



## Turkish Foreign Policy under the AKP: The Rift with Washington

**Edited by Soner Cagaptay, with contributions by Svante Cornell,  
Ian Lesser, and Omer Taspinar**

**T**he United States has grown increasingly concerned about the status of its relations with Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Despite Turkish assistance to U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the AKP's decision to reject expanded sanctions against Iran has been problematic; in Washington's view, Ankara's policy has been out of sync with U.S. initiatives against nuclear proliferation. Meanwhile, the downward trend in Turkish-Israeli ties is causing concern in Washington regarding the future of this key, historic partnership between two U.S. allies.

Whereas the Gaza flotilla incident and Turkey's UN vote against Iran sanctions raised eyebrows in May–June 2010, more recent developments temporarily assuaged Washington. Signaling its willingness to mend fences, the AKP reached out through back channels and sent a high-level delegation to Washington from the secular and pro-Western Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such steps helped alleviate some U.S. concerns over the direction of the AKP's foreign policy.

Since summer 2010, however, signs have begun to emerge that the policy rift between Washington and Ankara may be permanent. Speaking at the sixty-fifth annual session of the UN General Assembly on September 20, 2010, Turkish president Abdullah Gul criticized sanctions against Iran: "If the demand is for Turkey not to have any trade, any economic relations with Iran, it would be unfair to Turkey." On Israel, Gul stated, "In the light of international law, Turkey expects a formal apology and compensation for the aggrieved families of the victims and the injured people." He also made a veiled threat: "In the old world, in the old times, if such an incident took place, wars would follow, but in our world today, international law must be taken into consideration." In interviews with international media, AKP foreign minister

Ahmet Davutoglu has gone further on the subject of Iran sanctions, calling them "baseless, entirely provocative and biased."<sup>1</sup> He vowed that Turkey would not abide by such sanctions, stating, "We don't see them as measures whose implementation is compulsory under international law." Similarly, on September 22, 2010, Turkish deputy prime minister Zafer Caglayan declared that "Turkish banks and companies are free to trade with Iran."<sup>2</sup>

These and other foreign policy differences between Washington and Ankara are emerging at a time of declining Turkish public support for cooperation with the West. Despite efforts by the Obama administration to embrace Turkey, only 6 percent of Turks approved of working closely with Washington, according to the 2010 Transatlantic Trends survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States. More alarming is the increasing percentage of Turks who view NATO as inessential to their national security—up to 43 percent from 37 percent in 2009—as well as the 20 percent who prefer that Turkey align with Middle East countries, compared to the 13 percent who prefer that it align with the European Union. In addition, a constitutional reform package supported by the AKP passed with 58 percent of the vote on September 12, 2010, hinting at

continuing support for the party and the likelihood that critical policy differences will linger.

Although some of the alarmism concerning the AKP was mitigated by the successful compromise over missile defense at NATO's November 2010 Lisbon summit, Turkey's joint military maneuvers with China in October 2010—the first such exercises to take place in any NATO country—reinforced the notion of a country at drift.

Accordingly, the time is ripe for a review of the U.S.-Turkey relationship. What has caused the AKP's foreign policy rift with Washington, and what can be done about it?

The four essays in this study, all by Washington-based experts, argue that Turkey's slide away from the West is rooted in hubristic, "neo-Gaullist," nonaligned, and Islamist foreign policy proclivities, whether separately or in tandem. Whichever explanation one supports, it is obvious that something has shifted in the U.S.-Turkey relationship; going forward, the AKP's Turkey cannot be considered a reliable ally, but rather an occasional friend and, at times, an adversary. The following articles provide insight on the growing rift as well as policy options for Washington as it deals with the ongoing changes in bilateral ties.

# Axis Shift

By Svante Cornell

Critics of the AKP have argued for several years that a shift is under way in Turkish foreign policy. They point to Ankara's increasing focus on ties to the Middle East and especially to the Islamist regimes there. This has opened up a debate on Ankara's purported "axis shift" (*eksen kaymasi* in Turkish), with the core question being, essentially, whether Turkey is leaving the West.

At first, the AKP's circa-2006 decision to focus increasingly on the Middle East generated great expectations in the United States: the party set out on a "zero problems with neighbors" policy and proposed to mediate between conflicting parties in the region. As in Europe, such initiatives were generally welcomed in Washington. Concerns nevertheless began to mount after Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stormed out of a panel with Israeli president Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in early 2009. In June 2010, Ankara voted against Iran sanctions at the UN soon after Turkish-Israeli ties began to deteriorate following the Gaza flotilla controversy. This put the question of Turkey's orientation on the agenda of most U.S. government offices, which have since dusted off their Turkey files in an attempt to understand what has changed. Although some of the alarmism concerning the AKP was mitigated by the successful compromise over missile defense at NATO's November 2010 Lisbon summit, Turkey's joint military maneuvers with China in October 2010—the first such collaboration between a NATO member and China—reinforced the notion of a country adrift. As much as Turkish officials reject the notion of an axis shift, for many in the United States, the case is already closed: Turkey is not the ally it used to be.

## Factors Driving the Shift

Four main factors help explain the evolution of Turkey's foreign policy shift in recent years. Much of the change can be ascribed to Turkey's growing economic and

political clout and mistakes made by both American and European policymakers toward Turkey. Moreover, some of the irritants in Turkish-Western relations appear rooted in the overextension of Turkish foreign policy. Yet these factors combined do not suffice to explain the full nature of the shift. Some of Turkey's policies, in particular with regard to Iran, Israel, and Sudan, can only be explained by ideology: the salience of anti-Western and Islamist thinking in the Turkish government.

