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# TURKEY'S GLOBAL STRATEGY

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## Executive Summary

Dr Nicholas Kitchen, *LSE IDEAS Editor*

All eyes will turn to Turkey this month as it votes in parliamentary elections. After nearly a decade in power, and despite setbacks in the 2009 local elections, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is expected to win another landslide victory. Since January, poll ratings have consistently placed the party's support in the high forty-percents, and commentators have raised the possibility that the AKP might gain a supermajority of 376 seats in parliament, which would allow it to change the constitution without a referendum. Such an outcome would cement the major changes that Turkey has undergone since the turn of the century, and almost certainly see Erdogan remain in power for longer as Turkey's constitution transitions towards a more presidential system.

Yet whatever the election result, Turkey's international role will remain an intense topic of debate. In the last few years, as the AKP has grown increasingly confident in its foreign policy, observers have wondered aloud whether the country might be leaving 'the West', forcing that group to confront the question 'who lost Turkey?'

This is to cast Turkey's role, and its emerging global strategy, in unhelpful binary terms. Turkey's foreign policy strategy of Strategic Depth, articulated by foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu, has at its heart the proposition of regional engagement, or 'zero-problems with neighbours'. Turkey's geographical position provides the logic for this strategy: at the confluence of East and West, connecting Europe to the Arab and Muslim world, and most concretely, the bridge between the energy suppliers of the Middle East and Central Asia and the EU's 500million consumers.

The first pillar of that strategy has been economic. Turkey now ranks as the 15th largest economy in the world, its economy having tripled in size since the end of the Cold War and doubled since the turn of the century. Whilst the global financial crisis caused a recession in 2009, in 2010 real growth had recovered to 8.9%. The orientation of Turkish trade has been changing too, and although the EU remains Turkey's preeminent trade partner it accounted for less than 50% of Turkey's total exports for the first time in 2008, as trade relationships with the Middle East, Russia and the Caucasus grew strongly. Whilst investment and financial relations remain dominated by the West, the trend of diversification of the Turkey's international economic relations looks set to continue. The OECD expects Turkey to be the fastest growing economy of the OECD between now and 2017, with the proposed relocation of Turkish financial institutions from Ankara to Istanbul designed to promote Istanbul as a major regional financial centre and boost Turkey's voice in the G20.

Economic self-confidence has been matched by growing political assertiveness in the region. The headlines may have focused on the criticism of Israel over the Gaza flotilla and the rejection by the United States of Turkey and Brazil's diplomacy on Iran. But Turkey's deepening economic and political ties with its neighbours are increasingly making it the default regional power, a role in which Turkey itself

has been only too glad to cast itself, as a model of secular democratic development of a predominantly Muslim society. At the same time, the upheavals of the Arab Spring have proved problematic for a nation that simultaneously regards itself as a champion of democratic change whilst predicating its foreign policy first and foremost on pragmatic realist engagement. Whilst Turkey was quick to turn against Mubarak in Egypt, on Libya Ankara vacillated, caught between their longstanding humanitarianism in the country and an opposition to NATO intervention. As Syrian unrest grew, threatening the bilateral gains in security and economic relations achieved over the previous decade, Turkey sought to use its influence to pressure President Assad to adopt reforms in private.

Turkey has not been alone in struggling to realign its thinking in the face of such dramatic political change, and its influence and reach are certain to be central to the future to the economic and political development of the region as the revolutions responsible for overthrowing governments make the difficult transition to constructing them. The test of Turkey's foreign policy will be to articulate a political conception of the future for the region beyond the notion of ensuring strong bilateral relations with other governments.

In the final analysis however, Turkey's strategy cannot be captured simply by understanding the bilateral relationships, regional upheavals and economic and energy flows that constitute Turkey's core interests. Turkey's emerging role also more fundamentally reflects the changes in the world politics whereby power is becoming decentred and more diffuse, and established blocs are becoming less and less the bedrock of international system, to be replaced by more fluid arrangements that loosely bind states on the basis shifting interests, rather than lock them together as part of a more fundamental struggle for international order. In this sense, understanding Turkey's shifting global role can shed light on the emergence and orientation of other rising powers, including Brazil and India, and those emerging in the region which may rise in the future, such as Tunisia, Egypt and Iraq. For the West, the challenge will be to shed the bloc mentality that remains pervasive, and reconceptualise an international order in which independent states become assets rather than inconveniences. In a post-American world, there are likely to be more Turkeys. ■

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## > Contributors

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➤ **Turkey's Global  
Strategy**

## ➤ Introduction: The Sources of Turkish Grand Strategy - 'Strategic Depth' and 'Zero-Problems' in Context

Joshua W. Walker

**T**he dramatic changes in Turkish foreign policy and strategy in its regional and international relations in the first decade of the new century stands in sharp contrast with that of its immediate past. After the end of the Cold War, Turkey was a prickly power in a tough neighbourhood, one that included two major zones of instability, the Balkans and the Middle East. On three separate occasions, Turkey came to the brink of war with its neighbours: Armenia in 1992, Greece in 1996 and Syria in 1998. Regular military incursions were launched into Northern Iraq; in the Aegean, continuous tactical military provocations between the Greek and Turkish air force took place. Little movement was evident with regard to Cyprus and at one point Turkey even threatened to annex the northern part of the island. Relations with post-Cold War Russia were tentative and burdened by a long history of tension and conflict. Relations with Iran were soured by the Kurdish conflict and political Islam. Turkey's overall approach to its neighbours was characterised by confrontation, mistrust, and the use of threats and force. Yet, despite tensions over domestic issues such as human rights, widespread use of torture, and the situation of the Kurdish minority, Turkey remained a strong transatlantic partner.<sup>1</sup>

The contrast with the current situation is striking, as over the last decade Turkey has sought rapprochement with Greece, Syria, Iraq, Armenia, Iran and Russia. Turkey's active foreign policy aimed at 'zero problems' with its neighbours, which first aimed at improving bilateral relations and regional cooperation in the Balkans and among former Soviet states, has now been extended to the Middle East, the Gulf, and North Africa as well.

### THE ARCHITECT OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: PROF. DR. AHMET DAVUTOGLU

Accounting for these developments on the domestic, historical, and international level is critical in order to understand Turkey's foreign policy orientation, marked by the concepts of 'zero problems' and 'Strategic Depth,' elaborated by the current Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Professor of International Relations Dr. Ahmet Davutoglu.<sup>2</sup> 'Strategic Depth' seeks to reposition Turkey from the periphery of international relations to the centre as an actor sitting at the intersection of multiple regions. Having emerged from the shadows of isolationism pre-World War Two and dependency during the Cold War, Turkey is now asserting itself to play a greater role in its region, particularly the Middle East, with the prestige associated with playing an active regional role driving the resurgence

1 For more on this see 'Introduction' *Getting to Zero*. Ed. Evin, Ahmet, Kemal Kirisci, Ronald Linden, Thomas Straubhaar, Nathalie Tocci, Juliette Tolay and Joshua Walker (Lynne Rienner Press, Forthcoming Spring 2011).

2 Ahmet Evin, Kemal Kirisci, Ronald Linden, Thomas Straubhaar, Nathalie Tocci, Juliette Tolay and Joshua Walker, *Transatlantic Report 'Getting to Zero.'* (Washington DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2010).



in foreign policy activism. Turkey recalls the Ottoman Empire, which straddled the frontier between the civilisations that best defined East and West for a millennium. Since the end of the Cold War, memories of that empire are most closely associated with efforts to reposition Turkey in a renewed struggle between the 'modern' Western world and a resurgent Muslim world centred in the Middle East.

Turkey today is courting new alliances in order to maintain optimal regional and global independence and influence,<sup>3</sup> by specifically taking on a larger role in its former Ottoman territories, and by prioritising 'dialogue and cooperation' over 'coercion and confrontation.'<sup>4</sup> This approach has rallied favor with business and civil society, which are eager to develop closer ties with the neighbours in the economic and social domains.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the doctrine of Strategic Depth provides a normative chapeau to the plethora of state and non-state interests that concomitantly push Turkey to develop deeper and stronger ties to its neighbours. It also conceptualises a foreign policy trend which has been in the making since the days of former Turkish Prime Minister and President Türgüt Özal in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ismail Cem in the late 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

Davutoglu's proclaimed grand strategy and theory emphasises that Turkey is uniquely endowed both because of its location in geopolitical areas of influence, particularly its control of the Bosphorus, and its historical legacy as heir to the Ottoman Empire.<sup>7</sup> While traditional measures of Turkey's national power tend to overlook the cultural links fostered by a shared common history, Davutoglu emphasises Turkey's connections to the Balkans, the Middle East, and even Central Asia. In the same vein, Davutoglu argues that Turkey is the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire that once unified the Muslim world and therefore has the potential to become a trans-regional power that helps to once again unify and lead the Muslim world.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, Turkey is not simply an 'ordinary nation-state' that emerged at a certain point due to the play of circumstances or the designs of the outside powers – like, for example, many new states in Central Europe in the aftermath of the First World War. Rather, Turkey is a regional power in its own right, having strong traditions of statehood and broad strategic outreach. Thus, Davutoglu concludes, 'it has no chance to be peripheral, it is not a sideline country of the EU, NATO or Asia.'<sup>9</sup> Davutoglu contends that Turkey is a centrally positioned international player, 'a country with a close land basin, the *epicentre* of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus, the *centre* of Eurasia in general and is in the *middle* of the Rimland belt cutting across the Mediterranean to the Pacific. [Emphasis added]'<sup>10</sup> Such geo-strategic vision reflects the newly-acquired self-confidence on the part of newly empowered Turkish leadership who are supportive of a more proactive foreign policy – particularly in what they call the 'Ottoman geopolitical

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3 For further discussion on this doctrine, see Joshua Walker, 'Learning Strategic Depth: Implications of Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine,' *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (2007), 32–47.

4 For more see the original text of the book Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Istanbul: Küre, 2001), further expansion in an interview with a Turkish newspaper Ahmet Davutoglu, 'Türkiye merkez ülke olmalı,' *Radikal*, (Winter 2004), and in an academic piece for an international audience Ahmet Davutoglu, 'Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007,' *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (2008), 77-96.

5 Author Interviews conducted with representatives from each of these organisations and also with Hakan Fidan former advisor in prime minister's office who managed economic portfolio, Ankara August, 2009.

6 Meliha Altunisik-Benli, 'Worldviews and Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East,' *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40, (2009), 171-194.

7 Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik, Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth, Turkey's International Position) (Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari, 2001).

8 Ahmet Davutoglu. Interview with Author, August 18, 2009 in Foreign Ministry Ankara.

9 Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, see also his article 'The Clash of Interests: An Explanation of the World (Dis)Order,' *Perceptions* 2:4 (December 1997-February 1998).

10 Alexander Murinson, 'The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 42, Issue 6 (November 2006), 945-964.

space.<sup>11</sup> This orientation is highly critical of Turkey's Cold War strategy for its myopic reluctance to embrace the country's obvious advantages – namely, its rich history and geographical location.

### **CATALYST FOR CHANGE: THE AKP**

The emergence of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 as a political force has turned Turkish foreign policy on its head, articulating a vision for improving relations with all its neighbours, particularly by privileging its former Muslim space in the Middle East, such as Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. As a result, the debate over Turkey's historical roots and its legacy as a successor state to the Ottoman Empire has been rekindled.

Central to this revival of Ottoman legacies has been the expanding economic interests and regional dynamism represented by the rise of new rural Anatolian businesses led by devout Muslims competing with traditional metropolitan Aegean businesses. These Anatolian businesses have emerged as strong advocates for further Turkish expansion into emerging Middle Eastern rather than European markets. It would be hard to make sense of Turkish foreign policy towards countries such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria without taking into consideration these new business interest groups. Consequently the economic interests of these groups has played an important role in AKP government's efforts to promote greater trade and economic cooperation with the Middle East in the context of Turkey's new foreign policy agenda.

As a result of its central Anatolian roots and more conservative Muslim outlook, the AKP has focused on the unifying character of the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim values inherited by the Turkish Republic. Articulating a new vision for Turkey that is not dependent upon the West, while actively seeking ways to balance its relationships and alliances, the AKP harkens back to the days of the Ottoman Empire but more importantly of a self-confident regional power.

The shift in Turkey's policies towards its neighbourhood are stark and can be explained by a confluence of international, regional and domestic factors. At the international and regional levels, these factors range from the power vacuum left by the 1991 Gulf war and the 2003 war on Iraq, to the changing dynamics in the Kurdish question and the deterioration of the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza during 2008 and 2009. They include the waning influence that the EU now has on Turkish foreign policy,<sup>12</sup> as well as the US by first aggravating Turkey's sensitivities on the Kurdish question in 2003-2007 and then diffusing them by cooperating with Turkey in the fight against the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK.)

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11 Here the distinction between the academic discussions surrounding where the Ottomans had actual control and whether these areas should be considered 'colonies' given the Orientalist narrative of Western imperialism matters less than how policymakers incorporate a vision of cultural, historic, and religious affinity.

12 Some of this literature includes Mustafa Aydın and Sinem A. Açıkmeşe, 'Europeanisation through EU conditionality: understanding the new era in Turkish foreign policy,' *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (2007), 263-74.. Ziya Önis, 'Turkey and the Middle East after September 11: The Importance of the EU Dimension,' *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4, (2003), 84-95. Mesut Özcan, *Harmonising Foreign Policy: Turkey, the EU and the Middle East* (Adlershot: Ashgate Press, 2008) and Burak Akçapar, *Turkey's new European era: foreign policy on the road to EU membership* (Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

However, without Turkey's domestic transformation and most pointedly the willingness of the AKP to transform Turkey's traditional detachment from the region on the basis of Ottoman glorification and 'zero-problems' with neighbours, any explanation of contemporary developments in Turkish foreign policy would be impossible. The domestic contours of Turkey's foreign policy establishment are notoriously fractious, consisting of institutional actors such as the military and bureaucracy that must work with the democratically elected legislature. Given Turkey's political history of highly unstable coalition governments and corruption scandals, it is unsurprising that political parties have commanded far less public trust and support than the military, which is seen as the ultimate caretaker of Atatürk's secular republic.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the constitutional courts and presidency have checked the power of any parliamentary majority. While Turkish foreign policy was traditionally entrusted to the military and other state bureaucracies, the changes and reforms within Turkey have changed the actors responsible. Foreign policy is now increasingly coming under civilian control and the democratically elected government is seen as having the legitimate mandate to exert Turkey's influence globally.

It is with this backdrop that the AKP came to power in 2002 on the heels of a major economic crisis and series of corruption scandals. As the historical successors of Turkey's right-leaning Islamic conservative movement, the AKP had many domestic hurdles to overcome. After its surprise electoral victory, the AKP enjoyed popular support for most of its term. This popularity was fueled by the fact that the AKP was seen as being untainted by the corruption and cronyism of Turkey's traditional parties. Following the pattern of two-level games,<sup>14</sup> Erdogan and the AKP began using their foreign policy agenda to placate domestic opposition and expand areas of possible cooperation with Turkey's liberal elites. In particular, the AKP focused on the EU accession process to broaden its domestic support and weaken its opponents during 2002-2005. As part of this strategy Turkey began to use its rising regional influence to support its foreign policies in the Middle East, particularly since 2004-2005 as the European process came to a virtual standstill as a result of domestic politics in Europe and Turkey. Attempting this feat in the context of the ongoing Iraq crisis was complex, yet the AKP pushed for cooperation with the Middle East by relying on Turkey's historical legacy and its modern 'soft power' resources to fulfill its ambitions.<sup>15</sup>

In a country that has experienced four military coups (one being the 'soft' *coup* in 1997 that forced the closure of the *Refah* party)<sup>16</sup>, and one so-called 'electronic *coup*' that triggered the 2007 elections, attempts to discredit and ban the AKP through anti-democratic means are a new twist in an old plotline.<sup>17</sup> The AKP speaks for a large portion of the Turkish people who want to see changes made in the approach and character of both their Republic and its international relations. With a majority of the Turkish parliament and municipal administrations controlled by the AKP since 2002, the very structure of the secular Turkish Republic is beginning to change.

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13 Garith Jenkins, *Context and Circumstance* (London: Routledge, 2005).

14 Robert Putnam 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics,' *Double Edged Diplomacy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

15 Kemal Kirisci, *Getting to Zero*. Ed. Evin, Ahmet, Kemal Kirisci, Ronald Linden, Thomas Straubhaar, Nathalie Tocci, Juliette Tolay and Joshua Walker (Lynne Rienner Press, Forthcoming Spring 2011).

