

2.1. Turkey's failed pursuit of hegemony in the Middle East: Three periods of Turkey's 'independent' foreign policy *

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For decades, Turkey was considered an indispensable security partner of the West. Its membership in NATO and the Council of Europe, its long parliamentary tradition and its secular cultural and political orientation towards Europe led to Ankara being offered the prospect of membership in the European Union as early as 1970. It is true that a series of serious internal political and economic crises have prevented the country from achieving that goal until today. However, Turkey's membership in NATO and its integration within the Western sphere were always viewed as solid. Today, however, Turkey's reliability in connection with security policy is being questioned.

The list of global background factors that enabled the gradual alienation of Turkey from Europe and the US include the end of the Cold War, the rise of emerging powers, declining economic and political salience of Europe, and finally the weakening leverage of the US in the region identifiable by the baneful outcomes of policies of regime changes from Afghanistan to Iraq. All this contributed to the widening of Ankara's room of maneuver.

On the domestic level, the long phase of political stability in Turkey beginning with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) taking office in 2002 and years of unprecedented economic growth provided the political and economic grounds for a more assertive foreign policy. Since 2002, the initially moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) easily won every single election by such a wide margin that it was able to govern alone without interruption until today and probably for the years to come. The parliamentary hegemony of the AKP is the result of the successful integration of the conservative-religious portion of society not only into politics but also into the economy, the media landscape, the bureaucracy and the education sector. In all these areas, a new conservative middle class has succeeded in breaking the monopoly of the old, mainly secular Turkish nationalist elite. It has achieved a new societal normality, in which an emphatically displayed Islamic identity is no longer a hindrance but rather an advantage for moving up the social ladder. The concurrent weakening of the West-looking, secular Kemalist political tradition resulted into a new understanding of Turkey's identity and opened the

* This article was revised in September 2016.

way for questioning the necessity of strict adherence to Western policy expectations.

The man to make sense of this new global and domestic settings was Ahmet Davutoğlu, who first served as the main foreign policy adviser to the then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, later acted as Foreign Minister and finally ran the government as Prime Minister.

The new foreign policy concept of Ahmet Davutoğlu

Davutoğlu perceived Turkey as the heir of the Ottoman Empire, which had not only successfully incorporated European, Asian and Middle Eastern – in other words Islamic – aspects in its identity, but was also a center of power independent of the West. In line with this view, a versatile foreign policy is called for according to which Turkey's relations with Europe, Asia and the Middle East do not preclude, but instead supplement each other. Economic growth, regional cooperation in all directions and forward-looking diplomacy are to complement each other and to turn Turkey into an indispensable partner for all neighboring regions. Neither in regard to security (NATO) nor in terms of domestic or economic policy (EU) were Turkey's links to the West explicitly being questioned. However, in Davutoğlu's understanding, the independence to be achieved for Turkey was meant as distance to the West, and the talk of a decisive role for Turkey in the Middle East translated into Turkey as the leader of Muslim nations and protector of coreligionists from primarily Western domination.¹ Thus, in regard to the West, Davutoğlu's foreign policy comprised an inherent contradiction, namely the factual continuation of Turkey's alliances with the West and an overall discourse of fundamental clashes of the interests of Turkey and the Muslims with those of the West.

The fragile balance between belonging to the West and opposing it was masterfully maintained in a *first period* of Turkey's new foreign policy that lasted until the outset of what was first called the Arab Spring. In a *second period*, together with the Arab Spring, the covered antagonism between Turkey's newly defined interests and those of the West came to the fore. Today, after having painfully experienced both its own vulnerability to the unleashed dynamics of the Middle East Turkey is readjusting its foreign policy. In this *third period*, Turkey's resentment against the West, however, has not diminished, quite to the contrary.

¹ Günter Seufert: *Foreign Policy and Self-image. The Societal Basis of Strategy Shifts in Turkey*, Berlin 2012.

First period: maintaining a fragile balance between a new 'eastern' identity and adherence to the West

In this first period, from the mid-2000s onwards, Ankara sought to play an active role in various arenas of international politics and tried to assume the role of conflict mediator. In the Balkans, Turkey acted as go-between for Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia; in the Middle East Ankara was an interlocutor between Israel and Syria, and on the global level, together with Brazil, Turkey forged a compromise with Iran on the nuclear question, which was, however, blocked by objections from the US. The reorientation of Turkish foreign policy was especially obvious in northern Iraq and in Syria.

