

Mediation capacity of Turkey as a regional power

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Abstract

Mediation is frequently used as a method of resolution of the most complicated international conflicts. Not every international actor is suitable for conduct of the mediation. Turkey as a particular state with specific political, cultural and geographical characteristics would like to serve as a mediation centre for various international issues, which are almost everywhere in her neighbourhood. On the other hand, Turkey cannot be fitting mediator for all of these conflicts, which brings us to the closer assessment of her mediation capacity in certain cases.

When it comes to conflict resolution of the most complicated international disputes, mediation is one of the most used and at the same time most successful means of reconciliation. Mediation is being characterized as “an extension of negotiation process whereby an acceptable third party with no ultimate decision making power intervenes to change the course or outcome of particular conflict to assist the disputants in their search for mutually acceptable agreement” (Folberg and Taylor 1984, Moore 1986). We may conclude that mediation is the real art of possible.

Especially in those cases, which involve long list of mutual atrocities, killings and hatred, when direct diplomatic negotiations are not fruitful anymore or seems to be unthinkable the international mediation steps in. According to mediation specialists and theorists, mediation likely occurs when “a conflict has gone on for some time, efforts of actors involved reached impasse, neither actor is prepared to countenance further costs or escalation of the dispute, both parties welcome some form of mediation and are ready to engage in direct or indirect dialogue” (Bercovitch, 1984). Even if mediation does not always mean prompt settlement of dispute, it usually at least brings the conflicting parties to the negotiation table along with a truce, ceasefire or armistice for limited amount of time. As the examples of such developments can be mentioned the mediation of Israeli-Palestinian conflict by USA, later The Quartet² and recently Egypt and

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² (USA, Russian Federation, UN and EU)

also present improvements and steps towards settlement of the status of Kosovo in negotiations between Serbia and Kosovar Albanians mediated by EU.

There are some requirements for mediator to be successful. It has to be an actor, which is respected and well known by conflicting parties, state or international organisation, represented by individuals of high personal and professional dignity and experience. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for a single mediator, who was distrusted by one of the parties, to carry out any useful function (Jackson, 1952). In theory, ideal mediator should not have his own interest in achieving particular results, which could bring him expected advantages or be from any reason biased to the benefit of one side. All of these characteristics strengthen the trust and respect of possible mediator in eyes of conflicting parties, otherwise they may not agree with any kind of proceedings implicating lax, incompetent approach of mediator or favourable treatment of demands of adversary. On the other hand, in some cases this may be not enough, conflicting parties turn to mediator not only because they expect him to be impartial, but also because he may be able to help them protect their interest and possesses leverage on the other disputing party (Bercovitch, 1984). Passive mediation is usually less successful than active and conducted research argues that directive strategies brought better results than communication-facilitation strategies³⁴ (Donohue, 1989, Hiltrop 1989). At the same time, for the mediation to be successful, there has to be some major impetus for the conflicting parties to settle the dispute and find mutually benefitting solution, in other words, any possible positive outcome without at least some kind of so called win-win situation is not really possible. If conflicting parties cannot find anything positive resulting from the possible reconciliation, it is up to major actors of the global political system to exercise sufficient and adequate pressure, as they attempt to in present case of Iranian nuclear programme.

Turkey - natural regional mediator?

There is an old-new regional power in a Mediterranean and Middle East region. Turkey has always been relevant actor in this area, from the beginning as the only state that could deal

³ directive strategies involve very active approach of mediator who issues for conflicting parties new proposals, provides incentives for further reconciliation, offers rewards and punishments etc., while facilitation-communication strategies do not involve such strong interference of mediator

⁴ positive outcome in cca 50 % of cases when employed directive strategies and cca 30% when communication-facilitation strategies

with and change the conditions imposed by the winners in the wake of World War One. After period of recovery and restoration followed by membership in NATO as a protection against possible socialist revolution, Turkey turned to EC/EU to cement her position in so called advanced western civilisation. According to famous book of prof. Huntington, Clash of Civilizations, Turkey is an internally torn state with population tied to Muslim traditions but political elites committed to westernization of the whole society (Huntington, 1997, p. 163). Turkey cannot deny her history and kinship with Muslim states, but changes from the very beginning of the Republic cannot be reversed either. In favour of Turkey as a mediator in this respect speak assumptions that mediators who shared religious, ideological or economic values with conflicting parties had a higher chance of success than other mediators (Frei, 1976) and „the greater the cultural differences between disputants, the less likelihood of successful mediation“. (Raymond and Kegley 1985, p. 38).

