



# The New Levant

Understanding Turkey's Shifting Roles in the Eastern Mediterranean

Michael Werz May 2010

Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

Namik Tan, the new Turkish ambassador to the United States—a veteran diplomat who had served in Washington before and who was recently stationed in Israel—had only a few weeks to enjoy his new post. He was recalled to Ankara in March for almost a month after the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee passed a resolution describing the killings of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire in 1915 as genocide. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also cancelled a visit to Washington, but then decided to attend the nuclear energy summit in mid-April.

Then, a week later, in his recent statement on the occasion of the Armenian Remembrance Day, President Obama spoke of “one of the worst atrocities of the 20th century,” clearly acknowledging what has happened in 1915. The reactions were as sharp as they were predictable. Representatives of Armenian groups in the United States have criticized President Obama for not describing the killings as “genocide,” at the same time, the Turkish foreign minister labeled the statement “unacceptable” and as “incorrect and one-sided political perception.”

Such dramatic, some would say exaggerated, reactions by the Turkish government to charges of genocide almost a century ago amid the collapse of the last empire to control the region illustrates why this old geopolitical arena remains relevant today. Much of the current dynamic in Turkish foreign policy is due to a shift in domestic political power within Turkey to central and eastern regions of the country, which once were considered part of the Levant, alongside a Turkish economic and diplomatic opening toward all the other countries of this ancient region, which includes northern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Cyprus.

The emergence of this new Anatolia—Turkey’s Asian provinces—and the changing regional distribution of political power are visible in the city of Adana, a regional center that has received many internal migrants and developed into an energy hub and advanced observation post for the new Levant (see box). Today, most trade lines still go through Istanbul, but this is changing—and the political implications are massive.

These shifts boast huge policy implications throughout the Middle East. For the United States, it will be important and challenging to develop a more nuanced relationship with Turkey that acknowledges this vibrant yet potentially volatile democracy as an invaluable

## Turkey's new link to the Levant

Adana profits from the altered regional environment in Turkey and the Middle East like few other places. It is located only a three-hour bus ride from Aleppo, the second-largest city in Syria, manages 13 percent of Turkey's water resources, and has the country's third-largest agricultural commodity exchange.

In 1990, when Turkey cut off the flow of the Euphrates for a month to fill the Atatürk Reservoir, the country was close to a military confrontation with Syria. Today, visa requirements are gone and with the rediscovered Arab neighbor in view, Adana's Governor İlhan Atış said "borders are not natural but in the minds of people."<sup>2</sup>

The city is also a good example of the intrinsic connection between Islam and modernization. It is no coincidence that at the same time the city's first Hilton hotel was built for international and national business travelers, real estate billionaire Sakıp Sabancı erected one of the largest mosques in the Middle East, which can hold almost 30,000 faithful and features minarets 300 feet high. Both buildings, the Hilton and the mosque, are only a stone's throw apart. Both represent different aspects of a new era.



A symbol of the new Levant—the Sabancı mosque in Adana, Turkey.

partner in a wide array of policy fields while incorporating rapidly altering Turkish interests into such a strategy. The Obama administration decided to seize the “opportunity for Ankara and Washington to put behind their differences and past grievances decisively and to concentrate on advancing a more ambitious transatlantic agenda.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, new geopolitical spaces are coming to life across the new Levant that render foreign policy prescriptions of the Cold War era useless. In the 21st century political diplomacy in this region will be by necessity much more improvisational. Turkey finds itself at the center of this newly developing political constellation in the eastern Mediterranean even as Turkish society grapples with the new roles their nation should or should not play in this new geopolitical dynamic.

What's clear for the United States and Turkey is this—the old parameters of foreign policy in both Washington and Ankara that continue to paint the world in simplistic categories and reductionist analyses akin to the two-dimensional Cold War chessboard of the past century are as outdated as the binary lines of that Cold War-driven “us versus them” mentality.

