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ORSAM

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## TURKEY'S NATIONAL INTEREST ENTAILS PEACE AND STABILITY IN ITS REGION

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Having graduated from the International Relations Department of the Faculty of Political Sciences, Ankara University, Ambassador Yıldız started to serve in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1989. He worked as first secretary in Turkish Embassy in Damascus in 2000-2002 and 2005-2006 and in Turkish Embassy in Riyadh in 2004-2005. Having performed his duty in Turkish Consulate General in Jeddah in 2006-2008, Ambassador Yıldız took office as head of department in the Directorate General of Special Representative Office of Iraq in 2008-2009 and then as Consul General in Mosul in 2009-2011. Having served as Ambassador in Sarajevo in 2011-2014, Ambassador Yıldız was appointed as Senior Diplomatic Adviser to the Prime Minister as of 1 July 2014. After Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected as the President, he started to serve as Senior Diplomatic Adviser to the President in foreign affairs. Furthermore, he was also the member of the Foreign Policy Consulting Board during his office as senior adviser. Ambassador Yıldız maintains his duty as Deputy Minister as of 29 June 2016. Yıldız speaks fluent English and Arabic.

**ORSAM: Turkish foreign policy is undergoing a very busy period, while a significant transformation is underway in the Middle East. In this context, can you tell us briefly the main dynamics of Turkish foreign policy?**

**Ahmet Yıldız, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs:** Emerging in accordance with the internal and regional dynamics during the founding of the republic, the principle of “Peace at home, peace in the world” remains the main guideline of our foreign policy. This is the principle that guides our regional relations and global alliances. National interest is the prioritized objective of any foreign policy. That is the case for Turkey as well, but Turkey’s national interests entail firstly peace and stability in the Middle East and in its region; secondly, domestic peace within Turkey and; thirdly, the Western orientation of Turkey which involves its participation in the EU as a candidate and its strong alliance relationship with NATO, which bolsters its collective defense.

Hoping that the anomalies of the region will be normalized and outdated government systems will be transformed, we supported the revolutions in the Middle East triggered by the Arab Spring. We still believe that

the expectations of the Middle Eastern peoples regarding freedom and modernization can never be ignored. Of course, we also need to see the troubles emerging from regional conflicts. For example, the Islamic State of Iraq, founded in Iraq, spread to Syria and posed a more dangerous threat against the world in comparison to the al Qaeda. In this context, we consider the fight against terrorism a common objective –as stated numerous times– and we have been participating in the operations against terrorism in accordance with this objective.

Turkey has sought to help the Middle Eastern countries in every aspect. Moreover, there are multilateral mechanisms that Turkey pioneers in the framework of the Turkish-Arab Forum and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Moreover, our technical assistance initiatives in areas such as institutional modernization, transformation and capacity building as well as our humanitarian assistance seek to contribute to stability in regional countries. We hope that these initiatives will succeed.

A recent problem plaguing us is sectarianism, since polarization and sectarianism brought about by regional conflicts are harmful to both our domestic and foreign pol-

itics. A second problem that I am worried about is the failures in governance. Such mistakes fuel or at least lay the groundwork for sectarianism on the one hand, and terrorism, on the other. Terrorism as a third problem needs to be addressed and fought against in a joint fashion. The people of the Middle East will acquire prosperity sooner, if the wrong practices that lead to such social phenomena are avoided. Turkey's secular system, national-state mechanism and institutions pose a model for the Middle East. Unfortunately, many Middle Eastern countries experience just the opposite conditions to those in Turkey. Yet, we should not give up hoping that the regional countries will achieve similar success one day.

As things stand in our region, our operation in Al-Bab mainly seeks to secure our borders, although our soldiers are martyred. As you know, our borders once were entirely controlled by the regime, PYD and ISIS. The portion of the border that is controlled by ISIS posed a significant security risk, as the attacks against our cities and town demonstrated. The operation that was launched to annihilate this threat is successfully carried out. Turkish army is determined to carry out the operation in al-Bab until the

objectives are reached. The fight is conducted in coordination with the Russian Federation, the United States and other actors in the region.

