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TURKISH ACTIVISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE 1990s: TOWARDS A PERIODIZATION OF THREE WAVES

Mehmet OZKAN*

1. INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War led to fundamental changes in Turkey's foreign policy in general. Ankara began to exert influence in Central Asia, the Black Sea region, the Caucasus, the Middle East and the Balkans. This was a major shift from Ankara's previous policies of non-involvement. Contrary to the Cold War period, during which Turkey's foreign and security policy was relatively circumscribed because of its role in the containment of the Soviet power, in the post-Cold War era, Turkey has experienced a sweeping enlargement of its external horizons.[1] After the Cold War, Turkey began to pay particular attention to regional cooperative security and multilateralism in foreign affairs.[2] In this regard, Turkey initiated the estab-

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[1] Ian O. Lesser, "Turkey in a Changing Security Environment," Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 54, No.1, Fall 2000; and Alan Makovsky, "The New Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy," SAIS Review, Vol. 19, No. 1, Winter-Spring 1999.

[2] Ali L. Karaosmanoglu, "The Evolution of the National Security Culture and the Military in Turkey," Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 54, No.1, Fall 2000, p.210.

lishment of Black Sea Economic Cooperation,[3] and began to expand its political and economic ties with the newly established Turkic republics.[4]

Although Turkey's western orientation remained its first foreign policy priority objective, the end of the Cold War opened new opportunities to Turkey in further fields, and its relations with the countries in Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus developed. But policymakers in Ankara argued that the relations with these countries would not supersede Turkey's relations with the West.[5]

An important shift occurred in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East in this period. During the Cold War years, Turkey generally preferred non-intervention in Middle Eastern affairs, but this policy changed dramatically when Turkey assumed a central role in the Gulf War. The Gulf War, coupled with the collapse of the Soviet Union, brought key changes in Turkey's understanding of the Middle East. Turkey started to be more assertive than before in dealing with the region.

However, the last decade of Turkey's active involvement in Middle East has been contradictory, if not sometimes confusing. While Turkey supported the Coalition powers in the Gulf crisis, during the Iraqi War Turkey was one of the countries that had tried to stop the war. Turkey's unexpectedly fast-growing close relations with the Israel at the end of the 1990s, however, seems to had been ignored after 2002, given the fact that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan did not visit Israel until May 2005, and did not give the Israeli Foreign Minister an appointment when he visited Turkey. More to the point, although Turkey openly threatened to go to war with Syria in 1998, Syrian President Bashar Asad visited Turkey in 2004, the

[3] Berdal Aral, "Black Sea Economic Cooperation: What Went Wrong?," Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol. 1, No. 4, Winter 2002.

[4] Meltem Muftuler, and Muberra Yuksel, "Turkey: A Middle Power in the New Order," in Andrew F. Cooper (ed) Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers After the Cold War, London: Macmillan, 1997; and Sabri Sayari, "Turkey: The Changing European Security Environment and the Gulf Crisis," The Middle East Journal, Vol. 46, No. 1, Winter 1992, p.15.

[5] Mesut Ozcan, "European Union's Middle East Policy and Turkey," Avrasya Etutleri, Vol. 12, No. 27-28, 2005.

first of its kind in 65 years and Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer reciprocated this visit in April 2005.

How can we explain all these confusing or contradictory approaches of Turkey to the Middle East? Or does Turkey indeed have a coherent Middle East policy? Or does Turkey act according to circumstances that occur from time to time?

In order to answer these questions, one has to look at the domestic politics of Turkey. Every government might have a different approach to the issue depending on where it stands on the scale ranging from extremely left to extremely right-ultra nationalist. Centralist conservative parties might be found in the middle of the scale.

Turkish foreign policy in the post-Cold War period provides a striking example of the linkage between domestic and foreign policy. One simply cannot adequately analyze contemporary Turkish foreign policy without an explicit awareness of its tie to domestic developments within Turkey. Moreover, it is a two-way relationship between Turkish foreign policy and its domestic politics; that is, domestic developments impact upon foreign affairs and *vice versa*. Thus, Turkey is conducting, in the words of Robert Putnam, "double-edged diplomacy."[6]

Of course, Turkish foreign policy has never been entirely insulated from domestic politics, but it is fair to say that in the post-Cold War era it has become more sensitive to domestic pressures than it had probably ever been before. This is due to, in large part, to the ending of the Cold War, which allowed Turkey to throw off the strategic straitjacket that it had worn until then. Turkey's border with the Soviet Union suddenly disappeared and with it a source of constant fear and tension.

Most of scholars have analyzed Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East

[6] Robert Putham`in konuyla alakali makalesini bul ve buraya ekle.

in the view of "Turkey's search for security."[7] However, when one looks at from an overall perspective, it should be better if it is defined as "Turkey's search for coherence." After the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish elites and leaders were not able to develop a coherent understanding of and attitude towards the Middle East. Either they downplayed the region totally, or tried to cooperate fully as Islamists argued and urged. The single most important reason for Turkey's incoherence in its Middle Eastern relations is certainly security concerns. Kurdish issue and increasing domination of Islamists in Turkish domestic politics have created in Turkish society an "insecurity complex," or a "national security syndrome," as phrased by former Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz. This has resulted in creation of an uncertain self-identity, and a *securitized society* in domestic and foreign policy came to existence.[8] In the light of general feeling of insecurity, Turkey has developed its foreign policy priorities according to its security concern. Ankara developed its relations rapidly with Israel especially in military terms at the expense of alienating itself from its Arab neighbors, but for the sake of security. Kurdish issue has already been there to threaten Turkey's domestic politics with its increasing regionalization. With these complexities of the region, writing in 2000, Martin[9] argued that complex foreign policy choices of Turkey towards the Middle East require a balance between the less active neutrality - as during the beginning of the Republic, and the potential temptation to engage in the active pursuit of predominance in the region as Former President Ozal's tried to apply.

Overall, Turkey's Middle East relations have been wedged between security and coherence. However, these elements account for relations in general; there have been three waves of activism in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East.

[7] Kemal Kirisci, "Turkey`s Search for Security in the Middle East: The Economic Dimensions," Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs, March-May 1996.

[8] Mustafa Aydin, "Securitization of History and Geography: Understanding of Security in Turkey," Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Vol. 3, No. 2, May 2003.

[9] Lenore Martin, "Turkey's National Security in the Middle East," Turkish Studies, Vol. 1, Spring 2000, p.102.

2. Turkey in the Middle East: the Kurdish Issue and Relations with the Israel as Defining Factors

In the 1990s, two issues dominated, restricted or limited Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East. Without understanding the domestic and international links to these two issues Turkey's policy towards the Middle East cannot be understood properly. One distinguishing character of these issues is that they are so interlinked with Turkish security, domestically and internationally.

