

# Mediation as a State Enterprise in Türkiye

Türkiye's geography and history, constructed as exceptional through decades of political discourse, enables Ankara to forge a distinctive state identity and position itself as an "in-between". While this strategy opens the possibility for Ankara to play a mediating role in international conflicts, it also introduces a degree of ambiguity and unpredictability.

By Ümit Seven

In April 2024, ahead of the Summit on Peace in Ukraine, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Türkiye would be among the countries that "can perform a mediation mission but not the mediation." While acknowledging Türkiye's efforts and willingness to mediate, he noted Türkiye's "other interests and strong relations with Russia." Zelensky's statements highlight both Türkiye's ambitious mediation efforts and the limitations of its role as a mediator in the conflict in Ukraine and beyond.

Over the past decade, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government has institutionalized a political entrepreneurial mindset, enabling it to seize mediation opportunities as part of its broader order-setting aspirations in foreign policy. This strategic approach seeks to leverage Türkiye's "in-between" political position in international politics, emphasizing the country's unique geography and history. Building on this narrative, Turkish foreign policymakers present Türkiye as a "reliable" mediator that offers a viable alternative to the West. This notion of exceptionalism underpins Türkiye's mediation efforts in international politics. By combining the discourse of exceptionalism with humanitarian rhetoric, Ankara crafts a mediation strategy that



Delegates from Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and the UN attend the opening of the joint coordination centre (JCC) that oversees the Black Sea Grain Deal in Istanbul, Turkey on 27 July 2022. *Umit Bektas/Reuters*

progresses from facilitation to more directive approaches that entail an active role.

While much has been written about Türkiye's balancing act between the West and Russia, this analysis specifically explores Türkiye's mediation role, contextualizing it in its foreign policy. It examines how Türkiye, as a NATO member, has taken on the role of mediator in international conflicts and what sets Ankara's mediation efforts

apart. It begins by providing a brief overview of Ankara's evolving foreign policy in the early 2000s. Next, it situates Türkiye's mediation efforts within the context of its broader foreign policy goals. The analysis then explores Türkiye's involvement in Somalia and its diplomatic efforts in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine to understand the trajectory, conditions, and characteristics of Türkiye's mediation efforts.

### An Overambitious Agenda

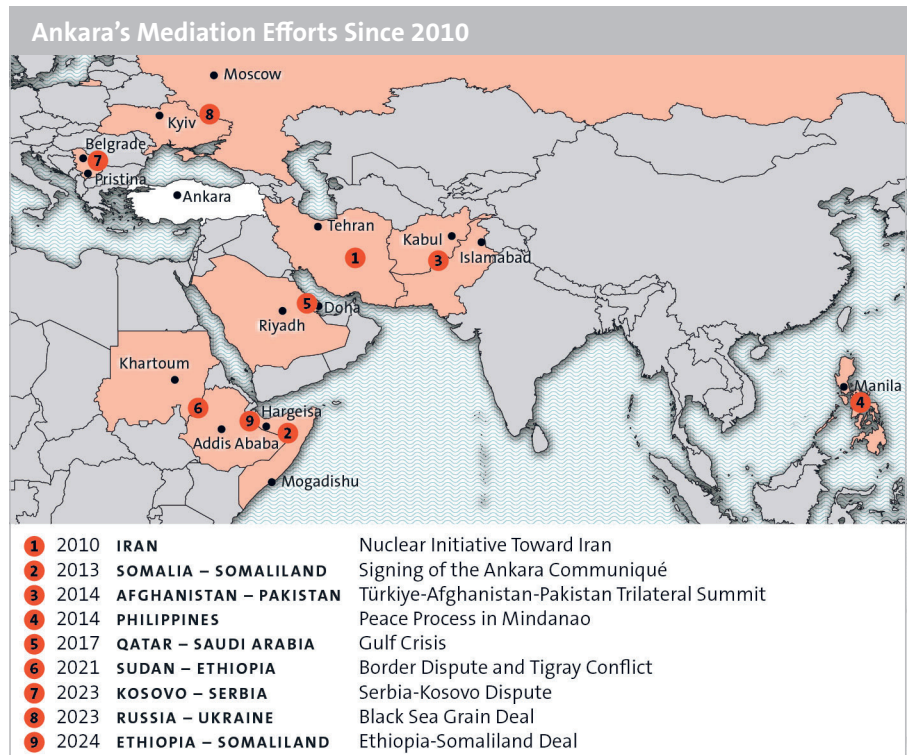
Following the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002, Ankara adopted a new vision for its foreign policy, transitioning from a risk averse “business as usual” path to a more ambitious and multidimensional agenda. Particularly, with the appointment of academic-turned-politician Ahmet Davutoglu as Foreign Minister in 2009, Turkish foreign policy underwent a significant transformation, becoming notably more assertive and driven by a quest for strategic autonomy. This occurred during a period when domestic politics were modernizing, with increasing civilian control over the military. As the government reconfigured civilian-military relations, the Turkish Armed Forces became the mere executor of foreign policy with diminishing influence on politics.

