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Evolution of Türkiye's Engagement in the Middle Eastern Regional Order: the Normalization Agenda and Beyond*

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Abstract

This article analyzes the transformation of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East during the turbulent years initiated with the Arab Spring. In due course, Turkish policy considerably shifted from proactive engagement with the region in the early 2000s to a bid to leading regional transformation, particularly in the initial years of the Arab Spring. However, the reversal of the Arab Spring increasingly presented a blowback for Türkiye's regional engagements. The ensuing regional insecurity resulted in a realist turn in Turkish foreign policy, with frequent resort to military instruments and coercive diplomacy. Eventually, regional policies of Türkiye corresponded to the search for de-escalation and normalization within the emerging Middle Eastern order since 2020. The article argues that changing regional dynamics corresponding with domestic conditions influenced and shaped Türkiye's policies towards the Middle East. Recently, under the impact of the regional-systemic pressures coupled with changing domestic conditions, recalibrating its regional engagement, Türkiye has prioritized the normalization agenda. It argues that while normalization agenda will remain an important objective for Türkiye's regional policies, it will evolve in a partial manner, and case-by-case, conditional on the unfolding regional order and Ankara's strategic priorities.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Middle Eastern Order, Regional Normalization, Securitization, Strategic Autonomy, Turkish Foreign Policy

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1. Introduction

Prior to the outbreak of the Gaza conflict in October 2023, the agenda of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East had been dominated by normalization initiatives. Unfolding against the background of the broader wave of regional de-escalation, Türkiye has been involved in simultaneous processes with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Syria, and Egypt. Moreover, such files evolved in parallel to Ankara's efforts to mend ties with the trans-Atlantic partners. What made such steps interesting was the way in which they came after a period of bitter confrontation and direct engagement in the conflicts and militarized disputes in the Middle East, not to mention the downgrading of diplomatic ties or restrictions on economic exchanges. Moreover, throughout all those ups and downs Türkiye has been ruled by the same political party, the Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The recent normalization process has aroused the question; how could we understand the evolution of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East? Has the normalization process heralded a new era of Turkish foreign policy in the making prior to October 2023, the Hamas attack on Israel? Many people pointed out that the worsening Turkish economy was the main driver in recent normalization attempts (Dalay, 2022). Indeed, Turkish economy experienced one of the most acute crises in recent decades, coming to exert limitations on the foreign policy options, and creating strong pressures to search for new directions. Some other people pointed out that after the departure of Ahmet Davutoğlu, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister, Turkish foreign policy adopted a more realist position, implying a considerable decrease in ideational motivations (Gümüş, 2022). However,

President Erdoğan has been at the helm of the strategic policies of Türkiye for over two decades. Since Türkiye has been ruled by the same leadership through all turbulent times initiated by the Arab Spring, we have searched answers for those questions primarily in the unfolding of regional context. We argue that the regional-systemic changes have pressured the Turkish government to adjust to the new geopolitical reality. In due course, Turkish policy considerably shifted from proactive engagement with the region in the early 2000s to a bid to leading regional transformation, particularly in the initial years of the Arab Spring. However, the reversal of the Arab Spring increasingly presented a blowback for Türkiye's regional engagements. The ensuing regional insecurity resulted in a realist turn in the Turkish foreign policy, with frequent resort to military instruments and coercive diplomacy. Eventually, the regional policies of Türkiye corresponded to the search for de-escalation and normalization within the emerging Middle Eastern order since 2020. The article argues that changing regional dynamics corresponding with domestic conditions influenced and shaped Türkiye's policies towards the Middle East. Meanwhile, the domestic drivers of foreign policy exerted enormous pressures on the government to reverse the previous course of action. Indeed, as Ankara was recalibrating its regional engagement, the broader attention was also focused on the emergence of a regional order, whereby Middle Eastern actors have been undergoing a transition phase to adjust to the new dynamics of intra-regional relations, fluid inter-state realities, and altered patterns of extra-regional global powers' involvement. While this transformation created both opportunities and challenges, it nonetheless enabled many of the regional actors to use the new window of opportunity to engage in policy correction.

In order to comprehend the evolution of the Turkish foreign policy during the turbulent times of the Middle East, below we will offer a brief survey of Türkiye's engagement with the region under five consecutive periods. Keeping in mind the difficulties involved in periodizing and labelling various phases of countries' foreign policies, we contend that it would be useful to trace the implications of the regional systemic effects on Türkiye's regional policies. This overview will also help investigate the dynamics of the recent period of normalization until October 2023 in a more systematic manner. The conclusion section will discuss the potential evolution of the normalization agenda, in light of the unfolding regional order and Türkiye's own strategic priorities.