**As you mentioned, current problems in Iraq and Syria are of vital importance for Turkey. Turkey, in the absence of its allies, had to fight on its own against the risks that emerged out of the current gap. In this period, Turkish-Russian cooperation has sparked debates about whether “Turkey shifts its axis.” What is Turkey’s position concerning the politics in the East-West axis? How will Turkey carry on the balance in the period ahead?**

It is widely acknowledged that the American administration has, recently, fallen short of meeting the need for leadership that not only us but also the West expects, particularly in the context of the Syrian crisis. Yet, our coordination with the U.S. concerning a solution to the Syria crisis through political transition continues. Moreover, we have been maintaining our coordination with other countries within the framework of the Friends of Syria group and the International Syria Support Group.

Concerning Russia, we are undoubtedly an active member of the NATO alliance. We

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have been contributing to NATO and we have expectations. NATO has declared on several occasions that it would respond against the threats and harassments against Turkey under the provisions of the Article 5, if Turkey's defense is threatened. In this context, there is an illusion about Russia. Turkey has managed to uphold its relations with Russia in the past, even during the Cold War, in accordance with its national interests and NATO commitments. Why not in this period? The following observation needs to be made: Both sides have developed cooperation based on mutual understanding after a long period of conflict. That cooperation has two objectives. The first objective is ensuring ceasefire and ending the bloodshed in Syria. Difficult but constructive negotiations have been held with

Russia about that. The second objective is the initiation of a political process, subordinate to the Geneva talks. We are continuing talks with Russia in that regard as you can follow from the news. Of course, we are informing our other allies about all these negotiations. We have made sure that the United Nations will be involved in this process. I hope the ceasefire will work and the negotiations will achieve success in an atmosphere of trust enabled by the ceasefire. The parties have been negotiating about technical details, participants and representatives of the opposition. Yet, the basis for our Syria policy remains the same. I hope that this process will contribute to the political transition process that we call the Geneva process.

**Considering Iran's position vis-à-vis the reconciliation between Turkey and Russia, what is Turkey's perspective about Iran's standpoint?**

A trilateral meeting was held in Moscow with success. Finding a political solution or reaching consensus by no means hides the errors and crimes committed in the past. Many parties in Syria have unfortunately committed acts that we can classify as crimes against humanity. As you know, similar things happened in Bosnia and those who committed crimes against humanity were judged in international tribunals. In Syria, groups such as PYD-YPG, al Nusra and DAESH had in some ways divided the opposition, thereby betraying the Syrian revolution. Secondly, some countries caused humanitarian tragedies via proxy war practices. States have international and humanitarian responsibilities on the field, which they unfortunately do not comply during proxy wars and furthermore they do not consider themselves responsible. We as Turkey have been doing our part in order to prevent the transit of foreign terrorist fighters through our territory, despite claims otherwise. In order to achieve that objective, we initiated entry bans and deported those who were detected.

Not everyone acted as constructive as us. We have been doing our part in both political and humanitarian dimensions. We are proven right by those who take shelter in Turkey after attacks. I hope Iran acts in a more constructive manner from now on. One of the reasons that polarize the Syrian people is that foreign Shiite militias continue undertaking operations on the ground. I know from my experience in the region that acts by sectarian motivations are hardly forgotten. Therefore, the developments of past few years were really unfortunate for our region.

