

DRIVERS OF FOREIGN POLICY CHANGE IN THE AK PARTY DECADE



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The AK Party decade in Turkish foreign policy has been an age of change and transformation. Since its election in November 2002, the AK Party has not only brought major changes to Turkish domestic politics, such as the reform of civil-military relations and democratization in the political realm, but it has also revised Turkey's foreign policy and national security doctrine. These changes have been critical to Turkey's rise as a regional power in the Middle East and have increased its visibility and impact in the international system. This analysis focuses on the transformation of Turkish foreign policy with respect to three major areas: changes in regional politics, increasing global activism, and the impact of civilianization and public opinion.

Return to the Middle East

Since the founding of the Turkish Republic, Turkey has followed a pro-Western foreign policy doctrine, which entailed not only a disproportionate emphasis on relations with Western countries but also minimal interaction with its neighbors to the east and south. Apart from a few exceptions, Turkey followed a non-involvement and non-interference policy

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towards most of the Middle East. Ideological and political polarization during the Cold War intensified this self-sustained exclusion from the region. While Western nations were building solid alliances and partnerships with various Middle Eastern countries, Turkish policy makers considered the region a quagmire and avoided any sort of partnership with neighboring countries. Following Turkey's newly energized interest in the Middle East during the Özal era and its active involvement in the First Gulf War, Turkey became involved in regional disputes and indicated its readiness to contribute to the resolution of problems between Arab nations and the state of Israel. However, this process was interrupted by increasing domestic instability in Turkey during the 1990s. The only notable exception to this pattern was the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement, which was launched after the initiation of the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Turkey could not take positive steps towards more engagement with the Middle East until 1999 in the wake of the crisis with Syria over PKK leader Öcalan's departure from Damascus. In a short period of time, the crisis was transformed into an opportunity and the two states signed the Adana Protocol, which paved the way for increasing diplomatic interactions, military and security dialogues, and the improvement of economic relations between these two countries. The normalization of relations with Syria accelerated with the AK Party's electoral victory in 2002. While trying to fulfill the European Union requirements for accession negotiations, Turkish diplomacy also spent a great amount of time and energy establishing and improving relations with its southern neighbors.

Turkey's main goals in this period were to foster peace and prosperity in the Middle East by increasing economic and social relations and by actively pursuing peaceful resolution of conflicts in the region through active mediation and diplomacy. Turkey took several important steps to reach this new foreign policy goal. First, the Turkish government became a more active player in regional organizations and other multilateral institutions. For example, Turkish scholar Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu has been the secretary general of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) since 2004. Additionally, Turkey gained observer status in regional organizations, such

as Arab League, and improved its business and strategic relations with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Secondly, with a more proactive diplomacy, Turkey started to repair its relations with its neighbors by revitalizing diplomatic interactions with Middle Eastern countries and leaders and foreign policy bureaucracies started to know and communicate with each other regularly. By increasing the relevance of economic diplomacy in the region, Turkish foreign policy sought to create complex economic interdependency between different sectors of Middle Eastern societies.

Turkish investors and businessmen have played an important role in Iraqi reconstruction efforts, in particular in Northern Iraq. While the war in Iraq was going on, Ankara contributed to Iraq's political stability and territorial integrity by following and leading different diplomatic initiatives, such as the "Platform for Iraqi Neighbors," which met for the first time in Istanbul in 2003 to find a peaceful solution to disputes between Iraq and its neighbors as well as to stop the sectarian conflict in the region. Turkish relations with Iran also improved until the Arab Spring and the crisis in Syria. Turkey not only increased its economic relations with Iran but also brokered a deal between Iran and the international community, known as the Tehran Declaration, to help resolve the nuclear crisis. Although the agreement was not accepted by Western powers, it was a significant case in demonstrating Turkey's invaluable ability to mediate between regional actors to resolve crises.

The Arab Spring and the revolutions in the Arab world transformed the nature of Turkey's foreign policy and especially affected relations with many Middle Eastern countries. Like other global and regional political actors caught by surprise by the developments in the Arab world, Turkey recalibrated its foreign policy to be "on the right side of history." Turkey was the first country to call on Hosni Mubarak to resign in support of the Egyptian people's movement. After a period of hesitation due to the presence of relatively large numbers of Turkish construction workers in Libya, Turkey also participated in the humanitarian intervention in Libya after the evacuation of their workers.

During the Arab Spring, one of the most significant

tests for Turkish foreign policy was deciding where Turkey would stand on Syria. Turkey had heavily invested in Syria during the AK Party decade and worked toward its economic integration. Personal diplomacy between Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Assad was at its best. However, with the spread of demonstrations to Syria, Turkey heavily encouraged the Syrian government to reform its political structure and answer to the people's demands. But after promising several times that they would be initiating the reforms immediately, the Assad regime refused to implement any meaningful reforms and started to use heavy force to stop the peaceful demonstrations against the regime. Turkey reacted to the bloodshed first by calling Assad to step down and then engaging in multilateral initiatives to resolve the conflict.