2. Proactive Engagement in the Middle East Prior to the Arab Spring

The decade prior to the Arab upheavals of 2011 witnessed profound transformations in the Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East. Under the consecutive governments ruled by the Justice and Development Party (JDP), Türkiye employed a 'civilizational perspective' towards the Islamic world, in general, and the Middle East in particular. Emphasizing shared history and cultural proximity with Middle Eastern countries, it increasingly asserted itself in regional affairs with a self-claimed mission to lead the transformation of the region (Altunışık, 2009; Kardeş, 2010). Likewise, the new outward orientation of its economic statecraft also resulted in Türkiye's quest for new markets, investments, and integration, which turned it into a 'trading state' (Kirişçi, 2009). Thereby, Türkiye underwent drastic transformations from a 'reluctant neighbor' focused overwhelmingly on security concerns stemming from the region to a pro-active player in Middle Eastern

politics. As an extension of the JDP's new foreign policy dictum 'zero problems with neighbors', Ankara strived for improving its relations with regional neighboring countries ranging from Iran to Syria, as well as seeking to mediate between the conflicting parties in regional disputes (Davutoğlu, 2013a). It even attempted to mediate between Iran and the United States on the nuclear controversy (Sinkaya, 2012).

One of the main driving forces behind Türkiye's increasing engagements in the Middle East was the growing self-confidence on the part of the JDP. Having secured decisive consecutive election victories, the JDP successfully led comprehensive reforms and managed to decrease the influence of the military in Turkish politics. This allowed it to act based on its strategic culture and vision toward the region, emphasizing among others its quest to play a leadership role in the region and serving a role model for other Muslim countries with regards to reconciling Islam and democracy (Aras & Fidan, 2009).

The growing self-confidence of JDP in power benefited from its harmonization of Türkiye's relations with the West and its special interests in the Middle East. Ankara's relations with the EU gained a new impetus with the initiation of the accession negotiations in 2005. Ankara also repaired ties with Washington after the crisis triggered by the rejection of a bill supporting the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 by the Turkish parliament. Ankara sought to cooperate with the United States in the latter's attempt to encourage the liberal transformation of Middle Eastern politics and economy under the framework of the Greater Middle East Initiative (Bağcı & Sinkaya, 2006).

JDP increasingly adopted a liberal orientation in foreign policy,

prioritizing the soft power, mediation in regional disputes, and economic interdependence among the regional countries. Besides cultivating good ties with regional governments, it sought to use regional forums such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to promote the transformation of the region. As part of this proactive reorientation, Türkiye reached out to the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the North African countries. Ankara introduced new institutional mechanisms to boost its foreign policy activism by initiating High Level Cooperation Councils, structured on periodic intergovernmental meetings and working groups, with more than a dozen countries, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and the GCC. Such forums provided a framework to further bilateral relations with regional countries (Öztürk, 2012). Türkiye also led the formation of ‘Quadripartite High Level Cooperation Council’ involving Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, in January 2010, aiming to create a visa-free and free trade area among the member countries (Renda, 2011).

After attaining a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for the 2009-2010 term, Ankara’s self-confidence was further strengthened, which bolstered its search for a regional power identity (Kardaş, 2013), giving further boost to its assertive orientation. Thus, Turkish leadership claimed to represent interests of the underrepresented people and countries on the international fora in the name of building ‘a fairer world’ (Erdoğan, 2021). In this regard, Ankara turned into a champion of the Palestinian rights and soured its relations with Israel, which was symbolized by the Davos walk out of Erdoğan in January 2009, and the crisis triggered by the Mavi Marmara flotilla seeking to break the blockade over Gaza in May 2010. Likewise, Ankara turned into a vocal critique of American policies that aimed at sanctioning and

containing Iran and Syria, underlining the destabilizing implications of those policies.

3. The Onset of the Arab Spring and Deepening of the Proactive Engagement

Against this background, the Turkish government viewed the Arab Spring of 2011 as a positive force that would accelerate the transformation of the Middle East in line with its vision and enhance Türkiye's capacity for regional leadership (Davutoğlu, 2011a). While the Arab peoples' quest for democratization would provide new opportunities for Türkiye to set the playground in the Middle East, it would also strengthen the country's claim for regional ambitions and international status (Mercan, 2022, p. 271). As a result, acting at times in contravention of the previous self-assumed role of the mediator in regional disputes and the policy of non-involvement in intra-Arab affairs, Ankara opted for active support for the revolutionary upheavals. After a short period of caution, on February 1, 2011, then Prime Minister Erdoğan asked the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to heed people's demands and leave power; Türkiye also eventually played an important role in 'standing with' the Tunisian and Egyptian people. As demonstrations spread to Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, the Turkish government continued to call for reforms to respond to the people's rightful demands. Eventually, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu spent long hours in order to convince the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to initiate reforms along with popular demands. Confronted with the inability of the latter, Ankara moved toward a policy of regime change in coordination with other regional countries and Western actors.

