

Turkey's "Zero Problems with the Neighbors" Policy: Was It Realistic?

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Abstract:

With the advancement of power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has introduced revolutionary policies in Turkey in various realms, including foreign affairs. The new trend in the foreign policy focused on not having problems with neighbors. This could be possible or nearly possible theoretically but eliminating century-long and deep-rooted conflicts with some of the neighbors would not be easy in practice. The new idealistic/moralistic approach necessitated new ways of policy formulation based on mutual gains and unthinkable concessions on the part of Turkey. Ankara's new approach had given a special importance to building bridges of trust with the neighbors, which also seemed attractive to the political leaders of the neighboring states. This idealistic/moralistic approach was vulnerable to the dynamic political and economic developments in the region and the world in general. The policy did not have a power of sustainability due to the various old, new, and emerging problems around Turkey and hence, the government had to give it up gradually and take a new course of foreign policy based on realistic approaches to defend its national interests

Keywords: Turkey | foreign policy | conflict | national interests | zero problems with neighbors

Article:

Introduction

When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey in November of 2002, its leadership promised to introduce evolutionary policies in different realms, including the foreign policy area. The new foreign policy vision and strategy of the state was formed gradually emerging from the doctrine of strategic depth put forth by Ahmet Davutoglu. It had several components that included balance between security and freedom, multidimensional and multitrack diplomacy, an active diplomatic course, proactive diplomacy, and zero problems with neighbors (Sozen, 2010). The principle of zero problems with neighbors had been the core of Turkey's foreign policy vision until recently. Although the principle sounded like a motto, it explained the new direction of the foreign policy toward all the states in the region, not just those bordering Turkey. Ankara's primary aim was to sustain the goal of applying active efforts to

solve the deep-rooted regional problems in line with a win-win approach through peaceful means.

Targeting zero problems with the neighbors sounded like an ambitious and courageous claim, but it was hardly realistic. Turkey has had several protracted conflicts with some of its neighbors such as Greece, over Cyprus and territorial waters in the Aegean Sea, and with Armenia, over so-called Armenian genocide, not to mention growing tensions with Iraq and Syria. Arguably, any statement, motto, or slogan, including zero problems with neighbors, may have a symbolic meaning but policy formulation is a realistic challenge requiring tangible courses defined through rational calculations. Having zero problems with the neighbors might also mean a long-term foreign policy target rather than a short-term objective. However, after having adopted such a policy, the general tendency to positive change would have been seen immediately. However, the developments in this direction were not stable and continuous. To discuss the dynamics of the Turkish foreign policy in the light of the zero problems with neighbors strategy, this article discusses Ankara's policy vis-à-vis Armenia, Syria, Israel (although it is not an immediate neighbor of Turkey), and Russia since 2003 and evaluates the achievements and failures.

Turkish Armenian Policy (2003-2015)

Armenians lived within the Ottoman Empire for centuries. Many scholars argue that they had found peaceful and fertile environment to form their ethnic identity only with the Ottoman Empire, which granted them special status with many privileges necessary for their cultural formation (Suslu, 2009). But the World War I brought about many tragic events in the Middle East, one of which was that Armenians and Turks have become blood enemies (Gunter, 2011; Suny, Gocek, & Naimark, 2011). This vendetta has been continuing for over a century. Many historians believe that the Ottoman Turks indeed committed genocide against Armenians while others believe that the Turks did not commit a genocidal crime against them, and all what they did was resettling the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire from one part of the country to another for security reasons (Akçam, 2012; Stone, 2007b; Suslu, 2009). While making the operation possible, the security forces did not touch those Armenians living in the urban places of the state, such as Istanbul, Izmir, and Aleppo (Lewy, 2005; Stone, 2007a). Others believe that Armenians and Turks were involved in the mutual massacres in the 1910s, and Armenians murdered at least as many Turks as the latter killed Armenians (Suslu, 2009). During a century since the tragic events, the issue has become protracted, and more importantly has been deeply politicized. Certainly, considerable historical research on this issue has been done, and it not always supports the pro-Armenian thesis (Alayarian, 2008; Gurun, 2001; Kévorkian, 2011; Lewy, 2005; McCarthy, 2006). However, not only many political entities around the world have recognized it as genocide, but some research circles have also taken it for granted literally multiplying the Armenian thesis by using secondhand documents (Lewy, 2005).

At such a historical moment, where the borders of myth and truth are blurred, the AKP government made an offer to the Armenian government to create an international commission composed of historians and scholars to investigate the issue objectively (Hill, Kirişci, & Moffatt, 2015). One of the methods of research would be studying the archive materials that have not yet been investigated by researchers. The crucial part of the offer was that both parties would be bound by the findings and conclusions of the international committee. The Turkish government would be committed to cover all the associated costs. Although the Armenian counterparts did

not approach this offer positively, both sides were willing to improve the relations through a number of joint political and economic projects (Kirisci & Moffat, 2014; Phillips, Columbia University, & Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2012). Yerevan was trying to minimize Russia's influence over Armenia and was willing to improve relations with Turkey without preconditions.

