

12  
MARCH  
2010

## TURKEY'S BOLD NEW VISA DIPLOMACY

**Deniz Devrim** Research Fellow at CIDOB  
**Eduard Soler** Research Fellow at CIDOB

*"You won't need a visa to travel from Amman or Beirut to Edirne. It is of great importance because we will get rid of artificial borders."*  
Turkish Primer Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan

The free movement of people is emerging as an increasingly significant factor in Turkey's foreign relations. The growing prominence of mobility in political debate reflects the rising attention that Turkey is paying to its neighbours. While this policy has specific strategic and economic objectives, ordinary people are beginning to benefit from its trickle-down effects. This is the case for Devrim Günçe, export manager at Knauf Turkey, a supplier of building materials. For this Turkish businessman from Izmit, travelling to neighbouring countries is becoming easier by the day. Recently, Turkey began lifting visa requirements with a series of neighbours: In October 2009, visas with Syria and Qatar were abolished, Jordan and Libya followed in November 2009 and Lebanon in January 2010. Russia, Ukraine, Saudi Arabia and Egypt could soon be added to the list. Meanwhile, obtaining a visa to travel to EU countries remains a very complex procedure for Turkish citizens.

Many observers argue that the current Turkish government, inspired by Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, has brought about a major transformation in Turkey's foreign policy. The approach involves a broad diversification of Turkey's foreign policy priorities with a number of primary objectives in mind: reinforcing Turkey's prominence in the international arena; resolving existing bilateral disputes, particularly with its immediate neighbours; strengthening those factors which can increase Turkey's soft power, notably in the Muslim world. There is no doubt that its immediate neigh-

hours have become more central to Turkey's foreign policy in recent years. Turkey's involvement in the search for a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict (including the failed Syria-Israel negotiations), its participation in Middle Eastern initiatives and the rehabilitation of bilateral relations with several Arab countries are all indicators of this new orientation. As expressed by one Turkish politician, Amman was a minor embassy some years ago; it has now become an important posting for a Turkish diplomat.

This process is followed with great interest in Turkey and beyond, and has prompted some analysts to tag the unfolding events with labels such as a return to 'neo-ottomanism' and 're-Islamised foreign policy'. Arab intellectuals are particularly interested in what the analyst Paul Salem described in his *al-Hayat* article as "Turkey's century in the Middle East", where he portrays a country that is not abandoning its bid to join the EU but is "evolving from being the rejected child of the European family to a potential patriarch of the Muslim family".<sup>1</sup> Columnists in Turkey often point out that the EU has lost its central place on the Turkish political agenda and that Turkey is slowly awakening from its dream of becoming a full member of the EU. Many analysts now suggest that

1. Salem, P., Could this be Turkey's Century in the Middle East?, in: *al-Hayat*, 30 October 2009.

Turkey's energetic visa policymaking with its neighbours is the clearest sign of the reorientation of Turkish policy away from the EU.

## Turkey's stage is the world

Foreign Minister Davutoglu has a vision: in the year 2023, Turkey will be a full EU member, a strong regional power, it will live in peace with all its neighbours and will be one of the biggest ten economies in the world. There are still many obstacles along the road to turning this vision into reality. Economic integration, however, is an important step to improving stability in the Middle East. The rise of a strong Turkish business community searching for investment opportunities has added a strong economic dimension to Turkey's foreign policy. Increasing intra-regional trade and freer travel between Turkey and its neighbours offers a good starting point

## Since the end of the Cold War, people's mobility to and from ex Soviet republics has been an important issue for Turkey in its relations with its neighbouring countries and an accommodating visa policy has already been used

for creating greater stability and security in the region.

For future cooperation with the EU, Turkey's foreign policy will represent a challenge. Traditionally, the EU has expected candidate countries to adjust to EU laws and policies, including relations with third countries. Turkey, however, will not settle for anything less than equal treatment on many foreign policy issues. Self-interest rather than a common destiny with the EU has become Turkey's defining approach. Today, its foreign policy architects have even come to reject the once popular *bridge* metaphor for their country and prefer to speak about Turkey as a *central country*, underlining thereby that Turkey is not the longer arm of the EU but a dominant player. Whereas for the EU, Turkey's ties with countries that the EU continues to shun, such as Syria and Iran, and Turkey's contribution to overcoming the international isolation of these countries could undermine EU foreign policy objectives. However, the EU should, instead, take advantage of the opportunities that Turkey presents. Even though Turkey still has to prove that its foreign policy approach towards its neighbours can produce concrete results, it is active in areas where the EU's role is weak, but where, at the same time, the EU's declared ambitions are high (Middle East, Central Asia, Caucasus).