In a speech delivered in November 2011, then Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu stated: “Today we don’t have a choice whether to support the status quo or support the winds of change” that would eventually lead to the rise of a new Middle East (Davutoğlu, 2011b). He named the developments unfolding with the Arab upheavals as the “start of restoration and reintegration of the region after a hundred years of colonialism and Cold War that culminated in separated nation-states with artificial borders” (Davutoğlu, 2013b). He claimed that with the ascendance of popularly elected governments in the Arab world, political borders would be removed to be barriers among the regional countries that would facilitate movement of goods and people across the region. Thus, he assessed the Arab Spring as a milestone and the harbinger of the rebirth of the ‘historical civilization’.

The relative receptiveness of the Arab street, and the Western support for the democratic transformation agenda unleashed a new wave of Turkish activism in the Middle East, building on the foundations laid during the proactive engagement initiated in the preceding years. Erdoğan’s tour of revolutionary countries, including Egypt, Tunisia and Libya in September 2011 displayed Ankara’s high level of commitment to revolutionary countries. The Turkish government enhanced its relations with new administrations in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. The country’s active role was further strengthened with the subsequent electoral victories of Islamist political parties that regarded the JDP as a model for themselves. Besides providing various technical equipment and financial assistance to the revolutionary governments, Turkish government initiated training and capacity-building programs for diplomats, policemen, bureaucrats, and the youth from revolutionary countries. It forged intimate relations

with Mohammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, the first democratically elected president of Egypt in June 2012. After the Syrian President Assad's refusal to revise its approach towards the uprising, Ankara broke its relations with Damascus and helped the mobilization of the Syrian opposition, and eventually supported the armed insurgents as the crisis became militarized. Türkiye also played an active role in rallying international support for the Syrian opposition and became one of the most active supporters of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People.

4. Reversal of the Arab Spring and Regional Blowback

The regional context in the Middle East that presented a large space of maneuver for Türkiye's activism was reversed due to the changing course of the Arab upheavals. The second phase of the Arab Spring saw the rapid securitization of the regional environment, coming to pose new challenges for Ankara (Kardaş, 2018). In a remarkable turning point, the Morsi government was overthrown by a *coup d'état* in Egypt, staged by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in 2013. The Turkish government stood with President Morsi and remained as the most vocal critique of the new administration, which resulted in the downgrading of diplomatic ties between the two countries. The coup also widened the growing divergence between Ankara and conservative Arab monarchies, which had been increasingly wary of the revolutionary upheavals and started to form a counter block. Jordan's King Abdullah had earlier hinted at the conservative distress with Turkish activism in the Middle East, when he warned against a developing 'Muslim Brotherhood crescent' under the guise of the promotion of democratization (Goldberg 2013). Later, the Kingdom of Saudi

Arabia and the UAE emerged to be among the primary supporters of the coup in Egypt to the dismay of Turkish leadership, while their policies on Syria also started to diverge. Ankara was isolated in its support for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in the name of defending democratic values. This development drove a further wedge with the conservative GCC states, which came to view the MB as a terrorist group. Another reverberation of the coup for Ankara's Middle East policy was Turkish government's disillusionment with the Western quietism against the coup¹.

Paralleling the developments unfolding in Egypt against the interests of Ankara, the evolution of the Syrian crisis into an all-out civil war and eventual emergence of a stalemate strained the activism of the Turkish policy. Either as an extension of its support for the opposition or due to its humanitarian concerns, Türkiye opened its border to the Syrian people fleeing from the violence, granting them temporary protection. However, due to the protraction of the civil war in Syria, the number of Syrians sheltered in the country reached 3.5 million people by 2016, which evolved into a social, economic, and political challenge occupying the Turkish government's agenda in subsequent years.

In the meantime, international supporters of the Syrian revolution gradually disengaged, leaving Ankara virtually alone to sustain support for the opposition for the sake of defending humanitarian principles and values (Hürriyet Daily News, 2013). Firstly, the Turkish government was dismayed by the inaction of

1. PM Erdoğan publicly condemned the West saying that it failed to define it as a coup and defend democracy in Egypt (Anadolu Agency, 2013). Davutoğlu also lamented the West for failing to "support democratic change forcefully enough at the time," arguing that Türkiye "was practically alone in providing financial support to underwrite democratic transition in the Middle East" (World Economic Forum, 2014).

the Obama administration just after the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons against the civilians in August 2013.¹ While the Group of Friends of the Syrian People lost its pace after several rounds of conferences, the United States, in partnership with some Arab countries, ceased its operations to supply Syrian opposition fighters with money, weaponry and training by the end of 2015, when Russia's direct involvement in the conflict further deteriorated the situation. In addition to the Iranian involvement, the expansion of Russian support for Assad diminished the opposition's energy and motivation to overthrow the regime, and culminated in defeats of rebels in many fronts, as epitomized by the restoration of the regime's full control over Aleppo in December 2016 (Sinkaya, 2019).