Among some relatively minor developments, there were such important initiatives as opening the border entry points between the two countries to let border trade flourish. The main goal was the establishment of full diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey. One of the most important developments in this direction was the soccer diplomacy when President Abdullah Gul of Turkey visited Yerevan on 6 September 2008 to watch the qualifying game for the European championship between Armenian and Turkish national teams. Before long, Gul's Armenian counterpart President Serzh Sargsyan visited Turkey to watch the game between the two teams in Turkey. While everything seemed to develop steadily, the factor of Azerbaijan was not calculated.

Unquestionably, both Turkey and Armenia are independent states enjoying all the rights bestowed by international law. Moreover, Turkey is a regional power with established Western values, such as democracy, rule of law, and free elections, and has been struggling to become a member of the European Union (EU). It is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a strategic ally of the United States, which makes its status stronger and more prestigious. Turkey did not experience a crisis during the global economic disaster of 2008 and indeed its economy has grown significantly since then. Nonetheless, Ankara was hesitant to act independently in the Armenian case. Eventually, it had to suspend its policy regarding the opening of the borders and establishing diplomatic relations with Armenia, which has invaded and occupied Azerbaijani lands for over 20 years.

All the international attempts to resolve the Upper Karabakh crisis between Azerbaijan and Armenia have been unsuccessful. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has adopted four resolutions 822 (30 April 1993), 853 (29 July 1993), 874 (14 October 1993), and 884 (12 November 1993) expressing its concern over the invasion of the Azerbaijani administrative regions, namely, Kelbajar, Agdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Qubadli, and Zangilan, by the Armenian armed forces (Askerov & Matyok, 2015). These territories are outside of the disputed Upper Karabakh region and are still under Armenian control. The Azerbaijani population of these administrative regions had fled their homes for other parts of the country, thereby creating remarkable social and economic problems for the nation (Askerov, 2014). Russia had supported Armenia in its military achievements significantly, whereas Turkey provided diplomatic support for Azerbaijan in international arena (Askerov, 2015). Turkey joined Azerbaijan in imposing an economic blockade on landlocked Armenia in an effort to force it to end its invasion of the Azerbaijani lands. Ankara has always been subject to a significant pressure of its population to help Azerbaijan and its national interests in general. Civic pressure made Ankara avoid establishing any types of official political and economic ties with Yerevan. The new policy vis-à-vis Armenia in the late 2000s, therefore, necessitated careful calculations that indicated to building essential preconditions through secret talks. Turkish and Armenian diplomats had clandestine talks in Switzerland in 2007 and 2008 to draw a roadmap toward improving relations between their countries.

The AKP leadership initially disregarded the Azerbaijani factor or underestimated it. The resolute position of the Turkish government became obvious with its blocking Azerbaijan's flags into the stadium in Bursa, Turkey during the match between Turkish and Armenian national

soccer teams. At first, it seemed as a simple regulation; however, the process took more serious character and developed into stern interpretations and criticism by analysts when Turkish TV channels broadcasted the event (Haberturk, 2009a). The government of Azerbaijan believing that opening the borders between Turkey and Armenia would empower the latter tremendously chose to apply a deterrence policy through raising the price for natural gas sold to Turkey, and removing the Turkish flag from the Martyrs' Alley in Baku, among other things (Haberturk, 2009b). However, it would hardly be realistic to hope that these would force Ankara to reconsider its new Armenian policy and especially when the Turkish people see Azerbaijan as a natural ally of Turkey due to shared cultural roots.

The popular reaction to the Turkish official policy through the political parties and organizations made the government to reconsider its strategy (Yilmaz, 2009). Eventually, Prime Minister Erdogan had to declare that key to the improvement of Armenian–Turkish relations would be the resolution of the Upper Karabakh conflict (Kohen, 2014). The economic reward of Azerbaijan is manifold, especially the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) project, which seeks to transport Azerbaijani natural gas to Europe through Turkey (Hurriyet Daily News, 2015a).

Azerbaijan would not be able to affect Ankara's policy, had there been no domestic support in Turkey for its position. Due to cultural and historical factors, Azerbaijan occupies a special place in the hearts of Turkish people and the policy of the Turkish government (Fidan, 2010; Uslu & Ok, 2013). However, Azerbaijan's strategic importance for Turkey should not be underestimated in causing Ankara to change its Armenian policy (Cecire, 2013) and this factor unexpectedly revealed Ankara's foreign policy miscalculations.