In the 1990s, the single most important factor in Turkey's redefinition its relations towards the Middle East was the Kurdish issue.[10] The Kurdish issue dominated Turkey's relations with the Middle East after the Cold War. Most of the time, Ankara defined its foreign policy orientations towards its neighbors either as a response to or to prevent the effects of the Kurdish issue on its internal and external policy. The Kurdish issue dominated Turkey's relations especially with the two countries: Syria and Iran. With Iraq, however, the Kurdish issue is not restricted to one country; rather it was *regionalized* after the First Gulf War. Especially with Syria, the conflict as regards to Syrian support to the PKK culminated in a crisis in October 1998. Turkey openly threatened to use military against Syria if it does not close PKK bases and deport its leader Abdullah Ocalan. As a result of this pressure, Syria had to deport PKK leader Ocalan and close the training camps of PKK in Syria. This military threat culminated in an agreement between Turkey and Syria in 1998 that have improved Turkey-Syrian relations considerably. The agreement, the Adana Agreement, called for immediate deployment of security measures between the two countries. These measures were: having regular security meetings, establishing a hotline directly between Turkish and Syrian authorities, and appointing four special security officials to each other's diplomatic missions to put into place.[11] As a result of this security cooperation, logistical support of Syria to PKK

[10] Meliha Benli Altunisik, "Turkey's Middle East Challenges: Towards a New Beginning?," in Idris Bal (ed), Turkish Foreign Policy in Post Cold War Era, Florida: Brown Walker Press, 2004, p.363.

[11] Ibid, p.368.

stopped, PKK bases in Syria closed and Ocalan deported. After a while, the PKK leader Ocalan was captured in Kenya, trailed in Turkey and sentenced to life in prison.

Resolving the Kurdish issue with Syria and having a security agreement created a thaw in Turkey's Middle East policy since Syria was leading the Arab opposition towards Turkey. Since the Adana Agreement, Turkey and Syria have increasingly looked for ways to improve cooperation and dialogue.

Turkey-Iran relations, too, were effected from time to time by the accusations of Turkey that Iran was also giving support to the PKK.[12] The separatist Kurdish organization, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), had been waging a war against Turkey since 1984. This war entered a new phase as a result of the Gulf War in 1991 and subsequent developments in Iraq. For Turkey, Iraq's future and that of its Kurds, touches Turkey's core security interests and even has the potential to threaten the country's territorial integrity.[13]

Moreover, as mentioned above, while dealing with Turkey's relations with the Middle East, the Kurdish issue deserves a special attention since it has been the main obstacle to normalization of Ankara's relations with its neighbors.[14] It has been also a significant issue in Turkey's foreign policy regarding Turkey's relations with the western powers. As Altunisik[15] rightly argues, in the 1990s Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East was largely formulated through the lens of the Kurdish issue. Due to fact that the war with separatist Kurdish rebel group PKK

[12] Kemal Kirisci, "The Future of Turkish Policy Towards the Middle East," in Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirisci (eds), Turkey in World Politics, An Emerging Multiregional Power, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001, p.95.

[13] Bill Park, "Turkey's Policy Towards Northern Iraq: Problems and Perspectives," Adelphi Paper 374, Oxford: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005, p.12.

[14] Jesus del Rio Luelmo, Turkey's Role in the Middle East as a Member of NATO: Its Importance for the Atlantic External Security, NATO Research Fellowship 1995-1997, Brussels: NATO, 1997, p.38.

[15] Meliha Benli Altunisik, "Turkey's Middle East Challenges: Towards a New Beginning?," in Idris Bal (ed), Turkish Foreign Policy in Post Cold War Era, Florida: BrownWalker Press, 2004, p.365.

intensified largely as a result of the direct and indirect support provided to it by Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbors, the traditional power politics approach dominated Turkey's relations with the region. However, only has Turkey's such traditional power approach entered in a new phase when the Justice and Development Party came to the power in 2002. For the first time in the post-cold war era Turkey's approach to its neighbors has gone beyond the Kurdish issue. While still keeping the Kurdish issue on the agenda with not underestimating it, Turkey has been trying to establish regional understanding of Kurdish issue and proposing it together with the Iraq as a problem that has regional repercussions.

Besides the Kurdish issue, the Turkish-Israeli alignment in the post-cold war era has also dominated Turkey's relations with the Middle East. The burgeoning ties with Israel represented a bold initiative on the part of Turkey. For the first time in the republican history, Turkey openly engaged in a strategic alignment with Israel and felt no restraint to publicize this relationship. Because of its deepening ties with Israel, Ankara became the focal point of criticism from the regional Arab governments. The Arab states perceived Turkey-Israeli relations as a development that would drastically change the regional balance of power in favor of Israel. Another concern of the Arab states was the fact that Turkish-Israeli alignment would give Turkey an additional leverage in the regional affairs.[16]

Historically, Turkey's relations with Israel has been predominantly friendly; however, the speed and scale of the development of ties between the two in the second half of 1990s came as a surprise to many observers. Since the first agreement on military cooperation in February 1996, Turkey and Israel have embarked on a bold alignment comprising different fields such as, besides military, economy, culture, and educational exchanges. The main thrust of the alignment based on exchange in military information, experience and personnel.[17] This new Turkish-

[16] Ibid, p.367.

[17] Wolfango Piccoli, Alliance Theory: The Case of Turkey and Israel, Copenhagen: Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, 1999.

Israeli axis created profound unease among the Middle Eastern states and Turkish society alike. To the Arab public, Turkey's alignment with the Israel definitely had almost exclusively served Israeli interests and was concluded at the expense of Arabs and Muslims.[18] In Arab academic circles, the alignment was viewed as a particular threat against Iraq and Syria. Overall, seen from Arab capitals, this axis did not foster Turkey's role of a possible mediator between Arab states and West; it was rather perceived as serving Israeli and US interests in the region.[19] This simply meant the deterioration of Turkey's already existing not-that-good relations with the Middle Eastern countries. For Turkish society, the axis was not supported by the societal elements; rather, it was planned and orchestrated by the Turkish military even-handedly. It was based on a top-down approach. By taking into account of the fact that Turkish military played the main role in defining the scope of the alignment and the alignment's lack of societal support, some argued that this alignment is "the preference of the official Turkey,"[20] Others have gone even further, calling this a Turkish Army-Israeli alignment rather than the Turkish-Israeli one.[21]

By many, Turkey's development of a overt strategic relations with Israel is regarded as an "activist" foreign policy and it is argued that it should be analyzed within the context of new activism in Turkish foreign policy in post-Cold War era.[22] In principle, this approach is true; however, a further analysis is needed. Any active foreign policy must go along with the "taking into account of others" in the region on the basis of not to stray away them. Activism must also be coupled with the "balance;" if not, it might end up, in short or long term, being "adventurist." In this

18 Jung, 2005, p. 10.

19 Ofra Bengio and Gencer Ozcan, "Old Grievances, New Fears: Arab Perception of Turkey and Its Alignment with Israel," Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 37, No. 2, April 2001.

