad, even on the most important issues related to threats coming from the neighborhood.

In the midst of the quagmire, Ahmet Davutoglu presented his third review in the summer of 2014 entitled “The Restoration of Turkey,” in the hopes of reviving the nation’s external role and status. In this review, Davutoglu put forward a markedly different perspective to the ideas prevalent in Turkish writings over the past decade, and turned away from the ambition for regional influence in international policy making. Seeking instead a restoration or revival, Davutoglu reaffirmed the three elements of humanitarian diplomacy developed in the previous year, and once again shunned a direct regional role.

The restoration of Turkey and the revival of its regional and international role rest on three pillars: first, strengthening internal democracy. Davutoglu called democracy “the most essential value of the modern period for Turkey, and we are now facing the necessity to protect it.” Second was ensuring the development of a dynamic economy,

since “the strengthening of democracy is not possible if Turkey’s economic development does not reflect back on the society through an equal income distribution.” Finally, the policy sought a program of active diplomacy, which, according to Davutoglu “is also prestigious diplomacy.” He explained:

The moment we lose this prestige, our activeness declines ... Those who adopt a static attitude in dynamic conditions will soon after become victims of that dynamism. On the other hand, societies with a self-renewing reflex show instead the ability to manage these processes and introduce a better-prepared world and country to future periods and even to future centuries and generations. Turkey, with its geography, historical background and dynamic human factor, is among those countries that have the capacity to serve a key role in all these processes. This capacity depends, however, on Turkey’s ability to adapt dynamically into the elements brought about by her historical and geographical depth, and utilize each aspect of this adaptation process without separating them. To put it more clearly, if Turkey fails to keep up with the rhythm of the dynamic changes it has been through, it will also run the risk of being left outside of history or of being the victim of history’s flow.<sup>10</sup>

Although the first two elements put the focus of policy on the internal Turkish scene over the coming phase, the approach also emphasizes an active diplomacy, which has been a defining feature of the AKP since its inception. The policy will thus continue, but without being restricted to the region or neighborhood. Rather, it will expand to include action that is seen as acting on a humanitarian and international level.

#### **4. “Consensus Politics” and Regaining Initiative**

The results of the November 2015 Turkish parliamentary elections brought to an end the long period of caution and uncertainty that prevailed following the Arab Spring. The problems of AKP policy, domestic polarization, a relative faltering economy, and the results of the June 2015 elections helped bring about a reassessment of AKP discourse, policy, and a reordering of priorities.

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<sup>10</sup> Ahmet Davutoglu, “The Restoration of Turkey: Strong Democracy, Dynamic Economy, and Active Diplomacy,” *Vision Papers*, no. 7 (August 2014), pp. 3, 11, 18.

Securing a vote of confidence from its electorate, the AKP regained its initiative, and made conciliatory policies as well as a desire for calm the main features of its domestic policy during the coming phase. Since it is expected that the AKP will remain at the center of Turkish politics for years to come, it seems the AKP will be able to fulfill a regional role, one that serves the interests of Turkey and its partners.

Immediately following its victory, AKP party leader Ahmet Davutoglu called for “the new government [to] work to ensure the equal representation of all citizens and take into account all opinions that are constructive.” Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan echoed this call, saying: “[I]t is time to embrace each other regardless of our differences.” Presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin coined a new term during the elections celebrations, “consensus politics,” which embodied this calming trend. In the wake of the victory Kalin urged Turks to leave behind partisan politics and focus on the major strategic issues. Consensus politics, he said, would be able to overcome unwelcome crises and reduce polarization. This approach, he said, would mean “having the same feeling for a common goal as individuals and as society.” The stress was on working according to a shared agenda, which does not eliminate disagreements but furthers Turkey’s power, stability, and security; and applies to the interests of regional and global powers that need Turkey as a strong and stable partner in a region engulfed in chaos.<sup>11</sup>

The AKP victory, and the long debate over its domestic and foreign policy at the November elections, will not lead to sudden changes in policies. Rather, the victory should consolidate the ideas proposed in the political and intellectual reviews outlined above. The consensus approach and avoiding internal polarization are positions that reflect Turkey’s new foreign policy approach; an approach based on the common goals of Turkey’s allies and a unified leadership for international action to tackle regional threats and challenges.