Moreover, the weakening of central authority in Syria and Iraq gave way to the rise of extremist groups, which posed new challenges for the security of the country. Especially the ISIS seized vast swath of territories in Syria and Iraq adjacent to the Turkish border and turned its wrath towards Türkiye. In addition to perpetrating terror attacks in different city centers, it continuously attacked border areas inside the Turkish territory. It also occupied the Turkish consulate in Mosul in June 2014, taking Turkish diplomats hostage for two months.² More importantly, the rise of extremist forces undermined the moderate opposition groups both on the ground and politically, as the Western appetite for regime

1. Reminding President Obama who had earlier set the use of chemical weapons as the American redline in the Syrian theater, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu stated that "all redlines are breached" and called the American administration for active military involvement against the Assad regime (BBC Türkçe, 2013).

2. Due to the continuous ISIS threats, Turkish government relocated the tomb of Suleyman Shah, grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman dynasty, nominally a Turkish exclave 30 km deep inside Syria, to the border town of Eşme in February 2015.

change in Syria decreased, and the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition channeled its support to the Kurdish groups.

Furthermore, the collapse of the state authority and the failure of the Syrian opposition to sustain its control over previously seized areas, thus, opened the stage for the growing presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an internationally listed terrorist organization, in the country. The PYD, the Syrian offshoot of the PKK, and its military wing YPG, seized Kurdish populated towns and expanded their control over Arab settlements as well across the north of Syria, eventually engaging in building autonomous administration there. Capitalizing on this new space in Syria, the PKK spoiled the peace process aimed at a democratic solution for the Kurdish question in Türkiye, and revived its terror attacks inside the country. The situation in the Syrian theater further deteriorated for Ankara, when the U.S. administration, particularly the Pentagon, opted to work with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a reconfigured version of the YPG, as the local partner to fight against the ISIS in 2015. Under the guise of fighting the ISIS, equipped and supported by the United States, YPG-led SDF further entrenched itself in the northeastern part of Syria. Likewise, PKK affiliates in the north of Iraq formed YBŞ (Sinjar Resistance Units) in the name of protecting Yazidi community in Sinjar against the ISIS threat. Thus, Sinjar effectively turned into a new stronghold for the PKK. The consolidation of PKK presence in the northern parts of Syria and Iraq, along with the ISIS came to be viewed by the Turkish leadership as the formation of a 'terror corridor' on its southern borders (Anadolu Agency, 2016). Hence, Syria emerged as 'a source of instability for the entire region,' which caused security challenges for the country (Çavuşoğlu, 2017).

In addition to the rising perceptions of threats originating from the Middle East, domestic developments also came to influence the Turkish approach to the region. The abortive coup attempt of July 15, 2016 staged by a group of officers loyal to Fethullah Gülen who led an esoteric movement later designated as a terrorist organization called FETÖ, further increased Ankara's security concerns, forging a new critical reading of the international and regional actors. President Erdoğan blasted the Western critiques of the government's fight against FETÖ suspects after the coup attempt, arguing that they should instead sympathize with the democratically elected government. For him, this was yet another affirmation that his country was left alone by the Western partners in dealing with the new security challenges (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2016). Moreover, seeking foreign hands behind the coup attempt, officials indirectly blamed the United States for providing tacit support for the terrorists by sheltering Gülen and his followers. Turkish officials also blamed the UAE for providing financial support to the abortive coup (Acet, 2017), which further accelerated the unfolding rift with the GCC monarchies.

Entangled with complex domestic political and security challenges, which it perceived to be supported by external actors, along with the growing security concerns on the southern borders and resumption of terror attacks inside the country, the Turkish government came to operate on the assumption that the country was 'fighting for its survival' (*beka mücadelesi*). Henceforth, the domestic political alignments also came to be reshuffled, as the governing JDP forged a new coalition with the nationalist party, National Action Party (MHP). The ensuing period increasingly saw an adjustment of Ankara's foreign and security policies, in an effort

to cope with the new challenges in the external environment. After a decade of proactive Turkish policies in the Middle East with heavy reliance on soft power instruments and liberal integration paradigm, new challenges at home and at the borders culminated in securitization of regional policies (Yeşiltaş, 2016). Ankara adopted a new doctrine that sought first and foremost to fight terrorism, by eliminating the PKK and the ISIS in neighboring territories through cross-border military instruments and adopting a coercive diplomacy.

5. Widening Regional Insecurity and Militarization of Ankara's Middle East Policies

The adverse regional environment and domestic developments resulted in Ankara's orientation toward a hard-power oriented foreign policy. Emboldened by the new domestic power constellation, Turkish army launched a series of military operations in the north of Syria, coming to frame it as an extension of fight against terrorism. After the Euphrates Shield operation in August 2016, Turkish military activities continued with other cross-border operations in Syria, namely Olive Branch (2018), and Peace Spring (2019). Turkish army also built military outposts in the province of Idlib within the framework of de-escalation arrangement reached with Russia and Iran. Ankara had at least three motivations in extending its military footprint in that region. First was the eradication of the ISIS in its southern borders. Second, the prevention of the YPG's seizure of further territory in the wake of ISIS defeats, which may eventually connect the cantons controlled by the YPG and effectively create a contiguous zone in the north of Syria. Third, in addition to the establishment of a defensive zone, Ankara also aimed at building a safe zone to

prevent further refugee flows as well as to repatriate some of Syrian refugees¹.

