

TURKEY'S SEARCH FOR REGIONAL POWER

Posted on August 20, 2010 by Keghart

Middle East Report Online

Category: [Opinions](#)



✘ Yüksel Taşkın, [Middle East Report Online](#), 21 August 2010

Under the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey is carving out a greater role for itself in Middle Eastern affairs. Since 2008, Turkey has sought the role of Middle East intermediary in trying to broker a peace agreement between Israel and Syria and to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis. This more independent and assertive foreign policy has put Turkey increasingly at odds with two of its long-standing allies, Israel and the United States. A crucial ally for the US in its war on Iraq, Turkey now refuses to comply with US policy on Iran. The Turkish government also has become more outspoken against Israeli violations of Palestinian rights in the West Bank and Gaza, placing it on a diplomatic collision course with Israel. Three months after the Israeli assault on a Gaza-bound Turkish aid vessel, the Obama administration is reportedly warning Turkey that if its relations with Israel do not improve, and if Turkey does not temper its opposition to US policy on Iran, Congress may halt arms sales to Turkey.

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Under the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey is carving out a greater role for itself in Middle Eastern affairs. Since 2008, Turkey has sought the role of Middle East intermediary in trying to broker a peace agreement between Israel and Syria and to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis. This more independent and assertive foreign policy has put Turkey increasingly at odds with two of its long-standing allies, Israel and the United States. A crucial ally for the US in its war on Iraq, Turkey now refuses to comply with US policy on Iran. The Turkish government also has become more outspoken against Israeli violations of Palestinian rights in the West Bank and Gaza, placing it on a diplomatic collision course with Israel. Three months after the Israeli assault on a Gaza-bound Turkish aid vessel, the Obama administration is reportedly warning Turkey that if its relations with Israel do not improve, and if Turkey does not temper its opposition to US policy on Iran, Congress may halt arms sales to Turkey.

The deterioration in relations between Turkey and its Western allies has led many commentators to conclude that there has been a decidedly eastward shift in Turkish foreign policy. In fact, Turkey's positions have inspired many journalists and policy analysts to postulate that Turkey is pursuing an "Islamic" agenda that entails a deliberate distancing from the West. This hypothesis has seemed plausible to some because the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP, by its Turkish acronym) is rooted in the banned Islamist parties of the 1980s and 1990s. The historian Bernard Lewis, for instance, speculated that in a decade Turkey might resemble the Islamic Republic of Iran. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman opined that "Turkey's Islamist government seemingly focused not on joining the European Union but the Arab League -- no, scratch that, on joining the Hamas-Hezbollah-Iran resistance front against Israel." Similar interpretations emanate from the secular

establishment in Turkey. Oktay Ekşi, a columnist for the *Hürriyet* newspaper, argues that the AKP's concerted efforts to attain Turkish accession to the EU were a ploy to gain "support in the West to overcome the secularists." Some analysts have even suggested that the AKP is pursuing a "neo-Ottomanist" agenda, seeking to claim the mantle of the last great Islamic empire. Johns Hopkins University professor (and former Bush administration official) Eliot Cohen wrote, "A combination of Islamist rule, resentment at exclusion from Europe and a neo-Ottomanist ideology that envisions Turkey as a great power in the Middle East have made Turkey a state that is often plainly hostile not only to Israel but to American aims and interests."

Such analyses misinterpret the AKP government's objective, which is not to break with Turkey's traditional cooperation with the US and EU but to increase Turkey's relative autonomy vis-à-vis those powers. Rather than a rupture with the past, Turkey's new approach marks a change in tactics in pursuit of the same goal.

Looking Westward

Turkey's foreign policy shift first caught the public eye when Erdoğan walked off a platform he shared with Israeli President Shimon Peres at the 2008 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, after delivering a passionate condemnation of Israel's then-ongoing military assault on Gaza. Operation Cast Lead came as a blow to Turkish mediation efforts between the Israeli and Syrian governments, which had been in full force right up to the beginning of the Israeli assault. The mediation effort was part of Turkey's new policy of "zero problems" with its neighbors -- a policy that envisions Turkey as an initiator and mediator of a policy of active neutrality and one that is linked to Turkey's EU membership bid.

