

# TURKEY AND THE GCC: AN EMERGING RELATIONSHIP

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The Middle East is now a changing geography, subject to direct U.S. interference through the Afghan and Iraqi invasions and through political attempts to transform the region socially, politically and economically. Calls for reform and renovation have reached an unprecedented level. Indeed, there is a high degree of desire and hope for good governance, democracy and human rights in Middle Eastern societies. The Gulf region is not independent from the problems of the wider Middle East; it is a participant in these critical developments. Relations between Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are very positive, avoiding the problems associated with competing agendas. The constructive nature of these relations is encouraging, considering the problems these countries are facing in their immediate neighborhood.

Due mainly to physical distance and different foreign-policy orientations, it might be an exaggeration to describe the situation as one of close relationships and mutually satisfying trade. However, the recent period has witnessed a considerable improvement in both political and economic relations between the GCC and Turkey. More important, the increasing participation

of these countries in international and regional diplomatic activities and forums aims to address regional and international problems. The conflict-prone situation in various parts of the Middle East is paving the way for greater roles for the stable countries of the region.

## TURKEY AND REGIONAL SECURITY

On December 17, 2004, European leaders extended a historic offer to Turkey that put the country on the track to membership in the European Union. During the press briefing of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, there were 200 representatives of the Arab media, in addition to the Turkish delegation and media. This interest is a clear signal that Turkey is emerging as a regional actor in the Middle East. By the same token, Turkey's new ruling elite has every confidence that they can play an active peace-making role in the region. What made Turkish politicians develop such self-assurance in regional politics? What is the Turkish promise to the region? How can Turkey contribute to regional security and stability? What are the unique features of Turkey, if such exist?

Turkey has undergone a serious reform process in the legal, political and economic realms. The last six years have witnessed an enormous change at both societal and state levels. Turkey's bureaucrats, politicians and civil society joined hands to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria of the EU and bore the pains of the IMF-led economic program. The coming accession process will be even more painful, but Turks have the will to face this challenge. Turkey's transformation put an end to the Cold War-style security-state apparatuses and changed the framework of domestic and foreign policy. This task of putting its house in order created self-confidence in regional policy. As a result, Turkish politicians have opted for an active diplomacy aimed at minimizing problems with neighboring countries.

Turkey's contribution to Middle East security can be analyzed under two main categories. First, Turkey is emerging as a role model in the Middle East. This does not imply a hegemonic relationship but rather points toward an alternative path for reform and economic development. There are two competing systems in this part of the world: the EU system associated with peace, democracy and economic development, and the Middle Eastern system characterized by instability, authoritarianism and economic stagnation. Turkey's reform process showed that the latter is not an unavoidable destiny for the countries of the region and raised hopes for consigning the chaos and instability in a number of countries to the dustbin. In this respect, Syria and Iran highly appreciate Turkey's EU membership process and consider a European Turkey as a model for developing their own relations with the EU. Turkey has also demonstrated that the twin

dilemmas of democracy and security, and of Islam and democracy can be reconciled. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) chose a Turk as its secretary general by a democratic vote, illustrating Turkey's rising prestige among Islamic countries.

Turkey's other major contribution has come through constructive diplomatic engagement in the region. Ankara has adopted an active role as peace promoter and is redesigning its policies toward a number of the problems of the region. Prime Minister Erdogan displayed a critical attitude toward hawkish Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories without severing relations. During a visit to Israel in January, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul indicated that there were serious talks of a possible mediating role for Turkey between Israel and the Palestinians, and even between Israel and Syria in the future. Turkey did not join in the U.S.-led occupation forces in Iraq but has put enormous effort into mobilizing regional support for a future Iraqi state. Indeed, Turkish policy makers have, on a regular basis, brought together the countries bordering Iraq. The UN Security Council has also taken these meetings seriously and has requested further regional cooperation on the Iraq question.

At another level, Turkey's constructive engagement with the EU creates a sense of trust in the West, whose influence is declining in this region. Turkey has successfully kept a certain distance from both the EU and the United States. For example, Turkey is closer to the EU in its policies toward Iraq and the Palestinian question while at the same time, following a similar line with the United States in the Balkans and Cyprus. Turkey's new orientation

prioritizes the notion of democratic legitimacy in international relations and validates the critical role of the United Nations in world politics. While Turkey attempts to contribute to regional security, it maintains balanced relations with the international powers, which have certain stakes in the region. This is a promising role at a time when the world is seeking the dynamics within the region that can stimulate reform and perhaps even transformation.