It is difficult to ignore the effects that negative signals from the EU concerning Turkey's EU membership have had on the Turkish elites that now look for a foreign policy approach not entirely centred on EU integration. Interestingly, Turkey's focus on pragmatic issues such as visa liberalisation and tourism is very much reminiscent of the European Community approach after World War II when cooperation among the

countries also began with economic matters. Also in the case of Turkey, economic liberalisation has opened new foreign policy options and might yet lead to important spill-over effects such as enhanced strategic cooperation with the Middle East and lasting stability in the region.

## Turkey's new visa diplomacy: Economies matter, politics too

In the past, Turkey's difficulties with its neighbours ranging from disputes with Syria over border issues and the use of water from the Euphrates, Syria's support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), turbulent relations with Saddam Hussein's Iraq as well as problems with Greece over the Aegean Sea and Cyprus explain why Turkey was a country with tense and hostile relations with its immediate neighbours. This situation has since changed and Turkey is no longer the withdrawn and isolated country of the 1990s, surrounded by more enemies than friends.

However, those arguing that Turkey's promotion of freer mobility in its neighbourhood is purely a consequence of the new foreign policy approach of the AKP government that came into

to power in 2002, overlook the fact that since the end of the Cold War, people's mobility to and from ex Soviet republics has been an important issue for Turkey in its relations with its neighbouring countries and an accommodating visa policy has already been used. Following the fall of the iron curtain, a flexible, quick and simple visa system, known as the "sticker visa regime" saw a surge in Russian, Ukrainian, Caucasian and Central Asian citizens arriving into Turkey. In recent years, there has been a renewed impetus in Turkey's visa policy towards its neighbours. Today, Turkey does not require visas from many countries in its near abroad; such is the case for citizens from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This has led to an overall and exponential increase in tourism and trade links, including the informal "suitcase trade" allowing Turkey play a greater political and economic role in each of these countries. It now seems that in the future, Turkish citizens will be able to travel freely to more and more countries in their neighbourhood, while travelling to EU countries will probably remain a major problem.

Tourism and trade are just two of the several incentives for Turkey to liberalise its visa regime towards its neighbours but they indicate that economic interests in general represent a crucial reason for this policy conduct. Turkey is an export-orientated economy searching for ways to tackle the worldwide economic crisis. To portray its policies as attempts aimed at reviving a neo-ottoman model are absurd. Foreign policy expert Mensur Akgün from Istanbul argues that Turkey's visa policy is driven by practical and economic factors. Like any other country Turkey is eager to use all the tools at its disposal to survive the current economic crisis which has

led to a decline in its exports to the EU. New markets are being explored with remarkable success and for Prime Minister Erdogan – who in some ways is following the foreign policy and economy approach of Prime Minister Turgut Özal in the 1980s – one of the main goals in foreign policy is economic.

In recent years, the total value of Turkey's exports to the EU has decreased (overall exports in 2009 were less than 50%), whereas this same figure for Middle Eastern countries has kept growing (overall exports in 2009 were more than 20%). Turkish manufacturers are expanding into Russia, Central Asia, around the Black Sea and to the Middle East; free mobility is key to encouraging these business activities. An important factor in boosting economic ties is the good reputation that Turks have in the neighbouring region. In contrast to some Western European countries, Turkish citizens receive a warm welcome in the Middle East. A survey conducted by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) measured the perceptions on Turkey in seven Middle Eastern countries and found that for a majority, Turkey represents a potential political and economic model and its influence is growing daily. The survey shows that 75% of respondents generally think positively about Turkey, 77% would like to see Turkey play a bigger role in the region and 61% see Turkey as a model. The internal transformation of a predominantly Muslim country into a functioning democracy and its fast-growing and diversified economy have impressed Muslim countries and have won Turkey the respect of its neighbours. A positive perception is an important factor in creating a good business climate. Vural Öger, businessman in the travel industry and former Member of the European Parliament, points out: "Having been former colonies of the Western world, the countries in the Middle East have an inferiority complex, whereas Turkey is like their elder brother. Why should Middle Eastern countries then get the same goods they can get from Turkey, from EU countries?"

