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Turkish Diplomacy in the Balkans and the Mediterranean. Opportunities and Limits for Middle-power Activism in the 1930s

During the last decade, several works on Turkish foreign policy have focused on the role of Turkey as a middle power in international politics. William Hale writes that the Turkish example may offer some interesting pointers as to how medium-sized states have reacted to changing international environments during the past 200 years,¹ while Baskın Oran, a Turkish scholar, who recently edited a two-volume work on Turkish foreign policy,² sees Turkey as a middle power in the context of twentieth-century international developments.

Both Hale and Oran base their argument on the traditional definition of middle powers and calculation of power using indicators such as population, economic resources and military strength. Similarly, middle powers are characterized by their opposition to undue great-power control, their growing tendency to act together and the influence they exert individually.³ They measure the power of middle countries in relation to the power of greater ones. Middle powers stand somewhere between the two extremes. In other words, they have some ability to resist pressure from more powerful states, and may sometimes be able to influence the policies of weaker ones, especially if they are geographically contiguous.⁴

In contrast to the works of Hale and Oran, this article specifically focuses on Turkey's role in international politics in the 1930s. The emphasis on this decade derives from the fact that during the interwar period, more than any

1 William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy 1774–2000* (London 2000).

2 Baskın Oran (ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası* (Istanbul 2001). In addition to these works, there are articles on the same topic. See, for example, Meltem Müftüler and Müberra Yüksel, 'A Middle Power in the New Order' in Andrew F. Cooper (ed.), *Niche Diplomacy* (London 1997), 184–96. They argue that the role of middle powers such as Turkey in international politics increases in times of uncertainty and crisis as in the post-Cold War era, in the sense that Turkey's role has begun to expand into new areas.

3 Carsten Holbraad is among the specialists who assess the power of medium-sized states by making the traditional distinction between the great and the lesser powers. He defines middle powers as states weaker than the great powers in the system but significantly stronger than the minor powers and small states with which they normally interact. Carsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics* (London 1984), 4, 68. Bernard Wood argues along similar lines that the scope of great powers' interests is defined in both spatial and functional terms, while that of secondary powers is geographically defined. Bernard Wood, *The Middle Powers and the General Interest* (Ottawa 1988), 3.

4 Oran, *op. cit.*, 30 and Hale, *op. cit.*, 1–2.

other phase of its history, Turkey can be classified as a middle power. Although 'middle power' is a relatively recently coined term, the diplomats of the 1930s were aware of Turkey's distinct status in the international power hierarchy. For example, British diplomats identified Turkey as a 'small great power'.⁵ In the interwar years, unlike the situation at present, the number of middle powers was limited. The international system was multipolar in the sense that on the one hand there were several great powers such as Britain, France, Italy and Germany and on the other there were many countries which had not yet become independent: they were still colonies.

Therefore, the interwar period was a distinctive era during which a country like Turkey with limited capabilities was able to command its power and to resist greater states. The aim of this article is to analyse to what extent Turkey during the 1930s was able to develop an autonomous diplomatic strategy in the Balkans and the Mediterranean. In other words, it focuses on how Turkey defined its priorities at the diplomatic level and to what extent it was able to realize such priorities independently from the decision-making of the great powers.⁶

In fact, Turkey offers an unusual case of middle powers on two major accounts. First, it was the indisputable heir to a great power, the Ottoman Empire. Unlike most other middle powers, it had changed from being a great power to becoming a middle power, not from being a colony to becoming a middle power. Second, in the 1930s, Turkey could be qualified as a middle power mainly at the diplomatic level. Even though Turkey was not an economic power in the 1930s, it was able to play a geopolitical role at the international level in developing a regional policy independent of the great powers due to its diplomatic efforts.

In the interwar era, Ankara was quite successful in developing a regional strategy in the Balkans, as already mentioned. However, in the Mediterranean, at the diplomatic level, Turkish political leadership was not as influential as in the Balkans. Unlike the Balkans where Turkey interacted with minor powers, in the Mediterranean it had to deal as a middle power with great powers. The second part of this article discusses the limits of middle-power activism in the Mediterranean during this period.

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5 Quoted in Yücel Güçlü, *The Question of the Sanjak of Alexandrette* (Ankara 2001), 253.

6 I rather agree with the revisionist approach of Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott and Kim Richard Nossal in defining the middle powers. These authors question the traditional definitions of middle-power status and instead identify middle powers by what such countries do on the diplomatic level and the manner in which they pursue their foreign policy objectives. Here the essence of middle-power activity is centred on diplomatic behaviour. According to this behavioural definition, middle-power diplomacy is guided by 'their tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, their tendency to embrace compromise positions in international disputes, and their tendency to embrace notions of "good international citizenship"'. Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers. Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver 1993), 19.

During periods following general wars, secondary powers are prompted to fight for their causes together with their peers, and this strategy separates them from great and minor powers. Turkey's role in the Balkans in the first half of the 1930s is a good illustration of the position of middle powers after periods of general war. Turkish efforts in this period were directed at the construction of coalitions of 'like-minded' states in the Balkan peninsula.⁷

The operating environment in the Balkans made coalition-building among these countries easier. First, they were geographically contiguous. This factor alone facilitated the collaboration of like-minded states. Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania and Romania had shared frontiers (continental or coastal). Second, in the Balkans, with the exception of Albania, power was more or less evenly distributed among geographically and economically minor states of comparable strength. Turkey was the only Balkan country with a sizeable territory. Third, no specific great power exerted a decisive influence in the region in the first half of the 1930s. In fact, immediately after the first world war there was a power vacuum in the peninsula, which the world economic crisis of 1929 only served to deepen.⁸

Compared to other Balkan states, Turkey had the greatest potential to act as a middle power in the region, not merely because of the size of its territory but mainly as a result of its diplomatic power in the Balkans. Turkey could tap its middle-power capacity more in diplomatic than in physical and military terms. At the time, Turkey already had in place a highly-developed diplomatic tradition and service. In functional terms, the Ottoman heritage added an element of creativity to the new Republic's diplomacy. The Turkish ruling class in the interwar period inherited the administrative experience of the Ottoman Empire. It used the knowledge, skill and know-how it had gained from the Ottoman experience to promote its diplomatic goals.⁹

While the Ottoman heritage provided a functional advantage for Turkey to assume a high-profile diplomatic role, the same heritage could have militated against Turkey's efforts. In other words, in the Balkans Turkey inherited the public image of the Ottoman Empire that was the result of nearly four centuries of Ottoman rule. Probably in no other Balkan country except Greece did this image decisively shape the public and official view of the new Turkish Republic well into the early 1930s. The subsequent resolution of Turkish-Greek problems that had defied solution since the Treaty of Lausanne had an equally strong — and positive — impact. Ankara's mending fences with Athens helped Turkey drastically change its international image as a pro-status quo power that rejected cross-border expansionism or irredentism so that the

7 Ravenhill writes that the creativity of middle powers is directed towards the construction of coalitions of 'like-minded' states. John Ravenhill, 'Cycles of Middle Power Activism. Constraint and Choice in Australian and Canadian Foreign Policies', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 52, 3 (1998), 312.

8 See Dilek Barlas, *Etatism and Diplomacy in Turkey* (Leiden 1998).

9 Selim Deringil, 'Dış Politikada Süreklilik Sorunsalı: II. Abdülhamit ve İsmet İnönü', *Toplum ve Bilim*, 28 (Winter 1985), 95–6.

new Turkey began to be perceived as a potential partner rather than a threat in the peninsula.

Moreover, the new rulers of Turkey were jealous guardians of their legal and formal equality with other states. Rather than seeking a *primus inter pares* status as the heir to the former imperial ruler, their persistent emphasis on the equality of states probably improved their image in the Balkans. Therefore, when Turkey embarked on diplomatic initiatives in the Balkans, it was able to convince other nations that it was working towards creating a coalition of like-minded states in the Balkans rather than reviving Ottoman domination.