At the outset of the Arab Spring, Türkiye positioned itself as an ambitious regional actor, aiming to shape Middle Eastern politics by leveraging its strong economic and political standing both domestically and internationally. Erdogan cast himself as a robust, trustful, and pious leader, committed to upholding Islamic culture while juxtaposing Ankara’s humanitarian policies against the backdrop of the West’s colonial history-driven agenda. However, as Ankara sought to steer the Arab Spring uprisings to align with its own interests, its assertive foreign policy began to falter in 2013. This

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shift resulted in increased isolation for Ankara and curtailed its effectiveness in mediation efforts.

Following the suspension of Türkiye’s EU accession talks in 2018, tensions between Türkiye and the EU escalated over various issues, including concerns about the rule of law, human rights, and Ankara’s drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. In 2019, the EU imposed punitive measures on Türkiye in response to its drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Further, Türkiye found itself excluded from the F-35 fighter jet program led by the US and confronted with sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) due to its acquisition of Russian-made S-400 systems.



As the relationship with the West transitioned from cooperation to conflict, President Erdogan reoriented the country’s international trajectory, consistently articulating his grievances against Western powers and underscoring Türkiye’s new strategic direction. In 2022, Erdogan expressed Türkiye’s intention to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a significant pivot towards Eastern alliances. His promotion of anti-Western rhetoric permeated public opinion, amplifying a narrative of dissent. Amid these shifting political dynamics, Türkiye has increasingly been described as a liminal state – referring to its in-between position – as well as a marginal and swing state in international politics.

### An Architecture of Mediation

Prior to the popular Arab Spring protests that swept the Middle East in 2011, Ankara recalibrated its foreign policy towards the Middle East with a more assertive approach and its mediator role gained considerable momentum. Ankara mediated the conflict between Israel and Hamas in 2008 and later facilitated talks between Iraq and Syria in 2009. Capitalizing on its geographic proximity to the conflict and its perceived neutrality, Ankara also played a

pivotal role in mediating nuclear negotiations between the West and Iran in 2010. Ankara’s successful intervention came after the collapse of the Vienna deal, at a moment when Iran sought a neutral ally in the negotiations. The Turkish government staunchly opposed any sanctions against Iran, deeming them counterproductive and detrimental to diplomatic efforts.

In the post-2010 period, Ankara took steps to institutionalize its mediation efforts while prioritizing mediation diplomacy. In September 2010, Türkiye joined forces with Finland to launch the Mediation for Peace initiative, aimed at bolstering the role of mediation in resolving conflicts. Simultaneously, Türkiye established the Group of Friends of Mediation, a coalition encompassing 52 member states, the United Nations, and various regional and international organizations. This initiative was followed by the inaugural Istanbul Conference on Mediation in February 2012, marking the beginning of a series of such conferences in the ensuing years.

In 2013, Ankara embarked on a strategic diversification of its diplomatic efforts through multi-track diplomacy. The concept of humanitarian diplomacy gained significant momentum with support from public institutions and NGOs, including

the Turkish Red Crescent, Turkish Airlines, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA), and the Yunus Emre Institute.