20 Lutfullah Karaman, "Israil ile Yakinlasma 'Resmi Turkiye'nin Tercihi," Islam, Vol. 14, No. 166, June 1997.

21 Gokhan Bacik, "The Limits of an Alliance: Turkish-Israeli Relations Revisited," Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. No. 3, Summer 2001.

22 Alan Makovsky, "The New Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy," SAIS Review, Winter-Spring 1999; Larrabee, F. Stephen and Ian O. Lesser, Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of New Uncertainty, Rand Corporation, 2003, www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1612/

regard, Turkey's relations with Israel in the 1990s could be described as, at best, "adventurist" rather than "activist." This is especially true when one analyzes the long-term impact of the alignment on Turkey's relations with the Middle East. Turkey-Israeli alignment can be also seen a mutual pact against increasing Islamists threat in Turkish domestic arena and the Middle East at large.

Turkey's alignment with Israel worked against Turkey, so to speak, from the Middle Eastern countries' perspective. The Arab League, meeting on September 1997, condemned the alliance for "expos[ing] Arab national interests to real danger and bring[ing] the region back to the policy of axes and alliances." The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in December 1997, meeting in Tehran, denounced Turkey for its growing ties with Israel. One by one each of the regional countries criticized Turkey for being part of a new US-sponsored regional security project, that would put the US and Israel as the main actors in the Middle East.[23] At the time, Turkey's external policy regarded as to have sharpened its anti-Arab attitudes and images, as well as pro-Israeli and pro-American ones.[24] Turkey in its own region became, so to speak, a "rogue state" and was alienated form the Middle East politics further.

3. Three Waves of Activism: A Periodization of Turkey's Active Role in the Middle East

3.1 Pro-Western Wave: 1991 Gulf War and Turgut Ozal

Robins[25] argues that the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq was an event that Turkey could not afford to ignore. Simply, the Iraqi control of Kuwait by occupation threat-

[23] Gokhan Bacik, "The Limits of an Alliance: Turkish-Israeli Relations Revisited," Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 23, No. 3, summer 2001, p.56.

[24] Bulent Aras and Hasan Koni, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Revisited," Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 24, No. 4, Fall 2002.

[25] Philip Robins, "Turkish Policy and the Gulf Crisis, Adventurist or Dynamic?," in Clement H. Dodd (ed), Turkish Foreign Policy, New Prospects, Modern Turkish Studies Programme, Occasional Paper 2, Huntingdon: The Eothen Press, 1992, p.71.

ened the power configurations in the Middle East. Turkey, as a neighbor of Iraq and as a Pivotal Middle Power, could not turn its back on such a development. Therefore, neither was it possible for Turkey to avoid being asked to play a central role in opening sanctions against Iraq in response to its invasion, nor to lessen the effect of the invasion on Turkey economically and politically without its involvement. Even though prior to the first Gulf War, the US brought tremendous political pressure to bear on Turkey to join the coalition in a war against Iraq,[26] it was made easy by Turkey's willingness to do so.

On 6 August 1990, Turkey closed the Kirkuk-Yumurtalik petrol pipeline with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 661 that decided that all states should prevent 'the import to their territories of all commodities and products originating in Iraq'. Turkey's closure of the pipeline and the ending of all regular trade with Iraq was undoubtedly a vital element in the economic campaign against Saddam regime. As Hale[27] argued without Turkish cooperation, "any effective embargo would have been quite impossible."

Turkey's then-President Turgut Ozal had dominated policymaking on the Gulf War and its implementation since it had occurred.[28] He championed an active foreign policy for Turkey on the crisis and indirectly criticized the basis of traditionalist approach of Turkey to the region.[29] In this regard, he clearly stated: "i is impossible for Turkey to pursue the hesitant, indecisive policy of waiting for other to make decisions first" (cited in Robins, 1992:76). Once the President Ozal had effective control over policymaking, this created uneasiness among the member of cabinets and even in the military. As a result of this, Foreign Minister Ali Bozer, Defence Minister Sefa Giray and Chief of Staff General Necip Torumtay resigned

[26]See Edward J. Erickson, "Turkey as Regional Hegemon - 2014: Strategic Implications for the United States," Turkish Studies, Vol. 5, No. 3, Autumn 2004, p.28.

[27] William Hale, "Turkey, the Middle East and the Gulf Crisis," International Affairs, Vol. 68, No. 4, 1992, p.684.

[28] Ertan Efegil, "Foreign Policy-Making in Turkey: A Legal Perspective," Turkish Studies, Vol. 2, No.1 Spring 2001, p.156.

[29] Alan Makovsky, "The New Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy," SAIS Review, Winter-Spring 1999.

from their positions. Although they resigned at different times and for varying reasons, each one was unhappy about the style and conduct of politics under the Ozal presidency towards the Gulf War.

Immediately after the Gulf War began on the night of 16/17 January 1991, then President Ozal obtained the extra powers from the Turkish Grand National Assembly. These were the authorization to deploy Turkish armed forces in foreign countries and allow that of foreign forces in Turkey. This permission was one that Ozal had long wanted in participating the coalition against Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. However, Turkey's participation was not to be direct with the commitment of forces in a land offensive, but more indirect in nature permitting the involvement of non-Turkish forces from Turkish territory. The indirect involvement of Turkey in the Gulf War took two forms. First, the Turkish government gave its permission for the US to use the joint air bases in the southeast of the country, not least the Incirlik base. In so doing, Turkey remained a platform for the US attacks against Iraq for the rest of the conflict. Second, Turkey played a key and extremely important role in the war by tying down a sizeable proportion of the Iraqi army. Prior to the Gulf War, Turkey had deployed around 60,000 troops in the southeast of the country to counteract the insurgency of the PKK. By November 1990, this had already risen to 95,000 men, while by the time war broke out this deployment had been increased nearly 150,000 troops for the purpose of maintaining security in the area in the case of attack from Iraq.[30] The magnitude of this force obliged the Iraqis to maintain an estimated eight divisions in the north of Iraq. Though there was no ground fighting on the Iraqi-Turkish border, this stand off helped to deter Baghdad from moving even greater forces to the southern front.

The war waged against Iraq by the multinational force was successful in driving the Iraqi armed forces out of Kuwait, but there were a number of undesirable consequences that emerged out of the conflict. Of the most important one was the Iraqi

[30] Ali L. Karaosmanoglu, "The Evolution of the National Security Culture and the Military in Turkey," Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 54, No.1, Fall 2000, p.211.