Balkan co-operation took root initially as a reaction to the emergence of revisionist powers, in particular Italy. Soon after the first world war, Italy embarked on a series of aggressive moves in the region. Italian forces first bombarded Corfu in Greece and took over Fiume from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Thus, Rome's direct involvement in the Balkans prompted Turkey to seek ways of forming a Balkan entente. The idea was aired for the first time by a Turkish diplomat Hüseyin Ragıp Baydur in conversation with the Romanian Foreign Minister I.G. Duca, in 1926.¹⁰ The idea itself may not have been original¹¹ or may have had many fathers,¹² yet probably no other Balkan state pursued it as vigorously and relentlessly as Turkey did in the interwar period.

The world economic crisis of 1929 was a further stimulus for Turkey to take the lead in Balkan co-operation. The crisis was a drastic manifestation of a transitional period during which different forces were competing to control the terms of the new world order. Changes at the global level reinforced Turkish activism and initiatives in the international arena. Furthermore, the inability of the European great powers to find solutions to the crisis gave Turkey more latitude in shaping Balkan diplomacy with its neighbours between 1930 and 1933, when the Balkan countries called for regional conferences to overcome jointly the economic and political effects of the crisis.

In March 1933, Mussolini's proposal of a Four-Power Pact drove Turkey and its neighbours to move towards a Balkan entente. In this pact, the fascist leader proposed co-operation in Europe between Italy, Britain, France and Germany in order to dictate the terms of the European peace. Mussolini's initiative did not really surprise the Turkish leadership because the latter was already convinced that, despite the intense rivalry among themselves, the great powers could collaborate when their interests required them to do so.¹³ The

10 Barlas, *Etatism*, op. cit., 137.

11 According to Stavrianos, the Balkan Entente of 1934 represented the third Balkan Alliance system. The first two attempts featured strong anti-Ottoman elements. L.S. Stavrianos, *Balkan Federation. A History of the Movement Toward Balkan Unity in Modern Times* (Hamden, CT 1964), 224–58.

12 For example, King Alexander of Yugoslavia is also considered 'the primary architect of the [Balkan] pact'. Bogdan Raditsa, 'Venizelos and the Struggle around the Balkan Pact', *Balkan Studies*, 6, 1 (1965), 120.

13 Public Record Office (PRO) FO 371/16801, C1237/175/22, f. 77. Concerning Turkey,

Four-Power Pact, however, ignored the demands and interests of the smaller states in shaping Balkan and Mediterranean politics.

On the surface, Mussolini's Four-Power Pact seemed in contradiction to his strategy vis-à-vis Turkey, which he had outlined to Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü and Foreign Minister Tefik Rüştü Aras during their visit to Rome in 1932. In Rome, Mussolini had told İnönü and Aras that in general Italy was against any kind of alliance system in the region and that his country preferred to develop a close collaboration with Turkey.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the Turkish political leadership believed that the European powers had not given up their intention of dividing the Balkans into separate spheres of influence. This division might reveal itself in the form of conflict or collaboration. The relationship between France and Italy formed a good example of this kind of competition in the Balkan peninsula. After France signed a treaty of alliance with Belgrade in 1927, Rome felt that France had formed a major threat to the region. In reaction, in 1928 Rome signed a neutrality treaty with Ankara. The signing of this treaty started a short-lived naval co-operation between Italy and Turkey. Subsequently, in March 1930, a Turkish daily quoted the *Chicago Tribune*, which pointed to Italian–Turkish naval co-operation as the principal reason for the Italian–French rift at the London Naval Conference.¹⁵

It would be an exaggeration to present improved Turkish–Italian relations in 1928–32 as the principal cause of Italian–French differences, particularly in naval affairs. Nevertheless, the quotation in the Turkish daily newspaper reflected the role that a middle power, Turkey, could play in the development of relations between two Mediterranean powers, Italy and France. From 1932 on, the nature of Turkish–Italian and of Italian–French relations changed. The turning-point was Mussolini's declaration of the Four-Power Pact.

Yet Mussolini continued to foster the image of friendly relations between Turkey and Italy. In fact, after the Four-Power Pact proposal, Mussolini approached the Turkish government to assure it that there was no change in Italy's policy of friendship towards Turkey. He also added that Italy would inform Turkey of all its political activities. In the same way, Mussolini expected *loyauté* from Turkey. Moreover, if there was any criticism of Italy on Turkey's part, he would like to hear of it directly from Ankara. In other words, Italy did not want to see or hear any intermediary between Rome and

according to the British archives, French ambassador in Rome M. de Jouvenel had recognized the priority of the Italian claim to penetrate Anatolia in the event of a break-up of Turkey on the demise of M. Kemal. But he also argued that any Italian penetration into Anatolia would be like dividing the lion's skin before the animal was dead and could hardly be regarded as a serious proposition.

14 Archivio Storico della Ministero Affari Esteri (ASMAE), Busta 7, Rapporti Politici, 1933/1. However, as we shall discuss later on, Mussolini was willing to form a more limited alliance system with Turkey and Greece.

15 Dilek Barlas and Serhat Güvenç, 'To Build a Navy with the Help of Adversary: Italian–Turkish Naval Arms Trade, 1929–1932', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 38, 4 (October 2002), 156.

Ankara. Accordingly, Balkan affairs were to be debated directly between Italy and Turkey without involving other countries.¹⁶

Italy's expectations did not resonate with those of Ankara, which believed that great power involvement in the region might endanger Turkey's relations with its Balkan neighbours.¹⁷ Ankara opposed France's intention of incorporating Bulgaria, in co-operation with Yugoslavia, into the Little Entente. The Turkish aim was to include these two Balkan countries within a possible Balkan entente instead.¹⁸ Related to that, Turkey focused on co-operation with other Balkan nations instead of developing its bilateral relations with Rome. Ankara endeavoured to enlist as many Balkan countries as possible in a Balkan entente.

In this way, Turkey hoped to prevent the manipulation of the smaller states by the great powers in the region. In other words, Ankara's aim was to form a 'neutrality' bloc in south-eastern Europe. In September 1933, it signed the Entente Cordiale with Greece that guaranteed the inviolability of their common boundaries. In October and November 1933, Turkey signed separate treaties of friendship, non-aggression and reconciliation with Romania and Yugoslavia.¹⁹

Rome inferred that these treaties did not bind Ankara politically to Bucharest and Belgrade because they concerned relations between these countries only in the event of aggression. The Italians argued that the treaties of neutrality Turkey had signed separately with Italy in 1928 and Bulgaria in 1929, unlike those signed with Romania and Yugoslavia, involved political responsibilities in peacetime also.²⁰ Thus Rome was convinced that Turkey's relations with Romania and Yugoslavia were not comparable in scope to those with Italy and Bulgaria. There was a tendency among Italian officials to believe that Turkey inclined more toward the Italian–Bulgarian camp than to that of Romania and Yugoslavia, members of the Little Entente.²¹

Italy continued working towards rapprochement among those Balkan countries which were not members of the French-sponsored Little Entente, namely Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. In fact, Rome had favoured Turkey's signing treaties with Bulgaria in 1929 and Greece in 1930. After the signing of these treaties, Italian political leaders thought that they would have even more con-

16 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri A. IV-6, D. 54, F. 85–4.

17 ASMAE, Busta 7–Turchia 1933, 18 June 1933.

18 ASMAE, Busta 7–Turchia 1933, 11 July 1933. According to Italian archival documents, Turkey would do everything possible to prevent the formation of a Slavic bloc. If such a bloc was realized, Ankara would come to a special agreement with the Soviet Union, Italy, Austria and Hungary. ASMAE, Busta 7/5–Turchia 1933, 16 September 1933. In fact, Yugoslavia could not persuade Bulgaria to co-operate within the Little Entente as France expected.

19 These three countries agreed on strengthening their armies to the same level. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-6, D. 54, F. 85–15.

20 ASMAE, Busta 7–Turchia 1933, 19 October 1933. According to these treaties, they would not be engaged in any economic or political agreement against each other. In fact, Rome had favoured Turkey's signing neutrality treaties with Bulgaria in 1929 and Greece in 1930.

21 ASMAE, Busta 11/1–Turchia, 26 May 1934.

trol over the Balkan states. Moreover, Rome expected that the Turkish–Italian and the Greek–Italian treaties would serve as building blocks for a tripartite alliance.²² For the Italians, the amelioration or deterioration of Turkish–Greek relations was dependent on the state of Turkish–Italian relations. Some Italian leaders were convinced that Turkey would determine the future of Balkan co-operation in a way that would not ruin Italian influence in the peninsula.

