



## Regenerating the U.S.-Turkey Partnership

By **J. Scott Carpenter** and **Soner Cagaptay**

**E**ight years after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) ascended to power in Ankara, U.S.-Turkish relations stand at a critical juncture: bilateral tensions surrounding regional flashpoints like Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process have heightened, and even the six-decade-old NATO-Turkish relationship can no longer be taken for granted, as evidenced by Turkey's current reluctance to endorse the NATO missile project. Indeed, Ankara's recent foreign policy shift—particularly on Middle East issues—has spurred deepening concern in Washington over Turkey's status as a U.S. ally as well as the country's direction as a whole.

The Obama administration took office convinced that its predecessor, by mishandling the war in Iraq, was responsible for the deepening chill between the United States and Turkey. The new U.S. president resolved to dramatically improve bilateral relations through a series of high-level meetings, including visits to Turkey by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and by President Obama himself in March and April 2009, respectively. The administration rightly emphasized Turkey's importance as a NATO ally, an aspirant to membership in the European Union (EU), and a significant regional player in the Middle East. During a speech in Istanbul, President Obama went so far as to welcome Turkey's cooperation on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a role traditionally reserved for Egypt. More recently, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Philip Gordon and other high-ranking officials have made a number of trips to Ankara to advance President Obama's objectives, reiterating his message that Turkey remains a critical U.S. partner. In a spring 2010 speech, for example, Gordon

specifically addressed the question of whether Turkey is turning away from the West, stating, "We do not see it that way. Turkey is an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic alliance and has been for decades."<sup>1</sup>

Yet despite these high-level outreach efforts and assurances, the leadership of the ruling AKP has failed to respond, a problem compounded by the absence of a U.S. ambassador in Ankara since early summer 2010. If anything, the AKP has accelerated a foreign policy shift in Turkey that is at odds with core U.S.—and, arguably, Western—priorities. Meanwhile, the increasingly polarized political landscape between the AKP and its domestic opponents remains both a source of instability in Turkey and a cause for concern in Washington. Today, it is clear that the Iraq war, while profoundly unsettling to U.S.-Turkish relations, did not instigate Turkey's dramatic turn. Rather, the war provided an enabling environment for the AKP to pursue a foreign policy agenda animated more by the party's core values than by U.S. actions.

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The Obama administration must demonstrate that it recognizes the enormity of Turkey's policy shift. In particular, it should find a way to reset bilateral relations to better advance U.S. objectives and prepare for the day when the AKP is no longer in power. Repairing the relationship to some degree would be in the national security interests of both countries. If this proves impossible, Washington should, at a minimum, seek to limit Ankara's foreign influence while better educating the insular Turkish public about the United States and U.S. policy through dedicated public diplomacy initiatives. Doing so will require a fuller understanding of both the current impasse and the decade of political and diplomatic sea change that led to it.

### Summer of Disconnect

Summer 2010 encapsulated many of the ongoing bilateral problems between Turkey and the United States, even as it offered fleeting signs of rapprochement. In May and June, the Gaza flotilla incident and Turkey's UN vote against Iran sanctions raised eyebrows in the United States. Washington's ire at the AKP's stance on these issues—most pointedly communicated through a reportedly stern conversation between President Obama and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the June G-20 summit in Canada (as relayed to the authors by U.S. officials)—spurred the party to launch a charm offensive. Signaling a desire to mend fences with Washington, the AKP reached out through backchannels and sent a high-level delegation from the secular and pro-Western Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This apparent about-face helped alleviate some concerns in Washington over the direction of Ankara's foreign policy. As recently as October 18, 2010, however, Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu refused to condone Turkey's participation in NATO's defense missile project—a network of ballistic missile interceptors in Europe—agreeing with foreign ministry officials that Turkey does not support a project that defines “countries like Iran [and] Syria ... as threats.”<sup>2</sup> Such statements leave no doubt that Turkey, long considered a strong U.S. ally both within the context of NATO and bilaterally, has been fundamentally transformed.

Additional signs have emerged suggesting that the policy rift with the United States may be permanent. Previously, many in Washington had looked favorably on AKP involvement in the U.S. effort to engage Iran.

But today, the party seems intent on working against U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy even as it aims to provide a conduit between Tehran and Washington. On September 29, 2010, for example, Turkish deputy prime minister Ali Babacan suggested that Turkey's banks and companies are “free to trade with Iran.”<sup>3</sup>

The seemingly insurmountable tensions between Turkey and Israel have provided further evidence of Ankara's contrarian stance in the Middle East. Speaking at the sixty-fifth annual session of the UN General Assembly on September 20, 2010, Turkish president Abdullah Gul highlighted the Gaza flotilla incident, stating, “In the light of international law, Turkey's expectation [from Israel] is a formal apology and compensation for the aggrieved families of the victims and the injured people.” He followed the remark with a veiled threat: “In the old world, in the old times, if such an incident were to take place, wars would follow. But in our world today, it is international law that has to be taken into consideration.” Gul also refused to meet with Israeli president Shimon Peres during the assembly.<sup>4</sup>

More disturbingly, dangerous provocations such as the flotilla fiasco show that the AKP is providing increased political support to Hamas. Ankara has claimed that the flotilla was a nongovernmental initiative led by the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief, and that the AKP therefore could not prevent the action. Yet the party's immense sway over Turkish society writ large and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in particular suggests otherwise. For example, when the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs passed the “Armenian resolution” on March 4, 2010, the AKP demanded that all Turkish NGOs cancel visits to Washington in protest. Even the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association—a Fortune 500 business lobby whose members collectively generate approximately 40 percent of Turkey's economic output, or more than \$400 billion—obeyed the order.