Kurdish refugee crisis. After the war, some 700,000 refugees from northern Iraq fled their home in the fear of retribution from Saddam regime, traveled to the Iraqi-Kurdish border.[31] For Turkey, the Iraqi Kurdish issue was both a refugee and a political problem. Therefore, Ankara initially determined not to allow the Iraqi Kurdish refugees across the border. However, the severe climatic conditions of the time that deteriorated suffering of the refugees created an international intense pressure on Turkey to admit some of the refuges across its border. In this environment, Turkey proposed to establish "safe havens" in northern Iraq for refugees.[32] The proposal accepted by the EU and the US. In this regard, following the withdrawal of coalition troops from northern Iraq in July 1991, Turkey approved the stationing of some 4,000 troops in southeast Turkey under Operation Poised Hammer that could be deployed back to Iraq in the event of the attacks on the Kurds. It was thus possible to remove all the refugees from Turkish soil, thereby eliminating the possibility of a long and costly stay for the refugees in Turkey. The concern of Turkey was that the Iraqi Kurdish refugees, because of their strong political dimension, could have a radicalizing effect upon Turkey's Kurds.[33]

The Gulf War showed that Turkey is one of the key actors in the Middle East. Indeed it was so even before the Gulf War because of the issues of water, and the Kurdish question. The Gulf War, however, served to reinforce the point. Most importantly, during the Gulf War, certain key principles of Turkey towards the Middle East were set aside. Of the most important one was the Turkey's non-interference in intra-Arab disputes and the Middle Eastern affairs.[34] Not only did Turkey

[31] Philip Robins, "The Overlord State: Turkish Policy and the Kurdish Issue," International Affairs, Vol. 69, No. 4, 1993, p.674.

[32] William Hale, "Turkey, the Middle East and the Gulf Crisis," International Affairs, Vol. 68, No. 4, 1992, p.688.

[33] Philip Robins, "Turkish Policy and the Gulf Crisis, Adventurist or Dynamic?," in Clement H. Dodd (ed), Turkish Foreign Policy, New Prospects, Modern Turkish Studies Programme, Occasional Paper 2, Huntingdon: The Ethen Press, 1992, p.83.

[34] Philip Robins, "Turkish Policy and the Gulf Crisis, Adventurist or Dynamic?," in Clement H. Dodd (ed), Turkish Foreign Policy, New Prospects, Modern Turkish Studies Programme, Occasional Paper 2, Huntingdon: The Eothen Press, 1992, p.85; and Ali L. Karaosmanoglu, "The Evolution of the National Security Culture and the Military in Turkey," Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 54, No.1, Fall 2000, p.210.

set aside this main principle, but also the style of Turkish foreign policy towards the region was changed. The traditional low-key, cautious, diffident approach was replaced by a new confident and high profile style. This policy as mentioned above was mainly promoted and championed by the Prime Minister (1983-1989) and later President (1989-1993) of Turkey, Turgut Ozal. Even after his death, the degree of activism and boldness that Ozal introduced to the Turkish foreign policy was so strong. In this regard, Jung[35] claims that such boldness in Turkish foreign policy has still been visible.

During the Gulf War, Turkey had an exclusive cooperation with the United States. Various commentators have suggested that Turkey's policy towards Kuwait crisis pursued under the 'single-handed' leadership of the then-Turkish President Turgut Ozal was based on the special close relationship between Ozal and George Bush. However, later research has shown that Turkey's active involvement in the issue was more than a special relationship, and had an impact, both positively and negatively, on long-term goals.[36] Whatever the reason was, Turkey was actively involved in the Gulf War and participated in the multinational force with a "suitable unit."[37] Moreover, as mentioned before, in July 1991, Turkey allowed the deployment on its territory of a Western multinational force called Operation Poised Hammer. Although the force was composed of ground forces to be deployed in Silopi, air forces in Incirlik and support elements in Batman to act a deterrent for any Iraqi reprisals against the Kurds of Northern Iraq, it became extensively interlinked with the Kurdish issue and thus created a concern and fear for Turkish foreign policy makers during subsequent years.

Turkey's active involvement in the Gulf War represented a fundamental alteration of Turkey's traditional "balanced" foreign policy towards the Middle East, a

[35] Dietrich Jung, Turkey at the Crossroads, Working papers, Copenhagen: Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, March 1999.

[36] Mahmut Ali Baykan, "Turkey's Policy in Northern Iraq, 1991-95," Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 32, No. 4, 1996, p.345.

[37] Ibid, p.343.

change that continued in the aftermath of the war.[38] The Gulf War, therefore, represented the beginnings of a transformation - though it was still in its very early stages – of Turkey's regional policy on its southern and eastern borders. This change in Turkey's regional behavior became distinctive when it began holding meetings with Syria and Iran. The regular tripartite meetings began in November 1992 mainly to discuss major regional issues, particularly to situation in northern Iraq. The main issue that brought the three countries together was the Kurdish issue since the three countries have a large number of Kurds living in their territory. The primary fear of the tripartite states was the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq and its repercussions in the region by encouraging the Kurd in their territories to do so.

According to Turkey, these meetings represented an example of regional cooperation that "had become important" under the "considerably changed circumstances" of the post-Cold War era. Turkey added that it had held consultative meetings with these countries before; but this time Turkey wanted them to be routine.[39] Although they were quick to declare that these meetings did not target the Western policies in the region, according to then undersecretary of the Turkish Foreign Affairs Ministry, Ozdem Sanberk, Turkey expected that these meetings would 'bring some balance to Turkey's relations with America and Europe,'[40]

While the joint communiqués of these meetings did not provide a specific remedy to the existing situation in northern Iraq, they were able to bring some countries from the region together to share concerns, ideas and fears on the regional issues. By making these meetings routine, it was hoped that they would become influential in regional affairs. They did not, however, become continuous because of Kurdish issue that later divided Turkey and Syria in their understanding of regional politics. This was an indication of Turkey's changing foreign policy towards the region. Turkey's involvement in the region was short lived. It did not continue because of

[38] Sabri Sayari, "Turkey: The Changing European Security Environment and the Gulf Crisis," Middle East Journal, Vol. 46, No. 1, Winter 1992, p.13.

[39] Mahmut Ali Baykan, "Turkey's Policy in Northern Iraq, 1991-95," Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 32, No. 4, 1996, p.357.

[40] Cited in ibid, p.357.

a number of factors – both internal and external. Internally, the death in 1993 of President Ozal, who had championed for an active role for Turkey in the Middle East and political instability within Turkey, the latter mainly through brief coalition governments, resulted in Ankara being unable to take a coherent approach towards the region. Externally, Syria's hosting of the Kurdish separatist PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in Damascus, and its letting PKK insurgents use Syrian territory for bases contributed to an increase in tension in the relations between Turkey and Syria. Another factor that led to deterioration in relations between Turkey and Syria, as well as Iraq, from time to time, was the water issue.