## A Growing and Changing Turkey

Turkey has undergone tremendous domestic change in the past decade. Politically, a powerful conservative movement, in power since 2002, has overturned the Kemalist legacy. This has taken place in conjunction with an arguably more significant shift: Turkey's emergence as an economic power. Since 1990, Turkey's gross domestic product has quadrupled, while exports have grown by a factor of five, foreign direct investment by a factor of twenty-five, and the value of traded stocks by a factor of forty. Given Turkey's status as the world's fifteenth-largest economy (by some measures), it is only natural that Ankara should act with more self-confidence on the international scene.

Turkey's rediscovery of the Middle East is part and parcel of this development: Turkish exports are looking for new markets. Indeed, hordes of businessmen regularly accompany Turkish leaders on their numerous visits to Middle East states. Given the close ties between politics and business in the region, tighter political ties

provide Turkish businessmen with preferential treatment. In some places, such as Kurdish-dominated northern Iraq, the dynamic is inverted: the growing presence of Turkish businesses there after 2003 helped open the way for political rapprochement with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Irbil. As such—and particularly given the protracted economic crisis in the West and the contrasting growth in many emerging markets—it should come as no surprise that a stronger Turkey would seek to go its own way on some issues, or pay somewhat lesser attention to Western priorities.

### Western Mistakes

A NATO member and candidate for EU membership, Turkey has traditionally sided with Western states on major foreign policy issues. Yet this relationship was always based on reciprocity. Unfortunately, since Turkey began negotiating for EU accession in 2005, opposition to its membership has not only grown in Europe, but also become ever more clearly articulated in terms of Turkey's identity rather than its performance: centering, that is, on the question of whether the country is in fact at all European. In a sense, Turkey—a nation with both a Western and Muslim identity—has been badly affected by the growing polarization between the West and the Muslim world.

Turkish politicians of all stripes, who agree on little else, are in accord regarding the hypocrisy of Europe's stance. Predictably, the overt calls against Turkish accession by French president Nicolas Sarkozy and German chancellor Angela Merkel have had a profound impact in Turkey. As documented by the German Marshall Fund's 2010 Transatlantic Trends survey, a large majority of Turks no longer believe that Turkey will join the EU. Worse, while more than 70 percent saw EU membership as a good thing in 2004, only 38 percent do so today. Europe's alienation of Turkey has clearly had foreign policy implications.

Meanwhile, the United States has failed to nurture bilateral ties. The Cold War laid the foundation for Turkey's integration into the West; since then, the U.S.-Turkish relationship has not been developed on a new footing. Moreover, the George W. Bush administration's Iraq policy deeply alienated the overwhelming majority of Turkey's population and leadership, especially because it inadvertently helped to reinvigorate the separatist

Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the mountains of northern Iraq, from where the group has launched terror attacks into Turkey.

### AKP Overextension

Turkey's foreign policy has evolved even more rapidly than its economy. Indeed, although Turkey used to be a status quo power, engaging in few initiatives and then only with caution, that has changed. This is in great part due to Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's foreign minister, who was the architect of the country's new foreign policy long before his 2009 appointment. Davutoglu brought a different vision to Turkish foreign policy—one that sought to maximize Turkey's influence in its neighborhood, which he refers to as its "strategic depth." It was he who launched the "zero problems with neighbors" concept, followed by the notion of "maximum cooperation." Turkey has thus raised its level of activity in bilateral relations with Muslim-majority countries and elsewhere, including openings in Africa.

Aside from its growing bilateral contacts and expanding profile in multilateral institutions, Ankara has taken on a series of initiatives as a mediator or facilitator: between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Israel and Syria, and Hamas and Fatah, as well as an aborted effort to mediate between Washington and Iran, among other issues. All of this has taken place in the context of an increasingly self-confident Turkey. Davutoglu often refers to the trepidation and lack of self-confidence of previous governments, implying that a Turkey at ease with its identity and history can play a great role in the region and beyond rather than remaining locked into the one-dimensional focus on the Western alliance. This shift began as an emphasis on Turkey's regional role—a subject that actually predates the AKP, having been much discussed in the 1990s. But since being included in the G-20 in 2008, Turkish leaders have begun referring to their country as not only a regional power, but also a global power. In 2010, Davutoglu overtly stated the goal of Turkey becoming one of the world's top ten powers by 2023.<sup>3</sup> And in a 2009 speech in Sarajevo, he laid out Ankara's ambition: "We will reintegrate the Balkan region, Middle East and Caucasus...together with Turkey as the center of world politics in the future."<sup>4</sup>

Although there is much to suggest that Turkey's role in the world will in fact grow, Ankara's confidence

appears dangerously close to becoming hubris. At the bureaucratic level, Turkey's state apparatus—especially the Foreign Ministry—is not yet entirely equipped to handle the load of initiatives coming from Davutoglu's office, and expanding the foreign policy bureaucracy can only happen gradually. Thus, many Turkish initiatives appear less than well prepared, suggesting a top-heavy approach rather than balanced and serious planning.

Indeed, excessive confidence helps explain the turbulence of 2010. Regarding their proposed nuclear deal with Iran, the Turkish and Brazilian leaderships appeared to have as their main objective preventing the United States from pushing new sanctions through the UN Security Council. When this failed, Turkish leaders appeared surprised. And Ankara's public rebuke of the U.S. reaction to the Israeli boarding of the Gaza-bound Turkish ship was truly unprecedented, as Turkey demanded that Washington follow Ankara's line. As Davutoglu stated at the time, "We expect full solidarity with us. It should not seem like a choice between Turkey and Israel."<sup>5</sup> When his wishes did not come true, Davutoglu expressed his strong dissatisfaction with the U.S. position. In both instances, Ankara overestimated its influence.

Davutoglu's "zero problems" policy was always predicated on the unrealistic assumption that none of Turkey's neighbors has intentions that run counter to Turkish interests. Likewise, the alienation of Israel was based on the equally unrealistic assumption that Turkey will never need the friendship of either Israel or its allies in Washington. But mostly, perhaps, these policies have been based on the notion that America and the West need Turkey more than Turkey needs the West. This may make sense when Turkey is growing and the West is in crisis, but it may be a dangerous assumption for the long term.

