

Turkey's Flip

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey's ties with its neighbors have been transformed since the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, came to power seven years ago.

Some analysts have described the AKP's foreign policy as a "zero problems with neighbors" approach. However, Turkey's new foreign-policy environment indicates otherwise.

Under the AKP, Ankara has indeed eliminated problems and built good ties with some neighbors, such as Syria and Iran, and signaled a thaw with Armenia, with whom Turkey shares a closed border.

On the other hand, Ankara's traditionally good ties with neighbors such as Georgia and Azerbaijan have deteriorated under the AKP, and Turkish-Israeli ties could unravel despite diplomats' best efforts. Subsequently, rather than having a zero-problems approach to all neighbors, the AKP's foreign policy has resulted in significant ups with some neighbors and significant downs with others, especially those that are pro-Western.

For starters, the AKP's foreign policy has focused heavily on the Muslim Middle East. Some analysts have referred to the party's foreign policy as "neo-Ottomanist," suggesting "secular" imperial ambitions or the desire to achieve the status of a regional power. In fact, though, the AKP's foreign-policy energy has not exactly reflected Ottoman ambitions. The party does not assert Turkey's weight equally in all the areas that were under Ottoman rule, namely the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East.

Instead, the AKP has focused its energy on the Middle East, with a slant toward Islamist and anti-Western actors, while building a finance-based relationship with Russia. In this regard, the party's use of diplomacy is evocative: A study of high-level visits by AKP officials in the region reveals that the party asymmetrically focuses on anti-Western Arab countries and Iran while ignoring Israel, the Balkans and the Caucasus.

Between November 2002 and April 2009, the Turkish foreign minister made at least eight visits to Iran and Syria, but only one visit each to Azerbaijan, a Turkic nation once considered Turkey's closest partner, and to Georgia, despite the fact that Turkey acted as a mentor after Georgia gained independence. Similarly, between November 2002 and April 2009, the Turkish prime minister made at least seven trips to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, while paying only two visits to Greece and Bulgaria, Turkey's two immediate European and Balkan neighbors.

Much of the AKP's energy in the Muslim Middle East has been focused on Syria. In the 1990s, Turkey viewed Syria as an enemy because of its support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, as it launched terror attacks against Turkey. Despite this, Turkey and Syria opened their borders Oct. 13, facilitated visa-free travel and began joint cabinet-level meetings to encourage bilateral policymaking.

Although Turkish-Syrian rapprochement began in the late 1990s when Damascus stopped supporting the PKK, the past seven years of detente under the AKP have led to a significant strengthening of Syrian-Turkish ties. The party's sympathy toward Turkey's Arab neighbors, its tendency to analyze the Middle East through a religion-based "us vs. them" political lens and its favoring of anti-Western causes in the region have helped build Turkish-Syrian relations. Today, diplomats describe these relations as perfect.

Turkey's ties with Iran have also improved under the AKP's leadership, though not to the same extent as those with Syria. This is due to the fact that Tehran is a regional power and, unlike the Ba'ath regime in Damascus, it does not need patrons to survive. Still, the AKP also defends Iran's nuclear program through its "us vs. them" lens.

As international pressure to prevent Tehran's program mounts, Iran will likely launch diplomatic overtures to strengthen its bonds with Turkey. Trade links, including the Turkish purchase of and investment in Iranian natural gas, will upgrade bilateral ties. This activity, however, will create also tensions between Ankara and Western powers who will view AKP-promoted investments in Iran as an obstacle to economically isolating Tehran.

While ties with Iran have improved, Turkish-Israeli relations have significantly deteriorated under the AKP. The party's critical rhetoric regarding Israel, which has eroded all Turkish public support for ties with the country, has been dismissed for a long time in the West and in Israel as domestic politicking. However, that evaluation changed earlier this month: On Oct. 7, the AKP withdrew an invitation to Israel to the Anatolian Eagle, a NATO air force exercise that has been held in central Turkey with the participation of Israel, the United States and other Western nations since the mid-1990s.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan justified his party's decision by saying that Israel is a "persecutor." Yet the next day, the AKP announced that it had requested that Syria, whose regime persecutes its own people, participate in joint military exercises. The AKP's "us vs. them" mindset, which does not see nations but rather religious blocks in the Middle East, is corroding the foundations of Turkey's 60-year-old military and political cooperation with Israel.

Rather than being pro-Western or neo-Ottoman in a "secular" sense, the AKP's foreign policy is asymmetrically focused on anti-Western Middle East powers, as well as Russia. Rather than having a "zero problems with all neighbors" approach, the AKP's foreign policy is a mixed bag, eliminating problems with some neighbors while souring previously good ties with other neighbors, especially pro-Western ones.

Could someone please explain to me how this is good for Turkey's interests?

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