Overall, the legacy of the Gulf War and Ozal in Turkish foreign policy is still considered as an important driving force behind Turkey's active involvement in the Middle East. As shown in following pages, the loss and gains resulting from the Gulf War became a reference point for Turkey's involvements in the region. For example, economically, Turkey loss approximately $60 billion by closing petrol pipeline between Turkey and Iraq. This economic loss alone has had an impact on Turkish policy orientation towards both the Middle East as well as vis-à-vis the international community.

3.2 The Anti-Western Wave: 1996-7 the Refah Government and Erbakan

The election results of 24 December 1995 shook the Kemalist foundations of Turkey. For the first time since the establishment of the secular Republic of Turkey, a party having an Islamic orientation, Refah (Welfare) Party, won the election. Though it was not able to form government alone, it secured the majority seats in the Turkish Grand National Parliament. After the collapse of the short-lived coalition government between the Motherland and True Path Parties, in September 1996, Refah Party established a coalition government with the True Path Party. Necmettin Erbakan became the first Islamist prime minister of secularist Turkey.[41] Once Refah

[41] Aryeh Shmuelevitz, Turkey's Experiment in Islamist Government, 1996-1997, Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, May 1999.

got to power, Turkey's foreign policy inclination towards the Middle East, in particular, and Islamic countries, in general, become persistent.

Refah Party placed importance on the development of relations with Turkey's neighbors. In this regard, Refah Party put the improvement of Turkey's relations with its immediate neighbors Syria, Iran and Iraq on its list of priorities.[42] Political circles in Turkey had already known Refah's Islamic orientation for a long time. Erbakan started political activities with an Islamic agenda in 1970 when he established the National Order Party. Though it was short-lived due to the military coup in 1971, under the name of the National Salvation Party (NSP) he continued his political life. Once again, when it was closed in 1980 after another military coup, the Welfare Party came to existence as the successor of the NSP. The National Salvation Party participated in several successive coalition governments between 1974 and 1977. The small NSP, however, controlled only about 10 percent of the parliamentary seats in the 1970s. Two decades later, in 1995, Erbakan significantly increased his support base to a point where Refah became the largest party and had close to one-third of the seats in the National Assembly. Although there have been many attempts to explain the reasons why Refah had increased its support base dramatically, the main one was the perceived failure of mainstream parties to resolve the country's pressing political and economic problems.[43]

When Erbakan became prime minister, internal and external observers alike were of the opinion that Turkey was lost or on the way to being lost because of the government's Islamic orientation. Rhetoric rather than reality, as later seen, was the

[42] Hurriyet (Turkish Daily), 1 July 1996.

[43] Sabri Sayari, "Turkey's Islamist Challenge," The Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 3, No. 3, September 1996; Haldun Gulalp, "Political Islam in Turkey: The Rise and Fall of the Refah Party," The Muslim World, 89, 1999, and "Globalization and Political Islam: The Social Bases of Turkey's Welfare Party," International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 33, 2001; Ziya Onis, "The Political Economy of Islamic Resurgence in Turkey: The Rise of the Welfare Party in Perspective," Third World Quarterly, Vol. 18, No. 4, September 1997; Nilufer Narli, "The Rise of Islamist Movement in Turkey," Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA), Vol. 3, No. 3, September 1999.

prevailing theme. In the mid-1990s, when Erbakan came to power, Turkey was faced with (in) security concerns both domestically and internationally. Internationally, the uncertain future of Northern Iraq, with a possible spillover effect on increasing Kurdish insurgency in Turkey; deteriorating relations with Syria, Greece and Iran over issues pertaining to Cyprus and the PKK issues; a dramatic increase of Islamists in Turkey's internal politics, especially after the 1994 local elections when the mayorships of Istanbul and Ankara, along with many other main cities, were captured by the Welfare Party candidates. The intersection between the concerns over internal and external security increased when the Welfare party came to power in 1995.

It was under such conditions that Welfare Party had to operate. Domestically, there was fierce military and sercularist opposition to Welfare's governing Turkey. Externally, the US and the European Union were looking for ways to deal with an Islamist government in a country that was critical to Middle Eastern affairs and close to troublesome areas.

As Robins[44] summarizes, after taking office, the Erbakan-led coalition government had to address a number of controversial foreign policy issues. These subjects included its relations with Israel; Operation Provide Comfort II towards northern Iraq and the customs union with the European Union (EU). These were the issues through which Erbakan, as prime minister, would show his foreign policy inclinations and reveal his hand.

Historically, Erbakan was an outspoken and consistently fierce critic of Turkey's increasing relations with Israel. Turkey's relations with Israel had been rapidly accelerated since 1993; however, in February 1996, the Turkish armed forces concluded a military-training agreement with Israel, which reached the high point of a bilateral relationship that had been developing since the 1980s. Despite his harsh criticism, Erbakan was able to make little or no moves to downgrade the

[44] Philip Robins, "Turkish Foreign Policy Under Erbakan," Survival, Vol. 39, No. 2, Summer 1997.

relationship with Israel. Moreover, Erbakan went ahead and signed the $600 million military deal with Israel on 5 December 1996.[45] It seems that Erbakan accepted the accords as *de facto* rather than being able to downgrading ties as he claimed before.

The Welfare Party's foreign policy towards the Operation Provide Comfort and the custom union with the EU shared a fate similar to that of the relationship with Israel. Before coming to power, Erbakan had seen Operation Provide Comfort as an occupation force in Turkey and demanded that it be ceased.[46] Similarly, Erbakan was opposed to the customs union agreement on the grounds that the union provided Turkey and the EU tariff-free access to each other's markets in principally industrial goods, while Turkey embraced the EU's external barriers on trade with non-member state, because Turkey was not yet an EU member. During the 1995 election campaign, while Erbakan promised to tear up the customs union agreement, once in the office he could do nothing about the agreement.

These contradictory promises and action of Refah Party before and after coming to power can only be explained by pointing to who really controls Turkish foreign policy. In Turkish politics, the power is coalesced in the center while leaving little influence from the periphery.[47] Traditionally, the military, the ministry of foreign affairs, along with the bureaucracy, represent the center, while parliament and government represent the periphery. Foreign policy is usually being made and executed by center rather than by the periphery. Therefore, while many governments come and go, the main tenets of Turkish foreign policy continue to be same. However, some governments might diversify the existing relations rather than bringing about a new one. In that regard, the Erbakan-led coalition government was not able to change any tenet of foreign policy in Turkey but added to it a new dimension. Despite its short period in power (11 months), Refah Party was able to

[45] Turkish Daily News, 6 December 1996.

[46] Philip Robins, "Turkish Foreign Policy Under Erbakan," Survival, Vol. 39, No. 2, Summer 1997, p.85.

[47] Metin Heper, "The Ottoman Legacy and Turkish Politics," Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 54, No. 1, Fall 2000; and Serif Mardin, "Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?," Daedalus, 102, December 1973.

increase Ankara's relations with strong Muslim countries radically and even established a grouping among them, the D-8. This has been the result of an activist foreign policy inclination of Turkey towards the Middle East.

