

**EUROPE, TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST:
IS HARMONISATION POSSIBLE?**

Bulent Aras and Salih Bicakci
Isik University

The possibility of Turkey joining the European Union has spurred heated debate within the EU, but it is also captivating the entire Middle East. This interest has been interpreted in Turkey as a clear signal that Ankara has emerged as a powerful regional actor. The change in language and rhetoric of Turkish policymakers is clearly visible and bears considerable influence on foreign policy. In this line of thought, Turkey's reform process paved the way for a number of structural changes in the domestic landscape, which also changed foreign policy attitudes toward the Middle East. What has suddenly given formerly inward-looking Turkish politicians this newfound self-assurance that they can influence regional politics? What promise does Turkey hold for the region? Did Turkey's perception of the Middle East change? What will be the priority areas in Turkey's new policy toward the Middle East? Can Turkey really contribute to EU policies of enhancing regional security and stability? Why would the EU care about Turkish positions in the Middle East?

Indeed, Turkey's new ruling elite is confident that their country can play an active peacemaking role in the Middle East. The process that we will focus on in this article is the Europeanization of Turkey's policy toward a number of Middle Eastern problems. We will analyze the emergence of a European Turkey and harmonisation of Turkish and European attitudes in the Middle East. Although Turkey's EU aspirations and progress gained momentum in the past several years, a historical analysis denotes that Turkey has been closer to EU positions on a wide range of issues, contrary to the widespread belief that Ankara follows a pro-U.S. stance in the Middle East. Within the limit and scope of an article, we chose Turkish and European attitudes toward the Palestinian question vis-à-vis the emerging harmonisation of Turkish and European foreign policy lines in the region. Following the historical analysis, which will focus more on developments in the recent era, we will also discuss Turkey's possible role in enhancing a more active, dynamic, timely and influential EU policy toward the Middle East.

Historical Background

In 1969, Turkey joined the Islamic Conference Organization as an observer and then right-wing Suleyman Demirel government regarded the conference as a political, not religious, meeting, concerned only with the fire at the Aqsa Mosque and the status of Jerusalem.¹ Turkey remained neutral and was able to act as a balance between opposing camps. For example, at the Rabat Conference in 1969, Turkey opposed a resolution that called for all the participants to end diplomatic relations with Israel.² The members of the European Community had limited progress in developing a common attitude towards the question until the Hague Summit of 1-2 December 1969.³ On the eve of the 1967 Six-Day war, European countries were stuck in their domestic considerations. For example, the 1967 war was a turning point for French-Israeli relations, and France adopted its critical position of Israeli policies in international circles. Israel had German support vis-à-vis the French attitude of supporting an Arab, anti-Israeli line in its Middle East policy. Germany's support of Israel was largely due to the change of policy under Konrad Adenauer, who initiated a reparation plan for holocaust victims and their relatives.⁴

The resistance to pursue various positions continued among European countries, despite attempts to adopt a common position. Even during the meeting of the Heads of State in Rome, they acted in different ways. For instance, France condemned Israel and supported the Arabs at the UN; the Netherlands positioned itself in a favourable manner to Israel; Germany proclaimed its "neutrality" but strongly backed Israel; eminent Italian governing families divided into two groups—the Fanfanis (close to the Arabs) and the Saragat (close to Israel); Belgium tried to find recourse in the UN institutions.⁵ The European Political Cooperation (EPC) was established during the Hague Summit in 1969 and the Middle East was one of the major interests of this unit.⁶ The EPC produced three common policies on the Middle East: the Schumann report in 1971,⁷ the Brussels declaration in 1973,⁸ and the London declaration in June of 1977.⁹

Turkey, however, pursued balanced policies during the 1973 war. During the crisis, the ambassadors of Syria and Egypt asked for political support from Turkey. The spokesman of the Turkish Foreign Ministry stated that "Turkey does not approve of Arab lands being forcefully occupied by the Israelis and that it feels a lasting peace settlement is

contingent upon the satisfaction of the legitimate demands of the Arab nations on this matter."¹⁰ Later, Turkey told the U.S. government that "the military bases in Turkey may not be used to aid Israel during the current war in the Middle East."¹¹ At that time, the U.S. delegation to NATO blamed Turkey for allowing arms transfers from the Soviet Union to the Arab states.¹² After the war, Turkey again tried to help those countries that had suffered in the war.

