

# European Views of Turkish Foreign Policy

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**ABSTRACT** *This article examines how the European elite views new parameters of Turkey's increasing activism in the Middle East with special emphasis on country's role in the Middle East in the context of claims of shift of axis on ideological grounds and Turkey's relations with the EU, Iran and Israel. It is demonstrated the emerging European perception among policy analysts and scholars regarding Turkish foreign policy is generally positive, and recent changes do not mean a shift in country's foreign policy orientation. Turkey is still perceived to be part of the Western alliance, but it is now seen more confident in taking initiatives and more eager to develop a regional approach.*

**O**ver the last decade, Turkey has significantly expanded its political and economic influence in its surrounding regions. The country's increased international profile has generated a wide range of intellectual debate on Turkish foreign policy both in academic and policy circles.

Turkey's historical identification with Europe, and its continuing attempt to join the EU, has made most people in Turkey define the West with Europe. Yet, debates over how the West views the continuity and change in the AK Party's foreign policy have mostly focused on American viewpoints. European perceptions of contemporary Turkish foreign policy have been largely ambiguous and confusing. In Turkey, too, discussions of how Turkish foreign policy is perceived in the West have generally focused on the American reading, neglecting transatlantic differences in perceptions of Turkey, and lumping together American viewpoints as the Western perspective. It is, however, of great importance that a distinction be made between European and American perceptions of Turkish foreign policy under the AK Party. The objective of this article is to analyze European policy analysts' perceptions of Turkish

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## Turkey's attempts to base its foreign policy agenda on such regions as the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans through a criticism of the West do not reflect a shift in its foreign policy orientation as often claimed

foreign policy during the AK Party period.

This study is based on an analysis of 32 in-depth interviews and some additional online interviews with representatives and academics of the leading think-tanks, universities and state institutions based in the United Kingdom, France and Germany. We are aware that the study might include certain biases due to

the use of only data collected in these three countries as way to understand a broader perception among European elites. These three countries were selected in large part because they are the major countries guiding European foreign policy. The interviewees were also selected with careful consideration in order to capture different perspectives and a wide spectrum of political opinions in the research. Interviewees were asked standardized questions in order to grasp the overall perceptions, and answers were grouped thematically.

### General Perspectives on Turkish Foreign Policy

As a staunch NATO ally whose actions were easy to predict, Turkey did not attract much attention as a foreign policy actor until a decade ago. The increasing activism in Turkey's foreign policy and the greater number of initiatives taken by Turkish civil society organizations, as well as by business circles, have increased interest in the subject in Europe. Turkey's assertive foreign policy had initially led to anxiety over perceived changes in the country. As former Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt observes, "for some, it has been difficult to digest the change of Turkey from a passive partner to the more active role Turkey is playing now."<sup>1</sup> After overcoming initial surprise at Turkey's rapid shift of vision, Europeans have developed a deeper understanding of Turkey, with discussions of its foreign policy becoming subtler and better informed.

The general perception of Turkish foreign policy under the AK Party is positive in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the respondents consider Turkey a strategic partner that cannot be ignored in diplomatic developments in its neighboring regions.<sup>3</sup> This is mostly seen as an asset, rather than a liability, for European interests, especially in regions such as the Middle East where Europe seems to struggle with decreasing leverage and a perceived lack of reliability.

The question of what drives Turkey's foreign policy has become a controversial subject over the last few years among scholars and commentators. Several argu-

ments have been developed that feature a direct link between the AK Party's Islamist roots and Turkey's opening to the Arab world. First of all, European policy analysts recognize the role of religion in shaping the party's ideology and outlook; in this sense, they think that the AK Party's Islamic background has an effect on how it approaches foreign policy. However, the party's ideology cannot be reduced to Islam only; religion is only one aspect of broader set of factors, such as culture, beliefs, emotions, social experiences and norms, interpretation of history, and international reality, that constitute the AK Party's vision of the world.<sup>4</sup>

The main characteristic of perceived change in Turkish foreign policy in the European mindset is that it is now more *interest-oriented* and *independent* in the sense that the country does not limit its foreign policy to the Western alliance only but seeks more of a diversified foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> Europeans are mostly aware that the evolution of Turkish foreign policy has been a rational process as the post-Cold War security structure has provided Turkey with an opportunity to have a more flexible and independent foreign policy. Therefore, the dominant European view is that change is not necessarily an AK Party phenomenon; rather it is a consequence of emerging global and domestic developments.<sup>6</sup> However, the AK Party has speeded up the process and added its special manner and style to it.

Although the overall image of Turkey's recent foreign policy is positive in Europe, it is not without questions and confusion, which is not due to *the intensity of the activism* or the *degree of independence* in foreign policy. Activism does not make Turkey's image in Europe a more positive or negative one. European scholars do not see Turkey's attempts at pursuing a more independent policy in its regional environment as a source of concern. Instead, they highlight the need for making a distinction between some American analysts, who might be "resentful" over Turkey's independent foreign policy, and Europeans, who are rather confused and uncomfortable with the tone and manner of that activism and independence.<sup>7</sup> Emotional remarks and the language of Turkish politicians and their stridently autonomous attitude feed the skepticism about what kind of a partner Turkey would be to Europe.<sup>8</sup>

Turkey's attempts to base its foreign policy agenda on such regions as the Middle East, the Caucuses, and the Balkans through a criticism of the West do not reflect a shift in its foreign policy orientation as often claimed. The European approach, in this respect, is more nuanced and sophisticated. Except on some issues like Iran, Europeans have developed a more objective and holistic approach towards the diversification of Turkish foreign policy under the AK Party. This approach has remained the same to a large extent even after the Arab Spring. The section below explores the questions of what European policy analysts make of the major discussion topics on Turkish foreign policy over the last few years, and how the Arab Spring has affected these perceptions.