However, in 1934, with new developments in the Balkans, Turkish–Italian relations became more complicated. The correspondence between the Foreign Ministries of Turkey and Italy that year was dominated by the formation of the Entente and its likely ramifications for Turkish–Italian relations. This correspondence suggests that the majority of Italian officials believed that the Balkan Entente would lead Turkey to take up a strong anti-Italian position.²³

The Italian ambassador in Turkey, Vincenzo Lojacono, wired Rome that the formation of the Balkan Entente was a clear sign of such behaviour for a number of reasons. First of all, Ankara had taken advantage of the Italian initiative to become reconciled with Greece and to orient Turkish–Greek reconciliation towards a pact excluding Italy. However, Rome did not see any future in Turkish–Greek relations unless led by Italy.²⁴ Secondly, Lojacono believed that existing anti-Italian feelings in Turkey and Yugoslavia had brought these two countries closer. He argued that in the Entente, Yugoslavia and Turkey were championing anti-Italian solidarity. Lojacono did not wish this solidarity to work against Italy.²⁵ Otherwise, he threatened, Italy would defend its interests in the Mediterranean.²⁶

As Lojacono observed, Ankara had been enthusiastic about the formation of the Balkan Entente. President Atatürk even favoured the idea that it be signed in Istanbul. His desire was to make Turkey the leader in such an initiative. Ankara's diplomatic behaviour was characterized by the pursuit of multi-lateral solutions and compromise positions. As a corollary to this, to the dismay of certain great powers Ankara was intent on promoting multilateral and compromise initiatives against all odds. For example, Atatürk had warned his colleagues that Italy could obstruct the formation of a Balkan entente. He had written to İnönü that Rome was against this entente and that Bulgaria, as an Italian proxy, could, with Italian encouragement, attempt to undermine it.²⁷

22 For more details see Dilek Barlas, 'Friends or Foes. Diplomatic Relations between Italy and Turkey, 1923–1936', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (May 2004).

23 ASMAE, Busta 11/2–Turchia, 21 May 1934.

24 ASMAE, Busta 11/1, 26 April 1934 and 11/1, 26 May 1934.

25 The Balkan Entente did not include Bulgaria as Italy expected, but ended up with including Yugoslavia. Under-secretary in the Italian Foreign Ministry Fulvio Suvich pointed out that Ankara rejected the demands of Romania and Yugoslavia that the entente take under guarantee their boundaries with Italy and Hungary. ASMAE, Busta 11/2–Turchia, 29 December 1933. According to some Italian officials, Turkey and Greece had not been instrumental in the formation of the entente and seemed to have been pushed into it by Yugoslavia.

26 ASMAE, Busta 11/1–Turchia, 26 May 1934.

27 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-6, D. 54, F. 63–10.

In February 1934, the Balkan Entente was signed between Turkey, Yugoslavia, Romania and Greece. Ankara tended to dismiss Greek concern about a possible conflict between Italy and Greece that the Entente might create. Venizelos, who had initiated a pro-Balkan policy in Greece, argued during the signing of the Balkan Entente that Greece was more a Mediterranean country than a Balkan one. He believed that Greece had to avoid any activity that could provoke its Mediterranean neighbour, Italy.²⁸ While the Greeks approved the Entente, under the influence of Venizelos, the Greek senate added the reservation that under no circumstances would the application of the pact involve Greece in hostilities with a great power.²⁹

A few months after the signing of the Balkan Entente, in his speech to parliament Mussolini reiterated his friendly feelings towards Greece and Turkey. According to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, Mussolini's speech was a sign that Italy would take up a position against the Balkan Entente, but not specifically against Turkey or Greece.³⁰ Therefore, Italy was likely to continue to perceive Turkey and Greece not as a part of the Balkan co-operation but as potential 'allies' in the formation of its Mediterranean policy.

The Entente was designed to tackle threats only from within the Balkan peninsula, namely from Bulgaria. This was mainly because of reservations on the part of the Greeks. However, Ankara was aware that Bulgaria could form a threat to its neighbours with the support of a great power such as Italy. According to Ankara, Sofia had to be won over to the ranks of the Entente countries because a Balkan Entente including Bulgaria would better serve Balkan security interests by alienating Sofia from Rome. Towards this end, Turkey made a last-ditch effort to enlist Bulgarian support for the Balkan Entente by renewing its invitation to Bulgaria to join the Entente. Although Ankara did not receive any positive response from Sofia, it managed to get a provision made for incorporating Bulgaria in the Entente, should it change its mind and wish to join later. Moreover, unlike Greece, Turkey signed separate military accords with Yugoslavia and Romania, according to which each party would declare war to help the other in the event of a Balkan attack, with or without the support of any external power.³¹

The Balkan countries which formed the Balkan Entente welcomed Turkish diplomatic initiatives and Turkish leadership towards building a coalition of Balkan states in the 1930s. These countries were convinced that Turkey had rejected its Ottoman heritage and did not have any imperial aspirations in the peninsula. In fact, during 1926 and 1927, Turkey was the first Balkan country

28 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A.IV-16-b, D. 65, F.20-18. During his visit to the British embassy, Venizelos talked about the possibility of an armed dispute, not only between Italy and Yugoslavia but also between Italy and Turkey, and concluded that Greece must not be involved in any of these disputes.

29 İsmail Soysal, *Türkiye'nin Siyasal Andlaşmaları I* (Ankara 1983), 450.

30 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A.IV-16-b, D. 65, F. 20-10.

31 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-6, D. 54-1, F. 79.

to propose the formation of a Balkan Pact with the motto ‘The Balkans for the Balkan people’.

Besides political stability, as a new nation state Turkey, like other Balkan countries, needed economic stability but lacked a strong economy to fight the repercussions of the 1929 crisis in the region single-handed. To find common solutions to the crisis, Turkey, together with Greece, initiated the Balkan conferences. The Turkish–Greek rapprochement not only led to the signing of the Balkan Entente but also opened the way for debates on the Balkan Union. In this process, the Greek political leader Papanastassiou even proposed that Istanbul become the capital of a possible Balkan Union.³²

On their way towards co-operation, the Balkan countries realized that they had to stand together against great-power rivalry in the region since, individually, these countries were not strong enough militarily. These common interests of the Balkan countries offered Turkey the opportunity to develop a Balkan strategy independent of the great powers. In the 1930s, Turkey did not have any great power patron and was indeed at odds with most of the great powers over a multitude of questions that could not be worked out at Lausanne. Therefore, Turkish policy was generally perceived as promoting the interests of the regional countries and diluting great-power control in the Balkans.³³ Turkish resistance against Italian–French rivalry in the Balkans was a very good example of this policy.

Turkey’s ability to take such an initiative in the Balkans derived from its historical experiences. It was true that the new Turkish Republic aimed at a deliberate break with its Ottoman past. Nevertheless, it inherited from the Ottoman Empire the historic role of serving as both a land bridge and a fortress connecting Europe and Asia. Moreover, Turkey still had control over the only seaway linking the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.³⁴ Further, the Turkish political leadership believed, like its predecessors, that the geo-strategic location and value of Turkey had not changed. In other words, such a position could not allow Turkey to remain aloof from new developments. Turkey, therefore, had to be strong and stable within its own region. To achieve this, it had to avoid polarization in international relations in order to avoid the patronage of any great power.³⁵ The most important way of doing this was to use its diplomatic powers to promote multilateral and compromise solutions in the Balkans.

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32 Tevfik Rüştü Aras, *Atatürk’ün Dış Politikası* (Istanbul 2003), 139.

33 The only great power with which Turkey maintained good relations after the War of Independence was the Soviet Union. Ankara had been careful to avoid any engagements that might alienate its neighbour in the north. However, Moscow did seem to approve of Turkey’s championing Balkan co-operation. See T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, *Türk Dış Politikasında 50 Yıl. Cumhuriyetin İlk On Yılı ve Balkan Paktı* (1923–1934) (Ankara 1974), 335–47.

34 Mustafa Aydın, ‘Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy. Historical Framework and Traditional Inputs’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 35, 4 (October 1999), 157–67.

