

The AKP's Foreign Policy: From Westernization to Islamization?

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Abstract

When Turkey's Justice and Development Part (AKP) came to power in 2002, it brought a new strategy to foreign policy. Some scholars ascribed this reorientation to the rise of neo-Ottomanism, others to Islamization, and yet others to a Middle Easternization of foreign policy. All labels have one element in common: They give weight to Islam and Turkey's imperial past as soft power assets in the conduct of foreign policy by rejecting secular Kemalism in the country's diplomacy. The AKP capitalized on Turgut Özal's neo-Ottomanist foreign policy and Necmettin Erbakan's multi-dimensional foreign policy by using Turkey's pivotal geopolitical location to transform it into a global actor. The ongoing Islamic revival has caused the country's attempted full westernization to slow down. But the West itself is hardly a monolithic bloc, given its own many internal cultural, linguistic, religious, political, and economic differences. I therefore describe Turkey as a "hybrid," a modern and developing "semi-western" state, and argue that over time it will become ever more "socially conservative."

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Introduction

Turkey's activism in diplomacy, regional status, and economic boom during the 2000s have augmented its standing for the western alliance as a regional power. Rather than accepting, watching, or participating despite the lack of relevant experience (i.e., "learned helplessness") in foreign relations especially after the Second World War, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) introduced a policy of active engagement and, from time to time, various "too self-confident policies" that increased its significance as regional player.¹ Turkey has an unmentioned and often forgotten foreign policy outlook that favors nationalism. From religious groups such as Milli Görüş to conservative parties, all groups regard their country's regional hegemony as the determining factor and a God-given right to be involved in the near abroad. "What they mean by the union and unity of Islam is a union under Turkey's leadership."²

The AKP leaders seem to have reached a consensus that Turkey became a global power under their rule. Not surprisingly, one of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's advisors may issue a warning to the United States or the European Union (EU) to the effect that the great powers' influence is decreasing and Ankara has taken over as "the new global power." Indeed, this new foreign policy establishment apparently distrusts the West, as can be seen in its belief that the western powers are trying to contain Turkey. In this sense, the western rivals seem to fear Turkey. Consequently, Gökhan Bacik does not think that any high-ranking government members still defend westernization. For example, they see the Arab Spring as a great success of Turkish diplomacy.³ In fact, this is why the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen Association's (TÜSİAD) head is concerned with the "anti-Western discourse" both domestically and abroad, for "a vision that sees many countries as 'enemies' of Turkey and the use of harsh rhetoric against neighboring countries [has] reduced Turkey's influence in the international community." Thus, TÜSİAD reminds Ankara of its once-stated goal of being an "honest broker in the wider region in the interests of boosting the country's economy."⁴

With a view to divergences in the AKP's relations with the West, this article explores neo-Ottomanism, the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, and the strategic depth doctrine in Turkish foreign policy. Is Ankara striving to overcome the Cold War order and its dependence on the West? Is the EU "losing" Turkey? A crucial factor here has been the critics' determination to describe the AKP's independent foreign policy as Islamization and therefore as directed against western interests. I therefore also discuss the relations between Turkey and the EU.

The AKP and Kemalism

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) banished Islam from state affairs and promoted western dress and women's rights. But he did not initiate this process, for westernization dates back to the Tanzimat (1839-76) years, during which the Ottoman Empire began to adopt certain aspects of western culture and use foreign engineers to repair its old military systems. Newly established schools, the exchange of permanent ambassadors, and the founding of privy councils were essential improvements, for they, along with other reforms, helped prolong the empire's existence. Also, these innovations – the main ones being economic and political democratization combined with the spread of an individualized culture – were necessary to transform the empire into a modern country. By drawing upon this heritage, the AKP underlines that Islamic solidarity trumps individualistic western habits.

Erdoğan's rhetoric often plays on a tension reaching back to the 1920s, a time when Atatürk was busy forging a secular republic from the ruins of the Ottoman theocracy. The current president draws much of his support from the pious masses; however, a burgeoning sense of Islamic identity that he has encouraged has also revived interest in social conservatism. The party thus appeals to conservative Muslim Turks who feel that they were treated as second-class citizens during the decades of secular rule. Speaking with scorn of the old Kemalist elite, Erdoğan has been trying to persuade religious conservatives, including pious Kurds and nationalists, to back the Islamist-rooted AKP. In fact, Islam entered the Turkish election campaign for the June 7, 2015, parliamentary elections and put religion center stage.

Given that Ottoman history defines Turkish identity, the AKP has combined clear efforts to modernize and westernize the country since 2002 while at the same time trying to maintain traditional religious and historical values. In its drive toward neoliberalism, however, the AKP introduced westernization by privatizing hitherto state-controlled industries. Nonetheless, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu strongly asserts that Turkey may be the only Muslim country that blends eastern and western cultures (along with many compromises and fusions between the two). Westernization has been a pervasive and accelerating influence across Turkey for the last three centuries, and the Kemalists assumed that it was the equivalent of modernizing a way of thought; however, this is often debated by their Muslim challengers.

Since the AKP came to power in 2002, Ankara has adopted a more consensus-seeking and engaged diplomatic approach, particularly toward the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. This is in stark contrast to the Ke-

malist republic's regional isolationism and indifference toward its Islamic heritage. The AKP government will probably continue to reorient itself to an increasingly independent foreign policy that stresses good relations with its neighbors and substantive engagement in the Near East and Eurasia.