**We need to compare the developments in Syria to those in Iraq for an appropriate understanding. You were in Iraq during its hardest times. What lies in the foundation of the problems in Iraq?**

As you said, I was the Consul General of Turkey in Mosul between 2010 and 2011. Before that, I had worked in the department responsible from Iraq at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At that time, there was a tendency toward normalization in Iraq. Therefore, I had the chance to visit Kirkuk –if I recall correctly– seven times, Tel Afar eight times and many other towns around Mosul. I don't mention here my visits to other

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places in Iraq. I managed to get acquainted with the backbone of Iraq, which is the province of Nineveh, Mosul, Muhallebiya and Iyaziya. The group called the Islamic State of Iraq, Al Qaeda's Iraqi branch, used to pose a serious threat only at nights, while collecting tributes. During that period, we were engaging all political parties in Iraq for our mission in Iraq and our secular understanding dictated that way. And we believed that it was necessary. Iraq could have continued like that but failed. In my opinion, the failure to implement local autonomy for provinces despite the constitution and political rhetoric and the decision to support the Syrian regime instead of the Syrian people are two factors that—in some way—had a toxic effect on Iraq. These developments reversed normalization and boosted sectarianism and political cleavages. This situation enabled ISIS to recruit and establish control along both sides of the border. The regime should have acted with good sense at the onset of the Syrian revolution. Syria's constitutional system, which the regime had pledged to change, was against every contemporary norm. This policy hurt the conscience of the people, intellectuals and tribes in the region, paving way for

extremism. I was the ambassador to Bosnia at that time, yet I used to follow Iraqi TV channels. Iraq is a very precious country for us, just like Syria. So is Turkey precious for them. We have numerous linkages, similarities and common interests. We have sought normalization of both countries. I served in the department for Iraq in its hardest times. We helped them during these difficult times when bombings took place and when the Iraqi politics required consensus among the parties. We are trying to be helpful now as well. Yes, we perceive threats from the Iraqi territory that the Iraqi government does not control. Organizations such as PKK and ISIS have benefited from the power gap in Iraq for a long time.

**Recently, we have been hearing threatening statements from Shiite militia groups against Turkey.**

They misunderstand Turkey. Judging by their own sectarian understanding, they consider Turkey as a sectarian actor as well. That is not the case; Turkey steps in and extends assistance in accordance with neighborly relations. We provided training to various Iraqi groups. Not only in the field of military, but also in every field from engineers to doctors,

from nurses to teachers Turkey extended training from in order to develop local capacity. We had to prioritize the fight against ISIS and the liberation of Mosul after the fall of Mosul, Tel Afar and al Anbar. As of the current situation, our military contingent of 600-700 soldiers in Bashiqa to provide training to volunteers from Mosul and help them defend themselves against ISIS. Therefore, we are ready to provide Iraq any kind of aid and support depending on its current needs. They misinterpreted our aid because of their sectarian biases. Yet, I believe that they have understood what our presence means and how much it has served Iraq even though they cannot admit it publicly.

**We have observed that Turkey challenged Iraq it opposed sectarianism, particularly due to the wrong policies on the part of Iraq during the second term of Nouri al Maliki. Can we say that Turkish foreign policy opposes all kinds of discrimination regardless of ethnic or religious background?**

True, no doubt! Iraq belongs to Iraqis. Syria belongs to Syrians. Turkey defends these countries' territorial integrity and advocates non-interference in their domestic affairs, yet opposes sectarian policies such as forming al

Hashd al Shaabi from entirely a specific sect, or sending a specific brigade or division to liberate Tel Afar. Nobody can question their existence if these groups reflect the Iraqi mosaic correctly. We are affected as well, when a sectarian policy in the region is implemented. That is why we question. After all, sectarianism is troublesome for the entire Islamic world and problems deteriorate when institutions particularly in the security sector are influenced by sectarian policies. Hence, that is Turkey's main point of criticism. For the liberation of Mosul, the local Shiite or Sunni people of Mosul who fled the city could have been trained by the Iraqi government together, such as al Hashd al Watani. They have to accept our principled approach.

Why did we defend Iraq in the 2000s? We used to say at all times that Iraq is the miniature of the Middle East. We stated various times that a conflict in Iraq would impact the entire Middle East, when we defended its territorial integrity. We still advocate the same idea when we oppose sectarianism. Our demographic structure is similar to that of Iraq. There are people from different sects in Turkey. We have relatives in Iraq. Therefore, our arguments must be seen as legitimate criticism coming from

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a regional state. They are not hostile against Iraq.

