

Israeli-Turkish Tensions and their International Ramifications

by Efraim Inbar

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Abstract: The deterioration of relations between Israel and Turkey, culminating in the “Gaza flotilla” affair of June 2010, are part of a reorientation in the Turkish foreign policy over the past several years: a move away from the West and toward Muslim states and non-state groups, including such radical actors as Iran, Hamas and Hizballah. This article reviews the rationale for the Israeli-Turkish strategic partnership in the 1990s and the early years of this century. It then documents deviations in Turkish foreign policy from Western patterns. Next it examines how changes in Turkey’s twenty-first century strategic environment, as well as in the domestic arena, led to a reorientation of Turkish foreign policy and to current tensions in bilateral relations. And finally, it assesses the impact of the changes in Turkish foreign policy on the Greater Middle East and global politics.

Tensions between Ankara and Jerusalem have escalated since Turkey harshly criticized Israel following its invasion of the Gaza Strip in December 2008 (Operation Cast Lead). The operation aimed to halt continuous missile attacks on Israel’s civilian population by Hamas. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s subsequent outburst at Israeli President Shimon Peres during a panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2009 was indicative of further cooling between the two powers.¹ Then in October 2009 Turkey abruptly canceled Israel’s participation in the multinational “Anatolian Eagle” air exercise. This was followed by Turkish political leaders’ severe criticism of Israeli policies. Subsequently, an inflammatory anti-Israeli drama series on Turkey’s state-controlled television station, depicting Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers as cold-blooded murderers and rapists, only exacerbated tensions. Since Fall 2009, hardly a week passes without Erdogan slamming Israel. Finally, Israeli military action to prevent the

The author acknowledges the research help of Elizabeth Stull.

¹Asli Aydintasbas, “Erdogan’s Davos Outburst is Nothing New,” *Forbes*, January 1, 2009.

“Gaza Flotilla” from breaking the blockade on the Hamas-ruled Strip in June 2010, which ended with nine Turkish Islamists dead on board one of the ships, provided Erdogan’s government another opportunity to condemn Israel and champion the cause of Hamas. These actions represent a serious deterioration of the once vibrant strategic relationship between Israel and Turkey.

The Israeli-Turkish Strategic Partnership

Turkey has a very important regional presence due to its mere size, geographical location and political history. For Israel, a state with a history of conflict with many of its Arab neighbors, good relations with Turkey, a country 99 percent Muslim, has been one way to break free from regional isolation and to minimize the religious dimension of its conflict with the Arabs. From the beginning of statehood, Jerusalem stressed the importance of good relations with Ankara. However, for a variety of political reasons, Turkey kept Israel at arm’s length. This dynamic changed with the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, Kemalist Turkey looked for partners in the Middle East that could help meet the growing security challenges from Iran, Iraq, and Syria.² The decreasing relevance of the NATO alliance, of which Turkey was a member, in dealing with Middle East contingencies, augmented this search.

Moreover, Turkey’s turn to Israel was the perfect choice, since Israel shared Turkey’s threat assessment and was a strong pro-Western country with considerable clout in the United States, the new hegemonic power in the world. Jerusalem could provide military technology that the West was reluctant to sell to its NATO ally because of Ankara’s controversial war against the Kurdish insurgency. As a result, Turkey upgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel to the ambassadorial level in 1992. Furthermore, during the 1990s, Turkey signed numerous bilateral military agreements, which turned this relationship into a strategic partnership.³

In the mid-1990s, relations with Israel bloomed economically, diplomatically, and militarily. Defense trade during that time was worth several million dollars. Major programs included a \$700 million deal to modernize Turkey’s aging fleet of F-4 Phantoms and a \$688 million deal to upgrade its M-60 tanks and an array of other sophisticated weapons systems. The Israeli Air Force was allowed to use Turkish air space to practice complex operations and the countries collaborated on issues of counter terrorism and intelligence.

²For the Turkish predicament and its foreign policy in the post-Cold War Era, see Heinz Kramer, *A Changing Turkey. The Challenge to Europe and the United States* (Washington: Brookings, 2000); F. Stephen Larrabee and Ian O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2003).

³For an elaborate analysis of the reasons for the strategic partnership, its content and its implications see Efraim Inbar, *The Israeli-Turkish Entente* (London: King’s College Mediterranean Program, 2001).

For Jerusalem, the intimacy between the two governments was second only to U.S.-Israel relations. A strategic partnership between Ankara and Jerusalem emerged, reinforced by a common strategic agenda based on similar concerns about Syria, Iraq, and Iran, and complementary interests in central Asia. The two states also displayed a similar outlook on global affairs, including foreign policy alignment with the United States, mixed feelings about Europe, and suspicion of Russia. The Israeli-Turkish entente became an important feature of post-Cold War politics in the Middle East.

