

# Only Problems

How Turkey Can Become an Honest Mediator  
in the Middle East, Again

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Turkey's former "zero problem" policy transformed into "only problems with neighbours" as the country increasingly became obsessed with being a regional power. Despite its foreign policy failures, Turkey could still become the source for peace and stability in the region. It just needs to return to the foundational principles of Turkish foreign policy: caution, neutrality and peace.

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When Turkey declared its new foreign policy under the headline "zero problems with neighbours," the government believed that historical and economic ties would be enough to provide a leading role for Turkey in the region. At the time, Turkey's good relations with both Arab states and Israel as well as increasing bilateral trade agreements in the region provided a solid basis for Turkey to mediate between conflicting parties, spread peace, and encourage democratisation. However, Turkey missed its opportunity. First, Turkey increasingly became obsessed with being a regional power with the aim of reviving Ottoman heritage throughout the Middle East. Second, Turkey, like the entire Arab world, was unprepared for the explosive and unpredictable nature of developments in the Middle East. When these two factors came together, Turkey had already lost its opportunity to become a force for conflict resolution in the region. It veered into taking sides; thus moving away from the main goal of the new foreign policy agenda. Despite its foreign policy failures, Turkey could still become a source for peace and stability in the region. It just needs to return to the foundational principles of Turkish foreign policy: caution, neutrality and peace.

### The Roots of "Zero Problems with Neighbours"

Turkey's new foreign policy, "zero problems with neighbours," was hailed as the unprecedented new dynamism for an inward-looking country,<sup>1</sup> although it was rooted in the legacies of previous governments. The "new" policy aimed at a pro-active independent foreign policy

that sought to mend Turkey's problems with its neighbours, improve relationships with a wide-range of states, and diffuse and mediate regional conflicts. Ahmet Davutoglu, the founder of the "new" Turkish foreign policy, deeply believed that Turkey's historical heritage compels it to intervene in conflicts outside of Turkish territory in order to diffuse them, but also in order to protect Turkey's interests. To this end, Turkey's political, economic and mental accumulation should be harmonised to tap its full power potential. In his conception, the power potential also included a capable defense industry, and, therefore, increased military strength.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the time has come for Turkey to assume the role of a regional power and a global player. Actually, Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) was not the first government to aim at improving Turkey's relations with its neighbours and bidding for regional leadership.

Although pursuing good relations with Europe and the United States had been the traditional anchorage of its foreign policy, Turkey always had some level of flexibility in engaging with other countries in its region. When Turkey became increasingly isolated in international politics due to the Cyprus dispute in the 1960s, it initiated a "multidimensional" foreign policy. According to this new policy, Turkey sought to improve its relations with its neighbours. The rapprochement between Turkey and the Soviet Union began when the Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Erkin visited Moscow in October 1964. Turkish-Soviet economic relations began to improve and become stronger by 1966, as the

Soviet Union agreed to help Turkey with financial aid as well as with investments in Turkish industrial capabilities. By the end of the 1960s, Turkey received more aid than the Warsaw Pact countries altogether.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Turkey also attempted to improve its relations with the Arab world. Turkey shifted its attention to the Arab states and attended the first Islamic summit conference in 1969, gathered to discuss the issues of the arson at the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the status of Jerusalem following the Six-Day War in 1967. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Turkey asked the United States not to use its bases in Turkey to support Israeli war efforts but allegedly allowed the Soviet Union to cross Turkish air space to supply Egypt. Following the U.S. arms embargo in 1975, which continued for three years, Turkey sought the support of the Arab states more aggressively.<sup>4</sup> Although this course of action hurt Turkey's relations with Israel, improving relations with both the Soviet Union and Arab states did help the Turkish economy. Thus, a Saudi offer of a 250-million U.S. dollar loan and an expansion of bilateral trade relations lent a hand<sup>5</sup> to the fragile Turkish economy between 1979 and 1981. When Turkey realised that, in addition to disagreements with Iraq and Syria over access to water resources and their support to the PKK, it could not muster Arab support for the Cyprus dispute, Turkey turned towards Israel. The rapprochement between Israel and Turkey began in 1986, and relations reached their peak in the mid-1990s through various defense agreements.<sup>6</sup> In the post-Cold War era, Turkey continued to follow a rather active foreign policy although at times derailed by internal problems. During the Prime Ministry and later Presidency of Turgut Özal (1983 to 1993), Turkey followed an active and multidimensional foreign policy with the resurfacing of "Neo-Ottomanism" – the belief that the historical and cultural heritage of Turkey compels the country to assume leadership in the Middle East. But it was short lived due to Turkey's focus on the fight against the PKK, rendering security the country's primary concern of its foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> Ismail Cem, the Foreign Minister of the coalition government between 1999 and 2002, also favoured the multidimensional pro-active foreign policy, which paved the

