

Food Corridor: Türkiye's Successful Role as Mediator

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ABSTRACT *Türkiye's latest success, in bringing the warring sides of Ukraine and Russia to an agreement on the export of grain out of Ukraine's ports, is due to Ankara's long time rational strategy of having access to both capitals by keeping the dialog open even during times of conflict. At last, the newly signed grain deal is going to be effective in helping to avert the anticipated worldwide food shortages. This commentary aims to understand the details of this grain deal by focusing first on the Turkish diplomacy that has been on track before and during the Ukraine war, with the Russian and Ukrainian governments.*

Keywords: Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, Grain Deal, UN, Mediation, Food Crisis

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Türkiye's latest success, in bringing the warring sides of Ukraine and Russia to an agreement on the export of grain out of Ukraine's ports, is due to Ankara's long time rational strategy of having access to both capitals by keeping the dialog open even during times of conflict. Türkiye is the only country in the world that is speaking to both sides at the same time and this skillful diplomacy of hers has given its fruits finally in the newly signed grain deal- which is going to be effective in helping to avert the anticipated worldwide food shortages. Before going into the details of this grain deal, how Türkiye has managed to assure and bring together both Moscow and Kyiv to sign an agreement, even though fighting is continuing on the ground in Ukraine, needs to be analyzed. To understand the details of this grain deal one needs to focus first on the Turkish diplomacy that has been on track before and during the Ukraine war, with the Russian and Ukrainian governments.

Türkiye's relations with Ukraine go back long before the current war, due to their cultural, historical, and geographical relations. In fact, in the early 1990s Ankara was among several administrations to officially announce the recognition of a sovereign Ukraine. Since then, Türkiye has always defended Ukraine's territorial integrity, especially when Crimea was annexed by Russia. The relations between Ankara and Kyiv have grown stronger with a bilateral military cooperation agreement signed on February 3, 2020. Accordingly, Türkiye was going to allocate about

25.8 million dollars to meet the requirements of the Ukrainian Armed Forces for the purchase of military and dual-use goods in line with this newly inked agreement. The volume of cooperation between the two sides was quite extensive but due to the outbreak of war, most of the objectives of this agreement could not be finalized. However, the purchase of Bayraktar TB2 armed unmanned aerial vehicles and three ground control stations by the Kyiv government in 2019 was later revealed and has subsequently proven its great combatting value during the Ukrainian war. Hence, it is not a coincidence that the world community, following the Second Karabakh War, started talking about the efficiency of Turkish drones and how they have positively changed the combat capacity of Ukraine. Likewise, one of the most eminent American political scientists, Fukuyama, stated a year ago that Türkiye's drone success has elevated Ankara's standing in the international arena, a development which he interpreted as a sign of a historic shift in warfare with which Türkiye is changing the balance of power in the Middle East.¹ Ukraine, with a limited number of 20 purchased Bayraktar drones, was able to use them successfully at the inception of the war. However, Western military supplies and support were needed against the massive Russian air assault and Moscow's other capabilities to accomplish a turn in the tide of war at the end of the first phase. Moreover, according to the military deal of 2020 Ankara has promised that it will facilitate Ukraine to pro-

duce drones themselves. But the war has unfortunately hindered some of these plans for cooperation between the two countries. What is more important, Selçuk Bayraktar, producer of the drone, during a video interview given to CNN international said that Ankara will not be selling this drone capacity to Russians. This strong pledge certainly proves Türkiye's fair standing toward the Kyiv government during this war.

In another example, Türkiye after a few days of examining the Russian assaults on Ukraine came to a legal conclusion that what is happening between the two sides can now be defined as 'war.' Therefore, it was straightforward for Ankara to apply one of the clauses of the 1936 Montreux Convention that gives the right to Türkiye to close passage of the Bosphorus straits to warring sides. Ankara's action of closing the Turkish straits was launched to lower the potential of the conflict from spilling over the Black Sea and beyond. As expected, Türkiye's stand was very much appreciated by the Kyiv authorities who had demanded it right after the initiation of the first Russian assault on their territory. Of course, Ankara's decision about qualifying the Ukraine conflict as a 'war' was important because legally it meant the denial of Russia's assertion of the conflict as only a "special military operation." Before the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, relations on the economic front were much improved between Ankara and Kyiv, reaching \$7.4 billion. In fact, before the outbreak of war, Ankara and

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Kyiv had also signed a free trade agreement.