The AKP's increasing domestic powers have added to concerns by some analysts that Turkish democracy is devolving into a one-party system—a troubling trend given the country's foreign policy shift. In addition to the pressure it is able to exert on NGOs and independent media, the AKP gained significant power over the country's high court when voters approved new

constitutional amendments on September 12, 2010. The party has also persistently used McCarthy-like tactics against secular Turks. Prime Minister Erdogan, for example, has called opponents of the constitutional referendum “coup supporters”—a threatening label given that the AKP is aggressively prosecuting previous coup allegations through an open-ended investigation against alleged members of the supposed ultranationalist Ergenekon group. Such tactics suggest a worrisome strategy designed to replace Turkey’s traditional political overseer (the military establishment) with the AKP itself, allowing the party to consolidate support, including for its foreign affairs vision.

### How We Got Here

For decades, Washington took Turkey for granted as a strong, steadfast regional ally both within NATO and more generally. Close military ties and a historic working relationship on international crises from the Korean War to Kosovo and the 1991 Gulf War ensured a robust “strategic partnership.” Following the Cold War, Washington sought to anchor Turkey firmly in the West by strongly advocating the country’s EU accession. This, in turn, required Turkey to pursue core economic and political reforms, which the United States and its EU partners advocated throughout the 1990s with only minimal success.

In the early 2000s, new opportunities arose, along with deeper challenges. The September 11 attacks required a NATO response in Afghanistan, and Turkey stood by the United States; indeed, Turkish troops remain in Afghanistan today. But two other events whose implications were only dimly perceived at the time transformed bilateral relations. The first and most consequential was the November 2002 election of the reform-oriented but Islamist-rooted AKP, which ushered in a period of rapid economic and political change. The second was Washington’s diplomatic mismanagement in the lead-up to Turkey’s 2003 parliamentary vote against permitting a northern invasion route to Iraq for U.S. forces—a policy decision facilitated, at least in part, by the AKP leadership.

These two events led to a crisis in bilateral confidence, and in the years since, the AKP has steadfastly pursued a foreign policy that threatens to undermine a traditional cornerstone of U.S. regional strategy. Today, a once-friendly, reliable, Western-oriented

Turkey is acting in a manner largely inimical to U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East, believing that Washington needs Ankara more than Ankara needs Washington. Perhaps of even greater concern, an illiberal AKP is increasingly couching its foreign policy in terms that play to Turkish populist sentiment, pitting Islam against the West even while it seeks to consolidate power at home with pledges of maintaining a democratic, secular Turkey.

### Washington and the AKP

The United States greeted the AKP’s 2002 election with caution, given the party’s roots in the banned Virtue Party (Fazilet) led by the problematic Necmettin Erbakan. Yet as Ankara began to aggressively implement far-reaching domestic reforms begun by the previous coalition government, the United States became an increasingly strong proponent of former Istanbul mayor and new prime minister Erdogan and his declared desire to make Turkey an EU member.

This shift was partly based on the new face of the AKP. Unlike its forbears—the openly Islamist, deeply conservative, and amateurish Fazilet, and the Welfare Party (Refah), which had served as a motherboard of sorts for Turkish Islamists going back to the 1980s—the AKP projected a modern image set by its charismatic leader. Whereas Refah and Fazilet had promoted an anti-American, anti-Semitic, anti-European, antidemocratic, and antibusiness agenda, the AKP opted for a different platform. By drawing from the ranks of the center-right, which gravitated toward the AKP when the traditional center-right parties imploded following the 2001 economic crisis, and attracting some members of the liberal faction, the AKP was able to populate the parliament with figures representing a wide array of ideological and demographic currents, including many young people and women, both secular and Islamist. The party also adopted a much-welcome pro-EU, pro-business agenda. At the same time, however, Erdogan and the rest of the inner leadership, including former foreign minister and current president Gul, remained closely associated with the rank and file of Refah.

Nevertheless, as the AKP introduced legislation that strengthened rule of law and opened the Turkish economy, Washington began to think about—and, occasionally, talk about—Turkey as a successful model for combining

democracy and Islamism, one that other countries in the broader Middle East might emulate. Because Erdogan seemed prepared to tackle even the most taboo issues of Turkish political life, including the Kurdish question and relations with Armenia, the Bush administration became convinced that the AKP would bring about a fundamental shift in domestic politics—a development Washington unreservedly welcomed. This view continues to color U.S. policy today. During a November 12, 2009, press conference in Ankara, for example, Assistant Secretary Gordon made clear that Washington is “encouraged by the direction” of Turkey’s democratic opening, and that, if successful, the process “will provide an opportunity for more stability in Turkey, more peace in Turkey, and more of a feeling of inclusion by all of Turkey’s citizens”—all things the United States would support.

Yet both the Bush and Obama administrations failed to fully appreciate how the AKP’s rise would affect the consolidation of democracy and balance of power within Turkey. In the years following the 2002 election, Washington treated its relations with Ankara much as it did prior to the party’s emergence. Principally, this meant relying on close relations with the military—viewed as the real power within Turkey—when working on sensitive diplomatic issues. The problem with this approach was that the Turkish military remained deeply skeptical of the AKP’s Islamist roots and had no desire to see the party succeed politically. At the same time, Washington misunderstood the AKP’s rationale for domestic reform, which the party pursued not so much to facilitate Turkey’s EU accession, but rather to change the rules of the political game. Specifically, the AKP sought to enhance its own maneuverability by eroding the dominance of secular institutions, particularly the military and the courts. That the West, including the United States, had long pushed for civilian control of the military caused Washington to miss the true aim of AKP policies.

