

AKP Reshuffles Turkey's Neighbors

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey's ties with its neighbors have been transformed since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power almost seven years ago in November 2002. Some analysts have described the AKP's foreign policy as a "zero problems with neighbors" approach. 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 other neighbors such as Georgia and Azerbaijan have deteriorated under the AKP, and Turkish-Israeli ties could unravel despite diplomats' best efforts. The AKP's foreign policy, far from producing "zero problems with neighbors," 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 desire to achieve status as a regional power. But the AKP's foreign policy energy has not asserted 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 towards 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 to the Middle East, Balkans and Caucasus reveals that the party focuses asymmetrically 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, while paying only one visit to Azerbaijan (a Turkic nation once considered to be the closest country to Turkey) and one visit to Georgia (despite the fact that after Georgia's independence, Turkey had acted as a mentor for that nation). During the same period, the Turkish prime minister made at least seven visits 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 of the Kurdistan Workers Party's (PKK) terror attacks against Turkey. Yet, on October 13, Turkey and Syria opened their borders, which facilitated visa-free travel, and set up joint cabinet-level meetings which encouraged a meld in bilateral policymaking. Turkish-Syrian rapprochement began in the late 1990s when Damascus stopped supporting the PKK, but the past seven years of rapprochement under the AKP have brought about a significant strengthening of Syrian-Turkish ties. The AKP's sympathy towards Turkey's Arab neighbors, and its tendency to analyze the Middle East through an "us versus them" religion-based political lens, as well as to side with anti-Western causes in the region, have helped build Turkish-Syrian relations. Today, diplomats describe Turkish-Syrian relations as perfect.

Turkey's ties with Iran have also improved under the AKP's leadership, although not to the same extent as Turkish-Syrian ties. This is due to the fact that Tehran is a regional power which, unlike the Baath regime in Damascus, does not need patrons to survive. Still, Turkey defends Iran's nuclearization, and as international pressure to prevent it mounts, Iran will likely launch diplomatic overtures to strengthen its bonds with Turkey. Trade links, including Turkish purchase of and investment in Iranian natural gas, will upgrade bilateral ties. Yet they will also create tensions between Ankara and the West, which will view AKP-promoted investments in Iran as undermining efforts to isolate Iran economically.

As Turkey's 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 Israel, had been dismissed for a long time in the West and in Israel as domestic politicking. However, that evaluation changed earlier this month. On October 7, the AKP uninvited Israel to "Anatolian Eagle," a NATO air force exercise that has been held in central Turkey with U.S., Israeli and Western states' participation 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. A proverbial mountain is moving in Turkish foreign policy: the AKP's "us versus 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, yet souring previously good ties with other neighbors, especially pro-Western ones. The question is: how is that good for the United States?

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