

Not Just a Bridge over Troubled Waters: Turkey in Regional and International Affairs

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In recent years Turkey has attempted to establish its foreign policy according to the doctrine of strategic depth suggested by Ahmet Davutoglu,¹ former chief advisor to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on foreign policy and today Turkey's foreign minister. This policy emphasizes that the importance of a nation in the international system is measured by its geo-strategic location and by its historical depth. Davutoglu claims that from this vantage Turkey's situation is unique because of its geographical location in a region connecting two continents and because of its historical links with the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia.² The doctrine reflects a neo-Ottoman trend, as well as Turkey's desire to increase its soft power and influence in the international arena; its practical significance lies in the growing number of mediation initiatives Turkey has promoted around the world, particularly with regard to regional conflicts. Turkey's policy towards its neighbors has been termed "zero problems,"³ as the objective was to try to invest great efforts in order to prevent possible crises along its borders.

In the past year, the doctrine of strategic depth was reflected in several diplomatic moves initiated by Turkey: offers to mediate between the United States and Iran, continuing efforts to mediate between Syria and Israel, and what came to be called "football diplomacy" regarding Turkish attempts to improve its relationship with Armenia, culminating

in the historic visit by the Turkish president to Armenia. Beyond these, as part of Turkey's responses to the crisis in Georgia, Turkey drafted a proposal for a platform of cooperation and stability in the Caucasus, which included Russia, Turkey, and the nations in the southern Caucasus region. Turkey has also encouraged renewal of the talks between the adversaries in Cyprus in light of the presidential elections in the Greek part of the island in February 2008, which resulted in the rise of a moderate leader who supports a settlement. In addition to these initiatives, after more than forty years, Turkey was once again elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

In contrast to these positive diplomatic developments, no progress was made in the past year with regard to the Kurds. The problem of terrorist activity on the part of the Kurdish Workers' Party (the PKK) remains and has even worsened, as has Turkey's typical response after PKK attacks, which consists of repeated entries of Turkish forces into Iraqi areas in order to pursue Kurdish fighters. In the past year, there was some progress in intelligence cooperation between the United States and Turkey regarding PKK activity in northern Iraq, and the United States viewed with understanding Turkish air and ground activity in the area. Nonetheless, it seems that despite American efforts to forge a closer relationship with Turkey, there was no essential change in the Turkish public's attitude towards the United States, at least not until Barack Obama became president. It seems that this election contributed to an improved United States image in Turkey.⁴

Turkey and its Immediate Surroundings

Turkey harbors significant concerns about the future of Iraq. The American goal is to withdraw from Iraq by 2011, but there are also calls from within the United States to accelerate the process. Turkey fears that Kurdish demands for a loose ethnic confederation in Iraq are merely a disguise for the Kurds' true intentions – to establish an independent Kurdish state. Yet while Turkey is vehemently opposed to this possibility, perhaps the establishment of such a state, over which Turkey would probably have more influence than any of the neighboring states, could strengthen Turkey's standing in the region. Even today, Turkish businesspeople are

highly invested in northern Iraq, and therefore their interest is to maintain stability in Kurdish areas.

To a certain extent, fears about the establishment of an independent Kurdish state also explain Turkey's efforts to forge a closer relationship with Iran, another country with vehement objections to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state and the presence of American forces in Iraq. In this context, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Turkey in August 2008 was particularly significant. The visit was to Istanbul, not Ankara, and was defined as a "working meeting" rather than an official visit, so that Turkey could avoid the official ceremonies and Ahmadinejad could forego the obligatory visit to the mausoleum of Kamel Atatürk, the father of Turkish secularism.⁵ Turkey's atypical flexibility on this issue suggests the high degree of importance it attributes to promoting its relations with Iran.

Also preoccupying the international community and touching on Turkish-Iranian relations is the Iranian nuclear issue. Turkey's stance is that at this stage, everything possible should be done to prevent a conflagration that could result from Israeli or American preventive action. The Turks are less worried about an Iranian nuclear threat posed against them, and more worried about the regional instability that might result from Iran's attempt to attain nuclear weapons. Prime Minister Erdoğan even identified somewhat with Iran's questioning the legitimacy of nuclear weapons states' attempts to prevent Iran from attaining these weapons. Nonetheless, it seems that in Turkey there is some disagreement over the significance of an Iran with nuclear weapons: the military and secular elites are worried by Iran's nuclear policies, whereas the leaders of the Justice and Development Party and new elite groups do not share these concerns. At the same time, despite the disagreement, there are no calls at present for Turkey to develop its own nuclear capabilities, which may be explained by the nuclear umbrella Turkey enjoys as a member of NATO.