Following the 1973 October war, France also tried to lead the European countries and called them to a collective response to the war. Nevertheless, during the Copenhagen Summit of December 1973, they could not agree on a common position. Possible European cooperation on the issue seemed even less promising than what was achieved during the 1967 war.¹³ This failure resulted in different treatment for EU states under the Arab oil embargo and provoked serious Franco-German divisions over American proposals for a cartel of oil consumers. The Netherlands was completely embargoed, while France and the UK were viewed as friendly by the Arabs and received normal supplies of oil. The other six were threatened with phased reductions.¹⁴

The subsequent two wars, the UN Resolutions in their aftermath and oil embargo has been influential developments in the European attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although the developments were more in favour of emergence of a common position, there always were different individual European positions at changing levels. The following quote came later and underlines the importance of the legacy of developments in this period.

A lasting peace settlement can only be based on respect for international law, including resolutions 242 and 338 of the Security Council of the United Nations. As the European Council has declared, such a settlement requires full recognition of the right of Israel to live in peace and safely inside internationally recognized borders, as well as the creation of a viable, independent and democratic Palestinian state and the end of the occupation of Palestinian Territories.¹⁵

On the other hand, Turkey had maintained a decisive stance on the Palestinian question since the end of the 1940s. The events of the year 1974 constituted a major turning point in the problem of the Palestinian people. The PLO and Arafat gained international recognition from the

international community and obtained observer status in the UN. The Arab Summit also declared the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Turkey voted in favour of all resolutions that emerged from the UN in 1974.¹⁶ This stance may be interpreted as pro-Palestinian considering the Western attitudes toward the Palestinians. The independent Turkish attitude, namely that of support, was first expressed in 1975. This was in association with the developments in Europe on the same question in the aftermath of the 1967 and 1973 wars. Although Turkey had expressed reservations about the PLO during its early days, Ankara established contact with it through the Turkish embassy in Cairo in January 1975.¹⁷ The 1974 Arab Summit meeting seems to have influenced this "verbal" recognition of the PLO. After all, these legitimization processes helped the recognition of Yaser Arafat as an influential figure in Turkish foreign policy and more than just the leader of the PLO.

Turkey pursued a policy line, from the early 1950s onwards, that the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians, including their right to establish their own state, was the only formula for the solution of the Palestinian question. The EU came to this point in due course, arguing that the peace process can only succeed on the ground of the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians. Ankara was supporting Palestinian statehood as the solution to the Palestinian question and was aiming to keep the PLO in the moderate camp. In fact, Turkey had long been defending the claims of Palestinians by voting in favour of them in the UN and in other international forums.

Ankara recognized the Palestinian entity as an independent state after its declaration of independence in Algiers on 14 November 1988.¹⁸ Turkey became the 11th state to recognize Palestinian statehood, and the first from the West. The EC's reaction came with a declaration in Brussels on 21 November 1988 in which they interpreted Palestinian independence as a positive step toward the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Turkey, on the other hand, saw the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a source of instability in the region. It felt obliged to readjust its position in association with the developments in this crisis. After an unsynchronized policy between Turkey and the EC on the Palestinian question, both parties started to pursue similar policies.

While there were considerable differences between Turkey and the U.S. over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Turkey did not seem to differ

substantially from the position of Europeans taken in the Venice Declaration of 1980. Europeans and Turkey regarded the conflict as a threat to stability in the Middle East and agreed on the importance of the right of self-determination for the Palestinians, including Palestinian statehood and the Israeli right to exist. In addition, they considered the PLO as an essential participant in the peace process.