Jerusalem received the news of the electoral victory of the Islamic-rooted AK Party (AKP) in October 2002 apprehensively. Yet, the AKP-led government maintained Turkey's good relationship with Israel. Visits from the Turkish leadership, including Premiere Erdogan (May 2005), continued, and cooperation continued, even in the strategic field. The bilateral relationship seemed to have weathered successfully several tests, such as Turkish fears over Israeli support for the establishment of a Kurdish state in fractured Iraq, the slowdown in the peace process, and the acceptance of a Hamas delegation in Ankara (January 2006).⁴ The latest manifestation of this "business as usual" attitude was the joint Israel-Turkey naval exercise in August 2009.

Yet, recent developments have cooled this the bilateral relationship. High level visits have decreased, while official Turkish criticism of Israel, often quite strident, has increased. Israel, under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, seems to have disappointed the AKP government for not informing Turkey about its impending attack on Gaza and for not making enough concessions to Syria in the Turkish mediation effort. Moreover, in September 2009, Jerusalem turned down a request from Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to enter the Gaza Strip from Israel, where he planned to meet Hamas officials before crossing back into the Jewish state.⁵ This decision was part of Israel's policy of not meeting with foreign statesmen who, on the same trip, met with Hamas officials. Israel's refusal infuriated the Turks, who showed their displeasure by cancelling the participation of the Israeli Air Force in the international "Anatolian Eagle" exercise in October 2009.⁶

The volume of defense trade has also decreased. Israel's growing apprehensions about the direction of Turkish foreign policy even led officials in Jerusalem to consider withholding export licenses for the sale of defense items and services to Turkey, and demoting the country's standing from "preferred" to "presumption of denial."⁷ In August 2010, Israel's Defense

⁴ Efraim Inbar, "Israel's Strategic Relations with Turkey and India," in Robert O. Freedman, ed., *Contemporary Israel: Political, Economic and Security Challenges* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), pp. 228-36.

⁵ Herb Keinon, "Turkish FM Cancels Visit over Gaza Row," *Jerusalem Post*, September 8, 2009.

⁶ "Turkey Cancels Air Force Drill Because of Israeli Participation," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 11, 2009.

⁷ Barbara Opall-Rome and Vago Muradian, "Israel-Turkey Rift Derails Defense Trade," *Defense News*, October 18, 2009.

Minister Ehud Barak expressed apprehensions about the appointment of a pro-Iranian to head the MIT (Turkey's spying agency), reflecting Israel's fears that Turkey is losing its pro-Western foreign policy orientation.

One explanation may be that the Palestinian issue has gained greater resonance in Ankara since the AKP came to power, leading to greater tensions with Israel. Erdogan stressed that "Turkey sees solving the Palestinian issue as key to achieving peace and stability in the region."⁸ Yet, the increased animosity between Jerusalem and Ankara also dovetailed with Turkey's growing divergence from the West. This reorientation in Turkey's foreign policy—leaving the Western fold—had a large influence on its attitude toward Israel.

A New Foreign Policy Orientation

As international circumstances change and domestic preferences redefine national interests, cooler relations and even international divorce often result.⁹ While Israel has been consistent in its desire to maintain strong relations with Turkey, an important regional player, Turkey's international and domestic environment has changed, leading to a new emphasis on its foreign policy. The contours of the new Turkish foreign policy indicate a propensity to distance itself from the West and a quest for enhanced relations with Muslim countries, particularly those located along Turkey's borders. Turkey also aspires to acquire a more prominent international status. One clear manifestation of Ankara's new foreign policy is the cooling of relations with Israel.

The first indication of change occurred in March 2003 when its AKP-led parliament denied U.S. troops permission to use Turkish territory to open a northern front against Iraq. This decision, which reflected growing anti-Americanism on a public level,¹⁰ was a great surprise to the U.S. officials, who believed Turkey was a trusted and reliable ally. Gradually, the differences between Turkey and the United States became more pronounced.¹¹ By June 2010, the U.S.-Turkey relations reached their lowest point since 2003, this time over Turkey's policies toward Iran's nuclear program, as elaborated below, and toward Israel in a dispute that may even hurt defense cooperation.¹²

⁸ *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 29, 2010.

⁹ Terry L. Deibel, "A Guide to International Divorce," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1978, pp. 17-35.

¹⁰ Melih Coban, "Rising Anti-Americanism in Turkey," *Turkish Review of Eurasian Studies*, Annual 2004-5, pp. 63-84; Nasu Usluh, Metin Toprak, Ibrahim Dalmis and Ertan Aydin, "Turkish Public Opinion Towards the United States: In the Context of Iraqi Question," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2005), pp. 75-107.

¹¹ Kemal Kirisci, *Turkey's Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times*, Chaillot Paper, No. 92 (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, September 2006), pp. 79-84.