### **Ideology**

The factors just outlined go a long way toward explaining what has changed in Turkish foreign policy, as well as some of its mishaps. But they fail to account for why Turkey has gone from mediating to taking sides—and why the AKP government has tended to side with Islamist causes.

Despite its stated objective to act as a go-between, Ankara has become an increasingly outspoken defender of Iran's nuclear program. During a November 2008 visit

to Washington, Erdogan urged countries with nuclear weapons to abolish their own arsenals before meddling with Iran.<sup>6</sup> He was also among the first to congratulate Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad upon his fraudulent and bloodstained reelection in June 2009. By October 2009, he was referring to Ahmadinezhad as a "close friend,"<sup>7</sup> seemingly lending legitimacy to the regime in Tehran rather than exerting pressure on it to comply with its obligations. Later that year, Ankara abstained from an International Atomic Energy Agency sanctions resolution against Iran that both Moscow and Beijing supported. Turkish leaders also began linking the issue of Israeli nuclear weapons with Iran's covert program.<sup>8</sup> In mid-2010, Erdogan and Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva held hands with Ahmadinezhad in Tehran in a display of defiance. And the day before the UN sanctions were passed, Erdogan hosted Ahmadinezhad in Turkey for a "security summit." Over the course of two years, then, Ankara arguably became Tehran's most valuable international supporter.

Turkish policies on Israel are equally illustrative. The AKP at first sought to mediate between Syria and Israel, in addition to reconciling Fatah and Hamas. Following the 2008–2009 war in Gaza, however, Ankara abandoned all efforts at balance, becoming the chief castigator of Israel in international forums. After Erdogan's walkout at the Davos World Economic Forum, Turkey disinvited Israel from planned joint military exercises under the NATO aegis. Then, a nongovernmental organization closely connected to the AKP, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, designed and implemented the notorious "Ship to Gaza" flotilla that aimed squarely at putting Israel in an untenable position. Ankara's reaction to the death of nine of the flotilla activists was telling: Davutoglu called the event "Turkey's 9/11,"<sup>9</sup> and a series of Turkish leaders threatened to cut off diplomatic relations with Israel, while Erdogan stated in no uncertain terms that he did not believe Hamas was a terrorist organization.<sup>10</sup> As in the Iranian case, the progression of Turkish policies with respect to Israel is clear: at first, Ankara sought to function as an honest broker and regional peacemaker, but it gradually moved to side with one of the parties.

Erdogan and Davutoglu's attitude toward—and preoccupation with—Israel is all the more perplexing in light of their embrace of Sudan. It is well known that

by 2005, more than 70,000 Muslims of African descent had been killed in Darfur in a massive campaign of ethnic cleansing run by the Sudanese government and its Arab Janjaweed militias. Yet at that very time, the AKP began cultivating Sudan as Turkey's main partner in Africa. During a 2006 visit, Erdogan lent legitimacy to Khartoum, stating that he had seen no signs of genocide in Darfur.<sup>11</sup> Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir was invited to Turkey twice in 2008. By 2009, Erdogan publicly argued that Israel's alleged war crimes in Gaza were worse than whatever had happened in Darfur (where by then it was widely acknowledged that up to 300,000 people had been killed): "Gaza and Darfur should not be confused with each other. Fifteen hundred people were killed in Gaza. If there was something like this in Darfur, we would follow that to the end as well." Erdogan also stated in reference to al-Bashir that "a Muslim cannot commit genocide."<sup>12</sup>

These positions suggest a gradual slide in the policies and position adopted by Erdogan and Davutoglu: a slide in which the AKP's increasing consolidation of power at home is mirrored not only by a growing confidence in foreign policy but also by a growing solidarity with Islamist causes and regimes. In this sense, the AKP's leaders appear to have returned, at least to some extent, to the more Islamist thinking that motivated them prior to the moderation of the conservative movement in 2001–2002 and the founding of the AKP—on display, for example, in Erdogan's numerous speeches in the 1990s, or Davutoglu's early published work, most notably his 1994 book *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World*. In this work, Davutoglu argued that the collapse of socialism was not a victory of Western capitalism, but an indication of a comprehensive crisis in European civilization. One of his underlying theses was

that the "crisis" of Western civilization results from an excessive reliance on reason and experience rather than divine revelation. The book is a full-scale assault on the "modernist paradigm," purposefully seeking to provide an "Islamic counterproposal" to the Western system.

### **Conclusion: U.S. Leverage?**

Turkish foreign policy has become increasingly decoupled from the West, with the AKP pursuing policies that have at times been diametrically opposed to Western interests. With the AKP appearing safely ensconced in power, especially following the constitutional amendments adopted in September 2010, this tendency is unlikely to be reversed anytime soon.

Yet this does not mean that the West has no influence on Turkey's trajectory. Indeed, Ankara's furious denials of any ongoing axis shift, its efforts at damage control during summer 2010, and the wild speculation in the Turkish press following every U.S. government meeting or statement concerning Turkey—not to mention the WikiLeaks diplomatic-cable scandal that erupted in November 2010—suggest that Ankara actually wants it both ways. Erdogan and Davutoglu have gambled on keeping their Western alliance—still the bedrock of Turkey's security policy—while also engaging in irresponsible adventurism abroad. They are likely to continue believing they can do so until a cost is attached to their policies.

---

*Svante Cornell is research director of the Central Asia–Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, a joint center affiliated with Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and the Stockholm-based Institute for Security and Development Policy, where he serves as codirector.*

# Nonalignment Revisited

By Ian Lesser

The debate over Turkey's increasingly active and controversial foreign policy has centered on questions of identity and orientation, and specifically on whether Ankara is drifting—or being pushed—into closer alignment with Muslim countries. Without question, Turkey's AKP government shares a greater sense of affinity, and a greater level of comfort than its predecessors, with Arab and Muslim neighbors, including Iran. But does this add up to a revolution in Turkish policy, and is religious affinity the key driver behind Ankara's new international strategy?