Besides these similarities, there were some differences between the Turkish and the Western European positions. The most important of these differences was that Turkish policy was based on a low profile and a non-interventionist approach to the question while the European approach was in favour of an enlarged process to include the USSR and the Europeans at an international conference. Turkey was, however, extremely reluctant to support any initiative which might have increased Soviet role in the conflict.¹⁹ Turkey tried to arrange its "peacekeeping" role so as not to harm its relations with the West. Then Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal was also aware of the practical necessity of maintaining relations with Israel. He regarded relations with Israel "as a window on future events." He maintained that in order for Turkey "to play a role in solving the problems of the Middle East...that window must remain open."²⁰

Meanwhile, more favourable circumstances emerged in the peace process in 1989. A proposal was put forward by Israel known as the Shamir Plan.²¹ Turkey welcomed this plan since it focused on the elections in the occupied territories. Turkey also welcomed the peace attempt made by Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak in autumn 1989.²² Although these attempts ended inconclusively, Turkey's policy was constructive and was interested in keeping up momentum in the peace process. Ozal called on the Israeli administration to accept the principle of land for peace and emphasized an even-handed role in the region in his proposal.²³ Turkey contributed to the peace process on the multilateral track, in particular, in wider regional issues. Turkey had been in favour of peace between the Arabs and Israel for a long time. In these years, the Barcelona process of the EU also started a new security understanding for the Middle East.²⁴ EU members wanted to create a zone of peace and prosperity which had peripheral characteristics. The EU had a sort of common policy line to support the Palestinian authority and people through economic means.²⁵ Indeed, the EU and Turkey had no promi-

nent role in promoting the agreement but both aimed to contribute to it in possible ways to keep the peace process moving forward.

This period has been both an era of hope and despair for reaching a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The EU position was to promote good governance, democracy and civil society among the Palestinians through aid programs. Although there were reservations about the EU programs, the EU regained an influential position in the Palestinian question. Its leverage in Palestinian domestic politics increased, and the EU's approach to pursue good relations with both the Palestinians and Israel has been one of the constructive approaches to the problem.²⁶ For example, the EU issued the Berlin Declaration on 24-25 March 1999, which proclaimed the landmark decision to support a Palestinian state and aimed to dissuade Arafat from unilateral actions.²⁷

The second half of the decade witnessed Turkey's diversion from the European position toward the Palestinian issue during the *de facto* suspension of Turkey's EU membership process until the 1999 Helsinki Summit. With the military gaining power in domestic politics in its struggle against an Islamist-led coalition at home, Ankara pushed for security-first policies in the region and searched for an alliance with Israel and the U.S. to address its security problems related to the Kurdish issue and political Islam. While the bureaucratic-authoritarian tradition of Turkish foreign policy was in favour of a Turkish-Israeli-American axis, the societal demands were more supportive of the Palestinian cause. The Helsinki summit put the suspended Turkey-EU relations onto a positive track, which was a turning point for Turkey's transformation and appropriation of a new foreign policy course in the coming years.

Convergence of the Foreign Policy Attitudes

This current period began with increasing suspicion that Turkey is stuck with the failure of the peace process, and its strategic cooperation with Israel turned to strategic isolation, in particular after the *Al-Aqsa Intifadah*. The new uprising in the holy lands brought the Palestinian question to fore.²⁸ Turkey extended US\$500,000 to cover the losses of the Palestinians. This should be considered a decent attempt to help, considering the severe economic crises in Turkey in late 1990s. The suicide bombings and *sui generis* combating techniques of the *Al Aqsa Intifadah* discomforted EU public opinion. Nevertheless, the EU ceased to involve in the political process and established itself as the most

substantial non-military financial supporter of the peace process. In particular, the EU took on the main financial burden of supporting the Palestinian Authority. Over the period spanning 1994-99, the EU provided over US\$2 billion of support to the Palestinians and became the economic lifeline for the administrative operations of the Palestinian Authority. It is questionable that the PA could have survived over this period without this European financial support.²⁹ The EU role emerged as a civil-economic power which supports civilian initiatives, political processes and economic development.