The continuation of effective military presence beyond borders has been an important characteristic of the new Turkish posture, despite the criticisms coming from the regional actors and Western powers. Through new rounds of military operations, Turkish forces remained in the north of Syria to keep 'areas cleansed from terrorists' secured. Moreover, Türkiye moved in the direction of forming civilian administrations (local councils) by the Syrian opposition groups, supporting them in the provision of public services, education, health services, in constructing the country's infrastructure, sports and recreational facilities, and in promoting the revival of economic activities. While Syrian refugees largely stayed in the country, by October 2019, nearly 365,000 of them reportedly returned to their homes in the liberated areas in northern Syria (Çavuşoğlu, 2019).

In this period, Türkiye expanded its military presence in Iraq, as well. In fact, Turkish army used to control some military outposts in the north of Iraq, mostly located in the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG)-controlled areas for a long time, formed in the context of pursuing PKK terrorists. Within the framework of the international coalition against the ISIS, Turkish military established a military base in Bashiqa, located 32 km north of Mosul in 2014 to train Kurdish and Sunni fighters (Hürriyet Daily News, 2015a). Concerns over the growing PKK presence in Sinjar after 2014 and the new reality following the defeat of the

1. Turkish officials justified the military operations on the grounds of ensuring national security by neutralizing terrorist threats along its borders, liberating Syrians including the Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Turkmens from the yoke of terrorist groups, and ensuring territorial integrity of Syria (Çavuşoğlu, 2019).

ISIS led Turkish army to expand its military operations into that region. Particularly Barzani's failed bid for the KRG independence referendum in 2017 resulted in Ankara's further adjusting its Iraq policy to empower the central government in Baghdad. Developing closer security cooperation with Baghdad, and coordinating diplomatic and military measures with Tehran against the KRG's independence referendum, Ankara increased pressure over Barzani. The growing security ties with Baghdad allowed Ankara to extend its military operations inside Iraq to Sinjar (Kardaş, 2021a, p. 139) which continued unabated despite the reactions coming from other powers.

The trend toward securitization and militarization of Turkish regional policies was hardly confined to the immediate neighborhood, i.e., Syria and Iraq, or issues related to the counter-terrorism or Kurdish revisionism. Beyond its immediate neighborhood, the Qatar crisis of 2017, the new geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and conflict in Libya, and eventually the conflict in the South Caucasus accelerated the dynamics of militarization in the Turkish foreign policy.

Turkish activism in the Middle East, as well as support for the political transformation agenda widened the rift between Ankara and the GCC monarchies. While the growing rift between Ankara and the bloc led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE evolved into a geopolitical rivalry across the region, Qatar, with which Türkiye shared overlapping perspectives on the regional transformation agenda as well, remained as the most trusted friend (Altunışık & Battaloğlu, 2023). Moreover, Doha-Ankara relations gained a strategic military dimension when the plans for building of a Turkish military base in Qatar came underway. Qatar's unique position in the regional affairs and ties with Türkiye drew the ire of

its GCC neighbors which asked the country to freeze its military relations with Ankara as well as complying with a number of other demands. The dispute, which first erupted in 2014, turned into a severe diplomatic crisis escalating into the Saudi and Emirati blockade against Qatar in June 2017. In reaction, the remaining procedures were swiftly completed, paving the way for the deployment of Turkish military personnel in Qatar and work towards the construction of Turkish naval base there (Kaddorah, 2021).

Parallel to the development of military ties with Qatar, Ankara also exercised its hard power in Libya. After the outbreak of the civil war in Libya between the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army under the leadership of Khalifa Haftar, affiliated with the House of Commons located in Tobruk, the Turkish government fully backed Fayez al-Sarraj, head of the GNA, as the internationally recognized government of the country. In contrast, Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE emerged as the principal supporters of Haftar. Türkiye and Libya signed two agreements, one on security and military cooperation, and the other on delimitation of maritime boundaries in November 2019. As an extension of the security cooperation deal, Ankara dispatched its armed forces into Libya in January 2020 for the purpose of training and providing technical and logistical support for the government forces. Turkish support for the Sarraj government was effective in repelling the Haftar forces' offensive to seize Tripoli, which turned the tide in Libya (Daily Sabah, 2022).

