Turkey-Middle East Relations in the Cold War Era and the Great Powers
Soğuk Savaş Dönemi Türkiye-Orta Doğu Münasebetleri ve Büyük Güçler

Yrd. Doç. Dr. Nedim YALANSIZ
Dokuz Eylül University

Abstract

Because of the Soviet threat at the end of World War II, Turkey followed a British-American centered foreign policy. In order to maintain a presence in the Middle East Britain embraced Turkey as her close ally in the region. The United States followed “containment policy” against the Soviet goal to spread communism in the region. Turkey thus played a key role in the region as a British and American ally in the Middle East, but one which destroyed its relations with the other regional countries, like Egypt, which was under Soviet influence. This paper covers Turkey’s relations with the Middle Eastern countries during the Cold War and examines the influence of Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union on Turkey’s Middle East policy.

Key Words: Turkey, Middle East, Cold War, Great Powers, Containment Policy, USA, Britain, Russia

Öz


Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Ortaçoğul, Soğuk Savaş, Büyük Güçler, ABD, İngiltire, Rusya

From the end of the Second World War, Turkey strove to take part in the Western institutions. In this context, Turkey took the first step by entering United Nations. Turkey also aimed to reinforce its own defense via NATO. But Britain, which wanted to give Turkey a role in the Middle Eastern defense system, did not wish Turkey’s entrance into NATO,¹ and

¹ A. Halâk Ülman, “Nato ve Türkiye”, SBF Dergisi, Volume: XXII (1967), Number: 4, pp.149-150; Türkkaya Ataöv, “Türk Dış Politikası Üzerine Düşünceler”, SBF Dergisi, Volume: XXIV, Number: 1,
Turkish president Mustafa İsmet İnönü sought to maintain neutrality. Russians at that time had special ambitions on the Dardanelles. For this reason, İnönü was obliged to take part in the Western alliance. The Democrat Party, which took the control of the government in 1950, aimed to play a key role in the Middle East after accomplishing Turkey’s entrance into NATO.  

Britain, which did not want to lose her control over the Suez Canal, proposed to form the Middle East Command (MEC) and Middle East Defense Organisation (MEDO) in which initially United States, France and Turkey would take part. At that time, in order to prevent the spread of the Soviets to the Middle East, the United States put a Northern Tier/Containment Policy into practise. In this strategy, the countries which had no Arab majority like Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan would play important roles. After regeneration of the British-Egyptian agreement, it was proposed Egypt by the British that Egypt take a seat in the Middle East Defense Organisation. But the efforts yielded no success because Egypt no longer wanted to be free from British pressure. Also the proposal of the Arab League to form a new defense organisation played a role in that situation.

Turkey clearly declared that it would not enter into the project of Middle East Command without first entering NATO. Besides this, as Fuad Köprülü mentioned in his speech at the Turkish National Assembly on 20 July 1951, Turkey was ready to play the necessary role in the Middle East after its official acceptance to NATO. This statement was enough to convince the British. The speech of the British Foreign Minister Herbert Morrison in the House of Commons on 18 July 1951 described the Turkish situation, saying “The basic difficulty with Turkey is to reconcile its desire to join NATO and its place in the defense of the Middle East…. Turkey’s playing its role in the defense of the Middle East is important for us. Turks agreed with us on this issue. I hope the necessary work will be completed for Turkey’s participation into the plans of the security of the Middle East, the most important region of the world.”