The public resentment for Israeli policies in the occupied territories did not prevent Turkey's participation in the third party mediation initiatives. The former President Suleyman Demirel was in the special committee to investigate the escalation of violence in the occupied territories, which at the end prepared the Mitchell Plan.³⁰ Demirel's visit to the Palestinian lands and also the letters sent by Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit to the Palestinian and Israeli leaders to put an end to the violence were in accordance with the societal demands at home.³¹ Turkish foreign policymakers were sensitive about preserving relations with Israel at a good level while criticizing the violence against the Palestinians. As an example, Turkey signed what amounted to an almost billion dollar weapons upgrade contract with the Israeli government in this critical period.

Europe faced these problems in depth and felt the necessity to steer its policy on the Middle East. The first sign was the Seville declaration. The Seville declaration of 22 June 2002 is explicit on the expected solution to the conflict:

A settlement can be achieved through negotiation, and only through negotiation. The objective is an end to the occupation and the early establishment of a democratic, viable, peaceful and sovereign State of Palestine, on the basis of the 1967 borders, if necessary with minor adjustments agreed by the parties. The end result should be two States living side by side within secure and recognized borders enjoying normal relations with their neighbours. In this context, a fair solution should be found to the complex issue of Jerusalem, and a just, viable and agreed solution to the problem of the Palestinian refugees.³²

In parallel to all these development, the September 11 attacks changed the dynamics of world politics. The U.S. administration declared a war against terror and U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan and Iraq with their allies. The Iraq invasion process resulted in a complete renewal of the Middle Eastern balances and reshaped Turkish-American relations. The Bush administration asked the Turkish government to allow U.S. forces to open a northern front against Iraq. This issue caused considerable public debate in Turkey.³³ The Cold War expectation that the Turkish security elite would fulfil the U.S. demands was not met. In the end, the Turkish government backed out of allowing U.S. troops to open a northern front to Iraq. This position was, however, in accord with Turkish refusal for permitting the use of air bases in Turkish soil in 1967 and 1973.

This decision has been a landmark development for the future route of Turkish foreign policy in the region. At the same time, Turkey has undertaken vast and serious legal, political, and economic reforms. Turkey's bureaucrats, politicians, and citizens united to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership and tolerated the pain of the IMF-directed structural-adjustment programs. Although the looming accession process seems to be even more painful, Turkey's people express a decisive will to face this challenge. The developments put an end to the final vestiges of Turkey's Cold War policies, including the national security state. Since then, the change in Turkish domestic politics has altered the regional profile and led to a new orientation in foreign policy, particularly since the advent of the ruling Justice and Development Party.³⁴ Turkey has succeeded in improving its relations with neighbouring countries. For example, Turkish leaders are a voice for reform in the region, and have advised Arab leaders not to use the Palestinian question to delay the reform process.³⁵ Turkish foreign policy has been far more in tune with domestic societal demands than ever before.

In this new policy line, the Turkish government also views its policy toward Israel as constructive: while it has expressed its objections on a number of issues, it has not suspended political relations. During a visit to Israel in January 2005, Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul indicated that there had been serious talks about Turkey playing a possible mediation role between Israel and the Palestinians, and also between Syria and Israel in the future. Prime Minister Erdogan, during his visit to Israel in May 2005, focused more generally on the necessity of peace

and stability in the Middle East. In response, his counterpart, Ariel Sharon, praised Turkish efforts to promote regional peace.³⁶ Kirisci summarized the situation that: "The current AKP government has conspicuously tried to keep good relations with Israel, though at the same time without hesitating to criticize both Israeli policies toward Palestinians and the Palestinians' use of suicide bombings."³⁷