Ankara's resort to military instruments and escalation in Libya was driven by a concern to uphold the legitimate government of Libya, which became essential to thwart the course of events

undermining Turkish interests in not only in North Africa, but also in the unfolding geopolitical rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean. The emergence of new groupings and organizations such as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, seeking the exclusion of Türkiye from energy exploration and transportation projects in the region, or the European Union's backing of Greece against Turkish theses in the dispute over Cyprus or the Aegean Sea resulted in Ankara's reliance on hard power instruments and coercive diplomacy (Kardaş, 2020). By inking a maritime agreement with the Government of National Accord of Libya, Turkish government extended its claim for exclusive economic zone deeper into the Mediterranean, challenging the areas previously claimed by Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. Meanwhile, Ankara dispatched drilling ships for the exploration of underwater hydrocarbon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, supported by the elements of its navy. It did not refrain from brinkmanship and escalation in this crisis, which even risked a military collision with Greece backed by the European Union.

As much as resort to hard power dramatically increased after the mid-2010s, it did not mean the abandonment of diplomacy and soft power tools altogether. Ankara was still committed to a moral and normative agenda in its foreign policy (Keyman, 2017). For instance, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu (2015-2023) declared the motto of 'enterprising and humanitarian foreign policy' as the new guiding principle (Daily Sabah, 2021). Accordingly, Türkiye continued to host more than four million refugees, nearly 3.7 million of whom were Syrians under temporary protection status, which made it the top refugee hosting country worldwide. Ankara also emerged as one of the top donor countries in the provision of humanitarian and development aid (Anadolu Agency, 2021). It

continued to support the Syrian opposition and the Muslim Brotherhood, despite the outside pressures. Ankara also maintained its pro-Palestinian position, which delayed the normalization of its relations with Israel. It criticized the Trump administration's decision to relocate the American embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem by leading the extraordinary meeting of OIC in May 2018. Ankara became a vocal critic of increasing Israeli violence against Palestinians, which resulted in the withdrawal of ambassadors in Ankara and Tel Aviv in 2018.

Türkiye also used diplomacy as an effective tool in support of its regional policies as it struggled to preserve its national interests. At times, it had to engage in deals with other regional rivals, showing flexibility and engaging in compromise when necessary. For instance, it closely coordinated with Iran and Iraq some concurrent measures against the independence bid of the KRG in 2017 (Sinkaya, 2018). Likewise, as Ankara expanded the military operations inside Iraq, it also worked to receive the acquiescence of the KRG and Iraqi authorities. In a move which took many observers by surprise, Ankara also reached a compromise deal with Iran and Russia on the four de-escalation zones in Syria in 2017, which culminated in the Astana process (Jaecke & Labude, 2017). Likewise, it developed different de-conflicting mechanisms to manage the scope and limits of its zones of military control in Syria through negotiations with Russia and the United States as well as other external actors maintaining military presence there.

Ankara's military activism in the wider Middle East triggered counter-balancing reactions on several fronts. Challenged with Turkish activism in the region, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt tried to counter it by backing its opponents in various theaters. Despite President Erdoğan's initially positive reaction to the new

Saudi King Salman, initial support for the Saudi-led military alliance to fight terrorism, and criticism toward ‘Iranian expansionism’, the subsequent developments saw the worsening of relations to such a level that Saudis and Emiratis imposed undeclared embargo on Turkish goods and economic activities. Several factors deepened the tensions (Kardaş, 2021b). Ankara argued that the UAE was involved in the abortive coup attempt in July 2016, while the Quartet’s concerted pressure over Qatar for its close relations with Ankara further widened the gap. Additionally, the Saudi authorities’ role in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist critical of the regime, in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 further deteriorated Turkish-Saudi relations (Altunışık & Battaloğlu, 2023). The Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian trio capitalized on their power in the Arab League to orchestrate a condemnation of Turkish military operations in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, their search for normalization of relations with the Assad regime further led to the frictions. The UAE has been taking the lead in restoring ties with the Assad regime, which was regarded as part of anti-Ankara activities of Abu Dhabi (Doha Institute, 2021). Likewise, initially, the UAE’s leading role in the normalization of relations with Israel following the Abraham Accords in 2020 drew further ire of the Turkish government, as it viewed this development in contravention of the Palestinians’ rights (Anadolu Agency, 2020).

Türkiye’s heightened threat perceptions and the growing utilization of military instruments further deepened the divergence of American and Turkish policies, especially in Syria (Kardaş & Ünlühisarcıklı, 2020). Consecutive military operations inside the Syrian territory raised the risk of direct military confrontation between Ankara and Washington, which continued to arm and train

the YPG/SDF as local partners even after the defeat of the ISIS. Although the Turkish government was 'optimistic' about a reset in Turkish-U.S. relations after the inauguration of the Trump administration in 2017, the U.S., particularly CENTCOM authorities, continued to criticize and sought to contain Turkish army's military operations. More often, American officials claimed that Turkish army's operations against YPG/SDF harmed the American-led Global Coalition's fight against the remnants of the ISIS. Henceforth, American administration considered Turkish military operations as a challenge for American national security. As the risk of direct confrontation became apparent following Ankara's 2019 incursion, the United States appointed a special envoy who eventually brokered a deal between the two NATO allies (Macaron, 2019). Confronted with the American inability to deliver on its demands, the Turkish side kept the prospects of future military activities in Syria as an option on the table, carrying out limited actions in response to the PKK terrorism. Eventually, shutting down a Turkish armed drone in the north of Syria in October 2023 by a U.S. aircraft underscored the lingering 'problem of trust' between the two states, as framed by the Turkish President R.T. Erdoğan (Epstein & Panella, 2023).