35 Deringil, *op. cit.*, 94.

Following the signing of the Balkan Entente, Ankara turned its attention to the Mediterranean where the great-power rivalry was intensifying. The operating environment for Turkish diplomacy in the Mediterranean was different from that of the Balkans. The sheer size of the Mediterranean, stretching from Spain to Turkey in the north and from Morocco to Syria in the south, denied Turkey the advantage of geographic proximity to the Balkans in middle-power diplomacy. In this vast geographic area, the number of potential partners for middle-power diplomacy was disproportionately limited. In the north, France and Italy were the two great powers in competition. The lesser powers included Spain in the north-west and Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey in the north-east. The southern part consisted of colonies of Italy, France and Great Britain. The diplomatic and naval rivalry among the great powers left very limited latitude for middle-power diplomacy. Hence, for Turkey, to operate in the Mediterranean was not as easy as in the Balkans.

This unpromising operating environment did not deter Turkey from promoting collaborative schemes. Ankara realized that the rivalry between the great powers was the primary obstacle to peace. On the other hand, these powers knew how to co-operate with each other when their interests required them to do so. For example, in the case of Rome and Berlin, fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany 'shared the same doctrine, aimed at the same ends, and had the same enemies', as asserted by Goering.³⁶ Mussolini's desire to establish Italian leadership in Europe and promote the cause of the 'have-not'³⁷ nations was the motive behind his proposal for the Four-Power Pact between Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. In other words, according to Rome, the 'have-not' nations, Italy and Germany should have the same rights as the 'have' nations, Britain and France, in dividing the region into spheres of influence.

However, Mussolini realized that he would not be very successful in his Four-Power Pact proposal because neither France nor Britain wanted to involve Hitler in the pact. Then Rome shifted its efforts from co-operation to competition. On 18 March 1934, Mussolini openly stated his goal — to assert Italian power in the region — by declaring that Italy's future lay in Africa and Asia. Then Mussolini continued: 'Italy's position in the Mediterranean, the sea which has regained its historic function of joining East and West, gives her the right and duty to accomplish this task.'³⁸ This was the message to other European powers, that they could not ignore the Italian challenge in the region.

Mussolini's declaration caused apprehension in Turkey, a Mediterranean as well as an Asian country. Shortly after, Mussolini felt the need to appease

36 Armando Borghi, *Mussolini, Red and Black* (New York 1974), 205.

37 Mussolini defined the revisionist countries such as Italy and Germany as the 'have-not' nations.

38 Meir Michaelis, 'Italy's Strategy in the Mediterranean, 1935–1939' in M.J. Cohen and M. Kolinsky (eds), *Britain and the Middle East in the 1930s* (London 1992), 47.

Ankara, pointing out that he did not have Turkey in mind when making this declaration. In his speech at the Grand National Assembly, Turkish Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüşüti Aras talked about Mussolini's declaration and his explanation to Ankara. But, unlike the early 1930s, he avoided any mention of 'friendly relations' between Italy and Turkey.³⁹

On the contrary, within a month Aras openly affirmed Turkey's fear of Bulgarian rapprochement with a 'Mediterranean power'.⁴⁰ Moreover, during his visit to Ankara, Greek General George Kondylis warned İnönü about the possibility of an Italian attack in collaboration with Bulgaria.⁴¹ Soon after, Mussolini declared that a new era had started in the history of mankind, in which the disarmament issue made no sense and rearmament was inevitable.⁴² At the same time, Italian diplomats in Ankara reported that İnönü had expressed the need to increase the military budget.⁴³

Around the same time, the Turkish press carried reports that Rome was dispatching reinforcements to Rhodes to suppress the Greek people who were in revolt against the Italian units on the island.⁴⁴ Italian build-up of naval fortifications and armaments was not limited to Rhodes. For instance, the Turkish Minister of the Interior Şükrü Kaya declared that the key to Turkish mistrust of Italy was the Italian fortification of Leros. This was a gun pointed at Turkey, he said, and from an aviation point of view, within easy striking distance of Turkey.⁴⁵ The internationalized status of the Straits added to Turkey's sense of vulnerability.

Mussolini, in his conversation with Turkish Ambassador Hüseyin Ragıp in Rome, stated that it was vital for Italy to fortify its base on Leros. He added that the fortification of Leros had more to do with Italian competition with Britain and France than with Turkey.⁴⁶ Hüseyin Ragıp had a similar conversation with the Italian ambassador in Ankara Lojacano in order to ascertain what motivated the Italians to fortify the Dodecanese. Ragıp asked Lojacano why Italy had felt the need to fortify Leros since Italy had freedom of passage through the Straits.⁴⁷ Lojacano argued that fortifying Leros was principally a defensive measure against France, as Italy felt hemmed in by France in the Mediterranean.⁴⁸

According to Aras, these measures were taken against either Turkey or

39 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A.IV-6, D. 54, F. 64-3.

40 ASMAE, Busta 11/1-Turchia, 21 April 1934.

41 ASMAE, Busta 11/1-Turchia, 26 May 1934.

42 *Ayn Taribi*, 6 (June 1934), 299.

43 ASMAE, Busta 11/2-Turchia, 18 May 1934.

44 *Ayn Taribi*, 7 (May 1934), 279-81. Ankara was also suspicious about Britain's support of the Greek population in the islands. In other words, the islands in the Aegean could easily become an area of rivalry between Britain and Italy and the the islands' populations would be used to this end. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-16-b, D. 65, F. 3-302.

45 PRO FO 371/18432, R 7064/471/22, F. 341-2.

46 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-6, D. 54-1, F. 90.

47 Ibid.

48 PRO FO 371/18432, R 7064/471/22, f. 341-2.

France. If the former was the case, Turkish uneasiness was amply justified.⁴⁹ If the latter, then Franco-Italian naval hostilities in Turkish territorial waters were something that Turkey did not want to be involved in. Turkish officials thought that, in spite of Turkey's relatively large size and strategic importance, its security was jeopardized because it did not have the means to defend its territory single-handed.⁵⁰ Faced with this reality, Ankara realized that Turkey had to be part of a greater project than just that of collaborating with its Balkan neighbours for security.

In May 1934, when Aras was in Paris on an official visit, French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou asked him to consider consolidating the Balkan Entente by a Mediterranean pact.⁵¹ Turkey welcomed Barthou's proposal, as did other Balkan countries. Although the idea of a Mediterranean pact came originally from the French, the Turks enthusiastically picked up the idea. In 1930, even before Barthou's proposal, the Turkish ambassador in Moscow Suad Davaz had told the French ambassador M. de Beaumarchais that Turkey was interested in the development of a 'Mediterranean Locarno' project.⁵² In fact, when Counsellor M. Franzoni of the Italian embassy in Paris visited the French Foreign Ministry, French officials gave him the impression that Turkey desired to participate in any entente consolidating peace.⁵³

In other words, Ankara had long been in favour of a Mediterranean pact which included Mediterranean countries like Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy, France and Spain. Since the Mediterranean pact was to guarantee naval frontiers against any naval or air attack in the Mediterranean, Britain, the most important naval power, should also be part of such a pact. In June 1934, Turkish interest in a Mediterranean pact was manifested by various articles in the Turkish press. For instance, *Cumhuriyet* reported that representatives from Turkey, Greece, Britain and France were engaged in talks in Geneva on the formation of a defensive Mediterranean entente.⁵⁴

Again, in June 1934, at a meeting between France and the Little Entente countries, a decision was taken on the creation of a Mediterranean entente, which would include France, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria. France would also work towards the participation of Italy.⁵⁵ However, not all countries were as eager as Turkey to join a Mediterranean entente. By the end of June, the Turkish press carried reports that Britain and Italy had already decided to stay out of such an entente.⁵⁶

49 PRO FO 371/17964, E 3073/2260/44, f. 365.

50 Holbraad argued that this was a typical characteristic of a middle power. Holbraad, op. cit., 69.

51 Ljudmil Spasov, 'Les Projets d'un Pacte Méditerranéen et l'Entente Balkanique 1934-1937', *Etudes Balkaniques*, 2 (1987), 7.

