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Strategic Advisory & Analysis

# **TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY AND THE MIDDLE EAST: COMPARTMENTALIZED, CAUTIOUS AND MULTI-DIRECTIONAL COOPERATION**

**BETÜL DOĞAN AKKAŞ**



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## Introduction

Türkiye's influence and involvement in Middle Eastern politics have steadily grown in recent years, and policies that position Ankara as a regional agenda-setter and constructive actor have begun to stand out. Türkiye's Middle East outlook in foreign policy offers insights into both the internal political dynamics and its relations with the West and global affairs. The years in which Ankara remained a passive diplomatic interlocutor in the Middle East ended with the combined impact of global, regional and domestic dynamics such as the end of the Cold War, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, and Turgut Özal's political vision that projected Türkiye's role into the region. Therefore, examining Türkiye's foreign policy toward the region requires a three-dimensional analysis. The first dimension concentrates on domestic politics, influenced by the political preferences of governments in power during specific periods and by ongoing internal agendas, and explores how Ankara's political reasoning regarding the Middle East is reflected in regional policy. The second dimension examines Türkiye's reactions to events in the Middle East, assessing whether Ankara has acted reactively or proactively through regional cooperation or diplomatic tensions. In this phase, Türkiye's ability to correctly interpret rising tensions and rapprochements in

the region and its capacity to negotiate with different interest groups have varied across periods. This process has largely been shaped by the strategic choices of political leaders of the time. The final dimension involves global trends that develop either independently of Türkiye's domestic politics and regional engagement or as a result of their influence. These dynamics can broadly be understood as ranging between systemic uncertainty and global stability, shaping Ankara's regional outlook as a middle power engaged in economic, political and military cooperation with global actors.

Considering all three analytical dimensions, it can be argued that since the Arab uprisings that began at the end of 2010, Türkiye has pursued a Middle East policy marked by cautious<sup>1</sup> and compartmentalized alliances within a landscape of multiple regional hegemonies.

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To understand this policy, which has evolved over the past two decades, it is necessary to define the regional and global dynamics shaping it.

## **A Multi-directional and compartmentalized diplomatic profile**

Türkiye uses its cooperation with Western countries and institutions, as well as its bilateral relations in general, as supporting elements in the Middle East. The expansion and strengthening of military strategies and the defense industry, military cooperation with Middle Eastern countries, commercial agreements, and interventions in active conflict zones such as Libya and Syria are not independent of Türkiye's position as an important NATO partner. Similarly, the strengthening of bureaucratic state structures during Türkiye's European Union accession process and its multi-directional policy—aligned with the West yet also engaged with the Middle East—have often led it to be described as a model in regional reform efforts. Although relations with the United States have reflected differently on the Middle East during different presidential administrations, it was generally accepted that Washington sees Ankara as a critical regional actor. During Donald Trump's second presidential term in particular—excluding the issue of the occupation of Palestine—the alignment achieved with Ankara strengthened Türkiye's position in Syria and in broader regional policies with Saudi Arabia. It should be emphasized that Ankara's role between East and West is not merely that of a transmitting bridge, but rather a policy-shaping and mediating actor.

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Parallel to this dynamic, another important factor shaping Türkiye's position in the Middle East has been the way Ankara's diplomatic profile in regional crisis zones—where it has taken initiative and played a founding role—has reinforced its global and Western-oriented image. This policy can be summarized as one of multi-directional and cautious partnerships. Unlike the earlier dynamic, this image has strengthened particularly in recent years. In this context, regional countries themselves have also begun diversifying their political and military partnerships beyond U.S.-centered policies. For instance, Saudi Arabia conducted its political negotiations with Iran through China, did not completely oppose Russia's position in the Ukraine war, and has considered joining BRICS. Despite Riyadh's close partnership with the United States, its cooperation with alternative diplomatic blocs—and similar patterns in countries such as Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait—has strengthened Türkiye's dual diplomatic profile as both a Western-aligned actor and an alternative regional partner.