Under the AK Party, Turkey has also taken politically bold initiatives in foreign policy. The Tehran Declaration was one of the most significant attempts to resolve the nuclear crisis between Iran and the international community while simultaneously working to broker a peace deal between Syria and Israel. In this new approach, Turkey continued to be the only regional power who could talk to every political actor in the region. Up until Operation Cast Lead in late 2008 and early 2009, Turkey pursued a policy of active engagement with all actors in the conflict.

As a result of these policies, Turkey's international stature and standing in the region increased consistently. Turkey started to be considered more of a policy-maker than just a policy-implementer and has risen as an indigenous power rather than being viewed as a satellite or an extension of a power bloc. With increased emphasis on people-to-people relationships, different agencies of Turkish public diplomacy and civil society organizations increased their activities in the Middle East. Because of this, Turkey has achieved popularity in the Arab street at unprecedented levels. According to the latest research in this field, Turkey is considered the country that has played the most constructive role throughout the Arab Spring.

Global Initiatives

The expansion of the scope of Turkish foreign policy stretches beyond the Middle East. Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP has increasingly engaged with other regions of the world, which had been neglected by Turkish foreign policy in the past. Under the framework of this new multidimensional foreign policy, Turkey increased the number of bilateral and free trade agreements with other countries and extended its economic activity into other regions. In addition, bureaucratic structures and institutions in Turkey were also recalibrated in order to meet the requirements of these new regional openings. Institutions like the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) supported development work in different areas. The Turkish government has also increased attention to the humanitarian issues beyond its borders. It became the first country to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Somalia and one of the few countries that reacted harshly to the massacre of Muslims in the Rohingya region of Burma as well as the ethnic tension that led to the killings of Uyghurs in East Turkistan.

As part of these regional openings, 2005 was declared the "Year of Africa" in Turkey. With this project, Turkey opened new embassies and consulates in different African capitals, where Turkish policy makers paid high level visits to build political and economic ties. In order to repair previously neglected relations, ambitious and aggressive initiatives were launched to jump-start a new era of cooperation. The Turkish government also encouraged business associations, including the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB), the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen, Industrialists (TUSKON), and Independent Businessmen and Industrialists (MUSIAD) to invest and establish business ties in Africa. Furthermore, government-affiliated educational institutions like the Yunus Emre Institutes opened new offices to increase cultural exchanges and now thousands of African students have been accepted to Turkish universities. In addition to building bilateral ties, Turkey also launched initiatives to institutionalize its ties with African countries and organized conferences to discuss the future of its economic and political relations.

Africa was not the only opening for Turkish foreign policy. Turkey reached out to Latin America as well. The Turkish Foreign Ministry declared the year 2007 the “Year of Latin America” in Turkish foreign policy. Similar to the Africa initiative, new economic and political ties were built between Turkey and Latin American countries, including the establishment of a Brazilian-Turkish economic council. New strategies and new ways of communication have been crafted to increase the level of cooperation with these countries, including increased number of flights to the region’s capitals. Turkish-Brazilian cooperation during the Tehran Declaration was particularly significant in demonstrating the possible areas of cooperation.

A More Civilian Foreign Policy

In addition to extending the reach of Turkish diplomacy, Turkey underwent a transformation in its domestic structure of decision-making. The role that civilian experts play in planning, deliberating and implementing foreign policy is one of its most defining features today. Turkish foreign policy traditionally was considered an elite business and run only by the foreign policy bureaucracy with the consultation of the military and through standard operating procedures. The National Security Council, which was dominated by the military, was considered the most important body in designing and determining the foreign policy and national security strategies. Civilian experts had never before become members of the inner policy circle and remained outside the policy formulation process. The monopoly on information possessed by bureaucrats and their privileged access to decision makers had created an inefficient, one-dimensional, and crisis-driven foreign policy decision-making.

In the last ten years, this inflexible policymaking structure was challenged by various developments. The first

challenge came from civilian experts. These non-state civilian actors continue to challenge the conventional form of policy making and contribute to the emergence of new ways of thinking in Turkish foreign policy. Their opinions generated new debates and discussions, which increased the visibility of multiple viewpoints on critical foreign issues. This new structure also energized experts and intellectuals and led to the creation of new think tanks and institutes to inform and influence foreign policy decisions.

In addition to the rise of these new elites, the Turkish public’s interest and involvement in foreign policy-related issues has increased dramatically. In recent years, Turkish society’s interest in foreign policy issues has increased rapidly. This was partly the result of advances in communication technologies and the greater ease of reaching information through social media. Non-governmental organizations have also played a more active role in Turkish foreign policy making, and some of these have already been active in influencing Turkey’s relations with the West. In recent years, these organizations started to influence Turkish foreign policy in a more assertive and organized manner.

The dramatic transformation of Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party decade is characterized by three major changes: 1- the Middle East was brought back to the agenda of Turkish foreign policy through engagement policy and economic integration initiatives, 2- Turkish foreign policy embarked on ambitious new programs in non-traditional regions such as Latin America and Africa, 3- the civilianization of and public interest in foreign policy issues influenced the decision making processes in unprecedented ways. In the wake of an evolving international system, these developments have redefined Turkish foreign policy and positioned Turkey as a major player in regional and global affairs.

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