way for normalisation of relations with Greece and Syria.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, when the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey had already initiated the process of improving relations with neighbours, well entrenched in its accumulated experience in conducting a pro-active foreign policy. The AKP greatly benefitted from the legacies and experiences of previous governments when formulating the "new" Turkish foreign policy approach.

## The Islamic roots and brand of conservatism of the AKP government facilitated rapprochement between Turkey and Arab states.

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The novelty of the new foreign policy was that the government aspired to attain a leadership position in the region. In other words, the government believed that Turkey could shape Middle East politics according to its interests rather than just improving relations with its neighbours. This represented a significant shift from the former model. The new model entailed establishing good relations with neighbours and becoming embroiled in regional conflicts and disputes. Thus, mediation was seen to be the key for acquiring more influence in the region. In comparison to the previous government, the AKP government had a slight advantage: Its Islamic roots and brand of conservatism facilitated rapprochement between Turkey and Arab states, thereby developing closer cultural, diplomatic and economic ties, as the AKP government was more comfortable in engaging with the Arab states and the Islamic world in general.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, while previous governments have also followed a multidimensional pro-active foreign policy, the AKP government showed a clear tendency to act independently from the Western alliance, especially in relation to major regional and international conflicts,<sup>10</sup> thereby weakening the traditional anchorage of Turkish foreign policy. Combined with the previous governments' normalisation processes and multidimensional



Political weather: Good relations with the U.S. and the European Union constitute one fundamental anchor in Turkish foreign affairs. However, the relationship to its Western partners was recently under considerable strain.

Source: Jason Reed, Reuters.

foreign policies, its Islamic roots and its tendency to act independently allowed Turkey to improve its cultural and economic relations with the Middle East, which served to bolster its mediator role in the region.

Based on cultural and improved economic relationships across the region, Turkey engaged as a mediator. The image of the neutral and credible actor was the main asset of Turkey in its mediation efforts.<sup>11</sup> Thus, as long as Turkey maintained its neutrality between conflicting parties, the countries were open to Turkish mediation. For example, under Turkey's mediation, Syria and Israel engaged in indirect talks in 2008. Turkey also arranged a meeting between Israeli and Pakistani foreign ministers- the first contact

between the two countries- in September 2005.<sup>12</sup> In 2010, Turkey attempted to broker a nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1, which is a prime example of Turkey supposedly acting with good intentions although this was to some extent perceived as an interference with Western interests.<sup>13</sup> Following the announcement of the nuclear deal, the United States accused Turkey and Brazil of undermining their efforts in putting pressure on Iran.<sup>14</sup> Despite the West's criticism, Iran welcomed Turkey's actions and reiterated its willingness to accept Turkey's mediation efforts even though parties failed to reach an agreement.<sup>15</sup> During the crisis in Bahrain in 2011, Turkey initiated communication between the conflicting parties of Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates as well as between the Bahraini state

and the opposition groups – again, owing to its neutral position.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, countries in the region accepted and welcomed Turkey’s mediator role as long as Turkey remained neutral towards the conflict parties. While neutrality and multilateral engagement were the strengths of the “new” Turkish foreign policy under the AKP, they unfortunately contradicted the aspirations of the leadership in the region.

### What Went Wrong?

The obsession with obtaining regional power status blinded Turkish policy makers to the ever-shifting realities on the ground and the power play of the international actors in the Middle East. Turkish policymakers, departing from the Neo-Ottoman approach, believed Turkish leadership can shape the Middle East. Such a posture, without a doubt, alienated Arab decision makers, who saw the Ottomans as a colonial power, rather than a benevolent state. Turkish activism was not a critical problem as long as Turkey did not force itself upon the Arab states and kept its distance. This is the main reason why Turkey was accepted as a mediator in the region in the first place. Unfortunately, Turkey has not refrained from attempting to shape the Middle East, although it was ill-prepared for becoming involved in Middle East politics. In the end, Turkey was forced to make tactical decisions that defined its policies and defused its influence in the region.

