

WHAT IS TURKEY DOING IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

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Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has taken on ambitious initiative after initiative during its eight years in office. It oversaw the opening of Turkey's EU accession negotiations in 2005; changed entrenched nationalist positions on Armenia and Cyprus; launched efforts to address the problems of Turkey's Kurdish minority; embarked on an extensive constitutional reform process; and took on a mediation role in international conflicts ranging from the Balkans to the Middle East to Afghanistan. Unfortunately some of these efforts have been less successful than others and in issues directly affecting Turkey, such as normalization with Armenia, the Cyprus problem and the Kurdish initiative, AKP has faltered. This has led critics to question the wisdom behind seeking far-away roles when pressing problems remain unresolved at home.

Most recently, eyes have been on Turkey due to its increased visibility and activism in the Middle East. Analysts have been interpreting this as a realignment of Turkey's foreign policy after Prime Minister Erdoan's televised row with Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos in January 2009. But two recent events have caused further concerns:

Following an Israeli attack on 31 May on an international aid flotilla trying to break the Gaza blockade, in which ten Turks died, tensions between previous two long-term strategic allies Turkey and Israel skyrocketed. But it would be wrong to say Turkish policies regarding Gaza and Israel are solely a result of the current government's conservative religious ideology. While it is true that AKP's support base is particularly upset about Gaza, the government's policy seems to also be backed by the more secular nationalist opposition – a rare occurrence in Turkey. Regardless of who is in government in Turkey, historically, relations with Israel have tended to develop in parallel with public opinion about Israeli readiness to make peace with and give rights to Palestinians. Previous crises happened during the 1967 Six-Day War, the declaration of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 1980, and the Gaza offensive in December 2008. In fact in 2002, it was Turkey's secular, left-wing Prime Minister Ecevit who used extremely strong language to condemn Israeli occupations in the West Bank. By the same token, the best period in Turkish-Israeli relations coincides with the Oslo peace process of the 1990s.

Therefore, Israeli-Turkish ties will likely improve when the Turkish public believes Israel is committed to peace talks with the Palestinians. After all, it was only two and a half years ago when Prime Minister Erdoan, as a host of Israel-Syria proximity talks, invited Israeli Prime Minister Olmert to his residence in Ankara. The visit went well, but just days later – and apparently having given no warning to Erdoan – Israel launched the Gaza war. The Turkish Prime Minister's sense of betrayal was shared by his popular supporters.

Furthermore, while Turkey sees a good moral cause in Gaza, the politicians carrying out this policy naturally have a domestic agenda. The sharpening tone of Turkey-Israel relations not only boosted Prime Minister Erdoan's popularity in the streets of the Middle East, but also won him support from his conservative, religious constituency in Turkey ahead of July 2011 elections. But some Middle Eastern governments, weary of competition, are suspicious of Turkey's anti-Israel rhetoric and expanding influence.

A second development that contributed to debates about Turkey's possible "turn to the east" has been its entanglement in Iran's nuclear issue and its rejection at the UN Security Council of a new round of sanctions on 9 June. In the midst of an ongoing diplomatic negotiation to arrange a nuclear swap deal for Iran, which US President Obama had apparently encouraged, the UN vote was a principled approach shared by Brazil. There is nothing intrinsically "un-European" about advocating a diplomatic solution to a potentially explosive issue, given the low success rate of past sanctions in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. There is merit in the argument that after 30 years of unsuccessful isolation and threats, a policy of engagement should be tried with Iran.

Turkey has reasons to worry about further volatility in its neighbourhood as it negatively affects its commercial and economic interests. Ultimately Turkey's Middle East policy seeks to encourage peace and stability through regional economic convergence – in many ways like the EU post-war model.

In this regard, Turkey has implemented several initiatives with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Libya such as visa-free travel, infrastructure and communications links including new roads and railways, free trade agreements, and regular joint Cabinet meetings. Most recently on 11 June, it signed a four-sided free trade agreement with Jordan, Syria and Lebanon with the goal of creating a zone of free movement of goods and people. These regional initiatives are more than just "Islamic" policies, however, because similar arrangements are also carried out with Greece and Russia, who have also become big beneficiaries of Turkey's regional trade boom.

It would be against Turkey's self-interest to lose the trust of its traditional allies or to abandon its EU path. Even though Turkey may be bitter over continuous attacks by France, Germany, Cyprus and others on its EU convergence process, it cannot afford to let its newly-acquired prominence and confidence divert its course from the EU. Because it is mainly the charisma of its EU negotiations, along with its economic achievements and the success of its democratic and secular system, which give Turkey a high profile and respect in the Middle East. Its connections with Western institutions and its ability to make regional concerns heard in places like Brussels, Washington and the UN Security Council earn it more international respect than any aid flotilla or anti-Israel rhetoric.

Moreover, Europe remains to be Turkey's most important commercial partner. More than half of Turkey's exports still go to Europe, 90 per cent of Turkey's foreign investments come from EU states and more than four million Turks live

in Europe. By way of comparison, the Middle Eastern countries take about a quarter of its exports, send ten per cent of the tourists visiting Turkey and host less than 200 thousand Turkish workers and residents.

Turkey's activism in the Middle East is not at odds with its Euro-Atlantic commitments. It remains heavily supportive of NATO's efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including against al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, it would gain much credibility for its wider foreign policy ambitions, and also prove its real commitment to international values and principles, if it can reach a breakthrough on disputes close to home first. First on its list are Cyprus and Armenia.