In the pages that follow, this paper will explore these trends within Turkey and across its borders throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Understanding how Turkey is changing itself and its region is critical to U.S. foreign policy. Knowing how to respond is even more important. This paper begins to build a map to achieve both goals.

# 21st century Turkey

Over the past five years, Turkey's government unleashed a torrent of diplomatic and economic activity and forcefully reintroduced itself into the Greater Middle East. Borders were opened by lifting visa requirements with neighboring Arab countries, and the political relationship with virtually every regime in the region were revisited. The face of Turkey's foreign policy, academic-turned foreign minister Ahmed Davutoğlu, tirelessly reiterates that the Cold War is over and so are the regional confines that came with it. "Our axis is Ankara," he states, "and our horizon is 360 degrees."

Such outspoken self-confidence is the result of dramatic internal changes that began in the 1980s when center-right Prime Minister Turgut Özal (later president from 1989 to 1993) pursued a policy of opening new markets and modernizing the economy—with unintended consequences for the country's elites. The members of this old establishment—from the far-right Nationalist Action Party to parts of the civilian administration, the powerful Istanbul oligarchs to the influential military—were thoroughly affected by the changes implemented during the past decade.

Paramount is the rise since 2002 of the governing Justice and Development Party, or AKP, the Turkish acronym for the democratic Islamic party. The AKP's close ties to and support from a nascent "Muslim bourgeoisie," translates into successive electoral victories. And with its political mandate secure, the AKP:

- Initiated the first steps of controversial legal reforms, including the abolition of security courts that have long secured the influence of the military in civil life. For the first time, Turkish society vehemently debates problems that date back to the current constitution written in the era of the military junta in the early 1980s—a constitution that limits individual cultural and political liberties, requires the country to be governed "loyal to the nationalism of Atatürk," the secular military founder of modern Turkey, and assures the military considerable political influence through the controversial National Security Council.
- Initiated serious introspection about Kurdish and Armenian minorities, reversing a decades-long denial regarding the killing of Armenians during World War I and a cautious acceptance of Kurdish language and culture that was at the core of a conflict that has dragged on since the 1970s and has cost more than 40,000 lives.

- Started a debate regarding the role of the military as well as the relevance of democratic rights, and pushed back the influence of the security apparatus, which in June 1997 pressed the government of the AKP's predecessor led by Necmettin Erbakan to step down, arguing that the Islamist movement had become more threatening to Turkish security than the Kurdish resistance.

All of this would have been unthinkable 10 years ago.

In the field of foreign policy in particular, the new openness comes with a price. The absence of strong notions of human rights and democracy in Turkish foreign policy is helping the country's standing in the region considerably. Regionalism trumps political compatibility when it comes to the attempts to build a close relationship with the regime in Syria that culminated in a joint cabinet meeting in the fall of 2009.

Then there is the Turkish reluctance to join the international community in its attempts to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear technology, or the positive bias of Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan toward Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir, who was indicted for committing war crimes by the International Court of Justice at The Hague.

The current Turkish government counters these arguments by presenting itself as an active diplomatic outpost merely acting as broker in a difficult region. Yet these brokering attempts have not rendered many tangible results so far, and it remains an open question if and when the AKP government will decide to make Turkey into a real stakeholder in the region rather than simply maintain its new role as a facilitator.

The latter may not be enough for the United States. As President Barack Obama reminded the Turkish parliament a year ago, "Turkey's democracy is your own achievement." Unlike in Germany, Italy, or Japan, the president noted that democracy "was not forced upon [Turkey] by any outside power."<sup>3</sup> The implication was clear—Turkey had an obligation to uphold its democratic principles at home and should apply the same guiding principles abroad.

Currently, though, Erdoğan's AKP indulges in the luxury of being neither here nor there on the promotion of democratic values in the region, continuing to leave this important issue unaddressed. Turkey's leaders can do so because the country occupies a privileged geopolitical space. But their nation's continued rise will turn this current lack of concern toward democracy and human rights in its neighborhood into a burden for others—mostly for the United States, Israel, and Europe.