To enhance its visibility and diversify its mediation efforts, Ankara introduced a [Mediation for Peace Certificate Program](#) for young diplomats from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) member states in 2018. More recently, in April 2024, under the leadership of Hakan Fidan, Türkiye's new Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry established a dedicated Directorate General for International Mediation. Under the leadership of an ambassador, the Office identifies key themes and regions of priority in international mediation, collaborating closely with various public institutions, including the intelligence services. Through these institutional initiatives, Ankara aims to leverage its mediation efforts worldwide, in line with its increasingly assertive role in international affairs, grounded in its "entrepreneurial and humanitarian diplomacy."

### A Lab for Foreign Policy

Türkiye's engagement with Somalia reflects President Erdogan's strategic vision for foreign policy and provides an example of how Ankara has sought to distinguish itself in the field of mediation. Turkish involvement came at a critical juncture when a severe famine and food crisis wreaked havoc on Somalia, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands between 2010 and 2012. Ankara adopted a multifaceted strategy to address the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Somalia, positioning it as an alternative to Western-dominated efforts. Erdogan's foreign policy, rooted in humanitarian responsibility, thus found its expression in Somalia.

Beginning in 2011, alongside growing cooperation in trade and investment, Türkiye significantly increased its emergency and humanitarian assistance to Somalia. The launch of Turkish Airlines flights to Mogadishu in 2012 further enhanced connectivity between the two nations. Through organizations such as TIKA, the Turkish Red Crescent, and other Turkish civil society organizations, including the Yunus Emre Institute and the Turkish Religious Foundation, Türkiye has implemented multiple diverse projects in the country, including the construction of hospitals, schools and providing scholarships to Somalis to study in Türkiye.

In 2013, Ankara facilitated talks between Somalia and Somaliland, resulting in the

Ankara Communiqué. As part of ongoing mediation efforts, Türkiye decided to establish a new consulate in Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, which is not recognized by the international community, to bolster the dialogue process and provide a

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tangible incentive for Somaliland. Later, the Turkish Maarif Foundation opened its doors in Somalia, offering language courses and educational support. In 2017, the Turkish Armed Forces set up the largest army base in Somalia to train Somali troops. Somalia has thus become a strategic space for Türkiye to define and advance its state identity, priorities, and principles.

In February 2024, Somalia concluded a naval agreement with Türkiye, enabling Ankara to establish a maritime presence in a strategically significant region. This move was in response to a prior agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland that granted Ethiopia access to Somaliland's coastline. In July 2024, Türkiye facilitated talks to mend the strained diplomatic relations between Somalia and Ethiopia, which were exacerbated by tensions over Somaliland's port deal with Ethiopia.

In Somalia-Ethiopia talks, Ankara's mediation role was significantly enhanced by its extensive cooperation and political and economic connections with both rivals. However, Türkiye's approach went beyond leveraging these advantages. It adopted a principled mediator stance, articulated through a discourse of humanitarian concerns, and positioned itself as an alternative to the West. Initially, Ankara's efforts focused on creating a conducive environment for dialogue and facilitating the negotiations. Although the ministers did not engage in direct discussions with each other, Foreign Minister Fidan conducted one-on-one meetings with the foreign ministers of both countries. This culminated in the signing of a joint statement aimed at improving bilateral relations.

### Ankara Between Moscow and Kyiv

Türkiye's involvement in the Black Sea Grain Deal serves as a concrete example of the way in which Ankara seeks to leverage its unique geography and history to assert itself as a mediator and enhance its media-

tion efforts. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Türkiye adopted a well-calculated and prudent approach towards both countries. It declared Russian aggression unacceptable and condemned it as a blatant violation of international law and a blow to peace. Ankara also closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits to Russian warships, exercising its right under Article 19 of the 1936 Montreux Convention. Yet, Türkiye declined to join its Western allies in sanctions against Russia, taking a more discreet stance against Russia.

While affirming its commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, Türkiye has extended substantial material support to Ukraine. Initially, Türkiye provided humanitarian aid through its Disaster Management Agency (AFAD) and the Red Crescent. Beyond this, Ukraine has grown into a key market for Turkish TB2 armed unmanned aerial vehicles.