In an attempt to push forward with the EU accession process, first of all Turkey tried to adjust herself to the “zero problems foreign policy with her neighbours” (Falk, 2012). After recognition that the conditions are very unfavourable to early/if ever accession to the EU, Turkey wanted to continue and upgrade this policy to active engagement in region especially in conflict resolution in various conflicts in her troubled region.

To the advantages of Turkey as a mediator of disputes in her region belongs her affiliation to both Muslim and western states. After reforms, long membership in NATO and association through customs union with EU, is Turkey more or less trustworthy and transparent partner of west. The government of moderate Islamic party AKP carried out unprecedented democratic reforms and after no go from Republic of Cyprus, Greece and France⁵ changed the course of foreign policy and engages herself more with kin Turkic and Muslim states. There is at the same time close cooperation with Russia in energy sector⁶. The only troubled relations are except traditional matters (Greece and Cyprus) those with Israel⁷. If Turkey maintains solid relations with both west and east, it will definitely want to use these prerequisites for achieving prestigious position of regional mediator. According to bold statements of government, Turkey seeks to become international mediation centre “Pursuing a more dynamic foreign policy in in recent years and exerting great efforts to place cooperation and dialogue on solid foundation in Afro-

⁵ regarding the negotiation chapters and EU membership

⁶ new Turkish power plant and transition of resources

⁷ which on the other hand reinforced the rapprochement with Muslim states

Eurasian, Turkey attaches special importance to preventive diplomacy, pioneers a great deal of mediation attempts in a wide geography and endeavors actively for the peaceful settlement of disputes” (MFA Turkey, 2011). In spite of all of that there is always risk of losing trust of all sides, also because of the phenomena of no clear identity.

The aim of this article is to assess the capacity of Turkey in mediation of various particular international regional conflicts. Middle East, Balkan and Caucasus is classical space where international conflicts grow like mushrooms. Turkey is herself part of some conflicts, namely with Greece⁸, Cyprus and Armenia⁹. However, there are other right on the borders of Turkey: civil war like conflict in Syria, which draws attention of the world these days, Naghorno Karabakh territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iranian nuclear programme enraging especially Israel. Except of these there are also other conflicts further from Turkey, like developments in Afghanistan and dealing with Taliban, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Kosovo statute, territorial integrity of Georgia after war with Russia and separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and also dispute between Greece and Macedonia about the official title of former Yugoslavian republic.

It is important to sort out all these conflicts and focus on those that may allow Turkey to step up as a mediator. Firstly, conflicts in which is Turkey herself involved (as a conflicting party) are irrelevant. Secondly, it would be difficult for Turkey (or anyone) to meddle in Russian sphere of influence, therefore can be Turkish engagement in the frozen conflict over Naghorno Karabakh ruled out. Thirdly, Kosovo issue is currently being on the long way to be solved because of the wish of both Serbia and Kosovar Albanians to become EU members¹⁰ and of course there is Turkish more or less one sided support of Kosovo¹¹. Fourthly, since Turkey can only hardly be perceived as a friendly partner for Greece and mediation in case of official name of Macedonia is also unrealistic. Fifthly, since the former close ties with Israel do not recently exist, there is opportunity for others to get in the position of mediator (last time Egypt). And at the same time, experience proves that maybe no one may emerge in this case as ultimately successful mediator. Sixthly, Turkey has her own issue with Armenia, close cultural ties with Azerbaijan and is also more or less dependent on Azerbaijani resources, which makes Turkey

⁸ territorial sea, airspace, Aegean islands, resources...

⁹ genocide issue and closed border

¹⁰ EU cannot afford another Cyprus and mediates the conflict till now quite successfully

¹¹ because of the parallel with Cyprus issue

staunch supporter of Azerbaijan regarding the conflict in Naghorno Karabakh. The main opportunities for Turkey did and will dwell in Syria, Iran and Afghanistan.

Turkey and Syria - Friend or Foe?

Turkey served for time as a mediator between Syria and Israel and also between Syria and Iraq. Israel and Syria held five rounds of indirect talks under Turkish mediation in 2008 about the future of the Israeli-held Golan Heights on the border between the two countries (Seibert, 2010). It was result of Turkish zero problems foreign policy and close friendly relations with Syria.