Kemalism considered the Near East a menacing and hostile environment from which Turkey had to be shielded, and thus Atatürk introduced strict guidelines of non-alignment and non-intervention with the country's Muslim neighbors. The sole exception was resolving territorial disputes, primarily with Iraq and Syria, that increased existing tensions. In fact, during the Cold War Turkey was considered as mostly marginal to political issues in Europe, the Near East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. But given its status as an Islamic country, some western politicians portray the country as a bearer of hope by serving as a model for democratization in the Near East. For its part, Ankara tries to promote dialogue between Islamic and western societies but rejects any characterization of itself as a model for a moderate Islamic state. It does so because in its eyes the secular establishment, particularly the United States, has an unreasonable attachment to the AKP and, in the Kemalists' opinion falsely, trusts Ankara to spread "moderate Islamism" as a "model" that may be embraced by other Islamic countries. These critics contend "that the Americans [have] failed to see the true nature of the Islamist threat."⁵

According to the AKP leaders, the West has become increasingly biased and close-minded in its perception of "Muslim" countries such as Turkey, which it has declared to be a partly "un-free" country for not following the ideal westernized democratic form of government. Furthermore, the West uses a double-standard when dealing with the Islamic world. Davutoğlu, who pursues this line of thought in his book *Strategic Depth* (2001), explains the decline of western influence and why the West has lost so much credibility around the world. He argues that western influence is now "unraveling," whereas Russia, China, and Turkey are rising. He proposes that Muslim countries can seek to balance western power by modernizing, developing economic and military power, and cooperating with Turkey against the West – all the while preserving their religious values and institutions. But he also wants to retain Ankara's relations with western organizations, and so Turkey has a customs union with the EU, in addition to being an official candidate for membership, and is a member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Council of Europe, NATO, and other western organizations.

I, however, describe Turkey as a "hybrid," a modern and developed "semi-western" state that will, over time, become ever more "socially conservative."

As a result of the ongoing Islamic revival, full westernization has slowed down. However, although its members do share a similar historical background, the West cannot be regarded as a monolithic bloc, for many cultural, linguistic, religious, political, and economic differences exist between it and Turkey. Therefore, Turkish officials are seeking to secure EU membership, as this would serve as proof to the Muslim world that the EU does not constitute a "Christian club."

Davutoğlu has slammed past Turkish administrations for rejecting close relations with its neighbors. He blames past Turkish foreign policy for focusing on the country's links to the West while disregarding its own interests in other nations, particularly those in the Islamic world. This neo-Ottoman concept intends to expand foreign relations within the neighborhood in order to add them to its relations with its western allies, not to serve as a substitute or them. According to its adherents, this new recollection of the Ottoman heritage does not emanate from "Islamization," but rather from the need to counteract the adverse effects of the Kemalists' overemphasis on Turkey's belonging to the West.

However, the majority of "Turkey's secular elite" considers neo-Ottomanism a cloak "for an Islamist agenda" that would marginalize the army's role as the custodian of "secularism."⁶ Davutoğlu counters that Turkey must emerge from its outdated "Kemalist approach," which presented the Islamic world as endangering secular Turkey's politics and culture. He highlights his view that Ankara's involvement in the Islamic world is necessary if it is to become "a regional force." As proponents of a broad and independent foreign policy, the AKP leaders stress their desire to create "good relations" with the Muslim world and to abandon isolating and radicalizing them. The AKP expresses its wish to assume "a leadership role" in its neighborhood without ending its existing relations with its western allies.

Turkish officials, especially in the military, have been uncomfortable with American attempts to portray Turkey as a model. The country's military and secular political establishments fear that this emphasis could weaken its western identity and strengthen the role of Islam in society. They are disturbed when Washington depicts Turkey as a moderate Islamic country, for this description contradicts Turkey's secular identity. In addition, it is also perceived as an example of the Obama administration's support of the new AKP government and its potential policy of furthering the (moderate) Islamization of Turkish society.

In the wake of the Syrian civil war, Turks have assumed that their soft power has boundaries. Turkish foreign policy was democratized in order to

abandon the Kemalist elites' "securitization practices." With regard to Washington and the EU, the Erdoğan administration's limits will cause it to choose rapprochement in the region. Currently, Turkey has no other option but to opt for the western alliance. In fact, it has already done this by agreeing to install the NATO missile defense on Turkish territory. Ihsan Yilmaz concludes that "only a NATO intervention invited by the Arab League could save Turkey's face and help the opposition." Turkey seems to have left all options to "hard power" on the table. Yilmaz criticizes this harsh rhetoric, which occasionally led to teaching foreign representatives, as constituting "one of the problematic aspects of our foreign policy."⁷ As Nuray Mert asserts, "Turkey is in the Western camp and a NATO country, and as such it should accommodate itself to the new global order and global perspective of the Western world."⁸

"Zero Problems" Revisited

Turkey's "zero problems" policy, which I and many others endorsed mainly due to its high moral basis, sheer benevolence, and solution-oriented aims, has produced no tangible results. Perhaps it has even completely collapsed, for Turkey now has fewer diplomatic ties than it did before formulating and then implementing this policy. Syria, Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority, along with Cyprus and Armenia, have either frozen or downgraded relations. Objectively, this has had a crippling effect on the policy's paradigms and caused Ankara to lose a great deal of the leverage and respect it so eagerly desired.⁹ Critics of the policy are becoming more creative every day. Following their invention of the "zero neighbors policy," they have recently come up with an even more sarcastic nickname: "Nothing but problems policy."¹⁰ Davutoğlu, commenting on the opposition parties' accusation that the government is not following its zero-problems-with-neighbors policy, has stated that Turkey is not resetting its foreign policy and that the Middle East is undergoing a transformation while Turkey's policies remain the same.¹¹

It is becoming more obvious that the stance based on Ankara's principal foreign policy approaches, such as "zero problems with neighbors" or "precious isolation," are dysfunctional and, in fact, even misleading, at least in the region. The policies that it pursued during the Arab Spring, such as Erdoğan's "principle" of adopting a pro-Morsi stance after the latter was ousted by the army, has led to the severance of relations between the two countries, a growing isolation in the region, and an inability to devise long-term policies.¹² This

sounds like a move of principles in the extreme, and it may further damage Ankara's current situation in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey already has no diplomatic relations with Syria and Israel, has few links left with the Shi'i half of Lebanon because of the Syrian civil war, and has only distant links with the secular half of the Palestinian Authority due to its commitment to the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Hamas in Gaza. This means that a major shift in Turkish foreign policy toward one based on realpolitik will be necessary. However, such a shift will also have consequences in the country's domestic politics.¹³