In northern Iraq, Turkey gradually abandoned the self-imposed limits of its policy on the Kurds and became the most important economic partner of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region. Prior to that, Ankara had bitterly opposed the establishing of the Kurdish regional government because it feared any kind of self-rule for the Kurds in Iraq would be a push for autonomy on the side of the Turkish Kurds and thus a direct threat to its own territorial integrity. This change was directly related to the shift in Turkey's domestic politics. The stronger emphasis of the AKP on Muslim identity had made it possible for the first time to see Turkish nationalism in more relative terms. Thus, the AKP hoped to solve also Turkey's own Kurdish question by emphasizing the fraternal Muslim bond. The ethnic identity of the Turkish Kurds and their language were acknowledged within the context of individual freedom, and in 2013, official peace negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) were initiated.

In regard to Syria, Ankara first ignored reservations voiced by the US and initiated intensive diplomatic, economic and military cooperation with Damascus. This cooperation made it possible for the Assad regime to break out of the isolation imposed by the Western community of states. In Davutoğlu's concept for Turkey in the Middle East, Syria played the key role. It was regarded as the gateway to the Arab world, and the political and economic integration of Syria and later of Jordan and Lebanon – the core Arab areas of the Ottoman Empire – was seen as a decisive step for Turkey establishing itself as a power in the Middle East.

Even though the West regarded Ankara's worsening relations with Israel as a matter of concern, Turkey, in that period, was still valued a reliable partner, and more than this, a model for the development of other Muslim countries. After all, its newly emphasized Muslim identity was combined with a secular juridical and political system, and large Turkey remained detached from the

confessional (Shiite/Sunni) and national (Persian/Arab) conflicts in the Middle East. Ankara saw itself not only as “the rising star”² of the region, but also as a benchmark brand worthy of emulation for almost all neighboring countries and as a future global player.

Second period: The Arab Spring and Turkey’s adoption of a pro-Sunni policy, diverging of interests with the West

The upheavals in the Arab world that started in 2011 altered the regional parameters and Turkish political strategy as a result. The relatively rapid collapse of the Tunisian and Egyptian governments and the emergence of conservative Sunni movements, as major domestic policy actors in these countries, led to the AKP believing these groups would easily seize power in Syria too.

In Egypt, Turkey was very active in supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and worked to convince its reluctant leadership to participate in the parliamentary elections. However, the military putsch on July 3, 2013 against Brotherhood-president Mohammed Mursi robbed Turkey of its closest ally in the region and created a first serious setback for Turkey’s regional ambitions. When Saudi Arabia, immediately after the coup, announced it was financially backing the military regime, Turkey’s foreign policy received another serious blow.

But at this stage, Ankara was already deeply in the Syrian power play. At first, Ankara worked hard in Damascus to persuade Bashar al-Assad to legalize the Muslim Brotherhood and to accept it as a partner in the government. When these efforts proved unsuccessful, the Turkish government reversed its stance and voiced unconditional support for the Sunni Arab opposition. Already in April 2012, Ankara called for a military intervention by the West under the leadership of the US, a move Turkey had rejected only a few months earlier. But in the meantime, the intervention in Libya had taken place where Western nations had exceeded the mandate of the UN Security Council and forced a change of government, thereby turning Russia into a strict opponent of any further Western intervention in the region. In the US, the election campaign for a second term of office forced Barack Obama to avoid new adventures in the Middle East.

When radical Salafist and Jihadist forces began to assert themselves within the Sunni opposition in Syria, the conflict between Turkey’s Western orienta-

2 So the programmatic title of the foreign policy paper by the Muslim Entrepreneurs’ Association MÜSIAD in 2010 (Istanbul).

tion and its desire for hegemonic power in the Middle East became apparent. Whereas Western countries, above all the US, had already in 2013 called on Turkey to abandon its support for Jihadist groups. But for Ankara the overthrow of Assad continued to be the absolute priority. Ankara's policies now ran counter to Western security interests in quite a number of issues. The West criticized Turkey's lax handling of the transit of Jihadist from Europe and Asia, Turkey's longstanding refusal to participate actively in combating "Islamic State" (IS), and Ankara's freewheeling hostility to the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – an effective instrument in the fight against IS.