When the Turkish parliament voted against permitting the U.S. military to use a northern route for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the stage was set for a managed rupture between the United States and Turkey. Washington made mistakes, of course, both before the vote and after the invasion. In retrospect, however, Erdogan’s decision to spike the parliamentary vote can be seen as the beginning of a long-term effort to both

fuel and exploit anti-American sentiment as a means of advancing his domestic and foreign policy ambitions. Accordingly, after Iraqi president Saddam Hussein’s fall, the AKP leadership did nothing to make the case for repairing the rift with the United States or to explain the value of the strategic partnership. Instead, it did the opposite, fanning existing anti-American sentiment across the spectrum of Turkish society. Perhaps the most egregious example was the party’s endorsement of the 2006 Turkish film *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, which depicts American soldiers as “radical evangelical” baby-killers being led by Israeli fascists. The depth of anti-American feeling allowed the party’s foreign policy establishment to chart a course in the region very different from that of the United States. The most obvious signal of this shift came in early 2006, when the AKP leadership hosted Hamas military leader Khaled Mashal in Ankara despite pressure from the United States and EU. In doing so, the party clearly demonstrated that it hoped to burnish its credentials as an Islamist actor.

Washington failed to definitively acknowledge the deliberate nature of this policy shift, however, even after more glaring evidence emerged in the wake of the AKP’s 2007 reelection. Riding a feel-good wave generated by a booming economy, and benefiting from public backlash to the Turkish military’s online publication of an anti-AKP statement, the party won a larger plurality of the vote and a convincing mandate. Not since the 1950s, in fact, had a party secured such a decisive parliamentary majority twice in a row. The votes gave the AKP elite much more confidence to pursue their twin policies of consolidating their position domestically and, of more immediate importance to the United States, implementing radically different policies abroad. The May 2009 appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu as foreign minister served as the symbolic culmination of this strategic pivot. No longer operating behind the scenes as Gul and Erdogan’s advisor, Davutoglu was now free to implement the ideas he had outlined in his book *Strategic Depth: Turkey’s International Position*,<sup>5</sup> which set out his concept of “neo-Ottomanism” (for more on this term, see the next section). Those ideas animated the AKP’s ideological slant even before the party came to power in 2002, and they have been concertedly applied ever since. As a result, Turkey’s ties with its neighbors have been altered beyond recognition.

### **Away from the West**

Some analysts have described the AKP's foreign policy as a "zero problems with neighbors" approach. Yet Turkey's new diplomatic environment indicates otherwise. The AKP has indeed eliminated problems and built good ties with neighbors such as Russia, Syria, and Iran. It has also developed ties from scratch with the new Iraqi government and the Iraqi Kurds, a formidable achievement and a boon to U.S. interests in the region. In addition, it has signaled interest in a thaw with Armenia, with which it shares a closed border (though that thaw has yet to occur). At the same time, however, Ankara's traditionally good ties with neighbors such as Georgia and Azerbaijan have deteriorated under the AKP, and Turkish-Israeli ties have nearly unraveled. Furthermore, Turkish ties with the EU—to which Ankara should be committing its energy if Turkey is to drop anchor in the West—have stagnated for reasons that have as much to do with the AKP's loss of interest in the accession process as with the objections of France and other European powers. In short, far from maintaining a zero-problems approach with all of its neighbors, Turkey under the AKP has instead soured previously good ties with several neighbors, especially those associated with the West. And Turkey's proverbial EU train, which the AKP initially pushed, has now come to a near halt.

Some analysts refer to the party's foreign policy as "neo-Ottomanist," suggesting secular imperial ambitions to become a regional power. This characterization is not quite accurate, however. The AKP does not assert Turkey's weight equally in the areas that were under Ottoman rule (i.e., the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East), and its ambitions can hardly be labeled "secular." Instead, apart from building a finance-based relationship with Russia, it has focused the bulk of its energies on the Middle East, with a slant toward Islamist and anti-Western actors. In this regard, the party's diplomatic activities are evocative: a study of high-level visits by AKP officials reveals that the party focuses asymmetrically on anti-Western Arab countries and Iran while ignoring Israel, much of the Balkans, and the Caucasus. Between November 2002 and April 2009, for example, Turkish foreign ministers made at least eight visits to Iran and Syria but only one each to Azerbaijan (a Turkic nation once considered to be Turkey's closest ally) and Georgia (which Ankara mentored after

it achieved independence in 1991). During the same period, Turkish prime ministers made at least seven visits to Qatar and Saudi Arabia but only two to Greece and Bulgaria, Turkey's most immediate European and Balkan neighbors. Despite this long-term pattern, the AKP's latest involvement in the western Balkans has earned accolades from Washington.

**Up with Syria.** Much of the AKP's effort in the Middle East has focused on Syria. In the 1990s, Turkey viewed Syria as an enemy because of its support for terrorist attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Yet on October 13, 2009, the two countries opened their borders and set up joint cabinet-level meetings, which encouraged commonalities in their policymaking. Although such rapprochement began in the late 1990s, when Damascus stopped supporting the PKK, the past several years under the AKP have seen the most significant strengthening of bilateral ties. The party's tendency to analyze the Middle East through an "us versus them" foreign policy lens—which casts the region as a set of politically defined religious blocs rather than nations—has facilitated this process, leading prominent Turkish diplomats to describe the relationship between the countries as robust. Regular strategic discussions by Turkish and Syrian cabinet members further support this assessment.