Soldiers of Bundeswehr stand next to PAC-2 launchers of a "Patriot" missile battery during a media rehearsal in Warbelow. REUTERS/Tobias Schwarz

## A Cautious Approach towards the Shift of Axis Claims

One of the most controversial subjects of debate on Turkish foreign policy over the last decade has been the country's alleged "shift of axis." Interpreting Turkey's recent foreign policy activism and visibility in the Middle East as reflecting a shift in the foreign policy axis of the country, scholars following this view have argued that Turkey's AK Party government is orienting the country away from the West towards a closer alignment with Muslim countries on ideological grounds. While discussions on Turkey's shift of axis have been more intense in the United States, these views have found broad coverage in Europe as well. The European understanding of the shift of axis debate has been, however, more nuanced. European scholars do not seem to agree with simplistic and selective basis upon which shift of axis arguments have been built.

According to Europeans, substantial changes in Turkey's foreign policy have taken place during the AK Party rule; however, these changes do not reflect a shift in country's foreign policy orientation. Turkey is still perceived to be part of the Western alliance, but it is now more eager to develop a regional approach. Given the impressive economic growth rate of the country, it is not surprising that Turkey now feels more confident in taking initiatives, even if they are at odds with European policies. This, in the European perspective, does not suggest a total disconnect or departure from the West, but a tendency towards relative independence in foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>

Turkey's concentration on its eastern and southeastern borders as well as on the Arab Spring, however, has caused some Europeans to give more credit to

the shift of axis claims. Turkey's decision to allow the stationing of the NATO missile shield in its territory has lessened concerns, but the final blow to the shift of axis argument came with the spread of Arab uprisings into Syria and the resulting disagreement between Turkey and Iran, which was contrary to the general view that emphasized the ideological parameters in Turkey's Middle East policy.

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The critical question for the European scholars, however, is where the West now stands on Turkey's list of foreign policy priorities.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the intensity of its involvement in its eastern neighborhood and the stalled accession process has created confusion in Europe on whether Turkey is still committed to the multi-regional

foreign policy objectives that Davutoğlu had set in motion. Reflective of this viewpoint, an analyst from Britain states that "it is not a question of whether Turkey is departing from the West; it is rather a question of whether Turkey is departing from the regional hub idea it instigated a few years ago".<sup>11</sup> This comment implies that Turkey's foreign policy activism is heavily concentrated on the Middle East, seemingly at the expense of other regions. Three major factors, Turkey's overall foreign policy rhetoric, issues in its Middle East policy, and the state of relations with the European Union, are considered potential question marks regarding the extent to which Turkey is now willing to cooperate with the West.

Seen from Europe, Turkey's criticism of the West in non-Western forums is worrisome. A leading British analyst maintains that Turkey—as a country that has been a beneficiary of Western security order and history—undermines its reliability when it manifests itself as a non-Western actor.<sup>12</sup> European scholars widely acknowledge that Turkey acts pragmatically in making use of its unique geographic position and its cultural and historical bonds to both Eastern and Western identities. However, manifestations of its "eastern identity" that appear confrontational to the West create a perception that a shift of balance might be taking place.

Turkey's image as a competing *power* appears to be confirmed when Turkish leaders level strong criticism against Western double standards, highlighting the West's at times destructive impact on the development of formerly colonized regions. Turkey, in doing so, portrays itself as an alternate actor to the traditional Western powers, while also presenting itself as a guardian of the formerly colonized, the Third World, Muslims and Turks against outside inter-

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ference. European observers warn that the anti-Western undertones in Turkish leaders' rhetoric may benefit Turkey in the short term in the non-Western world, where there is already deep suspicion against the West. But in the long term, this approach may lead to weaker ties with the West.<sup>13</sup>

The style of Turkish foreign policy is another aspect of confusion in Europe. The public expression of friendship with and support for some of the region's most "anti-Western" figures and groups has been a constant irritant to EU leaders.<sup>14</sup> Some feel that Turkey, intentionally or not, puts itself diplomatically in difficult positions.<sup>15</sup> Turkey's criticism of Western actors has become more visible and intense over the last couple of years, especially with the Arab Spring and its spread to Syria. Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan, on many occasions, has slammed the West and Western institutional structures like the UN Security Council for their inaction on Syria, and demanded their reform in a way to serve the interests and needs of the developing world.

