

# Turkey in 2014: Juggling Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges

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Foreign policy, together with economic growth and democratisation, was considered as one of the central pillars of AKP's popularity at home and abroad. However, in recent years the AKP government has experienced significant setbacks in the foreign policy realm, criticised for its slide into authoritarianism, with lower rates of growth beginning to expose structural limitations in the economy. The main challenge to Turkey's foreign policy emerged in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings. In the meantime, Turkey became estranged from its traditional allies, as Turkey-EU relations deteriorated and Ankara also began to experience frequent crises in its relations with Washington. Thus, from a country that was touted as a constructive actor, actively and positively engaging its neighbourhood and beyond, Turkey became increasingly isolated and lost influence in several areas in which it had enjoyed an assertive role in the recent past. These trends continued to a large extent in 2014 and became even more complicated as new crises erupted, both of a domestic and international nature. This paper will look at some of these challenges and foreign-policy responses by focusing on three issues: (i) Domestic politics and the linkages between domestic and foreign policy; (ii) The old and new challenges of the Middle East impasse; and, (iii) Uneasy relations with global powers.

## **The Linkages between Domestic and Foreign Policy**

The year 2014 was dominated by domestic political concerns and presented yet another example of the

linkages between domestic and foreign policy in Turkey. On the one hand, the evolution of Turkey's political scene had a bearing on its foreign policy, while on the other, foreign policy issues were used in the country's domestic politics.

The year was marked by two elections. Local elections were held on 30 March and presidential elections followed on 28 August. Particularly after the election of former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan as President, the domestic political debate began to focus on a shift from the parliamentary system to a presidential one and thus on the upcoming general elections to be held in June 2015, as the AKP needs a three-fifths majority of the 330 seats in the Parliament to pass a draft proposal on constitutional change. These developments meant that Turkey's policy makers directed their attention mainly to domestic politics and the elections and the debate over the system sharpened the existing polarisation. In 2014, the accusations of increasing authoritarianism and personalisation under AKP rule, in power since 2002, continued unabated in the country and abroad. The direct impact of the personalisation of rule was particularly evident with respect to two foreign policy issues, namely the normalisation of relations with Egypt and Israel, where any efforts to progress in that direction were halted by Erdogan's vocal opposition.

At the end of 2013 the country was shaken by corruption allegations against government officials, including three ministers, which led to a criminal investigation. The response of the government was widespread reassignments and dismissals of police officers, judges and prosecutors, which increased concerns over judiciary independence and the separation of powers. All this brought the tug of war between AKP and the Gülen movement, which had been ongoing for some time, to a head, as Er-

dogan and the AKP accused the movement and its followers of being behind what they termed as an “attempted coup” against the government. An extensive bureaucratic purge was initiated against what the AKP government called “the parallel state.” The extent and the intensity of the all-out war between the two former allies had several repercussions for foreign policy such as losing the support of the Gülen movement abroad which has an extensive global network. Yet the most enduring consequence of this crisis has been the strengthening of the belief held by Prime Minister Erdogan and some of his supporters that a coalition of internal and external actors is conspiring to topple him; a belief he also expressed during the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013. This conspiracy perspective was reflected in Turkey’s foreign policy as it made the government more inward-looking and suspicious of Turkey’s allies, including the US and some EU governments, which were at times openly accused of being part of the “plot against the government” in cooperation with their domestic allies. It can be claimed that this mindset was quite influential in the way the AKP government framed the coup in Egypt. Clearly upset by losing in Egypt a strategic ally with Morsi’s ousting, the AKP also used the coup as a metaphor at home to once again discredit Gezi park protests and other government opposition by invoking themes of victimisation through the claim of a plot to topple the government in Turkey. Thus, Erdogan in all his public speeches and rallies made extensive references to the Egyptian coup and clearly used it for domestic purposes.

### **The Kurdish Issue at the Nexus of Domestic and Foreign Policy**

Yet the quintessential issue that epitomised the domestic and foreign policy linkages continued to be the Kurdish problem. The issue had always had a regional dimension, which was kept in check by the Cold War. In the post-Cold War and Gulf War period, however, it was further complicated by rapid regionalisation. There have been several attempts since then to acknowledge the issue and propose solutions, but these have been half-hearted. The AKP government went farthest in this regard, de-

spite the fact that it too did not completely depart from the on-and-off approach. The AKP initiated what was called the “Kurdish opening” in 2009 to find a solution to the ongoing Kurdish conflict. The process went through several stages, characterised by several achievements and reached new levels when, in 2012, Erdogan allowed state officials to negotiate with the jailed leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan. In March 2013, Ocalan’s letter to the people, which called for an end to the armed struggle, was read both in Turkish and Kurdish during the Nowruz celebrations in Diyarbakır.

