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PolicyWatch 2638

Turkey's Regional Charm Offensive: Motives and Prospects

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Jun 27, 2016

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Brief Analysis

After years of foreign policy setbacks, Ankara is trying to mend fences with Israel, Egypt, Iran, and Russia, and the potential implications for the United States are mostly beneficial -- assuming the Turks can actually pull it off.

On June 29, Turkey and Israel are expected to approve a reconciliation agreement that will normalize relations after a six-year diplomatic impasse. Meanwhile, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly expressed his regrets to Moscow earlier today for the November incident in which Turkey shot down a Russian military jet that had crossed into its airspace. And on June 22, recently appointed prime minister Binali Yildirim declared that "Turkey would work to expand cooperation with Iran," adding that the relationship holds "special significance for the Turkish government, and all capacities should be utilized in advancing the two countries' ties."

These and other developments highlight Ankara's increasingly urgent desire to improve ties with various neighbors, which will be an uphill battle after a decade of dramatic foreign policy failures under Erdogan and former prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu. The prospects of this charm offensive actually succeeding vary. Although the normalization effort with Israel should work out, Ankara will likely continue compartmentalizing its relations with

Iran, improving economic bonds while disagreeing on regional issues such as the Syrian war (e.g., see "[Possibilities for a Turkish-Iranian Rapprochement](#)"). Turkish-Egyptian ties, which took a nosedive in 2013, will probably remain limited by Erdogan's mutual animosity with President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. And the future of Ankara's tense proxy showdown with Moscow is now up in the air pending a full Erdogan apology.

FAILED FOREIGN POLICY

The Erdogan-Davutoglu team has created more foreign policy problems for Turkey than ever seen in the country's modern memory. When Erdogan led the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as prime minister between 2003 and 2014, Davutoglu was his chief advisor and eventual foreign minister, later assuming the premiership himself when Erdogan became president. Although Erdogan forced him to resign last month, his replacement will be hard pressed to quickly undo so many years of questionable policymaking.

In his various AKP posts, Davutoglu attempted to make Turkey a standalone Middle East power. He believed this could be achieved by breaking with the United States when necessary and taking an active role in regional conflicts. Unfortunately, that policy has failed on virtually every front. Turkey's ties with Egypt, Israel, Russia, and Syria all ruptured. In the latter case, Turkey is now mired in Syria's civil war, backing rebels who are being crushed by the Assad regime and its regional allies, Iran and Russia. Moreover, Ankara has found itself unwelcome in Baghdad over its aggressive courting of Iraqi Kurds and Sunni Arabs -- another issue on which ties with Tehran have become rocky. As a result, Turkey is left with few friends in the Middle East, with the exception of Qatar, Iraqi Kurdistan, and to some extent Saudi Arabia.

SUCCESS WITH ISRAEL

In the near term, Turkey's most likely chance for foreign policy success is the normalization effort with Israel. Ties collapsed in 2010 after tension over the Gaza blockade culminated in the violent *Mavi Marmara* flotilla incident, but diplomatic talks aimed at repairing the rift are finally set to conclude this week.

Years of efforts to boost trade have helped bring these talks forward, as has a shared sense of an exploding region, leading both governments to find wisdom in restoring their old security relationship. Moreover, Israel considers Turkey the best conduit for potential natural gas sales to Europe, while Ankara wants to buy Israeli gas to decrease its own energy dependence on Russia.

As part of the nascent reconciliation deal, Ankara has apparently agreed not to press charges against Israeli military personnel involved in the 2010 flotilla raid, and to put a lid on Hamas activity in Turkey. In return, Israel will pay compensation to the families of nine Turkish citizens killed during that operation, and give the Turkish government access to Gaza in order to build desalination facilities, power plants, and a hospital. If these and other terms are authorized, the deal would jumpstart bilateral security cooperation to Turkey's advantage, giving Ankara access to Israeli weapons and technology that it could then use in its renewed war against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Even then, however, bilateral ties are unlikely to return to their heyday of the 1990s, when policymakers in both countries had an emphatic view of each other's threat perceptions. Turkey's continued ties with Hamas are a particularly tough sticking point for Israel. At the same time, though, Israel could act as a facilitator between Turkey and Egypt, bridging some of their sharp differences.

HONEYMOON UNLIKELY WITH EGYPT

Since 2013, Cairo has been ostracizing the Turks because of their support for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which the Sisi government considers a terrorist entity. The mutual dislike between Erdogan and Sisi is so strong because each represents the other's demise -- Erdogan is the Islamist leader who survived antigovernment protests, while Sisi is the secularist dictator who took over when protests toppled the Islamist MB-led government. Sisi also

sees Erdogan as a rival in Levant affairs, including in the Palestinian theater, where Turkey supports the MB-aligned Hamas. Therefore, bilateral ties are unlikely to fully recover as long as Erdogan and Sisi are in power, even if Israel plays the mediator role and Saudi Arabia continues its efforts to bring Turkey and Egypt into its fold against Iran. Rather, the two leaders' rivalry will likely feed existing tensions, including in Cyprus, where Egypt has carried out joint exercises with the Greek government.

