

A U.S. Perspective on Turkey in the Middle East

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For most of the 20th Century, the relationship between the United States and Turkey was one grounded primarily, if not exclusively, in Cold War concerns. Turkey was an early and important member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and strategically positioned both at the periphery of the Soviet Union, and in the historic intersection of Europe and the Middle East.

Over the past ten years, as Turkey's foreign policy has evolved under the "zero problems" doctrine of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, U.S. analysts and policymakers, while still very much convinced of Turkey's importance, do not seem to have arrived at a solid consensus over what is driving that evolution, or that evolution's endpoint. Therefore no solid consensus yet exists over what the future of the U.S.-Turkey relationship will be. There is considerable agreement, however, that the relationship will continue to be a very consequential one for the United States, and thus that U.S. policy should reflect this.

While TESEV's polling clearly shows that Turkey's visibility and favourability are rising among Middle East publics, there is little recent polling of American attitudes toward Turkey¹.

¹ The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2010. Istanbul: TESEV Publications.

An April 2009 CNN poll² found that, despite past tensions between Turkey and the George W. Bush administration over the Iraq war, a solid majority of Americans have a positive view of Turkey. 61 percent of Americans "looked favourably upon Turkey," while 34 percent had an unfavourable opinion.

A slightly more detailed American perceptions of Turkey was revealed in the 2010 Chicago Public Affairs Council survey³, which showed an American public tiring of foreign entanglements. According to the survey, more than two-thirds of Americans think that, as rising countries like Turkey chart a more independent foreign policy, "it is mostly good because then they do not rely on the United States so much (rather than thinking it is mostly bad because then they are more likely to do things the United States does not support.)"

According to the Chicago Public Affairs Council 2010 survey, while Americans do not generally perceive Turkey to be very important to American foreign policy overall, the data clearly indicate a growing appreciation for Turkey's rising international prominence. Along with

² http://articles.cnn.com/2009-04-06/politics/us.muslim.poll.1_muslim-americans-opinion-research-corporation-poll-new-poll-shows-americans?_s=PM:POLITICS

³ http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/Files/Studies_Publications/POS/POS2010/Global.Views_2010.aspx

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Brazil, Turkey was the country most perceived to be rising in influence over the next ten years.

It is important to note here that these polls deal in perceptions, not even necessarily fully formed opinions. But even though people are being asked about societies they know little about, these perceptions still factor heavily into domestic politics.

Among foreign policy analysts, however, the significance of Turkey's foreign policy evolution is more clearly understood, though there is some disagreement over whether this evolution is a good or bad thing for U.S. interests.

Writing in late 2008, analysts Brian Katulis and Spencer Boyer acknowledged that the strategic relationship between the United States and Turkey "remains a key pillar in overall U.S. national security policy." Because of serious strains in recent years, "mostly due to ill will generated by the 2003 Iraq War," the alliance "is in critical need of repair."⁴ The tension between the U.S. and Turkey was a result of the Bush administration's unilateralism and disregard for world opinion. The strategic importance of the Middle East to the U.S., and Turkey's greater role in the region, argued for restoring that relationship.

On the conservative edge of the spectrum, some have voiced increasing concern, even outright hostility toward Turkey's greater assertiveness in the Middle East. "Turkey today is an Islamic republic in all but name," wrote Michael Rubin, a former State Department analyst now at the American Enterprise Institute, in July 2010. "Washington, its European allies, and Jerusalem must now come to terms with Turkey as a potential enemy."⁵ While such alarmism is by no

means shared by a majority of analysts or policymakers, Rubin does represent a current that must not be ignored.

There is some recognition that it was the U.S., not Turkey, who made the first move against the regional status quo, and that the new Turkish posture is driven in part by the impact of the Bush administration's military intervention in Iraq. Analyst Steve Clemons of the New America Foundation noted in November 2009 that one of the factors driving Turkey's new policy was "the fact that the United States' recent policy in the Middle East has been an unmitigated disaster -- particularly since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 over Turkish objections."⁶

U.S. perceptions of Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East must be understood then against the backdrop of the Iraq intervention, and in light of a key U.S. concern -- the increased influence of Iran as a result of that intervention.

Turkey has sought to strengthen its trade relationship with Iran, and to leverage this into a greater mediating role in terms of Iran's issues with the international community. While this mirrors Turkey's policies toward other countries in its region, the stakes and profile of this relationship are necessarily higher with Iran, given the contentious nature of Iran's interactions with that community, particularly with the United States.