**Up with Iran.** Ankara's ties with Iran have also improved under the AKP, though not to the same extent as Syrian ties. This is due to Tehran's strong regional standing; unlike the Baath regime in Damascus, it does not need patrons to survive. Even so, Ankara has defended Iran's nuclearization efforts, a stance justified by the same "us versus them" lens described above. As international pressure on Iran mounts, the regime will likely launch diplomatic overtures to further strengthen its bonds with Turkey. Tehran is already Turkey's second largest natural gas provider after Russia. Expanding Turkish purchases and investments in this sector while enhancing other trade links would further upgrade bilateral ties, creating an enduring legacy of energy dependence on Iran for future Turkish governments. At the same time, the current business environment between Ankara and Tehran will inevitably exacerbate tensions with the West, which views AKP-promoted investments in Iran as contrary to its campaign of economically isolating the Islamic Republic.



**Up with Russia.** The improvement in Turkish-Russian ties is largely a product of energy needs and personal contacts. Until the past decade, bilateral relations were very poor. Historically, Russia initiated more than a dozen major wars with the Ottomans after the two countries established a land border in 1475. During the first half of the twentieth century, Bolshevism, which the Turks viewed as Russian expansionism disguised as communism, ensured that ties remained sour. The fall of communism opened the door for renewed ties, however, with Moscow cultivating commercial relations. The AKP has built its own rapprochement with Russia on this foundation, facilitated by close personal ties between Erdogan and Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin. (The two leaders have rendezvoused at least nine times since 2002, usually in private meetings in Russia.) More important, Turkey's dependence on Russia for its energy supplies suggests that even a non-AKP government would likely find it difficult to downgrade ties with Russia in the near term.

**Down with Georgia.** The improvements in Turkish-Russian relations have led to deterioration in Turkish-Georgian ties. After Georgia gained independence in 1991, Ankara served as its regional patron, training its military, providing its first naval vessels, and so forth. Things changed under the AKP, however, given the party's focus on Moscow. When Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, the AKP treated Tbilisi with benign neglect, offering to unite the occupied country and Russia in a Caucasus Stability and Security Platform. Needless to say, this proposal never took off. Furthermore, given its religion-based political attitudes, the AKP has shown an aversion to Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili's government, which regularly uses Christian symbols for domestic political purposes, as reported to the authors in private conversations.

**Down with Azerbaijan.** The deterioration of Turkish-Azerbaijani ties under the AKP is even more surprising than the decline in Georgian ties. Before the AKP came to power, Turkic and secular Azerbaijan was Turkey's closest ally; for example, the motto summarizing the relationship was "one nation, two states." Yet ties have nearly unraveled since then, and ideology has once again played a role. In the past, Azerbaijan viewed secular,

pro-Western Turkey as a role model. The Azerbaijani authorities reportedly complain about Turkish efforts to convert Shiite Azerbaijanis to Sunnism. This new face of Turkey is less attractive to Baku, and the differing values and lack of personal chemistry between AKP leaders and Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev have only exacerbated the strains. Even Ankara's attempts at rapprochement with Armenia—a positive development in and of itself—have fanned the fire in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, since the AKP has occasionally signaled that it does not view Armenian occupation of Azerbaijan as a key problem in regional politics.

**Down with Israel.** Turkey's ties with Israel have declined precipitously under the AKP, as demonstrated by the Gaza flotilla incident. The party's criticism of Israel has eroded nearly all Turkish public support for ties with the country, but until recently, the West and Israel dismissed such rhetoric as domestic politicking. That evaluation changed in October 2009, however, when the AKP rescinded Israel's invitation to Anatolian Eagle, a NATO air force exercise that had been held in central Turkey with U.S., Israeli, and Western participation since the mid-1990s. Erdogan justified the decision by calling Israel a "persecutor."<sup>6</sup> Yet the next day, the AKP announced that it had invited Syria—whose regime persecutes its own people—to participate in joint military exercises. Indeed, a proverbial mountain is moving in Turkish foreign policy: the AKP's clash-of-civilizations mindset is corroding the foundations of Turkey's sixty-year military and political cooperation with Israel.

**Down with the EU.** Turkish-European ties have become stale under the AKP as well. Key EU countries, especially France, have objected to Turkey's membership bid, bringing the accession process to a standstill. As mentioned previously, the AKP pushed aggressively for EU accession at first, making Turkey an official candidate for membership talks in 2004. In 2005, however, the AKP lost interest in the process precisely as the talks began—no surprise in retrospect given that they required Turkey to pass and implement tough reforms to consolidate liberal democracy at home. Instead, the AKP declared 2005 to be the "Year of Africa," opting to refocus the country's attention away from Europe at a crucial time, missing a window of opportunity, and further demonstrating

the party's waning appetite for EU accession. This only helped pave the way for French president Nicolas Sarkozy to deny Turkey's request two years later—under the facade of the Cyprus issue—leading to an impasse in Turkey's EU accession process.

In response to the impasse, the AKP had two options: it could view accession strategically, defining it as the ultimate goal of Turkish foreign policy and enacting the drastic reforms required for membership in order to embarrass France into lifting its objections; or it could forgo reform and place accession on the back burner. Ankara chose the second, tactical path, pursuing EU membership only when it brought the party popularity and not when it involved costly reforms. The fact that many EU states were only halfheartedly committed to Turkey's EU talks abetted this approach, driving even pro-EU Turkish diplomats away from the process. As a result, eight years after the party took power, Turkey's EU membership is stalled.