The Middle East Defense Organisation was introduced by Britain and the United States in June 1952 after Turkey’s official entry to NATO on 18 February 1952. The Middle East gained much more importance for the US after the Korean War. The situation of the region was highly serious. The possible absorption of the region, with its important oil reserves

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3 John Kent, “The Egyptian base and the defence of the Middle East, 1945–54”, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 21:3, (1993), pp. 52-59; Dietrich Jung, “Turkey and the Arab World: Historical Narratives and New Political Realities”, Mediterranean Politics, 2005, Vol.10, No:1, pp. 8-9; Like Australia and New Zealand that had warm relations with the UK, were taking part in the strategic defense plan of the Far East, South Africa was also willing to take role in the defense of the Middle East. 1952-53 [Cmd. 8768] Statement on defence, 1953, p.18


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and strategic points like Suez Canal, into the Soviet sphere of interest would greatly change the balance of power. The American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, who mentioned that threat in his speeches, visited the region on 11-28 May 1953 in order to check the feasibility of the British project called the Middle East Defense Organisation. In his travel Dulles had an impression that the Arabs were not ready for such a pact and they also gave more importance to their disputes with Israel, Britain and France than the Communist threat. On the other hand he also detected the non-Arab and neighbouring countries of the Soviet Union were aware of this threat.\(^6\)

Turkey, which supported the Middle East Command and the Middle East Defense Organisation, was the regional power component in the American policy called “Northern Tier” because it was the only Middle Eastern country in the western alliance.\(^7\) The initiatives that would be based on the Baghdad Pact came from the United States which would not take part in it. The bilateral agreements between the US and Pakistan and the cooperation agreement between Turkey and Pakistan formed the basis of the Baghdad Pact and the Northern Tier. But Turkey and Pakistan, besides being Muslim, were non-Arab Middle Eastern countries. The most appropriate country that could be added these countries, was Iraq, which was an Arab country that had close relations with Britain and Turkey. At the same time Iraq began to receive military aid from the United States in April 1954.\(^8\)

In order to protect her sovereignty over the Suez Canal, Britain started negotiations with the Egyptian side and on 27 June 1954 both sides settled the main articles. The fourth one of them related to Turkey. According to this article, Britain would use the Suez Canal and other Egyptian ports if any attack was made on Egypt, the Arab League members or Turkey.\(^9\) The reference to Turkey in the titles of this agreement is really important. Warm relations between Turkey and Britain at that time also showed that Turkey would assume an active role in the Middle East Defense Organisation. However the military junta in Egypt accepted this agreement because of the uncertainty of its status. The Junta also refused the addition of the article relating to Turkey, which they saw as an excuse of the British to go back to Canal region. This situation led to deterioration in Turkish-Egyptian relations. In the end, Britain won the recognition of that article with the political support of the United States.\(^10\)

Turkey gained the leading role with the co-operation agreement signed with Pakistan on 2 April 1954. The first steps in the intimate talks with Iraq accelerated with the realization of the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 19 October 1954. In this way, as an Arab country, Iraq became more involved. While Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Said Pasha was thinking that the reactions of the Arab nationalists would be settled with the entrance of Iraq to the pact, Turkey was also thinking that Egypt would support the pact with the other Arab countries. In

\(^7\) Kürkçüoğlu, ibid, p. 54.
fact, Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes began a Middle East tour starting from Iraq and later including Syria and Lebanon. Menderes who faced a warm reception in Iraq, met with the protests by communists in Syria. He realized that he could not get the support of Syria and Lebanon for the Baghdad Pact. Egypt’s description of the pact as a form of opposition against the Arab League bore the result that Syria and Lebanon would not support the pact without the consent of the Arab League.11

Adnan Menderes who made positive statements in order to prevent Egypt’s opposition to the Baghdad Pact, also sent his request for a meeting to Nasser via the Governor of Ankara, Kemal Aygün. Nasser refused this request, stating that “The Egyptian public opinion is not ready yet to accept my meeting with your Prime Minister. There are two important factors that show Turkey antipathetic to the Egyptians. One of these is your warm relations with Israel and the other one is your contributions for the establishment of Middle East Defense Organisation with Britain, United States and France. Meeting with Menders by ignoring these, may face a fierce response from the Egyptians. So initially we must prepare the public opinion here for Turco-Egyptian friendship…”12

Despite all the opposition, Turkey and Iraq signed the Treaty of Baghdad Pact on 24 February 1955. Great Britain joined the pact on 5 April 1955, and was joined by Pakistan on 23 September 1955 and Iran on 3 April 1955.13 Before joining the pact, Britain made a special agreement with Iraq on 4 April.14 With this agreement Britain asserted its intention to stay in the Middle East.