While Türkiye has been trying to support Kiev's struggle to defend its territorial integrity during the Ukrainian war, Ankara has been simultaneously aiming to continue its important engagement policy with Russia. Ankara, after the outbreak of the Ukrainian war tried to follow a kind of neutral policy between Kiev and Moscow and hence tried to keep open channels for dialogue with Moscow to bring an end to this war. On the diplomatic front, shortly after the initial invasion of Russia to Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Türkiye at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in March 2022 was able to bring the Foreign Ministers of both countries, Lavrov and Kuleba, together for the purpose of finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. Unfortunately, this gathering did not prevent the Russians later continuing their invasion into Ukraine, but it demonstrates the accomplishment of Turk-

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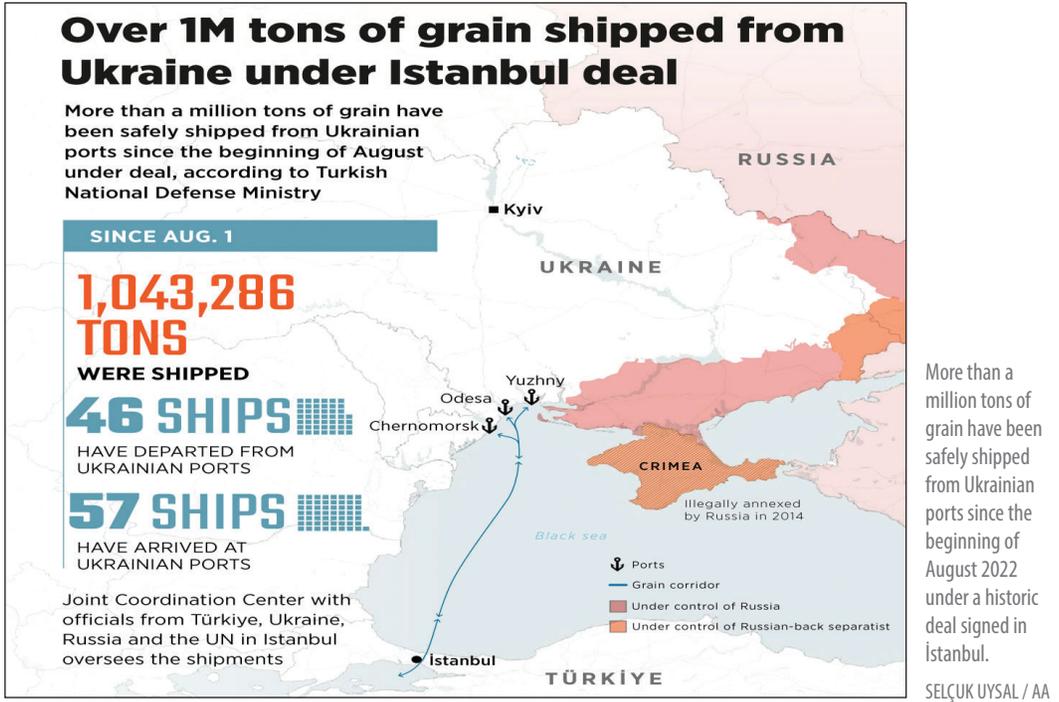
ish diplomatic effort through having access to both Kiev and Moscow and hence being able to persuade the two foreign ministers to come together in Antalya. Ankara's diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful solution have not stopped and continue during the different phases of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Peace talks have been held in İstanbul, where the two delegations came together to work on producing a plan of action for finding a solution to end the war. At the end of the negotiations in İstanbul there was a hope that an opportunity for peace was opened, but this positive mood was soon lost with the acceleration of fighting on the ground.