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pursue an independent engagement strategy without taking sides in the rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China. Although cautious and compartmentalized alliance attempts among these three global actors have progressed relatively steadily in economic and political terms, critical issues such as the S-400 crisis have occasionally turned into structural crises. Particularly during Trump's new term, convergence has emerged around policies aimed at protecting the region from new crises and resolving ongoing conflicts through official leaders rather than non-state actors. Through this approach, long-standing debates over the future of the YPG in Syria were resolved through a joint strategy between Washington and Ankara. Through a similar approach of cautious alliances, Ankara kept diplomatic ties with both Russia and Ukrai-

ne during their conflict and positioned itself as a key player in negotiations and the grain corridor initiative. One of the most prominent examples of Türkiye's multi-directional diplomatic profile after October 7, 2023 has been its initiatives toward regional and global actors and international institutions in response to Israel's attacks in Palestine—particularly its active role in the Gaza Contact Group. Thanks to this diplomatic approach, Ankara has been able to negotiate with both sides even on issues where it clearly takes a stance, such as Israel's war against Palestine.

### **Strategic pragmatism**

The third dynamic shaping Ankara's Middle East policy—constructed between the opportunities and risks presented by global and regional conflict dynamics—is the transformation of the “Türkiye model” debates after the Arab uprisings into a form of strategic pragmatism focused on geopolitical and economic gains. In other words, the model presented by the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) to other states in the region is no longer defined solely by the image of a democratic Middle Eastern society with economic growth, as it was in the early phases of the Arab uprisings. In contrast to the period when its soft power was more prominent, Türkiye's new image is built around the projection of a regional power that pursues security-oriented policies, acts as an agenda-setter in conflict zones, produces military technology and ammunition, and mediates international conflicts—in short, a power capable of taking multiple initiatives.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this shift has not been equally successful across all policies

and partnerships, just as Türkiye's soft power has not been equally influential in all Arab societies.

The processes in which hard power has come to the forefront and military and political moves have been conducted simultaneously have not only depended on Türkiye's capacity and policy readiness but also on regional escalation dynamics that have forced Ankara to prioritize security diplomacy and national interests. The prolonged civil war in Syria and the direct threat posed to Türkiye by terrorist organizations such as DAESH and the YPG; the emergence in Libya of forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar, backed by the UAE, against the Government of National Unity supported by Türkiye; and the increasing regional engagement of the Turkish defense industry in addition to the military base in Qatar can all be listed among the regional motivations behind Türkiye's strategic pragmatism in which hard power has become more prominent.

Strategic pragmatism has produced foreign policy outcomes with more concrete and practical positive results than Türkiye's image as a Middle Eastern and Muslim democratic model. Despite systemic uncertainties and regional instability, Türkiye has become one of the status-quo builders for both its own national interests and the actors it cooperates with in the region (such as the Libyan government and Qatar). In other words, for example, in Libya, by engaging with both the Government of National Unity and Haftar's forces, Türkiye highlighted its agenda-setting role. On the Syrian front, even before the cooperation established with the transitional government following the December 2024 revolution that

overthrew the Bashar Assad regime, Türkiye had already pursued persistent and constructive policies at both the global and regional levels in support of a possible regime change in Syria. In this context, strategic pragmatism served as the fundamental policy framework aimed both at enabling Syria's domestic politics to evolve into a stable process and at preventing the country from becoming a center of insecurity for Türkiye. Ankara's sustained influence over the Syrian process since 2011—while supporting the Syrian people and at the same time ensuring its own border security—provided an organic foundation for the constructive relationship it later established with the new leadership. Precisely thanks to this diplomatic influence, Türkiye was able, on the one hand, to support the Free Syrian Army and conduct military operations in northern Syria, while on the other hand quickly establishing an alliance with the transitional government's leader Ahmed al-Sharaa and developing policy maneuvers for the new political process. In other words, from the initial uprisings in Syria in 2011 to al-Sharaa's leadership, Türkiye's multi-dimensional strategic pragmatism has positioned Ankara as one of the regional actors shaping Damascus's political trajectory.