This outlook has led Turkey to take a more active role in mediating the nuclear dispute between Iran and Western powers. At President Barack Obama's Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington in April, the leaders of Turkey and Brazil -- two elected members of the UN Security Council -- laid out an independent plan for dealing with Iran's nuclear research program. Erdoğan and Brazilian President Lula da Silva proposed that the international community engage in negotiations to ensure that Iran's program is purely peaceful, as Iran claims. Obama, on the other hand, sought to rally support for an additional round of sanctions against Iran in the Security Council. Some weeks after the summit, Brazil and Turkey announced they had reached an agreement with Iran whereby Iran would ship its low enriched uranium to Turkey for safekeeping and Iran would receive nuclear fuel rods to be used at its medical research reactor. When a resolution calling for further sanctions against Iran was introduced to the Security Council in June, Turkey voted against it.

Turkey's assertiveness regarding Iran is remarkable considering its decades-old Western-oriented foreign policy -- a tradition that took shape during the Cold War when the country was ruled by hard-core followers of the republic's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Turkey's foreign policy during the Cold War cannot be considered apart from the Kemalist elite's identification of modernization with Westernization. The Kemalist modernization project entailed stripping "Oriental"

influences from Turkish society and politics and replacing them with Western political, economic, judicial and cultural practices through a series of reforms that went so far as to replace Islamic law with European legal codes and adopt the Latin alphabet, Gregorian calendar and Western clothing. In seeking to be admitted as part of "the West," the Kemalist elite tended to overlook and even "Orientalize" the East. The "other" of this Westernized elite was no longer the Greeks, with whom Turkey signed a treaty in 1930, but the Arabs and Kurds. In the realm of foreign policy, this Western-centric outlook involved Turkey aligning itself with Western powers and shunning involvement in the Middle East.

Prior to 1946 Kemalists followed a policy of passive neutrality vis-à-vis the Western powers due to the painful memories of World War I. After the Allied victory in World War II, however, Turkey's state elite did not hesitate to place Turkey in the Western camp against "the Soviet threat." In the 1960s, leftist Kemalists identified with the politician Bülent Ecevit's anti-imperialist, Third Worldist politics began to gain influence and distanced themselves from the pro-American standing of center-right leaders. The left Kemalists shared the civilizational preferences of their Kemalist fathers, but employed such terms as "development and modernization" rather than Westernization. Due to the legacy of Kemalist nationalism and Westernization, however, they never imagined themselves as members of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Interestingly, after the ruling Republican People's Party (CHP) opened the political system to multiple parties in 1946, the center-right opposition parties, distinguished from the center-left Kemalists of the CHP by their free-market ideology and appeal to Islamic values and symbols, did not depart from the Kemalist elite's foreign policy outlook. Hence it was the center-right Democrat Party, which, after winning power in the 1950 general elections, sent Turkish troops to the Korean war in order to gain entry into NATO. Turkey actively worked to prevent "Communist expansionism" in the Middle East and refused to join the Non-Aligned Movement on the grounds that Turkey was a Western state. Turkish leaders strove to maintain this unquestioning obedience to the "Western bloc" during the Cold War even in the face of growing socialist opposition led by leftist Kemalists and smaller socialist groups that were becoming influential, particularly among youth and intellectuals. Crucially, this alliance with the West was supported by the military establishment, which shared the center-right's pro-American and anti-Communist stance and had the power to intervene in politics. In fact, the 1961 constitution institutionalized the military's disproportionate power by creating an advisory body called the National Security Council, whose clout at times surpassed that of civilian politicians, particularly in the 1990s when the Kurdish insurgency in the southeast was at its peak.