After the ministerial-level engagement between Ukraine and Russia on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum on 10 March 2022, Russian and Ukrainian negotiators convened in Istanbul on 29 March 2022 and produced the Istanbul Communiqué which laid out Ukraine's position and a framework of a possible agreement. In the process, the state discourse deliberately made a distinction between facilitation and mediation, emphasizing Türkiye's role in facilitating the talks and [highlighting its position on humanitarian issues](#). President Erdogan openly criticized the West's approach to the conflict, stating that he does not agree with how the West is handling the situation with Russia.

Despite the withdrawal of the parties from cease-fire talks in May, President Erdogan and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres took steps to address humanitarian questions. Later, the UN delegation, with participation from the International Maritime Organization, drafted a concept that led to the creation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative. In this initiative, Türkiye emerged as a key mediator, leveraging its control over the Black Sea maritime routes and its strategic position between Russia and the West. During the negotiations, Turkish Intelligence (MIT) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs played a central role, while the Turkish military were tasked with implementing the deal. On 22 July



2022, Türkiye and the UN brokered a deal aimed at opening blocked Ukrainian Black Sea ports to allow shipping of urgently

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needed Ukrainian grain. The agreement also paved the way for Russian grain and fertilizer to reach global markets.

On 22 September 2022, Russia and Ukraine carried out an unexpected prisoner swap brokered by Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. As part of the deal, five senior Ukrainian commanders, including the commander of the Azov battalion, would remain in Türkiye until the end of the war. Ankara later leveraged the presence of prisoners in Türkiye as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Russia.

Following a reluctant extension of the deal in June 2023, Russian officials stated that the Black Sea grain deal could not be extended under current circumstances. On 8 July 2023, Türkiye handed over the commanders who led the defense of the bombed-out city of Mariupol to Ukraine. Russia accused Kyiv and Ankara of violating the terms of the prisoner exchange.

Erdogan refrained from providing an explanation for the release of the Ukrainian soldiers. However, by handing them over to Ukraine, Türkiye sent a clear message to

Russia, indicating that the extension of the grain deal is crucial for ensuring Türkiye's cooperation and maintaining their strategic partnership. On 17 July 2023, Russia suspended a humanitarian corridor designed to deliver Ukrainian grain to global markets, just hours before the agreement's expiry.

Erdogan held face-to-face meetings with Putin on 19 July 2023 in Tehran, followed by subsequent meetings in Sochi, Samarkand, and Astana. During these meetings, Erdogan attempted to persuade his Russian counterpart to renegotiate the shipment of grain products through the humanitarian corridor.

### The Limits of Exceptionalism

Over the past two decades, Turkish foreign policy has undergone significant institutional and paradigmatic shifts. In tandem with these changes, the Turkish government's mediation strategy has evolved, becoming both professionalized and institutionalized, and is now fully integrated into the country's foreign policy. With President Erdogan playing a central role as the primary mediator, its mediation efforts are characterized by its multidimensional framework and the strategic use of directive approaches.

As exemplified in Somalia and in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ankara constructs a difference between itself and the West in its mediation efforts and utilizes all its available resources and tools, including intelligence. It first concentrates on facili-

tating dialogue between conflicting parties without influencing the outcome. As negotiations advance, Ankara then takes on a more proactive role, setting the agenda and actively working to sustain momentum.

The discourse of geographical and historical exceptionalism plays a pivotal role in the design of Ankara's mediation strategy. It enables the Turkish government to craft a dynamic state identity that deftly steers its political orientation in its foreign policy. By defining this identity in opposition to the West, Türkiye positions itself as a reliable mediator in international conflicts. While this flexible political stance grants Ankara diplomatic leverage, it also introduces ambiguity and unpredictability, which risk further isolating the country within the international order. Cognizant of both the benefits and challenges of its shifting political orientation, Ankara therefore strategically defines its middle-power role by emphasizing humanitarian motivations in its mediation efforts.

For more on perspectives on Mediation and Peace Promotion, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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