Ambiguities stemming from the rhetoric and style of Turkish foreign policy have given rise to questions on whether Turkey wants to cooperate with Europe, how relevant to Turkey the issues on which Europe deems cooperation important, and what kind of partner is Turkey going to be for Europe. Many argue that these questions arise mainly because of Turkey's ambiguous foreign policy objectives. Some scholars counter that the ambiguities surrounding Turkish-EU cooperation in foreign policy originate with the EU itself. One British analyst argues that "the main problem is that EU foreign policy is weak in many regions Turkey operates; even if Turkey wanted to align itself to EU policy, it would not work at the moment—so why blame Turkey?"<sup>16</sup>

**Turkey's Middle East Policy: Between Doubt and Hope**

As noted earlier, the overall perception of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East is positive in Europe. Europeans see Turkey's regional activism as significant, especially since the West struggles with an entrenched problem of being seen as unreliable in the Middle East. Europeans believe that common interests between Turkey and the Middle Eastern countries are the mainspring of the relations between them. In other words, it is not Islamist aspirations and visions that have driven Turkey's recent external opening

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to the Middle East; it is rather economic considerations that have driven relations.

Nonetheless, a good number of European scholars are often stuck between hope and doubt regarding Turkey's response to the Arab Spring. Turkey was ahead of the game when Erdoğan, as the first leader in Europe and the Middle East, called on Egyptian leader Mubarak to heed the legitimate demands of the Egyptian people and step down. This move increased Turkey's profile as the most sensible power broker in the region. However, Turkey's position on Libya was seen as inconsistent.<sup>17</sup> Erdoğan's quick call on Mubarak to leave was easy, as Turkey did not have strong relations with the Mubarak regime in the first place; however, when it came to Libya, a country with which Turkey had great economic interests, it was far more difficult.

Others find Turkey's hesitations about intervention through hastily formed coalition forces fair.<sup>18</sup> With visible disagreements among European partners, the Turks were not the only ones to have voiced its reluctance for military operation in Libya. So, as one German analyst asks, "was there a real European unity that Turkey diverged from?"<sup>19</sup> Turkey, in this sense, just like other countries, made adjustments to its Libyan policy in light of the emerging reality.

On Syria, the Turkish approach is very much in line with Europe and it is committed to gradual democratization and to the integrity of the Syrian territory against sectarian and ethnic civil conflicts. Given the Russian and Chinese opposition to the adoption of sanctions at the United Nations, Turkey's decision to have unilateral sanctions has aligned Ankara more closely with the West.

The strong stance taken by Ankara against the Assad regime—which includes such steps as giving overt support to the Syrian opposition, basing the Syrian National Council in Istanbul, pressing for the international recognition of the Syrian National Council, and organizing both civilian and military opposition—has put Turkey ahead of Western actors who have adopted a more cautious approach. Turkey's Syrian policy, according to a British scholar, seems to confirm the country's more independent foreign policy tone over the last couple of years.<sup>20</sup> Turkey, once again, is considered to be signaling to the world that it has a big stake in the future of the Middle East, and that the West needs to reckon and cooperate with it.

Overall, Turkey is also perceived to have been quite sophisticated in its attempt to steer a line between the regimes and the peoples in the region. However, Turkish leaders' assumption that they could persuade non-compliant autocratic rulers to heed the legitimate demands of their people and to pave the way for democratic transition has been found to be naive.<sup>21</sup>

## ***Relations with Iran***

Over the last decade, Turkey has not only intensified its diplomatic relations with Iran, but also has expanded economic contacts with the country. Officially, Turkey opposes Iran's nuclear activities; however, Turkey sees less risk from Iran's nuclear program than European countries do. As a result, to solve this problem Turkey prefers diplomatic engagement to economic sanctions and military action. In line with this position, Turkey and Brazil struck a deal with Iran in 2010. The deal, known as the Tehran Declaration, came as a surprise to the West; meanwhile, international consensus on imposing sanctions on Iran was attained between the US, Europe, Russia and China, and in June 2010 the UN Security Council approved a new round of sanctions against Iran, with Turkey and Brazil voting against the sanctions.

Turkish-Iranian relations have been one of the most controversial subjects in Turkey's Middle East policy. While there is an understanding that Turkey needs to maintain good relations with Iran for a number of reasons, the nuclear swap deal is considered by some to have been a step too far on the part of Turkey.<sup>22</sup> This perception prevails in Britain and Germany particularly, where many European observers believe that the Tehran Declaration undermined the existing process of negotiations on Iran's nuclear activity among the West, Russia and China.<sup>23</sup> By striking a deal with Iran, Turkey was thought to have singled itself out, proceeding in the opposite direction from the West.<sup>24</sup> Turkey's "no" vote on sanctions, according to one British analyst, "reinforced the impression of a divide between Turkey and the West."<sup>25</sup>

Turkey's Iran policy—and its position on sanctions in particular—are under constant pressure due to Europe's deep distrust of Iran.<sup>26</sup> The public manifestation of friendship with Ahmadinejad (including an invitation to Turkey and a congratulatory message after his controversial re-election), explains one diplomat, might have created the perception that a shift in foreign policy priorities is happening in Turkey.<sup>27</sup> Still, as one British analyst points out, "this does not indicate a clear Islamist element in Turkey's Iranian policy."<sup>28</sup>

Some argue that Turkey's Iran policy is driven by politics of interests rather than religion. In this understanding, Turkey's "no" vote is seen as a declaration of independence in foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> A leading French scholar expresses this clearly:

People have been speaking for a long time of the decline of the West, now you have two middle powers coming out, playing an active role in reshaping the world, making peace and proposing alternatives that the West has not been able to offer.<sup>30</sup>

The Arab Spring has assuaged European concerns over Turkey's Iran policy and tilted the general perception in favor of the view that Turkish-Iranian relations

are driven by mutual interests.<sup>31</sup> Turkey's decision to allow the deployment of the NATO missile shield radar on its territory was important in this sense as it confirmed the country's strong commitment to the Western alliance. The recent setback in Turkish-Iranian relations due to disagreements over the future of the Syrian regime has further relieved resentment some felt over Turkey's vote against imposing sanctions on Iran at the United Nations.

