

UNDERSTANDING TURKEY'S TILT

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Turkey has never been an easy ally for the United States. The U.S.-Turkish relationship is idealized in many quarters, with the golden age of the Turgut Özal era in the early 1990s often cited as an example. But it also has had numerous challenges: to mention only a few, several crises over Cyprus, controversy over Turkish military coups, human rights violations, and the perpetual brinkmanship over the Armenian genocide issue. During and immediately after the Cold War, Turkey was a stable and generally predictable ally, but the deficiencies of Cold War-era Turkey should not be forgotten: at its core, the Turkish republic had a schizophrenic attitude to the West. On the one hand, it was decidedly western and secular, and sought acceptance by the West of its European civilizational identity. On the other, the Turkish elite was deeply suspicious of and even occasionally hostile to western powers, which it blamed for having sought to dismantle Turkey through the 1920 Sèvres treaty. Ever since, suspicion has constantly surfaced that western powers covertly conspired with Turkey's enemies to keep the country weak and divided.

It is important to keep this background in mind when considering the trajectory of the Turkish-American alliance. Under the increasingly autocratic rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey is once again a troublesome ally. Especially in the Middle East, Turkey is increasingly acting in ways that diverge from American interests. Its antagonism toward Israel is pronounced, and its policies after the Arab upheavals of 2011 went against U.S. interest, endorsing the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt supporting radical *jihadi* groups in the Syrian civil war. President Erdoğan, once among President Obama's five preferred world leaders, has also increasingly sharpened his rhetoric against the United States.



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The key question for American policymakers, then, is whether dealing with Turkey today is fundamentally different than it has been in the past. And on that score, there is significant reason to argue that Turkey has indeed changed in ways that have caused irreparable harm to the U.S.-Turkish alliance.

Divergent interests

In the past decade, the trajectory of Turkey's foreign policy has been relatively stable. Since the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, came to power, the Turkish government has focused on developing Turkey's influence in the Middle East. This represented an important break with the past; dating back to Atatürk's days, the foreign policy run by the secular center-right parties in conjunction with the military and bureaucratic elites saw the Middle East primarily as a source of problems, and a region to be avoided. This policy was rooted in equal parts in a sense of betrayal by the Arabs against the Ottoman state, and the conviction that the Middle East could only cause problems for Turkey. Instead, these elites concluded that Turkey was now modern and European, and therefore focused its foreign policy on its relationship with the western alliance.

The AKP, by contrast, saw the Middle East as a zone of opportunity, one that constituted Turkey's natural area of influence. In some ways, this realignment was pragmatic, focusing on promoting economic ties and increasing Turkey's influence. In this sense, there were parallels to Turkey's efforts in the 1990s to develop ties with the newly independent Turkic republics of the former Soviet Union. In both cases, the ambition was to develop a new "vector" of Turkish foreign policy to complement the main, western one.

Yet there are two major differences. First, the opening to the east of the 1990s was grounded in Turkey's linguistic

and cultural links with the newly independent states, and based on a strong demand for partnership emanating from these countries. By contrast, the opening to the south under Erdoğan was based on religious, not national identity. Moreover, it was not preceded by a particularly burning interest on the part of Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbors in such engagement. The initiative, so to speak, was supply-side foreign policy.

Secondly, the old opening to the east developed in full harmony with Turkey's western orientation. Turkey's initiatives were well-coordinated with the U.S., and rested on a commonly defined interest in supporting the sovereignty and independence of the former Soviet states in the Caucasus and Central Asia. While Turkey and its western partners differed on some issues, such as relations with Armenia, such differences were never allowed to cause harm to the U.S.-Turkish alliance.

By contrast, Turkey's contemporary policies in the Middle East have been dissociated from its western alliance, and often stand in direct contradiction to U.S. interests. Initially, Ankara sought to portray its activities as serving western interests as well, emphasizing its potential to act as a mediator between the West and rogue regimes in the Middle East such as Iran and Syria. But, as time has passed, Turkey's ambitions to mediate have been replaced by an ever more apparent tendency to take sides, support favorites, and undermine adversaries.

The most consistent and symptomatic example of this transformation is Israel. While the Turkish-Israeli relationship did not collapse until the 2008 war in Gaza, the AKP early on entertained ties with Hamas, and welcomed its election in 2006. In fact, Fatah representatives have long complained that Turkey has been biased in favor of Hamas and against Fatah in intra-Palestinian politics. Anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic themes

also crept into the mainstream Turkish media, particularly in television shows and in the reporting of the AKP's mouthpiece newspaper, *Yeni Şafak*. After the war in Gaza, Ankara abandoned all efforts at balance, going much further even than most Arab leaders in its condemnations of Israel. Ankara also helped launch the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla to Gaza in 2009, which finally led the relationship to collapse following the Israeli boarding of the ship. Soon enough, Erdoğan and other AKP leaders took to outright anti-Semitic rhetoric. In 2011, he accused the *Economist* of being controlled by Israel; and in 2013, following the Gezi Park controversy, he blamed the widespread protests against his government on the global "interest rate lobby." If the shorthand was not clear enough, one of his closest advisors spelled out that the global Jewish diaspora was behind it. Erdoğan's anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rhetoric has proven a key sore point in the U.S.-Turkish relationship.