52 Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (MAE) 1918-1940, Série Y Internationale, vol. 571, c. 63, D. 7, no. 104, 18 February 1930.

53 MAE, Levant 1918-1940, Turquie, vol. 624, Direction Politique, 28 November 1934.

54 *Cumhuriyet*, 12 June 1934.

55 *Cumhuriyet*, 24 June 1934.

56 *Cumhuriyet*, 29 June 1934.

In 1934 also, the Turkish ambassador in Rome Hüseyin Ragıp asked Mussolini's opinion on Italy's possible participation in a Mediterranean entente. He responded by focusing on two points: first, he questioned how effective this entente would be if Britain was not a member. Second, concerning the Mediterranean security issue, Mussolini said that Italy had already concluded treaties with Turkey and Greece and might consider extending the scope of these treaties in case of need.⁵⁷ Moreover, Athens was as lukewarm as Rome towards the idea of a Mediterranean pact. A foreign press summary in Turkish reported that the Greeks did not believe in the French initiative on such an issue or in the Little Entente.⁵⁸ For them, a Mediterranean pact could not be concluded without the support of two great Mediterranean powers, Britain and Italy. Greece might join the pact only if it included all Mediterranean countries.⁵⁹

Moreover, in October 1934, the death of Louis Barthou, the French Foreign Minister and the initiator of a Mediterranean pact, affected the developments of regional co-operation in the Mediterranean. For example, just before his death, Barthou had decided to make an official visit to Rome to discuss directly with Mussolini questions pending between the two countries. At this meeting, it was expected that Mussolini would promise to respect the independence of Austria and not to make revisionist demands on its neighbour, Yugoslavia.⁶⁰ But on 9 October 1934, Barthou, who had welcomed King Alexander of Yugoslavia to Marseilles in pursuit of this alliance, also became a victim of the Croatian Nationalists who had assassinated the King.⁶¹

After Barthou's death, French policy towards Italy became more ambiguous. Pierre Laval, who replaced Barthou, focused on bilateral relations with other Mediterranean countries rather than regional co-operation. In November 1934, Romanian Foreign Minister Nicolae Titulescu asked a French Foreign Ministry official whether France would work towards a Mediterranean pact or sign a treaty of alliance with Turkey. The French diplomat approved the latter option.⁶² Although Ankara did not oppose a rapprochement between France and Turkey per se, it preferred multilateral co-operation to a bilateral treaty. The general conviction in Turkey was that a pact would serve Turkish interests better in spite of a change in French regional policy.⁶³ It was also reported that the Turkish Foreign Ministry aimed to strengthen relations between Turkey and France. But since Turkey's chief interest was the

57 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-6, D. 54-1, F. 90.

58 *Ayn Taribi*, 8 (June 1934), 183-4.

59 *Cumhuriyet*, 13 July 1934 and *Milliyet*, 14 July 1934.

60 P. Milza and S. Berstein, *Le Fascisme Italien* (Paris 1980), 328-9.

61 P.M.H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940* (London 1996), 182.

62 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-6, D. 54-1, F. 97-1. At the same time, both Romanian Foreign Minister Titulescu and Yugoslavian Foreign Minister Yetvich declared that they agreed with Laval on the need for an alliance treaty between France and Turkey similar to that concluded between France and Yugoslavia. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-6, D. 54, F. 100-3.

63 *Ayn Tarihi*, 10 (September 1934), 115-16.

creation of a Mediterranean pact, the main point was that this relationship had to be completed by a Mediterranean entente.⁶⁴

In January 1935, Laval, who had observed Turkey's insistence on a Mediterranean entente, said to the Turkish ambassador in Paris that he would make every effort necessary to convince Mussolini to agree to such an entente.⁶⁵ Again in January, Laval made an official visit to Rome. However, during his visit, instead of discussing Mediterranean co-operation, he struck a bilateral deal with the Italians. He agreed to give up French economic interests in Abyssinia in exchange for Italian solidarity against any German action in Austria. He also agreed to cede to Italy some territories from Libya, the south of Tunisia, Chad and Eritrea. For his part, Mussolini promised eventually to renounce his revisionist demands over Yugoslavia.⁶⁶

To put it differently, the French were persuaded to turn a blind eye in Africa, in return for Italian promises of support in Europe.⁶⁷ In April, Britain endorsed at Stresa the Rome agreements between Italy and France. Even though Mussolini was unsuccessful in imposing his Four-Power Pact on Europe, the Rome agreements seemed like the start of a 'Three-Power Pact' between Italy, France and Britain.

Above all, France, as a 'half-ally' of Italy, became less eager for the formation of a Mediterranean pact. In fact, Tevfik Rüştü Aras said to the British ambassador in Turkey James Morgan: 'Now that Italy is a half-ally of France, she cannot possibly pretend — unless she is insincere — that any Mediterranean power constitutes a danger to her.'⁶⁸ Once Italy came to a bilateral agreement with France, it had no incentive to accept the previous French proposal of a Mediterranean entente. On the contrary, Mussolini had an alternative proposal. In February 1935, Turkish Ambassador in Belgrade Ali Haydar told British Ambassador Neville Henderson that the Italian government had already made proposals to the governments of Greece and Turkey for a tripartite Mediterranean agreement.⁶⁹ It was more convenient for the fascist government to form a coalition with a few Mediterranean countries which they could easily control than to favour a Mediterranean entente that included great powers such as France.

Italian Under-secretary for Foreign Affairs Fulvio Suvich suggested to the Greek ambassador in Rome in an explicit statement that it was desirable to exclude all other powers and to confine the agreement to Greece and Turkey.⁷⁰ Furthermore, he added that the Turkish government was in favour of this

64 *Cumhuriyet*, 28 and 29 November 1934.

65 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-16-b, D. 65, F. 5-17.

66 Pierre Milza, *Mussolini* (Paris 1999), 650-4.

67 Martin Clark, *Modern Italy* (London 1996), 281. According to the Italian diplomats in Ankara, the French-Italian agreement prevented Turkey from playing off France and Italy against each other. ASMAE, Busta 15/1-Turchia 1935, 16 August 1935.

68 PRO FO 371/ 19502, R 4367/950/67, f. 212.

69 PRO FO 371/ 19500, R 1719/302/67, f. 102.

70 *Ibid.*

principle. Turkish Foreign Minister Aras, however, expressed complete ignorance as to what Suvich was referring. Moreover, the new Italian ambassador in Ankara Carlo Galli had convinced his government that Şükrü Kaya, who had been acting for Aras, was in favour of a tripartite pact between Italy, Greece and Turkey that would exclude Yugoslavia and Romania. Şükrü Kaya admitted that he had discussed the general possibilities of a Mediterranean pact with M. Galli but absolutely denied that there had been any question of a tripartite agreement.⁷¹

The Greek ambassador in Rome had been instructed to reply to Suvich on behalf of both governments that no agreement was possible unless it included Romania and Yugoslavia, their partners in the Balkan Entente. Suvich objected, arguing that the latter was an Adriatic and the former a Black Sea country and consequently had nothing to do with the Mediterranean. But he later added that the proposal to include them merited consideration. Suvich also asked why, if Yugoslavia and Romania were to be included, Albania and Bulgaria should not be also.⁷²

In his report to London, British Ambassador Henderson pointed out two interesting features of this affair: Suvich's original insistence on the exclusion from the agreement of the other great powers and the subsequent expression of his willingness to consider the possibility of a pact which would include the other members of the Balkan Entente, though still excluding France and Britain.⁷³ In the spring of 1935, the Italian ambassador in Turkey Galli again proposed a tripartite pact between Italy, Turkey and Greece to Turkish Foreign Minister Aras. In order to persuade Aras, he said that once a tripartite pact had been formed, the membership of Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria could follow. Aras wanted to believe that Italy was ready to conclude such a pact with the four powers of the Balkan Entente, but the most crucial point for Ankara was that a Mediterranean pact must be guaranteed by Britain and France. The pact would be useless without these two powers.⁷⁴

However, in August 1935, the British Secretary of State's minute on Turkey pointed out Ankara's misapprehensions, first about Britain's desire under any circumstances to guarantee a 'Mediterranean Locarno', and second Mussolini's idea of including Romania and Yugoslavia in this agreement.⁷⁵ The minute emphasized the 'exaggerated fears of Aras' about Italy and talked of his 'pathetic attempts to protect his country'.⁷⁶ The British Secretary of State affirmed that the Turkish Foreign Minister had the following concerns: that British naval power in the Mediterranean was decreasing and that of Italy increasing; the League was breaking up and if the system of collective security

71 *Documents Diplomatiques Français 1932–1939, 1ère série (1932–1935)*, vol. IX (Paris 1980), 572–3.