### **DETERMINANTS OF TURKEY-GCC RELATIONS**

The determinants of relations between Turkey and the GCC in recent years have been the ongoing Iraqi crisis, Turkey's EU membership process, the threat of international terrorism and al-Qaeda, the U.S.-led Broader Middle East Initiative, increasing business and trade relations, the OIC meeting and issues of the wider Islamic world, and the threat of nuclear power in Iran. A thematic analysis will likely serve for a better understanding if one considers how major developments affect relations in the Middle Eastern context.

### **THE IRAQ CRISIS**

The March 2003 motion that forbade U.S. troops from using Turkish territory in the war against Iraq was a historical turning point for Turkey, as Ankara made it clear that it would follow the principle of democratic legitimacy in its regional and international policies. The Turkish parliament prevented the United States from opening a northern front against Iraq on the grounds that the international community considered the war illegitimate. Turkey's decision prolonged the process of the Iraqi invasion, forced the United States to search for greater legitimacy and drew

attention to the Palestinian question.

The parliamentary motion that prohibited U.S. use of Turkish territory saved Ankara from much of the negative impact of the Iraq crisis. The parliament's decision was shaped by a powerful consensus in Turkish society on this issue; it was correct both in ethical and strategic terms. The widely held belief that Ankara would face numerous problems with the United States did not hold up. Rather, the decision served to increase Turkey's prestige at both regional and international levels.<sup>1</sup>

Turkey is also active in facilitating diplomacy to bring countries bordering Iraq together on a periodic basis. The UN Security Council takes these meetings seriously and has demanded further regional cooperation on the Iraqi question. There have been several meetings in the capital cities of these bordering countries. Three GCC states have joined them: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain. There is a convergence of interests on the Iraqi question between Turkey and these countries because all want Iraqi territorial integrity – for different reasons. Legitimate attempts such as these to help the Iraqi people build a modern democratic state will be appreciated among regional and international actors.

However, on another dimension of the question, there is a need for further democratization and minority rights within these countries. This is necessary to counter the potential challenges of separatism that may spread to the whole region as a result of any serious Iraqi disintegration. Another requirement is to go beyond producing policies based on Kurds or Shias and to develop a joint Iraqi policy to help solve this problem. This policy may also serve to de-Americanize the Iraqi project and speed

normalization of the region and the situation in Iraq.

The Iraqi crisis has created further terrorism in the region. An international terror network is trying to create safe havens in Iraq under the pretext of resistance against the U.S. invasion. Turkey and the GCC countries have all been victims of international terror, and the threat is likely to continue in view of the active participation of these states in the war against terror. There are also U.S. and British diplomatic, economic and military assets across the Gulf and Turkey that are direct targets of the al-Qaeda network and others.<sup>2</sup> The recent terrorist attacks in Istanbul as well as attacks in the Gulf region — in particular on Saudi Arabian targets — indicate the seriousness of the problem. The terrorist network aims to destabilize the region and anchor itself in a number of countries. This common threat increases motivation of both sides to cooperate in building common fronts against it.

#### **DELICATE BALANCE: THE U.S. AND THE EU**

Turkey's reform of its political and legal infrastructure and its progress toward European Union membership have made it unique in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> Accustomed to balancing between the Middle East and Europe, Turkey currently appears to be

moving closer to the EU. Therefore, Turkish foreign policy now pays serious attention to societal demands.

Turkey is emerging as a regional civil power thanks to its political development, economic capabilities, dynamic social forces and ability to reconcile Islam and democracy at home.<sup>4</sup> As indicated, this civil power is one of the very limited sources of change from within the Middle East. Furthermore, Ankara's foreign-policy moves are in line with both the EU's foreign and security policies and its recent regional policy. Turkey has shown that the current instability in the Middle East is neither inevitable nor irreversible, a lesson

that is relevant for the whole region. For example, the British ambassador to Saudi Arabia recently underscored that calls for reform in the Gulf are worthwhile and that Turkey is a good model.<sup>5</sup>

One major challenge to Middle East security is the problem of how to

establish a security framework for the Gulf region. According to traditional understanding, the three poles that need to be balanced are Iraq, Iran and the GCC countries. The U.S. policy of balancing these actors against one another after the British left in 1971 failed with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Indeed, the U.S. policy of favoring Iraq over Iran, as well as the political debt provided by the GCC, created the main obstacles to a security regime in

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the Gulf region. While attempting to balance Iran, the United States attacked Iraq twice in addition to imposing harsh economic sanctions. This is something that the Iranian establishment could never have imagined.