Such policies are unlikely to go down well with these traditional allies of Turkey, especially since the AKP government leads a powerful force in the region, and is pressing for internal reform and aspiring to membership in the European Union. That means Turkey cannot entirely detach its foreign policy from considerations of democratic standards or good governance. Currently, though, this dilemma is painted over with omnipresent references



AP PHOTO/BURHAN OZBILICI



AP PHOTO/HAJER AL-SUDANI/POOL

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and foreign minister Ahmed Davutoğlu.

to the Ottoman past, ingrained in the notion of Turkey's new "360-degree" diplomacy and the newly established ties to Afghanistan, Armenia, the Gulf States, Iran, the Palestinian Authority, and Syria.<sup>4</sup>

But such a strategic overexpansion can incur collateral damage, especially to the once close Turkish-Israeli relationship. Case in point: Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu recently said in a meeting with Americans that "Israel has the right to security, so has Iran."<sup>5</sup> This is not only problematic because such a statement seems to blur the singularity of European Jewish history that led to the establishment of Israel. Of course, Iran's security has to be taken into account, but it is also true that Iran threatens regional stability. Much condemned in the United States, it should also be acknowledged that this impartiality toward regimes like those in Iran or Sudan is criticized by many supporters of the AK Party as well.

Given this dynamic, Turkey is often described as shifting away from the West. But this notion is far too crude for a number of reasons. For one, the surprising rise of the governing AKP and its more Islamist predecessors is less the *cause* of current changes and attempts of transformation, but rather the *result* of much broader transformational changes. One such factor is the rapid economic growth and increasing political influence of Central and Eastern Anatolia. For the first time in Turkish history, new middle classes are emerging and making their voices heard, competing with the established Western elites.

Substantial parts of these new elites are strong supporters of the governing AKP. Hence, much of the party's ambitious foreign policy agenda is driven by these new regional business interests. Since the old economic guard in Istanbul, which had materialized under decades of state protection, dominates domestic markets and many of the export routes to Europe, the emerging industrialists in Anatolia now push the government to open new spaces to sell and buy. So, the self-styled "Anatolian tigers" do business with newly friendly neighbors in Iraq, Syria, and all over Africa.

Even though the pan-Turkish fantasy of 1990—that all Turkoman people in Central Asia were brothers in waiting—has already proved to be an illusion, the idea of closer regional ties that have cash value has not. It is no coincidence that some already dream about regional economic and political integration modeled after the early European Union.

In short, Turkey is becoming the West of the East. The Obama administration appreciates this dynamic. Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Phillip Gordon recently acknowledged that "Turkey has international responsibilities that extend beyond its immediate neighborhood."<sup>6</sup> And indeed, Turkey might become an anchor of soft power for Western ideas about democracy, human rights, and economic exchange, producing regional security rather than being at the receiving end, as was the case, when Turkey was frozen into the Western bloc, which cared more about a counterweight against the Soviet Union than the democratic nature of an ally.

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## Kemalism

The tension between Turkey's long-ruling elite class and the more populist and religiously observant Justice and Development Party, or AKP, is in part a reflection of the modernizing mission of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic in the aftermath of the World War I.

From the founding of the state in 1923, Atatürk and his followers instituted major social, economic, and political reforms upon the country from the top down. Atatürk abolished the Ottoman-era caliphate, Arabic script, and Islamic education in Turkey, embracing the French secular doctrine of *laïcité*, which sought to ban the presence of religion in education, the government, and politics as an impediment to modernity. This strict construction of Turkish secularism led to a centralized, bureaucratic state whose self-appointed guardians in academia, the military, judiciary, press, and some influential sectors of the business class have regularly intervened throughout the country's history to preserve the Kemalist project.