It is likely that the policy change made Ankara lose some prestige and credit, since it did not keep its words given to the Armenian representatives who negotiated and signed protocols in Zurich on 10 October 2009. The protocols stipulated opening of the shared borders of Armenia and Turkey, and setting up formal diplomatic relations between the two countries. Mediated by the United States, Russia, and France, the agreement did not mention the Upper Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The parliaments of the two countries needed to ratify the accord (BBC News, 2009; Phillips et al., 2012). However, the Upper Karabakh conflict appeared to be a major obstacle for the Armenian–Turkish rapprochement. The Zurich protocols remained unratified and the parties accused each other for it.

In a number of occasions, Armenian leadership mentioned that Ankara should keep its commitments independent from the Upper Karabakh issue in particular and Azerbaijan, in general. Yerevan paid a price at home and abroad, as Nalbandyan, minister of foreign affairs of Armenia, signed the protocols without consulting Armenian communities that led to the protests by diaspora communities against the president of Armenia. The failure of the protocols has made the Armenian leadership feel deceived by the Turkish officials (Cheterian, 2011). On the contrary, the Turkish leadership has kept Armenia responsible for the impasse in regards to the Zurich protocols accusing it in the failed results that stemmed from its Karabakh policy. Erdogan, the prime minister of Turkey of the time, during his visit to Baku, Azerbaijan in May of 2009, stressed that opening borders between Armenia and Turkey, which was one of the major stipulations of the Zurich protocols, was subject to the resolution of the Upper Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Sabah, 2009). Obviously, Ankara miscalculated its abilities to persuade Baku about its new Armenian policy before signing the Zurich protocols.

Analysts argue that the resolutions of the Armenian–Turkish predicament lasting over a century and the newer Upper Karabakh conflict are interlinked because Armenians incline to

identify the latter as a contemporary version of the former (Sandole, 2003). The opposite might also be true as the resolution of the Upper Karabakh conflict would remove the major impediment for Turkey to improve relations with Armenia. As discussed above, the Karabakh issue was the main obstacle for the ratification of the Zurich protocols, which could become a turning point in the history of Turkish–Armenian relations. Today, it is realistic to claim that Ankara’s policy was designed to test the reactions of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and if positive, Ankara would act differently in seeking further normalization with Armenia.

Notwithstanding the secret talks, Ankara did not anticipate that Yerevan would not agree to investigate historical events of the 1910s through the new international efforts. The most surprising point was about Ankara’s belief in its ability to establish good relations with Armenia while maintaining good ties with Azerbaijan, the adversary of Armenia. Otherwise, zero problems with both the neighbors at the same time would practically be impossible.

Contending Syrian Policy

Syria became part of the Ottoman Empire in the early sixteenth century and before that it was part of the Mamluk Empire. It remained as an integral part of the Ottoman Empire until shortly after the World War I when it became partially British and partially French mandate till 1946. In 1938, the Hatay region of Syria seceded from it and became an independent republic and soon it joined to Turkey through a referendum. The role of the League of Nations in this process has been a justification tool for Turkey. Ever since, the Hatay issue has been one of the major sources of tension between these two states. For decades, Syria allowed militant Kurdish groups to establish bases on its territory to fight Turkey and used this as a deterrence policy (Ibrahim & Gürbey, 2000).

Even the leader of the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK), Abdullah Ocalan, remained in Damascus until 1998 when Ankara’s pressure forced his exile out of Syria. Later, when President Hafez al-Assad of Syria died, Turkey and Syria had an opportunity to start a new chapter in their history. Bashar al-Assad, the new president of Syria, visited Turkey in 2004 and a year later, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer of Turkey made a return visit to Syria despite international pressures. Later, President Assad and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan initiated new efforts to improve Turkish–Syrian relations, the warmth of which was reflected in their personal interactions. On 5 August 2008, Bashar and Asma Assads visited Turkey’s Bodrum for diplomacy and vacation, where Tayyip and Emine Erdogans welcomed them personally (Anter, 2008; Milliyet, 2008). However, the favorable state of their relations did not last long and started to worsen in the wake of the popular protests in Syria that broke out in March 2011.

A refugee flow from Syria to Turkey began almost with the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 and this raised serious concerns for the latter. In mid-2011, Prime Minister Erdogan harshly criticized the Syrian government for human rights violations (BBC News, 2011a; Dunya Times, 2011). After meeting with President Assad in Syria on 9 August 2011, Turkey’s foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, announced that Turkey completely suspended all of the agreements between Turkey and Syria. In general, Erdogan’s anti-Assad rhetoric knew no limits. Moreover, the minor events in Syria against Turkey admonished the deterioration of the relations between these two countries. For example, two Turkish pilgrim buses were attacked by the Syrian soldiers at a checkpoint near Homs on 21 November 2011 when they returned from Saudi Arabia leaving two people injured (BBC News, 2011b). This antagonistic approach continued in the following

year as well. On 9 April 2012, Syrian forces fired across the Syria–Turkey border killing two and injuring several people (Muir, 2012).