The Arab upheavals are another critical area of divergence. Early on, Erdoğan developed close relations with Syria's Bashar al-Assad and sought an opening to Iran, in a pragmatic move to expand relations with Middle Eastern countries. But Turkey's calculus changed in 2011, as the Arab upheavals provided a historic opportunity. Ankara soon became the chief sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region, supporting its various branches in their efforts to ascend to power. In Egypt, Erdoğan took the initiative among international leaders in urging Hosni Mubarak to leave office, and once the Brotherhood gained power in Cairo, the AKP became the chief sponsor of the short-lived regime of Mohamed Morsi. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu explained at the time that "Egypt would become the focus of Turkish efforts, as an older American-backed order, buttressed by Israel, Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, prerevo-

lutionary Egypt, begins to crumble."¹ As part of this effort, Turkey pledged \$2 billion in aid to Egypt in 2012, and endorsed the controversial constitution that Morsi pushed through that December to strengthen his power—and did so at a time when western powers were highly critical of this power grab.

Erdoğan also endorsed the vision of a Brotherhood-ruled Syria, despite the movement's weakness in Syrian politics. As Turkish writer Kadri Gürsel has put it, Turkey aimed for "the Muslim Brotherhood to fully and absolutely dominate the entirety of Syria."² When that strategy failed and the Free Syrian Army proved unable to make a lasting impact on the battlefield, Turkish leaders came to facilitate and support more forceful, and more radical, Islamist groups. Turkey has been credibly tied to various domestic *jihadi* groups, as well as the al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra front.³ In spite of strong western pressure, including a direct warning from President Obama in 2013, Turkey continues to implement very lax policies on its border with Syria. As a result, it continues to be the main transshipment point of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq, now mainly joining the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

The rise of ISIS, more than anything, has put the spotlight on the troubling inconsistencies of Turkish foreign policy, and the divergence between Turkish and American interests. As the U.S. sought to assemble a coalition against ISIS, Turkey proved among the most recalcitrant regional powers. To Ankara, the main problem in the region was not ISIS but the Assad regime, which Turkey had battled hard to overthrow. Erdoğan demanded, as a precondition for Turkish participation, that any military action against ISIS target Assad as well. At minimum, Ankara demanded a no-fly zone that would deny Damascus the advantage of controlling Syrian airspace. Matters came to a head with the

battle of Kobani, a Syrian Kurdish settlement on the Turkish border. As the town was encircled on three sides by ISIS, the Turkish border was the only source of help. Yet Turkey, weary of the power of the Syrian Kurds, long refused to allow any assistance through. The crisis over Kobani worsened as Turkey's considerable Kurdish population rioted against the government's stance, leading to close to 50 deaths. By late October, Ankara allowed a small contingent of Kurdish fighters to transit into Kobani, defusing the crisis somewhat. But Turkey's Kurds appear convinced that Ankara has actually supported ISIS, and even some ISIS fighters appear to share that view.

The implication of these developments is, as several observers have already noted, that Turkey is increasingly coming to resemble Pakistan of the 1990s. Having used and abetted *jihadi* groups across the border for instrumental purposes, it is now beginning to see the blowback of that strategy.⁴ And in the process, the prospects of Turkey serving as a reliable ally of the United States are dwindling. In the not too distant future, Turkey could prove not just a troublesome ally, but a problem in its own right.

Instrumentalism and ideology

How did it come to this? How is it that NATO ally Turkey has gained notoriety for its condemnations of Israel, now supports *jihadi* groups in Syria, and is even suspected of abetting ISIS forces across its border?

Western observers have had a tendency of blaming each other for Turkey's alienation from the West under Erdoğan. Americans like to point to the French and German handling of Turkey's EU membership aspirations—not least the damaging statements by the likes of France's Nicolas Sarkozy and Germany's Angela Merkel that Turkey is not a European

state. Europeans, meanwhile, prefer to point to the Bush administration's war in Iraq as a key milestone in the distancing of Turkey from the West. There is some truth to both points of view, but they miss one key aspect. Their validity rests upon an assumption that Erdoğan's partnership with the West, and his intention to integrate into the EU, was genuine to begin with. Yet the evolution of Turkey's domestic politics does not provide support for this thesis.