Of all the changes that have taken place in Turkish foreign policy under the AKP, this loss of interest in EU accession is the most alarming because of what it means for the country's ties to the West. If NATO membership made Turkey a Western-oriented country in the 1950s, EU membership is the only means of cementing that orientation in the post-September 11 world. Indeed, if the accession process had stalled prior to September 11, the stalemate would not have had such strategic ramifications for Turkey as it does today. Before 2001, there was room for Turkey to remain outside the EU but still part of Europe and the West. Today, with the EU pushing its boundaries into the Balkans, and with al-Qaeda pursuing a war between a perceived and politically charged "Muslim world" and the West, Ankara no longer has a gray area in which to position itself. Turkey must become an EU member and part of the West, or else fold into al-Qaeda's anti-Western "Muslim world." Looking at the AKP's regional report card since 2002, the latter path seems more likely at the moment—in the end, the AKP may not wish to anchor Turkey in the West.

### 'Correcting History'

The leitmotif of the AKP's orientation is summarized in Davutoglu's *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position*, which asserts that "since the end of the Ottoman

Empire, Muslims have gotten the short end of the stick, and the AKP is here to correct all that." The party has no intention of correcting wrongs against Muslims writ large, however—its foreign policy is guided not by Islam, but by Islamism, a political ideology that sees Muslims in perpetual conflict with the West and also other faiths. The AKP therefore favors other Islamists over Muslims who do not share its Manichean worldview. For example, Ankara has already forgiven and even defended some of the most prominent offenses that Islamist regimes have committed against fellow Muslims, such as the Sudanese genocide of Darfuris or Tehran's suppression of the Iranian population. Likewise, it has supported Islamist Hamas and its violent goals but not the secular Palestinian Authority and its peaceful cause of statehood.

This selective solidarity also applies to wrongs committed against Muslims by non-Muslims, so long as those non-Muslims are anti-European. The AKP and other adherents of political Islam have made the strategic decision that the enemy of their enemy is their friend. Hence, the party gives Russia a pass regardless of how many Chechens it kills, yet consistently singles out Israel based on the Islamist view that the Jewish state will always be a sore in the "Muslim world" regardless of its borders or policies.<sup>7</sup>

Permitting an ideological actor of this sort to mediate the Middle East's various conflicts is a dangerous recipe for Washington. Because the AKP sees a clash of civilizations everywhere it looks, it cannot be an impartial broker. Hence, when the AKP is allowed to interject itself between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, or between Europe and Iran, it quickly becomes an advocate for the Islamist side.

Moreover, after eight years of increasingly authoritarian AKP rule at home, many Turks now view the world through the same perspective. As evidenced by a 2005 Eurobarometer survey titled "Europeans and Their Languages," the majority of Turks do not speak a language in addition to Turkish. Of the respondents, 17 percent were conversant in English, 4 percent were conversant in German, 1 percent were conversant in French, and a statistically insignificant number were conversant in Spanish or Italian. Unable to read, write, or seek out information sources in alternative languages, many Turks have been left to view the world

as it is reported to them and debated by their government. Turks are remarkably isolated from the global information revolution; rather than opening them up to the world, the internet has largely served as a vessel for delivering conspiracy theories to the population in their own language.

Foreign Minister Davutoglu offered the best expression of the AKP's worldview in his *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World*.<sup>8</sup> Though published in 1994, this study was referred to by Davutoglu as his magnum opus at an Oxford University conference in May 2010. According to Davutoglu,

Western civilization, which lacks value legitimacy and depends on merely material superiority, cannot be the ultimate and best form of human civilization. Therefore, the Muslim masses should be selective and highly meticulous during the process of interaction with Western civilization. Secondly, the Muslim world, which lost the status of being a determinant civilizational force, can again regain this status consistent with the circularity of time: this requires a renovation of the Islamic civilizational value-parameters rather than a renunciation of them in favour of the adaptation of Western parameters.

### Prospects for Change?

Given the AKP's parliamentary dominance and concerted strategy, it should come as no surprise that the country's foreign policy could shift so dramatically in eight years. The AKP represents Turkey's new elite. The country now has pro-AKP billionaires, think tanks, universities, media (nearly half of which is owned by progovernment businesses), pundits, and scholars—it has, in other words, a full-fledged conservative, and often Islamist, pro-AKP elite. And just as the Kemalist elites shaped the country to their own pro-Western image, the new elites are laying the roots of their “us versus them” mindset across Turkish society. For example, according to a recent poll examining religion, society, and politics in Turkey by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, an Istanbul-based NGO, the number of residents identifying themselves as Muslim increased by 10 percent between 2002 and 2007, and nearly half of those surveyed described themselves as Islamist.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from social changes, the most important question for the United States and Europe is whether the most problematic elements of Turkish foreign policy can

be reversed or attenuated. If so, what should Washington be doing now to initiate such a reversal?

To date, the Obama administration has chosen high-level engagement and emphasized, as elsewhere, “mutual interest and mutual respect.” This approach has achieved little in terms of altering Turkish behavior or limiting its negative impact. President Obama's April 6, 2009, speech in Ankara, in which he stated his personal commitment “to renewing the alliance between our nations and the friendship between our people,” was not reciprocated. Instead, the AKP voted against new Iran sanctions at the UN Security Council and defended Tehran's nuclear project, infuriating many in the U.S. government. It also increased tensions with Israel via the Gaza flotilla incident and the canceling of joint military exercises.