Apparently, the dramatic change of the Turkish policy vis-à-vis Syria was partially a result of Syria's antagonistic policy toward Turkey. The turning point in the Syria–Turkey relations was the shoot down of the Turkish fighter jet by Syrian forces on 22 June 2012. Although Ankara has repeatedly expressed its concern for civilian casualties in Syria, the persisting ambiguities of Turkey's Syrian policy have played a significant role in the deterioration of the relations. Ankara eventually yielded to the US policy in Syria that was supporting the opposition forces, Free Syrian Army, against the Assad regime.

Ankara made miscalculated and hasty decisions to cut off ties with Syria in 2012. Erdogan had frequently used very weighty language in the address of the Syrian leadership to justify Ankara's rigid policy against the Syrian government in the eyes of his citizens (Hurriyet Daily News, 2012b). On a number of different occasions, he publicly expressed his certainty about being able to pray in the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus within a year, thereby implying his belief of rapid removal of the Assad regime (Hurriyet, 2012a). Ankara's unlimited wishful statements about Syria have shadowed its realistic approach to this crisis. It is widely believed that Turkey has played an indirect role in the Syrian conflict, as considerable amount of weapons Syrian rebels possess has entered Syria through Turkey (BBC News, 2013). The Turkish government has not rejected supporting the Free Syrian Army (FSA) but always denied any types of cooperation with the ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). Being a target of numerous bloody terrorist attacks of the ISIS and recent operations of Turkish army against this terrorist organization in Syria and Iraq have proven Ankara's honesty.

Perhaps, Turkey's economy has been affected more adversely than that of any other country in the region due to the internal war in Syria. According to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR/Syria Regional Refugee Response, 2016), as of December 2016, Turkey hosted over two and half million refugees from Syria (ibid.). In such circumstances, having no political leverage over the Syrian issue is a serious loss for Ankara. Criticizing Erdogan's hurried Damascus policy of isolation, opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu once stated that unlike his EU counterparts, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, the architect of the zero problems with neighbors policy, could not call his Syrian colleague by phone and warn of the consequences of unrealistic Syrian policy pursued by the AKP government (Gercek Gundem, 2015).

By withdrawing its ambassador from Damascus in 2012, Turkey disabled itself of reaching out to the Syrian leadership directly, which was necessary for managing the conflict peacefully or at least more constructively. For a country that claims zero problems with its neighbors, more leverages for peaceful engagement are crucial. Thus, although somehow justified, Ankara's hasty decision has not been supportive for its policy toward the neighbors set earlier. As a regional power, Turkey has weakened its own influence in Syria and the region as a whole by pushing itself out of the Syrian game.

Prime Minister Erdogan's obsessive usage of religious rhetoric (Hurriyet, 2012a) while condemning Syrian political leadership has considerably undermined Turkey's credibility as a fair and credible actor in the region. Over time, it has become clear that Iran, along with Russia and China, exercises more power and influence in Syria than Turkey, since the policies of the latter has deprived Ankara of the opportunities of having a political weight in its neighboring country. Erdogan has often defended Ankara's policy by employing justice and human

rights narratives (ibid.). Assad's reaction to this has been ironic and he accused Erdogan in provoking sectarian tensions in the region (Los Angeles Times, 2012). However, the suggestion Erdogan made on 24 September 2015 about Assad that he could have a role to play in the future political transition of Syria (Tol, 2015) was both a confirmation of failing Turkish Syrian policy and a signal of Ankara's readiness to reframe it.

The visible reality is that Turkey has been gaining more influence in Syria with abandoning its old zero problems with neighbors policy, which straightforwardly helped neither peace nor war in the region. This is seen from the developments after the fall of Aleppo to the Assad regime and its supporters in December 2016. The meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of Turkey, Iran, and Russia in Moscow on 20 December 2016 to work toward a political solution to end the crisis in Syria has manifested Ankara's renewed role as a regional power. On the contrary, the new developments in Syria have revealed the failure of Obama's Syrian inaction policy, since the United States was neither invited to the meeting, nor was consulted (Krauthammer, 2016).