Ankara's Syria policy in detail

After fruitless efforts to persuade Assad to introduce reforms and to cooperate with the Muslim Brotherhood, Ankara made serious efforts to bring about the fall of the Syrian government. Already in 2012, Turkey used the summit meeting of the "Friends of Syria"³ in Istanbul to call for the outright condemnation of the regime and for the international recognition of the "Syrian National Council"⁴ as the legitimate government in exile. Turkey also pushed for the immediate arming of the opposition, and in doing so – together with France and Qatar – set the militarization of the conflict in motion. At that juncture, Ankara was demanding the imposition of no-fly zones and/or security zones, which were officially justified as measures to protect the civilian population and refugees, but were to the same extent designed to block the Syrian Air Force and thus support the armed opposition. The Turkish government's request to have the Patriot air defense system of NATO member states stationed in Turkey – a demand for a couple of years met by the US, the Netherlands and Germany – can be interpreted as an attempt to involve NATO in Syria. For at no time had the Syrian regime represented a threat to Turkey. On the contrary, it was Ankara who in June 2012 sent a warplane into its neighbor's airspace to

3 The Friends of Syria was formed in February 2012, after Russia and China refused to support a resolution in the UN Security Council which would have permitted the deployment of military forces in Syria in accordance with international law. The organization involves a working group led by the US, to which, in addition to the major European countries (except for Russia), Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar belong. The group supported the Syrian National Council, in which the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was prominently represented.

4 The Syrian National Council was formed in August 2011 with the support of the Turkish government, and was criticized from the very beginning for giving too much leeway to Islamic/Islamist forces and for the fact that most of its members came from the Syrian opposition abroad.

test Syrian air defense. Turkish criticism of the West's reluctance to intervene militarily in Syria soon encompassed also the United Nations Security Council whose legitimacy Erdoğan bluntly denied in November 2012.⁵ Ankara's unease reached a high point in August 2013 after the Ghouta chemical attack⁶, the circumstances of which have not been finally clarified. An alarming warning of the escalation of Turkey's policy was an illegally recorded discussion held in Ankara's Foreign Ministry, during which it was earnestly taken into consideration to simulate a missile attack on Turkey from Syria in order to lend legitimacy to military intervention in Syria.⁷

Turkey's role in the formation of the Sunni opposition

Turkey played a central role in the formation of the Syrian opposition. Representatives of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, which – in the early stage of the protests – united substantial sections of the non-Islamist civil opposition accused the then Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu to contribute not only to the factionalization of the opposition but also to the militarization of the conflict. Turkey, already at this very early stage, valued Alawis as not belonging to Islam and labeled the Baath-Regime as the political representatives of the Syrian Alawis. In this way, Turkey adopted a clear pro-Sunni position and contributed its share to the transformation of the rebellion into an inter-confessional strife.⁸ Additionally, Turkey rejected any cooperation with Kurdish nationalist groups in Syria, and in the Syrian National Council, Ankara supported the forces who continued to define Syria as solely Arab and refused to grant the Syrian Kurds the political status as a national minority they looked for.

The Syrian National Council was formed in Turkey, in Antalya and Istanbul, and Turkey also made a decisive contribution to the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Turkey established the first refugee camps in Hatay (Alexandrette), directly on the Syrian border, and refused access to the camps

5 As Erdoğan said on November 19, 2012 at the 8th Eurasian Islamic Council in Ankara, the United Nations cannot claim to speak for the whole world, because not a single Muslim country is represented on the Security Council. It cannot be accepted that the fate of humankind depends on only 15 countries. <http://tinyurl.com/hp7g3eb>.

6 <http://tinyurl.com/jnh349z> and <http://tinyurl.com/pkzrbey>. A later report of the UN Human Rights Council on August 13, 2014 (A/HRC27/60) accused the regime of the use of chlorine gas in Idlib and Homs in April 2014.

7 Hasnain Kazim: Neue Video-Leaks: Erdoğan lässt YouTube sperren, March 27, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/pnje9t5>.

8 Samir Aita, editor-in-chief of the Arabic edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, talks with Fehim Tastekin, January 27, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/je24n9m>.

to both the UNHCR and to members of its own parliament. For a time, the camps were operated in accordance with a government decree that was never published and kept secret even from the parliament. The only Turkish NGO allowed to work in the camps was the Islamist Humanitarian Relief Found (İHH). All this arouses the suspicion that in that time, refugee camps were used as venues for rest, recuperation and recruitment for opposition fighters.