## Potential risks, uncertainties and opportunities in middle east policy

At this stage, the first of the potential risks and uncertainties that may shape Türkiye's Middle East policy in the coming years concerns the Israel-centered regional security deadlock that was recalibrated following Ha-

mas' Al-Aqsa Flood Operation on Oct. 7, 2023. Ankara has historically been an actor that recognizes Israel and maintains relations with it, while simultaneously supporting the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. However, although Turkish foreign policy has been able to absorb the political burden of this conflict in diplomatic terms, it is also attempting to cope with the climate of distrust that Israel has militarily built in the region over many years. This hegemony of insecurity could also produce initiatives that may undermine Ankara's regional policies and domestic political dynamics; it also carries the potential to trigger new front lines of conflict that could spread not only to southern Syria but also to areas controlled by the YPG. Ankara's efforts to accelerate the "Terror-Free Türkiye" process in domestic politics, along with its support for implementing the integration agreement between Damascus and the YPG in Syria, show that it aims to eliminate potential risks from possible Syria-centered relations between Israel and the YPG.

Regionally, Israel's attempts to intervene in partnerships across the Middle East—beyond the cooperation frameworks established through the Abraham Accords—as well as its divisive decisions regarding crisis zones, may create uncertainties that require Türkiye to act cautiously. In particular, Israel's attack on Doha, the twelve-day war with Iran, the ongoing genocide in Gaza, and Tel Aviv's policy of pursuing normalization with certain Arab states in order to divide potential pro-Palestinian alignments in the region stand out as prominent examples of the insecurity hegemony Israel has built in the Middle East over the past

two years—developments that could also heighten Türkiye's security concerns.

In addition, in early December 2025, Israeli media reported the possibility that Yemen's southern region might be recognized as an independent state. Subsequently, Israel's recognition of the disputed territory of Somaliland as an independent state toward the end of December, as well as the United Arab Emirates adopting similar diplomatic rhetoric treating Somaliland as an independent actor, triggered regional reactions. First, Saudi Arabia struck UAE military equipment in Yemen's city of Mukalla, and shortly thereafter the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council announced its dissolution. These developments can be interpreted as attempts to dismantle a channel of insecurity in Yemen that was believed to include Israel as one of its actors. The fragile political atmosphere in Yemen could also generate a wave of uncertainty for Türkiye's military and political investments in Somalia, given the geographic proximity between the two regions.

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ds to construct a strategy that, while continuing its policy of supporting Palestine, also mobilizes structural and systemic actors against the insecurity hegemony shaped by Israel. In this context, Ankara's consideration of joining the defense agreement carried out jointly by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia could be interpreted as an effort to establish regional deterrence. In a different format but still centered on the Palestinian issue, Ankara's participation in the Peace Council under the leadership of Donald Trump demonstrates that it is open to evaluating possible forms of cooperation aimed at weakening this insecurity hegemony. A second set of potential risks and uncertainties that may affect Türkiye's Middle East policy concerns the possibility that conflicts of interest among the regional states with which Ankara maintains partnerships—or between these states and Türkiye itself—could escalate into crises. In order to overcome potential areas of tension in the region, Ankara may need to pursue a balancing policy based on a compartmentalized and cautious alliance strategy.

In this regard, Türkiye should maintain balanced cooperation with both sides of regional crises while simultaneously playing a stabilizing role, as seen in the tensions between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that emerged over Saudi Arabia's and the United Arab Emirates' interests in Yemen. As mentioned earlier, in many regional tensions there is also an Israeli dimension that extends to developments and investments in the Horn of Africa. In a similar diplomatic deadlock that emerged after the 2017 Gulf Crisis, Türkiye openly supported Qatar; however, beginning in 2022 it shifted

toward an economy-driven normalization process and adopted a policy of reducing tensions with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. Likewise, between 2011 and the Russian intervention in 2015, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Türkiye pursued partially coordinated policies in Syria. Drawing on these experiences—but in a more compartmentalized manner—Ankara may need to define primary and secondary zones of insecurity. For instance, in cases such as Syria, Libya and Somalia, where Türkiye has significant military, political and economic investments, cautious cooperation could be pursued as a priority in high-risk areas. As a secondary priority, Yemen represents a crisis point that does not involve a direct conflict of interests with Türkiye but still has the potential to affect Ankara's relations with Arab monarchies. Ultimately, Türkiye has previously developed various forms of cooperation among Gulf actors. In the coming years, it may preserve its foreign policy capacity and influence in crisis regions by conducting a similarly compartmentalized and cautious form of shuttle diplomacy.

