



## **Turkish Foreign Policy During the Rule of Turgut Özal**

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### **Abstract**

The presented work discusses and analyses important issues of Turkish foreign policy in 1983-1993. In 80-90ies of the twentieth century Turgut Ozal played a crucial role in social-economic and political development of the Turkish republic. He was first a prime minister (1983-1989) and then the president of the country (1989-1993). Economic and political changes made in this period significantly determined further development of the country. It is worth noting that Ozal was the one who envisaged both sides of globalization, both prospects and risks, much earlier than his contemporary leaders.

Ozal carried out a rather active foreign policy which aimed at creating conditions for accelerated economic development. Ideological influence declined in Ozal's foreign policy and it became more pragmatic. The peculiarity of Ozal's foreign policy was the fact that it was focused on economic interests of the country.

Taking into consideration the country's geostrategic and geopolitical location, Turkey carried out a diversified and active foreign

policy and was focused on improving multilateral cooperation. Along with relations with western countries, the significant direction of foreign policy of Turkey in 1980s was approximation with Muslim countries with the purpose of trade-economic cooperation. In Ozal's times, foreign policy of Turkey was more focused on such regions as central Asia, Caucasus, the Balkans and Near East. Turkey was trying to become the political and economic center of these regions. Ozal did not regard relations with eastern countries as a replacement of relations with the West. Vice versa, this should have contributed to strengthening relations of Turkey with the West.

Ozal considered that Turkey should have become the connecting bridge between the Islamic world and the western one, which would support development of economic cooperation and significantly contribute to peace strengthening both in the region and the whole world. Ozal was a pragmatic person and his decisions at the international and regional level corresponded with national interests in that period. Together with moving to the free market economy and the open door policy Turkey managed to become the region's leading state. The foreign policy which Ozal government used to carry out in 1980s, played a respective role in this.

**Keywords:** Turkey; Turgut Ozal; foreign policy; globalization; Economic and political changes.

### **Introduction**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Republic of Turkey was embroiled in a severe socio-economic and political crisis, which led to the September 12, 1980 military coup. The 1983 parliamentary election concluded restoration of a multi-party system and marked transition from a military dictatorship to the civilian rule.

The rise to power of the Motherland Party and its leader Turgut Özal marked the beginning of significant transformation in the country. Özal played a pivotal role in Turkey's socio-economic and poli-

tical development in the 1980s and 1990s, first as Prime Minister (1983–1989) and later President of the country (1989–1993). Özal, a reformer aimed at transformation and modernization of Turkey. The economic and political changes implemented during his term in office significantly influenced the country's further development.

Özal proved to be a broad - minded politician. Next to Atatürk, he was the one who laid the foundation to major changes in the country. Instead of an import-substitution policy, Özal based his economic strategy on the export growth, aligning privatization with the globalization trends (Findley, 2011: 354).

It is notable that Özal foresaw both the prospects and risks of globalization much earlier than his contemporaries, and did his best to act in the national interest in terms of both domestic and foreign policy (Talbot, 1998: N344). During this period, Turkey needed to transition to a free-market economy and an open-door policy to which end foreign relations played an important role.

### **Methods**

Key methods of social-political research were used while working on the article. Namely, the comparative analysis method, empirical method, the method of observation, the evaluation method and the method of content analysis. The paper is based on empirical research materials, articles and books.

### **Results**

Research found that, the government of Turgut Ozal, which came to power after the end of the military regime, tried to implement the program of economic stabilisation. He tried to create conditions for accelerated economic development of the country and for this purpose carried out a pragmatic foreign policy. During this period, Turkey moved towards a diversified, active, multilateral foreign policy. Özal integrated Turkey into the global economy. As a result, Turkey transitioned to a free-market economy and was able to become the region's leading state after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

## Discussion

Özal pursued a highly active foreign policy. During his rule, Turkey abandoned its traditional status quo foreign policy and shifted towards active, multifaceted, and risky foreign relations. A distinguishing feature of Özal's foreign policy was its focus on the country's economic interests. In Özal's policy, the economy was so prioritized that foreign policy was viewed as a means of developing economic relations (Ertosun, 2014: 299).