Turkey's courts have banned 24 parties in the past 50 years, including the AKP's two predecessors. Since 1970, Turkish courts have closed down four Islamist parties, including the Welfare Party, which at the time claimed current Prime Minister Erdoğan as a member. This Kemalist legacy still drives Turkish politics.

The AK Party and its brand of reformist Islam were politically successful during the first 10 years of the new century because they offered a mechanism to emancipate Turkish politics from Cold War ties. Reference to religion is one tool among others to better position Turkey in the wider region, but not the lone driver. Islam serves as a cipher that the new Turkey uses to enhance its standing. References to Muslim creed and Ottoman history allow the government to project regional influence as well as confidence—and at the same time place itself outside the Kemalist tradition (see box).

In fact, reformist Islam is used by the AKP to assure the country will not be relegated to the status of a “sideline country,” as Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu puts it. By sideline country, Davutoğlu is referring to Turkey's long post-WWII isolation on the fringes of Europe. In this regard, reformist Islam in Turkey differs from parts of the Middle East and South Asia where the country has focused its reinvigorated diplomacy. There, Islamist political parties have played a much stronger role, and Islamist discourse has demonstrated more influence on public debates in recent years than they did in previous decades in places such as Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Egypt.

But it is hard to recognize a consistent long-term strategy behind the multiple alliances that Turkey is currently developing. And the same holds true for the much-quoted notion of *Strategic Depth*, the title of a book by Ahmet Davutoğlu published in 2001, in which

he refers to the necessity to make Turkey's interests felt abroad and develop relationships within the neighborhood, thus ensuring territorial security through soft power.

As in domestic politics, reformist Islam functions abroad as an antidote to the perceived historical amnesia of Kemalism—reform Islam provides meaning, creates bonds, and helps to redraw political borders across and beyond the new Levant. Broader political and economic developments within Turkey brought these foreign policy developments to the forefront of the political struggle—it is not that Turkey became more religious and conservative; rather, the conservatives became more visible.

Lastly, even though the Turkish- and Ottoman-focused geographical and historical continuity that seems to guide the AKP government is artificial, at the same time it expresses the necessity to rethink regional relations after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is no coincidence that many meeting rooms and offices from Istanbul to Ankara and Adana are ornamented with wall maps of the new Levant.

The emergent Anatolian elite symbolize substantial internal power shifts, but at the same time it is pushing to reposition the country as a whole within the region. The at times hackneyed use of Ottoman references is due to the lack of other concepts and ideas that could express the new internal and regional environment. But however distorted, there is a kernel of truth in these references. As in other regions around the globe, the end of the Cold War has led to the rearrangement of historical spaces, and the Levant is one of them. The Turkish government is addressing these changes, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. But it is safe to say that the country is not shifting, because it is moving—within the limits of its own political possibilities and limitations.

# Internal movements help to shift power

The political changes in Turkey today are the result of the substantial movement from the countryside to the city. In the mid-1950s, approximately 50,000 Turks lived in squatter camps around the nation's largest cities, mainly Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara. In 2002, the year of the first electoral success of reformist Islam, these squatters were more than 2 million strong. During the 15 years that preceded the AKP's accession to power, Istanbul took in more than 1 million immigrants, while close to 170,000 moved to Ankara.

Yet the desire of rural Turks to migrate to large cities was repressed for a long time, as even moderate leaders such as then Prime Minister Turgut Özal in the 1980s seemed to prefer to see East Anatolians leave for Germany and Denmark rather than decamp around Istanbul or Izmir. Looking back from the vantage point of 2010, one might say that Turkey's future was imprisoned in the countryside until the end of the 20th century. Rapid urbanization established a new population mix in metropolitan areas. In 1970, only one-third of the population lived in urban settlements with 20,000 or more. That number doubled by 2000, and the trend continues today.