Apart from economic interests and a certain cultural affinity, strategic considerations among Turkish policy makers play an important role for Ankara's initiatives in the area of visa policies. The AKP's foreign policy spokesman Suat Kınıklıoğlu points out that the current visa policy is in line with Turkey's neighbourhood policy in general, stressing that political and economic interests play a complementary role. The architects of Turkish foreign policy believe that stronger economic ties create a climate which is conducive to solving political problems. This strengthens Turkey's role in the region.

Without doubt, Turkey's so-called zero-problems approach towards its neighbours also has an economic background, considering that political conflicts with neighbours often have economic consequences. Behind the Turkish visa policy lie economic and political explanations. Turkey's focus on regional trade between the Balkans and the Middle East ends the unnatural break that reigned the Cold War; however, re-

investing in the geographical economic and commercial patterns of the Ottoman Empire has little to do with Islam or neo-ottomanism. Simply put, visa liberalization offers Turkey new trade links with neighbouring countries. Boosting trade is also a useful means of developing Turkey's southern provinces and cities, such as Şanlıurfa, Adana, Gaziantep and Mardin.

Nevertheless, significant barriers to higher trade volumes between Turkey and its neighbours remain. Devrim Günçe complains that existing trade barriers in the form of customs duties between Turkey and neighbouring countries are a major obstacle and adds that he would rather wait two weeks for a visa than pay existing custom taxes. The Customs Union between Turkey and the EU allows goods to travel freely between EU countries and Turkey, yet the existing visa regime prevents people who sell these goods to travel freely. In the case of Turkey and its non-EU neighbours the reverse

## Turkish manufacturers are expanding into Russia, Central Asia, around the Black Sea and to the Middle East; free mobility is key to encouraging these business activities

situation is causing problems: People have begun to travel freely, but barriers against trade are still high.

### Getting closer: The Syrian example

The case of visa liberalization with Syria results from the combined effect of political and economical factors. Turkish-Syrian relations have been extremely tense in the past. A deep ideological cleavage, sovereignty claims on the disputed zone of Hatay, the control of the use of waters of Euphrates and Tigris and PKK's safe haven in Syria explain why the two countries intermittently turned their backs on each other and even came close to war in 1998.

Following a change of Syrian policy towards the PKK by the end of the 1990s, relations between the two countries began to normalise. However, it was with political change in Ankara (victory of the AKP in 2002) and the arrival of Bashar-al-Asad succeeding to the Syrian Presidency after his father's death in 2000 that bilateral relations made a qualitative leap. The two countries stepped up the number of high-level official visits and set projects of trans-border cooperation in motion, they even carried out joint military exercises in May 2009. In 2004, a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries was signed and came into force in 2007. The two countries are also seeking ways to co-operate on water issues, a strong source of friction in the past. This new rapprochement culminated with the establishment of the "High Level Strategic Cooperation Council" that sets regular meetings between the two governments. In October 2009 the Foreign Affairs Ministers of Syria and Turkey signed an agreement that ended restrictions to free movement of people. This agreement now allows citizens

to travel to the other country without a visa, allowing them to stay up to 90 days every six months. A few months after this measure came into effect, the results in terms of border-crossing, tourism and trade are clearly visible, particularly in cities such as Gaziantep and Aleppo.

So what is the reasoning that lies behind the decision by both Syria and Turkey to leave aside all disputes and exhibit their new closeness in such a visible and confident manner? There are both political and economic reasons. This new departure is fairly positive for Syria, a country that in the recent past was included among George Bush's 'axis of the evil' and was listed by the US State Department as a country supporting terrorist organisations. Developing friendly relations with Turkey, a NATO member and EU candidate, is a good way to diversify its international relations. In economic terms, intensifying relations with its northern neighbour, a country which boasts three times its population and a GDP more than ten times larger, is also promising. However, some argue that this is not a relationship of equals, fearing that Turkey's economy will only threaten the Syrian private sector, which is slowly emerging from four decades of centralised planning. But the benefits of Turkish investment might balance unfair competition.