The emerging position in security and defence circles in the EU is recognizing Turkey's potential contribution to the European mechanisms for problem solving in the Middle East. For instance, a recent report underlined that Turkey is "going through a process of radical change, including a rapid evolution of mentalities." Turkey could be "an important model of a country with a majority Muslim population adhering to such fundamental principles as liberty, democracy, respect for human rights...and the rule of law."³⁸ Turkey appointed a special coordinator for Palestine and TICA (Turkish Development and Cooperation Agency) opened an office to sponsor infrastructural investments in the Palestinian territories. In addition, TOBB (The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey) organize an Ankara forum for economic cooperation between Palestine, Turkey and Israel. In result of several meetings, TOBB initiated a project for revitalizing the Erez Industrial Estate. The first phase of construction will be completed in March 2006.³⁹ On the other hand, the EU is gradually changing its attitude to the Palestinian problem and is involving itself in the politics by starting to discuss the status of Jerusalem.⁴⁰ The EU gains a *de facto* geopolitical depth in this region with Turkey's potential membership. This novelty will mean not only closing the physical and mental gap between the EU and the Palestinian question but also gaining a strong Turkish partnership in the Middle East.

Convergence of the Public Opinion

Europeanization of Turkish foreign policy also led to convergence of the public opinion in foreign policy issues in Europe and Turkey. The societal demands matter in foreign policy making than ever before in democratic societies. The common societal attitudes are signs and signals of further compliance of joint policy lines in the Palestinian question. The opinion polls conducted in past several years indicate convergence of the public opinion in this important foreign policy issue. In November 2003, a European commission opinion poll surveyed 7,500

people in 15 EU countries. The result was that 59 percent said Israel is a bigger threat to world peace than Iran, North Korea and the U.S.⁴¹

This situation was considered as a rise of anti-Semitism in Europe and European leaders did not do anything substantial to downplay the possible results of this negative assessment. After Oslo Agreement, the European position is determined as the creation of two states, Palestine and Israel. The Union asserted that "the creation of a democratic, viable and peaceful sovereign Palestinian state...would be the best guarantee of Israel's security."⁴² This position has been strengthened with the escalation of tension and violence following the *Al-Aqsa Intifadah*.⁴³ Although there seems an increasing public criticism over Israeli non-compliance of international law and human rights violations, the EU policy occurs more in tune with traditional sense of constructive engagement.

A poll conducted in October 2000 showed that 71 percent of Turkish society has an interest in Palestinian affairs and 60 percent demand a more active Turkish role on behalf of the Palestinian people.⁴⁴ Another poll conducted in November 2000 showed that 41 percent are in favour of delivering Jerusalem to Palestinian rule, 29 percent proposed autonomous administration, and only two percent favour Israeli rule over the city.⁴⁵ The widespread protests of Israeli expansion and violence in Palestinian lands in March and April 2002 indicated the societal sensitivity in Turkey.

Different segments of Turkish society, ranging from political parties to libertarian communities, joined their hands and hearts for extending support to the Palestinians. In addition, the leaders of three religious traditions—Islamic, Christian and Jewish—in Turkey jointly released a declaration entitled "Istanbul calls for peace" and demanded an immediate end to the violence, which is not acceptable by any religious traditions.⁴⁶ The comments of Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer in the aftermath of the emergence of the *Al-Aqsa Intifadah* clearly represented a response to the concern of Turkish society on this issue:

The Muslim world was deeply upset by the violent deeds against our Palestinian brothers after Friday's Prayer on October the 28th in Jerusalem, which Islam deems to be among the most sacred lands, following certain irresponsible provocations. Resorting to violence no matter for what purpose, and using weapons in sacred lands is totally unacceptable. Clashes scattered rapidly after the upsetting

event, and very unfortunately, use of weapons by Israeli soldiers caused several deaths. I do sympathize with those who lost their lives after these terrible occurrences. It is our common wish that a fair agreement be arrived at as soon as possible so that such occurrences are never repeated and common sense presides in the region, our Palestinian brothers enjoy rights—as accepted by the international community—including the establishment of their own state.⁴⁷