The threat of military intervention, however, was not the impetus for the center-right's Western orientation. Turgut Özal, president during the 1990-1991 Gulf war and reputedly the most religious personage in the center-right parties since the 1950s, willingly joined the coalition against Saddam Hussein despite opposition from Turkey's top generals. The chief of general staff resigned his post in

protest, arguing that the army was not prepared for such active involvement. The brass might have feared the possibility that sectarianism in a divided Iraq could instigate a new separatist wave among Turkey's Kurds. Turkey also joined the UN embargo on Iraq following the Gulf war despite enormous financial losses due to lost trade.

Not a Bridge, But a Gate

But the Turkish political stage was quite different in the post-September 11 world. A new "soft Islamist" party, the AKP, whose leaders had cut their teeth in the National Outlook Movement (Milli Görüş), a grouping of Islamist parties, won control of government following elections in 2002. The AKP deliberately distanced itself from the Milli Görüş and defined its ideology as "conservative democracy" in order to situate itself within the long-established center-right tradition, but it distinguished itself from other parties of the center right by its strong opposition to Turkey's policies on Iraq and Israel in particular. Nonetheless, the AKP elite strove to prove its loyalty to the traditional partnership with the US and issued successive reform packages to accelerate Turkey's accession to the EU. During its first term (2002-2007), the AKP sought to establish credibility among Turkey's powerful allies, whose support it needed to carve out a hegemonic position for itself in Turkey against the self-appointed civilian and military guardians of the republic.

Despite his party's opposition to Turkey's involvement in Iraq, Prime Minister Erdoğan, seeking international support to compensate for his party's weakness vis-à-vis the republican elite, pressured his party to pass a memorandum in 2003 that would allow the US to use Turkey as a base from which to invade Iraq and authorize the deployment of Turkish troops to the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. But the assembly, including some AKP members under pressure from their fellow MPs and growing anti-American sentiment on the street, narrowly rejected the bill. Though it was interpreted at the time as an anti-war gesture, the parliament's vote did not stop Turkish involvement in the invasion. US paratroopers were still able to use the Incirlik airbase as a launching pad. Turkey also has non-combat troops in Afghanistan for peacekeeping as part of the International Security Assistance Force -- a joint initiative of the UN and NATO. But the great unintended consequence of the rejection of the 2003 memorandum was to enable the AKP to position itself as a significant actor in the Middle East.

After a second landslide victory in 2007, the AKP leadership felt secure enough domestically to revise the party's Middle East policy. In 2009 the political scientist Ahmet Davutoğlu was appointed minister of foreign affairs, in which capacity he has been able to implement his vision of a more assertive role for Turkey in world affairs. This vision was outlined in his book, *Strategic Depth* (2001), in which he rejects the conventional depiction of Turkey as a bridge between East and West on the grounds that this notion implies passivity and advantages based solely on geography. Rather, Davutoğlu proposes an interactive policy for Turkey as an initiator and mediator of peace and stability in the region -- an approach popularly known as having "zero problems" with the neighbors.

Turkey's repositioning of itself as an independent regional power has shifted its stance vis-à-vis the EU. Erdoğan presents an image of complementarity for the EU and Turkey: "Turkey is coming to share the burden of the EU rather than being a burden for it. In order to be a global power, there must be a global vision and relations with different regions... Turkey will be the gate of the EU opening to Asia, the Middle East and the Islamic world... The full security of the EU passes through the full membership of Turkey." Due to its perception of enhanced strength vis-à-vis the EU, the AKP has lost its willingness to push new reforms to speed up the EU membership process, especially since 2005 when new governments in Germany and France became outspoken against Turkey's prospective membership.

The most significant foreign policy changes have emerged in Turkey's relations with the Middle East, changes which in turn have entailed new challenges for the traditional partnership between Turkey and the US. But there have also been changes in Turkish policy toward Russia. Marking a departure from the 1990s, when Turkey paid lip service to the notion of protecting "the Turkish world from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall," under the AKP Turkey is taking a less nationalistic position toward the Turkic and Muslim peoples of Central Asia and Russia. While Russia supplies Turkey with natural gas, Turkey has been key in securing the construction of transnational pipelines to transport Russian oil and gas to the outside world.