¹² Umit Enginsoy and Burak Ege Begdil, "Iran Tensions May Hurt US-Turk Defense Cooperation," *Defense News*, April 5, 2010; Umit Enginsoy and Burak Ege Begdil, "Gaza Raid Adds to Turkey-NATO Tensions," *Defense News*, June 7, 2010; Umit Enginsoy and Burak Ege Begdil, "From Bad to Worse," *Defense News*, June 14, 2010.

Continuous Turkish criticism of Israel seems to have elicited even a presidential warning that Turkey may lose arms deals if tensions continue.¹³

At the same time, Turkey has displayed a declining commitment to NATO, as best indicated by its behavior during the Georgian crisis in the summer of 2008. Facing immense Russian pressure, Ankara was slow in responding to U.S. requests to send ships into the Black Sea via the Bosphorus Straits. Turkey flatly denied several requests on the pretext that the military vessels were too large.¹⁴ Moreover, Turkey proposed the creation of a “Platform for Security and Cooperation in the South Caucasus,” which would create a regional security framework involving Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Washington did not seem keen on this initiative that left out a NATO role.¹⁵

The Middle East has been the area in which the AKP government most clearly has departed from the traditional Kemalist policy. The Kemalist approach had been to keep away from the Middle East, which was seen as corrupt, authoritarian, and underdeveloped. It also rejected the Pan-Islamic and Pan-Turkish ideologies that required contact and involvement with the Muslim countries to its East and South. The Kemalist legacy dictated good relations and integration with the West.¹⁶

In contrast, the AKP adopted a regional foreign policy dubbed “zero problems with neighbors,” the brain child of its current foreign minister, Davutoglu,¹⁷ designed to minimize regional tensions and improve relations with the Islamic world, especially in the Middle East. As a result, Turkey improved relations with authoritarian Muslim states such as Syria, Iran, Libya, and Sudan, usually in flagrant deviation from the preferences of its Western NATO allies.

For example, AKP-ruled Ankara defied American preferences on Syria, a country allied with radical Iran and on the American list of states supporting terrorism. In January 2004, Bashar Assad became the first Syrian president ever to visit Turkey. Erdogan reciprocated by visiting Damascus in December 2004 and by signing a free trade agreement. The high level visits and rhetoric about strategic cooperation between Ankara and Damascus was of great concern to the Bush administration. In April 2009, the two states conducted their first ever joint military exercise to be followed in September by the establishment of a

¹³ *Israel Hayom*, August 17, 2010.

¹⁴ Daniel Steinworth, “Turkey Walks a Tightrope Between Russia and the West,” *Der Spiegel*, December 12, 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,577920,00.html>.

¹⁵ An incredible deviance from NATO practices was the September 2010 air exercise held together by the Chinese air force and its Turkish counterpart over Turkish (NATO) airspace. Moreover, in November 2010, Chinese and Turkish commando units trained together on Turkish soil.

¹⁶ Patricia Carley, “Turkey’s Place in the World,” in Henry Barkey, ed., *Turkey’s Role in the Middle East* (Washington: USIP, 2005), pp. 4-5.

¹⁷ Ahmet Davutoglu, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2008), pp. 77-96.

“Senior Strategic Cooperation Council.” No other NATO member has such close relations with the authoritarian regime in Damascus, which has been closely allied with Iran for several decades.

Turkey further deviated from the Western consensus in 2008 by hosting Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir twice. Bashir, who was charged with war crimes and genocide in Darfur, presides over an Islamist regime.¹⁸ The AKP government actually criticized Western behavior toward the Sudanese leader as practicing “double standards,” distancing itself from the Western consensus.

Turkey’s new Islamist orientation became more apparent when, in June 2010, the AKP government formally invited Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah to Ankara.¹⁹ Hizballah, a Shiite militia whose goal is to transform Lebanon into an Islamist state and whose ideological platform is anti-Western, is an advocate of the destruction of Israel. Most Western states consider Hizballah to be an Iranian proxy and terrorist organization. In July 2010, Erdogan even personally called Nasrallah to convey his condolences after the death of the Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, the spiritual leader of Hizballah.²⁰

Another departure from the Kemalist tradition and part of an active attempt to increase its presence in the Arab world was Turkey’s participation in the Arab League summits. Speaking at a summit meeting in Libya, Prime Minister Erdogan stated that Turks and Arabs share not only a common geography but also a common culture, civilization, and beliefs, and that Turkey places great importance on the Arab League and is pleased with the group’s influence in both regional issues and global politics. “Turkey is ready to cooperate with the Arab League in any area,” he said.²¹ Turkey also joined the Arab League Parliaments organization as an observer.²² Another indication of Turkey’s growing interest in the Arab world took place in April 2010, when Erdogan inaugurated a new, state-run Arabic-language channel, the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). The Turkish government relishes the fact that Turkey and its prime minister became very popular in the Arab street following its clashes with Israel.