Relations with Israel: Deterioration and Normalization

Turkey has no direct borders with Israel; however, the elements of their historical affiliation and regional role they play, as well as advanced communication means have removed the appearance of physical impediments due to distance in their good relations. Moreover, the littoral states of the Mediterranean Sea and two regional powers, Turkey and Israel had been good partners cooperating in many fields including military and secret intelligence (Jewish Virtual Library, 2016; Lake, 2010). The historical help of the Ottoman Turks offered to Jews ousted from different parts of Europe and Russia at different times, especially in the 1800s, is well depicted in the Jewish history (Avraham, 2013). In some sense, this has been a reason for the Jewish lobbies in the United States to support the Turkish position in regard to the Armenian issue (Lake, 2010). Ankara's initial success in improving relations with Damascus and strengthening ties with Jerusalem resulted in its mediation role in several rounds of indirect talks between Israel and Syria (Inbar, 2005, 2011; Stern & Ross, 2013).

This good relationship gradually diminished and ended at Davos in 2009 with Erdogan's severe criticism of the Israel's Palestinian policy in the World Economic Forum (Bennhold, 2009). Prime Minister Erdogan has contributed one minute to the political terminology when he persistently asked moderator David Ignatius of The Washington Post for a minute to react to Israeli President Shimon Peres who was talking about the Israel's military campaigns in Gaza. This event was not accepted as courteous in Israel, and it has become the turning point for deteriorating Turkish-Israeli relations.

In January 2010, Israel issued a severe rebuke to Turkey's ambassador Ahmet Oguz Celikkol over a Turkish television series, Valley of the Wolves, which portrayed Israeli intelligence agents as baby kidnapers running operations to abduct children and convert them to Judaism (NBC NEWS, 2010). Celikkol was summoned to Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel to meet with Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon who did not shake hands with the ambassador and ordered not to have a Turkish flag on display. Ayalon told the cameramen in Hebrew that the Turkish ambassador was deliberately seated on a sofa lower than his own chair. The event initiated a new jargon, lower chair, in diplomacy. The follow up events did not improve their relations and rather Turkey canceled a military exercise involving Israel and the

latter ruled out Turkey's resuming its role as mediator in indirect Israel–Syria talks (Eligur, 2012).

The Mavi Marmara incident was the culmination of the crisis between Turkey and Israel when on 31 May 2010 Turkish ship, MV Mavi Marmara, carrying people and humanitarian aid for Gaza Strip was raided by the Israeli commandos killing 12 people. Israel severely objected to this campaign long before the attack happened but this was not an adequate move to stop it. The campaigners did not see anything against law and morality in what they were doing but the consequences appeared to be tragic for them. Israeli navy attack on the vessel in the international waters complicated the issue further. Turkey reacted to the incident severely demanding an apology from Israel and taking the case to international arbitration (BBC News, 2016a).

In 2010, the future of Turkish–Israeli relations was quite unpredictable both because of the hard stance of the respective governments and the new conflict issues they had created. Civilian victims of the Mavi Marmara crisis tied the communities to the problem and removing the new issues would entail a prolonged time for satisfying the aspirations of the citizens. The price of making the problem community-based instead of interest-based might always be costly because conflicts in which different identity groups are involved are usually more protracted (Kriesberg, 2007). Therefore, making civilians involved in it was a strategic mistake on both sides. In a sense, the Israeli–Palestine conflict had been enlarged through engulfing Turkey, which could have played a more active role in its transformation as an independent third party and impartial actor. However, it seemed Ankara was not interested in preserving the balanced policy between Israel and Palestine, thus ignoring its own national interests. Hitherto, it is obvious that having no problems with two hostile countries at the same time by supporting one of them is logically impossible.

Israel eventually apologized in March 2013 for the raid and agreed to pay compensation to the families of people that lost their lives as a result of the attack on the ship. However, this victory of Ankara did not make up the economic cost it paid due to worsened relations between Turkey and Israel. Like Israel, Turkey lost its best and most reliable strategic ally in the region for a prolonged time, which caused pausing strategic and economic cooperation. As a result, both countries suffered economic loss from the delayed trade especially in the energy sector (Volfova, 2014). But, Turkey lost prestige as well, both inside and outside, as it was not able to deter Israel correspondingly. On an occasion, Erdogan postponed his trip to Gaza that had originally been planned for April 2013 to unforeseen future as a result of the demand of the United States. Furthermore, the developments showed that Ankara's zero problems with neighbors policy does not and cannot exist independently from the dynamics of conflicting events taking place in the region. The interests of both Turkey and Israel eventually made them normalize relations in mid-2016 after a six-year rupture.

Today, while one minute has popularity in the Turkish domestic context with a different connotation, both Turkey and Israel make special efforts to restore the old strategic partnership once they enjoyed. Among other factors, Israel's need in Turkish alliance to end its isolation in the region has helped with the normalization process by starting a new rapprochement policy. However, the main factor for transforming the conflict and improving the relations is associated with Ankara's cession of its old foreign policy approach, zero problems with neighbors, which left Turkey with almost no friends in the region.