Indeed, Turkey has thus far refused to intervene or act unilaterally, even with respect to threats to its own national security. Instead, it is focusing on coordination and action with its allies, for legal reasons and out of political interest connected to cost-benefit

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<sup>11</sup> Ibrahim Kalin, “Consensus politics after the elections,” *Daily Sabah*, November 7, 2015, at: <http://bit.ly/1kT75RX>.

calculations, and to restore the balance of power disturbed in the recent past in favor of its rivals.

## Turkish Foreign Policy and Issues of National Security

The key change in Turkey's regional foreign policy was centrally to the approach the country takes to monitoring issues perceived as a threat to national security. Ankara was now taking reactions to nearby conflicts seriously, and attempting to mitigate the possible negative repercussions of these conflicts. At the same time, and as part of the same initiative, Turkey is giving support to local allies in neighboring states. More than before, then, regional issues play a significant part in determining Turkey's foreign agenda, and restrict what had earlier been an activist and pre-emptive role. Instead, the new policy has transformed the area around Turkey from an arena of influence—source for political development and opportunity—into a source of risk, an area from which threats emanate, and economic burden for the nation.

The recent parliamentary election results, however, gave AKP leaders the opportunity once again to restore Turkey as a regional activist. The difference this time would be that action would be taken in the direction of renewed security and military intervention in coordination and cooperation with allies and regional and global powers.

This new direction was confirmed in official statements immediately following the elections. Davutoglu, reinstated as Turkish Prime Minister, spoke shortly after the election win about the planned government policy to confront ISIL. The threat, he announced, demanded:

“An integrated strategy [to end the power vacuum in Syria] including air campaign and ground troops ... But Turkey alone cannot take all this burden. If there is a coalition and a very well-designed, integrated strategy, Turkey is ready to take part in every sense”.<sup>12</sup>

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan elaborated:

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<sup>12</sup> “PM Davutoglu calls for combined int'l air and ground campaign against ISIS,” *Daily Sabah*, November 10, 2015, at: <http://bit.ly/1JhShY>.

“The allies [of Turkey] are moving toward the idea of forming a 'ISIS-free zone' in northern Syria ... There [are] positive developments in this regard ... the allies are starting to agree on a 'terror-free zone' in northern Syria ... If it is necessary, they can use also air bases other than Incirlik against ISIS”.

This very generous offer to the international coalition came after Erdoğan had a long telephone conversation with US President Barak Obama on November 9.<sup>13</sup> This may be an expression of US and Turkish agreement over Turkey’s new understanding of its active role in intervention. Interim Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu echoed American sentiments when he argued that ISIS “placed our way of life and national security at risk.”<sup>14</sup> In adopting rhetoric similar to that of the Americans in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Turkey is setting the stage for a similar and collaborative response to its own “war on terror.” What this rhetoric implies is that the overriding priority for the coming period is to finish off ISIL in Syria, Iraq, and the Kurdish regions, while the priority of removing the Syrian regime or the search for a political solution to the Syrian crisis has been put back. This new position is consistent with general international positions, suggesting that Turkey is emphasizing its new vision by working with its international allies, even if this means giving up or delaying some of its own priorities.

### **1. The Safe Zone: Will it Solve Turkey’s Problems in the Neighborhood?**

Turkish foreign policy is currently focused on the one key issue: creating a safe zone in northern Syria. The establishment of the safe area would, it is hoped, achieve a number of urgent fundamental goals: the expulsion of ISIL from northern Syria, stopping Syria’s Kurds from taking control over the west bank of the Euphrates, stopping the flow of refugees by ensuring suitable security and living conditions within Syria. At the same time, it would allow Turkey to reconsider its active and influential role supporting the Syrian opposition, in particular since Syria became a space open to regional and international interventions, especially interventions by trans-national militias.