Led by AKP, Turkey also decided to hold a dialogue with Hamas in the aftermath of its victory in the Palestinian legislative elections (January 2006), and even after the bloody Hamas takeover of Gaza (June 2007). This decision deviated clearly from Western foreign policy which shunned any formal links with terrorist organizations that advocated the destruction of Israel. Western states refused to view Hamas as a legitimate interlocutor until it recognizes the

¹⁸ Emrullah Uslu, “Why Does Turkey Love Omar al-Bashir?” *The Jamestown Foundation*, March 6, 2009, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume 6, Issue 44.

¹⁹ ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3903302,00.html.

²⁰ *Israel Hayom*, July 8, 2010.

²¹ *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 29, 2010.

²² *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 10, 2010.

existence of Israel, accepts the agreements signed between Israel and the PLO, and renounces violence against the Jewish state. Moreover, Turkey sided with Hamas during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (December 2008) even when pro-Western Arab states supported Israel's struggle against radical Hamas. Ahead of his recent trip to Iran, the Turkish premier accused Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman of threatening to attack the Gaza Strip with a nuclear weapon in an interview published in the UK-based newspaper, *The Guardian*, on October 26, 2009.²³ The simple fact that Turkish sympathy for the Palestinians could have been directed toward helping the Palestinian Authority rather than Hamas is telling.

The behavior most indicative of an Islamic preference in Turkey's foreign policy and of the emerging gap between Turkey and the West is Ankara's new attitude toward its historic rival Iran, which, before AKP rule, was viewed with considerable suspicion and caution.²⁴ Moreover, Turkey is Sunni, while Iran is Shiite. Furthermore, *realpolitik* considerations would elicit in Ankara a higher threat perception from Iran as result of the nuclear aspirations of its neighbor.²⁵ The AKP government is working on a white paper that removes Iran from Turkey's threat list.²⁶

In contrast to its past policy, Turkey welcomed the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for a visit in August 2008. No Western country has issued such an invitation to the Iranian leader. Additionally, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan decided to congratulate Ahmadinejad immediately after his re-election in June 2009, despite protests that the vote was rigged and calls from the EU, which Turkey aspires to join, that the election be investigated.

When it comes to Iran's nuclear threat, Ankara, unlike its NATO allies, has refused to adopt the U.S. stance on harsher sanctions, fearing in part the economic consequences of such steps. Foreign Minister Davutoglu stressed that diplomacy is the only way out.²⁷ The greatest affront to Washington occurred on May 16, 2010, when Iranian leaders, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and Brazilian President Lula da Silva signed an agreement calling for Iran to send part of its low-enriched uranium to Turkey for safekeeping in exchange for enough higher-enriched uranium to fuel an Iranian research

²³ Robert Talt, "'Iran is Our Friend,' says Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan," *The Guardian*, October 26, 2009.

²⁴ For Turco-Iranian relations, see Tschaguiz H. Pahlavan, "Turkish-Iranian Reactions: An Iranian View," in Barkey, *Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, pp. 71-91; and Atilla Eralp, "Facing the Challenge: Post-Revolutionary Relations with Iran," in Barkey, ed), *Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, pp. 93-112.

²⁵ For the Iranian nuclear program, see inter alia, Anthony Cordesman and Khalid R. Al-Rodhan, *Iran's Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Washington: CSIS Press, 2006).

²⁶ Umit Eginsoy and Burak Ege Bekdil, "Turkey Removes Neighbors from Threat List," *Defense News*, September 6, 2010.

²⁷ Sabah-Aksam, April 16, 2010, TrkNwsE@yahoogroups.com.

reactor. Washington was cool to the news of the Iran-Turkey-Brazil nuclear fuel swap agreement, which undermined the U.S. push for economic sanctions against Iran. In response, Davutoglu said, “There are no grounds at the moment for a debate on sanctions.”²⁸ In June 2010, Turkey voted at the UN Security Council against the U.S.-sponsored resolution to impose a new round of sanctions.

In an earlier act of defiance against U.S. attempts to impose harsher sanctions on Iran, particularly in the area of refined oil products, Tehran and Ankara agreed to establish a crude oil refinery in northern Iran in a \$2-billion joint project.²⁹ Erdogan then visited Iran in October 2009, stating that “regarding settlement of regional issues, we share common views. . . .”³⁰ In Tehran, Erdogan once again stated that the pursuit of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes is the legitimate right of all world countries, including Iran.³¹ Turkey, which sits on the governing board of the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency, abstained in the fall of 2009 from a vote to censure Iran for building a secret uranium enrichment facility near Qom. Turkey has also preferred not to anger Iran by accepting NATO deployments of missile intercept radar in its territory, within the framework of a Washington-designed regional air defense against Iranian missiles.³² In light of the historic rivalry between Turkey and Iran, the shift in Turkish foreign policy constitutes a drastic change from past preferences. Even some Turkish Islamists feel uncomfortable siding with Iran.³³

The new Islamist emphasis in Turkish foreign policy was also a factor in Turkey’s participation in the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)—headquartered in Saudi Arabia and one of the most powerful lobbying blocs in the UN. Since 2005, a Turk, Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, has headed this organization. Similarly, Turkey, under the AKP, increased its involvement in the Developing Eight (D-8), founded in June 1997 by eight large Muslim nations, namely Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Egypt, and Nigeria. The main architect of the D-8 was Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Islamist Welfare Party, who served as Turkey’s prime minister in 1996-97.³⁴ Erdogan was also an active member of the Welfare Party.