The Bush administration has created the impression that the future of Gulf security rests to a considerable extent on U.S. will. Some European involvement is welcomed if it fits into the U.S. goal of providing stability and security in the region.<sup>6</sup> Americans talk a great deal about economic development, political participation and democracy; and the Gulf region seems good enough for U.S. interests and investment. However, there is no evidence that current U.S. foreign and security policy will achieve its goals.

The EU is a more familiar actor to the parties in the region. The European style of “soft” security measures and a focus on economic development and democratization seems preferable to U.S. shortcuts such as military intervention. The EU approach began to differ from that of individual European countries in recent years. The EU-Iran dialogue exemplifies the potential EU contribution to regional security. The recent Iranian decision to freeze all uranium-enrichment activities is mostly a product of far-sighted European diplomacy. The EU has made a number of potential contributions to the region, from monitoring elections to restructuring education systems. In addition, EU involvement will provide some welcome relief to states in the region as well as to the international community.

The GCC aims to develop further its relations with the EU. The new security environment in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, and the Iraq War has pushed the

two blocs together to adopt common positions and aims. While the current status of the relationship is less than impressive, the potential gains from cooperation are promoting closer interactions. Considering the fate of the Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue and the EU’s New Neighborhood Policy, there is a need to create fresh mechanisms to improve relations. Energy security, the nuclear threat in Iran, and the normalization of Iraqi policy are only some examples of potential areas of cooperation. Turkey’s active involvement in the EU mechanisms would facilitate it.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there have been some early signals of this future relationship. The EU, the GCC and Turkey have adopted the same policy line to deal with the problems associated with a nuclear Iran. All want a nuclear-free Iran and also a nuclear-free Middle East but oppose a U.S. military attack. They have been in favor of diplomatic efforts and, if necessary, economic measures against Iran.

### **THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST INITIATIVE**

Although its origins can be traced to the early 1990s, the Greater Middle East Initiative has recently gained prominence in both political circles and academic analysis. The American administration presents it as a new project that will create order and promote stability in the area from North Africa to the Indian subcontinent and from Saudi Arabia to Central Asia. In other words, this project is part of the Bush administration’s attempts to transform the globe into a safer place for the United States and its projects.

Since September 11, 2001, the only country in the Middle East that has promoted both security and freedom at home

in the greater Middle East region has been Turkey.<sup>8</sup> During the visit of Prime Minister Erdogan to Washington in 2004, Ankara achieved another high point in Turkish-American relations that is not likely to end soon. Turkish economic and democratic developments are positive signals in a region with few to offer. The NATO summit and G-8 meeting in June 2004 illustrate the idea that Turkey has reached a point at which U.S. and European interests overlap in many respects.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the GCC countries may make constructive contributions if they are assured that this project does not mean a one-sided imposition of U.S. will and interests. It should imply that all sides reach agreement through common analysis of problems and the measures necessary to solve them.

The GCC countries have great potential for reconciling economic development and modernity in the Gulf, and this may serve as an example for other regions. The GCC is also active in providing funds to a number of infrastructural programs outside the Gulf. It is necessary for regional countries to understand the conditions that created the constructive roles of Turkey and the GCC for regional peace, stability and development. In this regard, Turkey is a natural key to any plan or concept that aims to promote democracy and raise living standards, thanks to having both European and Middle Eastern identities, political and social modernization, and rising democratic standards.<sup>10</sup> There is a message here for other Muslim states, particularly in light of the fact that a large majority of them opposed the initial Greater Middle East Initiative before it was rewritten (and toned down) at the G8 summit as a “Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with

the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa.” When a government is democratically elected, it has the leeway to decide whether external projects are appropriate and can accept or reject them as it sees fit.