72 PRO FO 371/19500, R 1719/302/67, f. 103.

73 *Ibid.*, 104.

74 PRO FO 371/19502, R 2051/950/67, f. 210.

75 PRO FO 371/19502, R 5218/950/67, f. 215.

76 *Ibid.*, 216.

collapsed, Turkey's present alliances with the Soviet Union and the Balkan Entente's powers might afford inadequate protection.⁷⁷

As a result, Turkish officials worked towards a special Mediterranean pact that would guarantee Turkey's integrity. From the British Secretary of State's minute, it is possible to conclude that Turkish Foreign Minister Aras had tried to give the impression to the British that Italy seemed ready to conclude a pact with the four powers of the Balkan Entente. But at the same time, Italy's unsecured signature was not sufficient and for that reason a Mediterranean pact must be guaranteed by Britain and France. The Turkish Foreign Ministry thought that Britain and France must respectively guarantee Italy and the Balkan Entente against aggression.

Therefore, Turkish officials tried to convince the British of the urgency of forming a pact in the Mediterranean. According to them, the formation of a Mediterranean pact was a naval affair and as such of particular concern to Britain. The British ambassador to Turkey Percy Loraine wrote to London that Turkish Foreign Minister Aras wanted him to understand that the French government would favour such a scheme.⁷⁸ Aras had already spoken to Loraine about the danger that Turkey felt of the Mediterranean becoming a Latin lake. In fact, he raised the issue explicitly by asking: 'Might not this come about if France joined the proposed pact and England was not associated?'⁷⁹

The conversation between the Turkish Foreign Minister and the British ambassador in Turkey reflects a typical reaction of a middle power like Turkey. Ankara was making attempts to be a mediator between the great powers to prevent any regional instability. As in the first half of the 1930s, Turkey attempted to guarantee stability in the region not by having recourse to force but by forming coalitions with other countries. However, as a middle power, it was aware from the outset that it had limited physical and military assets. In addition, by the mid-1930s Turkey was faced with the increasing aggression of individual great powers in the region. As a result, it had to cooperate not only with like-minded states but also with pro-status quo great powers such as Britain.

By 1935, the Turkish political leadership was already convinced that Britain would be a determining factor in preventing any aggression in the Mediterranean. At the same time, Ankara knew that the British factor alone could not prevent the Italian threat to the region increasing. For that reason, Turkey insisted on pushing for the formation of regional pacts in co-operation with its neighbours. When Mussolini seemed likely to agree to incorporate Romania and Yugoslavia into a possible alliance with Italy, Turkey and Greece, Aras suggested that the Italian proposal of an alliance with these five countries ought to be replaced by a Mediterranean Locarno.⁸⁰

77 PRO FO 371/19502, R 5366/950/67, f. 224.

78 PRO FO 371/19502, R 5218/950/67, f. 221.

79 Ibid., 222.

80 PRO FO 371/19502, R 5218/950/67, f. 216 and R 5366/950/67, f. 225.

At the same time, the Turkish Foreign Minister questioned Rome's sincerity in including the whole Balkan Entente in a Mediterranean multilateral non-aggression pact. Aras was suspicious that this volte-face was inspired by Italy's desire, in the event of an Abyssinian war, 'to guard Italy's Eastern flank and to ensure that the Straits should remain open as a source of supplies'.⁸¹ In this case, the speedy conclusion of the pact might have the effect of facilitating and encouraging Italy's hostile designs on Abyssinia. Rome, in fact, would have recourse to such a tactic in order to take the region under its control.

In order to achieve this goal, Italy also intended to gain access to the Black Sea region through the Straits. For this purpose, Rome aimed at concluding a separate pact with the Black Sea powers: Turkey and the Soviet Union. The Italian ambassador in Turkey Galli, in his conversation with Aras in the spring of 1935, said that the best solution would be the conclusion of a Mediterranean pact between Italy, Turkey and the Soviet Union.⁸² By promoting a pact between Italy, the Soviet Union and Turkey, Rome sought influence in the Black Sea region at the expense of other regional powers such as Romania.

The Italians were already able to reach the Black Sea through the Straits by their presence in the Dodecanese. Yet they thought that the international status of the Straits could not in itself secure Italy's access to the Black Sea.⁸³ The best way to gain access was to come to a regional agreement with Turkey and the Soviet Union. Consequently, it was not a coincidence that at the time (May 1935) when France signed a mutual assistance pact with the Soviet Union, the Italian ambassador to Turkey was discussing with the Turkish Foreign Minister the possibility of forming a tripartite pact which would include the Soviet Union.

Italy's main strategy was to form coalitions with different countries in the Mediterranean to divide the regional powers. Rome, therefore, embarked on efforts to prevent the conclusion of pacts initiated by regional powers. Mussolini had never welcomed the Balkan Entente. For him, it had been formed under the influence of France. He had insisted that Yugoslavia, an ally of France, make its policy towards Italy clear before joining any regional pact. Otherwise, the inclusion of Yugoslavia might bring an end to the Balkan Entente.⁸⁴ Moreover, Rome had lobbied for a tripartite alliance between Italy, Turkey and Greece in order to split the Balkan Entente.

Turkey was able to resist Italian attempts in the region by continuing to collaborate with its neighbours. Moreover, after the signing of the Balkan

81 Ibid.

82 Spasov, *op. cit.*, 12.

83 ASMAE, Busta 11/1–Turchia, 7 December 1934. Lojacono argued that the Soviet Union, as a Black Sea power, provoked the Turks into objecting to the fortification of Leros. According to the Turkish archives, Mussolini found it indispensable for Italy to have a base in the Black Sea. *Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri*, A. IV-6, D. 54–1, F. 90–1.

84 ASMAE, Busta 15/1–Turchia 1935, 16 August 1935. In fact, Turkish Foreign Minister Aras thought that if an entente was concluded between Italy and Yugoslavia, the Balkan Entente would not carry any weight and Turkey would be isolated. *Documents Diplomatiques Français 1932–1939, 1ère série (1932–1935)*, *op. cit.*, vol. IX, 424–5.

Entente, Ankara insisted on expanding the scope of regional collaboration. The Turkish political leadership was aware that it had to fight against the control of the region by major powers and work for the participation of as many countries as possible in regional collaboration. However, immediately after the signing of the Balkan Entente, Turkey had to alter its earlier strategy in the sense that it now welcomed regional efforts initiated by powers such as France and also sought support from Britain.

The attempt to create a Mediterranean pact was a good example of such a policy. Even though the first initiative for a Mediterranean pact came from France, it was mainly supported by Ankara. Here Ankara was in a dilemma as a middle power: although Turkey was very supportive of such an initiative, it was aware that it had limited tangible sources compared to powers like France. It was difficult for Turkey to take the initiative in the Mediterranean as it had in the Balkans. Nevertheless, as a Mediterranean country, it felt responsible for contributing to peace in the Mediterranean.

From the mid-1930s on, Ankara continued to take political initiatives in the Mediterranean, which was the great-power playground of the time. In this process, the Italian policy in Abyssinia had a great impact on Turkey's Mediterranean policy. Between the summer and autumn of 1935, Italy had greatly increased its military strength in the eastern Mediterranean. It concentrated its forces between the Adriatic, the Dodecanese Islands and the Red Sea, and expanded the construction of its 1934–35 naval programme beyond its original scope.⁸⁵ The expansion of the Italian navy in the eastern Mediterranean could be taken as a sign of Mussolini's belief that the time was ripe for the total conquest of Abyssinia.⁸⁶ In fact, Italy, which in the spring of 1935 had already secured the acquiescence of France and Britain regarding its interest in Abyssinia, invaded this country in October.