Crisis in Russia

The last case to consider here is the crisis between Turkey and Russia that started with their contending policies over Syria and culminated with the downing of the Russian fighter jet by the Turkish forces on the Turkish–Syrian border on 24 November 2015. Before the crisis, Ankara and Moscow had developed strong relations cooperating in economic and strategic areas. However, Ankara had already started to shift its general foreign policy direction to a new path by the onset of this crisis. The case of Russo-Turkish crisis illustrates the importance of considering the complexity of dynamic issues while formulating new foreign policy goals, rather than pursuing previously formulated fixed foreign policies.

Ankara and Moscow had disagreements in their policies over the Syrian crisis, which gradually developed into a problem as the civil war progressed (Ozel, 2016). However, the turning point was the shot down of the Russian military jet in late 2015. Some similarities between this event and the Mavi Marmara crisis with Israel manifested in the weeks subsequent to the downing of the aircraft. Moscow blamed Ankara in a deliberate shooting of the fighter jet, whereas Turkey blamed Russia for being reckless and culpable accusing the Russian pilot of violating the Turkish borders (*ibid.*). The crisis escalated rapidly bringing about harsh measures on the part of Russia, which chose economic sanctions against Turkey. This caused Turkey's economy big losses in the areas of tourism, construction firms, and food exports (Girit, 2016).

Although the consequences of the crisis adversely affected economies of both the countries, the political leaderships made repeated declarations about their intentions not to change their positions (BBC News, 2015a, 2015b; Sabah, 2015; Yeni Safak, 2015). Russia has made it explicit that an official apology from Ankara and compensation for both the material damage and the life of the pilot would be necessary to reconsider its policy toward Turkey. Ankara, however, on different occasions stated that it would act in the same manner, if necessary (Sabah, 2015). The subsequent developments have shown that these two countries wanted a minor push to remove all the barriers in front of them to start a new phase of cooperation. Even a cursory examination of why Ankara softened its position so quickly and Russia accepted the half-hearted apology tendered in the late 2016 (Mercouris, 2016) indicates that both countries were ready to cooperate for mutual gains.

With the apology of President Erdogan on 24 June 2016, the latest Russo-Turkish crisis has entered a new phase of de-escalation offering new opportunities for rapprochement. Both Turkey and Russia have mutual interests in cooperation, despite their conflicting interests in Syria. Turkey supports the Syrian opposition against Assad's government, whereas Russia backs the Assad regime. Obviously, the complexities of the crisis between Ankara and Moscow originate from multifaceted regional issues, rather than bilateral relations. Similarly, managing the crisis necessitates a policy based on multilevel and multimodal approach based on realistic moves.

The crisis between Ankara and Moscow was relatively shorter as they managed to break the ices and improve their relations rapidly. Arguably, with no active third party role in the process, the relations between these two countries would hardly be improved so quickly. The institution of mediation started to work immediately after the crisis started and eventually yielded a positive outcome (Yetkin, 2016). Other than mediation, a few other abortive attempts, such as talks between the ministers of foreign affairs took place. The third party role was employed primarily by the governmental actors external to the conflict to find a solution to the problem without bringing the parties to the negotiation table. Certainly, these international mediators—President Aliyev of Azerbaijan, President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, and Abdulatipov, the head of the Republic of Dagestan, among others—had their own interests in the

compromise of the sides to conflict. All these leaders function within the sphere of Russian influence and can hardly go against Putin's will. Besides, they want to maintain good relations with Turkey, a leading Islamic state, with which they have cultural ties. In this case, the question of why Turkey relaxed its initially tough position against Russia could hardly be answered by its zero problems with neighbors approach.

The main reasons for Ankara's policy change vis-à-vis Russia include economic loss, losing trust in its Western allies, trying to (re)gain a new strategic ally to deal with the regional issues, and increasing domestic unhappiness, among others. The crisis hit Turkey's tourism, construction, energy, and agriculture sectors gravely causing billions of dollars' loss. A study suggests that if not removed, the economic sanctions on Turkey would cost the economy of the country a loss of US\$2.3 billion to US\$8.3 billion by the end of 2016, excluding the suitcase trade worth US\$2.5 billion and other indirect effects (Sonmez, 2016). The government had tried hard to produce alternative ways, such as intensifying cooperation with Arab countries to fill the gap hollowed by Russia but this was possible only partially.