## The internal transformation of a predominantly Muslim country into a functioning democracy and its fast-growing and diversified economy have impressed Muslim countries and have won Turkey the respect of its neighbours

As for Turkey, improving relations with Damascus is perfectly consistent with its declared goal of solving bilateral problems with its neighbours and becoming an important player in the Middle East. Turkey's mediation between Syria and Israel before the Gaza crisis is probably one of the clearest examples of this strategy. However, economic incentives are also very important. Trade volumes have doubled since the entry into force of the Free Trade Agreement with Syria and the visa-liberalization is expected to accelerate this boom even further. Moreover, Syria is seen by many Turks as the gateway to the Arab world for Turkish goods.

### Difficulties in Mobility of Turkish citizens to EU countries

In its relations with the EU, the free movement of people has been a major issue for Turkey, even before it became a candidate country. In the mid-eighties there were heated debates between Ankara and some then EC member states regarding the implementation of clauses of the Ankara agreement (creating an association between Turkey and the European Community, 1964) foreseeing the free movement of people between Turkey and the EC, which was never ultimately implemented. This issue is likely to remain controversial during the negotiation process for Turkey's EU

accession, particularly regarding the possible future extension of the Schengen visa regime to Turkey, in the harmonization of asylum policies, the control of Turkey's borders and the issue of reciprocity with the EU. With its new visa policy orientation towards the Middle East, Turkey is certainly not going in the direction of harmonizing its visa regime with that of the EU, an issue that will no doubt complicate the opening of the migration chapter. The chapter covering migration-related issues is one of the few chapters that is not formally blocked, but there has been, in any case, very little effort from the Turkish side to harmonize migration policies in its pre-accession endeavours. What can be seen as Turkey's failure to pursue this issue, and its proactive behaviour on visa policy with its non-EU neighbours in general, is the result of the overall loss of credibility of the EU accession process among Turkish officials.

Interestingly, many Turkish citizens that support EU accession rank liberalization of movement into the EU as one of the most desired benefits of joining: this is one of the elements that justifies supporting the process. Meanwhile, the EU's reluctance to facilitate the entry of Turks into its territory, or the prospect of it placing permanent safeguards on their mobility once inside its borders, has contributed to the growth of recent scepticism among ordinary Turks regarding the feasibility and attractiveness of the accession project.

The visa-liberalisation policies of the EU towards Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia that came into force in December 2009 and allow citizens of these countries to travel freely into the EU have provoked strong reactions in Turkey. The fact that visa liberalisation was granted to countries not yet negotiating EU membership but is being denied to Turkey, a country that has been an EU candidate for ten years and conducting membership talks for four years, is simply unacceptable to many Turkish citizens.

What is more, Turkish citizens feel they are treated unfairly when applying for Schengen visas. Travelling businessman Devrim Günçe tells us that he is often required to present private information such as bank details and electricity bills, even though he travels to EU countries on regular business trips. Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has criticised the hold-ups, indicating that if Turkish citizens are not given the same right under similar conditions, it would reveal the discriminative perspective of the EU towards Turkey.<sup>2</sup>

---

2. Turkey until today has not ratified the re-admission agreement, which is a condition for visa liberalisation.

## Conclusion

Both, economic interests and strategic considerations encourage Turkey to liberalize its visa regime towards countries in its near abroad. Economic growth is an important pillar of Turkish foreign policy and free mobility is a key asset for a Turkish economy that is expanding into Russia, Central Asia, around the Black Sea and to the Middle East. In 2009, Turkey and Russia declared their intentions to multiply their volume of trade to \$100 billion within five years. The planned visa liberalisation between both countries will be central to fulfilling this self-imposed challenge. As regards EU-Turkey relations, Turkey's visa diplomacy risks complicating an already difficult relationship, as all the countries with which Turkey recently abolished its visa requirements are part of the EU Schengen Blacklist.

The multi-priority and zero-problem approach of Turkey's foreign policy can be criticized for being too ambitious, especially considering Turkey's limited diplomatic capacities, but it offers an attractive approach for neighbouring countries. It is very likely that Turkey's regional influence will continue to grow in the future as other major regional powers, such as Russia and Iran, lack a comparably appealing vision for the region. In contrast, Turkey's cultural affinity with neighbouring countries, the quality of its consolidating democracy, its Europeanization process and economic development are broadly admired. Rather than assuming that Turkey's non-EU relations are one dimensional and can only signify that it is turning away from Europe, it would make more sense for the EU to seize the opportunity to support Turkey's potential to spread democracy and economic growth to its neighbours, all the more as many of these countries are part to the EU Neighbourhood Policy.