Another poll, conducted in November 2003 surveying 2183 people in different parts of Turkey, indicated the Turkish people's attitudes toward Israel and the Palestinians. Almost 50 percent were in favour of the necessity of change in the Palestinian leadership, namely Yaser Arafat, 40 percent said that Turkish-Israeli relations should be strengthened, and 37 percent said Turkey should be neutral in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, despite these attitudes to continue relations with Israel, the Turkish people also showed they support the Palestinians strongly on a number of related problems. For example, 66 percent support the Palestinians in the struggle and 54 percent favours that Jerusalem should not remain as Israel's capital.⁴⁸ The support to Prime Minister Erdogan for blaming Israel of pursuing state terror was 82 percent in another poll conducted in July 2004.⁴⁹

Although there is no strong anti-Israeli sentiment among the Turkish people, Turks are sensitive to the images of Palestinians suffering under Israeli occupation and sympathize with them. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's criticism of Israel, for example, on the occasion where he referred to Israeli acts in Rafah as state terrorism, generated much popular support at home that far transcended the ruling party's political base.⁵⁰ The practical implication of this picture in policy making process is emergence of a constructive pressure on Israel to comply with international law and regional considerations. Turkey's constructive engagement increased its leverage on Palestinian politics and achieved some progress to persuade the Israeli administration for Turkish mediation role in Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian conflicts.

Conclusion

By modernizing and democratizing at home, Turkey's politicians gained self-confidence in their ability to conduct a successful regional policy. The Middle East is closer and more suitable than ever for con-

structive Turkish involvement. This new approach is not totally home-grown and received support and contributions from the region. In this respect, many Middle Eastern countries appreciate Turkey's EU endeavour and achievements in membership process. Other Muslim states seem to grasp this: a Turk was chosen for the first time and by a majority vote to be Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Countries. At this point, Turkey's potential role to positively contribute to EU attempts in the Middle East comes to the fore. As we discussed in this article, a historical analysis of Turkey's Palestinian policy helps us to discover the European tendencies in Turkish foreign policy. The gap between Turkish policies and EU attitudes in the Middle East has been closed in recent years. Turkey's Iraq policy—despite its more than 50-year-long strategic partnership with the U.S.—has occurred in conformity with the mainstream European line.

Turkey shares the European attitudes if one also looks at the practical implications of Turkish attempts in the Middle East. The EU Action Plans with Israel and the Palestinians within the framework of European Neighbourhood Policy suggest developing, among others, social, political and economic cooperation schemes to secure peace and stability in the region. In this sense, Turkey leads an Iraqi neighbourhood forum, which resembles the European neighbourhood initiative. This attempt is a likely starter of a security regime in the Middle East. TOBB developed a strategic plan to invest in Gaza to build an industrial complex. In addition, Turkey emerged as a potential mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These are the initiatives that the EU was aiming to develop toward the region in the past several decades.

Turkey's new active policy in the Middle East raises strong interest in EU foreign and security policy circles. Turkey has begun to play a complimentary role to EU policies in the region even before it becomes a full member of the union. This complimentary role, however, is not free from problems. These problems are, among others, possible setbacks in Turkey-EU relations, regional limitations, insecure strategic environment and structural problems imposed by external interferences. Despite the potential problems, the Turkey-EU partnership is likely to fit into the realities of the region, which may satisfy widespread expectations and the major requirements in this critical geography. Turkey has a role to enhance a more active, dynamic, timely and influential EU policy toward the Middle East.

Turkey and the EU will be stronger together than acting separately in the Middle East. Turkey without Europe will face the disadvantage of dealing with the insecurity and instability of the Middle East alone. For the EU, it will miss a historic opportunity to integrate a democratic, Muslim country into the union, which already undertook a positive and complimentary role in its Middle East endeavours. Turkey's joining into the EU will make it a more valuable partner and anchor its European inclinations in the foreign policy realm. Namely, harmonisation of Turkey and the EU policies is not only possible but required to a considerable extent as well. Therefore, in coming decades, we will witness increasing Turkish influence in EU policies; a more active EU stance in the Middle East; further EU-Turkish joint involvement on the Palestinian question, democratization and economic development issues; Turkey's meddling between the conflicting sides; and its mounting civil-economic involvement in the region.

Notes

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