With the weakening of the moderate Sunni opposition and the collapse of the Free Syrian Army, Turkey committed itself to the support of Salafist groups, who cooperate with Jihadist groups. Turkey supported in particular Ahrar al-Sham (Islamic Movement of Free Men of the Levant), a Salafist organization that fights shoulder to shoulder with the Al-Nusra Front, an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. Despite its cooperation with the al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham had not been classified internationally as a terrorist organization. And yet, Turkey has also directly supported the al-Nusra Front at least in a piecemeal fashion, as for example in the case of the conquest of the Syrian-Armenian market town of Kessab in March 2014, when the al-Nusra Front was able to attack the Armenian settlement from Turkish territory. In 2015, Turkey enhanced its cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Saudi Arabia's new King Salman was trying to form a Sunni alliance that also included Turkey. Ankara was participating in the so-called Army of Conquest, which was formed in March 2015 as a result of a Saudi initiative and was helping both smaller fighting units of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as Ahrar al-Sham and the al-Nusra Front. The Assad regime is the primary common enemy, but Turkey and the Gulf States are also linked by their rejection of Kurdish demands for autonomy and self-administration in Syria.

Ankara's Kurdish policy in Syria

Ankara's relationships to the Syrian Kurds is determined by the traditional Turkish Republic's Kurdish phobia, which explains the longstanding Turkish rejection of any Kurdish self-government in Iraq. There are several reasons why Turkey reacted even more aggressively in the case of the Syrian Kurds. First of all, Kurdish autonomy in Syria means further internationalization of the Kurdish question and thus a further step toward normalizing the idea of Kurdish statehood. Secondly, Syrian Kurds are – in terms of language and kinship – closer to the Turkish Kurds than the Iraqi Kurds are. This makes direct political cross-fertilization between the Kurdish communities of the two states more likely. In fact, it was the PKK, who has been clashing for more than thirty years with Turkey, who founded the PYD, the organization that

controls the Kurdish political and military actions in Syria. And thirdly, the war in Syria bestows Turkey with the capability to act directly militarily against the Kurds of the neighboring country, which is not the case in Iraq. Thus, Turkey vigorously opposed the proclamation of three autonomous Kurdish cantons in northern Syria. Its leadership repeatedly equated the local Kurdish militias with the PKK and labeled them terrorist as evil as IS. In the fall and winter of 2014, Ankara openly waited for the Syrian-Kurdish border city of Kobane to be captured by IS to put paid to the efforts of the Kurds to obtain autonomy there. The successful defense of the cantons and the subsequent military successes of the Kurdish militias against IS were widely regarded as the decisive reason why Turkey broke off its own peace process with the PKK in summer 2015 and commenced heavy bombing of the central PKK bases in northern Iraq and of Kurdish cities in southeastern Turkey, key HDP and PKK strongholds.

Ankara's attitude toward IS

In many reports Turkey is accused of concealed as well as open support of the terror organization.⁹ Specifically, Turkey is indicted of arming IS fighters, transporting them and supporting them logistically, training fighters, treating injured combatants, financially supporting the organization, among other things by making it possible for them to export oil, helping them to recruit fighters, and even giving them direct military support.¹⁰ The following is undoubtedly true: Turkey displays an unusual “understanding,” which IS could initially count on. For the then Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, in August of 2014, IS was less a terror organization than an expression of the understandable anger of young Sunni Moslems, “a large majority of them Turkmens,” but also Arabs and Kurdish youth from the region, over their political marginalization and cultural humiliation.¹¹

Turkey has been very reserved in taking military action against the IS. For almost a year – from August 2014 to June 2015 – it left the US waiting for permission to use Incirlik airbase, and the US was forced to fly its missions from Kuwait, 1,200 km away. Ankara did not give the US permission until July 22, 2015. Only two days later, Turkey itself began heavy bombing. However, these were not directed against IS, which in an attack in the Turkish city of Suruç

9 Turkey “aided Islamist fighters” in attack on Syrian town, *The Telegraph*, March 15, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hajmaqax>; Turkey accused of colluding with Isis to oppose Syrian Kurds and Assad following surprise release of 49 hostages, *Independent*, September 21, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/hpse8lc>.