The most striking part is that Turkey needs to be reminded that it cannot solve Syria's problem alone, regardless of whether it is a regional power or not. According to the secular opposition, Turkey still has a confused perception of the Syrian affair and of regional politics in general. The Kemalists do not expect Turkey to involve itself in sectarian politics. It is true that Iran is the focus of the crisis and that Turkey has long been expected to play a role against it and its allies. It is also true that the various Sunni powers are being encouraged to counterbalance Iranian influence. Nevertheless, western policy has started to change, as can be seen by Washington's reluctance to alienate Iraq's Maliki government. Turkey, which has strained relations with Maliki and invested too much hope in strengthening its relations with the Kurdish Authority in Northern Iraq, finds itself in an odd position: hoping that more peace with the Kurds will be a key for "Greater Turkey," if not in terms of borders soon, then at least in terms of more regional power and influence, regardless of the other actors' interests. This Middle East adventure started with the AKP's delusion that the country was "the major player" in the region. As long as it refuses to revise this perception, Ankara will continue to put itself in difficult positions due to its own miscalculations.¹⁴

Just as the foreign media report that Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are the major powers behind the Syrian civil war, the Turkish media reporting from Syria also proclaim the links, even with a tone of pride. This means that Turkey is now directly and openly engaged in regional conflicts along national and/or sectarian lines. Its sectarian friends Qatar and Saudi Arabia are undemocratic and may be held less responsible at the domestic and international levels for their meddling. The AKP may think that it is Turkey's birthright to have the upper hand in Syria, as it was part of the Ottoman Empire; however, the present international order no longer recognizes the legitimacy of imperial norms.¹⁵

Right now, the problem is whether the region's current leaders and the West are ready to accept Turkey's rising power, as this would involve tran-

scending the current limits imposed by western hegemony. Washington has considered the country a regional power and model since the 9/11 attacks. But if things go beyond what was originally expected, a regional modeling policy of hegemony might turn into a regional containment of Turkey.¹⁶ The Obama administration must therefore reassess its assumption that Turkey is playing a constructive role in ending the violence in Syria; it must also take a hard look at its own role in contributing to religious strife.¹⁷

The good neighborly relations with Iran have cooled off due to Ankara's Syrian policies. Turkey's "zero problem" policy, which is somewhat similar to Atatürk's "peace at home, peace in the world" principle, albeit a low-key version, has been deeply wounded. However, it is still possible to see the effects of a historical and romantic view of foreign policy that regards the Middle East as Turkey's backyard and misplaced assumptions. Due to the ongoing and potential new conflicts there, as well as the current state of play in Turkey's accession to the EU, a fresh review of the AKP's foreign policy appears to be needed. To achieve this, however, the usual rhetoric and slogans must end, secular practices that are the basic tenet of Turkish diplomacy have to be valued, and the level of ideological input injected into foreign policy has to be reduced.¹⁸ For example, US Secretary of State John Kerry recently criticized a comment by Erdoğan likening Zionism to crimes against humanity.¹⁹

For its part, Turkey should soften its language against Israel in order to build a greater degree of trust. In relations with Iran, it would be well advised to use a carrot-and-stick approach, provide assurance that Israel is pursuing disarmament, and leverage the economic ties between the two countries as a form of negative reinforcement. Through this combination of diplomatic efforts and economic sanctions only when absolutely necessary, the global objective of a nuclear-free Middle East can be reached.²⁰ Turkey quickly abandoned its stated ambition to have "zero problems" with its neighbors and decided to join the United States in confronting Iran and allow the deployment of parts of NATO's antimissile shield, which is meant to neutralize a supposed Iranian missile threat. Washington's policy of punitive sanctions and not-so-veiled military threats toward Iran has encouraged Turkey to assert itself as a Sunni power. The perception that the country enjoys American "cover" for a foreign policy that directly confronts Iranian interests emboldened Ankara to throw its weight behind the armed Sunni rebellion against Assad, Iran's main regional ally.²¹

Turkey's close historical, cultural, and political links with the countries of the Mediterranean basin obligate it, according to former president Ab-

dullah Gül, to “engage closely” in the transition process of the Arab Spring countries. However, this historical fact should not be interpreted as an imperial dream, and thus Ankara should not cross the line from soft power to hard power unless the country’s vital interests are at stake.²² Relying on its unique soft power, Turkey should serve as a mediator by initiating, endorsing, and leading regional and international cooperation, thereby engaging with all sides instead of becoming overengaged with just one side as it did in Syria, which seriously damaged its soft power capacity. Gül’s suggestion to create a regional Middle Eastern security organization similar to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) offers a golden opportunity to implement this regional role.²³ Not only would this be a meaningful symbolic gesture signaling Turkey’s reemergence as a regional power committed to peace and diplomacy, but it would also be a pragmatic step reminiscent of the earlier Özal and pre-2009 Erdoğan periods.²⁴

Guided by the concept of “strategic depth” elaborated by Davutoğlu, Erdoğan’s long-term advisor-turned-prime-minister, Ankara began to focus far more on its neighborhood with the stated goal of becoming a dominant and stabilizing force, one that would function as an honest broker and project its economic clout throughout the region and beyond. The key foreign policy objective has been to contribute to world peace, stability, and prosperity. By the same token, the country spares no effort to develop its relations within and beyond the neighborhood. Turkey seeks to establish peace, stability, and security in the Middle East; to further integrate the Balkans with the Euro-Atlantic community; to bolster democracy and peacefully resolve conflicts in the Caucasus and Central Asia; to contribute to Europe’s enhanced energy supply and security; and to strengthen security and stability in Afghanistan and South Asia.