6. A Reset in Turkish Policy in the Middle East?

After a considerable period of confrontation and rivalry with many regional players, Türkiye eventually reviewed and readjusted its policies toward to the Middle East. In March 2021, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu declared Ankara's readiness to reciprocate 'positive steps' of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to overcome their disagreements (Reuters, 2021). Although this process was

popularly called by many observers as ‘normalization,’ Ankara has not stepped back from its security and military policies immediately. The so-called normalization agenda revolved mainly around the restoration of diplomatic relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Syria, and Israel, along with de-escalation of tensions between Türkiye and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean, which was made possible by the cessation of conflict in the Libyan theater. Meanwhile, Ankara has been seeking to open a new page with the West, by reinvigorating the stalled membership process with the European Union and initiating a new strategic dialogue with the United States.

The real game changer was the unfolding regional order, which started to take shape after 2020 (ICG, 2021). Increasingly, normalization emerged as the new norm of the Middle Eastern international relations, characterized by the Abraham Accords and later the initiatives to mend the intra-GCC disputes. The peaceful resolution of the Qatar crisis in the Al Ula Summit in January 2021 eased the regional tensions and created a more permissive environment in which Ankara could also prioritize the normalization agenda.

Nonetheless, Türkiye proceeded with reconciliation talks with its adversaries in a cautious manner. A watershed came only in late 2021, when the UAE Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited Ankara to meet President Erdoğan in November. The successive high-level contacts within a short time span, which culminated in President Erdoğan’s visit to the UAE on 14 February 2022 – first time after 2013 –resulted in the two countries signing new economic cooperation agreements. These mutual visits turned into symbols of Ankara’s normalizations with the GCC monarchies. The December 2023 and February 2024 visits by

Erdoğan to the UAE, as well as other contacts helped cement the deepening relations, which underscored cooperation deals in a wide range of areas and investments in the Turkish economy. Meanwhile, in the notorious Khashoggi case, Ankara stopped the trial of Saudi suspects -in absentee- and handed the case to Saudi authorities in April 2022. Soon after, President Erdoğan and Crown Prince Salman paid reciprocated visits to Riyadh and Ankara.

Paralleling the thawing relations between Ankara and the GCC monarchies, President Erdoğan announced the resumption of diplomatic negotiations with Egypt in March 2021. The Deputy foreign ministers of the two states conducted factfinding talks respectively in Cairo and Ankara. The first handshake between Presidents Erdoğan and Sisi was brokered by Qatar's Emir at the opening ceremony of the 2022 World Cup held in Doha in November (Bakir, 2023). Türkiye and Egypt fully normalized their relations reinstating their ambassadors mutually to serve in respective capitals in June 2023. Finally, in February 2024, President Erdoğan's visit to Cairo, where he received a warm welcome from President Sisi, turned a completely new page of cooperation, which, among others, involved partnership in the military-defense industries (Hürriyet Daily News, 2024).

Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu also announced the start of dialogue between Ankara and Tel Aviv after long-serving Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu left office in June 2021. Along with accelerating pace of regional normalization, Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Türkiye in March 2022, which was followed by mutual visits of Israeli and Turkish foreign ministers. The two states eventually agreed to return their ambassadors (Mansoor, 2022). While major initiatives to deepen cooperation between the two countries in various fields including the energy partnership

were underway, the process has been halted by Israel's war on Gaza in October 2023.

As part of the broader reset, Ankara also signaled readiness to engage in normalization with the Assad regime. It took some concrete steps to communicate with the regime, expanding on its existing ties with Russia on the ground and Russian and Iranian mediation attempts. After years of dialogue at the level of intelligence agencies, eventually the defense ministers of Türkiye and Syria met in Moscow in December 2022. However, the Assad regime conditioned the withdrawal of Turkish armed forces in the north of Syria for the resumption of negotiations with Ankara. Considering the weakness of the Syrian regime to control those areas and the prospect of the return of YPG elements to the Turkish border, Turkish government is not responsive to the regime's demands, and has remained skeptical about the GCC states' normalization with the Assad regime (Kardaş & Aras, 2023). Therefore, despite domestic and regional pressures for normalization with the regime, Türkiye will continue to maintain its military presence in Syria until it receives clear guarantees from the regime to protect its security interests, and will continue to insist on the framework for a political solution.