As with the Turkey's larger foreign policy, the relationship with Iran is based to a considerable extent on expanding trade and avoiding tensions that could constrain Turkey's economic growth. Trade between the two countries topped \$10 billion last year⁷. In September

4 http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/12/neglected_alliance.html

5 <http://www.michaelrubin.org/7639/turkey-ally-enemy>

6 http://www.thewashingtonnote.com/archives/2009/11/understanding_t_1/

7 <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1254622>

2010, Prime Minister Erdogan announced that Turkey intended to triple its trade volume with Iran over the next five years.⁸

At the same time as Turkey and Iran's economic cooperation has grown, however, they have been competing for political influence and economic advantage inside Iraq. Until recently, Turkey's economic influence since 2003 had been largely limited to northern Iraq (55% of foreign firms in Iraqi Kurdistan are from Turkey⁹), but it has now begun to expand elsewhere in the country. In 2010, the Turkish national oil and gas company TPAO (Turkish Petroleum and Overseas Company) was awarded a major contract to develop the Siba gas field in southern Iraq¹⁰ - a key area of Iranian influence. In October 2010, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki visited both Turkey and Iran, reportedly offering large investment deals in an attempt to gain support for his bid to form a new government.¹¹

Turkish policy in Iraq, which also involves improved relations with Kurdish northern Iraq and strong political support for the Iraqi government in order to provide the necessary stability for good business, is as good an indicator as any of trade-focused outlook. It should also put to rest many concerns of a radical Turkey-Iran "axis." As analyst Elliot Hen-Tov stated in a recent conference on Iran, "Turkey wants an economically interdependent Middle East with Istanbul as its hub. This is not Iran's vision."

Iran's nuclear programme is at the centre of the tensions between the U.S. and Iran, and

Turkey's stance on the Iranian nuclear issue is of considerable interest to U.S. policymakers. Shortly after Barack Obama won the presidential election in November 2008, Prime Minister Erdogan said in an interview that Turkey "could be very useful"¹² in mediating the U.S.-Iran relationship, which President Obama had campaigned on trying to improve, taking on some considerable political risk. While the Obama administration's engagement effort has not yielded an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 on Iran's nuclear program, Turkey has continued to attempt to present itself as a bridge-builder, trying to maintain good relations with both sides.

In May 2010, these efforts resulted in the announcement in Tehran of an Iranian-Turkish-Brazilian deal in which Iran agreed to swap out a portion of its nuclear fuel through Turkey¹³. Coming on the eve of a new United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution implementing tough new sanctions on Iran (in which the Obama administration had put considerable effort), the deal was seen by the U.S. as an attempt by Iran to undercut the U.S. with Turkey's assistance. Surprised by the U.S.'s dismissive response to the Tehran deal, Turkey voted against the UNSC resolution, angering many in the U.S. who had hoped that unanimity in the Security Council would function as further pressure on Iran.

In retrospect, it seems clear that there was miscommunication between the U.S. and Turkey as to what a satisfactory deal with Iran would entail, and thus any opportunity that the deal might have represented, even if only as an opening bid, was squandered. While the Tehran deal put some strain on the U.S.-Turkish relationship, and raised questions

8 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703440604575496031866586468.html>

9 <http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2010/12/11/turkey-and-iran-battle-for-influence-in-iraq/3/>

10 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11582702>

11 <http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2010/12/11/turkey-and-iran-battle-for-influence-in-iraq/2/>

12 http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/12/world/europe/12iht-12turkey.17731395.html?_r=1

13 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/05/16/us-iran-nuclear-deal-idUSTRE64F29P20100516>



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in Washington about Turkey's intentions with regard to Iran, Turkish leaders have repeatedly made clear that they are very concerned about the implications – for both security and for business – of a nuclear weapons capable Iran, and do not desire that outcome.

Also of concern to U.S. policymakers is Turkey's greater intervention on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. While there had been traces of tensions between Israel and Turkey over the years, the beginning of the current break between the two democracies can be traced to the 2006 Lebanon war, where Erdogan felt that Israel had short-circuited his attempts to foster detente with Hezbollah. Similarly, Erdogan saw the 2008-9 Cast Lead operation in Gaza as a personal affront, beginning as it did just days after Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had been in Turkey to discuss an opening with Syria.

While Prime Minister Erdogan's provocative statements on the issue (which reached a new level with his walk-out on Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos after a heated disagreement over Operation Cast Lead¹⁴), have gained him support among Middle East publics, the Iranian regime has made the issue a central plank in its ideological appeal to Middle East publics for three decades. Prime Minister Erdogan's statements, while clearly grounded in genuine beliefs, similarly serve to ingratiate

Turkey with Middle East publics for the purpose of gaining greater access to new markets. (It's also worth noting that the Palestinian issue is yet another area where Turkey could be seen more as competing, rather as cooperating, with Iran.)

Given the strong bipartisan support for Israel in the U.S. Congress, any effort on the Israeli-Palestinian issue that is perceived as done on behalf of Israel's enemies – as some have interpreted Erdogan's statements of support for Hamas – will raise alarms.

In contrast to some conservative Western caricatures of a new, "radical" Turkey, however, Turkey's response to recent upheavals in the Arab world revealed just how invested it is in the Middle East status quo. Commenting on this response, Steven Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations wrote, "Ankara's interests are wrapped up in the old regional order. As a result, at a moment of unprecedented regional change, when people power and democracy is sweeping the Middle East, the Turks look timorous, maladroit, and diminished."¹⁵ While this is overstatement, (and would be no less true of the United States' response to the Arab uprisings) Turkey's efforts to protect its substantial economic and political investments in places like Libya and Syria should put to rest any serious claims that Turkey is aspiring to be an agent of revolutionary change.

¹⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html>

¹⁵ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/05/05/arab_spring_turkish_fall

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