### ***Relations with Israel***

The declining state of relations between Turkey and Israel is another issue of concern among Europeans. Europeans are highly pessimistic about the future of Turkish-Israeli relations, arguing that the relationship between Turkey and Israel will never be as close as it was during the 1990s.<sup>32</sup> However, to what extent the current divergence will lead to splits between Europe and Turkey is hard to tell. So far, the deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations has not particularly affected Turkish-EU relations.<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, there has been some sympathy with and understanding for Turkey in Europe, especially after the *Mavi Marmara* incident.<sup>34</sup>

European policy analysts argue that the Arab Spring has increased Israel's isolation.<sup>35</sup> In the European view, Israel does not understand the change that is underway in the region; rather, Israeli leaders act in the old logic of military superiority. The latest military attack on Gaza is evidence of this. According to a French observer, "Israel's disproportionate use of power does not isolate the country in the region only; it also leads to the country's alienation in the West, especially in Europe."<sup>36</sup>

Growing frustration with Israel's approach to the peace process at policy-making and scholarly levels was most apparent during Israel's latest Gaza attack in November. Although European politicians continued to issue supporting statements on Israel's right to defend itself, their approach during the UN General Assembly vote on enhancing the status of Palestine is an example of how alienated Israel has become in the world. Even Berlin distanced itself from Tel Aviv with the decision to abstain from voting. Israel's reaction to the UN vote, announcing its settlement expansion plan, has drawn strong reaction from Britain and France, who have both summoned Israeli ambassadors in protest of Israel's decision.

That being said, however, Europeans commonly oppose the demonization of Israel.<sup>37</sup> The main aspect of concern regarding Turkish-Israeli relations is not

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Turkey's reaction to the *Mavi Marmara* incident and its subsequent demands, but instead the Turkish leaders' intense criticism of Israel. Europeans think that the harsh rhetoric employed against Israel has created the impression that Turkey seeks to present itself as a spokesperson for the Arab world.<sup>38</sup>

## Turkey, once again, is considered to be signaling to the world that it has a big stake in the future of the Middle East, and that the West needs to reckon and cooperate with it

The view that Turkey has weakened its hand by decreasing its diplomatic dialogue with Israel has been strengthened with the Arab Spring. What made Turkey and its foreign policy interesting, in the European view, was its close links to both Arab

countries and Israel.<sup>39</sup> Its weakened relations with Israel have thus diminished its sizeable influence in the Middle East. In the European perspective, the Syrian crisis and Israel's Gaza operation in 2012 exposed the lack of dialogue between Turkey and Israel. In the absence of open channels between Turkey and Israel, Europeans note, Egypt's leadership has ascended to the centre of diplomatic efforts in introducing a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, diminishing Turkey's role as peace broker. Despite Turkish leaders' involvement in ceasefire process, the European perception is that Turkey was sidelined in the negotiations.<sup>40</sup>

### The "Overstretch" Question Revisited

Turkey's peace-building attempts have drawn international praise; however, they have also fuelled a series of debates as regards to whether Turkey is going beyond its capabilities. There is a large consensus among European scholars that Turkey has indeed overstretched its resources in the foreign policy realm.<sup>41</sup> Active engagement in every conflict in diverse regions, though it might have earned Turkey international recognition, does not necessarily equate with outcomes. The common view of Turkey's mediation diplomacy is that Turkey mixes activity with value.<sup>42</sup>

Looking from Europe, Turkey's international mediation has been a mix of pragmatism and romanticism. It is pragmatic in the sense that Turkey has used mediation as a means to increase its regional and international visibility. One British expert observes that Turkish leaders know that they cannot solve all these problems themselves, but they want to be present to enhance the international role of their country.<sup>43</sup> Another scholar from France adds that Turkey sees mediation as a platform where it can market its foreign policy.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, one can argue that Turkey's mediation also includes some element of romanticism as Turkish leaders believe that their close relationships with the parties to the conflict could help them influence the settlement of problems.

Although close links and personal relations might be helpful to a certain extent, they are not enough to yield tangible outcomes on their own.