As a non-Middle Eastern country, Britain’s participation in the Baghdad Pact generated opposition. Arab nationalists, for instance, had long been opposed to Britain, which resisted to evacuation of the Suez Canal region. They were aware that Britain was thinking to protect it’s dominance in the region by using the pact. Britain’s partnership with important countries in the region, Turkey and Iraq, bothered Egypt, which aimed to assume the leadership of the Arab nations, and it’s closest ally, Syria. Shortly after the signing of the Baghdad Pact, Egypt and Syria’s declaration for the start of preparations for an alternative pact harmed the general faith in the success of the Baghdad Pact. Turkey responded harshly to that statement. Also, Turkey sent two diplomatic notes to Syria on 10 and 13 March 1955 and said that Syria and Egypt intended to isolate Iraq and thwart the Turco-Iraqi agreement. Turkey also added that if Syria insisted on this policy, it would thwart the relations between Turkey and Syria. In reply to that, Syria declared that the Egyptian-Syrian pact would not be against the Baghdad Pact and the main purpose would be the protection of the Arab nations against Israel. Syria’s rejection of the Turkish notes in this way caused the disruption of relations on both sides.15

11 Kürkçüoğlu, ibid, pp. 61-62; Bağcı, ibid., pp. 62-63.
12 Dikerdem, ibid, p.102.
15 Kürkçüoğlu, ibid, pp. 74-75.
The United States, which was not a member of the Baghdad Pact, participated as an observer and preferred to make bilateral treaties with the member states. The member countries of the pact, that wanted to get the financial aid from the United States, desired full US membership, but the United States was not willing. According to different sources, John Foster Dulles saw the entry of Britain directly into the pact as a great surprise. Because the United States never wanted Britain’s participation in the pact, the American side did not want to leave Nasser and Egypt to the Soviet Union and isolate Israel in the region. Additionally, the United States desired to prevent the increase of anti-colonial demonstrations in the Arab countries.

The Baghdad Pact and Turkey’s preparations for the leadership of it brought Turkey and Egypt face to face. Nasser also saw Menderes as a rival to himself in the way of his leadership of the Middle East. The visit of Celal Bayar to Pakistan on 16-28 February 1955 and the visit of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to Cairo on same dates and his statements praising the Middle East policy of Egypt showed that these two blocks would be on opposite sides in the Non-Aligned Conference. Turkey confronted Egypt and India in the Bandung Conference on 18 April 1955. Turkey, which stood against the non-aligned pact with Iraq, came into conflict with Egypt, the leader of the non-aligned movement. As a kind of a response to that, Egypt would cooperate with Greece in the Cyprus Question and would also support Archbishop Makarios in his efforts for recognition of Greek self-determination on the island.

Turkey’s alignment with both Britain as well as Pakistan and Iraq in the context of the Northern Tier angered the Soviet Union. The Soviets who sold weapons to Egypt via Czechoslovakia, said in a note that was sent Turkey on 18 March 1954, after the signing of Turco-Pakistani agreement: “As understood from the statements of Turkish and Pakistani statesmen, this pact is closely related with the military plans of the Atlantic bloc. Such a move from the Turkish Government not only makes the situation in the Near and Middle East worse but also directly related to the national security of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Government finds it necessary to call the attention of the Government of the Turkish Republic that such a policy will be damaging the relations between the two sides…” Turkey replied to this note on 9 May 1954 by indicating that the Turco-Pakistani Treaty was signed in accordance with the principles of the United Nations and with peaceful purposes.

After the Baghdad Pact Treaty was signed, the Soviet Union continued expressing opposition. The Soviet Foreign Ministry issued an official statement on 16 April 1955 that included the following: “The role that is given Turkey by the Western countries to form military blocs in the Middle East makes the Arab nations think Turkey is trying to get them again under its own sovereignty”.

