



Shifting Dynamics in the Middle East: Türkiye's Repositioning in the Region

Professor Yaprak Gürsoy reflected briefly on the tragic human impact of the conflict in Gaza, pointing out that despite earlier concerns, the situation had worsened. Gürsoy stressed that, the panel would focus on Türkiye's role in the region and the speakers would not attempt to recount the events in the war in detail.

Gürsoy mentioned that Sir John Jenkins would start by giving an overview of how regional dynamics and alliances had shifted since the onset of the conflict. Following him, Dr Dimitar Bechev would delve into Türkiye's foreign policy in the Middle East up until 2020. Dr Selin Nasi would then explore Türkiye's foreign policy reset since 2020, focusing on its pursuit of strategic autonomy. Finally, Dr Ziya Meral would discuss how Türkiye's military engagement and defence strategy were shaping its regional role.

Hosted by Contemporary Turkish Studies and the British Institute at Ankara (BIAA)

Tuesday 8 October, 6.00 to 7.30pm BST

In-person public event (Thai Theatre, Cheng Kin Ku Building, LSE)



Sir John Jenkins began by acknowledging the difficulty in discussing the conflict in the Middle East, given its distressing nature and emotional intensity. He emphasised that policymakers and commentators must try to understand the underlying structural issues driving not just this war, but other conflicts in the region. Jenkins suggested that the current war was a continuation of a long-standing shadow conflict between Israel and Iran, which had primarily been playing out in Syria and Lebanon as Israel sought to prevent Iranian military supplies from reaching Hezbollah.

Sir John Jenkins outlined Iran's strategy of building a network of allies in the region, particularly in the Levant, and how Israel's strategic environment had worsened as a result. While Israel had been able to slow Iranian expansion through Hezbollah and other militias, Jenkins noted that it had not been able to stop it completely.





This, he believed, had made a broader conflict with Iran inevitable, although he initially expected the conflict to erupt in Lebanon rather than Gaza. Jenkins explained that the key competition in the region is now between Israel and Iran. He noted that while Saudi Arabia had been part of this rivalry from 2015 to 2020, it had since distanced itself.

He touched on the economic dimension of the conflict, particularly in relation to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, arguing that such an ambitious economic transformation was unlikely to succeed while conflicts continued to rage both in the north and in Yemen. Jenkins also discussed broader geopolitical dynamics, including uncertainty around U.S. intentions in the region, which has significant implications for Türkiye.

Jenkins mentioned that Türkiye's earlier successes, particularly in northern Iraq, had faltered in recent years. He attributed some of this shift to changes in domestic Turkish politics. Furthermore, he highlighted the complex challenges Türkiye faces regarding the U.S. presence in Iraq and Syria, particularly U.S. support for Kurdish groups.





In conclusion, Jenkins voiced concern about the potential consequences of a U.S. withdrawal from the region. He warned that such a move would make it much harder for regional actors, including Türkiye, to maintain a stable balance of power.

Dr Dimitar Bechev began his analysis by discussing two major paradigms that have shaped Türkiye's foreign policy over time. He first introduced the "internationalist paradigm," where Türkiye positions itself as a leader focused on economic integration, the use of soft power, and active multilateralism. In this view, Türkiye sees itself as a significant player in regions like the Middle East, Eurasia, and the Balkans, with an emphasis on cooperation and leadership achieved through diplomacy and economic connections.

Dr Dimitar Bechev contrasted this with a second, more hawkish paradigm, which views neighbouring regions as potential sources of threat. He explained that this perspective, often championed by the military, is especially concerned with regions linked to the Kurdish issue and prioritises defending Türkiye's territorial integrity through hard power.





According to him, this paradigm perceives Türkiye's neighbours as dangers that need to be managed or contained.

He went on to describe a "pendulum effect" in Türkiye's foreign policy, where the country has shifted between these two paradigms over the past few decades. He traced this back to the post-Cold War period, highlighting the 1980s under Turgut Özal, when Türkiye leaned towards the internationalist approach. During this time, economic strength and integration with its neighbours were prioritised. However, by the mid-1990s, Türkiye's stance became more hawkish, particularly during the 1998 crisis with Syria, as the military began to exert more influence.