Drivers of the normalization wave were different depending on the case, since each had its own dynamics and unique stakes involved for Ankara and its regional counterparts (Çiçekçi, 2022). Yet, there are a number of underlying factors that appeared to create a more permissive regional environment for Anara to pursue normalization in this new phase (Kardaş, 2022). For one, similar to the other actors engaging in regional reset, Türkiye also started to experience the limits to the coercive policies and hard power instruments; in fact the resort to diplomacy to consolidate gains or

minimize the risks has become a preferable strategy for the country. For instance, the normalization with Egypt and Israel was closely related to the new geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean region and the Turkish interest to reclaim its role in regional energy projects. Second, broader geopolitical changes, such as the post-COVID reordering, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan or growing Chinese assertiveness, reminded all players of the risks involved in the deadly encounters and necessitated a new approach to regional security cooperation, based on the diversification of partnerships and the reduction of tensions in the neighborhood.

Third, conjecturally, economic considerations also contributed to a swift progress on the path of normalization. The rapid deterioration of the Turkish economy and its need for capital inflows and new export markets created further incentives to downplay the geopolitical disputes. As a result, Türkiye found a complimentary ground to engage in political reconciliation with the GCC monarchies driven by economic rationale, but also facilitated by the latter's drive for diversifying their security partners. Last but not least, since in some cases the disputes were caused by diverging positions on the broader regional issues rather than any direct bilateral issue, it was easy to initiate political reconciliation. For instance, as the tensions around the regional conflict zones subdued, Ankara and Abu Dhabi were able to capitalize increasingly on economic cooperation based on the groundwork laid in previous phases.

7. Conclusion

Türkiye remains a major actor to contribute to the Middle Eastern

order by playing a crucial role in hotspots and helping suppress the regional conflicts. However, as the Turkish experience of coping with the tectonic regional transformation has demonstrated, shaping the dynamics of regional order, either through supporting a political change or stabilizing regional conflicts, has proven beyond one country's ability alone. Eventually, Ankara also became part of the very same conflict spiral, which it was seeking to escape, and as a result of the blowback effects, it had to enact major revisions in its foreign policy course.

As it had been working hard to cope with the security externalities of the Middle Eastern conflict spiral, the window of opportunities opened by the regional wave of normalization was a welcome development for Türkiye. The Turkish government had mutually-reinforcing strategic and economic motivations to engage in this process, while other regional actors had overlapping interests in pursuing cooperative policies and moving beyond the heightened tensions. From the Turkish perspective, therefore, the normalization with the regional rivals was a viable project and the government had demonstrated its interest in making it sustainable.

The foregoing analysis, nonetheless, hardly suggests that normalization will evolve in a linear way, nor will it be the only determinant of the Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. The steps towards mending the problematic ties will continue to evolve in a partial manner, and case-by-case. For one, the broader trends within the regional order will be the main determinant of Turkish behavior in the coming years. The war on Gaza, unfolding since October 2023, reiterated once again that as much as the regional actors seek to usher in a new era of cooperation, the underlying dynamics of conflict remain in place. This reality led to the stalling of the Turkish-Israeli normalization process already. The risk of

further escalation and spillover of the conflict to other theaters remains as a destabilizing factor, with which all regional actors have to reckon as they devise their engagement.

Secondly, Türkiye will continue to filter regional policies through its strategic autonomy (Kardaş, 2011), which further suggests a selective approach to the normalization agenda. On the one hand, there are indeed substantive economic and financial drivers of the Turkish foreign policy, which create incentives for pursuing more cooperative relations with the wider Arab world. The rapid corrective steps with the GCC monarchies through mutual visits, business summits or plans for further investments and joint initiatives in regional infrastructure projects underscores the relevance of economic and financial incentives. Likewise, the civilizational-ideological drivers of the Turkish foreign policy also may contribute to the deepening of the normalization agenda. Still, commitment to the Palestine issue, along with shared historical and cultural commonalities remains central to Ankara's foreign policy making. The latest wave of Israeli aggression on Gaza and the Western inaction and complicity created a new ground to coordinate policies with other countries, which has made it possible to put aside disagreements over disputed files, deepening the normalization process.

On the other hand, while compromises with regional rivals might be rather easy to achieve on some of the regional issues, the cases where vital Turkish interests or security are concerned will have different dynamics. The conflict of interest is always possible especially when competing claims revolve around issues that challenge Türkiye's territorial integrity or direct national interests. The dynamics of Ankara's relations with the Assad regime in Syria or its position on the Kurdish revisionist actors' presence in Iraq

and Syria are important cases in point. Ankara's main priority is still the formation of a defensive belt along its southern borders to roll back and de-territorialise separatist actors. As Ankara continues to read its regional environment through defensive lenses and feels that its survival is threatened, a realist foreign policy approach to counter external actors by relying on coercive instruments and unilateral policies will underpin its policies in the Middle East. Therefore, reversals from the conditional normalization processes are always possible.

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