Turkey under AKP leadership is also making progress toward normalizing relations with Armenia. In 2009 the two countries reached an accord to establish diplomatic relations and open their border, which was shut by Turkey in 1993 to demonstrate solidarity with Azerbaijan in the latter's conflict with Armenia. The protocols have faltered due to difficulties in securing ratification in both countries' parliaments, but the agreement is a first step toward breaching a sensitive taboo. All these measures mark a significant departure from the cautious and even passive foreign policy conventions of the past.

Looking Eastward

The AKP has, with mixed success, embraced a soft-power approach to Iraq, avoiding the ultra-nationalist discourse of earlier governments that prioritized protecting the Turkman minority of Kirkuk from the Kurdish majority. Instead of speaking of the "Kurdish threat," the AKP government has adopted the phrase "our relatives in Iraq" to imply a religious tie that embraces the Kurds. Just ten years ago Turkish politicians insisted on referring to Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq by its acronym KDP, in order to avoid the term "Kurdistan," and derided Barzani and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani as "tribal leaders" unworthy of being treated as their counterparts, let alone equals. Under the AKP, the Turkish government has opened official relations with these leaders -- though officials are always sure to emphasize Turkey's support for a unified state of Iraq.

Turkey has business interests that raise its stake in establishing better relations with Iraq's Kurdish community. There are about 500 Turkish companies in Iraqi Kurdistan that contracted for 145

projects in 2009 amounting to \$16 billion. Turkey is reluctant to jeopardize these potential profits with political tensions. For their part, the Kurdish leaders, fearing hostility from their Arab neighbors in the event of a US withdrawal, have taken a pragmatic approach to forming relations with Turkey.

AKP leaders informally admit that the cooperation of Barzani, Talabani or both is crucial to any plan to stop the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) guerilla activities inside Turkey. In mid-2009, Erdoğan declared his party's "Kurdish opening," an initiative aimed at putting an end to the PKK's armed struggle through concessions such as granting greater cultural rights and some form of local autonomy to Turkey's Kurdish minority. The "opening" did not last long, however. Erdoğan, frightened by nationalist backlash, changed its name to the "democratic opening," then to "the project of national unity and fraternity," before gradually ceasing to mention it. The fallout of the aborted "Kurdish opening" does not augur well for the AKP's "soft" approach to foreign policy. If Turkey is unable to resolve its Kurdish problem through peaceful means, its new outlook will lose cogency in the eyes of Western allies. For instance, critics of Turkey's increasingly vociferous objections to Israel's policies toward the Palestinians will question Turkey's credibility by citing Turkey's treatment of its Kurdish minority.

While there seems to be concord between Turkey and the US over Iraq policy, an increasing rapprochement between Iran and Turkey has raised concerns in the US. In a recent New York Times article entitled "As Ugly As It Gets," Thomas Friedman blasted Brazil and Turkey for their gambit on the nuclear issue: "Is there anything uglier than watching democrats sell out other democrats to a Holocaust-denying, vote-stealing Iranian thug just to tweak the US and show that they, too, can play at the big power table?" But Turkey's position on Iran is not mere muscle flexing; nor is it rooted in an ideological affinity for the Islamic Republic. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Turkey's relations with Iran deteriorated due to fears on both sides of the other's ambitions to promote regime change. Even today, there is little serious sympathy for Iran among ordinary Turks, particularly not as compared to that shown for the Palestinians, for example. A BBC poll found that the percentage of Turks who have warm feelings for Iran is only 13 percent while sympathy for Israel is at 6 percent and that for the US under the Obama administration is at 13 percent. The clear majority of Turks, however, would be opposed to stiffer sanctions against Iran or a military strike since the US and Israel are believed to be acting in concert to achieve these ends.