If change is going to come, it will have to do so through electoral mandate. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for June 2011, and several key factors will play a role in their outcome. On the one hand, the AKP has seen its poll numbers sag since the global financial crisis began in 2008, leading to defeats in a number of important provincial and local elections. An increase in PKK terrorist attacks and the failure of the party's Kurdish opening in 2009 have compounded these problems.

On the other hand, the prime minister has taken a much more assertive rhetorical stance on Israel and increasingly aligned Turkey with the “resistance,” stoking Islamist-nationalist sentiment in a clear effort to win populist points both at home and in the Middle East. More important, the September 2010 constitutional referendum indicated that in a straightforward up or down vote, a majority of AKP supporters are still with the party.

Turkey's multiparty democracy has shown some signs of effective opposition to AKP dominance. The party's poll numbers suffered in early 2010 when the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) elected pro-European, liberal, and social democrat leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu. Although the CHP had been unable to challenge the AKP's charismatic style earlier, this seems to have changed with Kilicdaroglu at the helm. One spring 2010 poll even showed the CHP pulling ahead of the AKP for the first time since 2002.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the AKP has been employing vehement anti-European rhetoric (particularly since the Gaza flotilla incident), conjuring hysteria to boost its popularity. And the party will likely continue



to use populist, anti-European foreign policy to improve its prospects in the run-up to the 2011 elections.

More alarming for Washington is the possibility that, with anti-Americanism becoming universal in Turkey, both the AKP and its opponents may compete to see who can be most anti-American. “Brand America” has become so toxic throughout the country that even the opposition cannot be counted on to stand with Washington. In fact, most of the existing opposition leadership is trying to be more nationalist than Erdogan on critical foreign policy issues, particularly those related to the PKK in Iraq. This assessment applies to Erdogan’s efforts on the Kurdish front. Although lauded by President Obama, Erdogan’s bid failed to address the Kurdish issue and was roundly pilloried by opposition politicians, who characterized the prime minister’s ideas as dangerously soft.

This dynamic has created an even deeper ambivalence than usual in the State Department, which continues to praise the AKP’s domestic political and economic reforms while remaining rightfully concerned about key elements of the party’s new foreign policy. Moreover, given recent polling data, Washington is aware that the AKP is unlikely to be removed from office in the upcoming elections. Erdogan will likely secure another term as prime minister and then position himself to run for the presidency in a Putin-Medvedev-style inversion with Gul. These considerations have left Washington with few good options and contributed to its equivocal rhetorical and policy response. For some in Foggy Bottom, better the devil you know ...

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

The United States may not be able to reverse the AKP’s foreign policy outlook, but it must accept that a fundamental change has taken place, and that the challenge now is to mitigate negative outcomes associated with this change. As the fallout from Turkey’s no-vote on Iran sanctions indicated, Ankara remains responsive to U.S. ire. Whether the vote was born of a simple misunderstanding (as some believe) or was the culmination of a coherent policy (as the authors believe), the AKP’s leaders seem to recognize that they may have gone too far. Indeed, Ankara has offered some symbolic signals of contrition and pullback, such as scaling down its language on Israel and sending a high-level foreign

ministry delegation to Washington to rebuild bridges.

Nevertheless, symbolic gestures do not indicate a disposition to return to the status quo ante in Turkey’s foreign policy. Washington should expect more troubles ahead with the AKP’s political elite on issues related to the Middle East. In response, it must find ways of expressing its displeasure with Ankara while doing more to pull Turkey as a nation closer to the West. This will not be easy, but it can be done. To get there, the United States must pursue a complementary policy of using strategic public diplomacy to win over individual Turks while more pointedly employing traditional diplomatic tools with the Turkish government. It must also proceed cautiously, however, since a frontal challenge to the AKP would backfire. In addition, Washington should reorient its Turkey policy back to EU accession.

### **Strategic Public Diplomacy Track**

The U.S. goal for this track is to reach out to the Turkish public and build a relationship with the population while strengthening civil society institutions for a healthier democracy. Anti-Americanism is close to becoming a structural problem in U.S.-Turkish relations, and Washington lacks a counterpart in Turkey to address this trend. This necessitates a unique, country-specific solution: a massive, Turkey-only public diplomacy initiative with devoted funding.

The latest Pew poll figures show that only 17 percent of Turks view the United States favorably, up only 3 percent from 2009.<sup>11</sup> Despite the cosmopolitan impression one might get from visiting Istanbul, much of Turkey is extraordinarily insular, with little connection to the outside world. Most Turks are deeply suspicious of the West and tend to believe in conspiracies (e.g., that Western countries run Turkey or other regional states behind-the-scenes). This perception is rooted in recent Ottoman history. In the nineteenth century, the collapsing Ottoman Empire became subject to the Great Powers, with Western states playing Ottoman subjects against one another and the “Sublime Porte.” One legacy of that history is that the Turks, like other post-Ottoman nations, see themselves as objects of political change and Western influence, not as active agents of such change. Hence, even when they appear to be most connected to the outside world, Turks can remain deeply suspicious of Washington.

Even so, the United States should not simply accept defeat, but should instead invest much more heavily in efforts to communicate with the Turkish public in order to give weight to its government-to-government diplomacy. A U.S. strategic public diplomacy campaign can change Turkish foreign policy by educating the public about America, and such efforts have become increasingly necessary in light of Turkey's profound insularity.