10 See David Phillips regarding ISIS–Turkey Links, <http://tinyurl.com/lzjqo68>.

11 Cited from Kemal Göktaş, *Cumhuriyet*, October 16, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/hxsyeej>.

on July, 20 had murdered 32 left wing and Kurdish activists. Instead, Turkey bombed positions of the PKK, which had resumed the war against Turkey in response to an attack by IS, which they saw as working with the Turkish intelligence agencies. Only after an attack on participants in a peace demonstration in Ankara on October 10, 2015, leaving 107 dead and over 500 injured, did Turkey begin bombing of IS positions in earnest.¹²

Observation and identification of IS cells in Turkey were similarly lax. In June 2015, the former Turkish Foreign Minister Yaşar Yakış drew attention to the paradoxical situation that foreign journalists had documented a large number of examples of foreign Jihadists traveling to Turkey to join IS, with government agencies taking almost no action to stop it. An obvious example was the lack of action by intelligence agencies and police in connection with the IS attack in Ankara in October 2015. One of the two assailants was a member of the same Turkish IS cell as the perpetrators of two previous attacks; and the cell had been the subject of critical media reports months beforehand. It has only been possible to speak of systematic action against IS structures in Turkey since the attack of January 12, 2016, which IS carried out on a group of German tourists in the center of Istanbul's historic old town, and thus for the first time took direct action against Turkey's economic interests.

In that period, Turkey and the West's interests obviously clashed. Turkey was very reluctant to join the fight against the Islamic State. Time and again, Western countries deplored Ankara's lax control of its borders that permitted the influx of foreign fighters to the Islamic State. Ankara insisted on Assad's immediate withdrawal from power and strictly ruled out Assad even as a transitory actor, with whom to negotiate cessations and cease-fires. Turkey opposed every weakening even of the Jihadist opposition. To be able to continue its involvement in Syria, Ankara, together with Riyadh, was trying to keep as many Sunni rebels as possible from being classified as "terrorist organizations". Turkey thus was more a spoiler than a supporter in the Geneva peace negotiations and no reliable partner in the fight against IS terrorism in Europe.

Third period: Turkey turns to its traditional 'defensive' foreign policy, but upholds its distance to the West

A number of domestic and regional developments contributed to the shaping of the present state of affairs in Turkey's foreign policy. For one thing, in this *third period* of Ankara's new foreign policy, the circle is closing. Turkey waives its

¹² Hürriyet, October 18, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/zz9ol6t>.

oversized aim to shape the Middle East, and instead of trying to bend the fate of the region, Ankara again concentrates on shoring up its own security and territorial integrity. But this turn to a more or less traditional defensive and even Kemalist foreign policy comes without a new rapprochement with the West.

The domestic line of developments: the unfolding of single reign

Domestically the process is marked by a fundamental shift of the internal power balances that had been characteristic of Turkey since the outset of the Republic.

Still in the 2000s, the secular Kemalist elite and its iron fist, the armed forces, had been the most crucial political actors to reckon with. In 2007, the governing party was confronted with a half-hearted intervention by the military. A year later, the AKP only narrowly avoided being banned by the Constitutional Court. But in the ensuing years, the government was able to shake off its political thralldom to the military by means of a series of in part dubious criminal cases, known as the Ergenekon- and Sledgehammer trials. Additionally, Muslim conservative cadres, for the first time in the Republic, established hegemony not only in the security bureaucracy but also in the judiciary. It was to a great extent the movement of the former state cleric Fethullah Gülen, a movement marked by the concentration on education of science, a seemingly apolitical attitude, and a strategy of infiltrating state bureaucracy, that provided the human resources for the AKP in this regard.

At this juncture, the leading cadres of the AKP lost their interest in further democratization of Turkey and turned the party into the most willing instrument of its founder and former chairman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in his plans to introduce a “Turkish type” presidential system that amounts to nothing else than the autocratic reign of the leader himself.

