

Turkey and Middle-East Programme

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Turkey advancing in the Middle East

Debriefing Report



The Turkish pattern of choices for partners in the Middle East

The end of the old Turkish alliance system happened in three steps: The end of the cold war and the possibility to reach out to the « East » more freely, the Arab spring and post Arab spring periods with a new power dynamic emerging, opening opportunities and some new threats to the states. Turkey notably did clearly suffer a lot from the Syrian crisis. The Third step which is decisive to understand is the failed coup attempt of 2016, in which the trust with the west was completely broken (inspiring an official Turkish rhetoric of make them pay for the lack of support during the coup attempt). There is a Turkish obsession in the new approach of their alliances system for self-determination, a kind of paranoiac mood since the failed coup attempt of 2016.

On the one hand Turkey has difficulties to find friends ready to cooperate against feared threat such as the political emergence of Syrian Kurds; on the other hand it wants to sustain high national ambitions, thinking of the geopolitical environment in term of opportunities and leadership possibilities (Turkey reviving multilateral frames of cooperation where it can exert a role, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, or the D-8). But the relations with partners nowadays integrate the dimension of the punishment of traitors.

Turkey is still considered as an indispensable partner by many, especially by Western powers. Ankara is more and more considered as a country that you don't want to antagonize; a non-cooperative partner with low commitment to collective discipline. In that view, it is very unlikely that Turkey would leave NATO, but the internal difficulty of NATO to deal with Turkey is a symptom of its deep crisis and is accelerating its obsolescence.

As a result, in bilateral relations and multilateral cooperation frames, most countries engaging with Turkey will try to neutralize Turkey's ambition, or at least contain it. The historical frame of reference for Turks when they think about the region has evolved, with an increase reference to the Ottoman past. Turkey more and more frequently behaves like a revisionist power when it comes to question the legitimacy of the post WW1 borders in the Middle East.

Turkey's position in Syria

Only two years ago, Turkey was seen as the biggest loser of the Syrian war, which had reached a decisive turning point in disfavor of Ankara. Turkey had not succeeded in removing Assad from power and the Kurdish question had become more complicated than it originally was. The peace process with the PKK had collapsed and Ankara's relations with Moscow and Washington were dangerously strained. Violence from Syria was crossing the Turkish border. The majority of those challenges are still present today, yet Turkey has reversed certain trends. Ankara has strengthened its position and managed to open a small window to pursue its own objectives, reaching a better condition in Syria.

Turkey's policy of keeping and enlarging its military presence in Syria has three main aims:

- The first priority is to contain the YPG
- The second is to prevent a new wave of refugees
- The third one is to gain a seat at the negotiating table to decide on the political future of Syria.

The Idlib deal

On the 17th of December President Erdogan and Putin agreed on a cease-fire in the Idlib region, creating a buffer zone between Syrian army and rebels. This deal, as precarious as it is, continues to hold and is one of the rare open successes of president Erdogan in the Syrian crisis. There is a will to include the West into the process, further internationalizing the issue. This agreement is a tool for Turkey and other parties to save time in Syria. It is crucial to prevent a new humanitarian and refugee crisis that would have followed a Syrian offensive, and also to prevent jihadi penetration in a context of chaos. Turkey's presence in Idlib is needed to ensure the application of the agreement and to later have a say at the negotiation table.

The Manbij deal

Since the seizure of Manbij by the YPG in 2016, Turkey refuses their presence and has asked for a withdrawal. YPG presence is also confirmed in areas under Russian control and near pro-regime areas. In order to lower tensions the US military has accepted to negotiate the departure of the YPG from Manbij.

East of Euphrates

This region is controlled by SDF, backed by US military – a presence that has been temporarily reinforced because of the shift of US doctrine from the war against ISIS towards containment of Iran. However, there is a doubt about the willingness of the YPG to play the role that Washington wants to assign them. The relationship is fragile and a peace agreement is holding for the time being between the PJAK (the Iranian branch of the PKK) and Teheran. Another unknown element lies with the future relationship between the YPG and Assad. Assad will likely stay in power on the long run and before taking risky positions, the YPG will probably wait to better assess the internal agenda in Syria. Announcements made by the US administration in the fall of 2018 regarding the future of Syria (end of ISIS, the withdrawal of Iran and a political solution for Syria) show that the US positions may conflict with YPG interest. Donald Trump's sudden decision to withdraw troops at the end of December confirms the fragility of the Kurdish arrangement.

Turkey's regional strategy and its relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Historically the strategy of the Ottoman empire was to ally itself with any Western power who could help him confront Russia. Even in the first time of the Republic, a constant of Turkish foreign policy was to remain very cautious and aware of Russia. Yet today the Turkey-Russia mismatch is not only happening in Syria but in every area where the two nations are present (Middle East, Central Asia, Black Sea, Balkans, Caucasus).

As for the relations between Iran and Turkey, they follow their usual historical patterns: a competition that sometimes stirs conflict, but always with cooperation in the background.

The Gulf has now taken a central position in the Middle East, with monarchies becoming more ambitious and adventurous in the region. There is of course not one single Gulf style but different states and the relations with them shape differently.

Turkey has three different policies towards the Gulf. One is towards Qatar, one towards the Saudi/Emirati Gulf and one towards the “grey zone”.

Turkey has historically been sensitive to not antagonize Saudi Arabia to a great extent – but could tend to be more critical more about the UAE. On commenting the Khashoggi affair, Tayyip Erdogan started most of his statement by splitting Mohammed Ben Salman, the Crown Prince, from Saudi Arabia and King Salman.

Gulf has a symbolic and a financial importance. Every Turkish president who tried to increase Turkey influence in the Middle East did it by a tightening the relationship with the KSA.