Beyond nostalgic “neo-Ottomanism,” the values and interests of emerging powers in the “Global South” and what used to be termed the “nonaligned movement” may offer a better guide to Turkish policy. These factors can also help observers interpret Ankara's deteriorating relationship with Israel and its diplomacy toward Iran. The implications for U.S.-Turkish relations are potentially far-reaching.

Recent crises have sent the long-simmering debate over Turkey's orientation and international policy into overdrive. To an extent, this new and intense interest in Turkey reflects a much-delayed adjustment to forces that have been at work on the Turkish scene for decades while U.S.-Turkish relations have remained on autopilot. Today's Turkey is barely recognizable when compared to the staid NATO ally of the Cold War years. The balance in civil-military relations has changed fundamentally, and the Turkish military is no longer the principal interlocutor for strategic dialogue with Ankara. Public opinion counts in a way that would have been unthinkable even a decade ago, and in this sense, Turkey is now very much in the European mainstream. These changes, and especially the rise of the public opinion factor, have shaped Turkish foreign policy decisionmaking, from the March 2003 vote against the opening of a northern front in Iraq by the U.S. military to the June 2010 vote against Iran sanctions in the UN Security Council. These changes

also contributed to the slow-moving Gaza flotilla crisis with Israel, an event that would have been unthinkable in the old Turkey.

## Bridge or Barrier: Geopolitics Moves On

Geopolitical images associated with Turkey are remarkably durable. In the 1990s, analysts debated Turkey's role as a bridge or a barrier—the Washington Institute for Near East Policy was a leading venue for this discussion—and not much has changed in the discourse on either side of the Atlantic. But Ankara's new international policy elites inside and outside government have begun to edge away from this traditional model, offering a foreign policy vision in which Turkey is at the center and not simply a vehicle for the strategic objectives of others. This new look in Turkish policy has several dimensions, all of them meaningful from the U.S. policy perspective.

In regional terms, Ankara's foreign policy activism, including the “zero problems with neighbors” doctrine, has shaken up the neighborhood, with mixed consequences for U.S. interests. On the positive side, Ankara appears committed to the consolidation of detente with Greece and crisis management (if not exactly resolution) in the Aegean Sea and with Cyprus. This is revolutionary when one considers that only a decade ago, U.S. policymakers spent much time and energy keeping NATO allies from going to war in the eastern

Mediterranean. Turkey continues to play a constructive role in backing stability and reconstruction in the Balkans, another source of concern for Turkey watchers in the past. In Lebanon, Afghanistan, and, on the whole, Iraq, Ankara has pursued a positive, multilateral policy. And at NATO's 2010 Lisbon summit, Turkey accepted the allied consensus on missile defense architecture.

In other areas, however, the trend has been distinctly negative when viewed from Washington (or Brussels). On Iran, Ankara seems bent on an independent policy—an amalgam of commercial interest, wariness toward sanctions, and perhaps different judgments about the status and direction of Iran's nuclear ambitions. The Iranian situation is also a leading example of a consciously contrarian streak in current Turkish policy. Strategies formulated in the West no longer have sufficient cachet to compel unquestioned Turkish agreement. This perspective is hardly unique to Turkey. It is common across the global south, and particularly among emerging middle powers such as the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) and countries aspiring to be like them. In this sense, Brazil was not an eccentric choice of partner for Turkish diplomacy in the weeks before the UN Security Council vote on a new round of Iran sanctions. Privately, leading Turkish officials seem to have had little confidence that Tehran was negotiating in good faith, or that the agreement brokered by Turkey and Brazil would actually be implemented. But they saw it as an alternative test promoted by alternative actors. This rationale and approach are very much in a “neo-nonaligned” mold.

As for the deteriorating Turkish-Israeli relationship, a convincing case can be made that a sharp adjustment was inevitable. The strategic relationship between the two countries was very much a product of unique circumstances prevailing in the 1990s—including a shared interest in the containment of Syria and Iran and the marginal role of Turkish public opinion, which has long been well disposed toward the Palestinian cause. Those circumstances have changed, and explicit cooperation with Israel is not easily reconciled with Turkish aspirations for greater influence in the Arab and Muslim countries. The critical, open question is how far Turkish-Israeli relations will slide, and whether they will reach a new equilibrium in which some strategic quality remains.

### **The Business of Turkey Is Business**

Turkey shares with other emerging powers a strong sense of commercial interest and activism as a core component of its international policy. In the traditional formulation, “trade follows the flag,” but in the Turkish case, as with Brazil, India, and China, the formula has been reversed. As Turkey's new economic elites pursue trade and investment projects around their neighborhood and far beyond, Ankara has acquired new political and security stakes—and exposure. As traditional (and still critical) markets across the EU stagnate with persistent economic troubles across the EU, Turkish exports of goods and services to the Middle East and North Africa, Eurasia, and even Africa have boomed. At the same time, Turkey has become a favored destination for investors from the Persian Gulf, Russia, and Central Asia. All of this is unfolding against a backdrop of striking economic growth in Turkey, which reached a rate of more than 11 percent at one point in 2010 and is hovering around 6 percent annually as of this writing. Analysts differ on whether this extraordinary growth can be sustained. Yet clearly, this is another characteristic Turkey shares with emerging economies. In global terms, Turkey is having a very good crisis indeed.

### **Ankara and Brussels Agree: No EU Membership**

One consequence of this economic dynamism and shifting regional focus has been a marked weakening of Turkish enthusiasm for membership in the EU, even among traditionally enthusiastic elements. To be sure, the trouble in Turkey-EU relations has many sources, and much of the problem lies on the European side. But Turkey and the EU appear to be sliding toward the recently coined “privileged partnership” (a status short of full membership), even if this terminology remains anathema in Ankara. If so, a traditional pillar of U.S. policy toward Turkey in a transatlantic frame will be substantially undermined.