A marked improvement has taken place in recent years in Turkish-Syrian relations, stemming from common interests with regard to Iraq's future and Syria's need to breach the international isolation imposed on it by the Bush administration.⁶ This prompted Syria to present moderate stances with regard to Turkey, e.g., over the issue of allocation of regional

waters. Improved relations were also reflected by Turkey's central role in mediating between Israel and Syria. The diplomatic activity consisted of four rounds of indirect negotiations between the sides, and an intended fifth round was postponed because of the election campaign in Israel. In late 2008 Prime Minister Ehud Olmert traveled to Ankara to try to advance the negotiations with Syria. On the eve of his visit, at the annual international conference of the Institute for National Security Studies, Olmert said, "Removing Syria from the Axis of Evil is of supreme strategic interest for the State of Israel," and "a peace agreement with Syria can be achieved."⁷ During his visit, Olmert met with Prime Minister Erdoğan, President Abdullah Gül, and then-Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, and there was reportedly progress towards the formulation of a mediation document that would allow for direct negotiations between the sides.⁸ However, with the Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip in late December Syria decided to suspend the talks and Turkey withdrew from its role as mediator, though Erdoğan hinted that Turkey would once again fill this function and said, "Peace between Israel and Syria is not yet dead."⁹

Over the year there were few significant developments in Israeli-Turkish relations, but during Operation Cast Lead these relations suffered a significant blow. While in the past negative developments in Israeli-Palestinian relations have also almost always resulted in harsh criticism from Turkey, Olmert's visit to Ankara just a few days before the operation contributed to Turkey's feeling that it had been pushed into a corner. On the one hand, the impression was that Turkey perhaps knew of the operation in advance and did not prevent it, and on the other hand, if Turkey did not know about it, then apparently Ankara's importance was not as great as its leaders assumed. On several occasions during the operation and afterwards, Prime Minister Erdoğan spoke about Israel with great acrimony. He stated that an ongoing operation in Gaza would be "a crime against humanity," and that it reflected Israel's disrespect toward Turkey's attempts at mediation.¹⁰ He also stated that Israel was committing inhuman acts in Gaza, which would cause its self-destruction.¹¹ After Security Council Resolution 1860 was passed, Erdoğan said that Israel should not be allowed into United Nations institutions as long as it fails to fulfill the immediate ceasefire called for by the resolution. President Gül warned that Israel's actions would destabilize

the region.¹² A severe diplomatic incident also took place during the session devoted to the fighting in Gaza at the economic forum in Davos, attended by Israeli president Shimon Peres and Erdoğan; Erdoğan left the session in protest over President Peres' remarks and because he was not given sufficient response time.

Concomitant with the political tensions, there were large anti-Israel rallies in Turkey and calls for severing all commercial and security ties between the two countries. In response, the Israeli public reacted with a popular cry on the internet not to travel to Turkey. In this respect, the Bnei HaSharon basketball team's visit to Ankara and its fears of stepping onto the court in front of the irate crowd in the arena left their marks on Israeli public opinion. Although Israeli tourism does not constitute a highly significant percentage of Turkey's total incoming tourism,¹³ it has great importance in terms of direct contact between the two populations.

In addition to Turkey's extensive criticism of Israel, the central roles played by Egypt and France in managing and solving the crisis also contributed to undermining Turkey's role as chief mediator. Nonetheless, Turkey has not given up its attempts to mediate in the conflict; beyond the role played by the Turks in convincing Hamas to agree to a ceasefire,¹⁴ Turkish president Gül participated in the Sharm el-Sheikh conference at the end of the crisis, together with senior representatives from the European Union and the UN secretary-general. Turkey views the refusal by Israel and part of the international community to negotiate with Hamas as a mistake, leading to a continuing deterioration of the situation in Gaza. The Justice and Development Party in many ways identifies with Hamas, because while both were elected democratically, both have the legitimacy of their rule questioned, partly because of their Islamic base.

Turkey and the European Union

While Turkey continues to grow closer to Middle Eastern nations, it seems that over the year no real progress was made in Turkey's efforts to enter the European Union. In fact, there was perhaps some regression in that process. In addition to the objection already existing in Europe to Turkey joining the EU, some internal developments in Turkey weakened the prospects. The ongoing struggle between the old secular elite and the army