Another obstacle is the view among Turkey's AKP elites that supporting fellow Sunnis and Islamist movements such as the MB is a moral obligation, not just a political choice. This belief makes the AKP highly unlikely to dial back its support for MB branches across the Middle East, including in Egypt.

COMPARTMENTALIZATION WITH IRAN

Feeling the pressure of facing two powerful adversaries in Syria, Ankara has decided to extend an olive branch to both Iran and Russia. In the former case, the branch has been deeper economic ties, which have helped Iranians find relief from international sanctions. Tehran has reciprocated by bringing Turkish businesses into the Islamic Republic.

Efforts to integrate their markets have been particularly robust this year. On February 29, the first Iran-Turkey Capital Markets Forum was held, primarily to facilitate dual listing of companies on both countries' stock exchanges. On March 5, then-prime minister Davutoglu called for removing bureaucratic trade impediments to take advantage of their complementary economies and geographies, which he argued could help triple annual trade from \$9 billion to \$30 billion. And on April 9, the Iranian and Turkish Chambers of Commerce signed three documents to strengthen economic cooperation and banking relations following the twenty-fifth session of the Joint Economic Commission, held in Turkey. More broadly, high-level officials have been traveling back and forth frequently to emphasize the importance of economic cooperation for regional stability.

Improved Turkish relations with Iran -- even if only on the economic front -- could also open possibilities between Ankara and Baghdad. Turkey is deeply anchored in the increasingly independent Kurdistan Regional Government, but a closer relationship with the central government (and its more than three million barrels per day in oil exports) could bring additional diplomatic, energy, and trade benefits.

WINDOW FOR IMPROVEMENT WITH RUSSIA?

The course of Turkish-Russian relations has shown that any compartmentalization strategy is wrought with potential pitfalls. Prior to the November shutdown incident, Ankara and Moscow were able to develop deep trade and energy links even while disagreeing on Syria, but nearly all of those efforts broke down afterward, with Russia going so far as to impose sanctions on Turkey in January.

Even before Erdogan's expression of regret, however, Ankara seemed to be signaling that it wanted to repair ties. On May 30, only days after Davutoglu's ouster, Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus also expressed regret for the shutdown. The statement followed Vladimir Putin's own olive branch of sorts: during a May 28 visit to Athens, the Russian leader asserted that while Turkey had committed a war crime, he was open to reconciliation if Ankara gave "solid explanations and compensation [for the attack] instead of vague and general statements." Kurtulmus responded that the "two countries have no problems that cannot be overcome," while Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu suggested forming a joint working group to chart out steps for reconciliation. Yet the Kremlin will settle for nothing less than a full apology by Erdogan.

Russia had recently invited Turkey to the July 1 meeting of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation in Sochi, and Cavusoglu confirmed today that he will be attending. But beyond diplomatic obligations, only time will tell if relations are truly warming.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Good relations with the United States and NATO are now even more important for Turkey given the growing chaos in the region, the dangerous situation with Russia (which recently risked an aerial confrontation with U.S. aircraft over southern Syria), and the possibility of a "better" American leader than Barack Obama, from Turkey's standpoint. Yet bolstering a relationship requires more than just a desire for improvement -- as with any significant ally, U.S.-Turkish relations are a function of concrete factors like personal relations between leaders, the country's influence in its region, and the manner in which it exercises that influence.

Starting with the latter, if Turkey is actually able to make progress in some of its previously discussed efforts to improve regional relations, the climate between Washington and Ankara would benefit as well. The White House would see Turkish fence-mending with Israel and Egypt as a major assist given Ankara's diplomatic, military, energy, and economic strengths. This would be particularly true after the next U.S. administration takes office, since it will almost certainly be inclined toward a more active U.S. stabilizing role in the Middle East. To be sure, Turkish rapprochement with Iran could cause problems, though probably not major ones given the natural limitations of their relationship (i.e., the Syria impasse, not to mention longstanding Persian-Turkish tensions).

As for its direct relations with Ankara, Washington will either have to tolerate Erdogan's increasing authoritarianism or convince him to rein it in. Assuming a modus vivendi can be worked out on Turkish domestic issues, his personal relationship with the next American president will be critical.

Syria will be crucial as well. At the moment, Turkey and the United States are dangerously out of sync on their threat perceptions and policy prescriptions regarding two key issues, both existential for Ankara: Bashar al-Assad's continued hold on power under Iran and Russia's patronage, and the ascendance of the PKK-associated Democratic Union Party (PYD), a powerful Syrian Kurdish faction. The strain over how to deal with a third Syrian danger -- the Islamic State -- is compounding the first two sources of friction. Fortunately, both governments have several means of remedying much of the Syria-centric irritation that has kept them apart, including a tougher (or at least more realistic) U.S. line on Assad and his backers, a more cautious U.S. approach to supporting the PYD, a more realistic Turkish view on Assad's fate, greater understanding from Ankara regarding Washington's rationale for relying on the PYD's military capabilities against the Islamic State, and, hopefully, further victories over the terrorist group's forces in Syria and Iraq.

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