The two trips abroad made as president by Erbakan, leader of the Welfare Party, was to the Islamic world, where he visited nearly a dozen states, including Iran and Libya. Erbakan's major diplomatic initiative was to establish a grouping of the eight most populous Muslim countries. The Developing 8, also known as D-8, intended to foster economic cooperation, as well as political consultations among the Muslim countries.

Erbakan strongly wanted to develop relations with the Middle Eastern countries but the environment was not conducive for such a move. The leaders of Middle Eastern countries harshly criticized Turkey's increasing relations with Israel, arguing such a move would change the power balance against Arab states. Although Turkey emphasized that the relations with Israel was not against any third party, it changed little in the perception of Arab leaders.[48] While such external obstacles exist, internally, the Erbakan-led government was short-lived and unable to sketch out and implement its willingness to substantially change the course in Turkey-Middle East relations substantially. After the establishment of the D-8, the uneasiness towards Refah Party increased in Turkey. This resulted in the ousting of Erbakan from power and later politics altogether.

During Erbakan's tenure in office, once again continuity rather than change prevailed in Turkish foreign policy. Only this time, it extended radically to Islamic world. As Robins[49] rightly argues, the sole area of Turkish foreign policy significantly revised had been relation with the Islamic world. This opening had two overlapping dimensions. First, a bilateral dimension, where considerable effort was

[48] Ofra Bengio and Gencer Ozcan, "Changing Relations: Turkish-Israeli-Arab Triangle," Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 5, March-May 2000.

[49] Philip Robins, "Turkish Foreign Policy Under Erbakan," Survival, Vol. 39, No. 2, Summer 1997, p.88.

made to improve relations with selected Islamic countries; second, a multilateral dimension that was executed through an Erbakan-led D-8 initiative bringing prominent Islamic countries together to form a bloc of developing countries.

Despite the existing rhetoric of changing foreign policy, at the time Erbakan came to power, the reality was rather different. Erbakan's Islamic opening was not able to change or be undertaken as part of a broader aim to undermine Turkey's relations with its traditional allies in the west (Robins, 1997:89). Rather, it was pursued as a goal complementary to the existing orientation of Turkish foreign policy, aimed at the diversification of economic interests.[50]

Overall, during Erbakan's premiership, the 'foreign continuity, domestic change'[51] or in other words the 'strong state, weak government'[52] notion prevailed, leaving behind a mixed legacy vis-à-vis the Islamic world at large and the Middle East in particular. This rhetorically anti-western, practically complimentary to existing western- inclined foreign policy paved the way and contributed to search for a balanced Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East.

3.3. The AKP Government and 2003 Iraqi War: Towards a Balance?

Turkish politics changed dramatically after November 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won enough seats in parliament to form a government. Having created a 'political earthquake,' it is the first single party to rule Turkey alone in last 16 years and has the ability to achieve change through legislation.[53]

[50] Jenny B. White, "Pragmatists or Ideologues? Turkey's Welfare Party in Power," Current History, 96, January 1997.

[51] Alan Makovsky, "How to Deal with Erbakan," The Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 4, No. 1, March 1997.

[52] Philip Robins, "Turkish Foreign Policy Under Erbakan," Survival, Vol. 39, No. 2, Summer 1997, p.94.

[53] E. Fuat Keyman, "Turkiye'deki Politik Deprem: AKP Hukumetinin Bir Incelemesi," Stradigma (e-Journal), available at www.stradigma.com; and Mecham, R Quinn, "From the Ashes of Virtue, a Promise of Light: the Transformation of Political Islam in Turkey," Third World Quarterly, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2004.

In line with the general new foreign policy orientation of Turkey after the Cold War, since assuming power, AKP has designed Turkey's foreign policy in general. Prior to the AKP government, Turkey was governed by coalition governments and frequently experienced 'new governments.' Thus, in general, Turkish politics were far from stable. As a result, they lacked a coherent approach to internal and especially external issues. In recognizing this fact, with the AKP's coming to power, 2003 was seen as a year for Turkey to "make up losses"[54] in foreign policy. It was claimed that 2004 would be a year when Turkey would be brought onto the international agenda. In that regard, while Turkey intensified reforms for the joining the European Union, it hosted the meetings of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in May and the NATO meeting in June 2004, the OIC-EU joint meeting that was to be held in October 2004 was cancelled at the very last minute due to the problem of recognizing Northern Turkish Republic of Cyprus.[55]

During this period, Ankara seemed increasingly eager to diversify its foreign policy portfolio while acting independently from the United States. This orientation has been accelerated by the Iraqi war, which created a disagreement between Turkey and the United States. The Iraqi issue led Turkey to look for ways of complementing its relationship with the United States.

It has been argued that the start of the Iraqi War in 2003 was a difficult moment for Turkey. On the one hand, taking active role in the war would create serious economical burdens on Turkey; on the other hand, taking part on the side of the United States during the war would cause serious opposition to Turkey from the Middle Eastern countries, especially from the Arabs. Hence, the relationship between Turkey and Arab states would deteriorate, resulting in the isolation of Turkey.[56]

[54] The Chief Foreign Policy Adviser to Turkish Prime Minister, Prof. Ahmet Davutoglu, has used the term.

[55] At the previous meeting of the OIC in May 2004, Turkish Cyprus has been recognized as an independent state and invited to join the OIC meetings under this title. The EU, however, did not recognize the Turkish Cyprus as the OIC did. The OIC- EU joint meeting was cancelled because of the Turkish Cyprus status in the meeting.

[56] Idris Bal, "Turkey-USA Relations and Impacts of 2003 Iraqi War," in Idris Bal (ed), Turkish Foreign Policy in Post Cold War Era, Florida: BrownWalker Press, 2004, p.138.

Moreover, if Turkey participated in the war, the image of the creation of the so-called Turkey-Britain-United States triangle coalition in the eyes of Middle Eastern society was regarded as the 'worse- case scenario' by the government of Turkey.[57] If this scenario occurred, Arab states would take stand against Turkey on the bases that Turkey, Britain and the US shared the same ideas. That is to say, Turkey was the first ruler of the region under the Ottoman umbrella. Later, Britain came to the forefront at the beginning of the 19th century. The United States is the latest country to become influential in the Middle East. Given the fact that a negative image of Turkey already exists in the region, Turkey regarded this alliance as the worse possible scenario, one which would have long-term negative consequences for Turkey in the Middle East.