16 The Refah Party or the Welfare Party is an Islamist political party that emerged into politics in 1983. It is the predecessor of today's AKP or Justice and Development Party.

17 There were several coups during this period which signified the military exerting influence. For more on Turkey's non-overt coups see Steven Cook, *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

## TURKEY'S POTENTIAL ROLE

Beyond the academic discussions surrounding Turkey's potential and place in the world, the AKP has sought to counterbalance Turkey's dependencies on the West by courting multiple alliances to maintain the balance of power in its region. The premise of this argument is that Turkey should not be dependent upon any one actor and should actively seek ways to balance its relationships and alliances so that it can maintain optimal independence and leverage on the global and regional stage.<sup>18</sup> The approach exhibited by Davutoglu's foreign policy doctrine is perfectly suited for the prime minister's personality and his political rhetoric has resonated in Turkey as a whole. It also stems directly from the political power accumulated by his party. Given the AKP's unrivalled position domestically, its foreign policy doctrine of 'Strategic Depth' has become hegemonic within the country.<sup>19</sup>

Presenting Turkey as a regional power and 'model' in the Middle East was made possible by Turkey's broader democratisation since the end of the Cold War and in particular since September 11, 2001. As articulated in recent scholarship, there is a relationship between greater democratisation and Eastern oriented foreign policy initiatives throughout Turkish political history.<sup>20</sup> The three longest serving prime ministers (Adnan Menderes, Turgüt Özal, and Recep Erdogan) all implemented at least one Eastern oriented initiative (Baghdad Pact 1955, Central Asian Initiative 1991, and 'Strategic Depth' 2004) along with their domestic democratisation efforts. These same prime ministers commanded the largest percentage of the parliament and were among the most responsive to public opinion given the often tenuous relationships they had with Turkey's traditional purveyors of foreign policy, namely the military. There is something electorally attractive about Eastern initiatives even if they are less institutional or formalised in the same way that Western initiatives have tended to be (NATO 1952, EC Application 1987, and EU candidate status 2004). Within the democratising Turkey of the last decade, civilian leaders cannot ignore where public opinion stands on critical foreign policy questions as easily as the military leaders that previously dominated Turkish foreign policy decision-making.

Turkey's 're-engagement' with the Middle East has been greatly initiated by the AKP's domestic constituencies' historical memory and ideas about Turkey's 'rightful' place as the heir to the Ottoman Empire both in and of the region. The rise of the AKP has subsequently meant a de-emphasis of the 'othering' and 'Islamic threat' in Turkey's view of the region. Closer Middle Eastern relations are not seen as being dichotomous or detrimental to Turkey's western orientation, at home or abroad, as had been trumpeted under military rule in the 1980s. Hence, a more 'Islam-friendly' approach that focuses on economic opportunities and shared heritage has come to permeate Turkey's policy towards the region.

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18 Ahmet Davutoglu, Interview with Author, August 18, 2009. Also see Ahmet Davutoglu, *Alternative Paradigms: The Impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on Political Theory* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994).

19 For further discussion on this doctrine, see Joshua W. Walker, 'Learning Strategic Depth: Implications of Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine,' 32–47.

20 Joshua Walker. *Getting to Zero*. Ed. Evin, Ahmet, Kemal Kirisci, Ronald Linden, Thomas Straubhaar, Nathalie Tocci, Juliette Tolay and Joshua Walker (Lynne Rienner Press, Forthcoming Spring 2011).

Alongside this, Turkey's economic growth has also played into the country's developing ties to its neighbours, building economic interdependence with formerly hostile countries like Syria and Iraq, while hoping to draw others closer into Ankara's orbit. Rather than seeing Iran, Iraq or Syria as former enemies or 'others,' Turkey increasingly sees its eastern neighbours as potential markets for their goods and partners in a neighbourhood that can benefit from an actively engaged regional stabiliser. A growing Turkish economic interest in the Middle Eastern neighbours in turn has led to a growing influence of business and civil society actors in foreign-policy-making, insofar as non-state actors press the government and bureaucracy to develop cooperative ties. More specifically, growing commercial interests in the region have raised Turkish stakes in a peaceful and stable Middle East, consolidating Turkish foreign policy objectives to promote peace and regional integration in the Middle East.<sup>21</sup>

The change in Turkish foreign policy hinges on Turkey's domestic transformation and democratisation, kick-started, *inter alia*, by its EU accession process, and propelled by the rise of the ruling AKP under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Turkish foreign policy has traditionally been the exclusive domain of the military and the ministry of foreign affairs. In the course of the last decade not only have these institutions been transformed but others have acquired a growing role in foreign policy making. These include state bodies such as the ministries of energy, environment, interior and transportation and the under-secretariat for foreign trade.<sup>22</sup> In addition, civil society, and in particular businesses associations including the Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEIK) and the Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM) among many others, constantly lobby the government on foreign policy questions.<sup>23</sup> It would be hard to make sense of Turkish foreign policy towards countries such as Russia, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Syria without taking into considerations these economic interests.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, economic interests played an important role in efforts to improve relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as well as Armenia. These factors all push toward the same direction of greater regional integration and cooperation.

## TRENDING TOWARDS DEMOCRATISATION AND POPULISM IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

Turkish democratisation has made the government more accountable and sensitive to public opinion. Past governments were not as concerned with public opinion, however, the current government feels obliged for electoral as much as populist reasons to take public opinion into account. Indeed the backdrop to, though not necessarily the result of, the parliamentary vote in March 2003 not to allow the US to attack Iraq through Turkish territory was the massive public mobilisation against the looming war. Similarly, without a more responsive public and greater freedom of expression it would have been difficult to imagine the debates that made it possible for Turkey to reverse its policy towards Cyprus in 2004 and Armenia in 2008-9. Somewhat ironically it could also be argued that without democratisation it is doubtful that Erdogan would have been as critical as he has been of Israel since the Gaza operation, whereby the government and especially the prime minister responds to the public outrage over civilian casualties in the region.

21 Kemal Kirisci, 'The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy,' *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40, (2009) pp. 29-57.

22 Author Interviews with ministers, officials, and high-level ministers who requested to be left anonymous in Ankara, Turkey August, 2008.

23 Author Interviews conducted with representatives from each of these organisations and also with Hakan Fidan former advisor in prime minister's office who managed economic portfolio, Ankara August, 2009.

24 Kemal Kirisci, 'The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: the rise of the trading state,' 29-57.

The upshot and irony of this increasingly democratic Turkey is however a growing readiness to diverge and say 'no' to the US or the EU when the latter's policies have been perceived as countering Turkish interests. Unlike during and in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when Turkish army generals and diplomats could be counted on to support the West even when policies harmed Turkey's national interest, Turkish leaders are now being held accountable for their foreign policy decisions and at times give in to populism. In other words, like any other democracy, Turkey today responds to the public, including its nationalist segments, as well as to powerful business interests. Turkey's new self-awareness as a regional power means that rather than simply being able to rely on Turkey as an instrument of Western power projection in the Middle East, the West is now facing a stronger and more assertive Turkey that can and will disagree on key foreign policy issues. ■

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## Turkey and the European Union

Fadi Hakura

**T**urkey has enjoyed challenging and intricate relations with the European Union (EU) for over half a century. Official ties began in 1963 when Turkey and the then-European Economic Community concluded an Association Agreement that ushered in freer trade and closer political cooperation. Bilateral ties leapt forward with the establishment of a customs union in 1996. Nineteen years later, the EU launched accession negotiations with Turkey in October 2005.

Ever since the EU promised Turkey prospects of accession in 1963, the EU became synonymous with Turkey's westernisation. Europe was hesitant and tentative toward Turkish entreaties from the start. A turnaround of sorts took place under the leadership of German Chancellor Gerhard Shroeder and Foreign Minister Joshka Fischer. Their backing was crucial to initiating the negotiating process.

However, the replacement of Shroeder by Angela Merkel helped reduce accession to a snail's pace. Germany and France never cease to frustrate the ambitions of this Muslim-majority country. Jean-David Levitte, foreign policy advisor to French President Sarkozy admitted so much according to a Wikileaks cable, in which he confirmed that Paris wants Turks to realise that 'their role is best played as a bridge between the two worlds of Europe and Asia, rather than anchored in Europe itself.'

Turkey has commenced negotiations on thirteen of the 33 'chapters' or policy areas that it needs to adopt ahead of accession. Of these 33 chapters, only one is closed, seventeen are blocked and a mere three chapters are eligible for opening. In response to Turkey's refusal to grant port access to Greek Cypriot vessels and planes, the EU has suspended eight chapters. More broadly, the lack of tangible progress in the ongoing Cyprus reunification talks means that accession is heading to an assured stalemate, if not breakdown.

Turkey shares equal blame with Europe for the rapid deterioration of bilateral relations, since Turkey's reform agenda ground to a near halt once the EU agreed to accession negotiations, and Turkish enthusiasm abruptly dissipated. Accession was thereafter used tactically in power plays between the government and its domestic opponents. Turkey, in essence, was not fully committed to Europe.

### **EUROPEAN SCEPTICISM OF TURKEY**

Hrant Dink, an internationally-renowned Turkish-Armenian intellectual murdered in 2006, noted astutely that Turkey and Europe are bound by fear rather than solidarity. Both parties are pushed by geographical realities to deal tepidly with each other, not out of a desire for intimate neighbourly relations. Sandwiched between Europe and Asia, Turkey can ill-afford to totally ignore Europe and vice versa.

Turkey is quite unpopular among Europeans. In a 2006 survey by US-based 'Transatlantic Trends' in 9 EU countries, respondents disliked Turkey more than Israel, China and Russia and slightly less than Palestine and Iran. Turkey's image is similarly problematic. Simon Anholt, an independent government advisor, regularly conducts surveys of 'nation brands'. He asks people in 50 countries on what they think of other nations in terms of their exports, people, government, culture and so on. Turkey tends to fare poorly, ranked 36 in the 2008 index behind Russia and Egypt.

Turkey's Muslim identity lies at the heart of European hostility. In a 2009 Bosphorus University opinion poll conducted in France, Germany, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom, 39% of respondents agreed that Turkey is 'a Muslim country [...] incompatible with the common Christian roots' of Europe. Only 20% of respondents cited culture and religion as a prerequisite for EU accession when Turkey's name was omitted.

Cultural differences are also intensifying European doubts of Turkey's democratic credentials. TEPAV, a Turkish think-tank, found in a 2007 poll that around 50% of Europeans prioritised liberties and democracy as conditions for further enlargement. Mentioning Turkey's name raised that level to 85%.

EU leaders and their publics seem convinced that Turkey's Islamic background is incompatible with European norms. Just 31% of Europeans and 62% of political elites accept that Europe and Turkey share common values, a 2011 Transatlantic Trends survey reveals. It also found that a mere 21% and 51% respectively are enthusiastic about Turkey joining the EU.

Jeffrey C. Dixon, a sociologist, attributes the strength of opposition to the perceived threat that Turkey poses to the group position and identity of 'Europeans'. Turkey's identity is seen by a wide cross-section of European populations as apposite to secular lifestyles and attitudes. Germans, Austrians and the French are loathe to see more Turks living in their

neighbourhoods. Not even robust EU guarantees to permanently restrict Turkish migration was enough to assuage concerns.

In turn, Turkish Prime Recep Tayyip Erdogan ratchets up anxieties with muscular criticisms of German policies to integrate its large Turkish community. He told a German newspaper that those policies failed to consider the needs and expectations of this community. Addressing the government's campaign to encourage more Turks to speak German, he added: 'Any policy which seeks to revoke the language and culture of migrants violates international law.' These kind of comments reinforce European perceptions that Turks are culturally distinct.

#### **TURKISH SCEPTICISM OF EUROPE**

Naturally, the faltering EU process is coinciding with growing Turkish antipathy for accession. Popular support stands at only 40% compared to a high of 75% six years ago. Turkey's rambunctious prime minister criticises the EU's lukewarm attitude to Turkey's accession with increasing frequency. He recently thundered that Turkey is 'no more a country that would wait at the EU's doors like a docile supplicant.'

Not only is the political chasm widening, but the same seems to be happening culturally. Turks are increasingly focussing on the alleged cultural divide between Turkey and Europe. In particular, they feel that Europe rejects Turkey on the basis of religion. Undoubtedly, this an inevitable consequence of the slowdown of Turkey's journey to Europe .

#### **TURKEY LOOKING EAST**

Domestically, the EU barely registers in political and intellectual debates, and Turkish politicians pay lip service to the accession issue at best. Far more attention is devoted to rebuilding Turkey's diplomatic and economic outreach to the Middle East and North Africa, and Eurasia. Europe no longer assumes a pride



of place in Turkey's foreign policy calculations. Gone are the days when Turkey subordinated its national interest to Western strategic considerations.

Nowadays, the decline of accession is accelerating a more independent, less pro-European Turkish foreign policy. Turkey is fostering closer ties with Iran, the Arab world and Russia. This is particularly evident in economic and trade relations. While Turkey's trade volume with Europe remains static at around 45% of its overall trade, the share with the Middle East is climbing fast from a very low base to around 20%. Turkey is lifting visa restrictions on neighbouring countries. Europe, in contrast, refuses steadfastly to engage in 'visa diplomacy' with Turkey.

Policy independence, as opposed to interdependence, will increasingly define the nature of EU-Turkey relations. Thus far, Turkey's dealings with the EU have been mostly multi-lateral, a natural outcome of the accession negotiations. Driven by prospects of accession, Turkey has contributed peace-keeping forces to EU operations in the Ivory Coast and the Balkans, and supported at least 90% of EU's foreign policy positions. Cooperation will be patchier, *ad hoc* and less systematic in the future as Turkey's multiplicity of interests with the neighbouring Middle East and Eurasia may collide with European strategic concerns.

Three recent cases illustrate the mutual divergences vividly. First among them is the rift on Iranian nuclear ambitions. Turkey opposes the EU line of tough economic sanctions on Tehran. Instead, Ankara has argued vigorously for intensified diplomatic engagement with Tehran. Turkey surprised European partners by voting against the last round of sanctions at the UN Security Council. In addition, Turkey partnered with Brazil to secure Iran's agreement to swap 1,200 kilogrammes of low-enriched uranium for fuel rods on Turkish soil. Europe was prompt in dismissing this deal as too little, too late.

Energy security is another arena for dampening aspirations. Turkey and the EU have trumpeted the advantages of the Nabucco pipeline to diversify

energy supplies away from Russia. If built, it would transport 31 billion metres of natural gas from the Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia to European consumers. Yet, the weak accession process has diluted interest for Nabucco and other ambitious joint projects.

Most illustrative is the lack of effective cooperation between NATO and the EU. Turkey (in NATO but not the EU) objects to Cypriot (in the EU but not in NATO) participation in EU-NATO meetings. In retaliation, Cyprus vetoed tighter defence cooperation between the EU and Turkey. In addition, Turkey does not facilitate European access to NATO military assets for peace-keeping operations unless obstacles to the accession process are neutralised. As insecurity spreads across Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the regional order implodes in the Middle East and North Africa, the persistence of EU-NATO acrimony is untimely and indefensible.

## A LOST OPPORTUNITY

Proponents of Turkish accession have long argued that a secular European Turkey would magnify European influence in the Middle East. In a region bereft of democratic governance, Europe lost the opportunity to showcase the compatibility of secular democracy and Islam. According to a 2010 TESEV poll, Turkey enjoys an overall favourability rating of 75% in the Middle East. A similar percentage of Arabs endorsed Turkey's quest to join the EU as a shining example to the region.

Stressing the tangible fears of Turkish accession has sidelined the intangible benefits. Proper assessments of Turkey's place in Europe have fallen by the wayside. Europe has relied on bankrolling singular leaderships in the Arab world. Only a few lonely European voices forewarned that Turkey will be a key ally to influence events in its immediate neighbourhood. Now the futility and short-sightedness of that policy has been laid bare by the unexpected challenges to traditional Arab regimes.

Fortress Europe, however fortified the walls may be, will find it more difficult to combat its impending challenges without Turkey. Whether it is illegal migration or insecure energy sources, Turkey's contribution is incalculable. After all, Turkey is a key transit point for illegal migration and is proximate to three-quarters of global energy resources. As has been starkly demonstrated in recent months, Europe cannot take for granted the permanence of Arab leaderships. Arab public opinion, once safely ignored, is certain to play a bigger role in the developing contours of the new Middle East as more representative governments replace singular leaderships in the region. European attempts to impact regional changes without Turkey at the core will be more complicated.