ISIS will be defeated sooner or later. It seems so. The Mosul operation has been dragged on, yet some settlements in Nineveh among which I visited long ago have been liberated. I congratulate the troops and send my greetings. Recently, I came upon a news piece on TV. The Christians of Karakush were holding their Christmas celebrations. I wish that we will hear more good news in the period ahead from Tel Afar and other places. That is because this has taken quite a long time. Iraq has been experiencing war, embargo or civil conflict for almost forty years. This is a very long time for a people to endure. The current situation, I mean particularly the civil conflict, is very unnecessary.

All sides in Iraq have to create the atmosphere to marginalize terror and make the civil conflict end. There were and are still very wise politicians in Iraq during my term there, there still is. So is trained manpower in technology and education sectors. What is important is that this potential must be properly utilized. I am hopeful about Iraq. I hope that a meaningful struggle will be carried out for the political transition in Syria that will help achieve a solution.

**We can possibly say the same things for both Iraq and Syria. The institutionalization of state is the most important thing. If that is achieved, problems such as conflicts, favoritism and corruption will be eliminated, will it not?**

That is a solution relevant for all. In fact, there are various examples in the world relevant for the politicians, opinion leaders and tribal chiefs of the region. The Islamic world also has examples. Besides the examples for conflict, there are also countries living in peace and continuing development.

The experience in Iraq shows that if domestic dialogue is strong in a country, the affairs go smoothly. Yet, the more foreign actors meddle in the affairs, the more complex the situation becomes. One needs to learn lessons from these examples. Turkey conducts a foreign policy centered on the region that also includes economic interdependence. Our economies in the region complement each other. It was the case with Iraq as well. We should not let ethnic-sectarian perspectives meddle in the affairs. I saw in Iraq that there is such a culture. In that period there were unexpected developments such as people from different sects marrying or working together in the same offices. There were parties and groups that were formed by people from different sects and religious denominations. I mean that no problem is without solution. It is necessary to look at how the administrative systems of the countries can enable easier governance. We need to ask what kind of a system provides the best

governance, i.e., federalism reflecting its own conditions, a provincial system, or a system that enables provinces to declare federal regions such as the system put forward in the Iraqi constitution. As far as I know, the Iraqi constitution grants strong powers to provinces and their governors. It could have been better if it had been implemented properly.

**One of the most important points you stressed is that countries should not be influenced by other countries in policy making processes. Having principles is very important for foreign policy. It would be better if foreign policies toward Iraq are based on principles rather than conjectural concerns. What do you think about that?**

Iraqi politicians could have adopted a more principled attitude about the revolution in Syria. That is not the entire cause of the problem but anyway, they could have. Many groups and actors committed errors in this issue. We have stood for principles and adopted a humanitarian attitude towards the problem. In this respect, we can be proud of ourselves. Yet, some countries' preferences are not as principled and healthy. Iraq has more ethnic and religious groups than Turkey. For example, I have never considered

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Turkmen as Shiites or Sunnis. Neither have I considered Arabs as such. We had visitors in our Mosul Consulate from all social groups. You do not know if a person is Shiite or Sunni unless they tell you themselves. When you adopt our logic there in the field, you see that this issue about religious sects is not that important. Why does not this wound heal? Why does it cause problems? These issues are difficult to explain and there might be foreign factors behind them.

Of course, the Middle East is not composed of only Iraq, Syria and Iran. The Middle East, which we are also a part of, has a large population of Muslim majority and many states. We are maintaining our relations with these states –also in accordance with our historical links- on the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention in internal affairs. Our bilateral and multilateral relations with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, other Gulf States and all Arab states are continuing. The image in the world regarding the Middle East, which is illustrated by the Islamophobia fueled by the developments in Iraq and Syria, is not a correct one. One sees in the bigger picture that the regional states share deep cultural ties and a historical fraternity despite many wrongs that need correction. We need to build on that and

we shape Turkish foreign policy accordingly.