In Turkey, there is a widely shared view that the outcome of the 1990-1 Gulf Crisis and War turned out to be costly in economic and political means for Turkey. During the Gulf War, President Turgut Ozal's bold initiative in closely associating Turkey with the US military efforts to expel Iraq from the Kuwait backfired. As Robins[58] rightly indicates, Turkey suffered mainly from two consequences. Firstly, Turkey's participation in the international sanctions against Iraq had left a costly economic legacy. For example, the president of the Ankara Chamber of Commerce estimates the losses of Turkey in the Gulf crisis to be somewhere between $50 billion and $60 billion.[59] Secondly, the effective creation of a political twilight zone in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq, the so-called 'safe havens,' provided a sovereignty vacuum in which the PKK guerrillas were able to operate. Until 1998, when the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was pushed out of Syria, at the cost of bringing Turkey and Syria to the brink of war, this power vacuum had been used as an opportunity by the PKK to operate against Turkey. Only after Ocalan had been pushed out of Syria and subsequently captured in Kenya in 1999 was Turkey able to rela-

[57] Milliyet (Turkish Daily), 23 January 2003, www.milliyet.com.tr.

[58] Philip Robins, "Confusion at Home, Confusion Abroad: Turkey Between Copenhagen and Iraq," International Affairs, Vol. 79, No. 3, 2003, pp.559-560.

[59] Cited in Bulent Aras, "Turkey and the Iraqi Crisis," Bulent Aras (ed), War in the Gardens of Babylon, Middle East After the Iraqi War, Istanbul: TASAM Publications, 2004, p.173.

tively control the infiltration of PKK guerrillas into Turkey. Turkish society and elite alike were very aware of these negative results of the Gulf crisis on Turkey. For the sake of avoiding such a costly outcome, therefore, neither Turkish society nor the Turkish elite was supportive of US plans to invade Iraq. It was amidst this societal awareness that the AK Party came to the power.

Before the election of November 2002, the political atmosphere was mainly focused on domestic issues. On the one hand, Turkey was just out of one of the biggest economic crisis in its history; on the other hand, the public focus was rather on the 'domestic aspects' because of the Justice and Development Party's political identity.[60] In the 1990s the AKP leaders were members of the Islamic-oriented Welfare Party. Therefore, speculation, for example, concentrated more on what the AKP's approach would be to topics such as allowing headscarves to be worn by female university students. There was an expectation that the AKP would win the election. Public polls and researches were showing the same.

Contrary to expectation that the AKP would have an Islamic-oriented 'hidden agenda,' the AKP government surprised so many people, shattering a lot of prejudices and assumptions that the AKP would follow a low-intensive foreign policy in foreign relations and priorities would be given to domestic issues. The AKP has, by contrast, proven that it changed the discourse in the field of foreign policy rather than internal issues.[61]

Within days after the AKP assumed power, the biggest foreign policy test for the AKP government turned out to be the Iraqi crisis. The crisis required the greatest of diplomatic prowess, involving the most delicate of balancing acts for Ankara. On one hand of the scale was the US, which had clearly been clamoring for a war against Saddam Hussein and was relying on its 'strategic ally' Turkey to help in this

[60]Semih Idiz, "The AKP's Foreign Policy: Learning it the Hard Way," Turkish Policy Quarterly, Vol. 2, No. 4, Winter 2003.
[61] Ibid.

venture. On the other hand, certain regional dynamics, such as those involving the Kurdish issue, were being unleashed by the United States – a situation that Turkey has traditionally considered to be detrimental to her vital security interests.

The potential financial losses to accrue from this war were also a key consideration in Ankara, given the bitter experiences from the previous Gulf crisis when Turkey was left with a bill put at tens of billions of US dollars by Turkish officials, in lost trade and other and other commercial opportunities. Given the fact that the country has been grappling with one of the worst economic crises since the founding of the republic (2000 and 2001 economic crisis), if Turkey refused the US, it would be deprived of the support of its key ally in a host of economic and political fields. Such support was especially vital in the economic field since Ankara has been trying to implement a US- backed IMF recovery program involving billions of dollars of emergency aid for Ankara. The government was also concerned about the prospects of ending up with hundreds of thousands of, mainly Kurdish, refugees on Turkey's doorstep, as was the case in 1991, in the event of war. Such a prospect would not only involve a humanitarian disaster, but also represent a demographic bombshell for the country if these refugees were to be let into the predominantly Kurdish Southern Turkey.

The biggest worry, however, was that Northern Iraq's Kurds might use this war as their historic opportunity to declare independence. Such a notion is anathema to the military and civilian establishments in Turkey, who fear the potential spill over effects of this in the Southeast of Turkey where Kurds are predominant. This concern has always ensured Turkey's strong support the notion of a unified Iraq, and international respect for the territorial integrity of this neighboring country.

Against this background, Turkey was asked to support coalition against Saddam Hussein before the Iraqi War of 2003. As the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) rejected the deployment of between 60 and 70 thousands American soldiers on the Turkish border with Iraq, the relations between Turkey and the long-

time ally US deteriorated. The anxiety brought on by these cold relations increased when Kurdish groups opposed Turkish troops in Iraq at a time when Turkey wanted to sent nearly 10 thousand troops to Iraq as part of the planned reconstruction of the country. More broadly, the refusal of the 1 March draft resolution by the Turkish Grand National Assembly created results similar to those that appeared when the EU declared in its 1997 Luxemburg meeting that Turkey was not a candidate state for the EU. The relations between Turkey and the EU deteriorated all of a sudden. After the 1 March draft resolution, the same results were witnessed between Turkey and the USA.[62]

The 1 March 2003 motion forbidding US troops from using Turkish territory in the war against Iraq was a historical turning point for Turkey's relations with the Middle East. The Turkish parliament prevented the United States from opening a northern front against Iraq on the justification that the international community considered the war illegitimate. Prior to the Iraqi war, Turkey adopted an active diplomacy to minimize problems with neighboring states. More specifically, Turkey developed its relations significantly with Iran and Syria from commercial and security standpoints. These relations in connection with the Iraqi crises moved Turkey to convene a meeting with all countries bordering Iraq in order to enhance stability in the region and prevent then possible war. While Turkey was not able to prevent the war, its decision not to allow US soldiers to be deployed in northern Turkey has prolonged the process of the Iraqi invasion. It has also drawn more attention to the Palestinian- Israeli issue as a reason for much of the region's stability.[63]

Siding with the Middle Eastern countries and, to some extent, with Europe, namely France and Germany, has created opportunities and difficulties for Turkey. On the one hand, as mentioned above, Turkey's relations with the US entered an environment dominated by mistrust. On the other hand, Turkey's relations with

[62] See the interview with Dr. Soner Cagaptay, Aksiyon Weekly News Magazine March 1, 2005.

[63] See Bulent Aras, Turkish-Iranian-Syrian Relations: Limits of Regional Politics in the Middle East, Global Politician online magazine, 9 March 2005. http://globalpolitician.com accessed on 12 April 2005

Europe and the Middle East opened up. While Ankara faced difficulties with US, it enjoyed the opening entry negotiations for the European Union (EU) on 3 October 2005 and booming political and economic relations with its neighboring countries. Increasing Turkey-Syria and Turkey-Iran relations shows this point clearly from political and economic points of view.