Another factor making Ankara reconsider its position was the strategic approach of its Western allies to the regional problems that are of a vital importance for Turkey. Arguably, Ankara had developed an understanding over time that the West was not willing to remove Assad from the power, despite its initial attempts. The increasing threat of the ISIS has been a major factor defining the priorities of the West in the region, which shifted the concerns about the Assad regime to a secondary place. The impact of this on Ankara's policy was strong, since it had already burnt all the bridges with Damascus despite the improved relations with it prior to the conflict. A policy change on the part of its Western allies put Ankara on an unfavorable position. Turkey found itself in a position that was good neither for proceeding, nor for withdrawing. It expected the Western countries to continue serious military operations against the regime in Syria through the alliance with the FSA. The priorities of the West, however, had changed with the changing circumstances in the region. The West, especially the United States, saw the Assad regime as less dangerous than the ISIS and looked for new strategies, the indispensable part of which became cooperating with the Kurds of Syria (Hume, 2016).

The crisis of Syria has instigated new problems for Turkey's security, more importantly, for its survival within its existing boundaries because of the emergence of new and more critical conditions in the region that offer actual and potential support for Rojava, a Kurdish region in northern Syria. The United States and Turkey had developed a problem over the People's Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which Ankara sees as an extension of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), recognized as a terrorist organization by many countries, including the United States (Cagaptay & Tabler, 2015; Hume, 2016; US Department of State, n.d.). Ankara sees the YPG as the main threat to Turkey's national unity and territorial integrity. The United States, however, declared that it does not share Turkish views about YPG (Hurriyet Daily News, 2015b), whereby displeasing Ankara. The discrepancy between the policies of Ankara and Washington has deepened over time seriously damaging the trust between them. Its impact on Ankara has been serious, which manifested itself in various declarations of the President Erdogan of Turkey (Haberturk, 2016). Ankara's search for alternative policies has contributed to the normalization process with Moscow.

The latest developments in the region highlighted Ankara's needs for a new strategic ally, at the very least, an alternative ally that must be trusted in crises. Revitalizing the relations with Russia seemed to meet Turkey's needs more, since it has established itself as the major actor in the Middle East beating the inactive Western countries. However, before the Turkish-Russian

crisis was over, it seemed nearly impossible to end it for several reasons, two of which are noteworthy. First, Turkey and Russia had their relations stuck in an impasse breaking which required a high level of readiness by the parties, which did not initially exist. Second, to be Russia's strategic ally meant for Turkey to change its Syrian policy, at least partially. Both of these factors created new challenges for Ankara but it managed to produce a new policy to break the impasse. Prime Minister Davutoglu, the architect of the zero problems with neighbors policy, was relieved from his position by President Erdogan on 3 May 2016. Before long, the new Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, announced a rapprochement policy toward those with who Turkey was in conflict. The realistic steps taken by the new Turkish government facilitated the addressing of deep-rooted foreign policy issues of the country.

Visibly, the crisis hurt not only Turkey but also Russia, since it deprived both countries of mutual gains through cooperation. From the moment Russia applied sanctions against Turkey, both countries started to suffer economically. Russia's sanctions halted mutual projects in the energy and construction sectors, and increased prices in its own food market (Cetingulec, 2015, 2016; Girit, 2016). More importantly, Russia had to halt the developing strategic partnership with Turkey. This was not in the interests of Moscow, since Putin had tried to build special strategic relationship with Ankara to form a new regional alliance, although Turkey is a NATO country. Over the past two decades, Turkey and Russia have cooperated in several joint energy projects. Thus, Putin readily used the opportunity offered to him by means of mediation to secure Russia's national interests through improving relations with Turkey.

Moreover, Putin, as a master of using situations in his own favor, saw the crisis as an opportunity to create even stronger ties with Turkey. He patiently waited for the moment; after he received what he wanted in the form of formal apology by President Erdogan and secured the prestige of his own and his country, Putin saw no barriers to starting a new chapter with Turkey. The Kremlin made every attempt to show that it was not against Ankara in general. Russia was the first country to express solidarity with the Turkish government immediately after the coup attempt on 15 July 2016, when the Obama administration waited several hours to make a statement. This was one of the many tactics adopted by Putin to signal that he was a friend of Turkey and did not desire any chaos and instability in this country. This was a thoughtful policy targeting future rapprochement with Turkey.

Arguably, Moscow has seen Turkey as a new partner in shaping peace and security in Syria. The recent developments around the Syrian crisis shows that Ankara and Moscow have managed to build a new and strong strategic partnership in the security field. Russian-Turkish prolonged partnership in security field may seem eccentric and fragile due to Turkey's NATO membership. However, their national interests may necessitate long-term strategic partnership. Russia's conflict with the West since the annexation of Crimea on 18 March 2014 has increased its needs for better ties with the leading regional states such as Turkey. Therefore, using Ankara's displeasure with the US policy toward the Kurds of Syria, the Kremlin did not want to waste the opportunity to turn Turkey away from the West (Idiz, 2016). Having started with Erdogan's letter of apology, the Turkish-Russian rapprochement has continued after the fall of Aleppo on 22 December 2016. It is likely that Russian-Turkish relations have a strategic character with long-term goals.