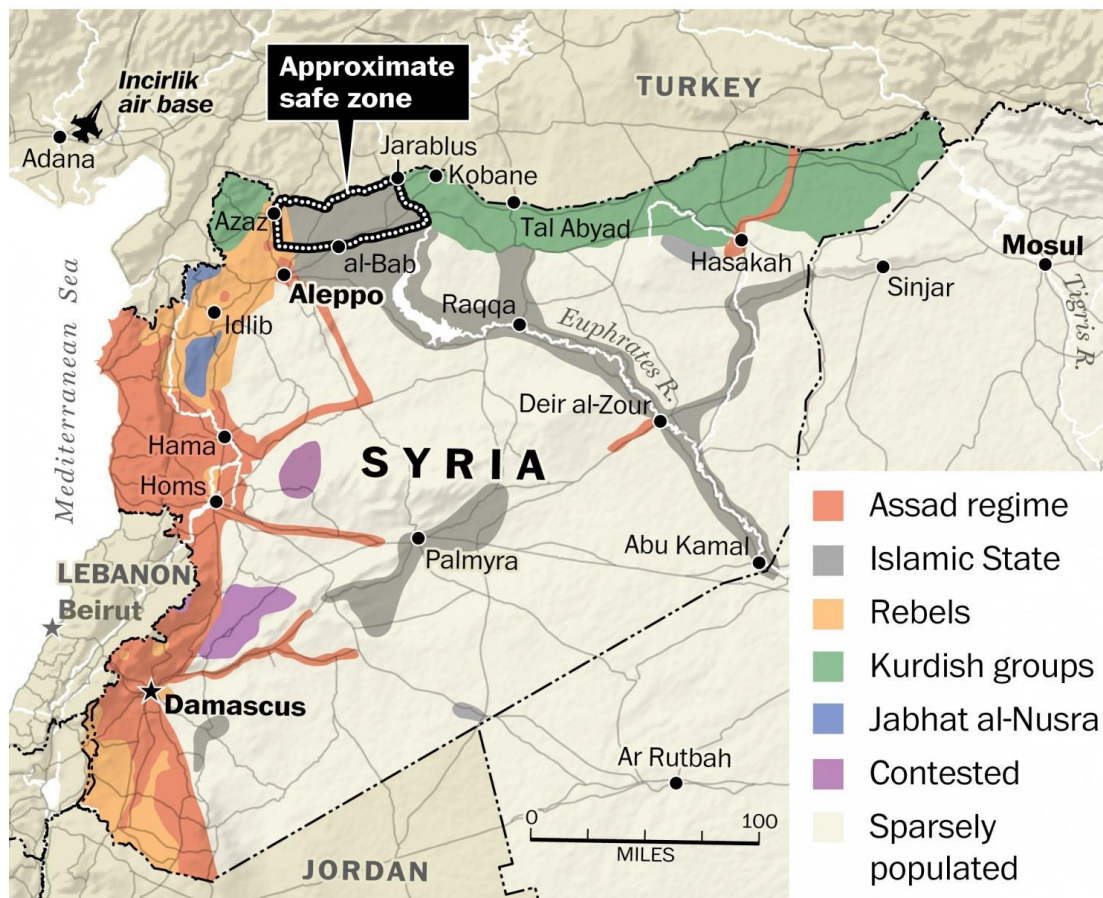
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<sup>13</sup> “Allies moving toward ISIS-free zone, President Erdogan says,” *Daily Sabah*, November 10, 2015, at: <http://bit.ly/1Xqg49f>.

<sup>14</sup> Burhanettin Duran, “The next government’s foreign policy agenda,” *Daily Sabah*, November 9, 2015, at: <http://bit.ly/1P8za4n>.



As it is imagined by Turkey the proposed safe zone would not extend the whole length of northern Syria—the Turkish-Syrian border is some 900km long. Instead, it would be restricted to a narrow strip of around 10 percent of this distance, extending 98km from Jarablus, west of the Euphrates, to Azaz. The zone would be no more than 30km deep, extending to al-Bab.



Sources: Institute for the Study of War, Hurriyet Daily News

THE WASHINGTON POST

### Map of the safe zone, the priority in Turkish foreign policy<sup>15</sup>

Since 2012, Turkey has sought to intervene militarily via its western allies, NATO in particular, and establish a no-fly zone in Syria. However, Turkey was unable to

<sup>15</sup> "U.S.-Turkey deal aims to create de facto 'safe zone' in northwest Syria," *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2015, at: <http://wapo.st/1OuXDwr>.

persuade the alliance to take such an action, since it lacked a legal justification for doing so.