#### **THE FUTURE OF EU-TURKEY RELATIONS**

Turkey's historical dream of EU membership looks at present a remote possibility. In light of the non-accession process, the mutual relationship is comatose. Neither side wants to terminate the accession drive nor galvanise progress. Both are satisfied with the current state of deep freeze. Prime Minister Erdogan is content to harangue the EU as a 'Christian club' for domestic consumption. Europe, on the other hand, procrastinates. To rephrase an old Russian proverb, Turkey pretends to desire accession, Europe pretends to want Turkish entry. Commitment is seriously lacking.

Meanwhile, the EU-Turkey relationship is losing momentum in the midst of global paradigm shifts and uncertainty sweeping the Middle East and North Africa. Unfortunately, the real prize of accession was missed: embracing a Muslim-majority society into the European fold. Such a development could have led to a prosperous, secular and democratic Turkey anchored in European norms. Instead, cultural differences are thriving.

Europe is rapidly losing weight in the international arena. Its response to the financial crisis, the emerging multi-polar world, new security challenges, questions

of European identity and human rights has come under scrutiny. Europe is not seen as taking the lead in handling the evolving situation on its southern shores; the US is. Europe did not coordinate actions with Turkey; the US had to step in.

Recent events indicate that bilateral relations will be lukewarm. Turkey may wish to renegotiate the terms of the partnership at some point, such as reducing the EU-Turkey customs union to a free trade area. It will be less tempted to show flexibility on the Cyprus conflict and territorial disputes with Greece. Turkey will probably interact with individual EU countries rather than multilaterally.

Eventually, however, the EU and Turkey will be forced into a new modus operandi beyond accession. Too many common interests will prevent a complete severance or rupture. They cannot defy the dictates of geography nor afford a collapse in relations. After all, several million Turks live in Europe; half of Turkey's trade is with the EU. Sadly, the lowest level of cooperation will be the outcome, a far cry from the exciting vision of a Turkey rooted in Europe. ■

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## Turkey and Greece

Ekavi Athanassopoulou

### AN IMPROVED CLIMATE

**The history of relations between Turkey and Greece during most of the 20th century might be best characterised as one of hostility or perhaps even outright enmity. Since 1974 the Aegean conflict concerning not only territorial air and sea rights but also sovereign rights over the Aegean seabed and its subsoil has been the central bone of contention between these two eastern Mediterranean countries. For both the economic, security and political implications of the issue are profound.**

However in 1999 the Turkish and Greek governments of Bülent Ecevit and Kostas Simitis respectively began taking initial steps to improve bilateral relations and these efforts have continued under the subsequent governments of Tayip Erdogan in Turkey and of Kostas Karamanlis and more recently of George Papandreou in Greece.

These mutual efforts have resulted in the establishment of a variety of instruments that are expected to help ameliorate relations. They include the regular exchange of high level visits, talks on Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), working groups exploring possible fields of bilateral co-operation in areas of low politics as well as 'exploratory contacts' that seek to identify points of agreement regarding the more contentious issues of high politics.

So far, in terms of concrete outcomes, we can see a large number of CBMs and a good number of co-operation agreements covering a wide variety of issues including tourism, environmental protection, investment, policing matters and energy (notably Turkey and Greece became linked through the opening of an Azeri gas pipeline in 2007). It must be stressed that whilst most of the agreements are modest in terms of scale and goals they clearly mark the beginning of a de-escalation of tensions, which may eventually lead to further steps towards a conciliation between these two longstanding adversaries.

Significantly, one sector of society which has responded very positively to the improvement in relations between Greece and Turkey is the business community in both countries. The volume of bilateral trade has increased dramatically from approximately \$US400 million in the 1988-99 period to approximately \$US2.5 billion per year for the last five years. Economic investment has also risen rapidly, reflecting mainly the entry of Greek investors into the Turkish market, at least until the financial crisis in Greece broke out.

However despite the improved bilateral climate it is still absolutely clear that in real terms progress at the high politics level has been limited, as none of the primary issues of contention between the two have been resolved, and there are few signs that Athens and Ankara are close to reaching a solution any time soon.

In fact it is these major issues of high politics which so often set back the efforts to build mutual confidence and co-operation. Genuine trust is limited and both sides have been extremely careful not to accept agreements which may indirectly compromise their sovereign positions regarding the highly contentious Aegean issues.

At the same time, hardly any progress has been made regarding Cyprus, which remains a key litmus test for relations in general between the two countries. Greek governments have de-coupled their relations with Turkey from the Cyprus issue, reflecting Athens' acceptance of Nicosia as the primary negotiator for any long term solution on the island. By contrast, Ankara still asserts its right to dictate solutions for the island, whilst the Turkish military in particular feels the need to actively protect Turkey's, and not just Turkish-Cypriot, interests in Cyprus. Hence, suspicion in Athens of underlying post-imperial expansionist currents in Turkish foreign policy will remain so long as Ankara essentially continues to project a hard-line attitude, showing no sign that it will reconsider its military occupation of Northern Cyprus.

### **DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES**

It appears in general terms that the overall aim of the ongoing dialogue between Ankara and Athens since 1999 has been to build mutual trust and by doing so to eventually achieve reconciliation over differences in the Aegean. But the particular and more immediate objectives of the two protagonists have been quite different. Essentially the Erdogan government, like its predecessor in power, has been hoping to resolve the range of the Aegean issues in a way that is as satisfactory as possible to Turkey's interests. Hence, Turkish foreign policy makers have been disappointed that the ten-year-process to improve relations with Greece has not yet yielded the big results they had been hoping for. Furthermore they are also beginning to fear that the process is in serious danger of running out of steam unless it can lead to concrete agreements regarding the contentious high politics issues. Rightly

or wrongly Ankara has attached more importance to the dialogue as a means to an end (solutions in the Aegean) rather than an end in itself (improved relations). As it has grown more and more frustrated Ankara has increased its diplomatic pressure on Athens to substantively address the Aegean issues.

On the other hand, while exploring areas of possible convergence of ideas regarding the resolution of contentious issues, Athens has primarily considered the ongoing process of improving relations with Turkey as a means for avoiding a serious crisis developing in the Aegean. (This was particularly the case during the years 2004-2009 when the party of New Democracy was in government). Though many within Greek political and diplomatic circles have come to appreciate the value of 'exploratory talks' with their Turkish counterparts, the idea of actively working towards a final settlement of the contentious Aegean issues through a mutually acceptable agreement, as Ankara has argued for, has provoked negative reactions across the political spectrum within Greek political and intellectual elites. Opponents argue that any agreement by Athens to work towards a settlement would be a victory for Turkish (and international) pressures at the expense of Greek sovereignty. In their eyes Turkey's pressure for better bilateral relations is a thinly disguised way of facilitating its ambitions to emerge as a regional power. Ironically, recent public pronouncements by Turkish government officials stressing the economic and security benefits that both countries will enjoy by settling the Aegean issues have further fanned the suspicions of these opponents concerning Turkey's motives. A majority among the Greek elites therefore remain deeply mistrustful of Ankara's motives and its policy over Cyprus offers fuel for their concerns.

### **CONTROLLED TENSION**

Where does this leave us? If improved relations between Turkey and Greece simply meant the implementation of modest CBMs, more trade and regular meetings between the leaders of the two

countries then the bilateral relationship seems better than perhaps at any time since the 1930s. But in the context of the issues that have bedevilled bilateral relations for over thirty years, these changes have not been profound. As a matter of fact the feeling both in Ankara and Athens is that they are reversible should a crisis occur.

Efforts by both sides to build channels of positive relations have not been anchored in genuine enthusiasm within foreign policy making circles or the learned public in either country. They have hardly inspired political leaders and they have rather passively been accepted by the general public, with the limited exception of some in the business community. To be more precise the step-by-step efforts at co-operation have so far been rather mechanical with the exception of a brief initial period (2000-2002), when progress in their bilateral relations was seen as instrumental in promoting bigger respective agendas. Turkey, which after much controversy had just become a candidate member of the EU, had to show real progress in its relations with Athens in order for its engagement with Brussels to evolve smoothly. Greece was also under pressure to improve relations with its neighbour in order to boost the case for the accession of Cyprus to the EU. Moreover, Kostas Simitis' government in Greece perceived a direct benefit in facilitating Turkey's engagement with the EU because this would encourage Ankara to abide by the European rules of conduct regarding issues that concerned Greece, including Cyprus. Perhaps it was inevitable for this initial momentum to slow since it was not motivated by a more deep-seated conviction, but other factors also contributed. In Greece the New Democracy government under the leadership of Kostas Karamanlis that came to power in 2003 was very sceptical of the benefits of this approach. At the same time the war in Iraq shifted Turkey's foreign policy priorities away from the EU and towards more basic security interests within the context of its Kurdish issue. Thus the extremely cautious process of 'exploratory contacts' has not been given top priority in either capital.

Furthermore, if one cares to look beyond the rhetoric, the 'contacts' have not been built on the existence of strong good-will in Ankara or Athens to follow a new foreign policy paradigm in their engagement with each other, based exclusively on diplomacy, mutual assistance and the rejection of military might as a means of coercion. On the contrary they have been taking place also under the shadow of controlled tension in the Aegean. As a matter of fact Mr Davutoglu is far from questioning the role of military force as an instrument of pressure. As he stated in 2010 when he unveiled Turkey's foreign policy 'manifesto' diplomatic problems have to be overcome through a balanced act between hard and soft power producing 'harmony just like in an orchestra'.

This is far from saying that the spectre of war between the two countries looms large, at least in the foreseeable future; indeed war has been unlikely for at least thirty years despite the fears of Greek political leaders and the general public alike. The modus operandi of Turkey and Greece has instead been crystallised in a game of controlled tension (mainly in the Aegean) that is used as a reminder to the other side of the lines that should not be crossed. So, when Mr Davutoglu asserts that 'nobody expects a crisis between Turkey and any neighbour', in our case Greece, one should carefully read between the lines. For instance, Athens has the right according to the international law to extend its territorial waters from 6 to 12 miles. The Turks understandably strongly oppose such a change in the Aegean status quo as it would compromise their country's economic and security interests. Ankara has been making it abundantly clear that it shall take all necessary measures including military ones, if necessary, to prevent this from happening. This constitutes a strong warning that has been taken very seriously by all Greek governments. Were a jingoistic government in Athens to ignore the warning and exercise this right shouldn't we expect a crisis between Turkey and Greece? It is only very reasonable for anyone to assume that we should, though it may not take the form of a full-fledged shooting match. Yet war is the eventuality Athens has

been fearing and assuming and is the main reason why every single Greek government has abstained from extending Greek territorial waters in the Aegean. Consequently, a crisis on this front between Turkey and Greece is unlikely, not because there has been a real shift in their traditional foreign policy paradigm, as Mr Davutoglu's statement would have us believe, but because Greece in this case is fearful of a hardline response by Ankara.

### **TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH GREECE IN BROADER CONTEXT**

The formulation and implementation of foreign policy is rarely the result of the ideas and actions of a single man even when he is a powerful leader. Most high-level foreign policy decisions result from the workings of small groups and are acted upon by bureaucracies. And policy and bureaucratic elites are guided in foreign affairs as in domestic affairs by their society's culture. Therefore, the apparent influence of key foreign policy makers has to be understood more in the sense that they are able to capture and express the zeitgeist within their nation, or their country's political elites, rather than in their personal acute contribution. Thus Turkey's current policy stance towards Greece is essentially the reflection of economic and political processes that have been gradually maturing in Turkey over the past thirty years as a result of changes at the domestic and the international level.

Ankara's active interest in improving relations with Greece through a dialogue to include both low (with a major emphasis on economic relations) and high politics issues first emerged in the late 1980s, in parallel with a new phase of modernisation that Turkey was experiencing at that time. A new generation of Turkish economic and political elites embraced the idea of Turkey's rapid integration into the modern world outside its borders. This idea was interwoven with the belief that Turkey needed to converge with the European Community (EC) (for economic but also political reasons). At the same time, they thought,

Turkey needed to grasp the opportunities offered in the new emerging international environment of the late 1980s in order to more assertively further its interests in all directions from its borders, using both hard and soft power tools. This new approach, that in the late 1980s found a fervent advocate in Turkish Prime Minister and later President Turgut Özal, has so far been proven to be sustainable despite certain disruptions in the 1990s. The socialisation of Turkish political and bureaucratic elites with their European counterparts as a result of Turkey's closer association with the European Union (EU) has reinforced this approach over the last fifteen years.

Within this broader context of Turkish foreign policy, relations with Greece fell into a category of their own due to Greece's membership of the EC. Successive Greek governments pegged support for Turkey's accession to the EC to Ankara abandoning its claims against Greek interests in the Aegean. Characteristically, in 1989 when the Commission turned down Turkey's application for membership it justified its refusal by referring among other issues to disputes with Greece and Cyprus. Ankara realised that it had to make an effort to better handle relations with Athens. However, this effort proved unsustainable during most of the 1990s. For one the dashing of hopes for Turkey's accession to the EC any time soon took much of the wind out of the sails of those in Ankara who were arguing in favour of improving relations with Greece. But it was the Kurdish issue that had perhaps the biggest impact on the minds of the foreign policy makers in Ankara, and consequently greatly determined Turkey's overall foreign policy during the 1990s. For most of that decade the Turkish state was faced with a growing Kurdish insurgency in the southeast of the country that reached alarming proportions for Ankara in the mid-1990s. The state of war between the Turkish state and the Kurdish insurgents, who were aided, one way or another by most of the neighbouring states, led to the accentuation of the state ideology that had been somewhat challenged in the 1980s, and which

portrayed Turkey as being surrounded by enemies. Greece was one of the countries on Ankara's list of those thought to be aiding the Kurdish insurgents.

But in the late 1990s both the Turkish state's relationship with the European Union (EU) and its Kurdish problem took a turn for the better. Though there were more low points to come, the EU accepted Turkey's candidacy for membership in 1999, and Turkey's commitment to the process that would open the way for its eventual membership was rekindled. Consequently Ankara began to reconsider once more the effects its foreign policy in general, and towards Greece in particular, were having on Turkey's prospects for EU membership. Simultaneously the success of the Turkish state in the conflict in the southeast in the late 1990s led to the gradual easing of tension with most neighbouring countries and the subsiding of the siege mentality that prevailed until then. These developments directly spurred Ankara's interest in picking up the thread of improving relations with Athens that had been dropped in the early 1990s.

At the end of the 1990s Turkish foreign policy makers, with renewed self-confidence and zeal, availed themselves of opportunities all around Turkey's borders in order to further its economic development and project Turkey's influence by engaging more with its neighbours. Furthermore, they tried to harmonise their policies with those of the EU, to the extent that their perceptions of their interests and desire for independence of action allowed.

When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power it proved that, despite its more conservative social outlook, it was able to take forward this outward-looking policy. However, under the AKP, like in the past, when the Turkish state's national narrative clashed with EU policies, as is the case with Cyprus, the belief that Turkey had to remain steadfast in its own approach prevailed in Ankara, despite the negative consequences for the smooth continuation of EU accession negotiations with Turkey.

## **WIDER STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS**

As long as the core issues between Turkey and Greece remain unresolved the recent improvement of their relations will remain tentative and, therefore reversals should not be ruled out. On the other hand, the foreign policy decision makers in both countries may prove able to sustain the current precarious balance in their bilateral relationship. Time will tell, but it is clear that both countries stand to benefit from keeping tension between them low and exploring potential areas of co-operation. Over the longer term good relations and deeper co-operation between them will also be a significant asset to European security. Challenges in the eastern Mediterranean may constitute major direct and indirect security concerns for the EU, including terrorist activities, instability due to violent regional conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, illegal migration, and organised crime. Hence, co-operative and friendly relations between Greece and Turkey can make a significant contribution to European security strategy. Furthermore, Greece and Turkey have a central role to play in the creation of an eastern Mediterranean energy corridor to serve the increasing energy demands of Western Europe. The United States' security interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East also stand to benefit from effective co-operation between Athens and Ankara, whether it is in the context of regional defence, regional development, and perhaps even American power projection in that part of the world.