For example, Washington should vastly increase country-specific exchange programs for Turkish journalists, scholars, rising politicians, opinionmakers, and students. Although Turkey is the largest beneficiary of such programs in comparison to other countries in the European arena, its participation is dwarfed by that of some strategically important countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Indonesia, China, and Mexico. According to the State Department, Bangladesh has more than 300,000 people participating in exchanges per year, while Turkey has only 26,000.<sup>12</sup>

Washington should also continue senior-level visits and broaden them beyond the security sphere. Since President Obama's 2009 Ankara speech, only two cabinet-level officials have visited Turkey: Defense Secretary Robert Gates in February 2010 and Secretary Clinton in March. Energy Secretary Steven Chu has never once visited the country since his Senate confirmation on January 20, 2009. Washington should encourage others, including Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, to plan such visits as part of a strategic outreach campaign in which at least one senior American official travels to Turkey per month. For example, Commerce Secretary Gary Locke—who has never visited—could lead a high-powered delegation of Silicon Valley business leaders to Turkey. From the State Department, Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale visited in September 2010, taking a delegation of American celebrities with her. And Undersecretary for Democracy and Global Affairs Maria Otero could also find useful ways to engage the Turkish people and government.

Between visits, the next U.S. ambassador to Ankara should continue the concerted outreach effort by frequently appearing on Turkish airwaves to engage and educate the Turkish public on U.S. policies. He or she should not do so alone, however—U.S. officials should generally be made available to make America's case in the Turkish media.

To encourage a greater number of American NGOs to partner with Turkish institutions, the State Department should consider authorizing the assistance coordinator for Europe to make funds available for this purpose. In particular, the State Department should focus on organizations that support media independence and gender equality in order to counter Turkey's recent slide on those indices. It could also spur local grant initiatives by making ample funds available to the embassy in Ankara and the consulates in Istanbul and Adana, as well as to American NGOs such as the National Democratic Institute, National Endowment for Democracy, and International Republican Institute.

In particular, Washington should use "Web 2.0" technologies in ways developed specifically for Turks, helping the population plug into growing online social networks. Although the Broadcasting Board of Governors has placed increased emphasis on such technologies in countries such as Egypt, it is not yet doing so in Turkey. Other useful tools for connecting with the common Turk include soft-power diplomacy (i.e., "soccer diplomacy"), a presence in Turkish-language social media, and educational exchanges for non-elite schools. Throughout all of these efforts, the U.S. message of strong support for Turkey's liberal democracy and place in the world should come through loud and clear—with an equally clear message that Turkey must exercise power responsibly.

### **Bringing Turkey Back into Europe**

When the AKP came to power in 2002, Western leaders were satisfied with its assurance that it would make EU accession the chief aim of Turkish foreign policy. The promise of a European Turkey helped assuage fears both domestically and in the West about the party's Islamist roots; if the AKP desired a European Turkey, analysts reasoned, it certainly was not Islamist. Some even promoted the party as Europe's herald to the "Muslim world" while shielding it from critics who worried about its worldview.

As noted earlier in this piece, the AKP did initially push for EU membership, legislating reforms and making Turkey a candidate country for talks in 2005. But just as accession talks began, the party turned its attention to the Middle East, suggesting that it would make Turkey a "center" or "bridge" country and earn the trust of both the West and the "Muslim world."

Eight years later, Turkey has become neither a bridge nor a European country. If anything, Turkey under the AKP is fast becoming the tribune of a politically defined “Muslim world” set in opposition to the West. Moreover, the country is run by an increasingly authoritarian government open to governance by illiberal politics.

By most any measure, however, the AKP’s foreign policy vision appears to have failed. Turkey has moved away from the United States, and this shift has not made it a regional power or a trusted mediator in Middle East issues. Much to the chagrin of those who desire increased Turkish influence in the world, Turkey has not become the “center country” that bridges the East and West, communicates with both Israelis and Palestinians, and garners the trust of both Tehran and Washington. Instead, Ankara’s involvement in the Middle East produces nonconstructive results for Europe and the United States while stimulating anti-Western political tendencies among the Turkish population.

In order to contain the AKP’s Islamist influence in Turkey and the region, the United States must deny the Erdogan government the influence and prestige that comes with being promoted as a regional mediator. In short, it should work to remove Turkey from the Middle East (at least as an Islamist-oriented catalyst) and put it back in Europe where it belongs. To this end, Washington should isolate Turkey from Middle East politics as much as possible. This includes preventing the AKP from playing the mediator’s role on key issues such as Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The United States should also work with its European allies to diminish EU objections, encouraging European leaders to make Turkey’s EU accession and NATO membership the dominant part of their discussion with the AKP and the Turkish public.

Indeed, the outcome of the EU process will have a major influence on the direction of Turkey’s foreign policy. Although some might argue that the United States has limited influence on this issue, past U.S. lobbying on Turkey’s behalf has yielded positive results in Europe, breaking impasses on the road to accession. The EU is unlikely to offer Ankara an accession date soon, but even the membership process itself provides a Western anchor for Turkish foreign policy and a lifeline for pro-Western and liberal Turks. The process also provides the strongest basis for Washington’s vision of Turkey as a country

that could prove the compatibility of Islam and the West, boosting a major post-September 11 U.S. objective.