### Turkey’s support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt impaired the relationship with some Arab countries in the region.

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Turkey sided with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia because it planned to project its power through the Brotherhood, which shares similar ideologies with the Turkish government. When President Morsi was deposed from power, Turkey reacted impulsively and burned bridges with Egypt. As Turkey invested its political

capital in the Brotherhood, rather than taking a neutral position, the ousting of Morsi neutralised Turkey’s influence. Turkey’s support to the Brotherhood not only alienated the al-Sisi government and severed Turkish-Egyptian relations; both Saudi Arabia and UAE took offence.<sup>17</sup> Following the removal of Morsi, Turkey criticised its western allies, the Gulf states, the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation for their silent acceptance of the situation.<sup>18</sup> As the Brotherhood was deposed from power, Turkey’s chances for greater influence in regional politics slipped right through its fingers. Since then, Turkey’s actions have made the country’s position worse.

When the rebellion started in Libya, Turkey was very successful in getting all of its citizens out of the country. However, it failed to show the same kind of success in reacting to the unfolding events in Libya. Initially, Turkey was cautious to get involved in the conflict, which was the right policy to follow in the face of uncertainty. This is due to the fact that Turkey had considerable economic stakes in the country and it was not clear which side was likely to win. However, the problem was that Turkey failed to alter its policy when European powers – France and the United Kingdom – got involved in the Libyan conflict and created a no-fly zone. Initially, Turkey was against the no-fly zone and criticised the coalition – going so far as to accuse the West of double standards.<sup>19</sup> Although Turkey eventually called for Gaddafi’s removal and providing access to Turkish facilities for NATO operations, Libyan rebels took note of Turkey’s action. Thus, when Turkey changed its mind, it was too late. Relations between Turkey and Libyan rebels deteriorated when Turkey was accused of supporting the *Fajr Libya* militia, which has inclinations towards the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Jihadist group *Ansar Al-Sharia*. Although Turkey denied these allegations, the country had already lost its credibility in the eyes of Libyan

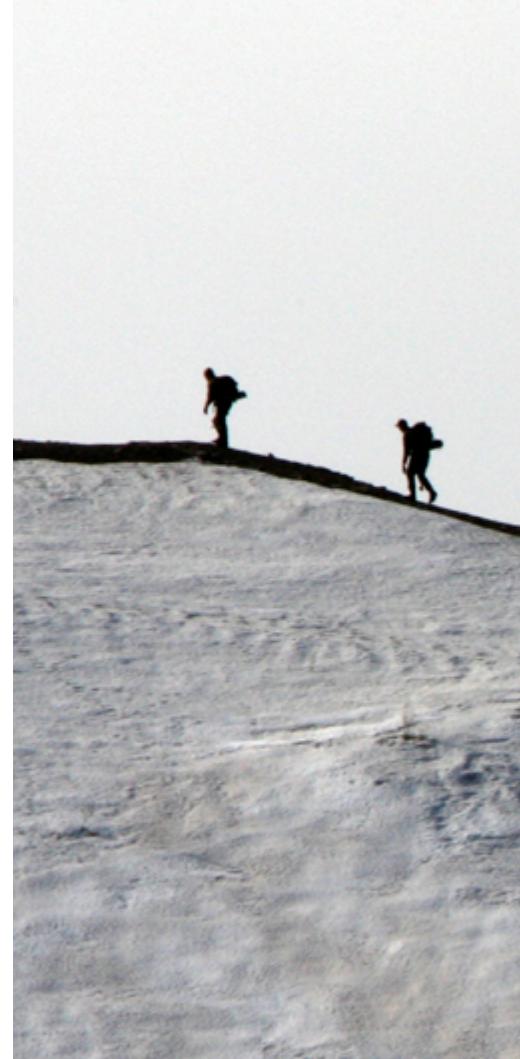
Under fire: The course of action against the →  
PKK – as in Diyarbakir – is driving a wedge between  
the government in Ankara and the Kurdish population.