²⁸ Umit Eginsoy and Burak Ege Bekdil, “Iran Row Pits Turkey Against U.S.,” *Defense News*, May 24, 2010.

²⁹ “Iran, Turkey to Build Oil Refinery in Joint Venture,” *Fars News Agency*, October 31, 2009.

³⁰ David Bedein, “Improvements Made in Turkish-Iranian Relations,” *The Bulletin*, November 1, 2009.

³¹ “Erdogan Terms Iran’s Visit Positive,” *Fars News Agency*, October 28, 2009.

³² Dondu Sarisik, “Turkey, Iran Seek Increased Cooperation in Energy, Security,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 29, 2009.

³³ Interviews with Turkish Islamists in Istanbul, May 2010.

³⁴ Mehmet Ozkan, “Turkey in the Islamic World: An Institutional Perspective,” *Turkish Review of Middle East Studies*, vol. 18, Annual 2007, pp. 159-93.

Explaining the Reorientation

The reorientation of Turkish foreign policy is the result of a mix of foreign and domestic influences. The first factor explaining the change is the significant improvement in Turkey's strategic environment. Immediately after the end of the Cold War, Turkey feared threats from all directions, but these eventually dissipated. The fears of a war with Greece in the mid-1990s ended as the two countries upgraded their relations and created a new positive atmosphere.³⁵ Since the October 1998 Turkish threat to use force against Syria, Damascus has complied with Turkish demands to stop supporting the Kurdish insurgency and cease its demands for the Alexandretta province.³⁶ Cyprus was "convinced" by similar military threats not to station S-300 surface-to-air missile systems on its soil, which could have hampered the freedom of action of the Turkish air force. Furthermore, Saddam Hussein's Iraq was eliminated as a threat to its neighbors by the 2003 American conquest, leading to a drastically less threatening regional environment. Under such circumstances, Turkey's need for strategic support from Israel and the West has decreased.

Generally, Turkey has perceived itself as a great power and a vital energy bridge to the West, giving Ankara great international latitude.³⁷ However, Turkey still needs access to energy resources that could be transported via Turkey to the energy-hungry West. Iran is of course a prime provider for supplying such energy products. Currently, about one-third of Turkey's gas consumption is provided by Iran (mainly through the Iran-Turkey pipeline commissioned in 2001, which the United States opposed). Thus the shift toward Iran has been partly motivated by energy related considerations.

Maintaining good relations with Russia, another energy producer, has a similar rationale. Alas, Iran and Russia are Western rivals.³⁸ Russia's national interest is to counter U.S. influence in all regions, including in Turkey, its southern neighbor.³⁹ While Turkey is keen on strengthening its position as an energy corridor, Russia wants to establish additional export routes to its south. As the world's largest energy exporter, Russia also plans to carry its crude oil through the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline currently being constructed from the

³⁵ See Dimitris Keridis and Dimitrio Triantaphyllou (eds.), *Greek-Turkish Relations in the Era of Globalization* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2001).

³⁶ For the bilateral relations see Muhamed Muslih, "Syria and Turkey: Uneasy Relations," in Barkey, *Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, pp. 113-29.

³⁷ Amanda Akcakoca, "Turkey: An Energy Bridge for Europe," *Today's Zaman*, April 11, 2007.

³⁸ For an analysis of Iranian-Russian relations in the 1991-2006 period see, Robert O. Freedman, *Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Question: The Putin Record* (Carlisle, PA: The Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, 2006).

³⁹ Leon Aron, "The Foreign Policy Doctrine of Post-communist Russia and Its Domestic Context," in Michael Mandelbaum, ed., *The New Russian Foreign Policy* (New York: Council of Foreign Relations Press, 1998), pp. 23-53.

Black Sea to the Mediterranean port. Notably, two-thirds of Turkish natural gas imports still come from Russia. Turkey's decision to award the contract for the construction of the nuclear power plant to a Russian company bolsters dependence on one supplier and may pose a strategic liability. Energy issues were at the top of the agenda in the meeting between Erdogan and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in Moscow in January 2010.⁴⁰

In recent years, Russia has become Turkey's largest trading partner, with a bilateral trade volume of \$38 billion. The business of Turkish exporters and contracting groups has suffered due to Russian obstructions of trade after the 2008 Georgian War. Turkey and Russia largely tackled problems in customs, food exports, and transportation in August 2009 when Putin made a visit to Ankara to request permission to conduct feasibility studies on the South Stream gas pipeline projected to run under Turkish waters. "We're looking for a mechanism to prevent any more crises and put the relations on a sound footing," a source at the Turkish Foreign Ministry said.⁴¹

In many ways, the two countries are natural partners. Both feel slighted by the West, both are nostalgic for past imperial glory, and both are ruled by governments pledging to restore their country's former greatness. Turkey is aware of the more aggressive recent Russian foreign policy in regions where it has important interests and seems to prefer some kind of cooperation rather than confrontation.