As demonstrated by the recent increase in Ankara’s foreign policy initiatives, especially in the adjacent regions and beyond, Turkey is making every possible effort to encourage the consolidation of democracy as well as the settlement of all disputes that concern it either directly or indirectly. Expanding the area of peace, stability, and prosperity can only have a positive effect on Europe’s broader neighborhood and the international community.²⁵ The AKP has invested a tremendous amount of time and effort into the Middle East over the past ten years, given its worldview and reverence for the Ottoman period. Support for Erdoğan’s neo-Ottoman foreign policy has certainly lessened due to its involvement in the Syrian civil war.

Neo-Ottomanism: A Cloak for Imperialism?

Neo-Ottomanism was first evoked by President Özal (1989-93) as a solution to the aggravated ethnic conflict between Kurdish separatists and the Turkish state. Highlighting the Ottoman Empire's cultural plurality, Özal's neo-Ottomanism favored a multi-ethnic and multicultural composition that could accommodate multiple identities, including the Kurdish identity. Under the AKP its contours were fixed and, in turn, shaped Turkey's foreign-policy vision. For Davutoğlu, Turkey's strategic depth is consolidated by its unique historical and geographic depth. The AKP's geostrategic vision, therefore, builds on the post-Cold War approach and yet stands out as a more ambitious and proactive project in what is often called neo-Ottomanism. Thus its vision transcends the Ottoman territories and suggests that relations should be cultivated with Africa and Asia as well as with the West. Davutoğlu clarifies the means by which global leadership is assumed. The strategic depth policy is larger than merely geopolitical power, for it implicates identity and economic power as well. In other words, it requires the re-establishment of cultural and trade relations with its interconnected regions.²⁶

By forming simultaneous alliances in its immediate geopolitical neighborhood, Turkey should be able to claim a global strategic role. In short, it should pursue active engagement with the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Balkans in order to counterbalance its unidimensional dependency on the EU and the United States. Within this framework, along with continuing its deep engagement with the EU and the United States, Turkey should also cultivate stronger relationships with Middle Eastern states as well as non-state actors in order to resolve existing disputes in its immediate neighborhood. Success in this undertaking could enable Ankara to form a united front, a political bloc composed of the Muslim countries and populations via its soft power. The AKP champions a deliberate revival of the imperial past in order to resolve the contemporary problems of the former Ottoman geopolitical sphere.²⁷

The AKP government has never liked scholarly comparisons of Turkey's foreign policy to a neo-Ottoman strategy. Yet in foreign policy perceptions matter as much as principles, and Ankara has given the distinct impression that Turkey's imperial history inspires its current international ambitions. This, in turn, often implies a departure from the policy choices made since the republic's proclamation in 1923. Seen from Cairo or Tunis, Davutoğlu's words have often been reminiscent of Ottoman imperial grandeur, and his habit of constantly referencing cultural and religious affinities between Ankara and the Arab world has not necessarily been welcome.²⁸

An imperial leftover from the Ottoman era drove home the lesson that Ankara had little to gain and much to lose by interjecting itself into the region's acrimonious politics. To the contrary, Davutoğlu often laments the previous governments' trepidation and lack of self-confidence, thereby implying that a Turkey at ease with its identity and history can play a great role in the region and beyond – one that is not locked into the one-dimensional focus on western alliances, but rather appreciates the “strategic depth” that Turkey had in the former Ottoman lands. While heavy going, the main thrust of Davutoğlu's work is clearly dominated by the deep conviction that the West and the Islamic world are incompatible and resentment of the West for trying to impose its values and political system on the rest of the world.

Indeed, the AKP leaders' tendency to side increasingly with the Islamists and their growing attention to non-western powers, when combined with their increasing criticism of the West, can be fully understood only if their ideological background is taken into account. This is not to say that the other previously cited factors are useless when trying to grasp foreign policy changes; rather, it betrays a deep disdain for the pro-western Arab regimes as well as an expectation that Islamic movements would replace them and see Turkey as a leader or a model.²⁹

The way in which the AKP government's foreign-policy vision emphasizes finding new export markets, positioning Turkey as a leading actor in its immediate region, and recreating its connections with Africa's predominantly Muslim countries, offers a key role to Turkish faith-based NGOs. As Davutoğlu states above, this venture requires soft-power elements over and above economic and political vigor. The social and cultural bonds reinstated by the achievements of humanitarian- and social-aid organizations lay the groundwork for further economic and political engagement between Turkey and African countries. Drawing upon religious solidarity and the Ottoman legacy, Turkish organizations form social and cultural ties with African nations. In that respect, Turkish faith-based organizations function as agents of soft power for the AKP government's economic and political influence in Africa.³⁰

Kemalists usually explain this shift in sectarian terms, and there is certainly an argument to be made that Sunni Turkey seeks a leadership role in the Sunni world. Ankara will therefore favor other Islamists over Muslims who do not share their Manichean worldview. Likewise, it will support Islamist Hamas and its violent goals, but not the secular Palestinian Authority or the peaceful Palestinian cause. This selective solidarity also applies to all

acts of valence committed against Muslims by non-Muslims, as long as the latter are anti-American or anti-European, because political Islam, in the secular view, has made the strategic decision that the enemy of its enemy is its friend.