This pattern worked until the internal crisis erupted within the GCC, and now Turkey is searching for the limits in dealing with the Saudis. Confronting MBS is preparing for a hard bilateral future with the Saudis. Now Turkey will have two long-term enemies in the region: Bashar Al-Assad and Mohammed Ben Salman. It is a weak spot in Turkish policy in the long run.

Turkey decided to not transform the Khashoggi affair into a bilateral confrontation but to involve as many actors as it could. It was important for Erdogan to maximize the gains from this situation. He decided to bring MBS to be confronted not by him as a regional rival but by the international public opinion. Erdogan was also cautious not to target Donald Trump in the process. Trump’s unpredictability can be an asset from a Turkish perspective. The bit by bit strategy was successful to keep the attention of the international community.

The role that Erdogan gave himself was essentially to provide a loaded gun against the Saudi to everyone who wished to use it. Now everybody who has an international case against MBS will win. The MBS episode has been a net contribution to increasing the Iranian influence in the region. Qatar is now closer to Iran. Iran has more influence in Lebanon, and in Yemen that it used to have.

The stake of the Khashoggi affair has also to be understood into the context of the West/Turkey relation. Turkey delivered messages to the West through the Khashoggi affair. The first is that the Turkish state is functional no matter what happened in the last years, when Western observers speculated about the collapse of the Turkish institutions. Intelligence services were efficient, the police and justice did their job as well. The country works. Furthermore, Turkey is portrayed as a democratic country shocked by the barbaric murder of a journalist. Erdogan is standing in defense of the press. The third result of the Khashoggi affair was to challenge the US.

What is the impact of Turkey’s current economic situation on its policies?

The Emir of Qatar visited Turkey at the end of November and signed a series of economic agreements. Nevertheless which sector is concerned and on what scale remains very unclear yet. All of this is mysterious. Qatar’s investment in Turkey are so far strategically linked to Erdogan, they tend to consolidate his system of control over the economy of the country. But Erdogan’s real problem with the economic crisis is the erosion of his electorate. Three are different ways to overcome this difficulty, one being to play on Turkish nationalism. This revives the possibility of an important military ground operation in Syria for various reasons. It would keep the whole army busy. It would bring media talks away from economical and internal problems. It would also show Turkish concrete power on the ground, with the idea to earn extra credits in the regional scene. A new operation will certainly happen in Syria, the question is when, where exactly, and on what scale?

What is happening now vis-a-vis the West?

The relation between Turkey and the EU is multi-dimensional and frustrated.

Turkey feels rejected by the EU despite its economic successes and efforts to reform. This trauma is explaining part of the equation and created an anti-Western rhetoric in Turkey. Internal development in Turkish politics also pushed it away from the EU at far speed since 2013. So at the same time external reasons and internal dynamics push Turkey away from the EU.

Europe was historically a reference for Turkish domestic policy, economic and political organization, while the US was a reference for Turkey’s foreign policy and security. But those two reference points played into a very specific context: the modernization period and the Cold War context. Nowadays these standards are devaluating. The attraction of the US still remains strong, while the attraction for the EU has decreased to a minimum level also because of the political crisis inside the EU. The dominant narrative is that at some point the Europeans will exclude Turkey. For the Turks no matter what they were willing to do or to discuss it was never enough (even if Turkish good will on some issues – as Cyprus, can be contested). The question is what are the real membership criteria, what is the framework? Is the accession key an identity one, or is economics or politics? If identity is a problem, why were we talking about the possibility of integration in the first place?

Now there is a hypocritical relation on both sides. Turkey still pretends it wants to be part of the EU and the EU is still pretending to negotiate to let Turkey into the club. None of the parties is willing to call it off. That creates a frame of crisis.

Turkey feels downgraded in terms of status. The membership process implies a hierarchy. There is a teacher/ student relationship. You do ABCD and then you become a member of the club. But this hierarchy does not correspond to the geopolitical reality. Recently it was Turkey who incorporated France and Germany into the Astana process. This discrepancy will continue to be problematic no matter who is in power in Turkey.

EU still has leverage on Turkey on the economic side.

Turkey will continue to be part of NATO but the meaning of its engagement will be dramatically different. There is a general problem with international governance and even more with regional governance. At the end of the day the real field problematic is with the US and the two parts will have to work out an agreement.

Turkey buying Russian S-400 missiles is not a natural deal. The message here is directed to Washington: if you are not there we will negotiate with Russia. Unless a major problem happens in Idlib, the Russia-Turkish relation will continue. The evolution of it will depend on the Turkish-US relation.

Does Turkey search for leadership in the Middle East?

Leadership in the Middle East is not a thing you can be serious about. If there is one you thing we learn from the Middle East is that there is no enduring possible leadership in the region. There was an Egypt moment, a Turkey moment, an Iran moment but none of them was for long. The Egypt moment was during Nasser time but now Egypt is no more powerful than any other country in the region. Turkey, even with its neo-Ottoman rhetoric, knows this and does not want to get involved everywhere. For instance, the Yemeni crisis is one of the hot topic of the region but nevertheless Turkey did not and does not want to get involved in it.

When we talk about Sunni leadership, it refers to the Arab context – yet only 20% of the overall Sunni population lives in the region. Turkey and Saudi Arabia will use the language of Islam to reach political objectives and build a political speech. No one can predict what will be the issue of it and that political Islam will not have the same fate as panarabism for example.

The economic soft power was an important leverage for Turkey in the region. There is now a dramatic degradation of the economic situation and a raise of grey economy. This explains why there is an increased interest in the stabilization of the region: Ankara needs new markets and it leads for instance to increased Iran/Turkey competition in Iraq.