

**Report:****Foreign Policy of Turkey in the Middle East: Values, Interests, Goals**

Ulrike Dufner & Marc Berthold  
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The Heinrich Böll Foundation has followed the development of Turkey's foreign policy vis-à-vis Europe and the region of the Middle East for many years. Due to considerable policy shifts in Turkey's recent past, the Foundation's Turkey office decided to launch its own foreign policy program with an initial series of meetings in Istanbul, Berlin and Brussels. The goal was to shape guiding questions and frame the foundations interests in its analysis and policy interventions in the foreign policy debates between Turkey, the European Union and the Middle East. The premise has been that Turkey has an important role to play and that successful foreign policy and close cooperation is in the core interest of the European Union as Turkey is on the path toward membership.

The first expert roundtable in Istanbul, on October 19, 2009, happened literally in the midst of major historical developments. Turkey and Armenia had just announced to begin a rapprochement which should lead to the resumption of diplomatic relations and an opening of their borders. A major delegation of the Turkish government just returned from a joint cabinet meeting in Damascus and members of the PKK announced to return to Turkey to start a process of potentially laying-down arms and reconciliation. At the same time however, the row between Turkey and Israel continued to escalate, at that time due to harsh Israeli criticism of a Turkish TV series which depicted Israeli soldiers in an insinuating fashion.

Within this context, the expert roundtable took place in an atmosphere of great interest and thirst for debate. Participants expressed the need to dwell on Turkey's own vision of a new foreign policy, its perception in the Middle East and the impact on European as well as transatlantic relations. Was there indeed a new concept and era of Turkish foreign policy?

The introductory input described recent developments as a result of Ahmet Davutoglu's arrival as a foreign minister. Already in his previous position as advisor to Prime Minister Erdogan, Davutoglu had written a foreign policy concept circumscribed with the notions of "zero problems with its neighbours" and "multi-dimensional foreign policy". Speed and scope of policy changes were indeed considered new and far-reaching. However, participants did cast doubt whether there was truly a long-term strategy behind it. Were decisions made with a future goal in sight? Would movements be followed-up with a sustainable set of steps? One participant noted that the current government had already launched political initiatives and steps which eventually ended up nowhere and did not amount to more than just testing waters. If Turkey continued this approach, main partners of Turkey would increasingly question Turkey's credibility in its foreign policy in general and its capacity to develop and pursue a coherent foreign policy which takes the interest of its main allies into consideration.

While some of the developments, particularly with Iraq, Armenia as well as with the Kurdish issue were hailed, there was some concern with relation to Syria and a certain degree of critique in dealings with Israel. While better relations with Syria were considered important for bilateral relations and also in sight of broader regional developments, such as decoupling

Syria from Iran, criticism was uttered with regard to the high-level profile of a joint cabinet meeting. The Syrian regime had not changed to legitimize this kind of proximity, was one of the more critical comments. Similarly, there was hesitation to fully welcome the Turkish approach toward Iran. While Turkey should invest its weight in the conflict around Iran's nuclear program, it did not help diplomatically that Turkey was among the first countries to congratulate Iranian President Ahmadinejad after the contested elections in June 2009.

Greater concern was expressed with regard to Israel. While the majority of the participants in general accepted the critical stand of Turkey's government towards Israel, a debate arose about its methods and the consequences of Turkey's recent move towards Israel. The relationship between both countries – if continued in the same manner - could suffer long-term damage. There was a general sense of agreement that Turkey's role as mediator between Israel and Syria had become almost unrealistic for the foreseeable future. The row was dated back to the initially unilateral engagement of Turkey with Hamas after its electoral victory in Gaza and the de facto end of the rule of the Palestinian National Authority in Gaza. Secondly, Israel's offensive in the Gaza strip while Turkey was involved in mediating between Israel and Syria. While several voices claimed that strategic interests between Turkey and Israel remained stronger than the current difficulties. It was also acknowledged that Turkey's criticism and behaviour toward Israel did increase its leverage with Arab states. One participant even hinted at the fact that even some European states would silently approve as Turkey was able to address issues many European governments would not dare to. The question remained however how this bilateral conflict was helping Turkey's interests and how it would fit into the zero-problems approach. One participant saw great risks as current developments could fan anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic utterances which made Turkey suffer internally.