Bechev noted that the early AKP government under Erdoğan marked a return to the internationalist paradigm, driven by economic growth, domestic reforms, and regional cooperation. He pointed to initiatives like Shamgen and growing ties with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq as examples of Türkiye's soft power strategy during this period.



However, he argued that the failure of the Arab Spring, especially in Syria, led Türkiye back to a more hard line approach. Challenges from Iran and Russia, as well as the rise of the Kurdish insurgency, pushed the country towards nationalist thinking, particularly after the failed coup in 2016. This shift, Bechev noted, was evident in Türkiye's military interventions in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Bechev concluded by pointing to a recent "foreign policy reset." He suggested that Türkiye might be returning to a more multilateral approach after facing economic difficulties and reaching the limits of its unilateralist policies, raising the question of whether the country's recent diplomatic engagements signal a broader shift.

Dr Selin Nasi began by observing that Türkiye's foreign policy had undergone a significant transformation in recent years, with the country positioning itself as an independent power in a more competitive, multipolar global landscape. She remarked that while some aspects of a liberal foreign policy approach were being revisited, the broader global environment had changed profoundly. Nasi pointed to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza as key examples of this shift, emphasizing that Türkiye was striving to maintain its autonomy by engaging both with the West and other major powers like China and Russia. This, she explained, reflected Türkiye's aspiration to operate within a world where regional powers hold greater influence. Nasi continued by clarifying that, unlike revisionist states such as Russia, Türkiye still has an interest in the existing international order, particularly in regions like Europe and the Middle East. She argued that Türkiye's membership in NATO and its relationship with the European Union demonstrated that the country was not seeking to dismantle the current system.

As an example, Nasi highlighted Türkiye's decision to join BRICS, interpreting it as symbolic of its attempt to carve out a place in a future global order while maintaining ties with existing institutions. Addressing the war in Gaza, Nasi pointed out Türkiye's complicated position.



While Iran is perceived as a rival, Türkiye has no desire to celebrate the escalation of violence in the region, as the repercussions of a larger regional conflict could be detrimental to the country.

Nasi then discussed Türkiye's foreign policy reset, acknowledging that its involvement in the Syrian civil war marked a departure from its previous non-interference stance. She explained that this led to economic challenges and regional isolation, prompting Turkish policymakers to launch a diplomatic campaign aimed at rebuilding regional alliances in recent years.

Finally, Nasi remarked on the shifting dynamics of Türkiye-Israel relations, noting how domestic political considerations have influenced Türkiye's increasingly anti-Israel rhetoric as the Gaza conflict intensified. She concluded by stating that while this stance resonates domestically, it has limited Türkiye's diplomatic leverage in the region.

Dr Ziya Meral remarked on how the global perception of peace, war, and security had shifted significantly in recent years. Meral questioned when this transformation truly began, asking whether it started with events like the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the Arab Spring, the Syrian war, or even the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. He noted that numerous countries, including Türkiye, the UK, and European states, had come to realise that their previous diplomatic and security assumptions were no longer valid. Consequently, defence investments and alliances had gained prominence. Meral pointed out the noticeable change in Türkiye's foreign policy, which had transitioned from focusing on soft power and trade to prioritising defence and security.

Meral added that Türkiye's historical sense of over-reliance on the Western bloc, even during the Cold War, had spurred its efforts to develop a more self-sufficient defence industry. He emphasised that while Turkish governments had previously discussed the nationalisation of the defence industry, it was not until the economic boom of the 2000s that Türkiye could seriously pursue this goal.



Meral highlighted the advancements in Türkiye's production of drones, missiles, and other high-tech military equipment, but he stressed that merely having this technology was insufficient. What truly mattered, he said, was how this technology was utilised and integrated.

Meral also explained that Türkiye's operational experiences in Syria and Iraq over the past decade had been crucial in refining its military capabilities. He noted that the use of proxies, intelligence improvements, and paramilitary evolution had all enhanced Türkiye's ability to assert itself in regional affairs while reducing reliance on external actors.