The future prospects of the bilateral relationship will be influenced by many factors. Clearly the course of relations between Turkey and the EU will be one of them, because the EU has played an essential role in shaping the Turkish (but also Greek) strategy of improving bilateral relations. The evolving course of Greece's financial crisis will be another. It can be argued that the Greeks should be expected to look forward to a settlement of the Aegean issues with Turkey in order to reduce the high defence burden they bear mainly because of the Turkish 'threat'. In fact exactly the opposite is true as the crisis has been playing into the hands of Greek neo-

nationalists. How the power-contest in Turkey will finally be sorted out between the rivals, and where the emphasis in Turkey's foreign policy is going to be will also have a role to play. But in the final analysis the key parameter that will determine the future prospects of the relationship is the attitude towards the future of the societies and national leaders in both countries and, consequently, whether they are willing, and also able, to make a real paradigm shift in their foreign policy by de-emphasising traditional national security approaches which are still strong in Turkey and Greece. ■

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## Turkey and the Caucasus

Kevork Oskanian

**T**urkey has had long-standing links with the region called the ‘South(ern) Caucasus’, comprised of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, including the de-facto independent entities of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The area was, for a long time, the scene of intense competition between the Persian-Sassanid and Ottoman Empires, before its gradual incorporation into the Russian Empire during the first half of the 19th century. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkey has become a major regional player through direct investments, and the trade and transportation links tying the Caspian basin to the outside world over Georgia in circumvention of Russian territory, most important among them the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. But the weight of both history and ethnic kinship has distorted the operation of material interests, even under Ankara’s new, zero-problems foreign policy. The historical legacies of massacre and conflict during and after World War One continue to weigh down on relations between Turkey and Armenia, and the close political interaction between Ankara and Baku – encapsulated in the slogan ‘One nation, two states’ – remains a major ethno-political factor shaping the regional environment.

### **TURKEY, THE SOUTH CAUCASUS, AND THE RUSSIA FACTOR**

Turkey’s role in the South Caucasus cannot be analysed separately from its broader relationship with the Russian Federation – which has seen a considerable evolution since the early years following the Cold War, when some officials in Moscow and Turkey traded threats during Armenian military advances in the region in May 1992. Initially, many analysts and policymakers in the West assumed Turkey would quickly fill the perceived strategic vacuum left by Moscow in the former Soviet states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. By the second half of the 1990s, these hopes largely subsided, as most dictatorships of the region either went into isolation (as in the case of Turkmenistan), or largely realigned with Moscow. Meanwhile, the Turkish economic crisis of 2001 caused Ankara to concentrate its efforts at improving its economy during the first years of this century, rather than expanding its political influence abroad. This led to renewed efforts aimed at joining the EU, alongside a drive to expand economic relations with the former Soviet Union and, specifically, the Russian Federation.

By the end of the 1990s, relations between Turkey and Russia had begun to improve. With the war in Chechnya no longer affecting Turkish domestic sensibilities, and the BTC-pipeline a *fait accompli*, the focus shifted from competition over energy routes – with Turkey as the major pathway preferred by the West – to the benefits of increased bilateral trade. Turkish conglomerates became major players in the Russian construction sector; and the completion of the Blue Stream pipeline across the Black Sea in 2003 turned Gazprom into Turkey’s main supplier of natural gas, making Russia the country’s largest trading partner by 2008. Ankara had also become more deferential towards Russia’s regional geo-strategic interests – a deference that increased in parallel with an enhanced independence from the West with the advent of the AKP government in 2003. Slighted by the EU in its European aspirations

and irritated by US policies in (northern) Iraq, Ankara aimed to maximise its alternatives, including within the former Soviet Union. These developments also coincided with the shift in Turkish foreign policy from the realist isolationism and explicit Western orientation of orthodox Kemalism, to the more activist, 'zero-problems' policies encapsulated in the term 'Strategic Depth' – an active engagement with the outside world aimed at maximising the policy options available to Turkey, centred on the former Ottoman territories and borderlands in the Caucasus, the Middle East and the Balkans.

Within the Caucasus (and, more generally, the former Soviet Union), the 'strategic depth' approach incorporates a general concern by Ankara to maintain the existing status quo, as well as to avoid offending Russian sensibilities. Turkey has generally taken a dim view of major upheavals in its neighbourhood – including the colour revolutions in the Ukraine and Georgia – and was genuinely alarmed during the 2008 August war, which brought home in stark relief its difficult position between East and West. Concerned at being excluded from major political developments in the region that may affect its economic interest in maintaining its position as an energy and transportation hub, and aiming to continue an engagement with, in particular, Russia, Erdogan resurrected an idea – earlier proposed by his predecessor, Süleyman Demirel – of a Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform '*without the participation of extra-regional powers*'. Touted as a forum aimed at promoting regional peace, cooperation and economic development, it was meant to include Turkey, Russia, and the three Southern Caucasian states, but pointedly excluded Western powers, fitting well into the multi-dimensional and increasingly independent nature of Turkey's policy of 'strategic depth'.

## **TURKEY AND THE THREE SOUTHERN CAUCASIAN STATES: BETWEEN FRIENDSHIP, COOPERATION AND HOSTILITY**

Ankara's bilateral relationships with the three South Caucasian states have combined promotion of the national interest with a prudent deference for Russia's core regional concerns. In short, Turkey maintains close co-operation with Georgia, mainly centred on economic matters, but refrains from taking sides in Tbilisi's troubled relationship with Moscow. Its relationship with Armenia is deeply problematic – in the absence of formal diplomatic links between the two capitals, the border between these two states remains firmly shut to bilateral trade and travel. By contrast, Ankara's ties with Baku have consistently remained extremely close; Baku sees its larger Turkic neighbour as a natural strategic partner, something Russia does not object to provided its military-strategic prerogatives are not directly challenged. In the southern Caucasus, Turkey's 'zero-problems' approach seems to be circumscribed by Russia's volatile relationship with Georgia, and the intractability of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, two issues over which Ankara has little direct influence.

## **TURKEY AND GEORGIA**

Turkey has had to tread carefully in its relationship with Georgia, the most pro-Western of the South Caucasian states. While Tbilisi's westwards lurch began well before the Rose Revolution-proper, the rise to power of the vocally anti-Russian Saakashvili presented Turkey with the problem of how to balance its formal alliance with the United States with its prudent policies vis-à-vis its trading partner Russia. Any participation by Ankara in the Train and Equip Programmes designed to upgrade Georgia's military infrastructure to NATO standards was, accordingly, lukewarm and piecemeal – largely limited to the upgrading and reconstruction of Georgian military bases and the sale of light military materiel. In addition, Turkey's broader strategy of expanding its position as an energy and transportation hub situated at the

crossroads between Europe and Central Asia created a common interest with Tbilisi in routing energy and transportation links from the Caspian over Georgian (and subsequently Turkish) territory. While the BTC pipeline is now operational, proposed infrastructure projects including the Nabucco gas pipeline clearly put Turkey and Georgia on the opposing side of a geopolitical argument with Moscow.

Ankara's close economic relations with Tbilisi are also potentially complicated by the presence of a large and active North Caucasian diaspora within the country. The related Circassian and Abkhaz communities were active in breaking the trade embargo against the breakaway region well before the August war of 2008, and these economic links have increased since their recognition by Moscow that year, adding to the possibility of friction with Georgia notwithstanding the presence of overarching shared strategic interests. It is precisely this precarious position between two hostile sides – Russia and the separatists on the one hand, and Georgia and its Western partners on the other – that drives Ankara's desire to avoid having to take sides, resulting in initiatives like the Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform and a continuing, delicate diplomatic balancing act.

## **TURKEY AND ARMENIA**

Turkey's most unambiguously problematic relationship in the Southern Caucasus is with the Republic of Armenia – weighed down by both history, and the tight ethno-cultural links between Ankara and Baku. While both sides recognise each other, they have no diplomatic relations; their land border has remained closed since April 1993, in reaction to Armenian military advances in Azerbaijan. Turkish policymakers – including those of the AKP – have since formulated three basic conditions for the establishment of formal links and the opening of the land border: first, an explicit recognition of the current land border delineated by the treaties of Moscow and Kars by Yerevan; second, an end to Armenia's efforts to have the 1915 massacres of the Ottoman Armenian

minority internationally recognised as genocide; and third, withdrawal of Armenian forces from Azeri territories. Armenia, on the other hand, has insisted on diplomatic relations and open borders 'without preconditions'.

The events of August 2008 gave renewed impetus to efforts by both governments to set aside their deep-seated differences, in a hitherto frustrated attempt to do away with one of Ankara's major obstacles towards a 'zero problems' Southern Caucasus. On the one hand, Turkey was reminded of the geopolitical vulnerability of its links to Central Asia through Georgian territory. On the other hand, Armenia was made painfully aware of its dependence on Georgian transit routes for 70% of its trade with the outside world. In what came to be called 'football diplomacy', president Sargsyan of Armenia invited his Turkish counterpart to the world cup qualifying match between the two countries in Yerevan in September that year – the first visit ever by a Turkish head of state to the Armenian capital. Abdullah Gul reciprocated two months later by inviting Sargsyan for the return match in the Turkish city of Sivas. The invitations were the result of several years of behind-the-scenes negotiations between the two sides, under Swiss mediation and with the strong encouragement of both Russia and the United States. In April 2009, the process culminated in the signing of protocols between the two governments: Armenia recognised the current border, an intergovernmental commission would tackle all outstanding issues (including historical ones) between the two states, while the Nagorno-Karabakh problem was left outside the formal scope of the normalisation process.

Turkey had multiple motives in moving towards normalisation with Armenia. On a general level, they fit into the 'zero-problems' policy formulated by AKP policymakers, whereby outstanding issues with all neighbours are to be addressed pro-actively. Several more specific reasons for the move have also been suggested, including the possible use of Armenia as an alternative to Georgia as a transit route for energy and transportation; averting recognition of

the 1915 massacres as genocide by US Congress on the eve of their 100th anniversary; and mitigating Armenia's stance in the Karabakh conflict through growing economic interdependence and civil-society interaction with Turkey. Crucially, Moscow – confident in its strategic dominance over Armenia's economy – seemed to approve of the rapprochement.

Now, nearly two years later, the process seems to have at best, stalled, or at worst resulted in complete failure, despite the overwhelming support from the international community. Under domestic pressure and in reaction to Azerbaijan's vehement opposition, Ankara has linked any ratification of the protocols by its parliament to 'progress' in the negotiations surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. Yerevan's reaction has been to suspend its formal approval of the documents, on condition of their renewed decoupling by Turkey from its conflict with Baku. As things stand, the improvement of bilateral Turkish-Armenian relations seems once again dependent on a final breakthrough in the OSCE-led negotiations surrounding the breakaway territory, or a volte-face by Ankara, both of which seem unlikely at this point.

## **TURKEY AND AZERBAIJAN**

Relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan are extremely close, although they do sometimes fail to live up to the oft-utilised slogan 'one nation, two states' – as during recent diplomatic spats over the pricing of gas supplies and efforts at Armenian-Turkish rapprochement. Ethno-linguistically, among former Soviet Turkic ethnic groups, Azeris relate most closely to the Anatolian Turks – the languages are largely mutually intelligible, and, with both societies largely secularised, the religious difference between the largely Shi'ite Azeris and Sunni Turks has become irrelevant. The large Azeri diaspora in Turkey adds to the inter-human links between the two societies, apart from acting as a foreign policy lobby in its own right on occasion. During the first years of independence – and, in particular, the ill-fated presidency of the late Abufaz Elchibey of the Azeri Popular Front – Azerbaijan's foreign policy was

based on an explicit adherence to the principles of pan-Turkism (the idea that ethnic Turkic peoples throughout the Eurasian landmass would have to unite politically), and a corresponding vehemently anti-Russian and pro-Turkish/Western stance. Since the advent to power of the Aliyevs, Baku has taken care to pursue a 'balanced and independent' foreign policy, one that aims to walk a tightrope between maintaining its independence and not provoking the geopolitical sensitivities of its large northern neighbour, which did not refrain from intervening extensively in domestic Azeri politics in the first, chaotic years of its independence.

Both countries are closely tied economically as well: beyond Georgia, Turkey is the main conduit for Azerbaijan's oil exports – through the BTC pipeline – and, potentially, gas exports (through the proposed Nabucco pipeline). Last but not least, military co-operation between Baku and Ankara started in the first years of the former's independence, with much of the Azeri officer corps receiving extensive training in Turkey; it has currently been expanded through a defence pact providing for mutual military assistance by either side in the event of an attack by a third party, the joint production of weaponry, deepened military co-operation through joint training and exercise programmes, and logistical co-operation. While this was the first time Azerbaijan formalised such close military-strategic co-operation with a NATO member, it does remain unlikely that Turkey would actually infringe on Russia's strategic space by directly intervening in a renewed conflict between Azerbaijan and CSTO member Armenia, or building bases on Azeri territory. This implicit understanding seems to underwrite Russia's hitherto restrained reaction to the deal.

## **PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE**

Turkey's position in the Southern Caucasus has been dependent on a number of factors: a balancing of its NATO commitments with its excellent economic (and increasingly, political) relationship with the Russian Federation; its shared interest with Georgia

in positioning itself as a transit hub for hydrocarbons from the Caspian basin; its ethnic kinship with Azerbaijan and the ensuing domestic pressure to support Baku in its conflict with Yerevan; and its historically fraught relationship with Armenia. In terms of the 'strategic depth' doctrine, the major initiatives undertaken by the AKP government since 2003 aimed at creating a zone of 'zero problems' in that particular section of Turkey's neighbourhood have not resulted in major changes in the region's strategic landscape. In contrast to recent developments in the Middle East, Turkey's priorities and alignments within the South Caucasus remain relatively unchanged – and any progress over the past decade has been, at most, incremental. The Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform has come to naught – in no small part due to Ankara and Yerevan's failure to come to an understanding on the many issues still dividing them: first among them, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Along with renewed hostilities between Russia and Georgia, this conflict poses perhaps the greatest challenge to Turkey's policies in the region. In the absence of a final peace agreement, renewed warfare between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains a distinct possibility in coming years. Ankara would have to make difficult decisions in such an eventuality, making its regional balancing act vis-à-vis Russia even more difficult than it is today. Turkey's lack of direct influence over the peace process itself (it remains outside the OSCE troika carrying out formal negotiations between the parties) is proving increasingly frustrating to its policymakers. In the Southern Caucasus at least, Turkey's historical and religious-ethnic ties have at best proven a mixed blessing in terms of contemporary policymaking. ■

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## Turkey and Iran

Elliot Hentov

**A**s the neighbouring state most comparable to Turkey in geographic, demographic and socio-economic size, relations with Iran differ from all other neighbourly relations, as Iran is considered Turkey's equal. As such, the relationship is also filled with historical legacies that have shaped public and elite perceptions. First, there is the legacy stemming from the century-old rivalry of the two former empires (Ottoman and Persian) whose competition was territorial, political, cultural as well as religious. Furthermore, the parallel decline of imperial strength – both in Constantinople and in Tehran - gave rise to a shared struggle against the encroachment of outside powers, mainly Russia and the West. The second legacy derives from the experience as modern nation-states and is rather amicable. It originates in Turkish and Iranian affinity to modernise in the face of superior enemies, guiding the two countries in their transition to modernity. Notably, Reza Shah's only visit abroad took him to Turkey in 1934 to inspect his western neighbour's reforms and social engineering. After World War II, the two states were nominal allies of the Western bloc though the institutional arrangement – the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) – was effectively dormant. Instead, Iran's natural resource wealth soon enabled the country to eclipse Turkey's developmental level and Iran's reassertion of influence resurrected Turkish memories of a threat from the East.

### RELATIONS WITH REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

This had been the context of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Relations with the Islamic Republic have henceforth vacillated between restrained tension and tacit cooperation, usually depending on Iran's foreign policy priorities. Iran's revolution had initially been welcomed by Turkish leaders due to internal political and economic weakness. Yet despite Turkey's immediate recognition of the Khomeini regime, the ideological contrast between the two regimes was stark and grew stronger with the 1980 military coup in Turkey. The impending clash was only averted through the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, creating incentives for Turkey and Iran to deepen cooperation. Ankara was reeling from an economic crisis and the 1980 coup had also left it politically weakened on the international stage. At the same time, Turkey proved to be the only viable trade and transport route for Iranians. Government-negotiated barter deals – oil for consumer and industrial goods – ensured stable Turkish-Iranian relations free of political differences for most of the war. However, Iran's offensives indirectly created a safe haven for the separatist Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) to launch an insurgency inside Turkey based on Iraqi soil. Toward the end of the war, Turkey's military response to the PKK increasingly made it a party to the conflict in support of the objectives of the Baghdad regime. This development and the simultaneous collapse in world oil prices diminished the importance of economic ties and Turkish-Iranian relations became more fractious.