The Arab Spring led to a revisiting of the debates over the lack of results that Turkish foreign policy delivers. Europeans have found Turkish leaders naïve in believing they could persuade non-compliant autocratic rulers to heed the legitimate demands of their people and pave the way for democratic transition.<sup>45</sup> The reluctance of the Assad regime to listen to Ankara's warnings, in the European perspective, is indicative of Turkey's overestimation of its power to bring about concrete change in the Syrian political landscape.<sup>46</sup> This view has particularly been stressed after a new Syrian opposition was formed with more US involvement in Qatar. According to some analysts, despite all its attempts, Turkey's inability to provide the Syrian National Council with full international recognition and the consequent formation of a new opposition body has showed Turkey's limits.<sup>47</sup>

While there is a great deal of consensus among European scholars that Turkish foreign policy is overstretched, some see it as an inevitable feature of being a rising power. All rising powers tend to overestimate themselves by assuming larger roles on the world stage than what their actual capacity suggests, as one French scholar argues.<sup>48</sup> In this sense, the problem of overstretch is not unique to Turkey; it reflects a willingness to have a higher status than its capability. Another reservation about Turkish foreign policy is the question of whether Turkey can sustain this level of activism given the current level of its financial and diplomatic resources. Although the Turkish economy is the fastest growing economy in Europe, and the second fastest growing in the world, European scholars are skeptical about "whether it is enough to deliver what it takes to influence the situation on the ground."<sup>49</sup>

## **The Turkish Model: A Conceptual Tool to Draw Similarity between Turkey and the Arab World?**

Looking from Europe, it must be underlined that debates over Turkey's potential to inspire change in the Middle East and North Africa region have attracted great interest and coverage. First of all, Europeans acknowledge that there is a high regard for Turkey in the Arab region, and most of the credit for that is due to Turkish leaders, who have, in just a decade, turned their country into one that is perceived positively across the Middle East.<sup>50</sup> Turkey's soft power, active diplomacy, and its economic and political development have all played a role in changing the country's negative image into a positive one in the Arab world.

However, in the European understanding, Turkey cannot be a model. European scholars warn about the danger of exaggerating the analogies being drawn

between Turkey's political experiences and the Middle Eastern countries.<sup>51</sup> The common view is that Turkey's unique experience with secularism, its own history and socio-political conditions, and its long lasting interaction with the West are not replicable in the Arab world today. If there is any model that Turkey offers, Europeans assert, it is the AK Party's own model.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, the evolution of the AK Party from an Islamist movement into a pragmatic and moderate party that is well integrated into the secular and democratic system offers insights into the future of political Islam in the Middle East. According to a great number of European scholars, the AK Party's model could serve to inspire broadly based and powerful Islamist movements across Arab world towards gathering under a political platform and expressing themselves via democratic channels.

Rather than a political model, European analysts widely advocate the view that Turkey, with its experience in successfully blending democracy and Islam, could constitute a source of inspiration or a lesson or an example for those countries in the region aspiring for a democratic change.<sup>53</sup> However, the potential of Turkey as a source for inspiration in the Middle East is very much associated with developments both internally<sup>54</sup> and in its relations with European accession.<sup>55</sup>

### **Turkish-EU Relations: Struggling to Go beyond Accession**

According to a significant number of European scholars, frustration with the way negotiations have unfolded has compelled the Turkish leaders to pursue an active foreign policy to cast Turkey as a regional power in the Middle East.<sup>56</sup> There seems to be an agreement among European scholars that there is a link between Turkey's stalled EU accession process and its proactive foreign policy in the Middle East. However, an analyst from Britain argues that a distinction should be made between causation and correlation.<sup>57</sup> A more analytical approach that takes into account systemic, regional and domestic changes that have induced Turkey towards a multi-directional foreign policy should be developed in this regard.

Turkey's increasing involvement in the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus has also triggered another debate on whether Turkey's regional power ambitions contradict its EU integration process. A plurality of European scholars hold the view that Turkey's strong foreign policy would boost Europe's global profile. As one scholar from Britain asked, "We have Britain and France in the EU with global aspirations, so why would Turkey's be a problem?"<sup>58</sup>

A great many European analysts suggest that the Arab Spring makes it important for the EU to cooperate with Turkey. The current deadlock in the acces-

sion process makes it exceedingly unlikely that Turkey will be granted membership any time soon. According to European observers, today's key foreign policy issues cannot be dealt with through the prism of the highly bureaucratic and technocratic accession process. In this regard, Catherine Ashton's attempt to encourage a strategic dialogue mechanism between the EU and Turkey is a welcome initiative, though it is still uncertain how this mechanism would work. European observers warn against it being an alternative to the accession process, instead believing it should complement the accession process.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

Turkey is changing, and so are Europe's perceptions of it. The country's economic success and active foreign policy have solidified Turkey's presence in European policy discourse. This is evident in the increasing number of conferences, seminars and publications across Europe devoted to Turkey and its foreign policy. As a historical ally of the West, Turkey's foreign policy orientation had been taken very much for granted. Whereas Turkey's actions were once predictable, now, for the first time, European scholars have looked at Turkey's assertive foreign policy and formed more nuanced opinions.

The emerging European perception among policy analysts and scholars regarding Turkish foreign policy is generally positive. European policy analysts are happy with Turkey's constructive role—especially its soft power—in its extended region. Most of the scholars who participated in this study believe that Turkey's increasing multi-regional presence and emerging global vision would be an asset to Europe, which has global ambitions yet has an incomplete vision. The European perspective on Turkish foreign policy has remained mostly unchanged after the Arab Spring, and is becoming more stable.

Nevertheless, European policy makers have a less optimistic view of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's increasing self-confidence has been met with caution by some policy makers who perceive Turkey as a potential rival. Particularly French policy makers are wary of Turkey's increasing foreign policy activism. Turkey is viewed as a rival to French interests in regions like the Middle East, which France has traditionally considered as under its sphere of influence.