**Considering the demographic diversity in the Middle East, one sees a significant Turkmen population in Iraq and Syria. Turkey is sometimes criticized by Turkmen about the issues that concern them. They think that Turkey does not support Turkmen sufficiently. What are your thoughts about this issue?**

The criticism was two-fold, and I suppose it is like that now as well. While our Turkmen brothers criticize us for lack of support, other groups in Iraq complain that we discriminate in favor of Turkmen and support them significantly. Both of these complaints are wrong. Yet, one can understand Turkmen's complaints since they are an oppressed people. I served in Syria as well. Unfortunately, these countries have been harsh on Turkmen and neglected their cultural rights and economic development, due to motives such as taking vengeance of history or acting on baseless and forged fears. Turkey has never considered benefiting from the Turkmen in Iraq or Syria against these countries. Turkey has never pursued a policy aimed at destabilizing any regional country, any Islamic country. Turkmen have remained faithful to their ethnic identity even

in the most confrontational periods of Iraq. They have not been influenced by the Sunni-Shiite divide. Yet, they have also remained faithful to Iraq's unity even when all actors thought that "Iraq would disintegrate." I observed during my service in Iraq that their behavior is greatly appreciated. Therefore, we understand Turkmens' complaints, but their criticism is wrong. Circumstances determine Turkey's aid to Turkmens in Iraq. It is sometimes military, sometimes cash, sometimes medical and at other times about education. If Turkey had less than good intentions regarding Iraq and Syria, it would use this potential in a harmful way as most states do. I state as the Deputy Minister once closely interested in the subject that Turkmens are a historical heritage for Turkey in Iraq and Syria. Reasonable Iraqis think like that as well. Iraqi governments have to respect our brothers' rights and culture. Even when they did not, Turkey adopted no harmful policy against them. Turkmens' most rightful demand was education in their own language. Iraqi constitution has allowed for that. As far as I know, both local governments and the decision makers in Baghdad have shown sympathy. Even though they have economic hardships and personnel problems, this is a natural expectation for them.

Of course, one needs to speak most about the sufferings of Turkmens around Tel Afar and Tuz Khurmatou. Even though some regions around Tel Afar and Mosul have been liberated, people still suffer in the towns of Muhallebiye and Iyaziya near Tel Afar. We used to work with the Iraqi government to aid the Turkmens in these towns before the ISIS invasion. We had achieved progress in infrastructure and education with the Iraqi government particularly in Tel Afar. We had also agreed about the establishment of a university in Tel Afar. Turkey would build the university and Iraq would provide the personnel. I hope that we will resume these projects once Tel Afar is liberated. I hope Tel Afar will never suffer a similar catastrophe. We are ready to provide every kind of support, if the Iraqi government cooperates.

We need to talk about Kirkuk and its surroundings as well. Kirkuk is a very delicate place and needs to be cherished. I am very glad that ISIS failed to reach its goals. Otherwise, the situation in Kirkuk where our kinsmen live in a multicultural environment would be much more different. It is crucial that peace prevails in Kirkuk. I hope that an agreement will be reached in Kirkuk that is satisfactory for our Turkmen kin. Turkey

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is ready to provide support, once an agreement is reached.

In our view, Turkmens are not different and separated from us. They are our kinsmen who had remained in Syria and Iraq. Therefore, we are ready to aid them as much as the conditions in their country allow. I know that many of them live in Turkey now, after suffering many losses in their families. They are our guests as long as they stay here. As long as the circumstances allow and security is maintained, they will receive our support. I wish patience

to those Turkmens who live under siege in fighting areas in Mosul. These times of hardships caused by the conditions in Iraq and Syria will pass. Turkey is strong and by their sides. The future of our region is bright. I ask them to be patient and to trust first in themselves and then in Turkey.

**We wish to express our gratitude to you for sharing your views.**

I thank you and wish you success in your work.

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