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16 Bağcı, ibid, p.71, citation number: 138.
17 Dikerdem, ibid, p.106.
18 Bağcı, ibid, p.65.
19 Kürkçüoğlu, ibid, pp. 78-79; Jung, ibid., pp. 8-9.
20 Bağcı, ibid, p.73.
21 From Ayın Tarihi, Number: 244, March 1954, pp.146-147: Kürkçüoğlu, ibid. pp. 81-82.
22 From Ayın Tarihi, Number: 246, May 1954, pp. 24-25: Kürkçüoğlu, ibid. p. 82.
23 Kürkçüoğlu, ibid, p.97.
After Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia voiced their opposition to the Baghdad Pact, Turkey and Iraq thought to include Lebanon and Jordan in the pact. But the initiative in this regard was prevented by counter efforts by both Egypt and Syria. Turkey and Iraq also could not get the support they expected from the United States. Because the Americans were thinking of a new plan instead of the Baghdad Pact: the Eisenhower Doctrine. The attitude of Turkey during the Suez Crisis in 1956 effected the relations with the other Middle Eastern countries. When the withdrawal of United States and the other supporters of this country followed the same path, Nasser could not get the loans from Britain, the United States and the World Bank that he needed for the Aswan Dam. So the next step was for Nasser to nationalize the Suez Canal. Turkey became a party to the crisis because of the Istanbul Agreement signed in 1888 to regulate the passage through the Suez Canal. Turkey played an active role in the Suez Crisis with Iran, Pakistan and Ethiopia. Turkey believed that the legal status of the Turkish Straits and the Suez Canal was not the same. Contrary to Turkey, Nasser put emphasis on the similarities of these two passageways and even wanted Turkey to carry out mediation in July 1956. Turkey supported the plan of John Foster Dulles in the London conference and participated in the proposal of United States, France and Britain to form The Suez Canal Users Association. After the establishment of this association Turkey became one of the first members of it. Jordan, once seen as the most appropriate country to be in the Baghdad Pact, reached a point of civil war with the demonstrations of the pro-Nasser Palestinians in the country. Egyptian- and Syrian-backed coup attempts to depose King Hussein occurred in February 1957. Generals who supported the coup took refuge in Syria. At the same time, the Soviet Union deported the American diplomats in Moscow with a claim that the United States was trying to overthrow the regime in Syria. The United States and Britain were concerned about the situation. On 22 August 1957, King Faisal of Iraq, King Hussein of Jordan and the American Deputy Secretary of State met in Istanbul to discuss the latest developments. Turkish President Celal Bayar and Prime Minister Adnan Menderes took part in these discussions. These meetings were rebuffed by the Soviet Union and the Arab countries including Egypt. Cairo commented that “the United States started to provoke the neighbours of Syria after seeing that they could not destroy the Syrian regime inside this country”. durante las negociaciones en Istanbul, King Hussein of Jordan was not forced to join the Baghdad Pact. But as an alternative it was discussed in the meetings to unite Iraq and Jordan under a new federation. Turkey was a mediator in that process. When Syria and Egypt heard the news and the support of United States and Britain to this, they began to spread news to the region that Turkey would soon undertake military action against Syria. The reason behind this was to put Turkey and the Arab states into a new conflict. In October 1957, the Arab League Political Committee decided that the Arab states should take a common stand against the threats of Turkey on Syria. The Syrian Foreign Minister Halil Kallas, on 15 October 1957, conveyed to the Iraqi, American and Soviet ambassadors that Turkey was massing on the Syrian border. On the same dates, King Hussein of Jordan during a meeting with the