Ankara will no doubt continue to use its populist, anti-western foreign policy to boost its popularity in the run-up to the 2015 elections. Thus AKP-ruled Turkey can no longer be considered a western ally. To contain the party's Islamist influence not just in Turkey but also in the region, the opposition must deny the Erdoğan government the influence and prestige that comes with being promoted to the status of a regional mediator. It is time for critics in the opposition to develop an alternative foreign policy to distinguish themselves from the AKP.³¹

Turkey has become a party to the regional conflicts rather than an arbiter. By casting its lot with Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Qatar, the country has positioned itself firmly, even if by default, in the camp of those who are confronting the alleged rise of the "Shia Crescent," which only further aggravates the sectarian polarization tearing the Middle East apart.³² Turkey finds itself on the side of al-Qaeda-affiliated militants fighting to overthrow a secular regime. Islamist movements across the Middle East and especially in North Africa have emulated the AKP's approach to gaining power through democratic means. As the AKP's recent authoritarian tendencies have become increasingly acknowledged, its credibility as a force for true democratization has suffered concomitantly. But the role of ideological reflexes and grand ambitions, in particular those of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, must not be underestimated.³³

Turkey lost most of its regional influence due to its blatant miscalculations concerning Syria. Its attempts to regain a foothold, on the other hand, continue to be hampered by Erdoğan's less-than-diplomatic remarks and outbursts. It seems that normalized ties with Israel, regardless of how much sense this makes in view of the current turmoil, continue to be a political liability for Erdoğan at a time when crucial elections are just around the corner. Normalized ties between Turkey and Egypt have also been postponed indefinitely for the same reason. These two realities indicate that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu may not be speaking from the same script. Thus it is not clear how Ankara hopes to re-establish an influential position for itself without a coherent and realistic approach to the region's major issues.³⁴

The renewed Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations present both politicians with an opportunity to take the first step in reviving the once highly praised "zero problems" policy. This may be the last chance to redeem their

foreign policy partnership and the best chance they have to reverse Turkey's growing image as an obstacle to progress. But far more importantly, it would mean the fulfillment of a legacy reaching back to Özal and Erdoğan's own early premierships: supporting policies that relieve the sufferings of the region's ordinary people due to the ongoing instability and violence.³⁵ If Ankara seeks a regional leadership role or even to export its model of Muslim democracy, it is better off appealing to the "hearts and minds" of those who crave self-determination. This is why Turkey's partners are hoping for a more stable and reasoned course of action. Ankara's choices will shape both the country's international image and future performance. In the final analysis, the country faces an important test: Will all of these promising developments lead to a lasting readjustment in its foreign policy, or will they prove to be just more fleeting words?³⁶

The EU "Losing" Turkey

Improving relations with the Middle East allows the AKP government to satisfy its electorate's "Ottoman" nostalgia for an eastward-looking foreign policy; builds Turkey's reputation as an independent emerging power, which pleases the nationalists; and highlights the country's dangerous and tumultuous neighborhood, one that has been repeatedly torn by war and ethnic conflict, filled with mutually hostile and suspicious states, riven with religious strife and beset with a variety of external shocks from the Soviet collapse to the American invasion of Iraq. Whether the question is economic growth, the Armenian issue, or settling the Kurdish problem, a deepening relationship with Iran drives wedges between Turkey and the partners it urgently needs. Failure will mean a return to nationalist and autarchic policies, as well as continual violence and instability.

In addition to such external forces as the Arab Spring and globalization, two noteworthy factors are the AKP leadership and an emerging civil society that had, for far too long, been dormant and cowed by the state's hegemonic power. The AKP, which advocates economic liberalism, has two handicaps that militate against an orderly liberal progression: (1) its own authoritarian tendency, as indicated by Erdoğan's domination of party politics, and (2) its political instincts are not liberal in the classical sense, but are imbued first and foremost with an apprehension toward Muslim sensibilities and concerns. While the party itself may be economically liberal, politically and culturally it has yet to transform itself due to the weakness of such institutions as the media and the education system.

There are important divergences between the EU and Turkey as regards the Middle East. In addition, denying the Kurdish and Alevi issues raise serious questions about the ruling party's commitment to democratic reform. Brussels will have to balance its praise for Turkey's regional role with a tough message about its policies toward Israel and Iran, which run counter to European interests, and about changes in the party's approach to domestic reform that contravene democratic values. Applying some much needed pressure to Ankara will signal to Erdoğan and his government that despite Turkey's importance, there are limits to what the EU will tolerate when it comes to Turkish domestic and foreign policies. Brussels should hold Erdoğan publicly accountable for his authoritarianism. With the executive's tutelage of the judiciary, harsh control of the Internet, a massively empowered intelligence service, as well as Erdoğan's interference in central bank policies, self-censorship and the AKP's intrusion into the media, not to mention the deterioration of civil rights, Turkey has become a hard sell on the international market. The country, which is addicted to international trade, investment, research and technology, and education and security, cannot afford a heavy fallout in diplomacy with its western allies.

A cold shoulder from the EU was only part of the reason why Turkey began courting new allies and reducing its almost exclusive reliance on the United States and Europe. These include the end of the Cold War and a new regional security environment engendered by the US-led invasion of Iraq in particular. Over the past decade, Turkey's Islamic conservative government has frenetically tried to improve relations with Russia, Iran, and Iraq while significantly downgrading the de facto alliance it established with Israel in the mid-1990s. Instead, foreign policy is now about warding off threats, dealing with opponents, building coalitions, and advancing commercial interests. Turkey sees its ties with Iran as a hedge against Kurdish nationalism, believing that brisk cross-border trade will make everyone – Turks, Kurds, and Iranians – richer and less suspicious of one another. But choosing Iran over the rest of the world is not smart policy.

Ankara's establishment of a consulate in Irbil indicates that Turkey is no longer the neighbor most likely to invade. To be sure, Kurdish and Turkish nationalisms remain irreconcilable in many ways; however, the Turks have clearly determined that the best way to deal with this challenge is to leverage Turkey's proximity to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq to their political, economic, and diplomatic advantage. Of course, the final disposition of Kirkuk and the political deadlock in Baghdad over elections could destabilize northern Iraq and threaten Turkish security, develop-

ments that would likely force Ankara to return to a more traditional policy to contain the Kurds and Kurdish nationalism.