Accordingly, the United States must work to keep accession alive, focusing first on unblocking talks that may reach a dead end in a matter of months. The talks, which began in 2005, are divided into thirty-five negotiable chapters, with opening and closing benchmarks. Of these, only one chapter, science and research, has been opened and closed. Of the remaining chapters, eighteen are frozen, meaning they cannot be opened for negotiation due to French and Greek Cypriot objections. Meanwhile, thirteen chapters that have already been opened cannot be closed, again due to French and Greek Cypriot objections. This leaves three chapters that could potentially be opened without objection: on competition, social policy, and public procurement. Yet the AKP is unwilling to open the chapters on social policy (which would allow opposition unions to organize more freely) or public procurement (which would force the party to be more transparent when handing out government contracts—Turkey’s public procurement laws have, in fact, become less transparent since 2002). The parties are expected to open talks on the lone remaining chapter (competition) soon. Once that is resolved, however, Turkey and the EU will run out of chapters to open, close, or even freeze, meaning the effective end of accession talks.

In light of this situation, Washington should work with both the AKP government and U.S. allies in Europe—particularly France and Germany, which have the power to unlock accession talks—to move the negotiations forward. For instance, it could encourage these allies to close some chapters, unfreeze certain others, and convince the AKP to open the social policy and public procurement chapters.

### **Winning Over the Individual Turk**

As the United States works to win over individual Turks, it must also make active use of the diplomat’s tool kit to limit the risks associated with Ankara’s influence abroad and begin responding more directly—albeit carefully—to the most troublesome aspects of Turkish foreign policy. For too long, the United States and the Obama administration in particular have fallen back on traditional language, calling Turkey a critical ally without insisting that Ankara fulfill the substance

of that alliance. The practical impact of this approach has been to encourage the AKP's activist proclivities without true regard for their implications. This approach needs to change.

First, the United States should make clear privately and publicly that it is displeased with Ankara's freelancing. If the AKP fails to get the message, then Washington should subtly downgrade its contact with Turkey's leadership and ensure that its ambassadorial interactions and official visits remain diverse, including public meetings with the opposition. Inviting opposition figures to Washington for high-profile meetings would be beneficial in this respect. On the military front, the United States should quietly but noticeably explore alternatives to Incirlik Air Base, given the persistent friction that has characterized bilateral negotiations over leasing rights. And internationally, the United States could become more reticent regarding Ankara's efforts to secure prominent roles within the UN or similar organizations.

Other creative uses of leverage could help encourage Turkey to consider who its true friends are. For example, although the bloom may be off the EU rose for many Turks, Europe remains a locomotive for their economy given the customs union the EU established with Ankara. The United States, working with the EU, could find subtle ways to remind Turks of the benefits of the relationship.

Turkey is not yet lost to the West. But one surefire way of producing that outcome is allowing U.S. politicians or diplomats to browbeat Turkish politicians or policy, whether publicly or privately. For example, efforts to aggressively push congressional resolutions on the "Armenian Genocide" merely play to Erdogan's strengths as a political alchemist, turning U.S. anger into domestic political gold. Instead, the United States must develop a more nuanced policy aimed at scaling back the AKP's influence and developing a real defense against its policies. The alternative—a policy that targets the whole of Turkey with measures such as passing the Armenian resolution or blocking military sales—would only push the Turks away from the United States, fulfilling the AKP's objective. In other words, the question of what to do with Turkey is partly predicated on the question of what not to do with Turkey. Given the AKP's strategy of rallying Turkish public

opinion behind its anti-Western foreign policy, the cardinal rule of the new era is simple: do no harm, meaning do not offend the Turks or the Turkish republic.

Blocking military sales to Turkey, for instance, would not help the United States confront the AKP, but would bring the secular and non-AKP components of Turkish society into the AKP's fold. This rule holds even for highly charged issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That is, confronting the AKP frontally on its support for Hamas prior to the 2011 elections would likely backfire. Exercising "smart power" will require subtlety and nuance, and the United States is capable of both.

At the same time, the United States must signal to Ankara that its anti-Western policies have a cost. To this end, Washington should withhold U.S. political access from the AKP; this would cost the party prestige that matters greatly in Turkish politics. So far, AKP leaders have been invited to Washington even as they transgressed U.S. policy in multiple areas, creating the impression that Washington either approves of AKP policies or considers the party indispensable to U.S. foreign interests. Granting meetings and face-time to representatives of foreign governments and institutions is a useful component of U.S. power, one that can be leveraged by denying the AKP such access while maintaining bureaucratic contacts. At the very least, this policy might highlight the party's current anti-Western orientation while encouraging the Turkish opposition.

## Conclusion

The AKP's years in power have coincided with a sharp deterioration in U.S.-Turkish relations. Although both sides have contributed to this decline, the AKP's disturbing shift in foreign policy—particularly with regard to the Middle East—has spurred deepening concern in Washington over the future direction of Turkey as a whole.

Such concerns can no longer be marginalized by U.S. policymakers. The United States remains the most powerful country in the world and should encourage Turkey to consider both the benefits of having Washington in its corner and the costs of rejecting U.S. support.

Beyond the employment of diplomatic levers, the Obama administration should focus on U.S. public diplomacy initiatives that increase knowledge about the United States among the Turkish public. Rampant Turkish



anti-Americanism is born of the country's traditional insularity, and it allows the AKP's foreign policy to thrive in the domestic political environment.

The party's counterproductive stance on the greatest threat to the region—Iranian nuclear aspirations—cannot

go unchallenged. If Turkey is to remain a strategic partner of the United States and the West, it must do more to stand with the international community on such issues. It is high time that Washington make Ankara count the costs of not doing so.

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## POLICY NOTES

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