### **Implications for U.S. Policy**

These shifts in the direction and character of Turkish policy are the result of structural trends aligned with strong preferences and affinities at the political level. Key aspects are likely to endure regardless of electoral outcomes and the fortunes of individual politicians and policymakers.

U.S. policy toward Turkey will need to reflect these changes, including Ankara's not-so-new inclination toward more independent and assertive policies coupled with greatly increased commercial and political reach. Questions of religious identity are not irrelevant in this equation. But the key driver may be nonalignment—that is, distaste for strategies made in Washington or Brussels, reinforced by nationalism and public opinion, and informed by shifting commercial stakes.

U.S.-Turkish relations have never been easy to manage. But policymakers would do well to anticipate a more trying period in which longstanding strategic assumptions may need to be revisited. Some aspects of Turkish policy, including NATO policy, will remain

resolutely traditional and conservative. In other areas, including cooperation in the Middle East, the relationship is likely to shift to an à la carte, ad hoc, interests-based, and much less predictable mode. A great deal can be done on issues such as cooperation against the PKK, or even nonproliferation and missile defense, despite differences over Iran policy. Yet on the Palestinian issue, the peace process, and cooperation with Israel, U.S. policymakers will face a much tougher task.

---

*Ian Lesser is a senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, leading the organization's work on Turkey, the Mediterranean, and wider Atlantic security issues.*

# Rise of ‘Turkish Gaullism’

By Omer Taspinar

The May–June 2010 Gaza flotilla incident, followed soon thereafter by Turkey’s “no” vote on new UN Security Council sanctions against Iran, reignited a heated debate about the “Islamization” of Ankara’s Middle East policy. Although the growing importance of religion in Turkey should not be dismissed, the real threat to Turkey’s Western orientation today is not so much Islamization,

but growing nationalism and frustration with the United States and Europe. If current trends continue, Washington might witness the emergence in Turkey of not necessarily an exclusively Islamist foreign policy, but a much more nationalist, independent, self-confident, and defiant strategic orientation—in short, a Turkish variant of Gaullism.

## What Does Turkish Gaullism Look Like?

Turkish Gaullism is primarily about growing Turkish self-confidence and independence vis-à-vis the West. For example, a Gaullist Turkey may in the long run decide to no longer pursue elusive EU membership. It may even question its military alliance with the United States. Burdened by a sense of never getting the respect it deserves, Turkey may increasingly act on its own in search of full independence, full sovereignty, strategic leverage, and, most important, Turkish glory and grandeur. As France did under Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s, Turkey may opt for its own “force de frappe”—that is, a nuclear deterrent—and its own realpolitik with countries such as China, India, and Russia. It could even contemplate leaving the NATO military structure, as France did under de Gaulle, while maintaining its political membership in the organization.

In American circles, current analysis on Turkey constantly refers to the tension between secularism and Islam or Eastern versus Western proclivities. Such focus often comes at the expense of understanding the most powerful force driving Turkish foreign policy: nationalism and self-interest, both increasingly impelled by

a perception that Turkey’s interests are not necessarily aligned with Western interests. One should not underestimate the emergence of a nationalist, self-confident Turkey that transcends the overemphasized Islamic-secular divide. After all, both the Turkish military’s Kemalism and the AKP’s neo-Ottomanism—the Turkish ideal of regional influence—share a similar vision of the country’s independence and nationalism.

## It’s the Economy, Stupid

To understand Turkish Gaullism, one needs to look at Turkey’s impressive economic performance. Today’s Turkey offers a considerably different picture from Turkey in the 1990s. During that “lost decade,” the Turkish economy was plagued by recessions, an average inflation rate of 70 percent, structural budget deficits, chronic financial crisis, and constant political instability. In addition, the fight against the PKK caused 30,000 deaths during that decade alone.

Turkey has managed to surprise most analysts with its remarkable economic recovery and political stability over the past ten years. Shortly after the lost decade culminated with the worst financial crisis in Turkish history in early 2001, Turkey enacted structural economic reforms and cleaned up its financial and banking system under the stewardship of then finance minister Kemal Dervis. Economic and political reforms continued after the AKP came to power in 2002. Over the past eight years, the Turkish economy has managed to grow by an average of 6.5 percent. According to various International Monetary

Fund data, Turkey is now the sixteenth-largest economy in the world, and in the past decade, its per capita income has nearly doubled, from \$5,500 to \$11,000.

Such economic performance, coupled with political stability, has fueled an unprecedented sense of self-confidence and pride in Turkey. The AKP, under the charismatic and mercurial leadership of Prime Minister Erdogan, personifies this sense of Turkish hubris. Much has been said about the AKP's Islamist character and the Eastern shift in Turkish foreign policy. Yet one should not forget that Turkey's newfound sense of confidence and grandeur is emerging at a time when most Turks feel they are not getting the respect they deserve from the West, particularly Europe and the United States.

### **Broad Anti-Westernism in Turkish Society**

Until recently, most Turks were enthusiastic about their country's EU accession prospects. Today, however, polls show that Turkey's patience and interest are wearing thin. Given France and Germany's reluctance to embrace Turkey and their insistence on granting the country less than full membership ("privileged partnership"), most Turks believe that the process is being governed by Western prejudice, double standards, and a lack of respect. According to the German Marshall Fund's 2010 Transatlantic Trends survey, the level of Turkish respondents who are still enthusiastic about EU membership has dropped to 38 percent from 73 percent in 2004. Only 13 percent of the Turks surveyed favored cooperation with the EU. Even fewer were interested in partnerships with the United States; a dismal 6 percent favored working closely with Washington. The unfounded perception that America supports Kurdish aspirations is probably one reason behind such popular resentment against Washington. Not surprisingly, the majority of Turks are in favor of their country acting alone or in partnership with Middle East countries that respect Turkey.