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24 Bağcı, ibid, pp.72-73.
25 Kürkçüoğlu, ibid, p. 83.
26 Kürkçüoğlu, ibid, pp. 94-97.
27 Kürkçüoğlu, ibid, pp. 106-107.
ambassadors of United States, Britain and Turkey, voiced the concerns of the Arab League about the tensions between Turkey and Syria. In fact, King Hussein was glad to hear of the maneuvers of Turkey against Syria. However, according to the Turkish ambassador in Amman, Mahmut Dikerdem, the Foreign Affairs Secretary General Melih Esenbel told him that despite all rumours Turkey would not undertake military action against Syria.\textsuperscript{28}

In this regard, the Ministry of National Defense declared that the rumours of a military buildup on the Syrian frontier were all groundless and the movements within the same area were all in accordance with NATO maneuvers that had been scheduled previously.\textsuperscript{29} Within this troublesome context, the United States made its first serious intervention into the Middle East through the Eisenhower Doctrine. This doctrine, that included the use of the US military forces if necessary against a possible attack on the Middle Eastern states from any of the countries under the influence of international communism was presented to the Congress on 5 January 1957. The Eisenhower Doctrine showed its first effect by moving the naval forces to Beirut during the crisis in Lebanon in 1958.\textsuperscript{30} Lebanon, on the other hand, was the first state that recognized this doctrine. After Lebanon, Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq, Greece, Afghanistan, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Israel and at least Saudi Arabia recognized it too.\textsuperscript{31}

While Egypt and Syria united under a new name, The United Arab Republic, on 1 February 1958, the Iraq-Jordan Federal Government also was founded on 19 May 1958. While struggling in that troublesome process, Jordan, at the same time, was giving support to Turkey on the Cyprus issue in United Nations.\textsuperscript{32} On the other hand, Turkey recognized the United Arab Republic and ended tensions with Syria. Despite the mutual tension between Turkey and the Soviet Union, certain changes in the policy of Nikita Khruschev presented a chance to solve the crisis. Khruschev’s speech, which was given in the Turkish Embassy for the Republic Day of Turkey in 29 October 1958, stated that “there was no threat to the Middle East and there was a misunderstanding in all events”, announcing this political change.\textsuperscript{33}

The coup led by General Kasım in Iraq, in which the pro-Western monarchy collapsed on 14 July 1958, was evaluated as the triumph of Nasser. After the official statement of the new regime that declared friendship to the West, it was recognized by Britain and the United States. Besides this, Iraq proclaimed relations with the Soviet Union, which had been cut since 1955, would resume. The new regime also did not behave warmly toward the Baghdad Pact. As a reply to this, the Baghdad Pact Council, meeting in Ankara on 23 October 1958, decided to move the center of the pact to Ankara from Baghdad temporarily.\textsuperscript{34} After the separation of Iraq from the pact on 24 March 1959, the Baghdad Pact collapsed. The name of the pact was changed to the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and its new center became Ankara. The United States, again, did not participate officially in that organization. As it was in the

\textsuperscript{28} Dikerdem, ibid, pp. 174-176.
\textsuperscript{29} Kürtçuoğlu, ibid, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{31} Yılmaz, ibid, pp. 108-109.
\textsuperscript{32} Dikerdem, ibid, p.178 and p.169.
\textsuperscript{33} Hale, ibid, pp. 130-131.
\textsuperscript{34} Cihat Göktepe, “The ‘Forgotten Alliance’? Anglo-Turkish relations and CENTO, 1959-1965”, \textit{Middle Eastern Studies}, 35:4, pp. 103-129; Kürtçuoğlu, ibid, p.128 and pp.134-135; Jung, ibid, p.9.
Baghdad Pact, the members in the new establishment were the same: Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Britain. The United States signed bilateral agreements with Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. As stated in Eisenhower Doctrine, the US agreed to give aid to these countries, including military force, against a possible attack from outside.  