Western leaders have accepted at face value the transformation of Turkey's Islamist movement in a democratic direction in the early 2000s. The AKP emerged from the orthodox Islamist *Milli Görüş* tradition, launched by Necmettin Erbakan in the 1960s. Erbakan's movement was heavily anti-Western, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic. With an origin in the highly conservative Naqshbandi order, this political movement essentially rested on two pillars: Ottoman nostalgia and the modern global ideology of political Islam, especially that of the Muslim Brotherhood. For starters, the movement considered Atatürk's abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 as a major disaster, and denounced the Turkish Republic's break with its religious and civilizational identity in favor of seeking acceptance into the European world. But whereas Turkish political Islam had traditionally had what one scholar terms "nationalist-local leanings," it was now infused with "'global' currents of Islamic thought"—particularly via its connection to the Egyptian Brotherhood.⁵ These aspects formed the main rift separating the movement from Turkey's center-right parties, which tended to respect religion, but also uphold secularism and argue for a European orientation and commitment to the alliance with America.

The AKP's founders split from the *Milli Görüş* movement in 2000, pledging now to be a post-Islamist party. Gone was their aversion to secularism, capital-

ism and Europe. Cloaking their policies in rhetoric about human rights, they now pledged only to redefine secularism in a manner more consistent with individual liberties. They accepted globalized markets and pledged reforms to bring Turkey closer to the EU. And in the AKP's first term, the government indeed stuck largely to this rhetoric, and implemented far-reaching reforms of European harmonization—steps which were eagerly supported by Turkey's liberals.

As is now patently obvious, however, Erdoğan and the AKP have abandoned those principles. Both their domestic and foreign policies appear to hold much more in common with their ideological origin than with the post-Islamist party of 2000-2005. The reasons behind this backtracking have only little to do with western policies. Rather, they have much more to do with the fact that the party's commitment to western values served an immediate, instrumental purpose: subjugating the old semi-authoritarian system of tutelage. From the introduction of multi-party democracy in the 1950s, Turkish elected officials had not been the masters of their realm. They had had to contend with the supervisory structures set up by the top brass of the army and the high courts, which served to keep elected power-holders in check. Thus, over five decades, the Turkish army intervened to depose governments four times, and the courts regularly banned political parties and policed acceptable political speech. It was this system that the Islamist movement, on its own, proved unable to take on.

The transformation of the AKP was not spontaneous. It was a direct result of the 1997 military intervention, which removed Erbakan from his position as leader of a coalition government. Up until that moment, Erdoğan—then Mayor of Istanbul—and his associates had viewed the EU only as a Christian club. But in 1997, they realized that they could actually turn European institutions to their

advantage. Seeing western outrage at the military intervention, they aligned themselves with EU demands for the civilian control of the armed forces and cloaked their demands in the rhetoric of human rights and democracy, appealing to European institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. Simply put, the younger guard of Islamists who created the AKP realized that they could turn the west into a lever in their struggle against the establishment. Meanwhile, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were advantageous, making the U.S. now eager for alliances with “moderate Muslims” around the world. Erdoğan and the AKP volunteered in this role, ensuring that they were now enjoying the implicit backing of both the EU and the United States.

By 2008, the AKP had managed to stare down the military's half-hearted efforts to rein it in, and had its candidate elected to the presidency. By 2010, Erdoğan succeeded through a referendum to take control over the judicial system. By that time, he had also confined a great number of dissidents, including senior military officers, to jail on largely trumped-up charges of coup plotting. It was also at this point that Erdoğan's remaining inhibitions against displaying his Islamist and authoritarian tendencies began to disappear. Once the AKP had consolidated power, adherence to western norms and values were no longer necessary as a lever against the establishment, and the AKP reverted to ignoring them in practice while occasionally paying lip service to them.

The Ikhwan worldview

How, then, should the United States deal with Turkey, and what could American policy-makers expect from their counterparts in Ankara on pressing international issues?

A first imperative is to see through what is left of the AKP's smokescreen and

view the party for what it is: a Turkish version of the Muslim Brotherhood, strongly anchored in the *Ikhwan* worldview. This has become all the more apparent since the appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu as Turkish Prime Minister following Erdoğan's election to the presidency. Davutoğlu, who served first as Erdoğan's foreign policy advisor and since 2009 as Foreign Minister, is the intellectual architect of Turkey's foreign policy. He is the only member of Erdoğan's inner circle to be an accomplished intellectual, and is—by all accounts—the only person in Erdoğan's entourage for whom the President actually has a modicum of respect. Thus, Davutoğlu's many writings, in which he expresses a well-defined worldview, should be read very carefully. In these, he minces no words, and implicitly concurs with Rudyard Kipling's old adage that "east is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet." Specifically, Davutoğlu emphasizes the differences between Islam and the West, and squarely announces the former's superiority over the latter. Because the Enlightenment rejects divine revelation and instead emphasizes reason and experience as sources of knowledge, he believes, the West is experiencing an "acute civilizational crisis," making the gulf between Islamic countries and the West unbridgeable. And he concludes that the failure of the Soviet system, rather than a victory for the West, was only the first step in the collapse of European domination of the world, to be followed by the collapse of Western capitalism.⁶