New obstacles to EU accession, perceived injustice in Cyprus, growing global recognition of the "Armenian genocide," and Western sympathy for Kurdish nationalist aspirations are all major factors forcing Turks to question the value of their longstanding pro-Western geostrategic commitments. Looking beyond the secular versus Islamist divide in Turkish attitudes toward the West, one finds that both camps embrace the same narrative of nationalist frustration vis-à-vis Europe and America.

### **How the EU and Washington Lost the Kemalists**

To fully understand Turkey's nationalist frustration, one should also look at the domestic determinants of Turkish foreign policy. Ironically, many Kemalists, who were once Western oriented, have now turned against the West. This is mainly because Turkey's domestic and foreign policy dynamics have turned upside down since the AKP rose to power eight years ago. During its first three years in power, the party passed more pro-EU legal reforms than most of the previous secularist governments in Turkish history. The formerly Islamist AKP became the strongest advocate of Turkey's EU membership for a simple reason: it wished to clearly prove its democratic and pro-Western credentials to critics who believed the party still secretly nurtured an Islamist agenda. Yet the Kemalist opposition remained very skeptical. What had caused this sudden change of heart among former Islamists? Was the pro-EU stance tactical? The opposition concluded that the AKP was engaged in *taqiyya*, or dissimulation of real intentions. According to this logic, the Islamists were pushing for EU reforms in order to weaken the role of the Turkish military. After all, the secularist military was the main bulwark against political Islam.

Unsurprisingly, such an interpretation of the AKP's intentions changed the way the Kemalist elite approached the EU. The military already had concerns about the EU's minority rights agenda vis-à-vis the Kurdish problem. With the additional complication of an Islamist agenda in the mix, the Kemalist camp was unwilling to wholeheartedly embrace Turkey's EU agenda. This was the end of the love affair between Kemalism and Europe. The tables had turned—the Kemalist elite was now increasingly anti-Europe, while former Islamists were in favor of pro-EU reforms—though recent developments suggest a rapprochement between the Kemalists and the EU.

That Washington, under the George W. Bush administration, praised the AKP as a model for the Muslim world and spoke of Turkey as a "moderately Islamic" country only exacerbated the Kemalist sense of frustration with the West. The Kemalists saw this as U.S. support for Islamicizing Turkey. In addition to President Bush's praise, former secretary of state Colin Powell's 2004 reference to Turkey as an "Islamic republic"

strengthened the secularist paranoia and provoked widespread conspiracy theories and criticism in Turkey.<sup>13</sup> Many within the secularist establishment believed that America was pushing Turkey to play the role of the “good Muslims” against the “bad ones” in the Arab world, a posture that would situate Turkey firmly in the Islamic Middle East rather than secular Europe. Former Turkish president Ahmet Necdet Sezer, for example, reacted by stating, “Turkey is neither an Islamic republic nor an example of moderate Islam.”<sup>14</sup> Kemalist concerns about U.S. intentions have been further exacerbated by the fact that Fetullah Gulen, the leader of Turkey’s most influential Islamic movement, has found safe haven in the United States since 1998. It is under such circumstances that the Kemalist backlash against the West at times came to be associated with the “Eurasian” alternative to Turkey’s pro-EU and pro-American orientation.

### How Turkey Turned

In the meantime, shortly after Turkey began accession negotiations in 2005, the EU grew increasingly cold toward Ankara. As previously stated, the French and German leadership argued that Turkey should be offered the lesser status of privileged partnership rather than full membership. This situation increasingly frustrated the AKP leadership. The EU’s enlargement fatigue—coming after the union inducted ten new members in 2005—mirrored Turkey’s own reform fatigue. By 2005, with the Greek Cypriots now in the club and vetoing many accession chapters pertaining to Turkey, Ankara grew more and more disillusioned with the EU process.

As a result of such dynamics, the AKP, beginning in 2006, decided to jump on the bandwagon of nationalist frustration with the West. The party and its supporters are now part of the overall anti-EU, anti-American, and anti-Israeli mood dominant in Turkey. Such sentiments form an anti-Western rainbow coalition ranging from Turkish secularists to Islamists. The sad irony is that such frustration with the West is in great part fueled by self-confidence and national pride. This is why Erdogan—with his policies challenging the West in Iran and

his anger against Israel—is not merely an Islamist ideologue but, in truth, also a Turkish Gaullist. Although their opponents consider them dangerous fundamentalists, Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu share “a certain idea of Turkey”—to paraphrase a Gaullist formula about France—as a game-changer in the broader neighborhood, per the AKP’s vision.

### Is Turkish Gaullism Worth the West’s Attention?

The answer is yes. The recent referendum results on Turkish constitutional reforms clearly show that the AKP is doing well domestically. Barring a sudden change in the AKP’s policies or new pro-Western sentiment within the opposition Republican People’s Party under newly elected leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, Turkish Gaullism will increasingly define Ankara’s foreign policy. In the past, Americans and Europeans would often ask whether Turkey had any realistic geopolitical alternatives—and complacently reassure themselves that it did not. But today, such alternatives are beginning to look more realistic to many Turks. The rise of Turkish Gaullism need not come fully at the expense of America and Europe. But Turks are already looking for economic and strategic opportunities in Russia, India, China, and, of course, the Middle East and Africa. If the strategic relationship between Ankara and Washington continues to erode, and if Turkey’s prospects for joining the EU continue to recede, the country will certainly go its own way. Some American and European observers do not take the risk of such a development seriously; such views underestimate the degree of resentment toward the West that has been building in Turkey. It is high time for analysts to pay more attention to what unites the country’s secularist and Islamist camps: a new brand of Turkish nationalism. Gaullism may be the real future for Turkey in the twenty-first century.