A third potential risk and uncertainty that could shape Türkiye's Middle East policy relates to the possibility that non-state actors in Syria, Iraq and Libya could create regional security challenges for Türkiye either through state-formation processes or through domestic political calculations within these countries. At such potential fault lines, Ankara may need to remain prepared against actors that have not yet completed their state-building processes and to strengthen its alliance with the Damascus administration to maintain stability in Syria. In Syria, the political aspirations

of the Druze in the south, (partially) the Alawites in the west, and the YPG in the northeast could undermine Türkiye's priority of a strong and stable centralized Syrian state.

In this context, the agreement between Ahmed al-Sharaa and Mazloum Abdi emerges as a political opportunity that may reduce the risks and uncertainties Türkiye could face through the Syrian theater. While the positive impact of Ankara's Syria policy in the military and political process leading to this agreement cannot be overlooked, maintaining a similar form of strategic pragmatism will remain necessary. Should Abdi—or the YPG—fail to comply with the agreement, or if developments in the other two regions of Syria produce outcomes beyond the expectations of the Sharaa administration, Türkiye may need to cooperate with regional and global actors that prioritize stability in Syria in order to manage potential security challenges. For example, considering that the United States' long-standing Kurdish policy carried out through the YPG appears to be approaching its end, the alignment achieved with Donald Trump could be activated. At the same time, a joint roadmap could be developed with regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, or shuttle diplomacy among Syrian stakeholders could be further strengthened. As seen in the case of Libya, maintaining communication with different interest groups involved in the conflict and acting with strategic pragmatism could help shift the process in Ankara's favor. Finally, the fragmented and escalation-prone nature of Middle Eastern politics—characterized by competing alliances and interests—

creates the conditions for multiple and parallel hegemonies to emerge simultaneously. For instance, while Saudi Arabia seeks to eliminate the UAE's influence in Yemen, Abu Dhabi's economic and military hegemony continues across a broader geopolitical space that includes the Horn of Africa and North Africa. Although Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Qatar exercise a form of joint hegemonic influence in Syria, the continuation of the genocide in Palestine demonstrates the limitations of regional hegemonies in shaping outcomes. Therefore, Ankara may need to reassess its geopolitical interests within a landscape defined by multiple hegemonies and strengthen its capacity to construct alternative frameworks. Ultimately, regardless of whether developments are viewed through a Palestine-centered lens, the widespread insecurity and instability across the region—largely shaped by Israel—creates a regional equation in which Türkiye must pursue multidimensional policies, recognize overlapping hegemonies and build cautious alliances. In a period where the predictability of the Western-centered order has been significantly weakened, the fundamental prerequisite for safeguarding regional stability and national interests lies in Türkiye's ability to continue producing proactive and constructive foreign policy. In this regard, Türkiye may need to acknowledge and anticipate multiple hegemonies across different conflict zones while establishing compartmentalized, cautious and multidimensional partnerships, and sustain these policies under the framework of strategic pragmatism.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>The concept of cautious alliances was adapted into Turkish by Associate Professor İsmail Akdođan from the concept of hedging in international relations. It refers to a diplomatic process in which an actor maintains relations with all parties through subtle and flexible manoeuvres amid multiple, competing interests.

<sup>2</sup> See: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan explains the Türkiye model and the deep democratic values he proposes to take root in the Middle East: "Democracy in the Middle East, Pluralism in Europe", YouTube, 30 January 2004, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qj2lMa6U5qM>

# Betül DOĞAN AKKAŞ

## ABOUT

Akkaş serves as an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations at Ankara University. She graduated from the Department of International Relations at Bilkent University in 2014. In 2017, she received her master's degree from the Gulf Studies Program at Qatar University with a thesis on the securitization of Qatari foreign policy. Akkaş completed her PhD in the joint Gulf Studies program of Durham University and Qatar University. She also serves as the convenor of the International Mediterranean, Middle East and Asia Studies group within the British International Studies Association (BISA). Her main research interests include Middle Eastern politics, Türkiye's Middle East policy, the political cultures of Gulf countries, their foreign policies and security strategies.



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