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The media coverage of Turkey is not helping either—especially in Germany and France. Reports focus predominantly on points of divergence, thereby reinforcing existing ideas about Turkey. European scholars argue that modesty and objectivity are needed in analyses of Turkey, which would reduce prejudices and demonstrate Turkey’s potential importance to Europe.

Though European scholars do not believe Turkey is fundamentally changing its foreign policy axis, they are uncertain about Turkey’s priorities. Turkey’s relations with some anti-Western actors and its criticism of the West have led to several questions such as: What objectives does Turkey hope to achieve in its foreign policy? What are Turkey’s priorities? How may we characterize its global vision? What values does its foreign policy uphold? What is Europe’s role in Turkey’s evolving vision? Who are Turkey’s key partners? And to what extent does Turkey intend to cooperate with Europe, in particular, and the West, in general? European scholars have widespread agreement that Turkey has not adequately or clearly conveyed its foreign policy priorities to its partners.

However, the confusion does not move in a single direction. The uncertainty regarding Turkey is compounded by ambiguities surrounding the foreign policy posture of the EU, according to some analysts.<sup>60</sup> EU foreign policy officials are, according to a French analyst, at a loss to articulate what Turkey offers Europe in the foreign policy realm, and what kind of cooperation Europe should pursue with Turkey. Moreover, Europeans do not have clear ideas of the

role that the EU should play internationally, the priorities European foreign policy should adopt, or Turkey’s role in this. The underdevelopment of European foreign policy may lead some to ask why Turkey is blamed for being uncooperative with the EU on foreign policy.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, as European observers note, the EU in the next decade will concentrate more intensely on economic and currency-related issues.

These entail tackling the debt crisis and enacting sorely needed economic reforms and regulations. The significance of foreign policy may well diminish. If Turkey sustains its current economic trajectory in the coming years, its capacity to extend its influence into the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East will increase. Europe’s declining influence could be ameliorated through constructive and peaceful relations with Turkey. When evaluated from this perspective, Turkey appears to be the most important foreign policy partner for Europe in the coming years, a fact that European policy makers cannot ignore.

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## Endnotes

1. See "Interview with Carl Bildt: EU, Turkey and Neighbours Beyond", *Turkish Foreign Policy Quarterly*, July 10, 2010.
2. The majority of experts interviewed in London, Berlin and Paris in 2011 generally expressed positive opinions on current Turkish foreign policy.
3. SETA Interview, Berlin, May 2, 2011.
4. "I think there is always an element of ideology in foreign policy. But that is not only in Turkey. Ideological viewpoints play a big part in Chinese and Russian foreign policy too. Each country sees the world in part through its historical, cultural and economic background. So yes there is an ideological element but it's not unique to Turkey. However, Turkish foreign policy is not Islamist." SETA Interview, London, February 25, 2011.
5. "Turkish foreign policy is much more interested in getting involved in the global world than in seeking an alignment with the Western world only." SETA Interview, Paris, June 9, 2011.
6. "Certainly compared to Turkish foreign policy up to 2000, there has been a tremendous change in Turkey. When you consider relations with Iran, Russia, Georgia and Syria, the major factors that have been driving Turkey to pursue an active policy are economic. The economy's impact has always been important in Turkey's relations over the last two decades. So, speed and manner may be the AK Party's phenomenon, but it had started before." SETA Interview, Berlin, May 2, 2011.
7. SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011; Berlin, May 4, 2011.
8. SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.
9. SETA Interview, Paris, June 8, 2011.
10. "First Turkey needs to clarify its position and priorities and decide where it wants to go and who its partners are." SETA Interview, Berlin, May 4, 2011.
11. "The question in my mind is not whether Turkish leadership is focusing more on the Middle East but whether it is still desires a multi-vectoral foreign policy which also involves anchoring in the West, or whether it is primarily interested in one or two of the vectors like Russia, the Balkans and the Middle East. Sometimes you see language used by the leadership suggesting that they are not interested in a multi-vectoral policy, and are rather primarily interested in one or two of the vectors." SETA Interview, London, February 22, 2011.
12. SETA Interview, London, February 22, 2011.
13. "I think there is perhaps a misreading of the extent to which the West is in decline, a misreading of the rate of decline of the US and the irrelevance of the European Union. Sometimes there is a judgment that these multilateral structures, either NATO or the EU, are on the way out and the US is on the verge of decline. That is a common misreading of what is certainly a moment of retraction of the Western community and what Turkey and other nations think they get by criticizing the West. To turn its back on its allies too quickly is not positively seen in Europe. Having gone so far in raising its stakes in criticizing the West is creating uncertainty. The cost is there when you try to win points against your team and that's certainly the view many Europeans would share." SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.
14. SETA Interview, Paris, June 7, 2011; Berlin, May 4, 2011; London, February 23, 2011.
15. "To what extent this represents the religious sensitivity of AK Party and its leadership is hard to tell, but I think it is just a diplomatic show of Turkish leaders implying 'I'm here.'" SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.
16. SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.
17. "Turkey sent unclear messages to Libya." SETA Interview, Paris, June 7, 2011; SETA Interview, Berlin, May 4, 2011.
18. "Libya is a catch 22 situation. Not to intervene would have also been problematic. Qaddafi would have used his influence to destabilize Egypt and Tunisia because he never accepted the revolutions. Intervention would also have been problematic, and then people were enthusiastic about the Arab

revolution because it was a home-grown revolution with no foreign intervention, not like the Iraqi case where people come from distant geographies and tell you that they bring you democracy. And secondly we don't know much about the transitional council in Libya, and most of the guys were former associates of Qaddafi for decades. I think Turkey took absolutely the right decision, Brazil and Germany also." SETA Interview, Paris, June 8, 2011.