---

*Omer Taspinar is a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a professor at the National War College, and an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies.*

# What Should Washington Do about Turkey's Drift?

By **Soner Cagaptay**

For the AKP, “Turkey’s traditionally strong ties with the West represent a process of alienation.” This and similar sentiments—from Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s book *Strategic Depth*—serve as an answer of sorts to most any question about the AKP’s transformation of Ankara’s foreign policy. “Since the end of the Ottoman Empire,” he wrote, “Muslims have gotten the short end of the stick, and the AKP is here to correct all that.” Such declarations have seemingly cast Turkey as the new defender of the Muslim world.

The party has no intention of correcting wrongs against Muslims writ large, however. This is because AKP foreign policy is guided not by Islam, but by Islamism, a political ideology that sees Muslims in perpetual conflict with the West. Ankara will therefore favor other Islamists over Muslims who do not share its Manichean worldview. For example, the party will forgive and even defend some of the most prominent offenses that Islamist regimes have committed against fellow Muslims, such as the Sudanese genocide of Darfur or Tehran’s suppression of its own population. Likewise, it will support Islamist Hamas and its violent goals but not the secular Palestinian Authority or the peaceful Palestinian cause.

Whichever way one describes the AKP’s foreign policy—whether as a product of a hubristic view of the world, an Islamist *Weltanschauung*, neo-Gaullism, a neo-nonaligned stance, or some combination of these factors—it is clear that the AKP’s Turkey is not a reliable U.S. ally. Given the party’s dominant place in the Turkish domestic political scene, what should Washington do to maintain the U.S.-Turkey relationship and avoid likely foreign policy rifts with the AKP?

**Pay more attention to Turkish politics, because what happens in Turkey does not stay in Turkey.** The AKP’s foreign policy vision has gradually solidified as

the party has entrenched its power at home. Since 2002, it has neutered domestic checks and balances. For instance, the party has used legal loopholes to put the media into the hands of party supporters, resulting in half of Turkish media outlets falling to pro-AKP businesses and the rest facing massive putative tax fines. Meanwhile, large secular Turkish businesses fear the AKP’s financial police and tax audits, while judges, journalists, and generals have been targeted in the ongoing Ergenekon ultranationalist coup case for allegedly planning to overthrow the government.

The AKP’s consolidation of power at home has not been without consequences for the United States. Although the party initially maintained amiable ties with Washington and even pushed for EU accession after coming to power, its rhetoric has consistently demonized both the EU and the United States. The party has labeled U.S. policies as “genocidal”<sup>15</sup> and bashed the West for “being immoral.”<sup>16</sup> Such rhetoric has been influential domestically: today, at a time when dissent over the AKP’s policies has disappeared, few Turks care for the West, most oppose EU accession, and the vast majority simply hate America. For instance, recent Pew poll figures show that only 17 percent of Turks view the United States favorably, up only 3 percent from 2009 despite Obama administration efforts to engage Turkey through various public diplomacy initiatives.<sup>17</sup>

If a vigorous debate on domestic and foreign policy is to emerge inside Turkey, then the environment of fear and intimidation that the AKP has created must be reversed. For example, the Ergenekon case must be recognized for what it is—a witch hunt that persecutes rather than prosecutes alleged coup plotters. Turkish authorities must downgrade the investigation so that dissent to the AKP's views on foreign policy and other matters can reemerge and ensure a healthy democratic environment. In this regard, it would help if Washington made media freedom and independence a key part of its dialogue with the AKP and a central tenet of its outreach to the Turkish public. Such an approach could help encourage debates inside Turkey that might in turn result in policies supporting the United States.

**Limit the AKP's role in sensitive foreign policy areas and take Turkey out of Middle East policy, *ceteris paribus*.** As long as the AKP has the power to intimidate Turks who hold views different from its own, it will feel comfortable pursuing the foreign policy it has always sought. There is little the West can do to change the AKP's outlook on this front. In fact, some Western officials, perhaps unwittingly, helped facilitate this development in the first place. Believing that the AKP could be a bridge-builder between Western and Muslim countries, these officials promoted the new Turkish government as a special mediator in the region while shielding it from those critics who worried about the AKP's worldview.

To the contrary, if the AKP insists on sticking its proverbial nose where it does not belong, Washington should limit such interference. A good example in this regard is the AKP's 2010 attempt to broker a nuclear fuel swap deal with Iran and Brazil. As a result of that agreement, Washington decided it did not want Turkey to play a role in facilitating Iran talks—an area in which the U.S. government would previously have welcomed Ankara's help. Indeed, when Turkey has proven unhelpful, Washington has shown that it is willing and able to limit Ankara's role.

Allowing the AKP to serve as a catalyst in Middle East conflicts has been similarly unproductive. Because the AKP sees a clash of civilizations in regional politics, it cannot be an impartial mediator. Hence, whenever the party has been permitted to interject itself between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority or the United

States and Iran, it has quickly become a tribune for the Islamist side. And after eight years of increasingly authoritarian and dominant AKP rule at home, many Turks now also see the world through Islamist eyes.

To be sure, the AKP's popularity has been sliding somewhat since the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) elected a charismatic new leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, in early 2010. One survey even showed the CHP pulling ahead of the AKP for the first time since 2002.<sup>18</sup> Recent polls, however, show that the Gaza flotilla debacle, which resulted in the tragic death of Turkish citizens, has boosted the AKP's popularity.<sup>19</sup> And the government will no doubt continue to use populist, anti-Western foreign policy to bolster its standing in the run-up to the 2011 parliamentary elections.

Washington needs to face the reality that Turkey can no longer be considered a true ally under the AKP. In order to contain the party's ideological influence not just in Turkey, but also in the region, the United States must deny the Erdogan government the influence and prestige that comes with being promoted as a regional mediator. It is time for Western leaders to distance themselves somewhat from Ankara. Hence, U.S. policy should focus on limiting Turkey's interference in Middle East issues, directing the country's energy toward Europe, and reanimating its stalled EU membership process.