leaders on the one hand, and the Justice and Development Party with its leanings to Islamic principles and the new elites on the other demonstrates the problematics of the Turkish democracy to many Europeans. This struggle took an acrimonious turn this year in a lawsuit submitted to the Constitutional Court in March 2008 against the ruling Justice and Development Party on the grounds of its deviation from the principle of secularism. In July 2008, the court ruled against the suit, yet at the same time, a majority of ten judges to one ruled that the policy of the Justice and Development Party does in fact not meet the principle of secularism. However, six judges – though a majority of seven was needed to arrive at such a decision – thought that this justified shutting down the party. Shutting down the party, which in the July 2007 elections won almost 47 percent of the vote, could have been destructive to Turkey's image as a democracy, and the fact that a single vote spared the party did not entirely prevent harm to this image. Also, the depth of the suspicion and mystery surrounding the extremist secular Ergenekon organization, some of whose members were arrested this year, aroused protest both in Turkey and abroad. It was claimed that the organization sought violent action to undermine political stability and bring down the Justice and Development Party. Some charged that the accusations against the organization were exaggerated, even fictitious, while still others stressed that the existence of such an organization – said to have members that include former senior military personnel and others from the secular elites – is evidence of a deep state in Turkey alongside the sovereign government.

In addition to the problems between the secular elite and the Justice and Development Party, a halt in reforms relating to the Kurds is another factor that will make it difficult for Turkey to prove that it meets the criteria for gaining acceptance into the EU. There is disagreement whether the cessation of the reforms stemmed from the Justice and Development Party's concerns that a controversial policy might cost it support in the March 2009 local elections or whether a more substantial change in the Justice and Development Party's policy has taken place.¹⁵ Those who claim the latter even hint at a kind of agreement that was reached between the Justice and Development Party and the military establishment, whereby the Justice and Development Party would not introduce revolutionary policies

with regard to the Kurds and the military would not work to undermine the party.¹⁶

In contrast to these internal developments that Europe sees as problematic, the August 2008 crisis in Georgia demonstrated that Turkey remains important from the geo-strategic perspective vis-à-vis Russia, even in the post-Cold War era. Criticism of the West's weak response to the aggressive Russian policy against Georgia bolstered the claim that the EU can profit politically and militarily by deepening its relations with Turkey, Georgia's neighbor. The crisis in August also demonstrated the problem inherent in constructing pipelines for transporting energy resources that cross Georgia in order to bypass Armenia, embroiled in disputes with Turkey and Azerbaijan. The EU would now probably be interested in Turkey's help in solving the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh because that conflict also makes the situation vis-à-vis Russia more difficult in the Caucasus region. Therefore, an improvement in Turkish-Armenian relations could contribute to willingness of the sides to make compromises in the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Turkey's closest ally. On the other hand, deterioration in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations is liable to help Russia's influence over the Caucasus grow because Russia is Armenia's ally.

Turkey's difficulties in gaining acceptance into the EU on the one hand, and the need to prevent Turkey's distancing from the West on the other, are increasing the odds that Turkey will be offered a "privileged partnership" with the EU, an idea supported by French president Nicolas Sarkozy and German chancellor Angela Merkel.¹⁷ At the same time, it is not clear if Turkey will be willing to make do with a special status as opposed to full membership. Turkey claims that the impediments to meeting the criteria for acceptance into the EU do not justify the unwillingness of EU leaders to grant Turkey a commitment in principle to accept Turkey into their ranks. In fact, the question of Turkey entering the EU goes way beyond the question of economic and political profits. Accepting Turkey as an EU member touches on questions of identity that the Turks are struggling with, particularly in the present era. The EU countries will presumably make great efforts to add economic incentives to the "privileged partnership" and thus smooth the way for Turkey's acceptance of the idea, but the global economic crisis will make it difficult for now to put together a significant

economic incentive package. The economic crisis will probably also have a negative impact on economic growth within Turkey, and it might well be that this will have implications on the level of support the Justice and Development Party enjoys. In 2008, the growth level in Turkey decreased significantly as compared with the growth rate, which although positive did not allow for the creation of new jobs in sufficient quantity to cope with the problem of Turkish unemployment in general and the problem of unemployment among the younger population in particular.¹⁸

Looking Ahead

A concerted effort on both sides will be needed in the coming year to rehabilitate Israel-Turkey relations. Some of the deterioration in the wake of Operation Cast Lead may be attributed to a continuing process of distancing between the nations and the wane of common interests, but some stems from the more active role Turkey seeks in regional mediation and the challenges that this role confers on Turkey and other nations. Therefore despite Turkey's desire to present itself as a fair mediator, in extreme crises such as Operation Cast Lead the limitations of this policy emerge, with Turkey finding it difficult to maintain an impartial public stance. A possible solution is accepting Turkey as a "biased mediator" but one that "can deliver the goods," partly because of its good relations with Hamas and its improving relations with Syria and Iran. The important questions in this context are if Turkey is willing to play such a role and if Israel is prepared to accept harsh criticism from Turkey if it is backed by achievements.