Iran after 1989, post-Iran-Iraq War and post-Khomeini, was focused on overcoming its international isolation, advancing reconstruction and retaking a recognised role as part of the regional order. In this context, Turkey was neither expected to provide assistance nor pose a major obstacle to Iranian regional designs. However, the momentous changes in the global order with the end of the Cold War complicated Turkish-Iranian tensions as power shifted decisively toward the US-affiliated camp. In addition, Turkey's initial exuberance over reconnecting with its Turkic brethren in the Caucasus and Central Asia briefly elevated Turkey to an Iranian national security threat in the early 1990s. In response, Iran undertook great effort to stem Turkish influence by backing the PKK as well as Islamic fundamentalists inside Turkey to destabilise its political system. Tensions reached a crescendo in early 1997, due to the rise of political Islam inside Turkey and Tehran's embrace of Turkish Islamists, in part contributing to the 'post-modern coup' in February 1997. This also ushered in a more militarised Turkish foreign policy that softened after the apparent victory over the PKK in 1998-1999. Thereafter, lacking any security dimension, Turkish-Iranian relations became uneventful and centred around energy trade. Turkey's economic crisis in 2000-2001 further subdued relations with Iran, preoccupying Turks with internal problems and international financial pressures. The political reaction to the economic meltdown was the November 2002 election that replaced most of the Turkish leadership and set the country on a new path internally as well as in its foreign relations.

#### **NORMALISATION OF RELATIONS SINCE 2002**

While Turkish-Iranian rapprochement began in 2000, three fundamental parameters of the bilateral relationship have been transformed since 2002. First, Turkey's domestic politics underwent profound change. The 2002 election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) heralded a new leadership in Ankara. Moreover, this new elite set about altering

the character of the Turkish state in a manner that diminished the military-bureaucratic influence and with it, the ideological differences between Turkey and Iran. In detail, due to a 10% electoral threshold, only two parties managed to enter parliament: the moderate Islamist AKP with 34.5% of the vote and the staunchly Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) with 19.5% of the vote. In light of the quirks of the electoral system, 45% of the electorate remained unrepresented in parliament, and the AKP received 363 seats, four short of a two-thirds majority. This new constellation was akin to regime change. Turkish columnist Mehmet Ali Birand called it 'a civil coup', and the Turkish daily *Milliyet* summed up the seismic shakeup of the elite with the football metaphor 'Red Card' posted above the faces of the political leaders ousted from parliament. Viewed from Iran, the previous elite had stood for a security-oriented, ossified Kemalist worldview, which was deeply hostile to Turkish engagement with the Islamic world, particularly Iran. In this regard, Tehran struggled to hide its pleasure of the Turkish public's wholesale rejection of the old elite.

Furthermore, the AKP gradually infused Turkish foreign policy with a novel worldview of Turkey being a central player in its own right, thus emphasising greater regional activism and trade-driven foreign relations. In this context, the AKP drew on the a new foreign policy paradigm in the writings of Professor Ahmet Davutoglu that laid out the vision of Turkey as a global power at the crossroads between East-West and North-South. His worldview was a whole-hearted repudiation of the Kemalist 'bunker mentality', which the AKP also considered linked to the perpetuation of elite rule inside the country. Indeed, 'strategic depth' posits a different worldview of how to think about Turkey's role in the world, leveraging the country's geo-strategic location and historical depth. In order to build on these inherent assets, Turkey needed to resolve longstanding tensions with its regional neighbours, particularly Iran, a policy later termed 'zero problems'. Moreover, claiming to form a centre and not simply a peripheral member of any axis, Ankara needed to re-balance its

relationships. Instead of solely being a junior anchor of the Western alliance, Turkey needed to create multiple alliances that maximised its operational independence and helped to maintain a balance of power in its adjacent regions. Davutoglu foresaw this approach to be accompanied by substituting the 'security-oriented' Kemalist outlook with a new 'economy-oriented' foreign policy. Together with the AKP discourse of political Islam, this new approach has facilitated identifying common ground with Iran and strengthened the two countries' rapprochement in the past decade.

Second, the strategic environment and Turkey's foreign relations entered a new era due to the US invasion of Iraq. Ankara's rejection of support for the invasion and the gradual deterioration of the Turkish-US relationship lessened Turkey's image as a US ally in the eyes of Iranians. Before Erdogan had formally taken office, the impending US invasion of Iraq posed a major foreign policy challenge to the AKP government. Despite the generous offer of US assistance, elite opinion began to follow the general public with rising nationalist sentiment, growing skepticism over US motives and memories of the cost incurred during the Gulf War in 1991. The discussions culminated in the historic parliamentary vote on 1 March 2003, which denied Turkey as a staging ground for US troops. Though many observers termed the vote an 'accident' or a 'managerial failure' by Erdogan, others identified it as the beginning of a policy of distancing Ankara from US influence in the region. Whereas this was widely viewed as a political catastrophe for the AKP at the time, it proved to be a blessing for Turkish-Iranian relations. The parliamentary vote was a key turning point in the bilateral relationship, as Ankara sensed a profound change of attitude from Tehran thereafter. It confirmed Tehran's initial impression that the election of the AKP indeed heralded a new era of independence in Turkish foreign policy, one that dared to counter US preferences. Moreover, Iran considered the increased democratisation of Turkey to be to its benefit, as it has assumed the majority of the Turkish public to be sympathetic to their eastern neighbour for religious and cultural reasons.

Moreover, the Iraq War generated a convergence of Turkish-Iranian strategic interests for three reasons. First, Iran was confronted with large-scale US troop deployments on two of its borders, feeling increasingly besieged and thus eager to mitigate the US threat. Second, US-Turkish relations drastically worsened after the 1 March 2003 vote and once US troops had occupied Iraq. This was both due to political and operational failures as well as to the simple fact that the two allies had grossly different objectives in post-Saddam Iraq. The growing gap with Washington allowed or even induced Ankara to pursue other strategies. And third, both Iran and Turkey faced the prospect of an independent Kurdish state that would pose an irredentist threat to their national borders. Moreover, the fall of Saddam's regime and explicit Kurdish support for the US occupation facilitated the re-establishment of a safe haven for the PKK and the re-start of an insurgency. This was not only a challenge to the Turkish state, as the PKK spawned or cooperated with the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), a similar group battling the Iranian state. Under these circumstances, increased Turkish-Iranian cooperation in Iraq was foreseeable, though it would eventually become tempered by competitive impulses over how to fill the power vacuum in Iraq and the Middle East.

On the economic front, Turkey's rapid economic boom was predicated on a trade-driven foreign policy, with Turkey boosting exports of manufactured goods and specialised services in return for an expanding Iranian energy supply. In this context, the AKP government has considered it a strategic necessity to expand commerce and trade with Iran, regardless of Western concerns. As Davutoglu explained in 2007, 'here all our allies should take into consideration Turkey's unique position. As a growing economy and surrounded by energy resources, Turkey needs Iranian energy as a natural extension of its national interests. Therefore, Turkey's energy agreements with Iran cannot be dependent upon its relationships with other countries.' Chart 1 illustrates the boom in Turkish-Iranian trade, which languished at barely over \$600 million in 1998. By 2004, trade stood at close to \$3 billion and exceeded \$10 billion in 2008.



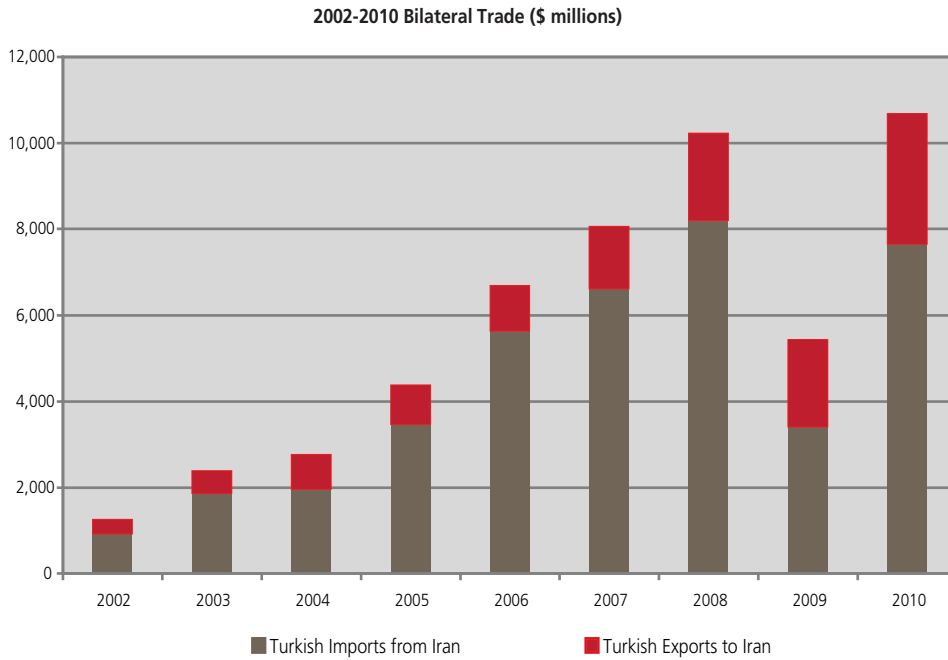


Chart 1: Turkish-Iranian Trade from 2002-2010 in US \$ millions.

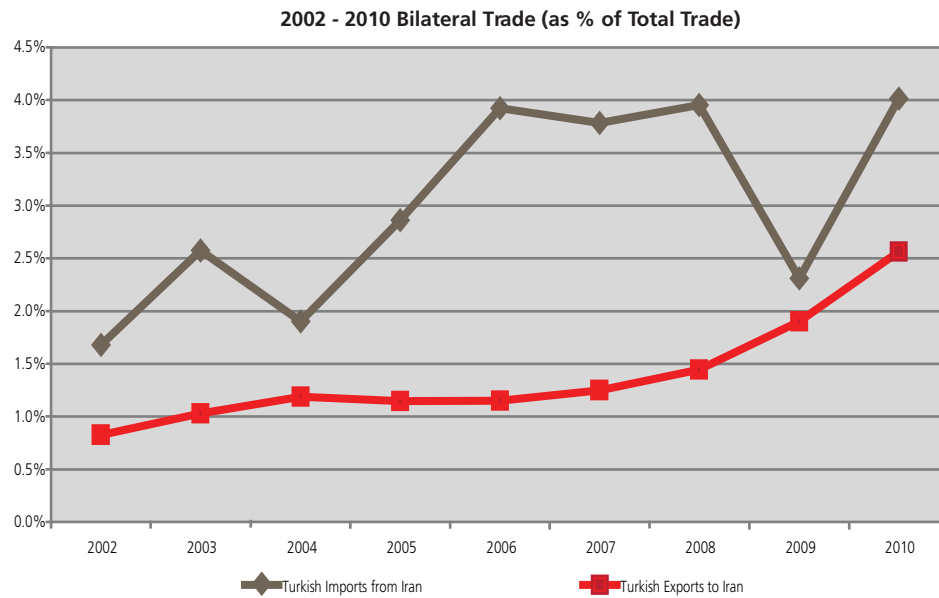


Chart 2: Turkish-Iranian Trade from 2002-2010 in as a percentage of total Turkish trade.

Data from the Turkish Undersecretariat of the Prime Ministry for Foreign Trade, found at [www.dtm.gov.tr](http://www.dtm.gov.tr)

This 15-fold increase over a decade is impressive, though not by the standards of overall Turkish trade growth, particularly with other regional partners. Chart 2 shows that as a percentage of Turkish exports, Iran roughly doubled its share from 0.73% in 1998 to 2.01% in 2009 and ranking as the 14th largest export market. As a percentage of Turkish imports, imports from Iran actually experienced a more rapid increase, rising from 0.94% to 4.06% in 2008 before dropping to 2.42% in 2009. Above all, the composition of bilateral trade is essential to understanding the fluctuations in recent years. More than 80% of Iranian exports are energy exports, either natural gas or oil, and therefore the nominal amounts are a function of Turkish energy consumption and the world market price of energy. In contrast, Turkish exports are less volatile as they are concentrated in industrial goods and infrastructural services.

In similar fashion to the deterioration in US-Turkish relations, Ankara's ties to the EU worsened after the historic October 2005 recognition of Turkey as an official EU accession country. Initial euphoria was soon followed by a *de facto* freeze over the Cyprus issue, turning Turkish public opinion against the EU and slowing Turkey's drive toward integration with the West. Turkey's primary security concern was how Iraq's instability was reinvigorating the PKK-led insurgency. In this context, by mid-July 2006, the region was preoccupied with the outbreak of the Israel-Hizbullah War, widely seen as a pivotal moment in the proxy war between Iran and the United States. Simultaneously, Iran had provided its territory for the Turkish military to prepare an assault near Qandil valley. Throughout August, Turkey and Iran were jointly bombing alleged PKK / PJAK camps inside Iraq, with daily reporting following the coordinated Iranian and Turkish operations. The details of the exact nature of the operations, such as casualty figures, are difficult to verify. Yet the impact on Turkish public opinion was clear: Iran was supporting Turkey in its counter-terrorism struggle while the US and Europe were either apathetic or in collusion with Turkey's enemies. Since 2006-2007, most Turkish opinion polls consider the

United States the greatest threat to Turkey, only a minority of Turks endorse EU membership and Iran enjoys favorable public opinion. The AKP was thus pursuing a foreign policy in accordance with public sentiment, as Turkish sympathies for Iran had begun to override a history of sectarian and socio-political differences.

The third parameter of change was the looming confrontation between the West and Iran over the latter's nuclear program. Foremost, it added another channel of engagement between Ankara and Tehran. Since 2006, through public statements of support, Ankara has sought to ingratiate itself with the Iranian leadership in an effort to play a mediating role in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. However, behind closed doors, Turkish decision-makers have contemplated how to cope with the major security threats posed by Iran's nuclear development. In the short term, the nuclear dispute could lead to another regional war with Turkey bearing huge economic and political costs. And in the long term, Iran's nuclear status would decisively shift the balance of power towards Tehran, even if Turkey were not a direct target of Iranian hostility. As a result, Ankara has pursued a mixed policy aimed at preventing military conflict as well as minimising Iranian hostility, a balancing act that has caused friction with its traditional Western allies. Nevertheless, for Turkish-Iranian relations, the nuclear issue has been a boon to Turkey. It has allowed Ankara to elicit Iranian goodwill on bilateral issues, notably on opposition to Kurdish militancy and the completion of favourable energy deals that should enable Turkey to become a key energy transit corridor. Lastly, by ultimately accepting Turkish mediation on the nuclear file and by virtue of the Turkish vote against the US in the UN Security Council, Iran has reluctantly promoted Turkey's image as the leading regional power.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, the past decade has deeply affected Turkish perceptions of Iran. Despite Iran swinging toward greater authoritarianism, worsening domestic human rights and bellicose rhetoric, Turks no longer view Iran as a direct security threat, but rather as a regional partner whose victimisation by the Western-led international community could be detrimental to Turkish interests. In turn, Tehran has become more conciliatory, though it has not shed its ambivalence about the new role of its Western neighbour. Turkey's newfound independence and amity toward Iran have been appreciated. In addition, bilateral Turkish-Iranian relations lack any potential irritants. If at all, Iran's reliability as an energy supplier and the pricing of its hydrocarbon resources are the most challenging issue for bilateral ties. While the Iranian market continues to offer great opportunities for Turkey's exporters, the relationship lacks the potential glue for any deeper political partnership.