The most recent intense diplomatic effort of Türkiye, which has accomplished a grain agreement, will soon bring an end to the looming food crises, especially in the countries in the global South that are dependent on Ukrainian grain. This deal of course was the result of both Kiev's and Moscow's trust in Türkiye which has been constructed over the years. From the perspective of Russia, despite divergent views with Ankara on several fronts like Libya, Syria and Karabakh, Moscow has been able to cooperate in many other areas like

tourism, trade, energy, etc. with Ankara because of her determination to follow a policy/strategy of compartmentalization with Putin's Russia. In this case, during the Ukrainian war, though Türkiye denounced the assault of Russia and defended the territorial integrity of Ukraine –Ankara also rejected the previous annexation of Crimea in 2014– she has at the same time declined to join Western sanctions against Russia. Moreover, Ankara has also kept airspace open to Moscow. So, even though Russians were quite uneasy about the sale of Turkish drones to the Kiev government they are also aware of the importance of Türkiye's balancing act in the case of Ankara's attitude on the sanctions issue as well as other matters –accepting that Türkiye closing the passage to warships of warring sides during the times of war was in accordance with the Montreux Convention of 1936. It is true that Ankara's closing the straits to Russia is expected to limit Moscow's ability to support its Black Sea Navy and this could be expected to affect Russia's long-term war-fighting capacity. But on the other hand, Russians are also aware that the same Montreux Convention, as long as it exists, has great value in limiting the passage of vessels of non-littoral states, like the U.S., and their remaining in the Black Sea during peacetime.

Western Critics and Türkiye's Balancing Act

Despite the criticisms, originating from Western countries, that Tür-



kiye's strategy of maintaining a balancing act between Ukraine and Russia is dangerous while the war becomes more prolonged and brutal, this prediction has not come true. On the contrary, at the end of the six months of fighting in Ukraine, it has become clear that with Ankara's support, given to Kyiv in various realms, not only has this attitude of Türkiye helped check Russia's further expansion into Ukraine² but also with Türkiye's simultaneous engagement policy with Moscow –keeping the channels for dialogue open– the possibility of various crises becoming more acute and persistent has been prevented. In this regard, the world community has witnessed how Türkiye together with UN Secretary-General António Guterres on

July 22, 2022, managed to persuade both Russia and Ukraine to agree on the export of grain safely departing from Kyiv's ports to world markets-where it is desperately needed. Moreover, Ankara has so far taken on a visible role in NATO exercises in and around the Black Sea, as a reliable member of NATO, which proves Türkiye's important role in terms of deterrence in the Alliance –a role that frequently its allies in the West do not want to recognize. Moreover, as regards the criticism of why Türkiye has not joined the EU-led sanctions against Moscow, the answer is simple. First, Ankara is not a member of the Union and hence it is not bound to observe the EU's sanctions. Second, she does not believe that these sanctions could be a help in



An aerial view of Sierra Leone-flagged dry cargo ship Razoni, carrying a cargo of 26,527 tons of corn, as it passes under the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge to travel through Istanbul to reach Lebanon on August 3, 2022.

ALI ATMACA / AA

persuading Russia to stop its war in Ukraine.

Türkiye and UN's Successful Efforts to Finalize the Grain Deal

It is a reality that 30 percent of wheat traded across the world today is produced in Russia and Ukraine. Hence, since the beginning of the Ukrainian war, due to the blockade on the ports of Ukraine, nearly 15 million tons of grain have not been able to be exported to the world markets, amounting to nearly 10 percent of the world's wheat trade. The situation of food supply security was under stress, even before the eruption of war, due to factors like the COVID-19 pandemic as well as climate change. The outlook for food supply remains positive for the time being. But of course, the recent sharp rise of oil prices, which

has increased shipping costs, as well as trade cuts due to the outbreak of war, has as expected inflated the commodity prices –including the price of grain and those most affected are the already vulnerable people in the global south developing countries.

According to the Global Report on Food Crises, hunger levels continue to rise at an alarming rate and hence it is predicted that by the end of 2022 almost 40 million more people are going to suffer from food insecurity compared to 2020.³ The figures show that even before the start of the Ukrainian war especially in developing countries, people have already either run out of food or reduced their consumption in the first year of COVID-19 restrictions. According to Caitlin Welsh, the Director of the Global Food Security Program unless the release of stocks of