**Put Turkey back in Europe and NATO.** Washington is not in a position to provide the EU with directions regarding Turkey's accession. And it is implausible in the extreme to believe that an EU totally preoccupied with saving the euro and bailing out poor peripheral members is going to advance admission of another relatively poor southern state. At the moment, the goal is not necessarily to move forward on reinforcing Turkey's ties with the West, but simply to stop the backslide. This requires that Turkey's EU membership prospects remain alive, and that accession talks continue. Toward this end, Washington should employ discreet backroom diplomacy with its European allies.

Currently, membership talks have come to such a grinding halt that the proverbial Turkish accession train recalls a joke about the trains in Leonid Brezhnev's Soviet Union: with Russia stagnating, the trains did not move and the scenery did not change, so passengers said "choo-choo" to create the illusion of locomotion. This

epitomizes Turkey's EU accession, and at some point, Turks will realize that their EU train is not moving forward and disembark. This would not only end Turkey's consolidation as a liberal democracy, but also accelerate its slide away from the West.

Turkey's foreign policy involvement in the Middle East stimulates ideological tendencies among the Turkish population and drives a wedge between Turkey and both the United States and Europe. The solution is to

take Turkey out of the Middle East and put it in Europe, where it belongs. Therefore, as the country prepares for general elections in 2011 that promise to pit the AKP against the CHP, Washington should make Turkey's EU accession and its NATO obligations the dominant part of its discussions with Ankara and the Turkish public.

---

*Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.*

# Notes

1. “Davutoglu Slams Report Turkey Violates UN Sanctions,” *Today’s Zaman*, September 24, 2010, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-222530-102-davutoglu-slams-report-turkey-violates-un-sanctions.html>.
2. Joe Parkinson, “Turkish Firms Free to Trade with Iran,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2010, [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704116004575521322772087354.html?mod=googlenews\\_wsj](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704116004575521322772087354.html?mod=googlenews_wsj).  
“Bosnian Serb Party Officials Slam Turkish FM’s ‘Ottoman Balkans’ Remarks,” BBC Monitoring Europe, October 29, 2009.
5. Mark Landler, “After Flotilla Raid, U.S. Is Torn between Allies,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/world/middleeast/02policy.html>.
6. Ayla Jean Yackley, “Turkey’s Erdogan Slams Nuclear Sanctions on Iran,” Reuters, October 31, 2009, <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-43582520091031>.
7. Robert Tait, “Iran Is Our Friend,’ Says Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan,” *Guardian*, October 26, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/26/turkey-iran1>.
8. Associated Press, “Turkey: World Is Turning a Blind Eye to Israel’s Nuclear Weapons,” *Haaretz*, April 11, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/turkey-world-is-turning-a-blind-eye-to-israel-s-nuclear-weapons-1.284046>.
9. Glenn Kessler, “Turkish Foreign Minister: Israeli Raid on Gaza Aid Flotilla ‘Like 9/11’ for His Country,” *Washington Post*, June 1, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/01/AR2010060101506.html>.
10. “Erdogan: Hamas Not a Terrorist Group,” *Jerusalem Post*, June 4, 2010, <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=177496>.
11. “Prime Minister Erdogan Reiterates ‘No Genocide’ in Darfur,” *Today’s Zaman*, November 9, 2009, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-192402-prime-minister-erdogan-reiterates-no-genocide-in-darfur.html>.
12. Ibid.
13. Meliha Benli Altunisik, “The Turkish Model and Democratization in the Middle East,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* (Winter–Spring 2005), [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2501/is\\_1-2\\_27/ai\\_n15694705/?tag=content;coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2501/is_1-2_27/ai_n15694705/?tag=content;coll). See also Banu Eligur, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
14. See Altunisik, “The Turkish Model.” For Sezer’s full remarks, see “Address of H. E. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer at the Opening Session of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (22nd Term, 3th [sic] Legislative Year),” *Turkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı* (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey) website, October 1, 2004, <http://www.tcgb.gov.tr/ahmet-necdet-sezer-konusmalari/495/56644/address-of-his-excellency-president-ahmet-necdet-sezer-at-the-opening-session-of-the-turkish-grand-n.html>.
15. See, for example, parliamentarian Mehmet Elkatmis’s 2004 comment on U.S. military action in Falluja: “Such a genocide was never seen in the time of pharaohs nor of Hitler or Mussolini” (translated from Turkish). Quoted in *Yeni Safak*, November 26, 2004, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/arsiv/2004/kasim/26/p04.html>.
16. For example, Erdogan once stated, “The poet who penned the Turkish national anthem said that we should compete with the art and science of the West; but unfortunately, we adopted the West’s immoralities” (translated from Turkish). Quoted in Bulent Aydemir, “Batının ilmini değil ahlaksizliğini aldık,” *Sabah*, January 25, 2008, <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2008/01/25/haber,8B601321AE6D4C2287A5CBC5E777E323.html>.
17. Pew Research Center, “Obama More Popular Abroad Than at Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 17, 2010, <http://pewglobal.org/2010/06/17/obama-more-popular-abroad-than-at-home>.
18. “Political Trends and Prospects,” SONAR Survey, May 2010, <http://www.cnnturk.com/2010/turkiye/05/29/sonar.anketi.chp.32.48.ile.ak.partiyi.gecti/578170.0/index.html>.
19. See “Political Trends in Turkey” (in Turkish), SONAR Survey, August 2010, [http://www.sonararastirma.com/rapor/Turkiye\\_Siyasi\\_Egilimler\\_Agu10\\_Referandum.pdf](http://www.sonararastirma.com/rapor/Turkiye_Siyasi_Egilimler_Agu10_Referandum.pdf). See also “Referendum” (in Turkish), GENAR Survey, September 2010, <http://www.genar.com.tr/files/refaranduma5kala.pdf>.