But it is not only popular opinion that compels Erdoğan to take a less confrontational stance toward Iran. Any additional sanctions will create significant problems for Turkey's economy, since Turkish trade with Iran has steadily increased. Currently the two countries have a trade volume of \$10 billion -- a fivefold increase over 2002. Iran is the second-largest source of natural gas for Turkey. Turkey is also planning to invest \$3.5 billion in the South Pars natural gas field. Chaos in Iran will bring not only economic hardships but also tens of thousands of new immigrants to Turkey, as was the case after the Iranian revolution (and, to a smaller extent, amidst the turmoil following Iran's 2009 presidential election). Moreover, instability in Iran risks escalating the Kurdish insurgency led by the PKK's sister

organization in Iran, the PJAK, another development that could have ramifications in Turkey. Hence, Erdoğan's motives are quite rational and material despite claims that he is ready to abandon Turkey's traditional foreign policy for the sake of Islamic brotherhood.

Turkey's opposition to sanctions on Iran aside, it can be expected that Turkey will gradually distance itself from Iran. The June 9 passage of a Security Council sanctions resolution against Iran was a blow to the Erdoğan government, which had voted against it. Aware of the growing mistrust in Washington toward Ankara, Erdoğan is trying to promote the concept that Turkey is the ideal intermediary between the two camps. The AKP is also wary of siding with Iran for fear of losing the good will of Gulf Arab states and access to the mountains of petrodollars at their disposal. In fact, one of the driving motives of the AKP government is to attract these petrodollars in the form of investments in Turkey. Since the AKP's coming to power in 2002, Gulf investment in Turkey has skyrocketed, reaching \$30 billion dollars in 2008.

A Seat at the Table

The AKP realizes the significance of projecting Turkey as a regional leader not only to declare its independence from the West but also to marginalize Iran as the other contender for the title. Much like Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Erdoğan has become popular throughout the Middle East due to his outspoken criticisms of the Israeli state. The competition to be the new protagonist of the Palestinians is a challenge to Arab leaders who are deliberately meek about Israel's siege of Gaza. The fact that the pious Erdoğan became prime minister of Turkey through free and fair elections is another challenge to autocratic Arab governments and goes some way toward explaining his popularity among Islamist groups in Arab states, who view Turkey's experience as a potential model.

Erdoğan's frequent references to the Palestinian cause are motivated by a combination of ideology and deliberate political tactics. A paternalistic inclination to protect the Palestinians is also linked to the Islamists-turned-conservative democrats' psychological need to prove that they are still committed to their moral obligations to the umma. The political Islamists in Turkey have undergone a serious process of ideological moderation. Except for the Palestinian issue and the right of women to wear headscarves in public places, AKP cadres and other groups that adhere to Islamism are suffering from an absence of common ideological grievances. Increasing economic, cultural and political power have moved the AKP toward the center of the political spectrum as the party moves to reclaim the center-right tradition started by the Democrat Party in the 1950s. As in the Arab world, Turkish Islamists have also drifted away from the strategy of capturing central state power as a way to Islamize the country. Rather, they are increasingly positioning themselves to capture society, particularly by means of charitable and human rights associations.

Turkey has also sought cultural means of increasing its prestige in the Middle East. The AKP government has launched an Arabic-language satellite channel and news programs in Arabic to

propagate positive views of Turkey's policies. Turkish TV series have found a considerable audience in the region and angered conservatives who see them as deliberate efforts to induce moral laxity among Muslims. Some scholars at the al-Azhar mosque-university, for instance, blamed the melodrama *Gümüş* for increasing the divorce rate in Egypt by raising the "romantic expectations of women."

Tactically, increasing its prestige and power in the Middle East allows Turkey to assert itself as an indispensable power in the region. The AKP does not aim to break the country's long-standing ties with the US and European powers, but rather to enhance Turkey's status as a vital and autonomous player in the region. Increasing signs of multi-polarity also provide ample opportunities for the Turkish government to enhance its regional influence, which can be converted into bargaining power in its dealings with the US and the EU. As Ahmet Davutoğlu lucidly described his vision: "The new global order must be more inclusive and participatory... Turkey will be among those active and influential actors who sit around the table to solve problems rather than watching them."

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Endnotes

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