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However, in 2014 the peace process was made more complicated by the developments in Syria. On the one hand, the PYD, a close associate of the PKK, increased its control over the Kurdish-populated areas of Syria, where central government had withdrawn, creating uneasiness on the part of the AKP government and bringing fresh urgency to the issue. On the other hand, the new opportunities presented by the post-Arab uprising developments in Syria triggered an eagerness in the PKK to exploit those opportunities and strengthen its hand vis-a-vis the AKP government in its negotiations. Towards the end of the year, the crisis over Kobane, a Syrian Kurdish town on the border with Turkey, best represented the ambiguous attitude of the AKP government, as well as the PKK’s opportunistic moves. The government’s reluctance to help Kobane, especially by allowing fighters to cross the border, led to a two-day rampage by supporters of the Kurdish parties in Turkey, the HDP and PKK, in several cities, thereby endangering the peace process. In the meantime, the PYD effectively became the most prominent force fighting ISIL on the ground. The US started to drop arms, ammunition and medical supplies on Kobane and, together with its allies, began to bomb ISIL positions. These developments, together with mounting international pressures, led Turkey to allow Kurdish *peshmerga* from

Iraq to cross through Turkey to Kobane. Thus, the AKP government had to accept what it had refused at the beginning, although the damage had already been done.

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### **The Middle East Impasse: Old and New Challenges**

In 2014, the developments in the Middle East took over foreign policy agenda, which, however, was unable to abate the erosion of Turkey's influence in the region. The AKP government's conflict with Israel, Syria and Egypt remained in place. As an International Crisis Report put it in 2014 "the humanitarian, policy and security costs" of the Syrian crisis continued to rise. With the number of Syrians living in Turkey reaching approximately two million, Turkey was facing a major challenge. More importantly it remained unable to change the situation on the ground in Syria and became increasingly disillusioned about decisive action being taken by anybody else. The only positive sign in terms of Turkey's relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours, which emerged towards the end of the year, was the improvement in relations with Iraq's central government after Haidar al-Abadi took office in September, and the signing of the agreement between the KRG (Kurdish regional Government) and the central government over oil exports.

Recent developments in Iraq and Syria with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the establishment of the so-called Islamic State (IS) have opened up another set of new challenges for Turkey. The rapid advances of ISIL threatened the territorial integrity of Turkey's two southern neighbours and thus challenged Turkey's long-standing policy. These developments also increased pressures on Turkey to join the US-

led anti-ISIL coalition. In the meantime, ISIL seized many parts of northern Syria and became Turkey's neighbour.

Moreover, ISIL seized the Turkish consulate in Mosul upon entering, kidnapping the consul along with 49 staff members and holding them hostage for 102 days. This new instability in Iraq has almost completely undermined Turkey's trade with central and southern Iraq. Only after the release of the hostages in October 2014, did the Turkish Parliament adopt a resolution to authorise the military to carry out operations in Syria and Iraq and allow foreign troops to operate out of Turkish bases. Similarly, Turkey seemed to at least intensify its crackdown on cross-border oil trade or human trespassing. However, Turkey has been continually criticised for not doing enough against ISIL as the AKP government has maintained its reluctance to join the anti-ISIL coalition and get involved directly.

Finally, Turkey's relations with Iran began to deteriorate due to the developments in Syria and Iraq. This was a complete turnabout from the beginning of the year when Erdogan visited Iran and the two countries signed a strategic cooperation treaty. Despite their divergent positions on Syria the two countries had decided to isolate their bilateral relations from the negative effects of the Syrian crisis. Yet the rise of ISIL and the formation of the US-led coalition against it altered the balances once again. Iran's active collaboration in the fight against ISIL and Turkey's reluctance led to a deterioration in bilateral relations between the two countries.

### **Uneasy Relations with Global Powers**

In 2014, Turkey's relations with the US also faced challenges. The AKP government first perceived US involvement in the region against ISIL as an opportunity to negotiate with the US to extend its fight to topple the Assad regime. A central demand of the Turkish government in this regard has been to ask the US to establish a no-fly-zone over Syria in return for allowing the US and the coalition to use the Incirlik air base for manned flights and for Turkey to join the coalition directly. Yet, the Obama administration clearly did not want to expand its war in Syria to include the regime, but

rather limit it to fighting against ISIL. The only US cooperation with Turkey was the signing of an agreement to train what was called “moderate opposition” in Syria. The two countries, however, had difficulties in developing a common strategy against ISIL.

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Relations with Russia, already strained to some extent due to the Syrian crisis, faced a new challenge with the crisis over the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea. Yet, the two countries did not allow these divergences to poison their otherwise beneficial relations. During his visit to Turkey in December, Putin announced a new gas pipeline, Turkish Stream, instead of the South Stream, citing EU objections as the reason for the move. Furthermore, despite calls by the EU to support the sanc-

tions against Russia, Ankara and Moscow pledged to increase economic ties. These developments further widened the gap between Turkey and the EU at a time when not much was happening in their relations.

### Conclusion

2014 was a year of increasing challenges for Turkey’s foreign policy. Mostly consumed by domestic issues, the AKP government responded to some of these challenges pragmatically, whereas adopted non-flexible positions on others. The decisions seem to be based on cost-benefit calculation, taking into consideration not only Turkey’s regional and international interests but also the government’s domestic goals.

### Reference

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