One may anticipate that the good relations between Turkey and Syria and Turkey and Hamas will continue, whereas the relations between Turkey and Iran rest on shakier foundations, partly because of Iran's quest to exert greater regional influence. Indeed, it is unclear how much longer Iran can avoid interfering with Turkey's intentions to increase its own influence. This was apparent when Iran opposed any progress in the Israel-Syria peace talks mediated by Turkey. From Israel's perspective, the growing closeness between Syria and Iran, and the growing closeness of Turkey to both of these nations, are worrisome developments, whereas detaching Syria from the radical axis may contribute not only to a possible decrease in

the range of threats against Israel but also to rendering a blow to the radical axis itself. Moreover, as in the past, progress in the peace process may lead to improved Israel-Turkey relations. On the other hand, deterioration into violence, particularly between Israel and the Palestinians, is liable to broaden the damage already caused to these relations in the wake of Operation Cast Lead.

In terms of Turkish-American relations, Turkey anticipates that the Obama administration will depart from its predecessor's approach and put greater emphasis on real dialogue between the United States and its allies. The foreign affairs team put together by Obama – Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, National Security Advisor James Jones, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates – may be expected to be attentive to Turkey's needs, in part because of Jones's prior functions in NATO and Gates's continued term as secretary of defense. At the same time, the possibility that the United States might recognize the events of 1915 as a genocide perpetrated by the Turks suggests a potential rift between the United States and Turkey. Because of a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress and a Democratic administration in the White House, and past support by Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton on the matter, Armenian groups in the diaspora have increased the pressure to reach this historic decision.¹⁹ It has even been suggested that one of the reasons for the growing closeness between Turkey and Armenia in the past year was Turkey's concern that without progress in direct relations with Armenia it would be impossible to convince the Americans not to support such a decision.

In the coming year, the possible opening of a direct line of negotiations between the United States and Iran will in practice reduce the significance of Turkey as a mediator between the two nations. Also, progress in talks between Israel and Syria requires United States involvement, something that would again render Turkish mediation less important. Progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations too seems to depend more on the extent of the Obama administration's commitment to the process than on Turkey's involvement. Such developments might harm Turkey's prestige as mediator and its ability to realize its doctrine of strategic depth, yet they are at the same time in line with what is understood to be current Turkish interests –

the solution of conflicts between nations in its geographical proximity and its “zero problems” policy regarding its neighbors.

Notes

- 1 The concept “strategic depth” refers to a book by this name that Davutoglu published in Turkey in 2001. It should be noted that Davutoglu’s use of the term differs from its accepted meaning and usage in a military context.
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- 3 A. Davutoglu, “Turkish Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007,” *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 1 (2008): 80.
- 4 “Turks Optimistic of Improved U.S. Ties with Obama Presidency,” *Hurriyet DailyNews*, January 20, 2009, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/world/10811298.asp?gid=244>.
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- 7 “Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s Speech at the Institute for National Security Studies Annual Conference,” December 18, 2008, [http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1229840156.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1229840156.pdf).
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- 9 “Erdoğan: Israel Broke 6-month Truce,” *Jerusalem Post*, January 25, 2009, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1232643740818&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>.
- 10 “Erdoğan Angered by Israel’s Gaza Campaign,” *Today’s Zaman*, December 29, 2008, <http://www.todayzaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=162602>.
- 11 H. Keinon, “Israel: Erodgan’s Words ‘Unacceptable,’” *Jerusalem Post*, January 5, 2009, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1230733177704&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>.
- 12 “Turkish President Gül Denounces Israeli attacks on Gaza,” *Hurriyet DailyNews*, December 28, 2008, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10657842.asp?scr=1>.

- 13 In 2008, some 26 million tourists visited Turkey; it is estimated that some 650,000 were Israeli. "More than 26 Million Tourists Visit Turkey in 2008," *Journal of Turkish Weekly*, December 30, 2008, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/62569/more-than-26-million-tourists-visit-turkey-in-2008.html>.
- 14 "Turkey Convinces Hamas on Ceasefire with Israel, Top Official Says," *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 19, 2009, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/world/10807124.asp>.
- 15 C. Ülsever, "Why AKP has Changed," *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 18, 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/haber.aspx?id=10380946&yazarid=294>.
- 16 "The Worrying Tayyip Erdoğan," *The Economist*, November 27, 2008, http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12696853.
- 17 J. Dempsey and D. Bilefsky, "European Leaders Greet Sarkozy with Mixture of Hope and Caution," *International Herald Tribune*, May 7, 2007, <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2007/05/07/news/europe.php>.
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