The EU's foot-dragging over Turkey's accession reinforced Turkey's distance from the West. The EU's failure to fulfill its promises to the Turkish Cypriots, in return for their cooperative attitudes toward resolving the Cyprus conflict along the lines of a UN plan for reunifying the island, reduced support for accession talks. Moreover, Euro-skeptics in Turkey felt that the European integration and its associated conditions would undermine the unity and secular nature of the Turkish state.⁴² Several European states expressed serious reservations about Turkey joining the EU and Turkey's bid for EU membership received a heavy blow in 2008 when the possibility of quick accession passed. France and Germany proposed plans for a "special relationship" with Turkey, rather than full membership.⁴³ In response, support for joining the EU drastically declined among the proud Turks.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 12, 2010.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ziya Onis, "Turkey-EU Relations: Beyond the Current Stalemate," *Insight Turkey*, Vol 10, No. 4 (2008), pp. 40-44.

⁴³ "Fears Grow of Sarkozy Initiative to Downgrade Turkey's EU Bid," *Financial Times*, October 15, 2009; Saban Kardas, "Merkel and Sarkozy Call for Privileged Partnership Angers Turkey," *The Jamestown Foundation*, May 13, 2009, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 6, Issue 92.

⁴⁴ Central and Eastern European Watch, "Turkey's EU Membership and the Public Opinion," http://www.despiteborders.com/clanky/data/upimages/petkova_turkey_eu_public_opinion.pdf; EurActiv, "EU-Turkey Relations," <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/eu-turkey-relations/article-129678>.

Since the advent of the proto-Islamic AKP in Turkey in October 2002, the new elite have reached a significantly different perspective on the region and different policy priorities. The AKP wants to improve relations with its Muslim neighbors, which the Kemalists saw as a burden on Turkey's quest to become part of the West, politically and culturally. After winning two national elections, the AKP gained greater confidence to implement foreign policy that identifies with the Muslim world. The government has also instituted Islamist policies domestically. Aiding these decisions was a public that was increasingly nationalistic and anti-American.

Turkey's new activism in the Middle East, an area that was once "hands off," reflects growing aspirations for a leading role in the international arena. This aspect, somewhat evident already in the 1990s, is fueled by neo-Ottoman as well as Islamist impulses in Turkish society. Such ambitions have led Turkey, eager for a greater international stature, to offer mediation in regional disputes – such as between the United States and Iran, Iraq and Syria, Israel and Syria, and Israel and the Palestinians. Turkey's search for "grandeur" through "mediation mania" may appear ridiculous. Moreover, this penchant for international recognition has pushed Turkey away from its previous status as a faithful ally of the United States.

Cooling relations with Israel was, therefore, part of the shift in Turkish foreign policy. Yet, clashes between Ankara and Jerusalem toward the end of 2009 were also result of a genuine dislike by the AKP leadership of Israel and the Jews, an animosity ingrained in parts of the Turkish Islamist movement.⁴⁵ Erdogan's meeting in New York in September 2009 with the leaders of the U.S. Jewish community ended in a fiasco. Moreover, in his October 2009 speech at the Istanbul University, Erdogan made unequivocal anti-Semitic remarks,⁴⁶ in keeping with his background in a staunchly Muslim anti-Zionist political movement known as Milli Gorus.⁴⁷

The International Ramifications

Turkey's geographical location and size bestow on the state strategic importance. Indeed, Turkey carries great regional and international weight. Diverging from the West has serious consequences for the balance of power in the Greater Middle East and for global politics. Currently, the Middle East is divided between ascending Islamic Iran and its radical allies, and pro-Western

⁴⁵ "Antisemitism and the Turkish Islamist 'Milli Gorus' Movement: Zionist/Jews 'Bacteria,' Disease," The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), August 20, 2007.

⁴⁶ Itamar Eichner, "Erdogan: Learn from Jews How to Make Money," *Ynet news*, October 11, 2009, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3788294,00.html>; Haviv Rettig Gur, "Erdogan's Remarks Aid Anti-Semitism," *Jerusalem Post*, January 29, 2009.

⁴⁷ Ali H. Aslan, "Erdogan's message to the Jewish lobby," *Zaman*, December 19, 2009, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/yazarDetay.do?haberno=195990>.

moderate forces – Israel and most Arab states. Until recently, Turkey appeared to belong to the pro-Western camp, but it crossed the Rubicon when Erdogan visited Iran in October 2009. Turkey sided with Iran on the nuclear issue when its Foreign Minister, Davutoglu, in a meeting with Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Saeed Jalili, stressed his country’s support for Tehran’s “peaceful nuclear program.” During the meeting held in Tehran, Davutoglu also announced Ankara’s firm stance on the consolidation of ties with Tehran.⁴⁸ The relationship with Iran remains the litmus test for Turkey’s Islamist leanings.

