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Ten Years After: Turkey's Gulf Policy (1990–91) Revisited

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Preface

The 1980s brought profound changes to Turkey. Politically, economically, culturally and socially the country witnessed sharper changes than at any time since the 1920s. Foreign policy also changed and this paper looks at the changing environment of Turkish foreign policy-making and the evolving reasoning behind the general policies throughout the Gulf War. There are many reasons for choosing the Gulf Crisis of 1990–91 to demonstrate changes. It was the closest Turkey came to entering an international war for which it was unprepared and unenthusiatic. Yet the crisis had the most serious repercussions on Turkey's own national security and highlighted the changes that had taken place in Turkey. It took place at a time when the fundamental paradigms of the bipolar system were dramatically altered and the so-called "new world order" was emerging. Thus the Gulf War was also poised to demonstrate Turkey's responses to the newly emerging world system that effectively made it impossible for Turkey to follow its traditional foreign policy posture. Since then Turkish foreign policy has come under heavy criticism both inside and outside Turkey. Accordingly this paper evaluates Turkish foreign policy at one of its critical moments. A shorter version of this paper was written in 1994 and published by the American University Cairo as "Turkish Foreign Policy during the Gulf War", *Cairo Papers in Social Science*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring 1998). I like to thank the editors of the *Cairo Papers* for allowing me to revise and update my article for the *Ankara Papers* series.

Introduction

Unless the survival of the nation is in danger, war is murder.
M. K. ATATÜRK

We should not be cowardly; we should not shy away from war if necessary. If we want to create a better world, war is nothing to be afraid of.¹

The developments and the point we have reached today reveal to both friend and foe that the policy Turkey followed [during the Gulf Crisis] was far-sighted, realistic and correct.²

[His] assumptions [regarding the post-Gulf War Middle East] did not work out, [and] Turgut Özal's policies, which were praised at the time, did not succeed after all.³

The Gulf Crisis/War and the accompanying end of the Cold War marked one of the most important international developments since the Second World War for Turkey. It was so close to Turkey and profoundly affected its domestic developments and international standing, as well as regional security calculations. The Gulf War was the event over which Turkey came closest to entering into an international war since its establishment in 1923. The Cyprus intervention of 1974 was a limited affair, and the only other military conflict Turkey was involved in was fought over the faraway lands of Korea. The Gulf War, on the other hand, was painfully close to home and carried with it the dangers of engulfing the whole country in a war that Ankara was neither ready nor enthusiastic for. Yet the crisis was the one that presented, in the mid- to long-term, the most acute repercussions for Turkey's own national security. Moreover, the crisis demonstrated very effectively the changes that took place in Turkey and in its ideological underpinnings vis-à-vis its immediate surroundings.

The 1980s brought profound changes to Turkey. Politically, economically, culturally and socially the country witnessed greater changes than perhaps at

any other time since the 1920s. During this multi-faceted evolution, foreign policy could hardly have been standing still.⁴

Since the end of the Second World War, for almost 40 years, Turkish foreign policy had followed the Western lead. Throughout the Cold War it was a distant outpost on the European periphery, a barrier to Soviet ambitions in the Middle East, and a contributor to the security of Europe. Its geo-strategic "value" was largely limited to its role within the Atlantic Alliance and, more narrowly, its place within NATO's southern flank. During this period, Turkey had, to a surprising extent, ignored the volatile politics of the Middle East and in turn was mostly ignored by its southern neighbors.

However, its traditional foreign policy of non-intervention and non-involvement in Middle Eastern politics had been challenged during the second half of 1980s by two equally important developments: the end of the Cold War and the frustration of Turkey's hopes to join the EC.⁵ While the end of the Cold War had reduced Turkey's importance to the West on the southern flank of NATO, and thus signaled an end to the military and economic benefits derived from it, the events in eastern Europe further undermined Turkey's chances of joining Europe as the EC would give priority to accommodating the newly democratic east European countries before considering Turkey. Thus, after the postponement/rejection of Turkey's application for full membership in 1989 by the EC, and the sudden changes in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Turkey seemed, by 1990, to be left alone with fundamental political, orientational and defense dilemmas.

Given the fact that orientation toward Europe and eventual integration into it underpinned Turkey's Kemalist foreign policy, the changes in international politics inevitably came to test its continued validity. It was the recognition of these facts that led Turkish officials to look for "new principles" to guide the country's foreign policy, and that shaped many of Turkey's foreign policy moves, including its growing activist policy toward the Middle East, highlighted by its high profile during the Gulf Crisis.⁶

Moreover, the crisis took place at a time when the fundamental paradigms of the bipolar system were dramatically altered and the so-called "new world order" was emerging. Thus Turkey's stand in the Gulf War was also poised to demonstrate, or give us clues about, the response of Turkey to the newly emerging world system that effectively made it impossible for Turkey to follow its traditionalist foreign policy based on the relative safety and stability of Cold War politics.

Further, Turkey's foreign policy during the crisis was a perfect example of *one-man rule à la Özal*. There is no doubt whatsoever that late President Turgut Özal dominated Turkish policy-making during the Gulf Crisis/War and thus he alone deserved any credit or criticism derived from it. While the domestic discussion over the constitutional boundaries of the president's rights and responsibilities was heightened by Özal's controversial standing, the prime minister and foreign ministry officials were forced, to the embarrassment of the

latter, to the background by his highly visible public stance and successfully publicized foreign contacts, including almost daily phone calls to and from President Bush of the USA.

On one occasion, his phone call to Washington caught President Bush in the middle of a press conference, which the latter immediately broke because "President Özal of Turkey is on the line". Later footage of this incident was shown several times on Turkish state television. His close cooperation with the USA during the crisis earned him the title, in the words of President Bush, of the "staunchest ally of the US".⁷ Apart from his "staunchness", Özal's credibility with Bush seems to derive from the fact that Özal was the first statesmen to warn Bush about Saddam long before the crisis erupted.⁸

Although this controversial meddling with the government's business cost him the highly visible and critical resignations of three top officials – the foreign and defense ministers, and the Chief of General Staff left their offices with protests over his conduct and style of policy making – it was President Özal again who remained in his place and was able, despite the widespread domestic misgivings, to claim at the end of the crisis that Turkey had passed this important test "with flying colors".⁹

Özal based his plans during the crisis on a number of propositions:

- 1) Saddam Hussein of Iraq would not survive the crisis.
- 2) The map of the Middle East would be re-drawn.
- 3) Turkey would take its place at the table where the future of the Middle East would be determined.
- 4) Turkey would be compensated by the Gulf States for its losses.
- 5) In return for the inconveniences it experienced during the crisis, Turkey would get from Europe and the USA additional aid, more credits, support for its EC membership ambition and its policies vis-à-vis Greece and Armenia.¹⁰

After ten years, we are now in a position to test both the validity of these propositions and whether they were achieved and, if so, to what extent.

In an attempt to answer the above questions, this paper will look at the changing foreign policy-making environment of Turkey, and its domestic political, economic and social as well as external inputs during the Gulf War. It will also contemplate the question whether Turkey, given its domestic, regional and international circumstances, could have acted otherwise.

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