The consequences were two-fold. The fast increase in urban populations produced many problems for city governments in providing services, thus undermining their legitimacy. And it created space for the appeal of the early Islamic Refah Party that combined welfare with religious traditionalism. At the same time, Turgut Özal, himself of partial Kurdish background and a devout Muslim, pursued a policy of opening new markets and modernizing the economy. The reforms helped small- and medium-sized businesses overcome the arrested development of Central and Eastern Anatolia.

The upshot: New economic elites arose with no political representation in the established system. Anatolia's emergent middle classes, including sizeable parts of the Kurdish population, were the agents of transformation and economic progress, but there was almost no political avenue to represent their interest. Such representation had to be organized from scratch and in opposition to the old oligarchies.

Within this unique context, reformist Islam became a convenient and successful vehicle for an agenda that was aimed at economic modernization—a conservative attempt to provide meaning outside the chauvinistic tradition—and to shift the balance of power within Turkish society. The secular political space was occupied by either Kemalist nationalist

factions of different degrees within the Nationalist Movement Party, or MHP, the party's Turkish acronym, or traditional Social Democrats of the legendary Republicans People's Party, which has been a powerful voice in Turkish politics since 1923. Neither of these traditional political factions allowed for many new actors.

The effort to change Turkish society outside the established political parties and the military required new venues as well as new sets of political spirituality to successfully compete with authoritarian Kemalism. Islam provided that political vehicle for activists that intended to overcome Turkey's undemocratic traditions in a way that very much resembles the role of Polish Catholicism in the early 1980s, which provided space within a socialist society that allowed no institutions for dissenting opinions.

Of course, the frontlines were not always so clear cut. In the early 1990s, for example, the AKP's predecessor organization, the Islamic Welfare Party, cut a political deal with Turkish nationalists and had some of their candidates running on their ticket. The subsequent ban of the Islamists, however, resulted in the institutional re-establishment of reformist Islam in the form of the more moderate AKP.

The AKP did not arrive at this point by design. In order to counter the vigorous Kemalist critique against the Islamic Welfare Party, separation of church and state was accepted by the new party leadership and Islamist views were dampened. In June 1997, the military pressed the Necmettin Erbakan administration to step down and banned his Welfare Party the following year, arguing that the Islamist movement had become more threatening to Turkish security than the Kurdish resistance. Party members and affiliated business owners were exposed to different degrees of recrimination, and some left the country.

In the ensuing months, Islamic political activists developed new strategies to stay active in business, the media, and education. They also dropped the rhetoric against democracy, globalization, and EU membership, all of which helped to create much-needed political breathing space for reformist Islam. In August 2001, politicians of the newly founded Justice and Development Party, the AKP, were unsure if they would be able to surpass the 10 percent electoral threshold, even though pragmatic leadership provided room for new constituencies by abolishing most if not all of the more inflammatory rhetoric of earlier days.

Those worries turned out to be groundless. AKP won the 2002 elections and then four more consecutive elections at the local, general, and presidential level. Yet reformist Islam in its current form remains only a temporary unifier for the broad alliance that constitutes the AKP. The coalition has an impressive bandwidth, ranging from Islamists whose ambivalence toward Israel is palatable, to "matter of fact" businessmen, all the way to a new generation of politically homeless progressive intellectuals. Now, though, the party's diverse coalition has some choices to make about the future direction of Turkey itself and their country's new roles in the region.

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# Turkey's domestication of political Islam

Islamist doctrines, which were weak in Turkey to begin with, have rapidly lost their primacy within the increasingly professional AKP organizational environment. This shift in focus also is due to the responsibilities of government, which require the different factions of the party to deal with their differences. This unique development resulted in both the domestication of Islamism as well as its contribution to the normalization of Turkish politics. Only 13 years have passed since pressure from the military establishment compelled an Islamist government in 1997 to resign in what was called a “postmodern coup.”

