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Turkey: Reengagement with the Middle East?

LSE Ideas

By Christopher Phillips

Turkey's reengagement with the Middle East in recent years has been widely misunderstood. The AKP government's perceived falling out with long-standing ally Israel, its drawing closer to Syria, Iraq and Iran, and a seemingly less enthusiastic approach to EU accession has led many to conclude that Ankara is shifting Eastwards in its foreign relations priorities. Yet this reorientation should not be over-exaggerated. Far from abandoning old alliances in the West for new friendships in the Muslim world, Turkey is instead settling into a new role as a regional power that was thrust on it after the power vacuum produced by the Iraq war and a decade of economic growth.

To an extent, Turkey's past disconnection with the Middle East has been exaggerated. Turkey's longest borders are with Arab states and basic issues such as security and trade have long been discussed between governments. Nevertheless the extent of Ankara's involvement since 2003 is substantially more than before. Turkey has concluded free-trade and visa-free agreements with Damascus, Baghdad and Tehran, and has invested heavily in each economy. Improved ties with Syria have been particularly fast-paced. President Bashar al-Assad became the first Syrian leader to ever visit Ankara in 2004, after 60 years of relations, yet now trade between the two states has doubled and April 2009 saw the first ever Syria-Turkish joint military exercise.

Parallel to this, Turkey's older political, economic and military alliance with Israel appears to be foundering. Prime Minister Erdogan heavily criticised Tel Aviv's assault on Gaza in winter 2008-9 and subsequently cancelled joint military exercises. Many see the various diplomatic spat that followed, coupled with the AKP's Islamist origins, as evidence that the alliance cannot last.

Yet such an analysis is too Middle East focused and ignores the wider changes in Turkey's foreign policy. Since the Iraq War, the AKP have pursued an increasingly realist foreign policy devised primarily by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. He argues for, "zero problems with neighbours," whatever their past or current misdeeds. This has allowed the regime to put aside its ideological differences and historical disagreements with not just Syria, Iran and Iraq, but also older enemies in Armenia, Greece and Russia. Israel, whilst also a neighbour, had a privileged position in the past and, in effect, Erdogan's admonishing has simply stripped it back to a place of average importance. Yet there is no chance of the alliance ending completely. Military cooperation in particular is deep and unlikely to end. Moreover, even Turkey's Arab allies in Syria have voiced their support for a continued Tel Aviv-Ankara alliance, recognizing its ally's ability to restrain its enemy.

Another reason behind Turkish reengagement south is its desire for new markets. Following an impressive decade of economic growth, Davutoglu advocates increased Turkish 'strategic depth' with its neighbours – promoting its cultural, economic and political influence further than in the past. Turkey's under-developed Middle Eastern neighbours may provide appealing markets, but they will be explored alongside, not instead of the European trade that built Ankara's strong economy.

Finally, Turkish reengagement is based on military necessity following the collapse of Saddam's Iraq. Still fighting Kurdish insurgents in its south, Ankara fears instability in the Arab states will provide safe havens for its enemies to rearm and train. This fear was demonstrated in 2007 when Turkey invaded northern Iraq to smother Kurdish rebels. A desire to use its economic, political and military clout to co-opt stability in its southern neighbours is therefore driving policy more than any desire to refashion the region around its interests.

Turkey may be reengaging in the Middle East both out of necessity and out of choice, however this does not mean ideological realignment. Far from pursuing an Islam-centric foreign policy, Ankara is displaying the traits of an emerging realist regional power: extending its influence wherever it can, whenever it can.

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