Largely unchallenged by an ideologically deeply divided opposition, Erdoğan was elected President on August 10, 2014. It was the first direct election to this office in Turkey, and Erdoğan took advantage of this circumstance by arguing his direct ballot has actually put an end to the parliamentary system foreseen in the constitution. To uphold the unity of the various strings of his conservative electorate and to ensure that it will vote en bloc in a planned referendum designed to bring the constitution in line with the new ‘political reality’, Erdoğan polarized society along ethnic (Turkish-Kurdish), confessional (Sunni-Alevi) and religious (Islamist-secularist) lines. He did this most notably by declaring the end of the peace negotiations with the PKK in June 2015

and by turning to the traditional remorseless Kurdish policy of the Republic. The armed confrontation began again and in the first months of 2016 entire districts of Kurdish cities were laid waste. In June 2016, the Parliament, on request of the AKP, lifted the parliamentary privilege of 156 deputies, threatening in the first place almost all members of the pro-Kurdish HDP with juridical persecution and the loss of their seats.¹³ Erdoğan expanded his power further by silencing the critical press, organizing a supportive press, taking control of the intelligence agencies and the police and constantly applying pressure to the still independent parts of the judiciary.¹⁴ The dismantling of Turkish democracy that came with all these measures reached such proportions that already in 2015, at the latest, it could no longer be assumed that Turkey still fulfils the political criteria of Copenhagen¹⁵ – a core prerequisite for continuing talks on accession to the European Union. Turkey's move away from the EU and, thus, from the West gained additional momentum.

In late 2015, however, a chance to mend fences accrued to Turkey and the EU. When the EU haplessly dealt with the massive influx from Syria and Iraq via Turkey to Greece via the Aegean, the then Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu pursued the opportunity to present Turkey as key to the handling of the crises, generously offering the EU a readmission agreement in return for a speed-up of membership negotiations and a visa waiver for Turkish citizens. Dragging her feet in both issues, the EU daftly wasted the opportunity to make the refugee crisis manageable. More than this, Brussels did not realize that, on a domestic level, Davutoğlu was desperately looking for a diplomatic success to affirm his standing against Erdoğan. Only a couple of month later, in May 2016, Erdoğan discharged Davutoğlu to be able to blame the failures of Turkey's foreign policy on him. Marginalizing his last remaining potential competitor in the party, Erdoğan nailed down his single reign.

With the failed putsch of July 15, 2016 that claimed the lives of 240, mostly civilians, and injured more than 2,000, the situation worsened dramatically.¹⁶ In line with vast parts of the parliamentary opposition, the Government blamed the attempt on followers of Fethullah Gülen¹⁷ in the military and

13 Dirk Tröndle: "Dilemma in Ankara. Über die Immunitätsaufhebung der türkischen Abgeordneten", *Die politische Meinung*, Juli-August 2016, p. 111-115.

14 Günter Seufert: "Erdoğan's 'New Turkey'. Restoring the authoritarian State in the Name of Democracy", *SWP-Comments*, October 2014.

15 These criteria encompass institutional stability, rule of law, respect for human rights and the protection of minorities.

16 These and the following numbers according to Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, cited at the news website *t24 Online*, August 15, 2016.

17 Günter Seufert: *Is the Fethullah Gülen Movement overstretching itself? A Turkish religious Community as national and international Player*, Berlin 2014.

clamped down on anyone suspect of being related in one or the other way to that particular community. However, as Gülen had been supported by almost all Turkish governments since 1983 and as he was the closest ally of the ruling AKP between 2002 and 2011, his community had rapidly expanded in the last 40 years and had become the largest Islamic movement in Turkey, running a swath of civil society organizations, media outlets and up to 15 universities, all financed by a wide range of conservative entrepreneurs. In its chase of Gülen's adherents, the government, besides alleged cadres of Gülen in the military, the judiciary and the police, purged the whole state administration, firing not only Gülenists, but liberals and leftists likewise. Almost 19,000 persons were taken in custody and 11,000 arrested. Amongst the latter, with more than 2,000 persons, judges and prosecutors formed the largest group followed by high-ranking military officers and members of the gendarmerie. More than 5,000 academicians were purged from private but also state universities, and 56,000 persons had their passports obliterated. The Government declared the state of emergency and issued governmental decrees that denied those purged from military and civil services the right of juridical recourse. Leading AKP members raised the issue of reintroducing the death penalty. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım and President of State Erdoğan openly approved the idea, where-upon a number of European politicians warned Turkey that venturing this step would be the final nail in the coffin of Turkey's EU membership negotiations. Simultaneously, Turkey's relations with the US experienced a new serious challenge. The US reacted reluctantly to Turkey's declaratively submitted demand to extradite Gülen who has lived in the US since 1999. To make things worse, pro-government Turkish media started a campaign accusing NATO for having lent a helping hand to the putschists. Most of the Generals that had been fired after the attempt had served in NATO units and counted as Atlanticists who favored cooperation with the West.¹⁸