Source: Sertac Kayar, Reuters.



rebels, who threatened to shoot down a Turkish aircraft, accused of supporting the Operation Dignity.<sup>20</sup> Failure to act and inconsistency alienated the rebels, with Turkey losing its position and possible influence in shaping the future of Libya.

The Syrian conflict is another example of how unprepared Turkey was for the complexities of Middle East politics. In Syria, Turkey was one of the first countries to take an anti-Assad stance and to begin supporting Syrian rebels. Turkey wanted to be at the table to shape the future of Syria, and probably thought the conflict would be over within months, just as had been assumed for Libya. Consequently, even when Turkey tried to persuade Assad to introduce reforms and end the clashes, according to the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallim, Turkey wanted to bring in the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been banned since 1963, to the political process in Syria.<sup>21</sup> The meditation was doomed to fail when the Syrian government perceived that Turkey was trying to bring in a political actor that poses an existential threat to the Assad regime. In addition, another problem was that Turkey again failed to read international politics correctly. In the Libyan case, European powers were eager to intervene, and the rebels, despite the existence of different groups, were able to act under the unified command of Mahmoud Jebril.<sup>22</sup> In Syria, in comparison, no one was willing to get involved by supplying arms to the Free Syrian Army which had slowly started to disintegrate in smaller factions with different goals. Furthermore, Russia had taken an unyielding pro-Assad stance since the beginning of the conflict. While Turkey insisted on deposing Assad, the realities on the ground have shifted significantly. Under the reluctance of its Western allies, Turkey's calls for establishing a no-fly zone and humanitarian corridors in northern Syria and increasing support for moderate rebels failed to materialise.<sup>23</sup> So-called Islamic State (IS), which turned the weaknesses of Syrian rebel alliances to their own advantage, took control of large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq. Founded on a very radical interpretation of Islam, IS poses a greater threat to both the West and Russia. However, Turkey failed to



recognise the IS threat and remained focused on the Assad regime. Turkey was unwilling to shift its position despite the significant changes taking place in the Syrian conflict. Had Turkey acted more cautiously and tried to find common ground with Syria and the rebels, the situation could have been much different, at least for Turkey. However, Turkey opted for becoming involved heavily in the conflict, supporting rebel groups with questionable allegiances. In other words, Turkey could be considered one of the big losers of the developments in Syria so far; based on miscalculation and misperception of the developments in the Middle East.



Demarcation: Turkey fears the creation of a separate Kurdish state at the Syrian and Iraqi borders. Next to other factors, this explains why Turkish forces have taken actions against Kurdish militia in northern Syria recently.

Source: Fatih Saribas, Reuters.

Furthermore, Turkey's uneasy relations to its Kurdish population have reflected upon its policy decisions in the Syrian conflict. Turkey is worried about the peculiar status of Kurds in Iraq and Syria. Turkey considers a possible emergence of a Kurdish state in the region to be the greatest threat to its national security interests. Turkey fears an independent Kurdish state in both Syria and Iraq could make irredentist appeals to Turkish Kurds in Southeast Anatolia.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the government fears that a strengthened Kurdish unity could alter the power balance during peace negotiations in Turkey. As Salt argues: "Erdogan wants to negotiate from a

position of strength, and that means controlling the Kurds on both sides of the Turkish-Syrian border."<sup>25</sup> Driven by security considerations and power struggle, Turkey positioned itself against strengthening Kurds in Syria. To prevent this, Turkey dragged its feet whenever Kurds needed help. The prime example was Turkey's inaction during Ayn-Al Arab (Kobane) siege. When IS approached Ayn-Al Arab (Kobane) in October 2014, Saleh Muslim, the leader of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), travelled to Turkey to seek military assistance against IS. Turkey demanded that Syrian Kurds should be aligned with the Free Syrian Army, which was being supported

by Turkey. This was unacceptable to Saleh and he had to return to Ayn-Al Arab (Kobane) empty handed.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Turkey did not allow Kurdish reinforcements to pass through Turkish territory for a long time. As Turkey's fight against the PKK intensified, uneasy relations to the Kurds in the region became even more complicated.