The discussion led to a closer deliberation of the broader context of Turkish foreign policy developments. Are they part of the EU accession process or rather expression of the search for an alternative? Are the developments generally conducive or counterproductive with regard to EU membership? Is it also a consequence of the new Obama winds from the U.S?

There was a general sense among the participants that Turkey was continuing to pursue EU accession but was broadening its foreign policy both in its own geopolitical interest but also under the assumption that this would increase its attractiveness toward the EU. Turkey would have more leverage in the future. Prime Minister Erdogan was quoted with the words that Turkey wanted to lift a burden from Europe not be a burden.

Part of the momentum around Turkey's new role could also be based on the fact that it perceives a political vacuum between a weak European Union, handicapped by its internal friction around the Lisbon Treaty, and an early US presidency, which is still formulating its Turkey as well as Middle East policies. Participants expressed concern that Turkey might overstretch with the number and scope of changes in foreign policy.

One speaker added that a number of regional players from Iran to Egypt were gathering their capital to become dominant powers in the Middle East and that Turkey was collecting hers. Turkey was particularly attractive with the people in the region as it was socially and culturally familiar as a majority Muslim country with an established democracy and its closeness to the United States and Europe. In the Middle East, Turkey's EU accession is even considered a litmus test for Europe's true relationship with the Muslim world.

Despite of its regional positioning, participants argued that Turkey was credible as it did not want to challenge the regional setup. Turkey was not a revisionary force in the Middle East.

To qualify the scope and force of this new foreign policy approach, one speaker noted that Turkey was only dealing with clearly weaker neighbours, and that major challenges, such as the ongoing conflict with Greece over Cyprus was not touched at all.

While there was a sense of acknowledgment that it was particularly the AK Party that was able to make improvements in relation to the Middle East as it had credibility among the political elites and the streets of the region, there was concern whether these new policies would translate beyond the AK Party and could be sustained during a different government coalition.

Participants did not see a strong, ideological and intellectual centre in Turkish foreign policy making and no institutional setup which would ground and coordinate policies with European allies or NATO. Any unilateral steps bore the risk of ending nowhere and could turn out being problematic for Turkey's interests and strategic position.

The role of Europe was largely criticised. It was noted that Europe did in fact not play a role in domestic foreign policy deliberations. The EU was making itself irrelevant in the entire region due to its lack of a coherent Common Foreign and Security Policy. One commentator described the EU's focus on enlargement that it would not lead to an increase in political clout on the world's state but rather just slow down its eventual irrelevance. Within the Turkish foreign policy community, the EU was perceived as a major problem as it demonstrated far-reaching ignorance towards Turkey.

In relations with the United States, participants saw signs of convergence of interests. Both countries would increasingly see eye-to-eye on approaches toward Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and also on a two-state-solution in the Arab-Israeli conflict. While Turkey was heavily criticized for its dealings with Hamas, participants highlighted that Turkey could in fact be an effective player with Hamas, while its Western allies were in a more difficult position.

While there was a broad consensus that there is a decisive shift in the understanding and approach of Turkish foreign policy, there was no clear sense of assessment if this shift from a passive to a more proactive foreign policy was moving Turkey more toward or more away from its Western alliance. On details, this new foreign policy was largely welcomed, but key questions evolved in the discussion, and will become central for future discussion with the Heinrich Böll Foundation's Turkish foreign policy program:

- What is the long-term vision in Turkish foreign policy?
- How can it be solidified and sustained?
- Is unilateralism justified or should Turkey focus on coordination with its allies?
- Where does Europe still fit into the scheme?