Indeed, reformist Islam is the current expression of what President Obama described as “Turkey’s democracy” developing upon its “own achievement.” The massive electoral success of the AKP—garnering 34 percent of the vote in 2002, 47 percent in 2007, and 39 percent in 2009 making it the largest party in the country—mirrors the emergence of a diverse opposition against the old establishment. AKP-style reformist Islam today is also a positive voice of reform, progress, and mediation.

The party has been moving from the conservative Islamic field into the center of society and democratic reform is an important pillar for the new forces that have emerged from Turkey’s regional and political periphery. This may have less to do with convictions than pragmatic interest in greater participation by groups that have been previously excluded, as Kadir Yildirim explains in his recent monograph, “Muslim Democratic Parties in Turkey, Egypt and Morocco.”<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the Kurdish initiative of the AKP, which has emphasized “brotherly unity” between Turks and Kurds citing the Islamic tradition, and the increasing civilian control over the military instigated by the fact that high-ranking security officers can now be tried in civilian courts, exemplifies the impact of reformist Islam in pursuit of political influence at home and abroad. These moves are contributing to a more diverse public “square” within the party as well as in society at large.<sup>8</sup>

Exemplifying this trend toward moderation and openness is one of the more recent flagships of public opinion: *Zaman* newspaper, which is close to the Fethullah Gülen movement representing a moderate version of Sunni Islam. The movement condemns terrorism, supports interfaith dialogue, and has initiated such dialogue with the Vatican, some Jewish organizations, and the AKP government. Established in 1986 but coming into its own only in the past decade, the newspaper climbed a learning curve and became more moderate in recent years. “We have learned to call Hamas a terrorist organization,” admits their correspondent Kerim Balci, “and have also learned from the criticism of the Anti-Defamation League.”<sup>9</sup>

# Turkey and Israel in the new Levant

Turkey's reconnection with the region could come at a price. The Turkish-Israel relationship has felt the strains of Turkey's new neighborhood policy, as demonstrated by the public disagreements between the two countries that erupted so vigorously in recent years. Even the 500,000 Israeli tourists who come to Turkey every year will not be able to overshadow the fact that what once was hailed as strategic alliance between the two countries is suffering through a difficult phase and will require work from both sides if they are to rebuild it to meet a new strategic environment.

But here again, broader developments come into play. The end of the Cold War affected the entire region in a unique manner, especially with the United States tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Iran looming on the horizon. Turkey has used this period to implement its "zero problems with neighbors" policy. Israel has vacillated between a focus on security through peace with its neighbors or deterrence, with the fall of Saddam Hussein bringing new concerns about Iranian intentions and a potential nuclear program.

While Turkey's strategic situation has improved in many ways, Israel's strategic position has changed as it faces conflicts on two of its borders that raise questions about its deterrent capabilities against non-state actors. The relationship between the two countries, which has long been based on a similar view of the region, must now adjust to this new reality.

One experienced Turkish observer sees no such future, "Times have changed; there is a paradigm shift which has altered the Turkey-Israel relationship, argues Cengiz Çandar. It was never strategic and never will be."<sup>10</sup> Whether the relationship was and can be strategic, the times have certainly changed, with Israel increasingly becoming one regional actor among others for Turkish foreign policy makers. Turkey has also begun to use its policies vis-à-vis Israel to gather political currency in other parts of the region. Israeli policymakers, for example, evince concern about this new Turkish attitude and have not fully assimilated the goals behind Turkey's outreach to its neighbors. Nonetheless, security cooperation, which has long been the core of the relationship, as well as high-level Israeli visits to Ankara, continue unabated.

Ultimately, the two countries will need to see that their interests align, though perhaps in a different manner. A Turkey that is a regional powerhouse will be stronger if it continues to serve as a unique touchstone for Israel. A good relationship with Israel will reinforce

Turkey's distinctive position in the region as a country that speaks with, and could potentially mediate, between all sides. For Israel, having a strong, well-liked regional ally interested in resolving the tensions in the region would be an equally attractive draw. Such a relationship, however, would require both sides to trust and respect one another—a prerequisite that is made harder by the behavior of politicians on both sides.