Because of the renewed fighting with the PKK, the Turkish government feels "betrayed" by the Kurdish groups and politicians altogether. Although the PKK and its affiliate TAK (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons) are both classified as terrorist organisation by western allies,<sup>27</sup> it is distressing for the Turkish government to see that its allies fail to provide assistance in the – from the official Turkish point of view – legitimate fight against terrorism. Additionally, while the Turkish government considers the fight against terrorism to be legitimate, the fights in the cities drive a wedge between the Turkish government and the Kurdish population. Consequently, the ongoing clashes stall initiation of a comprehensive "peace project" started by the AKP government in 2013.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, Northern Iraqi leader Barzani also expects Turkey to fight against the PKK. Thus, failure to do so could worsen relations between Turkey and Northern Iraq. Turkey's close cooperation with Barzani, at times, alienated Iraqi central government. For example, the Iraqi central government was concerned by the increased number of Turkish troops in Bashika Camp without consulting with them about the matter. However, Turkey could have chosen a different path, one that truly seeks peace and stability in the region, and this is still possible.

### Solution?

The pursuit of becoming a regional power is a fictional and damaging venture, and it is time for Turkey to abandon that pursuit. Turkey does not need to be a regional power to become a major actor in the region. In other words, the country can still be an influential actor in the region without imposing its will persistently and taking sides in regional conflicts. Turkey could have followed the stance Sweden and Norway have taken in world politics; engaging with conflicting sides

while staying neutral and credible. Had Turkey remained neutral and credible, it could have used its influence over the Brotherhood in Egypt to moderate its policies while trying to establish common ground between different actors. Turkey could have helped the Kurds during the siege of Ayn-al Arab (Kobane), which could have paved the way for reconciliation with the Kurds in the region as well as in Turkey. This could have put Turkey in a much stronger position. However, these are missed opportunities.

## Without internal peace Turkey cannot promote the peace process within the region.

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Turkey can still return to its previous position of an "honest mediator", though it would be a difficult task, given the positions Turkey had taken over the years. Nevertheless, this is the only position that is beneficial for Turkey, as well as for the international community. Not only are Turkey's current policies far from having a stabilising effect on the region, they even pose the danger of destabilising Turkey. The European countries in particular should encourage Turkey to stand back and disengage from the Syrian conflict. This is all the more true after Turkish troops have recently fired on U.S.-backed Kurdish militia in northern Syria.

Both the United States and Russia welcomed and supported Turkey's military operation, the Euphrates Shield, in Syria following the G20 Summit since this military operation is not against the territorial integrity of Syria. It aims to free the southern border of Turkey from terrorist organisations. The problem is that all major actors have different definitions of the terrorist organisations, and thus have divergent priorities. The United States and Russia support Turkey as long as it remains focused on fighting IS. Turkey, on the other hand, is more concerned with preventing Kurdish forces to gain a foothold in the western bank of the Euphrates River. The difference in the priorities has created some

friction between Turkey and the United States. Thus, when Turkish forces clashed with the U.S.-backed Kurdish militia, the United States criticised the clashes and urged Turkey to focus on IS.<sup>29</sup> While the crisis has been resolved when the Kurdish forces agreed to withdraw from the western banks of the river, the uneasy relationship between Turkey and Kurds in northern Syria continued to be a possible destabilising factor in the region. This uneasy relationship hinders Turkey from acting as an “honest mediator” and a stabilising actor in the Middle East.

Even if Turkey alters its foreign policy position and aims to become neutral in regional conflicts, its uneasy relations with the Kurds will continue to be a problem. This will continue to shape Turkey’s threat perceptions and interests abroad. Although Turkey initiated the peace process with the Kurds in Turkey, the recent clashes in the cities froze the peace process. The fighting also creates obstacles to a possible Kurdish-Turkish rapprochement in Syria, which could greatly benefit the war against IS. Turkey needs to make peace with its Kurdish minority; and Europe and the U.S. need to support Turkey in making peace within its borders. Without internal peace, Turkey cannot defuse the conflicts and support peaceful settlements.

Turkey’s ineffectiveness is the consequence of the country’s decision to turn away from its role as the “conscience of the Middle East” and thus become a “lonely country” in less than a decade, transforming a “zero problem policy” into “problems with all neighbours” along the way. The public perception of Turkey is at its lowest point since the establishment of the Republic in 1923. Unless the AKP government manages to set aside these “inflexible” policies, Turkey’s poor foreign policy is likely to persist.

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