Finally, he discussed the growing importance of Türkiye's defence industry in its international relations, citing a 22% increase in defence exports. While he acknowledged the benefits of these sales, he cautioned that translating them into long-term influence in the Middle East posed a greater challenge.

During the Q&A session, Sir John Jenkins was asked about the historical and geopolitical intricacies of the Middle East, particularly in relation to Kurdish regions. Jenkins noted that while the UK had played a role, many of the region's challenges stemmed from more complex factors, including historical events like the Russian withdrawal of support and internal divisions among Kurdish groups.

Jenkins discussed the broader instability in the Middle East, noting differences in wealth and ambition among states. He emphasized the historical role of offshore balancing by the Ottomans, the British, and later, the Americans, in securing the Gulf.

Sir John Jenkins highlighted that the rise of Iranian influence, alongside declining U.S. involvement, has led states like Saudi Arabia to seek new security arrangements, including rapprochements with Iran.

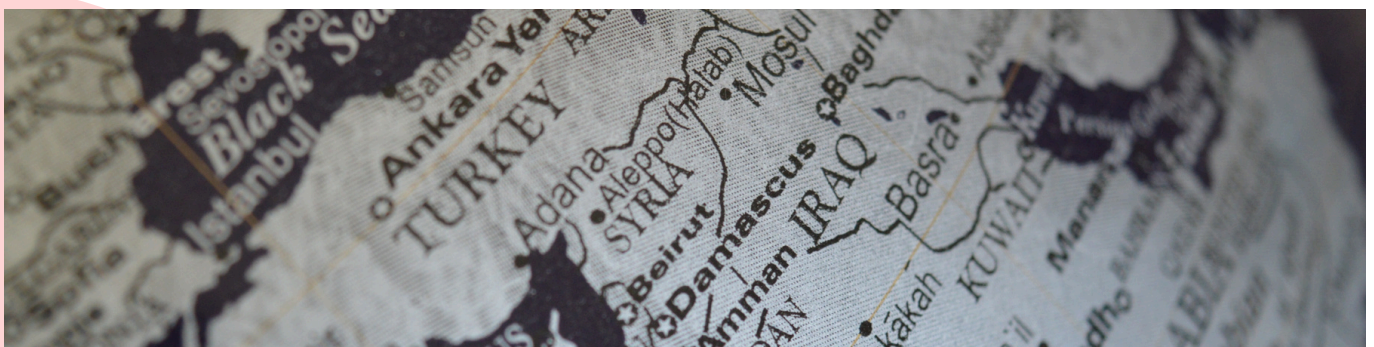


On the topic of drones, Jenkins explained that Saudi Arabia turned to Chinese and Turkish suppliers after facing restrictions from Western nations. This reflected a larger trend of states "reinsuring" against future uncertainties. He also touched upon the complexities of the UK's historical involvement in the region, recounting how some Iraqis, even as late as the 1930s, would have preferred the return of the Ottomans over British rule.

Dr Dimitar Bechev clarified his earlier points on Turkish foreign policy, emphasizing the role of ideology. He explained that political Islamists in Turkey embraced a "liberal paradigm" that positioned Turkey as a leader in the Middle East, which was deeply rooted in ideological beliefs. He highlighted nationalism as the dominant ideology shaping Turkish politics, arguing that this "lone wolf syndrome" resonated strongly across the political spectrum, including with President Erdoğan, who later aligned himself with nationalism.

Dr Selin Nasi further discussed Türkiye's recent diplomatic shifts, noting improvements in relations with Arab countries since a foreign policy reset in 2020. While trust has not been fully restored, Türkiye's invitation to the Arab League summit after a 13-year absence marked a diplomatic success. However, Nasi pointed out that Türkiye's efforts to rally Arab countries against Israeli expansionism have been less successful, largely due to its pro-Hamas stance, which has alienated both Israel and Gulf states, limiting Türkiye's involvement in broader diplomatic negotiations.

Bechev posed a question to Dr Ziya Meral regarding Türkiye's strategic autonomy. He pointed out that while Türkiye has made strides in developing its defence industry, there remain significant dependencies on Western technology, such as the use of Siemens engines in submarines. This, he suggested, raises questions about whether Türkiye can fully disentangle itself from Western procurement networks.



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