Based on this logic, Davutoğlu developed his own foreign policy doctrine for Turkey: that of "strategic depth," predicated on the notion that Turkey's strength lies in its civilizational identity as a key Muslim state. Davutoğlu is therefore implementing what amounts to a "Pan-Islamist" foreign policy, according to one leading expert.⁷ Indeed, Davutoğlu decries the

post-1918 divisions of the Middle East into nation-states, supporting instead the unity of the Muslim *ummah* as a potential, and in his view more natural, geopolitical structure. His prescriptions borrow heavily from pre-1945 European geopolitical theorists as well as anti-colonialist thought, and emphasize the need for Turkey to build alternative alliances to the West, in effect to counterbalance it. In the final analysis, as one American observer noted after an interview with Davutoğlu, he considers Turkey to be the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire that once unified the Muslim world and therefore has the potential to become a transregional power that helps to once again unify and lead the Muslim world.⁸

Thus, it should come as no surprise that Turkey seized on the 2011 Arab uprisings as a historic opportunity. After all, they coincided exactly with Davutoğlu's thinking, appearing to herald the end of the western-imposed political order in the Middle East—one that it was now up to Turkey to help remake. So far, however, things have not gone as planned. Turkey has experienced numerous setbacks, from its failure to oust Assad to the removal of the Brotherhood in Egypt. Yet Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have seen no reason to change course: Turkey's regional isolation is explained as "precious loneliness," and the culprits increasingly identified as foreign conspirators, primarily Jews and Americans, more often than not acting in cahoots.

Difficult way forward

But even if Turkey's government is as ideologically motivated as the foregoing suggests, it can nonetheless cooperate with the United States. Ideology and pragmatism are not necessarily contradictory, and the Turkish leadership knows that it is in a vulnerable geopolitical position and is now to some extent dependent on American support

for its security. Bluntly put, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu want to have their cake and eat it too. On the one hand, they want to pursue their sectarian, ideologically-driven policy to remake the Middle East. On the other, they want to benefit from membership in NATO, maintain cordial relations with Washington, deter the U.S. from countering their objectives, while remaining fearful of alienating the U.S. to such an extent that America begins moving against Turkey.

For U.S. policy makers, this means that Turkey should be treated in a transactional way rather than as an ally with which America shares common values, and that Turkish leaders should be made to understand they cannot have it both ways. There are no common values underpinning the relationship. Any agreement with Turkey must be based on a cold calculation of interests, in turn based on a thorough understanding of what Turkey's actual objectives are. It also means that American policy makers would do well to reduce their dependence on Turkey, in military as well as political terms—something that would, in turn, help America put pressure on Turkish leaders.

Turkey's geographic position will undoubtedly mean that Washington will need a working relationship with Ankara in many crises yet to come. But in Turkey, there is a strong sense that America needs it more than the opposite is true. The U.S. should therefore begin exploring options to every contingency in which it is dependent on Turkish support, and review what possibilities exist to reduce or replace that dependency through the strengthening of relations with other regional allies—ranging from Romania in the west, Georgia and Azerbaijan in the east, to the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq and Jordan in the south.

Beyond that, the U.S. will need to develop a more muscular policy deal-

ing with Turkey itself. Erdoğan's regime is increasingly Islamist and autocratic, and the President himself increasingly disrespectful in public of the United States. So far, the U.S. has failed to consider strategies to roll back these tendencies. Unless it does, America may face a situation in which a key NATO ally is at best a "frenemy."



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3. Halil Karaveli, "Turkey, the Unhelpful Ally," *New York Times*, February 27, 2013.
4. Michael Tanchum and Halil Karaveli, "Pakistan's Lessons for Turkey," *New York Times*, October 5, 2014.
5. Ahmet Yıldız, "The Transformation of Islamic Thought in Turkey since the 1950s," in Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).
6. Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Alternative Paradigms: The Impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungen on Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993); Ahmet Davutoğlu *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World* (Kuala Lumpur: Mahir Publications, 1994). For a detailed discussion, see Svante E. Cornell, "What Drives Turkish Foreign Policy?," *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2012.
7. For an excellent overview of Davutoğlu's political thought, see Behlül Özkan, "Turkey, Davutoğlu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism," *Survival* 56, no. 4, 2014, 119-40.
8. Joshua Walker, "Introduction: the Source of Turkish Grand Strategy—'Strategic Depth' and 'Zero Problems' in Context," in Nicholas Kitchen ed., *LSE IDEAS, SR007*, London School of Economics and Political Science, 7.