On the other hand, the regional factors that have advanced rapprochement between Tehran and Ankara have largely run their course. Iranian scepticism concerning its Western neighbour is rebounding, particularly as Turkey's status as a regional power will increasingly be in direct competition to Iranian foreign policy objectives. This competition will primarily play out in the construction of the new regional order in the Middle East. It was already visible in 2010 over the election and formation of a government in Iraq. Moreover, the two countries have very different hopes and fears regarding the Arab uprisings, which have only just begun to unfold. ■

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## ➤ Turkey and Syria

Christopher Phillips

**In October 1998 war clouds were gathering over the Syrian-Turkish border. Turkey, in the middle of a gruelling campaign against the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) in its eastern territories, accused Syria of supporting the Kurdish rebels, not least by hosting PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in Damascus. This was the latest incident in a long history of uneasy relations between two neighbours who have held a catalogue of territorial, ideological, political and resource-related grievances that remained unsettled since each state's creation. Indeed, in fifty years of independence, no Syrian head of state had ever visited the Turkish capital, Ankara. Now, with the dispatch of 10,000 Turkish troops to the border and Turkish President Suleyman Demirel's declaration that Hafez al-Assad, his Syrian counterpart, must face consequences for his support of the PKK, escalation to conflict appeared inevitable. Yet rather than falling into the abyss, Assad relented. Ocalan was expelled, Syrian support for the PKK ended, and Turkey and Syria quickly signed the Adana accords on 20<sup>th</sup> October, which marked the beginning of an unexpected new chapter in the previously antagonistic relations between the two neighbours.**

A decade later, any thought of conflict is far removed. In September 2009, Turkey's foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu and his Syrian counterpart Walid al-Mouallim signed an accord that ended visa-requirements between the two states. This, along with an earlier agreement to allow free trade, ensured that people and goods could pass freely over the same borders that had been peppered with barbed wire and landmines barely eleven years earlier. In what marks a significant turnaround in relations Damascus and Ankara have found themselves increasingly closely integrated over the past decade. In what has become a close personal relationship, Syria's president, Hafez's son Bashar al-Assad, now describes Turkey as Syria's best friend, while Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's prime minister, publicly calls Syrians his brothers. Even though, at the time of writing, President Assad was facing international condemnation for a harsh crackdown on pro-democracy activists at home, Erdogan remained restrained in his criticism of the Syrian leader, urging restraint and reform but cautioning against too harsh a global response – quite the transformation from the warmongering of 1998.

Why did this turnaround come about? Turkey's recent reengagement with the Arab states such as Syria, after years of estrangement, has divided analysts. Some see ideology as the main driver, with the Islamic origins of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) pushing Turkey closer to Muslim states at the expense of historical ties with Europe, the US and Israel. Others see pragmatic realism in Turkey's approach. Davutoglu, who was a Professor of International Relations before turning to politics, advocates a doctrine of 'zero problems' and 'strategic depth' with all of Turkey's neighbours, to further Ankara's regional clout and to boost its rapidly expanding economy. On the Syrian side, most see a pragmatic dimension to Damascus' friendship with Ankara, providing Bashar al-Assad and his Ba'ath regime with a vital ally during a difficult decade of US-led international isolation. Nonetheless, ideology is not totally absent from Syria's thinking, as the Turkish alliance has allowed Damascus to boost its regional profile and aid its weak economy without abandoning its long-standing confrontation with Israel and western 'imperialism'. In considering what has driven the relationship in the past decade, this

article suggests that though realism has propelled both sides, no major ideological compromise have been required.

## **HISTORICAL GRIEVANCES**

Recent closeness contrasts with Syria and Turkey's historical enmity. The creation of each state was in some ways defined in opposition to the other. The Republic of Turkey founded by Atatürk out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 was culturally and politically orientated towards Europe rather than its former territory, with Arabic script rejected for Latin and Arabic words removed from the Turkish language. Adamant followers of Atatürk, the Kemalists, carried this European approach into their foreign policy for years. Syria also defined itself against Turkey on gaining independence from France in 1946. As the self-declared 'heart' of Arab nationalism, Damascus projected the Ottoman Turks as its repressive historical enemy. The French exacerbated this rivalry in 1938 by giving Turkey the Syrian province of Alexandretta (Hatay) in a bid to maintain Turkish neutrality in the Second World War. The loss of Hatay first prompted Syrian calls for a 'resurrection' or 'Ba'ath' of Arab nationalism, eventually merging into the party that has ruled Syria since 1963. Ever since, the regime maintained its grievances with Ankara, laying claim to Hatay and including it on official Syrian maps. From the 1960s water also became a recurrent source of disagreement, with tensions heightening in the 1990s when Damascus complained that Turkish plans to dam large sections of the Euphrates would cripple its agricultural sector.

Turkey and Syria also found themselves on opposite sides of the Cold War. Turkey was a member of NATO while Syria received the most Soviet military aid in the Middle East. Syria, determined to regain the Golan Heights from Israel that it lost in the 1967 war, backed a motley collection of Palestinian and Lebanese militant groups to harass Tel Aviv and

derail American visions for the region. Turkey, in contrast, formed close military and economic ties with the US and, latterly, Israel. By 1979, these long-standing grievances persuaded Hafez, Syrian president from 1970-2000, to support Turkey's enemy, the PKK, providing them with training camps first in Lebanon and later in Syria itself. Though this was partially motivated by domestic concerns, as support for the PKK also helped placate Syria's own Kurdish population, support for the Kurdish rebels appeared mainly functional: a bargaining chip for water and Hatay. Hafez's willingness to jettison all support for the PKK in 1998 after the Adana accords, illustrates the pragmatic nature of Assad's alliance with Ocalan. Support for the PKK had failed to improve Damascus' hand on its historical grievances, yet had pushed Turkey closer to its greater enemy, Israel, with whom Ankara signed a military accord in 1996, and now brought a genuine threat of Turkish military intervention. In essence, Turkey upped the stakes and Syria quickly folded.

## **SHIFTING CIRCUMSTANCES**

Yet avoiding war in 1998 did not necessarily lead to closer alignment. It was the shifting domestic and international circumstances for both regimes that developed a diplomatic rapprochement into the integrated alliance it later became. For Turkey, though relations with Syria did improve under the Kemalist foreign minister, Ismail Cem (1997-2002), the election of the AKP in 2002 catalysed the enhanced ties. This was not, however, due to any ideological familiarity between the Islamist-leaning AKP and its fellow Muslim state in Syria. The AKP was equally eager to push Turkey's application to the EU and improve relations with long-standing rivals Greece, irrespective of religion. Instead the enhanced ties with Damascus reflected the new pragmatic foreign policy of AKP ideologue Davutoğlu. Moreover, Syria did not have a blank cheque, and ties strained on occasion, notably

when Turkey joined the international chorus for Syria to withdraw from Lebanon after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. Additionally, the new approach had a strong economic component. After the financial meltdown of 2001, Turkey recovered well in the 2000s and sought new markets for its booming economy, and the relatively stable Syria proved an obvious target.

Changing international circumstances also pushed Turkey closer to Syria. The Iraq war forced Ankara to reconsider its approach to the Middle East. The removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 left a vacuum in Iraq that was rapidly filled by Islamists, sectarian fighting and Kurdish nationalists, posing a threat to Turkey on its previously quiet southern border. Erdogan recognised the need to be more active in the new Iraq and the south in general. Backing certain Iraqi political parties and improved relations with Iran were a key facet of this strategy, but Syria quickly emerged as a key ally in the new strategy. The autonomy of Iraq's Kurds post-2003 was one concern, with Ankara fearing it would revive the PKK. In 2007 Erdogan launched an invasion of Iraqi territory to destroy newly built PKK bases. Almost immediately, Assad rushed to support the action. Syria, who had quashed its own Kurds emboldened by the freedom they saw in Iraq in 2004, provided Turkish intervention with international support. More broadly, the Iraq war also presented Turkey with new realities in the Middle East. Its Cold War ally, the US, had rushed into a regional conflict that Ankara opposed, denying Washington the right to use its territory to attack northern Iraq. Similarly, soon after the fall of Baghdad, George W. Bush's administration ramped up its rhetoric against Iran and Syria, alienating Turkey's neighbours, enraging their domestic populations and many within Turkey too. Turkey began to recognise that if the US vision for the Middle East was no longer in line with its own, Ankara might have to assert itself more prominently to the south, and Syria proved crucial in doing this.

Changing international and domestic factors overlap to explain Syria's new approach to Turkey as well, though issues of regime survival rather than ideology were paramount. On assuming power after his father's death in 2000, Bashar al-Assad took several years to consolidate his own power. It was not until the Lebanon crisis of 2005, brought about by alleged Syrian involvement in the Hariri assassination, that Bashar was forced to assert his own authority. Under Hafez, Syria's foreign policy became a pillar of domestic legitimacy, projecting power in Lebanon, defying Israel and, theoretically, supporting the Palestinians. The Lebanon crisis, in which Syria was humiliatingly forced to withdraw its troops from its western neighbour, made Damascus look weak and threatened Bashar's domestic legitimacy. Former vice-president Khaddam used the crisis to justify his cooperation with the opposition Muslim Brotherhood in exile and call for Bashar's government to be overthrown.

More significant than the domestic threat, which lacked both popular support and sufficient elite backing, was the danger posed by the Bush administration. Having been forced out of Lebanon, Syria appeared vulnerable. A vocal lobby in Congress called for Damascus to be the next regime changed after Baghdad, and Israel was emboldened to bomb a suspected nuclear facility deep in Syrian territory in 2007 and, allegedly, was behind two assassinations on Syrian territory in 2008. The US initiated a diplomatic boycott on Syria after Hariri's killing, which was acceded to by most of its allies, including the EU and the Arab world. Facing isolation and needing foreign support to bolster his position at home, Bashar cast his net for new allies. While this drew him closer to old ally Iran and rising regional player Qatar, it was Turkey that he courted most – making the historic first trip by a Syrian president to Ankara in 2004. Assad was willing to make substantial sacrifices to forge this new friendship, such as finally accepting Turkish sovereignty over Hatay in 2005. He also proved a shrewd diplomat, rushing to support Turkey's 2007 incursion in Iraq to show his loyalty to his

new friend. Bashar's labours were rewarded when Turkish president Sezar defied US protestations and went through with a proposed state visit to Damascus in March 2005, at the height of the Lebanese crisis. This set the tone for the coming blossoming of the relationship, and Turkey made a point of internationally rehabilitating its new ally. Not surprisingly, when the French president, Nicholas Sarkozy, eventually broke the international boycott and visited Syria in 2007, Assad met him accompanied with Erdogan stood by his side.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP TODAY**

After evolving from a diplomatic rapprochement into a fully formed alliance, the Syria-Turkey relationship today is composed of several key strands: diplomatic, economic, military and cultural. The diplomatic side is of the greatest value to Syria, as Bashar al-Assad has made it a key pillar of his foreign policy. Turkey's role in easing Syria back into the international fold was crucial, and not just in defying the US diplomatic boycott. As important was Turkey's efforts in mediating indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel in 2007-8 that, though they came to nothing, helped soften Syria's image. This certainly helped the EU to justify ending the ineffective diplomatic boycott of Damascus in 2008, eventually even offering Syria membership of the Euro-Med partnership. It also allowed American opponents to George Bush, such as Nancy Pelosi who visited Damascus in 2007, to engage with Syria, and that engagement in turn helped the new US administration of Barack Obama end the boycott altogether, though some Bush-era sanctions remained. Moreover, as Turkey's relationship with Israel has declined in recent years, most notably over the IDF's assault on a Turkish aid flotilla to Gaza in May 2010, Erdogan has won much praise on the Arab street. Though Assad said he wanted Turkey to maintain strong ties with Israel, hoping for an eventual return to mediation, he also benefitted domestically from association with the popular Erdogan. Pictures were distributed

of Assad's many meetings with Erdogan after the Gaza flotilla in 2010. The domestic benefit of the alliance for Syria has the added bonus that Turkey, as a mainly Sunni country, is more popular with the mainly Sunni Syrian population than its longstanding alliance with Shia Iran.

Turkey also benefits diplomatically from its ties to Syria, beyond the simple pragmatism of getting on better with a neighbour. Syria has acted as a gateway to the Arab world for Turkey both economically and politically. Prior to the 2000s it was not only the Syrians who had a negative opinion of the Turks, with the foundation-myths of Jordan and Iraq all containing a considerable anti-Ottoman element. Befriending the Arab nationalist regime in Damascus thus helped soften Turkey's own regional image, even before Erdogan started taking a more populist line on Israel. Backing pro-Palestine Syria also plays well domestically with the AKP's conservative base at home. An improved image has certainly helped Turkey boost its regional clout, and strengthen its economic ties with the region, with trade from the Arab world now representing 10% of Turkey's overall trade.

The Syrian-Turkish relationship also has a vital economic component, a reminder that much of Davutoglu's 'zero problems' strategy is about finding new markets for Turkey's booming economy. A year after the Adana accords, the first economic missions were dispatched to Ankara and Damascus. A Joint Economic Committee was established that facilitated trade agreements and sponsored events such as the industrial exhibition in Damascus in January 2004 where 300 Turkish manufacturers returned home with \$250 million worth of Syrian contracts. By January 2007 a bilateral free trade agreement had come into force and in 2009 visa free movement of people was agreed. As the senior, and richer, partner, Turkey has invested a considerable amount on infrastructural projects in Syria, particularly around the northern city of Aleppo. In 2008 Ankara committed \$6.3 million to 42 cooperative projects

as part of the new Syrian-Turkish Inter-Regional Cooperation Programme and in 2011 started work on a 'friendship dam' on the Orontes river in Hatay that would irrigate Turkish and Syrian land. Syria certainly benefits from Turkish trade and investment. Syria's exports to Turkey rose from \$187m in 2006 to \$662m in 2010. Turkish companies have built much-needed infrastructure, such as cement plants and hotels, and boosted the oil and tourism industry. Yet there are downsides as superior Turkish manufactured goods threaten previously protected Syrian businesses. Within two years of the free trade agreement, one of Aleppo's oldest textile manufacturers, the Kouefati Group, had gone bankrupt after failing to compete. No such problems exist for Turkish businesses that are thriving in the new market. Turkish exports saw a 3-fold increase between 2006 and 2010, rising to a value of \$1.85bn, making Syria Turkey's seventh-largest market in the Middle East and North Africa. Though Syria may treasure the investment, its trade deficit with Ankara is growing, making the economic relationship increasingly one sided.

Military cooperation between Syria and Turkey is limited, but symbolic. After years of Turkish military cooperation with Israel, the conduct of a joint Turkish-Syrian military exercise in April 2009 served as a psychological boost to Damascus over its southern enemy. For Turkey, who sent military delegations to Syria and conducted joint training, the arrangement is mainly aimed at securing its southern border, and Turkey is unlikely to risk the United States' wrath by forging a serious military partnership. The dilapidated Syrian military still relies on Russia and Iran for hardware, while Turkey retains military contracts with Israel, despite their frosty diplomatic relationship. In terms of natural resources, the alliance has finally eased long-standing water concerns. As of 2008, Turkey, Syria and Iraq agreed to hold regular summits to discuss the allocation of water from the Euphrates and Tigris, defusing previous tension. In another symbolic gesture, Erdogan agreed to divert Euphrates water into the long dried up Quweiq

River that runs through Aleppo, providing a boost to its flagging agriculture and a showpiece for the city centre.

An overlooked but key area of cooperation is the cultural sphere. In recent years Turkey has furthered its soft power throughout the Arab world by promoting cultural products such as popular television dramas that have gripped Arab households. Syrian production companies have dubbed the dramas into the Syria Arabic dialect for export to Gulf-funded Arab satellite channels. One drama in particular, *Nour*, had an unprecedented impact. During Ramadan Arab streets were deserted when this Turkish drama was shown, accruing viewing figures in the tens of millions. The serials, which broadcast modern Turkish life into Arab living rooms, help to improve the regional image of a prosperous fellow Muslim country. Until recently Arab serials, often originating in Syria that has a reputation for strong Arab dramas and good actors would portray Turks as the enemy in historical stories about Ottoman oppression. Now Syria, by providing the dubbing, proves the key gateway for Turkey into the wider Arab cultural sphere. Syria has had less of a cultural impact on Turkey, which perhaps is expected given their differences in size and cultural reach. That said, Turkish tourism into Syria has boomed and, it is said, closer relations with Syria have helped Turkey reassess and even embrace the Ottoman past it had until recently shunned.

#### **FRIENDS FOREVER?**

The revolution in Turkish-Syrian relations in the past decades, from enmity to close friendship, has essentially been driven by pragmatism on both sides. For Syria, facing diplomatic isolation and a flailing economy, improving ties with Ankara was a no-brainer. For Turkey, the election of the realist AKP and new regional realities created by the US' invasion of Iraq prompted a push for increased regional influence, and Syria, with its long southern



border, was an obvious starting point. Yet crucially for both sides, détente and then alliance did not come at a great ideological cost. Syria had to give up its support of the PKK and accept the permanent loss of Hatay, but neither had been an ideological pillar of the Ba'ath regime that was not worth sacrificing to stabilise the embattled order. Moreover, the support of Turkey in the face of diplomatic isolation allowed Syria to avoid any unpopular compromise in the conflict with Israel, the regime's principle ideological focus. For Turkey, resolving its differences with Syria did require a shift in the rigid anti-Arab ideological approach of generations of Kemalists. However the change in foreign policy, from a solely Euro-centric foreign policy to Davutoglu's wider 'zero problems' strategy, was motivated by realism and economics, not any pro-Islamic stance of the AKP as some have alleged. Syria's principle value was its geographical closeness and economic underdevelopment, not a similar religion or ideology.