Turkey had requested NATO support according to Article 5 of the NATO Charter, which stipulates that: "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them [...] shall be considered an attack against them all."<sup>16</sup> However, for Article 5 to come into effect, the member state must act in self-defense against the attack; this is in conformity with international law as defined in Article 51 of the UN Charter, which only applies when the aggrieved state requesting the lawful right of self-defense was the state subject to the attack in the first place. Since Turkey was not attacked by the Syrian army, or by any other organization operating on Syrian territory (at least before the ISIL attacks in Ankara), this Article does not apply. Following the ISIL attacks in Ankara, however, Turkey could justify intervention against the Islamist group, as was done in Iraq against the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), or on the model of states attacked by ISIL (such as France) which have intervened on the basis that Damascus is not realistically in control of its territories, and Syria now acts as a launch pad for the threat, and the current leadership is "unable or unwilling" to prevent it. Despite these developments, creating a no-fly zone or a safe zone on Syrian territory may be difficult to defend legally.<sup>17</sup>

Were Turkey to unilaterally decide that it would create a no-fly or safe zone on Syrian territory, its forces deployed in the no-fly area would not be there legally according to Article 5 of the NATO Charter. This is because Turkey was not attacked by the Syrian regime to begin with. Even if Turkey were subject to attack on its own territory as a result of military clashes within Syria, it would be difficult to convince the alliance of Turkey's right to self-defense, because it would be the party that initiated the attack. Even if Turkey were to succeed in convincing its allies that the situation falls under the rubric of Article 5, that article alone does not guarantee that the alliance will provide

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<sup>16</sup> NATO, *The North Atlantic Treaty*, Washington D.C. April 4, 1949, at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Can Kasapoğlu, F. Doruk Ergun and Sinan Ulgen, "A Turkish Intervention in Syria: A Reality Check," EDAM Discussion Paper Series, no. 2 (July 2015), pp. 8-9.

Turkey with military assistance, because NATO decisions are unanimous and each individual member state must agree.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of the difficulty of intervention and NATO's having avoided involvement in the Syrian war to date, Turkey's final alternative was to join the US-led international coalition against ISIL and open its Incirlik airbase to facilitate operations.

However, Turkey's goal for a safe zone is not just the eradication of ISIL. Turkey views the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), given its links to the PKK, as an additional threat to its national security and territorial integrity. As a result, Turkey has upped its rhetoric against the PYD and requested from its allies that they not offer the party any assistance or weapons. After the People's Protection Units (YPG) made advances against ISIL along the Turkish-Syrian border with air support from coalition forces, Turkey began to warn of the risk of the "partition of Turkey." Both Erdoğan and Davutoglu viewed the lack of response by any NATO member state to Turkey's concerns regarding the PYD as "a warning that requires the Turks to unite to prevent the plan to partition the southeast of the country." The AKP used this discourse in its election campaign and succeeded in garnering the support of many Turkish nationalists.

Washington finally responded to Turkey's concerns, primarily it seems because of the need for Turkish airbases to fight ISIL. Spokesman for the US Defense Department Steve Warren stated that Washington would not supply forces of the Syrian Kurdish PYD with weapons, which in future would go to the Syrian Arab opposition in Syria.<sup>19</sup> Turkey saw this as "a satisfactory development".<sup>20</sup>

On the basis of these regional and international agreements, Turkey has decided to cooperate fully and actively with the US-led international coalition against ISIL, and implement the ISIL-free zone. The allies have agreed to take precautionary steps against empowering YPG forces by not providing weapons as Turkey requested. In exchange, measures to establish the safe zone will not directly target the Syrian regime.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>19</sup> Merve Şebnem, "Western allies have a lot to answer for," *Daily Sabah*, November 11, 2015, at: <http://bit.ly/1jddHHO>.

<sup>20</sup> Duran.

This realistic policy and the mutual concessions embody the new Turkish approach, which is based on consensus, working within international collective efforts, and coordination in order to avoid legal restrictions and possible negative consequences of unilateral action.

However, the ISIL-free zone will not solve Turkey's current or long-term problems. What it may achieve is a reduction of the ISIL threat and its attacks in Turkey, the prevention of ISIL control over supply lines to the Syrian opposition, and a partial reduction in the flow of refugees burdening Turkey and Europe. However, a close look at the proposed reality of the safe zone reveal a number of areas that it fails to address in terms of Turkey's identified policy concerns. It will stop neither growing rival regional nor international influences. The question remains, then, does this gap in the identified concerns of the state demand the creation of other policies and decisive measures that could display Turkish power and its status in the regional environment?