In northern Syria, for instance, the PKK-affiliated Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) has been fighting Islamist radicals. Until recently, Turkey was reportedly supporting Jihadist groups against the PKK affiliate. (...) Turkey has also turned a blind eye to weapons transfers from its territory to Jabhat al-Nusra, a radical Islamist militant group, hoping to boost the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime and keep the PYD in check.³⁷

This is a dangerous game, for once Assad falls Turkey might find itself with a jihadist problem in its newly acquired sphere of influence. Opponents of this policy believe that Ankara's policies could usher in a dramatic collapse of the regime that could be taken advantage of by Syrian Kurdish groups pushing for an independent Kurdish state. For Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000), the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was a convenient instrument to help settle old scores over the disputed territory of Hatay and, more directly, to force Turkey's hand on sharing water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. As a result, Turkey is once again facing simultaneously hard-power threats from the PKK, Iran, and Syria while struggling to reassess its relationship with the Free Syrian Army as the conflict intensifies. As it seeks influence in Syria and Iraq, Ankara has to make peace with its own Kurdish minority. If autonomy is the way to resolve the Kurdish question in Iraq and Syria, in Turkey the path to conflict resolution is more federalism.³⁸

The AKP is in dialogue with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan about disarming his organization. Nonetheless, observers on both sides accept "that the demands regarding political rights and Kurdish identity, such as the right to Kurdish-language education and greater degree of self-government, should also be addressed to reach a solution."³⁹ Meghan O'Sullivan urges "policy makers in the U.S. and Europe ... to set aside their traditional way of viewing the world exclusively as a collection of nation-states; recognize the possibilities and risks behind Kurdish empowerment; and craft a strategy to encourage this pro-Western population to gain more influence in the region without provoking a backlash."⁴⁰ In September 2013, the PKK said that it was "suspending [its] pullout from Turkey into bases in northern Iraq, arguing [that] Erdogan's government had not made good on [its] promises to enact reforms to improve Kurdish rights."⁴¹

Turkey can promote itself as a model in the Middle East, with full support from Washington and Brussels, only by guaranteeing equal rights to all of its citizens. But before doing so, it must first guarantee democratic rights at home,

including freedom of speech and press, minority rights, and freedom of – and from – religion. In this regard it still needs the West, one of the anchors of liberal democracy in Turkey. Yet if the current course of action is maintained, it may well drag Turkey into turmoil and the kind of instability and polarization that could cause it to look more like the post-Arab Spring Middle East rather than an inspiration for pluralist democracy, consensus-building, and tolerance. Indeed, it would be a mistake for the party's leaders to believe in Turkey's increasing international prominence with a growing strategic independence from the West. "The US will collect the debt for the economic, military, political and diplomatic support it extended to Turkey in the early 21st century in order to make it a political actor that would establish order in the region."⁴² In fact, Turkey's economic and political ascent remains deeply contingent upon preserving its bonds with the West.

Today, many people inside and outside Turkey wonder whether the country will remain the same successful democracy, open economy, and reliable security partner of the West that it has been in recent years. There is cause for concern, but there is also time for the Turks to sort out the issues behind the Gezi Park demonstrations. Nonetheless, the AKP is now on the offensive with a campaign of rhetorical abuse and judicial action against those who participated in or supported the demonstrations. Therefore, continued political polarization and resulting questions about the AKP's postponing of democracy will make EU-Turkish coordination more difficult. The European goal thus should be to do whatever it can to ensure that a complete and honest debate takes place in Turkey and to encourage the Turks to resolve the serious splits in their society in a democratic, peaceful manner. Assuming that Turkey retains its democratic system, this continued partnership will be possible. Given the ongoing chaotic circumstances in the region, this partnership will remain essential for dealing with Syria.

Following the rapid decline of the rule of law there, international interest in Turkey is waning. The EU and Washington are highly concerned. Indeed, if European and American officials are permanently driven away by Ankara's provocative announcements of "strategic interest," why should they consider supporting a "volatile country" when their own publics "have become inward-looking"? Broadly speaking, Marc Pierini argues that the Turkish argument "depicting Turkey as a strategic addition to the EU has now largely vanished." In his view the EU may, "according to the accession negotiations' ground rules, state that Turkey's dismantling of fundamental freedoms, elimination of almost all key components of the separation of power, and authoritarian tendencies are not EU-compatible." Consequently, Brussels would in all likelihood choose

to “suspend accession negotiations until the rule of law is restored.” This former top European diplomat warns that “that would be the most logical scenario under the mutually agreed rules of the accession process.”⁴³

In its “Report on Turkey,” the European Parliament (EP) strongly criticizes the dysfunctional rule of law, checks and balances, separation of powers, the executive’s intrusion into the judiciary by appointing the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), the infringements of media freedoms by the administration’s censorship, and the self-censorship of media bosses.⁴⁴

Technically, as things stand now, it can be argued that the country no longer sufficiently fulfills the political criteria of the EU accession process. The visible trends on the Turkish political scene point to further degradation of the rule of law; greater controls on the judiciary, the press, and the citizens at large; more worries from financial circles; and a widening gap with EU standards. The artificial way the current crisis has been engineered makes it difficult to reconcile Turkey’s domestic political games with its global interests, particularly vis-à-vis the EU.⁴⁵

Considering the current malfunctioning of the rule of law and the separation of powers, Turkey risks losing its self-acclaimed reputation as a land of opportunity for foreign investors and being viewed as a country in which they will think twice before investing.⁴⁶ Erdoğan even “blamed an ‘interest-rate lobby’ for stoking the Gezi Park protests last summer.” On the contrary, his predecessor Gül “called for a ‘new growth policy’ and argued that Turkey should address its low savings rate, its educational failings, and the lack of women’s participation in political and economic life.”⁴⁷ Yet anyone who cares about the future of the western alliance with Turkey should not lose sight of ongoing trends that could threaten the economic underpinning of the country’s security – and with it the possibility of a stable and secure peace among Turkey and its neighbors.