These politicians have chosen to ignore that for the two countries the question is not whether the two countries need each other but why and how. Prime Minister Erdoğan's continuing public outrage over civilians killed during the conflict in Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009 and the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip does not leave many doors open for more pragmatic and less ambivalent Turkish politicians who want to pursue a rational relationship with the most developed democracy in the Middle East. Even though some members of the Turkish government signal that the prime minister might be over the top with his frequent criticisms, there is no one who forcefully speaks up in Israel's favor.

The AKP leader himself is not easy to read, even for his own countrymen. "Erdoğan is a former Islamist," states Gokhan Bacik, professor of international relations at Zirve University, "we don't know what he is now."<sup>11</sup> At the same time, while many Israeli leaders, including President Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, have continually stressed the importance of the bilateral relationship, other top members of Israel's government, in particular Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and his deputy Daniel Ayalon, have been far less diplomatic.

This realignment is happening at a time when the relative regional importance of the European Union, the United States, and NATO are diminishing and when the idea of Turkey playing a longer-term role as mediator between Israel and Syria appears to be waning. But if Turkey's longer-term role in the region is still unclear, so too is its perception of itself. The more Turkey reaches out toward its Eastern neighbors, the more European and Americans lament the country's "shift toward Islam," but at the same time Turkey is seen as European by almost all of its newly found Levantine friends and neighbors. With a slight note of annoyance, Kerim Balci of *Zaman* newspaper stated in an interview, "Arabs see Turks as Europeans and a similar religion does not change that; they speak with us as if we were French."<sup>12</sup>

To the degree that the European self-assurance of Turkey gets stronger, the appeal of the European Union will keep fading. Also, the notion that Turkish society does not have enough democratic substance to proceed on its own now sounds like a late echo of a bygone Kemalist era. Even though the pace of reform has slowed down considerably and the current attempts for overdue constitutional reform seem to be driven in good part by the desire to solidify the AK Party's grip on power, one success, be it the Kurdish opening or the rapprochement with Armenia, could trigger others, argues Cengiz Aktar, an influential pro-EU public intellectual.<sup>13</sup>

Prime Minister Erdoğan's continuing public outrage over civilians killed during Israel's Gaza operation "Cast Lead" in January 2009 does not leave many doors open for more pragmatic and less ambivalent Turkish politicians.

# United States and Turkey: Parameters of an alliance?

In the 2008 Center for American Progress report “The Neglected Alliance: Restoring U.S.-Turkish Relations to Meet 21st Century Challenges,” authors Brian Katulis and Spencer Boyer argued that “the strategic relationship between the United States and Turkey—a decades-long partnership that has advanced both countries’ common interests—remains a key pillar in overall U.S. national security policy. Yet this vital alliance has suffered through serious strains in recent years.”

The process of defining the parameters of a strategic relationship with the new Turkey began with President Obama’s visit and speech in Ankara last April. It is unfolding within a global and local environment for which there are no playbooks. President Obama acknowledged in his speech that a “critical region ... surrounds Turkey” and the two countries “share common goals.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet it will take time and skill for the United States to be able to establish a stable and comprehensive partnership with Turkey. Attitudes in Turkey ranging from mild skepticism to unrelenting anti-Americanism have as much to do with the country’s internal transformations as with the West’s decade-long support of governments with questionable legitimacy, especially during the period of political instability that resulted in military coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980. Recent disagreements culminated in the massive confrontation when the Turkish parliament refused the U.S. military passage to the battlefield in Iraq in 2003.

The opportunity of building upon Turkey’s internal dynamic toward democracy was lost during the Iraq invasion that never gathered legitimacy and the international support of the first Iraq war. Tagging onto this severe disagreement between two major NATO partners, some in the AKP’s rank and file have helped to maintain and heighten anti-U.S. sentiment because it proved to be an easy generator of domestic political gain. Given this no-win situation, the United States needs to maintain the political initiative in forging a new association but also address the longer-term underlying trends in Turkish society.