Both states had always reasons for cautious approach in their mutual relations. Turkey was a secular state with close ties on NATO, EU, USA and Israel, what diminished mutual trust and contributed to atmosphere of previously troubled relations. Present Turkish province of Hatay or so called Sanjak of Alexandretta¹² has been for long subject of territorial dispute. This has later been accompanied by conflicts over use of water from Euphrates river and Syrian support for PKK¹³. After the worsening crisis in 1998, several treaties between Syria and Turkey were concluded, including cooperation on fight against PKK. Mutual trust has been strengthened with Turkish denial of participation at Iraqi invasion in 2003 and relations flourished after onset of new era in relations in 2007 with enforcement of the free trade area and especially in 2009 after the signature of Joint Political Declaration on establishment of High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC), multiple mutual high profile visits including presidential, prime ministerial and foreign ministerial level, visa exemption agreement and total of 50 agreements and Memorandums of Understanding signed in Damascus at the HLSCC meeting in December 2009. As a direct effect of these developments, the trade volume rose from 796 million USD in 2006 to 2.5 billion USD in 2010 and touristic visits between the two countries more than doubled (MFA TURKEY, 2012). There is no doubt that these improvements contributed to rise of Turkey in eyes of Syria and more than friendly climate. This helped Turkey to gain necessary amount of trust to become facilitator of talks between Syria and Israel in 2008. Rapprochement with Arab states and opposition towards Israeli policy lead to loss of confidence on the latter side and spelled out the end of mediation process.

¹² Turkish province on borders with Syria with majority of Arab population

¹³ Kurdistan Workers' Party, organisation struggling for independent Kurdistan listed as a terrorist by multiple international organisations

The honeymoon in Turkish-Syrian relations ended with beginning of current crisis. Turkey attempted to maintain as positive relations as possible with both Syrian government and insurgents, but deteriorating of situation in neighboring state and relatively slow but steady inflow of refugees persuaded Turkey to put her wait for support of Syrian opposition. Turkey acted as one of the last friends of Syria in the region, but with passing time and increasing number of civilian casualties as well as refugees on Turkish territory, the time for Syria is already up. Civil war touches upon Turkish interests, causes unrest on the borders and may serve as a possible entry point for further PKK members. Since the situation proved to be too difficult to be handled by Turkey this time, UN dispatched its heavy weight diplomat, former secretary general Koffi Annan, for a mission to Damascus, who took a break on his way in Ankara. After very active engagement in this issue, Turkish influence and possibilities are hitting their limits, when Turkey could not after all achieve particular results.

Officials and analysts say Turkey is extremely wary of engaging in any unilateral military action, mindful of the perils of igniting a sectarian conflict on its own border, alienating public opinion in the Arab world or, worse, inadvertently instigating regional war. “The stakes are very high for Turkey in Syria,” said Soli Özel, a columnist for Haberturk, a leading Turkish newspaper. “If Turkey proves to be ineffectual in resolving the Syrian conflict, then all of the claims of its regional prowess will take a big hit” (Bilefski, 2012). The role of Turkey in this conflict, which poses a challenge and opportunity at once, is very complicated. It should not get too much militarily involved in the situation, to not lose support of fellow Muslim nations, have to help the insurgents to prove her “support for the righteous side” and try to diminish the intensity of the conflict to prevent even greater humanitarian crisis on her doorstep, which could easily usher into increase of Syrian refugees on her territory by tens to hundreds thousands of refugees.

Pressure on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is intensifying these days, with US-Turkish agreement on non-military aid to insurgents, closed Turkish embassy and warning from Russia that Syria is facing civil war (Gedalayhu, 2012). Since the step-down of al-Assad is still not likely, some of the intriguing questions will be answered on “Friends of Syria” meeting on 1. April hosted by Turkey in Istanbul, which shall bring together Syrian opposition factions and especially group of western and Arab states, which favor stronger international action against Syrian government (Today’s Zaman, 2012). Major contribution to sustainable solution without

much more bloodshed and atrocities could cement Turkish ties to Syria, especially if al-Assad stepped down, but current situation is no doubt major challenge to Turkey. If Turkey manages to retain trust of whatever future Syrian government and regains that of Israel, it would be possible to continue peace talks with Turkish support in years coming. Current situation and Syrian president leave no doubt that right now no interference is welcome.