## **2. Is it Time for Turkey to Show its Power?**

Since the surfacing of AKP ambitions to restore Turkey's regional and international status based on geographic and historical depth and geopolitical thinking, it has tried to achieve its goals by means of soft power and a diplomatic approach. This approach, however, which is sometimes described as idealistic, is inconsistent with the essence of geopolitics, which rests on power politics, expansionism, and achieving interests by all means. The problems with this approach surfaced during the Arab Spring, particularly once there was a widespread belief that Turkey would be a decisive force in Syria, an area it sees as its backyard and the gateway to the Arab region. Over the past four years, domestic and foreign criticism of Turkish policy has mounted because of its lack of realism on the regional level and its refusal to use decisive means in line with the ideas it has promoted about itself as a pivotal regional player. In view of this situation, there are three possible future scenarios: first, a review of the perceptions that drive Turkish policy and then a lowering of the threshold of expectations regarding Turkey's role. Turkey would have to cease inflating its position in the region and the world. The next option would be a decision to reaffirm the current perceptions that drive policy, and then to adjust policies so that they might better achieve Turkish national interests, being ready to use all means necessary. The third option would be a period of relative retreat and isolation, an opportunity to re-group and re-charge. This would mean that a

period of isolation would come without resorting to political negativity towards the outside world, but at the same time without concealing the major-power ambitions the current leadership sees as a strategic objective.<sup>21</sup>

Domestic conditions and the succession of elections in Turkey has meant that the third option remained in effect for some time. Turkey kept an eye on regional and international interventions in Syria, but most action was a reaction to events that directly affected the nation without taking any decisive steps to forward Turkey's own policy priorities. This stance can be seen in reactions of the Turkish government to the Ain al-Arab / Kobani crisis in October 2014, the weakness of its response to Russia's annexation of the Crimea in March 2013, to Russia's extension of its control over the Black Sea (which is also a Turkish sea), and the weakness of its response to Russia's direct military intervention in Syria at the end of September 2015. Even prior to this, Turkey was seen as being totally impotent before Iran's effective and glowing influence in Iraq and Syria. Turkey was also put in an embarrassing position by the strengthening nuclear capabilities of two regional powers, Iran and Israel, while the Turkish nuclear program remains in its infancy. Failure to respond to any of these incidents saw criticism mount and finally peak.

Turkey realized it was caught among the aims of the Russian military intervention in Syria. It was worried that intervention would consolidate a long-term Russian presence to its south, which would cut it off from the Arab world, prevent its linkage with the states of the Arabian Gulf, end its role in the region, and perhaps assist the creation of an independent Kurdish entity in its neighborhood. Turkey also realized that Russia's intervention followed the coming together of plans for the safe zone. Russia moved quickly to prevent Turkey gaining an advantage in Syria, and set up a new airbase in rural Lattakia, ready for operation and expansion. This base could become a permanent forward base overlooking Syria, Turkey, and the eastern Mediterranean.

Russian intervention in Syria in general, and its targeting of Turkish symbolic, national, and historical sites in particular (such as the Turkman Mountains in rural Lattakia), crystalized Turkey's accumulated anger. This reached its peak in the decision to shoot

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<sup>21</sup> Emad Y. Kaddorah, *Turkey: An Ambitious Strategy and Constrained Policy, a Geopolitical Approach* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2015), pp. 133-5.

down a Russian fighter plane on November 24, 2015. For the first time, the extent of change to Turkey's regional foreign policy became clear.

The flagrant Turkish challenge to Russia represented by the shooting down of a Russian aircraft revealed the change in Turkish behavior towards potential strategic threats. Turkey wanted to set limits to Russia's show of strength in its airspace and in its neighborhood. Turkey also wanted to maintain sovereignty over its territory by the use of force. However, the incident does not indicate a shift in policy, Turkey remains committed to a diplomatic approach and seeks no escalation with Russia. It has stressed that bringing down the jet was not directed at Russia per se, but was a response to the violation of Turkish sovereignty.