With Turkey crossing over, it will be more difficult for the international community to contain Iran and curb its nuclear program. Indeed, Turkey, a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council, angered the West by refusing in March 2010 to support additional sanctions on Iran.⁴⁹ In June 2010, it voted against sanctions. Since Turkey borders Iran, its failure to cooperate in the economic sanctions against Iran undermines the West’s policy. Ankara’s current stance allows Iran to become more immune to economic pressure and enhances Iranian power in the region, which will likely prove to be Turkey’s largest strategic miscalculation in the future.

Nevertheless, Erdogan’s government views cooperation between Iran, Syria, and Turkey as an important element in regional stability.⁵⁰ The three agree on the Kurdish issue since all fear an independent Kurdish state. The U.S. exit from Iraq brings the three even closer. They are also intent on weakening the position of Israel—perceived as a Western outpost—in the region. The political elites of the three states believe the West, and particularly the United States, to be in decline. Their common perception of President Barack Obama as very weak makes their alliance less likely to elicit costly countermeasures from a West in strategic disarray.

Turkey’s shift in foreign policy will undoubtedly strengthen Iran’s grip over Syria and Lebanon. The Hizballization of Lebanon is a corollary process, allowing Iran to establish a “Shiite corridor” to the Mediterranean. Iran will gain an even greater influence in Shiite southern Iraq after the U.S. departure and will strengthen its presence in the Levant through territorial links via Iraq to Syria and Hizballah in Lebanon. Furthermore, Turkey’s shift will end any Western illusions about snatching Syria away from the radical camp in order to strengthen democratic forces in Lebanon or facilitate a peace treaty between Syria and Israel. Backed by Turkey, Syria can more easily resist Western pressures and continue its alliance with Iran.

⁴⁸ “Turkish FM: Ankara Supports Iran’s Peaceful N. Activities,” News number: 881128095314:35, February 17, 2010, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8811280953>.

⁴⁹ Burak Ege Bekdil and Umit Enginsoy, “Turkey Rejects More Sanctions on Iran,” March 25, 2010, www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4555173&c=MID&s=TOP.

⁵⁰ H. Sabbagh, “Erdogan: Cooperation between Syria, Turkey and Iran is Important for Peace in the Region,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, October 27, 2009.

Such a development will enhance Iran's capability to project power in the Eastern Mediterranean and even further west into the Balkans, whose three Muslim states already show signs of Iranian presence. Turkey has also developed a keen interest in the Balkans – once an integral part of the Ottoman Empire. Muslim communities in European states are in constant danger of radicalization and Iranian encroachment could reinforce such a process. Similarly, northern Cyprus, occupied by Turkey since 1974, could again become a base for Muslim influence in the Mediterranean.

An Ankara-Tehran axis would pressure the pro-Western Arab states to the south. In addition to the current tensions between Egypt and Iran, hostilities are also growing between Egypt and Turkey. While Turkey's international behavior has gained sympathy on the Arab street, the pro-Western Arab leaders seem less enchanted. They view Turkey's current pro-Iranian foreign policy as extremely concerning. Egypt in particular sees the Turkish approach to the Hamas regime in Gaza as a threat to Egyptian vital interests.⁵¹ The Ankara-Tehran axis that weakens the pro-U.S. Arab states, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, also hinders U.S. influence in the region, particularly when everyone expects the United States to withdraw in the near future from Iraq.

An attempted rapprochement with Armenia is part of the Turkish desire for “zero problems” with its neighbors, but it is important to recognize that Armenia receives support from Iran and Russia. The geopolitical consequence of better relations between Yerevan and Ankara is problematic. Indeed, the new, maybe temporary, Turkish-Armenian understandings have put strains on the Turkish-Azerbaijani strategic partnership.⁵² The latter alliance has been the backbone of the East-West energy corridor, and the geo-strategic balance in the region that has allowed for Turkish (or Western) entrance into the Caspian. Without the Turkish-Azerbaijani strategic partnership, Turkish, EU and U.S. influence in the South Caucasus is at risk. Baku has feared Iranian influence and hoped that Turkey and the West could balance the proximity of Iran, which it borders. Similarly, Georgia's pro-Western orientation is at stake. If Turkey and Russia reach an agreement over Georgia, its independence is doomed.

The change in Ankara's foreign policy similarly threatens the Central Asian states, which all have Muslim majorities as well as cultural and linguistic links to Turkey (with the exception of Tajikistan). After independence, following the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, these states adopted a pro-Western orientation and looked at Turkey as a secular model for development.⁵³

⁵¹Fulya Özerkan, “Aid convoy spurs crisis between Turkey and Egypt, *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 6, 2010, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=aid-convoy-spurs-crisis-between-turkey-and-egypt-2010-01-06>.