Apparently, Ankara has abandoned its zero problems with neighbors policy vis-à-vis Moscow and framed its new foreign policy more realistically around its own national interest. The renewed desire about cooperation between Russia and Turkey seems to be very strong. Despite the disaster in Aleppo, for which Russia is blamed along with the Assad regime and Iran,

and the assassination of Russian ambassador, Andrey Karlov in Ankara on 19 December 2016, the leaderships of both countries have made strong statements of further cooperation (Evrensel, 2016).

Turkey's New Concerns

Turkey has faced dynamic international, regional, and domestic developments since AKP came to power in 2002. New developments in the realms of internal and external security, as well as economic and political life of the country have made the Turkish government to abandon its zero problems with neighbors policy and adopt new and realistic strategies in formulating its foreign policy goals and implementing them. Unlike the zero problems with neighbors policy focused primarily on the neighboring countries, the new approach is based on particular political and economic issues that offer some importance for the country.

The security concerns of Turkey due to the emergence of the ISIS and civil war in Syria have forced Ankara to develop new policies to address ongoing and emerging issues. Ankara's expectations for building a new regional order has not materialized and recent developments in Syria, including the fall of Aleppo, have shown that Assad regime has consolidated its power in Syria. In addition to the concerns about continuing threats from the terrorists based on Syrian soil, Turkey developed new anxieties about US-backed YPG's increasing role in the regional affairs. Ankara has repeatedly objected to the US cooperation with YPG, declaring it as a branch of the PKK, but the US officials declared that their views on the issue did not overlap with those of Ankara (Daily Sabah, 2016a). This has contributed to the change in Ankara's foreign policy significantly since it damaged the trust Turkey had in the United States as an ally.

The internal security issues of Turkey have also been a major problem for the government, which faced the fierce 15 July 2016 coup attempt. The government survived the coup, which exposed huge domestic security problems. The government's claims that the coup is connected to the foreign sources have made it reconsider its approach to some foreign countries, including the United States that delays extradition of Fethullah Gulen, who is accused of masterminding the coup attempt (Hurriyet Daily News, 2017).

The increased terrorist attacks of both the ISIS and PKK on the Turkish soil (BBC News, 2016b; Daily Sabah, 2015) have revealed the flaw of the Turkish government in providing security to its citizens and tourists in Turkey. Some of the last events include the assassination of the Russian ambassador Gennadiy Karlov, attack to the military servicemen in Kayseri and Istanbul, all of which took place within 10 days in December 2016. As never before, Turkey finds itself under the crossfire that necessitates developing new policies to address both internal and external issues. It is well accepted now that an idealistic/moralistic zero problems with neighbors policy is no longer an answer to the problems of the country.

Conclusion

The AKP started several political, economic, and cultural reforms with its advancement of power in Turkey in 2002. The new trend of foreign policy was articulated idealistically through the adoption of the motto of zero problems with neighbors. The early developments showed that it was more than a rhetoric and the government started multidirectional rapprochements, even revolutionary policies in some cases, toward the neighboring countries. However, the new

policies formulated in line with idealistic/moralistic thought significantly reduced rational and realistic calculations to frame sustainable foreign policy strategies of the country. Employing idealist attitudes in making a foreign policy is also natural, but as this case study suggests, relying solely on idealism/moralism for a foreign policy is practically impossible and would bring about challenges for national interests.

In this case, one of the problems has been the discrepancy between the government's declarations and its actual policies. They frequently did not converge because of the dynamics of regional events, needs, interests, as well as the attitudes and behaviors of other actors. The discrepancy between idealistic declarations and realistic actions was also a result of inaccurate policy calculations made by the Turkish government. In some cases, through adhering to idealistic moves, Turkey disqualified itself as a rational regional actor, thereby damaging its national interests, and more importantly, disabling itself to contribute to the regional peace.

Turkey's zero problems with its neighbors as an idealistic target certainly deserves applause, since it rests upon the notions of constructive dialogue, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation for mutual gains, among others. However, pragmatically speaking, the materialization of this policy has never been realistic in the context of the region at this historically threatening moment. Unless Turkey acquires the status of a neutral country, which does not seem possible until all of its internal identity-based problems are resolved, having zero problems with the neighbors seems very unrealistic. Realistically, it is impossible to please Armenia while supporting Azerbaijan, to delight Israel while sustaining Palestinian position, and to gratify Damascus while helping the Syrian rebels. The complexities of the issues and dynamism of the events in the region require rapid moves to formulate new foreign policy strategies or make necessary maneuvers and changes to play an effective role in peaceful/useful activities, and no state desiring to fulfill idealistic or realistic sentiments it has should deprive itself of this role through its unrealistic commitments.

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