Davutoglu displayed the new and strident Turkish tone, marking the end of the period of standing by and putting up with the actions of friends and foes. Shortly after the Russian craft was downed, he said:

We would like the entire world to know that we will take all necessary measures and make any sacrifices when it comes to the lives and dignity of our citizens and for the security of our borders while our country is in a circle of fire ... It must deal with the immediate response of our armed forces to planes violating Turkish airspace today within that context.<sup>22</sup>

Turkey's request for a NATO meeting, its communications with allies, and work through the UN following the downing of the Russian jet can be read as the implementation of its new approach to foreign policy practice. This was crystal clear in the immediate support it gained. Obama announced on the same day that "Turkey has the right, like any state, to defend its territories and airspace," while requesting both sides "avoid any form of escalation."<sup>23</sup> NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg affirmed that NATO had information that Russia had violated Turkish airspace and that "[the alliance] stands in

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<sup>22</sup> "Turkey has the right to respond if Turkish airspace is violated, says PM Davutoğlu," *Daily Sabah*, November 24, 2015, at: <http://bit.ly/1jddMLt>.

<sup>23</sup> "Obama: Turkey Has the Right to Defend its Airspace," *US News*, November 24, 2015, at: <http://bit.ly/1XezLpw>.

solidarity with Turkey and supports the territorial integrity of our NATO Ally, Turkey,"<sup>24</sup> confirming that the move was justified and that Turkey was not an aggressor, but merely had lines that should not be crossed.

The Western support for the action revealed that Turkey had been in constant touch with and coordinated with its allies, especially NATO. This shows how much Turkey has a stock of capabilities and networks it can take advantage of in order to correct the disruption to the balance of power in the region, defend its sovereignty if it is subject to attack or retaliation, and display the deterrent capability of Turkish forces and NATO.

## Conclusion

Change to foreign policy is usually limited when the same party remains in power. This applies in Turkey as much as it does anywhere else. The AKP's foreign policy has been subject to review between 2011 and 2015. However, the fundamental change in the policy did not yet become apparent.

Although there has been no radical change in Turkish foreign policy, there are two general trends that can be observed. First, the balanced orientation between east and west, a familiar feature of AKP foreign policy, is gradually shifting. Turkey appears to be returning to its traditional pro-western stance on the security and economic levels. The Iranian and Russian interventions in Syria had a direct effect in weakening Turkey's eastward looking approach. The AKP has recently come to realize that strategic reliance on Russia is not sustainable since it has in essence become a rival power and challenger, and is no longer a friendly state for Turkey to rely upon. This was manifest in the aftermath of the shooting down of the Russian plane, despite the moves to make sure that there is no damage to bilateral relations. At the same time, Iran's role as a rival in the region and its policies against Turkish interests in Syria and Iraq have had an effect on relations, making them tense, and revealing the possibility for damage to their strategic bilateral contact. Further strengthening reorientation toward the west are the new challenges emerging in the region post Arab Spring, which have increased the costs and threats to Turkey at the expense of benefits and interests. New signals from

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<sup>24</sup> "Statement by the NATO Secretary General after the Extraordinary NAC Meeting," Press Release (2015), Issued no. November 24, 2015, at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_125052.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_125052.htm).

Turkish officials point in this direction. For example Turkey's EU Minister Volkan Bozkır has stated: "Turkey has a new government and the government program clearly indicates that Turkey has only one direction and only one train, and this is the train to Brussels."<sup>25</sup> The priority is joining the EU and giving new impetus to cooperation with the west.

The second change is development of the AKP's foreign-policy discourse. The party has worked to display its power and the possibility of using it following direct threats to Turkey's national security, and after regional and international powers have started to clearly threaten Turkey's security and interests in the region.

The possibility that Turkey will adopt a military interventionist approach to confront these dangers cannot be ruled out. This approach, however, will be based on action with allies whose capacity it will call upon to reassert the balance of power, rather than through unilateral intervention. This is consistent with the intellectual and political reviews undertaken by the AKP. The results of the November 2015 elections helped shape the current policy outlook, and at the same time increased opportunities to implement it.

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<sup>25</sup> "Turkey has only 1 direction and only 1 train and that is the train to Brussels: EU Minister Bozkır," *Daily Sabah*, December 6, 2015, at: <http://bit.ly/1jJBINO>.



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