While the Adana Agreement had brought about a rapprochement between Syria and Turkey , when Turkey openly threatened Damascus that it would use military means if the latter did not halt its support of the PKK, relations began to sag. AKP's coming to power marked a dramatic improvement in these relations. Historically, the Adana Agreement (1998) opened a new phase in Turkey-Syria relations. Syria stopped its support of the PKK and both sides looked for ways to improve relations. In this environment, Turkish President Ahmed Necdet Sezer's attending Hafiz al-Asad's funeral in 2001 represented a turning point. This was followed by Syrian Vice-President Abdul-Halim Khaddam's visit to Turkey in November 2001. After AKP's assuming power in November 2002, the relations between Turkey and Syria increased dramatically. In July 2003, Syrian President Mohammed Mustafa Miro became the first Syrian prime minister to visit Turkey in 17 years. Three agreements on health, oil and natural gas, and custom matters were signed during his visit to further enhance cooperation between the two counties. At the same time visits at ministerial and technical levels intensively conducted on a reciprocal basis to further social and economic cooperation. As a sign of improving ties, Turkish companies established 12 investment projects in Syria in 2003, and trade between the two reached the $1 billion benchmark. Furthermore, the improvement of relations was culminated in the visit by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in January 2004. This was the first official visit by a Syrian head of state in 57 years. During his visit specific measures were taken to improve relations as well as coordination and consultation on regional issues.[64]

[64] Meliha Benli Altunisik, "Turkey's Middle East Challenges: Towards a New Beginning?," in Idris Bal (ed), Turkish Foreign Policy in Post Cold War Era, Florida: BrownWalker Press, 2004, p.369.

The same dramatic increase has also been witnessed Turkey and Iran relations becoming disentangled from the Kurdish issue in January 2000 when both states started a process of security cooperation against the PKK by signing a memorandum of understanding. After this period, Turkey-Iranian relations improved considerably economically and politically. Besides the Kurdish issue, Turkey-Israeli relations have always been obstacle in developing Turkey's relations with Iran. Iran was critical of Turkey's development of relations with Israel militarily and strategically favored Israel rather than Middle Eastern states. It was at this time period that Turkey's relations with Israel were in transition 'from hyperactivity to normal ties.'[65] Unlike the mid-1990s, Ankara opted to play a low-key profile in its relations with Israel beginning in 2000. This contributed to the developments of Turkey's relations with Iran rapidly in economic and political arena.

Turkey's relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Gulf States and Palestine are have also improved. Turkey's refusing to allow the deployment of American troops created an environment in the Middle East in which Turkey was perceived as having returned to its roots – the Middle East. Turkey has developed its relations with the regional organizations, namely Organization of Islamic Conference, Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council. Turkish was candidate for OIC Secretary-General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu and won the election at the 2005 meeting in Istanbul. In 2006, Turkey was invited to the Arab League meetings as 'permanent guest.' The developing relations with the Middle East became even clearer when the OIC invited Northern Cyprus Turkic Republic as the Turkish Cyprus State to its meetings.

Overall, during AKP period, Turkey has diversified its foreign relations - not only with the Middle East, but also Asia and Africa. Stressing that none of the relations is seen as an alternative to another, Turkey is keen on playing a key role in its immediate region and further afield. Assuming the co-chairmanship of Civilization

[65] Ibid, p.369.

Alliance with Spain by the request of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in order to develop civilization harmony, instead of clash, is an indication that Turkey could represent or speak on behalf of the Middle East in particular, and Islamic world at large.

Though, one needs to wait and see whether this wave of Turkey towards the Middle East is temporary or permanent, it is easy to identify this wave as being more sophisticated and diversified in comparison to previous ones. Economic, social and cultural relations have intensified and have had a greater impact. In contrast to previous waves, the AKP has added those dimensions that might herald a balanced wave to Turkey's relations with the Middle East.

4. CONCLUSION

The end of Cold War has created both new opportunities and obstacles for Turkey. When the Cold War ended, the classical Cold War definition of the global politics dramatically changed. Turkey was no longer a buffer between the Soviet Union and the oil-rich Middle East; nor was it a barrier between the NATO and the Soviet Bloc. The new political realities in the international system opened new horizons for Turkey. After the 1990s, Turkey's foreign policy inclination towards the Middle East could be analyzed within the context of three periods. First of all, in the post-Cold War era, Turkey's first active involvement in the region was its active involvement in the Gulf War. When Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, it was contrary to international law. Hence, the UN Security Council decided to act to protect Kuwaiti sovereignty. In the US-led United Nations force, Turkey played active role and as part of the UN sanctions against Iraq, Turkey halted the flow of petrol in the pipeline from Iraq to Turkey. Turkey's second active involvement in the Middle Eastern affairs was the time when Turkey's Islamic- oriented Refah (Welfare) Party came to the power in 1996. Though it was a short period- only 11 months- Ankara was able to start an economic initiative among the eight strong Muslim nations. Called the D-8, this initiative originated and was orchestrated from Turkey. Lastly

and currently, Turkey's active involvement in the Middle East started when the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) assumed the power in late 2002. Though it is still underway, this period has been the most sophisticated involvement of Turkey in the region with the aim of long-term goals. In this period, the 2003 Iraq War was a big test as well as an opportunity for Turkey to change the course of the relations between the Middle Eastern states and Turkey. It was in this period that Turkey initiated the Istanbul Declaration as a regional consultation process. The aim of this initiative was to create a greater say on the part of regional countries on issues affecting them directly.

Turkey's new regional policy in the Middle East aims to promote a regional peacemaker role and gives priority to democratic legitimacy in international relations. Turkey's new neighborhood policy has a vision of minimizing the problems in its neighboring regions, while at the same time avoiding being pulled into international confrontations. Otherwise, Turkey will contradict its projected aims and targets in the region.

As shown above, Turkey occupies a place that is full of geopolitical complexity of the region. Behind the 'new' inclination towards the Middle East, current Turkish foreign policy-makers seem to be understood the complexity of Turkey that 'transcends a strictly Western orientation.'[66] Turkey, with the changing understanding of foreign policy discourse towards the Middle East during the AKP period, seems to have a balanced foreign policy approach, rather than an adventurist or isolationist one. Should this trend continue, Turkey, with its power in the region, is 'clearly moving towards becoming a regional power in the next ten years.'[67]

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[66]See Cengiz Candar and Graham E. Fuller, "Grand Geopolitics for a New Turkey," Mediterranean Quarterly, Winter 2001, p.23

[67] Edward J. Erickson, "Turkey as Regional Hegemon- 2014: Strategic Implications for the United States," Turkish Studies, Vol. 5, No. 3, Autumn 2004, p.40.