### **WIDER MUSLIM WORLD**

The Muslim world is at a turning point. The problems emerging from within Muslim countries are now transnational in character and most have a global reach. In addition, Muslim nations are facing outside reform plans that may well affect their futures for decades to come. In June 2004, the OIC held a meeting of foreign ministers in Istanbul and addressed a full agenda on the subject.

The internal tribulations of the countries of the Muslim world surpass their external ones. The absence of democratization is a common problem. The relationship between state and religion and the place of religion in the public sphere are still problematic issues. Secularism is subject to many interpretations in the Muslim world and is sometimes a source of tension between state and society. Globalization has also posed challenges, initiating an identity crisis and fostering a lack of self-confidence. In addition, intercommunal violence and ethnic problems run deep in many Muslim countries.

Turkey seeks to be more active in the OIC and may offer a fresh source of dynamism to the organization. Ankara said “no” to the United States before the Iraqi invasion and has also repeatedly brought the Palestinian question to the fore in its public pronouncements. Prime Minister Erdogan has openly criticized the Israeli government’s actions in the Occupied Territories and has called on Israel to stop

what he referred to as state terror. At the same time, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul declared before the OIC summit that Muslim countries were in desperate need of reform, and he argued that the Palestinian question should not be used as a pretext to delay this. The fact that a Turk, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, was chosen to lead the OIC could be a positive development for the Muslim world. Perhaps opportunities for constructive developments in the Muslim world can now be exploited.<sup>11</sup>

The OIC meeting was never going to resolve even a small number of these issues. Most of the latter are systemic; their solutions require much time and effort. In their final statement, the OIC foreign ministers declared the need for the full sovereignty and political independence of Iraq, issued a declaration backing the Palestinian cause, and expressed support for the Turkish Republic of Northern

Cyprus, which recently emerged from its international isolation. The participants also agreed on the need for reform in the Muslim world and condemned terrorism. Turkey and the GCC countries share the same concerns and are actively involved in a number of constructive attempts to address these questions. These include a joint visit to the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in September 2004 by the ambassadors of Turkey and the Gulf countries.<sup>12</sup> Turkey and Saudi Arabia are also active members of the Kashmir Group of the OIC.

#### TRADE AND BUSINESS

Turkey's main trading partner among the GCC countries is Saudi Arabia. The volume of trade between the two countries was \$1.2 billion in 2003 and reached that level in the first eight months of 2004. Considering that these countries are

#### *Turkey-GCC Trade (in thousands of dollars)*

	2001		2002		2003	
	Import	Export	Import	Export	Import	Export
<b>Bahrain</b>	14,613	11,159	18,942	16,635	15,173	28,625
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	500,641	729,644	1,323,277	788,004	967,862	738,654
<b>U.A.E.</b>	65,138	380,145	98,007	440,228	110,929	697,710
<b>Qatar</b>	5,777	8,401	10,658	15,496	8,310	15,688
<b>Kuwait</b>	123,355	104,769	26,520	134,983	15,909	164,883
<b>Oman</b>	70	31,449	11	11,807	1,293	22,313

*Source: Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr>, January 3, 2004.*

emerging markets and have the will to increase trade, this volume could double in the coming year. Turkish exports to the United Arab Emirates, its thirteenth-largest export market, reached \$714 million in the first half of 2004.

There are significant numbers of Turkish workers in various GCC countries, with about 100,000 Turks in Saudi Arabia. In addition, 200,000 Turks travel to Saudi Arabia each year for the Hajj and to visit the holy places. Turkey is a natural tourist destination for GCC countries, and Kuwaiti and Saudi citizens have bought property in Yalova and Bursa in western Turkey. In addition, there are 17 Kuwaiti companies operating in finance, trade, banking, textiles and mining in Turkey.