Referring to the Gezi Park protests, Erdoğan accuses a coalition of “marginal groups, riff-raff, anarchists, terrorists and vandals,” as well as the opposition and followers of an influential US-based Islamic cleric, of stoking trouble on the streets to undermine him.⁴⁸ To the contrary, the EP report criticizes the Turkish police for “excessive violence” against the protesters and the courts’ apparent failure to penalize those state officials and policemen responsible for excessive violence, loss of life, and serious injuries to protesters. The report also expressed concerns over the nation’s ongoing polarization and severely condemns Turkey’s unwillingness to adhere to the Copenhagen cri-

teria, which raises serious doubts and causes pessimism and skepticism about its commitment to further advance the accession bid process.⁴⁹ “Turkey should reform not for the sake of the EU, but for the Turkish citizens that benefit the most by creating a modern and prosperous state,” stresses Ria Oomen-Ruijten, the EP’s Turkey rapporteur.⁵⁰

Absent political progress, the passage of time will only create an environment in which social division intensifies, violence increases, investment is scared off, alienation grows, and the best and brightest leave to make their futures elsewhere. It is up to the country’s political leaders to formulate politics that both advance the democratization process and the continued alignment with the West. Both the Gezi Park protests as well as the corruption allegations are likely to turn the March 2014 local elections into a vote of confidence for the AKP. At this stage, civil society should engage all parties to provide a wider perspective and incentives for cooperation within a democratic framework. The present crisis is part of a long-running drama pitting the country’s dominant secular elite against a new, more pious or Islamist segment of society whose bases of support are not necessarily in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, or other major cities. The different and seemingly irreconcilable worldviews of these competing camps have led to a high-stakes political struggle over who will control the state’s resources. Largely depending upon the outcome, the country’s future will either be that of a vicious circle or of a virtuous one.

Turkey no longer presents a role model for the shape that other new democracies in the Near East will take. A Turkey dominated by domestic polarization may not necessarily help stabilize the Near East. Critics view this as a cause for serious concern, especially in view of the lack of alternatives. Indeed, on critical regional issues Turkey and its allies have often worked at cross-purposes. Remedying this will require a steady effort to rebuild trust and communication and to find common policy grounds on which they can cooperate. “For Ian Lesser of the German Marshall Fund, a transatlantic think-tank, Turkey now needs a ‘zero problems’ strategy with the West.”⁵¹ Allies can bring capabilities, insights, and funding to the table in ways that can reinforce Turkey’s own efforts.

It will also require more determined action to advance the parties’ common interests, as well as more decisive steps to address the region’s conflicts and problems. The arena in which a more proactive policy is most urgently required, and which would do the most to reassure allies and deter Iran, is Syria. On the one hand, three years of turmoil in the Arab world should counsel smart, economical, and effective multilateral action, and not just serve as

an excuse for western inaction. On the other hand, Erdoğan should consider the impact that his decisions have had on American and European interests in the region. In the end, Turkey need not act alone and certainly should not unilaterally resort to providing military aid to extremist Syrian rebels.

Conclusion

The AKP brought a new strategy to Turkish foreign policy. Some scholars ascribed this reorientation to the rise of neo-Ottomanism; others called it Islamization and yet others argued that it was a Middle Easternization of foreign policy. These labels have one element in common: They give weight to Islam and Turkey's imperial past as soft-power assets in the conduct of foreign policy by rejecting secular Kemalism in Turkish diplomacy. The AKP capitalized on Özal's neo-Ottomanist foreign policy and Erbakan's multi-dimensional foreign policy by using the country's pivotal role so that its geopolitical location could transform it into a global actor.⁵²

In his 2001 book *Stratejik Derinlik*, Davutoğlu developed his thesis by arguing that Turkey, thanks to its geographical position, possessed a "strategic depth" that it had hitherto failed to exploit. Therefore, it should move away from its previous "threat assessment approach" and actively engage with regional political systems in the Middle East, Asia, the Balkans, and Transcaucasia.⁵³ He suggested that rather than acting as a mere "bridge" between the West and the Muslim world, a previously repeated foreign policy mantra, Turkey should act as a "central country" by breaking away from a "static and single-parameter policy" and becoming a "problem solver" that contributes to "global and regional peace."⁵⁴ Rather than concentrating purely on defense, Davutoğlu stressed that Turkey should work for "zero problems" with all of its neighbors. In accordance with these principles and wherever possible, the AKP tried to make greater use of soft power (i.e., economic, political and cultural means) instead of the alternative heavily securitized doctrine, especially in relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors.⁵⁵

As Ankara's failed attempt to integrate the extremist Hamas into the peace process demonstrates, this not only contradicted its alignment with the United States and Israel but also harmed its standing as an honest broker and mediator. The AKP leaders intended to mediate between Israel and Syria, but when Israel attacked Gaza, Ankara ended its diplomacy between Hamas and Tel Aviv ended abruptly. Since the Israelis refused to apologize for their operation against the Gaza flotilla, the Turks downgraded their "diplomatic relations with Israel" and halted "military cooperation." When Israel imposed

“a siege on Gaza” in 2007, Ankara demanded that it be lifted and that dialogue with Hamas be renewed. Turkey believed that creating peace would introduce “political stability” and that “economic integration” would safeguard the reconciliation process.⁵⁶ The “reconciliation” between Hamas and the PLO could enhance Turkey’s mediation efforts and its standing with the Arab public.⁵⁷

When Turkey accused Israel at the UN Security Council of launching a deadly attack on the Gaza flotilla, which consisted largely of humanitarian aid sent from Turkey, Walter Russell Mead said that Ankara had clearly decided to move away from its long-standing partnership with the United States.⁵⁸ Consequently, Turkey ended military and intelligence cooperation with Washington. Meanwhile, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu apologized for the raid on the Mavi Marmara and offered to pay damages to the victims.