Regarding the political mood in society and the prevalent perspectives on Turkey's relation with the region and the West, the former discourse of Turkey's greatness and its vision to shape the Middle East has given way completely to a discourse of Turkey as a country under siege. Official statements, repeated day after day in the mainstream media, present Turkey as the one and only country under attack of three terrorist organization simultaneously: the PKK/PYD, the Gülen-Movement, and the Islamic State. Particularly the President of State and the media outlets close to him paint the picture of a politically

18 Metin Gürçan: "Is Turkey abandoning NATO or vice versa?", *Al Monitor Online*, 18 August 2016.

imperialist and culturally Christian West that turn all these terrorists loose on Turkey.

The turnaround in foreign policy

In November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian warplane that had violated Turkish airspace for only 15 seconds. The downing came after Russia's heavy bombing of Salafist and Jihadist rebel groups in Syria, some of them Turkmen, formed and supplied with weapons by Turkey. The move, initially cheered both by Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, became emblematic for Turkey's foreign policy attitude to fight over its weight. Turkey had to face the almost total loss of Russian tourists, saw its food stuff exports to Russia blocked and – due to the fear of Russian retaliation – did not dare to use Syrian airspace. Russia, additionally, strengthened its relation with the Syrian-Kurdish PYD and granted air support to the Kurdish militia in their fight against IS. As Russia also established intelligence cooperation with Iran and Iraq, Turkey realized that it was almost completely sidelined from Syria and isolated in the region it had ventured to shape according to its own interests only a couple of years ago. Calls to overhaul foreign policy, long voiced by the opposition, now were echoed even in the pro-government media. Turkey has to enhance the number of friends and to diminish the number of its enemies, became the new slogan. In the first week of June 2016, Turkey gave ground on Palestine and resumed diplomatic relations with Israel. Immediately afterwards, the government announced its intention to reach a settlement with Russia, Egypt and even with Syria. Therefore, it came as no surprise that Erdoğan already in the same month sent a written apology for the downed jet to the Russian president, expressing his desire to reestablish the economic and political relationship the two countries upheld prior to the crisis. The failed military coup of 15 July accelerated the Turkish-Russian convergence. The leading cadre of the AKP obviously felt seriously threatened. No matter how true it actually is, the AKP located the center of gravity for the coup first within Gülenists in the military and second within the more Atlanticist group of Turkey's generals. Erdoğan and leading members of the cabinet accused the US to shelter Fethullah Gülen, in Ankara's eyes the mastermind of the coup. Turkish-US relations had already been heavily strained due to Washington's military cooperation against IS with the Syrian Kurdish PYD, an offshoot of the PKK. In the days following the putsch attempt, the US-backed PYD stood ready to attack the last remaining territory the Islamic State held close to the Turkish border. For in the case of a Kurdish success the Kurds would have gained the possibility to connect their three can-

tons in Northern Syria and then control almost the whole of Syrian territory that borders Turkey; for Ankara this posed a risk of escalation.

This was the moment for Turkey to openly revise its failed policy on Syria and to forego all the aims that lay and continue to lie beyond of Turkey's reach, namely to overthrow Assad, to shape the Middle East, and to shepherd the Sunni Muslims in the region. Instead Turkey again made the 'threat of Kurdish separatism' the fulcrum of its foreign policy. Less than two weeks after Erdoğan's meeting with Putin in St. Petersburg at August 9, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım underlined common interests of Turkey and Syria in regard to Kurdish separatism and terrorism, and said Turkey is not opposing talks with Assad. Only a couple of days later, at August 24, Turkish troops entered Syria head on for the first time. Officially, the operation aims at the Islamic State but the troops are fighting equally, if not primarily, the PYD. On September 4, the Turkish Armed Forces announced to have helped successfully the Free Syrian Army to set up a buffer zone between the Syrian towns Jarablus and Azaz in the North of Syria preventing the Kurds to connect their two cantons to the West and East, Afrin and Kobane.