From the beginning, Ankara opposed Italian policy towards Abyssinia. Until the Italian conquest of Abyssinia was complete, Turkey focused on strengthening existing regional pacts and encouraging the formation of new ones against Italian expansionism. During the Abyssinian crisis, the Turkish press carried reports and feature articles that emphasized Turkey's military and naval strength in the eastern Mediterranean. For example, an interesting commentary in *Tan* argued that Turkey's military and naval strength had to be taken into account more seriously than that of any other power of lesser degree in the event of war or quest for supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean.⁸⁷ Again, according to the Turkish press, neighbouring countries began to consider Turkey's contribution to international peace in the context of the Mediterranean conflict.⁸⁸ In fact, Turkey promised Yugoslavia 'unlimited

85 See R. Mallet, *The Italian Navy and Fascist Expansionism, 1935–1940* (London 1998).

86 Michaelis, *op. cit.*, 49.

87 *Tan*, 14 February 1936.

88 *Tan*, 5 November 1935.

assistance' in the event of an Italian attack on Belgrade.⁸⁹ Belgrade considered the Turkish army a force that could deter Bulgaria and stand against Italy. After a military delegation from Turkey had visited Romania and Yugoslavia in November 1935, a tripartite military conference was held in Belgrade between the three countries that resulted in the signing of a military convention.⁹⁰

Even after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the Turkish Foreign Ministry still had it in mind to bring forward a general Mediterranean settlement to include all riparian states and Britain on the basis of non-aggression and mutual guarantees, including settlement of the Italian–Abyssinian conflict.⁹¹ Contrary to Ankara's desires, the British Foreign Office's immediate objective was not to discuss the Mediterranean question in its broader aspects but to further British–Italian *détente* in the Mediterranean. In December 1935, the British Foreign Office advised its embassy in Turkey to discourage the Turkish Foreign Ministry from embarking on so ambitious and comprehensive a scheme.⁹²

Turkey's dilemma as a middle power endured vis-à-vis the great powers even though it hoped to have more British support in the region. The greatest disappointment for Turkey was the growing disregard by these powers of multilateral organizations and initiatives. As a member of the League of Nations, Turkey endeavoured to assist the League in its efforts, including the use of sanctions for the maintenance of peace under all circumstances, as Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü argued.⁹³ However, while the League imposed limited sanctions on Rome, the British and French Foreign Ministers were considering new concessions to Italy in Abyssinia. For instance, in December, Samuel Hoare and Pierre Laval agreed to cede most of Abyssinia to Italy.⁹⁴

The Turkish political leadership felt uneasy about how the great powers approached international security and questioned how peace could be maintained in the existing regime of collective security. These powers were concerned with finding bilateral solutions to settle international issues, instead of counting on the authority of the League of Nations. In contrast to this, Ankara frequently emphasized that the greatest benefit they expected from the League was its pursuit of the principle of collective security. Concerning the

89 Krastjo Mancev, 'Le Conflit Italo-Ethiopien et l'Entente Balkanique', *Etudes Balkaniques*, 21 (1986), 50.

90 This convention ensured reciprocal military aid between Turkey, Romania and Yugoslavia in case of aggression against any party. Mancev, *op. cit.*, 53. For Romania's opinion on the military evolution of Turkey, see Dimitru Preda, 'Romanian Diplomatic Documents on the Political–Military Evolution of Turkey During Atatürk (1923–1938)' in *XIX. International Colloquium of Military History* (Istanbul 1993), 163–86.

91 PRO FO 371/ 19168 J 9177/1/1, f. 194.

92 *Ibid.*, 195. Britain, in fact, confined itself to giving military assurances to Turkey, Greece and Yugoslavia.

93 *Aym Taribi*, 24 (October 1935), 79–80 and PRO FO 37119034, E 6600/1213/44, f. 83.

94 Barlas, *Etatism and Diplomacy in Turkey*, *op. cit.*, 161.

Abyssinian issue, İnönü said: 'If the idea of the mutual guarantee of nations for the maintenance of peace widens its scope so as to be applicable to all events, we are in favour of labouring to assure such an evolution.'⁹⁵

Thus Ankara demanded more effort and efficiency from the League of Nations towards all nations. British Ambassador in Turkey Loraine reported his informal conversation with the President of the Republic of Turkey. Concerning Abyssinia, Atatürk said that it had become necessary to consider seriously what the position would be, supposing Italy won a total victory. Then he continued: 'Italian exultation over such a success would be all the more intense and arrogant because the success would have been won despite the League of Nations.'⁹⁶ Finally, he asked the following question:

If the action taken by the states who had pronounced Italy an aggressor and were enforcing sanctions on her, had not proved efficacious to prevent Italy's single-handed conquest of Ethiopia, was it to be expected that the action of those states through the League would be more energetic and more efficacious in preventing Mussolini's next act of spoliation?⁹⁷

In this conversation President Atatürk made several points. First, Ankara was against 'inactivity' towards Italian 'colonialist' policy in Abyssinia since Turkey itself had been a victim of colonialist policies in the very recent past.⁹⁸ Second, the Turks could not disregard the invasion of a country which was a member of the League that they had expected to be more active and efficient. Third, Mussolini's action in Abyssinia might be the harbinger of future Italian actions in other territories if he was not stopped.⁹⁹ Finally, Atatürk's conversation with the British ambassador aimed to give London the message that Britain should be more outspoken concerning Italian expansionism.

In March 1936, Turkish Foreign Minister Aras, in his interview in *Paris-Midi*, said that Turkey's place in the Mediterranean had become even more important in the past three months, and that this might create a basis for British-Italian rivalry.¹⁰⁰ Aras discussed two related issues. One was the sanctions implemented by the League against Italy. He argued that the sanctions would have an effect only some time in the future. The other issue was the increasing geopolitical significance of the Mediterranean region. Since the Turkish political leaders believed that effective measures against aggression had not yet been taken, they had made every effort necessary to work for regional co-operation in the Mediterranean. But Ankara had seen that the conflicting interests of the Mediterranean powers prevented such co-operation.

Aware of its limitations, Turkey was forced to prioritize its objectives in a situation of increasing instability. Ankara's disappointment at the failure of

95 PRO FO 371/19034 E 6600/1213/44, f. 48.

96 PRO FO 371/20093 E 2583/2583/44, f. 254.

97 *Ibid.*, 255-6.

98 ASMAE, Busta 19/1-Turchia 1936, 11 January 1936.

99 *Ibid.*, 3 September 1936. In fact, in 1936, Mussolini stated that Italy had to be strong and armed in order to revise old treaties and impose its rule on the world.

100 Cited in *Aym Tarihi*, 27 (March 1936), 45.

the League of Nations to ensure international security led Ankara to demand a revision of the status of the Straits. In fact, Ankara assumed that the four members of the League — Britain, France, Italy and Japan — would not, in fact, guarantee the security of the Straits, contrary to their decision at the Lausanne Conference. Thus, after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and the German occupation of the Rhine Demilitarized Zone, Turkey's prime objective became the revision of the Straits status by calling for a new meeting.

In response to this Turkish demand, regional solidarity manifested itself in the Balkans. The members of the Balkan Entente issued a joint communiqué supporting Turkey's claims.¹⁰¹ But Turkey had to convince Britain, a mainly naval power, to bring about a change in the status of the Straits. At this point, Britain consented to the Turkish demand because of the rapidly deteriorating political situation in the Mediterranean. As a consequence of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, Turkey was seen to be a counterweight to Italian action and ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁰² Moreover, Turkish friendship with Britain would prevent Soviet–Turkish collaboration in the region.¹⁰³

Finally in June and July 1936, Turkey, Britain and the other signatories of the Lausanne Treaty met at Montreux and decided to abolish the International Straits Commission. Furthermore, the Montreux Conference put the Straits under Turkish control by terminating the requirement that the Straits be demilitarized. Italy was the only country to reject the transfer of the rights of the Straits Commission to Turkey, as such a change would prevent Italy from having free passage through the Straits.¹⁰⁴ As an excuse not to accept the Montreux Convention, Rome used the imposition of sanctions.