⁵²Fariz Ismailzade, “Azerbaijan Nervously Watching Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, September 11, 2009, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 6, Issue 166.

⁵³Daniel Pipes, “The Event of Our Era: Former Soviet Muslim Republics Change the Middle East,” in Michael Mandelbaum, ed., *In Central Asia and the World: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan* (New York: Council of Foreign Affairs, 1994).

If Turkey becomes an Islamist country, the pressure for Islamization from Iran (and also from Saudi Arabia) will grow in Central Asia. These states may succumb to political Islam, or alternatively, may look to regional powers, Russia or China, thereby abandoning their pro-Western orientation.

Turkey's new positioning will undoubtedly facilitate the ability of Russia to penetrate the Middle East. During the Cold War, Turkey prevented Russian divisions from pouring southward and participating in the wars conducted by its Arab allies. Thus, a Russian-Turkish alignment could expose the heart of the Middle East to greater Russian encroachment, especially since Vladimir Putin has revived the country's imperial ambitions in many regions, including in the Middle East.

If Turkey becomes increasingly Islamist, Europe could lose a great buffer from the turbulent Middle East. Indeed, if the Islamist tendencies in Turkey become entrenched, a strong Muslim revisionist state that is also an heir to the Ottoman Empire, could emerge at the edge of Europe, with aspirations to extend its influence toward the West. NATO, which may reacquire an active defensive mission, would be significantly weakened by losing the Turkish army, an important component on its eastern flank. Already Turkey has shown reluctance to host U.S. interceptor missiles (part of a planned NATO collective missile defense system) for fear of upsetting Iran.⁵⁴ NATO probably needs to adopt greater caution in sharing with Turkey sensitive information and technologies to stop potential leaks and technology transfer to Iran.

Finally, the new direction of Turkish foreign policy raises the question whether Turkey will continue its nuclear abstinence. Granting legitimacy to Iranian nuclear aspirations might indicate a desire to emulate its nuclear behavior. Pakistan, the main source for the nuclear know-how in Iran has even better relations with Turkey. Russia has already agreed to sell a nuclear power plant. The road to a nuclear bomb is indeed a long one, but it has a starting point, which usually is not very clear.

Even if the nuclear appetite has not been whetted yet in Ankara, the loss of Turkey as a Western ally will inevitably become a strategic disaster even larger than the Islamic revolution in Iran.

Conclusion

Turkey's foreign policy has changed. It would be very difficult for Israel to continue with a "business as usual" attitude in light of the current AKP-driven Turkish behavior. Jerusalem is unlikely to accept Ankara as a mediator in its disputes with Syria and the Palestinians. In all probability, arms sales and strategic cooperation will no longer be possible, while diplomatic and economic relations will only marginally be affected. Turkey understands that its

⁵⁴ Umit Eginsoy and Burak Eke Bekdil, *Defense News*, September 13, 2010.

regional aspirations require a certain level of diplomatic relations with Israel, an important regional player. Jerusalem still wonders why Ankara prefers the dictators of Tehran, Damascus, Khartoum, and Gaza over the democracy of the Jewish state. Israel has no interest in further deterioration, and so far it is reluctant to declare publicly that an AKP-ruled Turkey hardly belongs to the Western camp.

The reorientation of Turkey's foreign policy should be of great concern to the West. Western capitals are slow in gauging the changes in the domestic and foreign politics of Turkey. Washington still plays with the idea that Ankara represents "moderate Islam." Yet, Turkey's preferences and policies are anything but moderate. Seeking good relations with Iran and Sudan, as well as with Hamas and Hizballah, puts Turkey in a radical Islamist camp. Turkey is an important country whose foreign policy reorientation changes the balance of power in the Middle East in favor of the radical Islamist forces. It affects negatively the pro-Western orientation of the Central Asian republics. It considerably weakens the Western alliance and NATO. Turkey could also revive the historic Muslim threat to Europe from the East.

Thanks to the Islamic roots of its ruling party, Turkey is undergoing an identity crisis. At the same time, the quality of Turkish democracy is deteriorating. Hopefully, Turkish democracy will be strong enough to choose the progress and prosperity that only a Western anchor can grant. The nation is scheduled to hold elections in July 2011, and the current polls show that the secularist parties have a chance of replacing the AKP government, despite the remarkable political skills of Erdogan. These skills helped him win the September 2010 referendum on constitutional changes, which will strengthen the AKP grip over the judiciary and the military. The West must grasp that Turkey does not represent "moderate Islam" and should do everything possible to bolster the secularist parties in order to prevent an Islamist triumph in the elections. Turkey's drift to Islamism would be a great strategic loss to Israel and the West, and a tragedy for the Turks.