Turkey, which reviewed the relations with the United States after the Missile Crisis in 1962 and Lyndon Johnson’s Letter in 1964, concerning Turkish intervention in Cyprus, headed to strengthen the relations with the Middle Eastern countries. In this framework, Turkey supported the Arabs in the Arab-Israel wars of 1967 and 1973. It also supported the Arabs in the United Nations meetings on the Palestinian issue. The burning of Al Aqsa Mosque on 21 August 1969, shortly after the war of 1967, brought Turkey and the Arab countries closer to each other. In the Arab Foreign Ministers Meeting in Cairo on 25 August 1969, it was agreed that an Islamic Summit would gather. The Islamic Summit, which was considered as the basis of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, was held in Rabat, the capital of Morocco, on 22-25 September 1969, with the participation of Turkey at the foreign ministry level. Iraq and Syria, which were previously invited as observers, did not take part in the summit which was very remarkable.

After Turkey’s support to the Arabs during the war of 1973, the relations between the two sides became much warmer. Turkey announced on 10 October 1973 that the Israeli occupation of Arab lands was impossible to accept and a permanent peace could only be achieved by taking the requests of the Arab nations into consideration. A few days after that announcement, Turkey declared that Israel would no longer use bases on Turkish soil. Indeed, when such a request came to the Turkish authorities from Israel, Turkey behaved reluctantly but did not hesitate to open the air space to the Soviet Union which wanted to give aid to the Arabs.

Turkey’s membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference in 1969 strengthened its relations with the Middle East. This rapprochement showed itself during the adoption of the United Nations resolution that accepted Zionism as racism in 1975. After United Nation accepted the Palestinian Liberation Organization as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians in 1975, Turkey began to give support to this organization and allowed it to set up an office in Ankara in 1976. Also an official agency was established in 1979 in Ankara.

When Turkey was pushed into economic crisis because of the embargo on arms after the 1973 Oil Crisis and 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation, it was moving in the direction of increasing financial relations with the Middle Eastern countries. In addition, the Ecevit Government signed a Friendship and Cooperation agreement with the Soviet Union in 1978.

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37 Ari, ibid., p. 373-374.
38 Ari, ibid, pp. 375-376.
39 Ari, ibid, p. 376.
40 Ari, ibid, pp. 376-377.
Ecevit gave the impression that Turkey would reduce its cooperation with the United States and NATO.\textsuperscript{41}

**Conclusion**

Towards the end of the Cold War, the equilibrium of Turkey’s relations with the both sides started to change again. While the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that same year were again escalating tensions between the great powers, Turkey was turning its eyes back to the West to strengthen relations. Turkey, as the only ally of the West in the region called the Northern Tier by the United States, began to gain its traditional importance in the eyes of the White House again. This progress resulted in signing a new Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement in March 1980 between Turkey and the United States.\textsuperscript{42}

Besides strengthening the ties with the United States, Turkey started to participate in the Islamic Conference Organization’s meetings at the Presidential level. Previously, Ankara was represented in the meetings of the same organization by the foreign ministers. Turkey, which supported the initiatives of the Arabs relating to the Palestinian Question and the withdrawal of Israel from the occupied territories, did not participate in any decision of the Islamic Summit Conferences to cut relations with Israel. Ankara also supported the decisions of the summit as long as they were in compliance with the resolutions of United Nations.\textsuperscript{43}

As a conclusion, through the end of the 80’s, Turkey’s rapprochement with the United States made the Soviet Union feel uncomfortable. The Soviet press of that time was publishing articles opposing the agreement signed between Turkey and the United States. Turkey, as a reply to this, repudiated the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and even opened its doors to Afghan refugees. The high tension in the relations of the two sides continued until the era of Gorbachev. But the collapse of the Soviets changed the climate of the relations. At the end of the Cold War in 1989, there was no longer a threat to Turkey from the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{44}

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*Parliamentary Papers:*


\textsuperscript{41} Hale, ibid, p. 169.

\textsuperscript{42} Hale, ibid, pp. 171-172.

\textsuperscript{43} Arı, ibid, p. 349 and pp. 377-378.

\textsuperscript{44} Hale, ibid, p. 173.


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