19. SETA Interview, Berlin, May 2, 2011.

20. SETA Interview, London, November 29, 2012.

21. "It was naive on the part of Turkish elites to believe that they could persuade Qaddafi to push for political reforms and mediate between the regime and rebels." SETA Interview, Berlin, May 4, 2011.

22. SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.

23. "The fact that Turkey voted against the imposition of sanctions was a logical conclusion for Turkey in that it had initiated with Brazil a second track. So for Turkey it makes sense to vote 'no', otherwise it would have damaged its honest broker image. I think there was a genuine desire on Turkey's behalf to be useful. But it was somehow if the 'no' vote in the UN was a vote against course of action decided upon by other nations in the West, China and Russia." SETA Interview, London, February 22, 2011.

24. "From the Western policy makers point of view, Turkey's different position on Iran was perceived as Turkey going in opposite direction, and as a strong NATO ally of course they were not happy to see it." SETA Interview, Berlin, May 3, 2011.

25. SETA Interview, London, February 22, 2011.

26. "Turkey may have underestimated the seriousness of the mutual antipathy between the West and Iran which does go back over 40 years." SETA Interview, Oxford, February 24, 2011.

27. SETA Interview, Berlin, May 4, 2011.

28. SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.

29. "The deal Turkey struck with Brazil or with other countries in the future shows that Turkey can now take initiatives without having to wait for the permission of the West." SETA Interview, Paris, June 9, 2011.

30. SETA Interview, Paris, June 9, 2011.

31. "I must say the setback in Turkish-Iranian relations has to a significant degree allayed concerns over Turkey's improving relations with Iran. Recent deterioration of the bilateral relations over the Syrian crisis is the most well-known tension that has been experienced in Turkish-Iranian relations for decades. It reminded people that the ideological element is not what drove the recent convergence." SETA Interview, London, November 29, 2012.

32. "The relationship between Turkey and Israel will never be what it was in the past. But I don't think they are heading to this sort of end destination that a lot of people talk about. I don't think the path will go like a V-shape. I think what they will do is find a path that is going to different levels and then they will continue in parallel but not as close as they used to be. That's my sense." SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.

33. "Turkish-Israeli relations have created some differences between Turkey and EU but there is nothing lasting which has long run negative impact on relations between EU and Turkey." SETA Interview, Berlin, May 2, 2011.

34. "Turkey's harsh reaction to Israel particularly after the *Mavi Marmara* incident is more understandable in Europe than Turkey's dealing with Iran; this is associated with a pro-Palestinian public opinion in Europe. There was a lot of outrage over the Gaza conflict." SETA Interview, Oxford, February 24, 2011.

35. SETA Interview, London, November 29, 2012; Berlin, December 6, 2012.

36. SETA Interview, Paris, June 9, 2011.

37. SETA Interview, Berlin, May 2, 2011; SETA Interview, London, February 22, 2011.

38. "My guess is Turkey's foreign policy does not have much to do with the ideological background of the party of Erdoğan. This is more of the old power-play thinking. I have the impression that Turkey

is looking for a role in the region and the process of accession in the EU has more or less come to a halt. There is a certain disappointment in Turkey so the government now reassesses other options. To become a regional power, to become a kind of spokesperson for the Arab world seems to be such role." SETA Interview, Berlin, May 4, 2011.

**39.** "Brokering was much smarter than harshly criticizing Israel almost every day." SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.

**40.** "Egypt has taken advantage of Turkey's lack of ties to Israel. It was not smart move on the part of Turkish leaders to lose all senior level dialogue with Israel; even Egypt has those ties. The Gaza ceasefire showed that Turkey was marginalized during negotiations that produced the ceasefire." SETA Interview, Berlin, December 6, 2012.

**41.** "Engaging in every conflict will not necessarily promote Turkey's international position." SETA Interview, Berlin, May 2, 2011.

**42.** "I think Turkey, to some extent, has overestimated its mediator role. Turkish leaders should be a bit more cautious in mediation in terms of not trying to mediate every conflict in the region, because some of the conflicts are just transitory, like dispute between Syria and Iraq. That's where Turkey has to be a bit more careful as conflicts that suddenly appear in the Middle East can quickly disappear so Turkey should not try to mediate every tiny dispute and conflict in the region but choose very carefully which conflicts to mediate. Engaging in every conflict will not necessarily promote Turkey's international position." SETA Interview, London, February 25, 2011.

**43.** "Davutoğlu knows that he cannot solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict or he cannot deal with Lebanon alone. The mere fact that he is present in each shows that he insists on enhancing Turkey's role." SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.