Nuclear Issue - Iran

Turkey, Iran and their predecessors have a long history of mutual relations, both peaceful and full of conflict. Although both states consist predominantly of Muslim population, Turkey is secular state trying to fit into concept of western democracy with prevailing majority of Sunni Muslims and Iran can be from the revolution in 1979 depicted as a fundamentalist regime, which is based on Shi'a Islam. After the deposition of US supported Reza Shah Pahlavi and establishment of theocratic rule in Iran, was conflict with ideological antagonists only a matter of time. Iran has mostly been considered regional power and one of the key actors in Middle East region. Instead of construction of another western ally in the region with similar characteristics as Turkey, which could help reduce the frictions with Arabic-Muslim countries, Iran became one of the staunchest critics of US foreign policy and especially sworn adversary of Israel. Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad stated in last years several times his wish "to wipe Israel off the map" which sounds nothing but Iranian version of Arabian phrase "drive the Jews into the sea" (Soutar, 2006). Such declarations could not stay unnoticed in Israel which spent years fighting for sole existence, with dreadful memory of holocaust in mind.

Developments between Israel, Palestinian Authority and neighbouring Arabic states were and are accompanied by occasional outbreaks of violence, which could not lead to anything else but animosity with Iranian regime. One of the safeguards for existence of Israel is the presumed nuclear arsenal, which is connected to Israeli non-membership of NPT¹⁴. On the other hand, Iran is not only member of this treaty, but publicly also announced intention to apply its provisions, namely peaceful use of nuclear energy for civilian purposes like production of electricity. At the same time this intent was not greeted equally enthusiastically in the west and especially Israel, which could theoretically become the closest target of results of Iranian nuclear programme, in

¹⁴ Non Proliferation Treaty or full title "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons"

case that it was not that much peaceful as declared. Iran was not always very helpful when it came to IAEA¹⁵ officials' inspections, what did cast doubt on real purpose of nuclear programme.

Iran has made it to the US rogue states list but after arguable results of previous interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, justified by alleged existence of weapons of mass destruction, another US warlike venture in Middle East is much less likely than before. The construction of antiballistic missile shields indicates, that it is no more conflict between Iran and Israel or US, but also broader range of actors that are mostly NATO and EU members, some of them with permanent seats in contemporary (although archaic and rather ineffective) global security structure - UNSC.

Turkey in line with zero problems policy and desire to play greater role in the region maintains lively relations with Iran. Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan has just recently returned from the official visit in Tehran, where he met with both president Ahmadinejad and Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Turkey in long run always voiced her support for Iranian (peaceful) nuclear programme as underpinned by following quotes: "The government and nation of Turkey has always clearly supported the nuclear positions of the Islamic republic of Iran, and will continue to firmly follow the same policy in the future," Erdogan was quoted as saying in the statement issued by Ahmadinejad's office. "Military threats against a country that seeks to master peaceful nuclear technology are not acceptable" (El Arabiya, 2012) ... those who criticize Iran's nuclear program continue to possess the same weapons," said Erdogan (Haaretz, 2009). Khamenei's insisted that Iran is not pursuing nuclear weapons because Islam prohibits weapons of mass destruction (Goodenough, 2012). Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Saleh stated during this visit that talks between Iran and representatives of the six powers (5 plus 1 - US, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany) would be held on April 13 in Istanbul: "Istanbul has expressed its readiness to host these talks and is still one of the probable options for hosting these negotiations, I personally believe that Istanbul is the better option for hosting the negotiations" (Cowel, 2012). Previous similar meeting took place in Istanbul in 2011 but failed.

This may seem as another honeymoon in relations, but appearances can be deceiving. According to some of Iranian as well as Turkish high profile analysts, Turkey is Iran's international rival whether likes it or not, in the whole Islamic world, especially in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (Qajar, 2012, Çevikalp, 2012). Turkey is member of NATO and as such agreed to

¹⁵ International Atomic Energy Agency

construct anti-missile shield on her territory, which could be easily used against Iran. At the same time, Turkey and Iran are deeply divided in their opinion regarding recent developments in Syria. Iran continues to declare support for Syrian president and government no matter the rising number of atrocities. And in one of the last attempts to continue policy to make everyone happy, Turkey joined the US and EU lead sanctions on Iranian oil exports (EUbusiness.com , 2012).

In wake of this events Iranian officials started to raise doubts on Turkey (Istanbul) as a host for international talks about nuclear programme and proposed Syria, Iraq or China instead (Gladstone, 2012). Desired role of Turkey in this whole process is therefore in question.

Afghanistan – Building

The last but not least, another challenge for Turkish mediation, diplomatic and peacebuilding capacities are developments in Afghanistan. Turkey and Afghanistan enjoy stable and close political and cultural relations. Afghanistan was the first state which recognised the independence of modern Turkish republic after the World War 1 in more or less today's borders in 1921 through the Turkey-Afghanistan Treaty in Moscow, being the first international treaty of the Ankara government (Eksi, 2010). There are also numerous ethnical groups in Afghanistan including whole Central Asia region, which belong to so called Turkic nations.