Özal remained true to Turkey's traditional foreign policy principle of westernization. At the time, Ankara made noticeable efforts to expand relations with the Western actors, such as the United States and the European Community. However, these connections were focused on the economic development rather than Turkey's security (Ertosun, 2014: 316).

In Turgut Özal's foreign policy, relations with the US were undeviatingly important. Özal realized that the US was a global powerbroker and believed that benefiting from the country's economic, technological, and military potential was essential for Turkey's development.

During Özal's tenure as Prime Minister, often referred to as the "golden age," the relationships between Turkey and the U.S. were very close. Considering the developments in the Middle East and the economic measures implemented in Turkey, both sides felt the need for cooperation.

In the early stages of his rule, Özal carried on with Turkey's traditional foreign policy aimed at increasing the U.S. assistance in strengthening Turkey's defense. Later on, he shifted his focus to developing the trade and economic relations. During his 1985 visit to Washington, Özal declared, "Not aid, but trade." He believed that increased exports would reduce Turkey's need for support by the United States and international organizations, and, also boost private investments in both countries. Importantly, it was during that visit, that the decision

was made to establish the Turkish-American Business Council (Uzgel, 2001: 50).

After the 1980 coup, relations between Turkey and the European Community stalled until 1984. Nevertheless, in the 1983 government program Özal prioritized Turkey's membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) (Demiray, 2015: 267).

Seeking to improve relations with European countries, starting from 1985, during his visits in Europe, Özal established trade contacts favorable for Turkey and highlighted the advantages of Turkey's investment climate. In April 1987, Turkey applied to the European Economic Community for full membership. For all Özal's great efforts to open up new vistas in Turkey's foreign policy, his attempt failed (Утургаури & Ульченко, 2009: 55).

Özal's ultimate goal was for Turkey to become a part of the Western political system. He believed that relations with regional or Islamic countries would not be an alternative to the West. Özal thought that Turkey's success in the Eastern world would strengthen its integration with Europe. As a result, a stronger Turkey would be able to achieve a more meaningful integration with the West (Laçiner, 2011: 6.01).

From the second half of 1988, Turkey began to emphasize that the European Community was not its only option, and in case of a negative response, apart from the United States, it would seek to develop relations with the Soviet Union and the Middle East (Ertosun, 2014: 306).

The context of Turkey's relations with the West changed when it shifted its unilateral foreign policy focus on the West in favor of a diversified and multifaceted foreign policy. Özal's Administration signed more international agreements than any other in Turkey's history.

Özal's foreign policy became less ideological and more pragmatic. Considering the country's geostrategic and geopolitical location, Turkey pursued a diversified, active foreign policy, aimed at improving multilateral cooperation.

Even before the collapse of the Socialist bloc, Turkey had improved relations with the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries. In September 1988, Turkey opened a checkpoint at Sarpi, on the Georgian border. Between 1986 and 1990, Turkey signed several economic, commercial, scientific, and technical collaboration agreements with the Soviet Union. As a result, Turkey's trade volume with the Soviet Union increased significantly.

In 1991, Turkey and the Soviet Union signed a friendship and cooperation treaty. Turkey opened a consulate in Baku, while the Soviet Union established one in Trabzon. In 1992, Turgut Özal initiated the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) aiming at stable and peaceful development in the region. It promoted Turkey's closer ties with the Balkans and the former Soviet countries. Turkey was one of the first to establish relations with post-Soviet states. In March 1991, Özal visited Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, and that same year, his Kazakh counterpart went on his first official visit abroad to Turkey. The visits by the leaders of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan followed suit. Turkey's historical, geographical, and cultural realities facilitated rapprochement with these countries.