**44.** "One thing that's interesting about Turkey's mediation diplomacy is that it is done in a very overt way. It was the case during mediation between Israel and Syria, especially. Turkey made it so public that you have the feeling that the Turks are extremely proud of their successes so they market it. But foreign policy is not about marketing." SETA Interview, Paris, June 7, 2011.

**45.** "It was naive on the part of Turkish elites to believe that they could persuade Qaddafi to push for political reforms and mediate between the regime and rebels." SETA Interview, Berlin, May 4, 2011.

**46.** "The Syrian uprising showed the limits of Turkey's capacity to effect the situation on the ground. Turkish soft power has been limited in persuading Assad to push for reforms." SETA Interview, London, November 29, 2012.

**47.** "Turkey's ability to shape the Syrian crisis has been limited. The recognition of the SNC fell short of legal recognition. Countries that have recognized the Council under Turkish pressure at the Friends of Syria Meeting in Istanbul in April 2012 did not recognize it as the sole representative of the Syrian people. When the US plans to involve Turkey in the Syrian crisis it did not yield any tangible outcome, the US became more involved." SETA Interview, London, November 29, 2012.

**48.** "First all rising powers are over-stressing themselves. The very meaning of the concept of a rising power is to say I was in the second class and now I plan to be in the first one. This is a common denominator of all rising powers." SETA Interview, Paris, June 9, 2011.

**49.** SETA Interview, Berlin, May 4, 2011; London, February 23, 2011.

**50.** Reflective of general European view: "Thinking the long resentment, changing Turkey's perceptions in the Arab world in the last few years was a great success. Erdoğan's strong stance against Israel helped improve the image of Turkey. Arabs also see consistent economic growth and stable democracy which has been able to integrate conservative Muslim party to the political system. So they are very impressed with Turkey." SETA Interview, Paris, June 8, 2011.

**51.** "Turkey's experience is valuable. But there are key differences. One key difference is a difference between the strong tarikats in Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood is nowhere as organized, disciplined and internationally engaged as the tarikats in Turkey. Secondly, the Turkish military, in a way, guided the democracy process for years as one of their viewpoints was copying the institutions of the West. The Egyptian military does not share the Western view of the Turk-

ish army. Economic differences are also there. The Turkish economy has a strong industrial and manufacturing base, growing services sector and growing export strategy. The region's economies, on the other hand, are far more underdeveloped." SETA Interview, London, February 25, 2011; "Elements of the Turkish experience are different; for one thing Turkey is rather a homogeneous country which is not the case for several Arab countries who are deeply split along sectarian lines." SETA Interview, Paris, June 8, 2011.

**52.** "The AK Party itself is an example of a party that has had to negotiate constraints of democratic institutions and diversity of opinion in Turkish society. The party is quite an interesting model for anyone who might have a dichotomy of Western democracy versus Muslim state. In that sense the AK Party challenges that simplistic idea." SETA Interview, London, February 24, 2011.

**53.** "Turkey presents lessons to be learnt, and how to adopt and change, not a model to follow. Turkey is an experience that Arab people aspire to." SETA Interview, London, February 25, 2011; "I think we are talking about analogies rather than models, like interesting aspects which could be borrowed from and could be explored. We are not talking about a fully formed, blueprinted way of transforming another country. You would not expect it to work. So a source of inspiration is a nice way of putting it because it is a way of giving more positive esteem as well. I think countries if they change beyond the leader, the actual process of government will need to be quite different in the future. Then the Middle East needs a lot of inspiration. Different countries depending on their different circumstances will need different sources of inspiration. So if Turkey is part of that inspiration, that is a good thing, but we should not confine it to Turkey as we may find different variations." Oxford, February 24, 2011.

**54.** "Turkey is not a stabilized democracy, so there is still a lot to do, the way journalists are dealt with hurts the Turkish model debates, so the Turkish model is very much dependent on internal politics." SETA Interview, Paris, June 7, 2011.

**55.** SETA Interview, Berlin, May 4, 2011.

**56.** "Turkish-EU relations have certainly lost momentum. Turkey now says we have looked at the West a lot, but now it's time to make the investment we haven't made in the past with the East. In the absence of that then Turkey has realized it has a lot of gains to make, a lot of new friendships to establish, and therefore looking east and south and north makes a lot of sense. I think it is a realistic position to have. And a good position to have because today Germany and France are against Turkish accession and there is nothing Turkey can do about that." SETA Interview, Oxford, February 24, 2011.

**57.** "While the opposition of Germany and France may have strengthened the hands of those who believe Turkey should look elsewhere, I am not convinced that it has effectively caused it; we have to draw a distinction between causation and correlation." SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.

**58.** SETA Interview, London, February 23, 2011.

**59.** Natasha Wunch, "EU-Turkey: Asymmetric relationship", Almut Moller (ed.), *Crossing Borders: Rethinking the European Union's Neighbourhood Policies*, DGAPAnalyse 2, August 2011, pp. 39-42.

**60.** "We do not have a realistic assessment of what role the EU can play in global affairs." SETA Interview, Berlin, May 2, 2011.

**61.** "There is no European common foreign policy especially since Arab Spring started. There is absolutely no such thing as a commonly defined foreign policy. Even the Euro-Mediterranean partnership which looked the most sophisticated cooperation framework does not work anymore. All member states are pursuing their own national interests." SETA Interview, Paris, June 7, 2011.