The relationship with Syria has given Turkey a gateway into the Arab world diplomatically, economically and culturally and Ankara's involvement in Middle Eastern affairs has now become normalised. The fact that after the wave of popular unrest in the Arab world in early 2011 many activists are looking to Turkey's AKP as a model of how Islamic pluralist democracy can work, illustrates how far Turkey's regional soft power has reached. As the Arab world begins to democratise, Turkey is well placed to benefit from new alliances as a model to emulate. Yet at the same time, that might be at the cost of its relationship with Syria, which is threatened by the wave of anti-authoritarian feeling. Having focused so much on foreign policy and breaking the diplomatic boycott with Turkey's help, domestic concerns have been neglected and Bashar Assad's regime was shocked when unrest erupted in Syria in March 2011. At the time of writing the Ba'athists were engaged in a brutal crackdown on pro-democracy activists, with over 1000 deaths reported. Though Erdogan has been cautious to criticise, despite a new wave of

European and US sanctions on regime members, if the regime survives it is unlikely that he will be able to publically be as close to Assad as before. Indeed, given the Turkish commercial interests in Syria, Erdogan may begin to wonder if regime change is more to Turkey's liking, especially if domestic Turkish public opinion turns on Assad and international pressure falls on Turkish companies to divest.

Yet even if Assad survives this newest round of isolation, there is no guarantee that Turkey, for all its previous friendship, would ride to the rescue a second time. This in many ways typifies the inherent imbalance in the relationship: that Assad needs Erdogan far more than Erdogan needs Assad. While Syria relies on Turkey economically and diplomatically, Turkey's use for Syria has diminished. Ankara now has much larger potential markets in Iraq, Egypt and the Gulf and it will continue to influence the Arab world even if Syria were to pull itself out of the alliance. Moreover, were Assad to fall, Erdogan recognises that such is the dependence of Syria on Turkey as a consequence of the past decade of cooperation, any new regime would prove just as compliant as the current Ba'athists. ■

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# Turkey and Iraq

Hasan Turunc

## OVERVIEW

**I**nteraction between Turkey and Iraq is rapidly increasing, with economic and strategic interests driving political cooperation, yet there are still longer-term challenges remain to be solved, particularly in relation to energy and water security. Iraq is one of Turkey's most important trading partners and is becoming an essential source of energy. It attaches great deal of importance to Iraq's stability and territorial integrity and sees those matters as crucial to its own security and stability. Turkey has become more active in Iraqi affairs, including burgeoning trade and investment relations, close communication with influential political actors and pro-active engagement with Iraqi Kurds. The elimination of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is a major security objective on the agenda of Turkish-Iraqi bilateral relations. Moreover, the future status of Kirkuk, an ethnically mixed city of Kurds, Arabs, and Turcomans, among them Muslims and Christians and home to some of the Iraq's largest oil reserves, is another cause for concern for Turkey. Turkey's principal anxiety is that the oil riches of Kirkuk will only encourage the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to seek greater autonomy, which may spill over into its own borders and spark unrest among Turkey's own Kurdish population. Essentially, energy, economy and reconstruction form the crux of the Turkish involvement in Iraq.

Iraq, albeit reluctantly, perceives Turkey as an essential political power in its neighbourhood and a useful ally to rebuild Iraq's economy and maintain a stable route for its exports. The Kurdish region has attracted enormous Turkish investment which has been central to its stability and development. However, this very region has put immense constraints on Turkey-Iraq relations since Turkey has serious concerns about Kurdish autonomy and PKK activities in northern Iraq.

A further area of political difficulty is the final status of the oil-rich Iraqi province of Kirkuk. Turkish officials have voiced their concerns over the fate of Kirkuk on a number of occasions, fearing that if Iraqi Kurds annex Kirkuk into their autonomous region, they will eventually want to carve out an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq and thus stoke separatist desires in Turkey's own Kurdish population. With the aim of preventing such an eventuality Turkey has developed close relations with Turcomen population that lives in Kirkuk in order to influence the developments and is utilising this small minority as a bargaining chip.

## BACKGROUND

After the World War 2, Turkey usually cooperated with other western allies in the Middle East such as Iran, Israel, and Jordan in order to contain the influence of those countries regarded as Soviet clients, including Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. Since 1954, Turkey has hosted a US Air Force base at Incirlik, which

has played a critical role during the Cold War, the Gulf War, and the recent Iraq War. During the 1990s Iraq was Turkey's leading trading partner, with the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan receiving oil by pipelines starting from Iraq's northern oil fields and Iraqi markets were enjoying a wide range of goods from Turkey. Yet as the decade wore on United Nations sanctions had devastating effects both on the Turkish economy and Iraqi-Turkish trade relations. The United States-led invasion in 2003 caused instability on Turkey's border with Iraq just as its fear of Kurdish separatism in northern Iraq was growing dramatically. The Iraq war made it imperative for Turkey to further cooperate with its immediate neighbours, including Iraq and Iran, since the war led to a seismic shift in the strategic balance of power and triggered deep structural changes in the Middle East. As such, Iraq's fragmentation from a unitary state into a sectarian-divided entity had grave implications on the systemic order of the region. No longer could Iraq act as buffer in a highly volatile part of the world, which involved thwarting Iranian regional ambitions and ensuring a Western-oriented Turkey. Contemporary Iraq is torn by competing powerplays between - and within - Iran, Saudi Arabia and, to a far less extent, Turkey. Saudi Arabia fears the winds of change blowing from Tunisia to Oman; Iran is playing a dominant role in the Arab world while its ally Syria is wracked by an escalating internal popular rebellion against single party rule. Turkish attempts to contain the chaos in Iraq, subdue Kurdish aspirations for self-determination and, at the same time, maintain balanced relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran is taxing Turkey's foreign policy to the limits. Whilst Turkey may have gained international acclaim for pursuing a 'zero problems with the neighbours policy', a laudable goal of nurturing positive ties with the neighbours, it now looks increasingly unattainable at least in the short-term as Iran favours Shi'ite activism and Saudi Arabia asserts Sunni interests in Iraq, Bahrain and across the Middle East.

As a state directly neighbouring Iraq, Turkey had an interest in a stable Iraq and rejected the formation of an independent Kurdish state, primarily because

it has a sizeable Kurdish minority and feared that Kurdish independence would lead to internal unrest and destabilization along its own border. Thus, Turkey was forced to reconsider emerging power and political relations in order to protect its interests. Gradually, Turkey assumed a greater role and became more directly involved in Iraq with the aim of protecting its strategic interests and impacting future developments.

In this context, Turkey encouraged efforts towards Iraqi national reconciliation during which it brought together Sunni Arab Party representatives and the US Ambassador in Istanbul in December 2005. This was a turning point in Sunni Arab participation in the political process. Recently, Turkey played a central role in mediating with Sunni members of the Iraqi parliament for the purpose of supporting the Status of Forces Agreement with the United States in 2008. Turkey hosted training programs related to democratisation and good governance for Iraq's political parties from all ethnic and sectarian backgrounds which have been attended by more than 500 Iraqi politicians, and the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Academy offers training programmes to Iraqi officials. All political parties participated in a conference on Iraq's constitution in July 2006 in Istanbul hosted in cooperation with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq, and Turkey initiated the Neighbouring Countries Process, to bring together Iraq with its neighbours for Ministerial consultations. This initiative evolved into the Enlarged Ministerial of Neighbouring Countries Meetings, now comprising the neighbours of Iraq, P-5 and G-8 Countries, as well as the UN, OIC, Arab League and the European Commission.

Iraqi Shi'ite leaders have had ambivalent attitudes toward Turkey's increasing involvement in Iraq for a number of reasons. First, the Turkish military has made frequent incursions into northern Iraq in pursuit of the PKK; second, Turkey is a pre-dominantly Sunni Muslim country; and third, they remember Turkey's trade and business relations with Saddam Hussein's regime. However, mutual economic interests and emerging geo-political realities of a post-American

withdrawal have pushed both sides to cooperate and compromise. As Iraq's most stable neighbour, Turkey has been seen as a vital partner to build and stabilise the Iraqi economy and infrastructure – particularly in the energy and construction sectors; a window for exports and imports; and a source of much-needed international legitimacy for the Iraqi government. The improvement in relations has been reflected in bilateral visits, in July 2008 when Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Iraq, during which Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki agreed to boost economic relations, and in October 2010 when al-Maliki visited Turkey seeking assistance in his bid to form a government following the Iraqi general elections.

## **ENERGY, ECONOMIC AND TRADE RELATIONS**

Energy, economic and trade relations have generated increasing interdependence between Turkey and Iraq in recent years. Turkey hopes that gradually stabilising Iraq will generate further demand for goods, services and materials, which in return will create considerable business opportunities for Turkish companies. Excluding the oil sector, Turkey is the largest commercial investor in Iraq. Turkish companies generally provide manufactured goods, furniture, handicrafts, special-purpose products and associated consumables, and Turkey's Trade Ministry estimates that the trade volume between Turkey and Iraq exceeded \$6 billion in 2010, up from only \$940 million in 2003, boosting Iraq's position from Turkey's tenth largest trade partner to the fifth largest. Turkey is second only to China among the countries that have companies doing business in Iraq, with 117 companies working on energy, agriculture and industrial projects.

In an effort to sustain such economic ties, on 19 October 2010 the Iraqi government created a committee to increase business and economic relations with Turkey with estimates for bilateral commercial exchange reaching \$12bn by the end of 2011. This is a more than a three-fold increase

on previous agreements. The commitment on both sides for enhancing commercial and trade relations was evident in January 2011 when Turkey declared that it would be pleased to see inclusion of Iraq in a planned free trade zone alongside Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.

The booming construction and contracting market in Iraq, with a potential volume of \$100 billion, accounts for the lion's share of Turkey-Iraq trade volumes. A report by Turkey's Undersecretariat of Foreign Trade published in 2010 noted that the rapid growth of construction and contracting sectors, which focus on infrastructure investments in water supply projects, waste water treatment plants, electricity power plants, hospitals, school and housing construction, highways, airlines, bridges and port construction. Turkish companies contracted 39 projects in 2007, with a volume of \$545 million. In 2008, the number of projects rose up to 72, with a volume of \$1.43 billion.

Energy is also a key feature in the bilateral relations. Iraq has had three rounds of oil and gas auctions since the US-led invasion in 2003. In the third round of auctions in 2010, the state-owned Turkish Petroleum Corporation was among the foreign companies with which Iraq signed deals to develop its natural gas fields. Iraqi gas is particularly important for Turkey, since it is expected to contribute supplies to the Nabucco gas pipeline, a project designed to carry Middle Eastern and Central Asian gas to European consumers via Turkey. Moreover, Iraqi natural gas could be connected to the Turkish national network through a pipeline to be constructed parallel to the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline. Within this framework, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Turkey and Iraq on 7 August 2007 in Ankara in order to supply Iraqi natural gas to Turkey and via Turkey to Europe.

Although attacks by insurgents inside Iraq have repeatedly interrupted the flow of oil between Turkey and Iraq, the rate is currently around 450,000 to 500,000 barrels per day. Ceyhan, on Turkey's

Mediterranean coast of Turkey, is the terminus for a pipeline that transports crude oil from fields around Kirkuk in northern Iraq, which accounts for about a third of Iraq's total crude exports. Iraq will be able to export crude oil for another 12 years through Ceyhan after both countries agreed to renew their accord in September 19, 2010.

In the other direction, Turkey provides 275 mw/h of electricity to Iraq and plans to increase this to 1200 mw/h, one-quarter of Iraq's electricity requirement. Furthermore, the Electricity Ministry of Iraq has awarded contracts worth more than \$900 million to three Turkish companies for the installation of 20 gas turbines in Baghdad, Kerbala and Nineveh, which will boost Iraq's own power-generating capacity by 2,500 megawatts. As part of the agreement, Calik Enerji, a Turkey-based company, would build a plant and install 10 turbines in Kerbala province in southern Iraq valued at \$445.5 million. In addition, Turkish construction firm Enka Insaat has won a \$267.5 million deal to build a power plant and install six turbines in Nineveh province in northern Iraq, and Eastern Lights, another Turkey-based firm, will install four turbines in an existing plant in Baghdad under a contract worth \$204.8 million.

Turkey's policy of expanding trade and commercial relations with Iraq is part of a larger strategy to become an energy transit hub between east and west. Iraq's natural resources might play an important role in the proposed Nabucco pipeline supplying Europe via Turkey. Moreover, construction and other related projects are providing excellent source of employment in Turkey's southeast region which has long been economically underdeveloped.

#### **TURKEY AND THE KURDISTAN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT (KRG)**

Despite booming economic ties, bilateral engagement has been constrained by Turkey's rejection of rising Kurdish autonomy and the presence of PKK bases in northern Iraq. In 2006 and 2007 Turkey threatened to

limit economic and trade relations if the Iraqi central government did not take all necessary actions to root out PKK located at the border region. In 2007, Turkey took further steps and announced that Turkish officials were drafting plans to implement a food and energy embargo against Iraq when more than 40 Turks were killed in a month. In a highly controversial move, Turkey conducted an eight-day military incursion into northern Iraq targeting PKK strongholds in February 2008. Although the US did express some reservations concerning the operation, it provided Turkey with actionable real-time intelligence. The Iraqi central government responded pragmatically, understanding Turkey's need for action while condemning the military incursion simultaneously. This was one of the numerous incursions that Turkey has conducted into northern Iraq since 1990s. Although Turkey takes Iraqi relations very seriously, it is prepared to take unilateral security measures against the PKK in Iraq.

Until recently, Turkey did not recognise the KRG as an exclusively Kurdish entity and has usually preferred to work through the central government in Baghdad. This situation changed significantly when the Turkish National Security Council made an official decision to conduct direct discussions with all the political groups in Iraq. This has been possible due to a number of interrelated factors. Under the Status of Forces Agreement the planned withdrawal of US troops by the end of 2011 weakened the KRG's position in relation to Turkey, as the US was its main supporter. At the same time, significant economic interdependence and trade interests between the KRG and Turkey have emerged, pushing the KRG to increasingly cooperate with Turkey to contain the PKK as Turkey continues to seek internal stability and unity in Iraq between Kurds, Arab Sunnis and Arab Shiites.

Thus, Turkey seems to be more flexible in practice than it presents publicly in dealing with the Kurdish autonomous region. At the same time, since the US is aiming to withdraw its military forces by the end of 2011, the Kurds are also seeking to strengthen themselves against possible clashes with the Iraqi central government, utilising the extensive diplomatic

outreach that a strong relationship with Turkey can bring.

Turkey dominates the economy of the KRG region, where an estimated 80 percent of goods sold are imported from Turkey. Fifty-five percent of the foreign companies registered in the KRG region are Turkish. According to a press statement issued by the regional government in April 2010, Turkey and KRG discussed opening the airway between Sulaimaniya, Erbil and Turkey to improve travel for citizens, companies and businesspeople which may further strengthen economic and business ties.

Private Turkish companies have already made huge investments in the KRG region, especially in the oil fields of Tak Tak, Khor Mor and Chemchamal. The efforts of companies like Genel Energy of Turkey, Dana gas of Norway, and Nabucco's chief operating company OMV make it highly pertinent to develop a direct connection to Turkey from the KRG region.

The close trade and commercial ties with Turkey are critical to realising the KRG's economic potential and to ensuring the long-term stability of the KRG economy. Meanwhile, Turkey understands that it needs the full cooperation of local Kurdish authorities in northern Iraq if it wants to eliminate PKK.

## **FUTURE ENERGY AND WATER SECURITY CHALLENGES**

Turkey has fundamental flaws regarding energy efficiency, savings, external dependency and intensity. Equally worrisome is the fact that Turkey is far behind Western countries in terms of benefiting from renewable energy sources to counter balance its dependence on carbon fuels. Rapid urbanisation and industrialisation is driving rising energy consumption and external dependency.