Although the AKP’s popularity has slightly decreased in recent months, the lack of leadership and organizational capacities among the opposition still gives the current government a fairly good outlook for the 2011 general elections and the presidential elections in 2012. “There is no dependable opposition,” comments AKP parliamentarian Suat Kiniklioğlu, the opposition is disparate “to the degree that it makes us uncomfortable.”<sup>15</sup>

For the United States, Turkey is not only relevant in its own right. But the way Turkish politicians look at the region and the way they exercise their newfound power is also an important litmus test. Reading Turkish policies the right way offers insights into the establishment of a new regional dynamic.

The new Levant's pivotal points in the eastern Mediterranean are Istanbul, Ankara, and Adana. Nowadays, the pepper and cumin that defined trade between the Levant and the Italian city states of the 15th century have been replaced by oil and gas flowing across Turkey. The nation is a new center and must be viewed from all directions, a perspective that is sacrificed by thoughtlessly adding Turkey to the so-called "Muslim world." Rather, Turkey is becoming the West of the East. "For us Istanbul is New York," said a tourist from Saudi Arabia in passing.

But the anecdotal evidence is supported by numbers. A recent report by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, or TESEV, a non-government organization based in Istanbul, showed that Turkey is the most highly regarded country by many Arabs in the region. Even though these numbers might be driven up by Turkish soap operas that are very successful in neighboring societies, an astonishing 60 percent of Arabs responded "yes" when asked if Turkey could be a model for the entire region, and more than 1 million visitors from the Arab world in 2009 underscore the strong identification.<sup>16</sup>

Such identifications are important in an era of unprecedented change in the ways international politics are conducted and global public opinion is formed. Today, new geopolitical spaces are coming to life with Turkey at the center of this newly developing political area. Turkey is in the process of adapting to that new role. And if it wants to be a significant world player, then more can be expected and demanded of it. Everything indicates that Turkey is going to be a hub of regional power politics, resources, and public opinion, leaving its imprint on the region. These are only three of many reasons to thoroughly rethink Turkey and make it a test case for successful U.S. foreign policy.

# Endnotes

- 1 Sinan Ülgen, "In Search of Lost Time: Turkey-US Relations after Bush" (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2009), p.2.
- 2 During a meeting with a U.S. delegation led by the Washington office of the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists, or TUSKON, on January 6, 2010, in Adana.
- 3 Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament, Turkish Grand National Assembly Complex in Ankara, Turkey, April 6, 2009, available at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-By-President-Obama-To-The-Turkish-Parliament](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Obama-To-The-Turkish-Parliament).
- 4 See a documentation of Turkey's regional ties in Middle East Progress, available at <http://middleeastprogress.org/2009/01/turkey%E2%80%99s-regional-ties/>.
- 5 During a meeting with a U.S. delegation led by the Washington office of TUSKON on January 5, 2010, in Ankara.
- 6 "The United States and Turkey: A View from the Obama Administration," presentation by Philip H. Gordon, assistant secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Sabanci Lecture, The Brookings Institution on March 17, 2010, available at [http://turkey.usembassy.gov/statement\\_031710.html](http://turkey.usembassy.gov/statement_031710.html).
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- 11 Gokhan Bacik during a meeting in Istanbul, January 7, 2010.
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## About the author

Michael Werz is a Senior Fellow at the Center American Progress, where his work as member of the National Security Team focuses on climate migration and security as well as transatlantic foreign policy including Turkey. He has published numerous articles and several books dealing with a wide range of issues including race and ethnicity in the 20th century; western social and intellectual history; minorities in Europe and the United States; ethnic conflicts, social and labor policies in Europe; and anti-Americanism. Werz is an adjunct professor at Georgetown University's BMW Center for German and European Studies and is a frequent policy commentator for international media.

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