Özal's government changed Turkey's foreign policy vector, as he sought to expand Turkey's sphere of influence in the East. During Özal's time, Turkey's foreign policy increasingly focused on regions such as Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Turkey aimed at becoming the regional political and economic center, the regional leader. It shifted its strategic priorities and focused more on regional issues rather than playing with global powers (Ataman, 2002: 132-149).

One of the important aspects of Ankara's foreign policy was rapprochement with the Muslim countries in terms of trade and economic cooperation. Hence the importance Özal attached to his visits in the Middle East. During the first two years of his rule, Özal visited 20 countries, 11 of which were in the Middle East. It should be said that in the history of the Turkish Republic, this was the first time

that a Prime Minister visited the countries like Bahrain, Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Yemen (Ertosun, 2014: 307).

Özal emphasized special importance to developing relations with Islamic states. He said: "With many of them, we are connected by historical and cultural roots, and we do our best to develop political, trade and economic ties with them. Turkey holds a high profile position in the Islamic world, and we believe that its weight and respect will increase both in the West and across the world. We also believe that as a result our country will become a bridge between the Islamic world and the West" (Утургаури & Ульченко, 2009: 54).

As noted, Özal did not view relations with Middle East as an alternative to the ones with the West; conversely, he thought that such relations should contribute to strengthening Turkey's ties with the West. He was a rational individual with a pragmatic vision based on the national interests. Özal knew with both the Eastern and Western mentalities quite well, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of both the West and the East. Considering Turkey's geostrategic and geopolitical location, he assumed it would be a mistake for a country situated in the heart of the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East to focus its foreign policy solely on the West. Based on its geostrategic location and economic and political interests, Turkey needed to pursue a diverse foreign policy instead. Once, a Western diplomat remarked: "Özal is a pragmatic person. His „mind is in the West, but his heart is in the East“. His mind is in the West because that's where the capital and technology are, and his heart is in the East because he sees his Islamic identity and culture there" (Ertosun, 2014: 300).

Özal believed that Turkey's balanced relations with both Western and Eastern countries would foster economic cooperation and significantly contribute to peace not only in the region but globally for that matter. Özal's second government program stated: „economic development and strengthening of national defense are our main foreign policy goals“.

Özal viewed relations with various countries and regions as a means of opening up Turkey's economy to the world. To this end, he often went on foreign visits accompanied by businessmen to give them opportunity to establish contacts and expand activities. Özal's foreign political activities aimed at creating favorable conditions for stepped up economic development. He believed that economic ties and joint projects would make it easier to resolve political problems (Ertosun, 2014: 299).

As said above, Turgut Özal pursued a very active and pragmatic foreign policy influenced by certain personal traits. He tried not to provoke conflicts with anyone on foreign policy issues. His principle was: "Let's not make enemies unnecessarily", but act according to the national interests.

In foreign affairs Özal attached great importance to personal relationships. He forged close ties with the leaders of both Western and Muslim countries of the time. His personal qualities earned him goodwill, which was conducive to the implementation of his plans. Another peculiarity of his foreign policy was the telephone diplomacy. He would often have phone conversations with world leaders for which he was frequently criticized. At the time, this type diplomacy was making its first steps but is widely used today. It should be noted that during his presidency, Özal often made significant foreign policy decisions without consulting the government, which caused dissatisfaction among some government members (Ertosun, 2014: 297).

### **Conclusion**

However, it would be a mistake to attribute Özal's foreign policy, or the political and socio-economic changes that took place in Turkey in the 1980s, solely to Özal's personal qualities, talent, vision, or omissions. Like the other states, Turkey could not make decisions completely on its own for its geographical location and political ties imposed certain conditions and influenced its decisions (Laçiner, 2011: 6. 01).

All in all, Özal's pragmatic decisions on both international and regional levels were in line with the national interests of the country at the time. Özal integrated Turkey into the global economy. With the transition to a free-market economy and an open-door policy, Turkey managed to become the regional leader. The foreign policy which Ozal government used to carry out in 1983-1993, played an important role in this.

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