What international analysts and commentators often fail to observe and critically neglect is that Turkey is neither an oil nor a natural gas producer. Turkey plans to meet its rising energy need in several ways

but hydro-power seems more appealing to Turkish authorities because it is clean and cheap. Again, contrary to the general perception, Turkey is neither a country rich in fresh water resources nor the richest country in the region. Turkey's exploitation of the waters of Euphrates and Tigris rivers has long been controversial. Since 1984 Turkey has been building a series of dams and hydropower plants in southeast Turkey, as part of an ambitious scheme known South-East Anatolia Project or GAP. Iraq regularly complains that the scheme is depriving the Iraqi population of much-needed water.

In Iraq, consecutive years of drought, war and lack of adequate governance has hindered overall development of the water sector. It faces the threat of desertification at an average rate of 0.5 percent a year. The flow of Euphrates in Iraq declined from the long-term average of 27 billion cubic metres (BCM) to 9 BCM in 2009. Desertification is expected to affect Turkey too. For example, in the Konya basin, about 80 percent of the depletion has occurred over the last decade, and the basin faces complete desertification by 2030. There is serious disagreement about the actual amount of flow of the rivers across national boundaries, with Iraq asking for 65 percent of the water potential of the Euphrates and 92 percent of the Tigris while Turkey plans to use about 52 percent of Euphrates and 14.1 percent of the Tigris.

## **CONCLUSION**

Economic and strategic interests are facilitating political cooperation between Turkey and Iraq, but energy and water security are the main obstacles to enduring good relations. Few commentators believe that water alone can become the cause of war between Turkey and Iraq; nevertheless its destabilising effect is apparent. Turkey's mounting energy demand, coupled with the devastating effect of climate change and drought, may put burgeoning Turkish-Iraqi relations under intense pressure if robust and adequate mechanisms guaranteeing clean and sustainable water resources are not in place. ■

## Turkey and the United States

Emiliano Alessandri

**The recent evolution of US-Turkish relations highlights broader challenges of the transition from American unipolarity to a still inceptive 'multipolar world'. The relationship cannot be understood unless its evolution during the 20th century is contrasted with the recent reality of the fluid interaction between a self-described 'emerging power' (Erdogan, 2011) with regional aspirations and a global superpower with extended interests in Turkey's many neighbourhoods (including the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East) but a declining international influence.**

In this context, the ultimate test for the Turkish-US relationship does not lie in Turkey choosing between 'West' and 'East'. The challenge is, rather, about America and its long-standing European allies (including Turkey) being able to redefine the West and reaffirm its relevance, as American unipolarity is replaced by an interdependent but also more plural international environment. The Turkish-US relationship will remain in flux in the years to come not only because of the instability that characterizes one of Turkey's neighbourhoods, the Middle East, but also because it epitomizes more broadly the internal convulsions of the West in an age of hegemonic transition and global change.

As America explores the foundations of a new relationship with Turkey, Ankara is called to determine how much of its current ambition as a rising actor can be sustained in the longer run by a more independent course and to what extent its strategic aspirations can still be more effectively served by reliance on traditional alliances, such as the one with the US, and participation in international Western institutions of which Turkey has been for decades a loyal member, such as NATO.

One thing is certain: the relationship will remain difficult for Washington and Ankara to manage until new geopolitical realities are acknowledged and sources of mistrust are honestly discussed with a view to extinguishing them. America's dialogue with Turkey is impaired by a certain patronizing attitude that characterizes also the US approach to other 'junior partners'. This is evident in the recurrent US debates on the risk of 'losing Turkey' (which assume that at some point Turkey was at America's disposal) and in the tendency of the Washington policy community to treat Turkey as an 'issue' instead of as an 'actor', as openly lamented by Turkish elites. This attitude, moreover, has been coupled with the difficulty to contain the influence of a wide array of Turkey's detractors in the US, which can be found among elements of the political elite obsessed with the risk of Turkey's 'Islamization', pro-Israel groups, or among representatives of the American Armenian Diaspora.

Turkey's view of the US, on the other hand, is negatively affected by a widespread conspiracy mentality which leads many Turks to resent US 'imperialism', long-standing fears about America's involvement with Kurdish separatism (despite years of shared intelligence and military cooperation against groups such as the PKK), and by the tendency to hold Washington accountable for any stance taken by Israel. The latter has been a regional ally of Turkey for decades, but in particular since Israel's Gaza offensive in 2008, the relationship has been fraying as ever larger sections of the Turkish elite and public have held Israel responsible for human rights violations against the Palestinians, and harshly criticized the

Israeli government for its allegedly uncompromising and zero-sum-game approach to relations with Muslim communities in the region. This evolution has significantly complicated Turkish-US relations. Both anti-US and anti-Israel sentiments are becoming more widespread among the Turkish public (Transatlantic Trends).

## **THE BACKGROUND**

The golden age of Turkish-American relations during the Cold War is largely a legend. As with other relationships between the American superpower and regional allies, difficulties emerged at various points, including the tensions which erupted in the early 1960s over the future of the US nuclear capable missiles stationed on Turkish soil during the Cuban missile crisis, and US sanctions and arms embargo against Turkey following the Turkish army's invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Turkey's participation in US-led international alliances, moreover, did not invariably translate into a strategic restraint, as evidenced by the repeated tensions between Turkey and Greece – two NATO allies – over issues such as their respective possessions in the Aegean.

Furthermore, the question of Turkey's belonging to the West was no less complex than is today; it was simply less debated in international circles. Not many US leaders during the Cold War identified Turkey's semi-democratic system and the pattern of repeated military coups (1960, 1971, and 1980) as formidable impediments to the nation's development as a Western country. What was different until the 1990s was not so much the stability of Turkish-US relations, but rather the relative clarity and predictability of the larger strategic context: an international system divided into two main blocs, organized under US leadership in the West, with Turkey firmly siding with anti-Soviet countries.

Turkey's support for the US-led international intervention against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 seemed to suggest that Ankara could become a critical regional partner in the establishment of the 'new world order' envisioned by George H. W.

Bush. But the 1990s proved to be a critical period of change for Turkey, with a mixed impact on its international orientation and relationship with the US. In the context of a rapidly evolving international system no longer divided into blocs, Turkey soon realized that it was no longer sealed in the Western camp and confined to the role of a diligent guardian of NATO's southern flank. Thanks to the reforms passed during the Turgut Özal era (1983-1993), which the US supported, the country liberalized its market internally while opening up its economy, thus laying out the foundations of a new, multidirectional, regional integration. This led to a renewed interest in European integration but also to establishing links with countries in Turkey's rediscovered southern and eastern neighbourhoods, which in some cases happened to be in America's 'black list', such as Iran.

Clashes with the Kurds, moreover, intensified and Islamist movements rose to political prominence, risking undermining Turkey's secular identity, and its ongoing liberalization process, as well as its Western strategic orientation. Particularly troublesome for Washington was Turkey's inclination in the 1990s to interpret its newly-found active regional role as requiring confrontation with its neighbours in some cases. Growing tensions with Greece in the mid-to-late 1990s were viewed with great alarm as they could lead to open conflict between two US allies in the already conflict-ridden Balkans. Turkey's strains with Syria, which led to a showdown in 1998 that stopped just short of war, caused great concern for their possible broader regional ramifications even if they helped cement the Turkish-Israeli alliance.

## **'NEW TURKEY' AND US-TURKISH RELATIONS**

The 2000s brought with them a set of new challenges for Turkish-US relations. America supported the single most important societal and political development taking place in Turkey: the rise of the post-Islamist, culturally conservative, market-oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP) – which represented at once the rise of the Anatolian Turkish elites and the decline of the traditional urban Kemalist secular



establishment. Recep Tayip Erdogan was received in Washington in 2002 and met with the US president before he became the country's Prime Minister and when he was still a relatively unknown international figure – a non ritual, exceptional event. The idea that as a secular democracy, ruled by a moderate Islamic party, Turkey could boost America's efforts to communicate and implement a new agenda of change in the Middle East after the 9-11 attacks was appealing in US circles, particularly conservative and neoconservative ones, then in charge of foreign policy.

This vision, however, was soon to prove largely delusory. The Turkish Grand National Assembly's 'no' vote to logistical support to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was just the first act of a long saga featuring a rising regional actor who has, since then, in many instances resisted or opposed US actions in the Middle East that Washington has justified as promoting security and democracy, but that have translated into new instability around Turkey's borders. The specter that has constantly haunted Ankara is that of a Kurdish state arising from the ruins of post-Saddam Iraq, powerful enough to support Kurdish separatism in Turkey's South East. The concern, however, has gradually become larger. As an actor increasingly integrated with the economies of its neighbouring countries (including some of America's rivals such as Iran and Syria), Turkey has found it difficult to accept US-sponsored policies aimed at altering the already fragile balances of the Middle East with the goal of imposing Western outcomes.

Therefore, US-Turkish relations have become tense since 2003 not because Turkey 'has gone Islamist', but because the alliance has not fully adjusted to the new reality of Turkey as a regional power with its own legacies and interests in its neighbourhood. In this context, the economic, strategic, security, as well as psychological impact of the Afghan and Iraq wars on Turkey – both taking place next to its borders, but conceived and run by Washington – has been consistently underestimated by the US. The US foreign policy elite has preferred to focus on

the 'new directions' of Turkish foreign policy rather than to acknowledge America's own foreign policy transformation – from a guarantor of stability to an agent of transformation (and sometimes a factor of instability) in the Greater Middle East – especially during the Bush years.

Faced with an American counterpart only limitedly receptive of Turkish claims and views, Ankara's growing inclination has been that of distinguishing itself from US policies in the region, by emphasizing the use of 'soft power' as opposed to hard means, and the need for dialogue and cooperation, instead of competition, even with the more problematic regimes. This has led to initiatives that have created significant disagreement and tensions with Washington, such as Ankara's engagement with Hamas in Palestine, the shift from confrontation to cooperation with Syria in the 2000s (when Washington was on the contrary trying to isolate Damascus), but also to valuable mediating efforts, such as Ankara's brokerage in 2008 of peace talks between Syria and Israel.

Turkey has, in fact, shown considerable convergence with US policies and goals when stability was the main objective and diplomacy was as central as hard power: the stabilization Afghanistan (to which Turkey has contributed by participating in the political dialogue as well as by sending aid and troops), Lebanon (in which Turkey has played a critical role in the UN peace mission), as well as post-war Iraq. Initially focused on a largely unilateral military effort to stop the transborder activities of Kurdish violent groups, Ankara has later pursued engagement with the new Iraqi Kurdish authorities in Northern Iraq as a more promising way to confront the PKK threat and to prevent the rise of a hostile neighbouring Kurdish state more broadly. Turkey has got deeply involved in the political discussions among Sunni and Shite Iraqi factions and the Americans with the objective of avoiding a protracted civil war and preventing the fragmentation of the Iraqi state into new independent entities, including a Kurdish one, next to Turkey's borders.

Despite this blend of orientations and policies, the debate in the US has increasingly revolved around the question (for some already a reality) of Turkey's 'drift' from the West. Although the disagreement over the handling of Iraq had ceased to be an issue by the time the Bush administration finished its second term, both Turkish and US leaders could agree at the end of the 2000s that the relationship needed a major overhaul if levels of strategic convergence similar to the one achieved during the Cold War were to be ever attained again.

### **US-TURKISH RELATIONS DURING THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION**

The Obama administration has to be credited with the attempt to 'modernize' the relationship with Turkey (Gordon, 2010). The many faces of what has come to be known as 'new Turkey' have been carefully taken into account, even though old metaphors, including the 'bridge between the West and the East' one, have too often offered the foundation of an understanding of contemporary Turkey that tends to remain stereotyped. While trying harder to understand Turkey, the US administration has conducted a review of America's role in the Middle East as part of a broad reflection on the US international strategy in a globalizing world. The US has also reviewed its relations with the 'emerging powers', espousing the paradigm of 'engagement' over containment or confrontation. Understanding how critical the relationship with Turkey is to such undertaking, the Obama administration has sought a 'model partnership' with Ankara (Obama, 2009), as if by engaging with the 'new Turkey' Washington intended to send a signal to other Muslim countries and emerging powers more broadly.

Three years into the Obama administration, however, frustration is the common feeling in Washington. Faced with a stalling accession process to the EU, persisting suspicion in US circles, but above all galvanized by its economic success and growing influence in its neighbourhood, the Turkish ruling elite

has turned more nationalistic, becoming increasingly fascinated with the idea of Turkish 'non-alignment' or an 'independent foreign policy'.

Cooperation with the US in the stabilization of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Iraq has continued. At the same time, however, in particular relations with Iran and Israel have caused deep tensions reverberating across the Atlantic. As already mentioned, Turkish-Israeli relations have become particularly tense after Israel's Gaza offensive of 2008. Although itself sometimes critical of Israel's policies, the Obama administration has seen with concern Turkey's choice to dramatize its differences with Jerusalem and to capitalize on the region's negative views of Israel to boost its image among the Arab peoples. The 'Mavi Marmara' incident in May 2010, which brought Turkish-Israeli relations to an all-time low, materialized Washington's worst fears. Even if the US has mainly focused on preventing conflict between its two allies, Ankara has seen Washington's reactions to the incident as betraying a clear pro-Israel bias.

Relations with Iran have too created deep tensions with Washington. Turkey's 'no' vote in June 2010 on UN-mandated sanctions against the Republic of Iran caused damage to America's efforts to build international consensus on the Iranian nuclear question and inflicted a major blow to the Turkish-US relationship (the Obama administration insisted until the last moment that Turkey would at least consider abstention). Contending that isolation is not an effective strategy for stopping Teheran's nuclear plans, Ankara has decided to keep cultivating its economic relationship with Iran, embracing an open-ended dialogue with the regime without the threat of coercion. This is a path that no EU country or NATO ally considers any longer acceptable or viable.

America's selection of priorities in the Middle East and its securitized approach to relations in the region may be questionable from the Turkish perspective. It is significant and alarming, however, that on an issue as important as Iran, the Turkish – US relationship

has failed to deliver. Fraying relations with Israel, moreover, have raised serious doubts in Washington about the concrete implementation of Ankara's self-styled 'zero problems with neighbours' policy. Turkey has stressed that its goal is the same of the US and European countries: peace and prosperity in the region. But as Turkey redefines its place in the changed strategic context, it will find it increasingly hard to shield behind the appealing but largely neutral formula of 'stability'. Turkey's rise and the rapidly evolving regional environment will by definition require Ankara to choose priorities and select partners. The most recent developments in North Africa and the Middle East underscore this problem.

Turkey has been arguably more prompt than the US, and certainly more than EU countries, to lend its support to the Arab movements demanding change. Turkey's claim that it represents a source of inspiration for Muslim societies demanding better governance and more equitable development has not been contested by Obama administration, which on the contrary has appreciated Turkey's aspiration to play an active role in facilitating and securing the democratic transitions in countries like Egypt and Tunisia.

Turkey's attitude towards Libya and Iran, and its close ties with an authoritarian regime such as Syria, however, have highlighted serious contradictions in Turkish policy, and revealed the possibility for continued tension with the US in the region. Ankara expressed reservations about the adoption of economic sanctions against Libya and initially opposed military intervention against the Gaddafi regime. As in the past, Turkey has also remained embarrassingly silent on popular protests in Iran, just as when the Iranian opposition and Washington were instead hoping that that the 'Arab spring' could give leverage to the Iranian people to finally overthrow the Ahmadi-Nejad regime in Teheran.

Turkey's difficult balancing act between endorsing democratic change and preserving stability and

good relations with some of its regional partners highlight tradeoffs and dilemmas that the US and other Western countries are themselves facing. The recognition that this is the case should lead Turkey to actively seek consultation and coordination with Washington. Turkey has been right to reject the view that the US or the EU can decide on its behalf what Western policy is, especially in its neighbourhood. Ankara is also right that the emergence of a multipolar order compels a review of Western strategy and a rebalancing of the relationship between the American superpower and its allies so as to accommodate the new geo-economic and geopolitical realities. However, if it is interested in developing this idea, Ankara should now be proactive in engaging Western allies on its views, promoting a dialogue with the US and the EU on how the Middle East should develop in the years ahead. Faced with an America only slowly revising its long-held assumptions and policies and an EU that is divided on its views of Turkey, Ankara's activism in the most recent years has seemed directed at carving out a space for itself more than at seriously developing a new idea of international engagement agreeable also to Washington. ■

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