Later during the Cold War period Afghanistan became indirectly battleground of superpowers and not even collapse of Soviet Union could bring lasting peace into this region. After the 9/11 bombings NATO intervened in Afghanistan to overthrow Taliban's government and troops of alliance are still present in this country. Security situation is not satisfactory but US and other governments plan to withdraw their armed forces soon. Increased presence of US and NATO in Afghanistan picked also curiosity of other important actors, which are in this region due to geographical reasons in almost every direction – China, India, Pakistan, Iran and Russia. All of these actors influence stabilisation of security situation and nation-building¹⁶ in Afghanistan (Crabtree, 2011). Taliban, which is sworn enemy of interventionist powers, used area behind Pakistani borders as a shelter and base for violent attacks into Afghan territory.

It was apparent during the last years that Turkey armed by her zero problems foreign policy became one of the key players, which could serve well towards solving the puzzle. Turkey

¹⁶ In sense of state building - armed forces, police, judiciary, infrastructure, public services of all kinds, opposite of failing state

is not only one of the important contributors to the ISAF¹⁷ mission in terms of manpower, but achieved better results than other ISAF troops because of distinct approach. Turkey's amicable approach, through which she embraces all groups of the country without any discrimination, makes Turkey a role model to be adopted for her political approach by other regional players in resolution of Afghanistan's issues (Eksi, 2010). As Afghan Minister of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock Mohammad Asif Rahimi says regarding the civilian and economic reconstruction of the country: "Recent changes in Afghanistan may finally bring peace and stability, and Turkey is playing a leading role" (Rahimi, 2012). In other words, the Turkish approach has always been to provide their regional reconstruction aid to the existing local authorities, regardless of their religious (i.e. Taliban) affiliation, what is cause of the fact that although Turkey has deployed more troops to Afghanistan than Canada, Turkey has yet to suffer a single fatality as a result of hostile fire (Taylor, 2009). In this particular case it does not mean that Turkey did not experience loss of lives in Afghanistan, when only few weeks ago 12 Turkish members of NATO mission died in tragic helicopter crash. Turkish opposition parties immediately started to question the reason for Turkish military presence in Afghanistan, but government answered with firm support and strong backing of Afghan mission. "In this time of sorrow, I would like to reaffirm our strong commitment to Afghanistan... ..Our soldiers were in Kabul to help their Afghan brothers and sisters to build a secure and stable Afghanistan," Turkish permanent UN representative Ertugrul Apakan said during an open debate of the UN Security Council on the current situation of Afghanistan (Xinhua, 2012).

Turkey continues to play important role not only in Afghan internal issues, but tries to solve one of the main external issues connected to the core of security situation in Afghanistan. These are the attempts to settle disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan over Taliban's bases on Pakistani territory. Turkey enjoys good relations with both states and is actively engaged in trilateral dialogue. Since April 2007, Turkey has hosted six Turkey-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Forum meetings involving senior Turkish, Afghan, and Pakistani government officials and on another occasion succeeded in bringing almost all involved powers to one table (Weitz, 2012). Results of these Turkish diplomatic activities have been limited, but they may serve as a good base for further improvements and so much needed process in early future. Thanks to these contributions to Afghan security, Turkey may be indispensable when it comes to reconciliation

¹⁷ International Security Assistance Force – NATO led mission in Afghanistan

attempts among Afghan factions inside of the country well connected to the cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Conclusion

Turkey exists in troubled neighbourhood circumvented by international conflicts of various levels of intensity. Geographical, political, cultural and historical characteristics of Turkey predict suitability of this state to conduct international mediation and created favourable climate for her active participation in resolution of these conflicts. At the same time, there are multiple factors that prevent Turkey from deeper engagement in many regional disputes. Turkey is currently struggling to achieve positive results especially in three vital regional issues with clear global impact. These challenges dwell in Syria, Iran and Afghanistan. Possible mediation of talks with Syria becomes everyday more difficult, as numbers of refugees rise and Turkey could easily get into the conflict herself. Iranian nuclear ambitions and Western concerns could be tackled, but Turkey is balancing on a tight rope between both sides, where the trust of any of them can be lost easily. Their greatest expectations are likely evolving in Afghanistan, where the security situation could not be dealt with by purely military measures and Turkish civilian inclusive support as well as ties with Pakistan proved very useful.

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