Turkey's dynamic business sector has been paying increased attention to GCC markets. The main business deals are in textiles, construction and food. For example, Turkey's leading food and beverage group, Ulker, has investments in Saudi Arabia.<sup>13</sup> The Turkish construction company GAMA is active in this region. Also, the textile company Minteks sells its products in GCC markets. Turkey's finance sector is also undergoing a major transformation and is seeking active participation in GCC financial markets. Yapi Kredi Bank has a branch in Bahrain.<sup>14</sup> Gulf companies are also increasingly active in the Turkish economy. For example, Saudi Oger is set to pay \$6.5 billion for a 55 percent stake of Turk Telekom (Turkish Telecommunication Company).<sup>15</sup> Participation by Turkish companies in international trade and business affairs in the GCC is increasing. Turkish companies were seventh at the Gulf International Trade Fair held in Dammam in September 2004.<sup>16</sup>

The aim of recent visits of high-level Turkish politicians was mostly to discuss economic cooperation prospects. In late May, Turkish Foreign Minister Gul visited Bahrain for consultations with King Hamad Ben Issa al-Khalifa, head of the GCC, and other top Bahraini officials. Both sides agreed on a framework cooperation deal on trade between Turkey and the GCC. This deal is likely to pave the way for the groundwork for a free-trade area encompassing much of the Middle East. Gul also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with his Bahraini counterpart to abolish visa requirements and increase travel between Turkey and Bahrain.<sup>17</sup>

Turkey's economic bureaucrats and its business sector have closely followed the success of the international trade centers in Dubai and aim to replicate them. From the Balkans to the Middle East, a number of newly developed Turkish cities have the potential to become regional centers of economic attraction. There is a great deal that can be learned from the GCC's experiences.<sup>18</sup> Gulf investors discovered this potential, and Dubai International Properties, a leading developer based in the UAE, has signed an agreement with the Istanbul municipality to build a business center worth \$5 billion in Istanbul.

## CONCLUSION

Despite a number of regional and international problems, we have witnessed the development of positive relations between Turkey and the GCC in the first half of the current decade. This cooperation developed as a response to international terrorist threats and the Iraqi crisis. Turkey adopted a neighborhood policy that would minimize its problems with bordering states. This policy also aims to go beyond



the immediate neighborhood and, in particular, develop economic relations in a number of relatively close areas. The Gulf region is important in this sense; the GCC represents a plausible set of countries in which Turkey has important stakes.

The post-9/11 atmosphere and the Iraq War created a favorable environment in which to establish further ties. We now have promising relations emerging between Turkey and the GCC. Increasing attention is being paid in Turkey to cooperation with the GCC, and Turkey's enhanced civil-power image is marketable and welcomed by the GCC. Turkey's active peacemaking role in

the region will surely serve the interests of the GCC. The GCC's attempts to build a security regime in the Gulf will no doubt yield positive results, and Turkey will be one of the main beneficiaries of a peaceful environment. Business and trade relations, which are likely to grow faster than those in the political realm, would consolidate constructive relations. Peace and security in the Middle East begin from the internal structures in the states and require an interdependent security understanding and practices throughout the region. The emerging relations between Turkey and the GCC are exemplary in this sense.

<sup>1</sup> Fuat Keyman, "Turkiye ya da Kilit Ulke/Bolgesel Guc," *Radikal*, May 9, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Bulent Aras, "Teror, Uluslararası Sistem ve Turkiye," *Radikal*, November 23, 2003

<sup>3</sup> See Volker Perthes, "America's Greater Middle East and Europe: Key Issues for Dialogue," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 11, No. 3, October 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turkiye Merkez Ulke Olmalı," *Radikal*, February 26, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> *Arab News*, October 6, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Bulent Aras, "Gulf Security: European Knights or American Cowboys?" *Daily Star*, December 20, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see Kemal Kirisci, "The December 2004 European Council Decision on Turkey: Is it an Historic Turning Point?" *MERLA Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 4, December 2004.

<sup>8</sup> See Bulent Aras, *Turkiye ve Ortadogu* (Istanbul: Q-Matris, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Soli Ozel, "Emperyal Dusler," *Sabah*, July 11, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> For a recent analysis, see Ziya Onis, "Turkiye AB'nin Geleceğini Sekillendirebilir mi?" *Zaman*, April 5, 2005

<sup>11</sup> Yasin Atlioglu, "Islam Konferansý Orgutu (IKO) ve Turkiye," *TASAM Stratejik Yorum*, January 15, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> *Manila Bulletin*, September 25, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> *Turkish News Digest*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> *Turkish News Digest*, January 14, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> *AmeInfo*, July 3, 2005

<sup>16</sup> *Saudi Arabian News Digest*, September 24, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> *Aksam*, May 31, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Personal Correspondence with a group of bureaucrats working at the Turkish Undersecretary of Foreign Trade, February 11, 2005.