It is important here to point out that at Montreux, Turkish officials still made efforts to work for regional alliances. During the conference, Turkish Foreign Minister Aras and Romanian Foreign Minister Titulescu had conversations with Soviet Foreign Minister Litvinov on the possibility of forming a Black Sea pact, part and parcel of a wider Mediterranean pact. Even though Turkey did not completely agree with Romania and the Soviet Union concerning their rights in the Black Sea, Ankara fully supported the idea of a Black Sea pact for the security of the Straits.¹⁰⁵

After taking the Straits under control, regional co-operation became even more significant for Turkey. Ankara continued to emphasize the importance attached to the formation of a Mediterranean pact. Turkish officials knew that the security of the Straits was closely related to the security of the Mediterranean which ought to be guaranteed by regional co-operation. Although Turkey, to some extent, guaranteed its own security by taking the Straits under its control, it was quite aware that multilateral solutions were the only

101 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-18-b, D. 74, F. 1–21.

102 PRO FO 371/ 20072, E 269/26/44, f. 146.

103 The Soviet Union was the first country to reply to the Turkish demand.

104 *Documents Diplomatiques Français 1932–1939, 1ère série (1932–1935)*, op. cit., vol. II, 501.

105 Spasov, op. cit., 15.

way for complete security. In other words, it was cognizant that to pursue a generalized strengthening of multilateral decision was in the middle powers' interest since it helped to reduce the uneven control of great powers.

Moreover, systems where two or more great powers were involved in a mixture of co-operation and conflict relationship offered the chance for middle powers to follow multilateralism in foreign policy strategy.¹⁰⁶ During Montreux and afterwards, Ankara again took the initiative in efforts to create a regional entente in the midst of conflict and co-operation between the great powers. In the atmosphere of 1936, when steps were being taken to form the Axis between Germany and Italy, Turkey aimed to persuade at least France and Britain to work for Mediterranean co-operation. During the Italian–German rapprochement in July, it was easier to persuade France, which felt the need to balance the influence of the Axis powers in the region.¹⁰⁷ In September, the Turkish press reported a conversation between Turkish Foreign Minister T.R. Aras and French Foreign Minister Yvon Delbos in which the latter emphasized the significant place that Turkey occupied in the eastern Mediterranean following the establishment of the new regime in the Straits.¹⁰⁸

The French government sent a memorandum to London proposing a Mediterranean pact of mutual assistance which would include the Mediterranean as well as the Black Sea countries.¹⁰⁹ The French administration believed that such a pact would guarantee the security of Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey. But the British administration did not agree with the French. In October, British Foreign Office Under-Secretary Sergent said to French Foreign Ministry Chargé d'Affaires Roger Cambon that the security of the three Balkan countries could be disregarded if there was a possibility of settling British–Italian relations *tête à tête*.¹¹⁰

British behaviour in the Mediterranean reveals the main difference at this time between middle-power states and the great powers. While the former stressed the importance of multilateral solutions to international problems, the latter preferred bilateral ones. For London, to be on good terms with Italy in the Mediterranean was more important than to be involved in regional co-operation as, in this way, it could prevent Italy from getting closer to Germany. But Ankara aimed to preclude this kind of bilateral relation. It had not yet given up hope of forming a Mediterranean pact. During the first stage,

106 Holbraad, op. cit., 213.

107 In a speech in October in Milan Cathedral, Mussolini declared that the July agreements (1936) between Italy and Germany had resolved all the problems between the two countries. *Ayim Tarihi*, 36 (October 1936), 245–7. On 11 July, the fascist leader gave his approval to an Austro-German agreement which made the Anschluss a foregone conclusion. Michaelis, op. cit., 53.

108 *Cumhuriyet*, 22 September 1936.

109 Ibid. The proposition was made after the suspension of guarantees given by Britain to Turkey, Greece and Yugoslavia and the cancellation of economic sanctions against Italy.

110 Spasov, op. cit., 16. In January 1937, London signed a 'Gentleman's Agreement' with Italy. By this agreement, Britain accepted that the Mediterranean was of vital interest to Italy. John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton, NJ 1975), 200.

Turkey made every effort necessary to persuade its neighbours and partners in the Balkan Entente. In October 1936, İnönü and Aras had talks with Yugoslav Prime Minister Stojadinovic to persuade him to work for a Mediterranean pact. In April 1937, the Turkish government repeated to Belgrade its desire to see the formation of such a pact.

In the second stage, Turkey, which was frustrated by the reluctance of its neighbours, focused on persuading the greater powers.¹¹¹ In May, Aras proposed that France present to the League of Nations its project for a Mediterranean pact of mutual assistance in July 1936.¹¹² Britain again avoided convening the League for a discussion of the French project. Instead, in September 1937, Britain and France called a meeting of the Mediterranean powers at Nyon to ensure the protection of navigation and air lanes in the region. Turkey decided to participate in the Nyon Conference even though the formation of a regional pact was its main objective. It had to take counter-measures against Mussolini who, in the summer of 1937, attacked shipping en route to Spain in order to give additional support to Franco.¹¹³ As a result of these events, Turkish–British rapprochement would be achieved before any Mediterranean pact, as the Yugoslav press commented.¹¹⁴ But even after Nyon, Turkey was the only country which continued to favour the formation of a Mediterranean pact.

The Balkans and the Mediterranean were the two major arenas for operations for Turkish diplomacy during the interwar years. The Balkan peninsula was the first region in which Turkey concentrated its efforts. As a Balkan country, Turkey focused its activities primarily in the Balkans where it had immediate interests. But Balkan security could not be guaranteed without taking the Mediterranean region into consideration. The Balkans had been part and parcel of a larger region, the Mediterranean, on which its security depended.

The 1930s illustrate the capabilities and limits of a middle power like Turkey in pursuing an activist policy in international relations. Turkey was easily able to play a decisive role in Balkan diplomacy in the first half of the 1930s when great-power rivalry was not as intense as during the second half. In the second half of this decade, Turkey could not afford to restrict its diplomatic focus to the Balkans. It also had to follow an activist policy in the Mediterranean.

After 1934, France offered an alternative plan to Mediterranean countries in

111 In January and March 1937, Belgrade signed pacts with Sofia and Rome respectively.

112 Spasov, *op. cit.*, 18.

113 These included Turkish shipping. *Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri*, A. IV-6, D. 54, F. 102–(33–81). During the same year, abandoning the League of Nations and signing the Anti-Comintern Pact, Italy increased its solidarity with Germany and Japan. Felix Gilbert, ‘Ciano and his Ambassadors’ in Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert (eds), *The Diplomats 1919–1939* (Princeton, NJ 1994), 529.

114 *Cumhuriyet*, 14 November 1936.

the region. Ankara welcomed this offer since the proposed pact would include all Mediterranean countries. In other words, unlike the Italians, the French were not advocating the creation of a sub-system limited to a few countries. In fact, Ankara more than any other country encouraged the formation of a Mediterranean pact because it seemed the best way to prevent the domination of the region by any of the great powers.

Not only the expanded geographical scope but also the intensity of great-power rivalry in the Mediterranean placed limitations from the onset on what Turkey could achieve diplomatically as a middle power. Although Turkey supported the formation of a Mediterranean pact as a multilateral forum to promote peace and stability more than any other country, it realized that the pact could never be formed without the support of a great power — France or Britain. Even though the Mediterranean pact could not be realized, Turkey never gave up hope of playing a constructive role in bringing about Mediterranean stability.

To conclude, Turkey's role in the Balkans in the first half of the 1930s is an example of typical middle-power behaviour. Turkey was able to play its most conspicuous role within its own region, the Balkans. On the other hand, the essence of Turkish middle-power behaviour was centred on diplomatic activism in the 1930s. In the Balkans as well as in the Mediterranean, Turkey made every effort to use its diplomatic capacity successfully.

In the case of the Balkans, Turkey was capable of constructing coalitions with like-minded states. Moreover, all through the 1930s, Turkey tried to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems. To support the formation of a Mediterranean pact by all Mediterranean countries instead of supporting the Italian tripartite alliance is a good example of such a policy. Its efforts to find a solution to the Abyssinian problem at the international level were also an example of Turkey's tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems. Although Turkey could not reap the fruits of its efforts in the Mediterranean as it had in the Balkans, it never gave up its attempts at the diplomatic level.

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