In general, and although Davutoğlu certainly helped give Turkish foreign policy a much higher international profile, it can be argued that, in practice, the two approaches of securitized nationalism and de-securitized liberalism continued in uneasy tandem and that the AKP leadership did not always stick strictly to its own declared principles. Unexpected events like the so-called Arab Spring confronted it with questions that Davutoğlu’s grand vision had not foreseen. This reflected both the internal balance of power among the AKP government, the state establishment, and hard external realities.⁵⁹

In fact Davutoğlu, the main architect of the AKP’s foreign policy, actually changed the language of foreign policy debates: His concepts of “strategic depth” and of Turkey as a “central country” were attempts to fit policy into a holistic conceptual framework that it had previously lacked. The aim of “zero problems” with neighbors was a clear reaction to the highly securitized – even xenophobic – nationalism that had previously been advanced. Overall, it was presented as an alternative to former policies that had been dominated by caution, passivity, and adherence to the status quo.⁶⁰

More controversially, it was argued that the AKP’s policies were, far from being new, actually neo-Ottoman, a charge that implied a reversion to pre-republican practices. Özal had adopted this vision over a decade ago in an attempt to reinstate Ottoman history and culture as part of the Turks’ collective memory. In fact, he had developed a more active regional policy and emphasized economic cooperation as a means of solving international problems. The improvement in relations with neighboring states began with the 1999 reconciliation with Greece and was initiated, in the case of Syria, by the 1998

Yılmaz government. In other words, the AKP exploited pre-existing opportunities rather than creating new ones.⁶¹

Neo-Ottomanism required that Turkey should be more active in the former Ottoman space, stretching from the Balkans to the Middle East and North Africa.⁶² This was seen as corresponding to Davutoğlu's emphasis on Turkey's role in its "hinterland," most of which had been part of the Ottoman Empire, and was used by the AKP's neoconservative American critics as the basis for alleging that the party was turning Turkey away from the West and toward a neo-Ottomanism inspired by Islamic extremism.⁶³ It was even argued that neo-Ottomanism was a "misnomer" since the AKP "ignores Israel, the Balkans and the Caucasus."⁶⁴

In Davutoğlu's strategic depth doctrine, Turkey plays the role of a "bridge" to the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Middle East. This new direction denies the Kemalist doctrine of abstaining from any grand foreign policy design and instead focus on westernizing itself. Furthermore, this doctrine places less value on nationalism but more on the transnational vision of Muslim community. Thus the AKP leadership reoriented itself away from the West by balancing its relationships through rapprochement by its "zero problems" policy.

This new foreign policy activism has overburdened Ankara's diplomacy, while the re-Islamization of its foreign relations with the Muslim world (e.g., Hamas, al-Nusra, and the Muslim Brotherhood) has alienated the West and led to serious concerns and doubts about its reliability as a western ally. Turkey returned to the western camp during the Syrian civil war due to its vulnerability to the Middle East's sectarian polarization and its inability to counter-balance Iran's growing presence in the Levant, the Persian Gulf, and Iraq without western protection. In the end, the AKP revised its own foreign policy strategy and replaced soft-power arguments with hard-power threats to almost all its Muslim neighbors. History will prove that this reversal backfired and harmed the country's self-proclaimed status as the sole Muslim democracy that was serving as an exemplar for other Islamic nations interested in progressing on their paths to prosperity and peace.

As part of the conception of Turkey as a central country with interests and engagement in the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Black Sea region, Central Asia, and the Middle East, it had to be accepted that Ankara was not the most influential external actor in any of them and that its power projection could therefore be limited. Thus, being a central country meant negotiations and compromise with no certainty of being able to achieve ideal results. Relations with Russia, Iran, Armenia, Cyprus, and Iraqi Kurdistan were apt examples. The difficulty, it could be argued, was that if the neighbors refused to accept

Turkey's self-perceived reasonable conditions and had the support of other powerful states, then problems would go unsolved, as in the cases of Armenia, Israel, and Cyprus. Equally, Syrian-Israeli as well as Armenian-Azerbaijani hostilities made it impossible to achieve "zero problems" with them. By late 2011, Hale had concluded that this policy was in tatters.⁶⁵

Furthermore Turkey's relations with the Arab monarchies have been hurt due to Ankara's support for Egypt's ousted President Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood. "The neo-Ottoman foreign policy fell apart when the Syrian civil war intensified and the Egyptian army unseated the country's elected president, Muhammad Morsi, an Islamist ally."⁶⁶ The growing sense of regional isolation caused Ankara to reorient its foreign policy toward the United States and the EU, apparently considering Washington and Brussels as indispensable allies in containing Iran's regional influence and protecting itself from the instability in Iraq and Syria. Thus the post-Arab Spring regional landscape has upended many of Turkey's regional ambitions.⁶⁷ Ali Bulaç, who defends the AKP, stated that since "Turkey [had] defied the global powers that had sponsored and financed its policies, it should have predicted the counter-moves. It is not a surprise that it has been dragged into a process of instability as a result of the deadlock in foreign policy."⁶⁸

Meanwhile, the idea of a "Turkish model" for the Middle East has butted up against stark demonstrations of the limits of Ankara's power there, for many of its policy initiatives have not worked out as planned. Moreover, Turkey's recent political turmoil has not only limited its ability to play a larger role, but has also detracted from the EU-Turkish relationship and Brussels' ability to objectively understand the country's ongoing political developments. The strategic environment has shown Turkey's political elites that they must balance their country's identity and maintain strong ties with the EU, the United States, and NATO if they hope to take a leading role in managing the Syrian civil war's regional fallout.

Broadly speaking, Pierini opines that Turkey's depiction of itself "as a strategic addition to the EU has now largely vanished" because in his view "according to the accession negotiations' ground rules, [the EU may] state that Turkey's dismantling of fundamental freedoms, elimination of almost all key components of the separation of power, and authoritarian tendencies are not EU-compatible."⁶⁹ Turkey no longer presents a role model for the shape other new democracies in the Near East will take. In addition, a Turkey dominated by domestic polarization may not necessarily help stabilize the regional turmoil; its role as a barrier against the disorder on its borders and a reliable partner for the West may become more questionable; and its ability to serve

as a bastion of stability in the Greater Middle East seems to be diminished. By the same token, its status as an island of stability in a fragile region is no longer accurate.⁷⁰

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