wheat, and other grains and oilseeds from Ukraine and Russia are accomplished, the food shortages and crises that are resulting as a side-effect of the Ukrainian war, are expected to exacerbate crises and create more instability in places like Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and other hot spots.⁴ She also emphasized that about half of the major wheat buyers in Africa and Asia are already living through acute food insecurity and made it clear in her commentary that accessing Ukraine and Russia's supplies is gaining vital importance and hence it should be the top priority of the world community and leaders.⁵ Additionally, she insisted that western restrictions on Russia's agriculture sector should remain off the table.⁶ Accordingly, after the eruption of the Ukrainian war, Moscow grain stocks have been exempted from Western-based sanctions imposed on Russia. Hence, the good news came on July 22, 2022, resulting from an effort of Turkish diplomacy that focused together with the UN to get a deal between the warring parties to allow tens of millions of tons of grain trapped in Ukrainian ships and silos to be sold to world markets –via the establishment of a safe shipping corridor in the Black Sea. It is no wonder that the Turkish President's Spokesman İbrahim Kalın described the situation as a critically important step for global food security. UN Secretary-General Guterres during the signing ceremony of the grain deal in İstanbul thanked President Erdoğan and his government for facilitating the talks that led to the accomplishment of a conclusive deal. He additionally, praised the Rus-

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sian and Ukrainian representatives for putting aside their differences in the common interest of humanity. Furthermore, Guterres pledged the UN's full commitment to the deal and urged all sides to do the same.⁷ He described the achievement of this agreement as unprecedented due to the continued fighting between the two sides on the Ukraine front. That is why, before the signing ceremony in İstanbul, he said that “today, there is a beacon on the Black Sea. A beacon of hope, a beacon of possibility, a beacon of relief in a world that needs [this] more than ever.”⁸

The grain deal that was rightfully described as an unprecedented beacon for the hope of success and relief within the war conditions has triggered a hope that in time when the agreement becomes operational, it can act as a confidence-building measure between the two warring sides and finally guides the way to secure a first cease-fire –which could hopefully lead to peace and end the human suffering. This is what the Turkish observers hope to see and expect. In this regard, when the first Ukrainian

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grain-loaded ship, which is headed to Tripoli, departed from Odesa port on July 22, 2022, and reached the Turkish straits via the use of safe corridors there was a great feeling of optimism. The safe passage ships that have made its way to Tripoli successfully was thanks to the workings of the Joint Coordination Center (JCC) that opened on July 28, 2022, in İstanbul. The duty of the JCC is to provide and assure safe sea transportation of grain and similar food products to be exported from Ukraine's three ports. Additionally, the JCC is expected to register and monitor the departure of commercial ships via satellite, internet, and other technical means available and carry out all activities in coordination with the parties and the UN. Moreover, the ships will also be expected to be inspected by joint inspection teams at locations deemed suitable for loading at Ukrainian ports and before they enter the Turkish Straits upon arrival at ports in Türkiye. According to the deal dated July 22, 2022, the JCC aimed to con-

sist of five civilian and military representatives each from Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, and the UN.⁹

With the successful moderating performance of Türkiye that has resulted in the inking of a grain deal between Ukrainians and Russians, the likelihood of worsening conditions of food shortages and hence the anticipated global crisis seems to have been avoided for now. Therefore, the likelihood of instability stemming from the looming food shortages is also expected to be prevented in places like Egypt, Lebanon, and elsewhere. As the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye's Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu says, the most important thing from now on should be "to attain the implementation of this deal and hence transport of grain and wheat to the countries that need it, of course without disruptions and interruptions."¹⁰ According to Çavuşoğlu, once the deal is successfully implemented –since both sides are expected to gain from its implication– then it could be possible to expect that this accumulated trust could boost relations between Russia and Ukraine in a healthier way.¹¹ He assumes that under the environment of improved trust it would be easier to work towards focusing on conditions of a cease-fire. In this regard, Çavuşoğlu once again mentioned that Ankara is ready to host and mediate the talks between Moscow and Kyiv, hoping to lead to lasting peace.¹²

The courage that Türkiye finds to lead cease-fire talks and then hopefully peace negotiations emanates from the valuable trust Ankara has

built with its two neighbors over the years. Crucially, during the rise of the current new Cold War Türkiye has avoided choosing sides in the rivalry of the great powers, and instead, it has pursued a balancing and autonomous strategy that has avoided polarization between the group of countries allied against each other, providing a third option. This has given her the capability to establish and maintain a channel of dialogue with Ukraine and Russia both before and during the war. Türkiye's act of pro-active and balancing diplomacy that is based on the trust which is constructed between Ankara-Kyiv and Ankara-Moscow has naturally yielded a very productive outcome in the realization of the July 22 grain deal. ■

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