The challenge, posed by the establishment of a PKK/PYD dominated Kurdish self-rule in Syria, obviously was the main single reason for Turkey to revise its foreign policy on Syria and the region. Without a doubt, the economic pressure caused by Russian sanctions on Turkish tourism and export and the changing trajectory of the war in Syria that made the overthrow of Assad more and more improbable, facilitated the decision. Apparently, the danger of new terrorist attacks by the Islamic State came only third, despite the assaults at Atatürk Airport of Istanbul on June 28 and at the border city of Antep on August 21. However, the overall change of Turkey's Syrian policy, the rapprochement with Russia, the willingness to deal with Assad and after all the direct attack on emplacements of the Islamic State are likely to make Turkey more than before the target of the Islamic State and other Jihadist Groups.

Relationship with the European Union and the West

The refugee crisis has made it clear how much the EU depends upon cooperation with Turkey, particularly in the area of migration. For the EU member states have demonstrated their inability to develop a common strategy and solution. This alone is the reason for the joint action plan of the EU and Turkey, which has been continually further developed and organized since October 15,

2015.¹⁹ In addition to sharing the financial costs between the EU and Turkey, it involves the blocking of irregular migration from Turkey to Greece, returning refugees who have arrived via the Aegean from Greece back to Turkey and, in return, the regulated entry of Syrian refugees registered in Turkey into EU member countries. However, Turkey is no less vital for European security of energy supplies, for the reconstruction of Syria and Iraq, for the fight against terrorism and for counterbalancing increased Russian influence. This remains true regardless of all the justified criticism of the dictatorial tendencies of Erdoğan's policies and the restoration of the authoritarian state that accelerated dramatically after the failed putsch attempt.

However, the derail of democracy and rule of law, massive violations of human rights and the blunt effort to change the administrative structure of the country to the benefit of the ruling party by government decrees, rule out even the smallest possibility to go ahead with the EU-membership process. This is disastrous for the European Union, for it was obviously the status of the country as a candidate for accession to the EU that gave Brussels ways of influencing Turkish politics in the second half of the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s. To the benefit of Brussels, for Turkey, waving the visa requirement for its citizens in the Schengen Area is far more important than the accession process, and the EU should use this instrument without delay, to continue the cooperation in the refugee deal.

On the one hand, visa-free travel would strengthen not only economic but also civil society interactions of the country with Europe, which the Turkish civil society has greater need of than ever. This is similarly true for journalist, academics and politically persecuted persons. On the other hand, Turkey has been placed at a disadvantage in this regard compared to the Western Balkan countries, whose citizens have been able to travel without a visa for several years.

In its own interest, however, the EU must refuse to make concessions in connection with all the criteria that must be fulfilled in order to justify assigning Turkey the status of being a safe country for refugees from Syria. These include in particular not deporting Syrian refugees, protecting their human rights, protecting them from political persecution and discrimination, and the UNHCR being able to access refugee housing.²⁰ In addition, Brussels must insist on consultation and transparency in spending the total of €6 billion, which

19 For the chronological development of EU refugee cooperation with Turkey and links to related documents see: <http://tinyurl.com/j3bmo4a>.

20 UNHCR: Die Genfer Konvention von 1951 über die Rechtsstellung der Flüchtlinge: ihre Bedeutung in der heutigen Zeit, <http://tinyurl.com/gsofbj2>.

have been granted to Ankara to improve the living conditions of refugees. The EU should also insist on the involvement of international NGOs and ensure that these can operate largely independently in the context of international cooperation. As could be inferred from reforms up to now in the context of the accession process, in the case of cooperation related to the refugee crisis too, strict control of the implementation of new Turkish laws will be needed.

The U-turn in Turkish foreign policy will have impacts on Europe's security also far beyond the refugee crisis. Regarding Syria, Ankara's rearrangement of its policy holds the potential that Turkey will be less a spoiler of cease fire and later peace negotiations, as Ankara appears to be more or less in line with Russian and American approaches as far as the basic parameters of transition are concerned. But the return to square one in its policy on the Kurds both in Turkey and in Syria poisons the stakes of any peaceful solution and may drag Turkey in the direction of a civil war, particularly when the Islamic State drives up its terrorist attacks. This will have serious repercussions on Turkey's relation with the European Union and on public order in the migrant receiving countries of Western Europe. Turkey's rapprochement with Russia is likely to create quite a number of frictions with NATO allies, from defense procurement to energy security, from intelligence cooperation to the handling of regional conflicts. NATO allies are well advised to coordinate their policies towards Turkey to minimize the leeway for the Turkish leadership and to control negative effects of Turkey's new foreign policy outlook.