

## Turkey: Pax Ottomana?

**Hugh Pope, Foreign Affairs** | 27 Oct 2010

Turkey does not fit neatly into anyone's conception of the world order. For centuries, people have debated or fought over whether it is part of Europe, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, or Eurasia. Some see its current government as careening toward "Islamist fascism"; others believe it is integrating into a basically pluralistic, secular, globalized international order. Does its fast-growing economy, the 17th largest in the world, make it a rising international power on a par with Brazil, China, India, and Russia? Or is it a minor player that is overextending itself? Although Turkey has an important secondary role to play in many major areas of U.S. concern, such as stabilizing Afghanistan and Iraq, it is essential to none. In short, Turkey is unusually vulnerable to being misunderstood, particularly since the Turks themselves often seem unsure about what exactly they want their country to be.

This past summer, Turkey trod on two hot-button U.S. policy interests, Iran and Israel, thus putting its new "zero-problem" foreign policy in an uncomfortable spotlight. As soon as the Turkish government was seen as having stepped outside the U.S.-led agenda, commentaries about its new orientation spread in major U.S., European, and Middle Eastern newspapers and journals. "It isn't Ottoman Islam that these Islamist Turks seek to revive," Harold Rhode, a former longtime U.S. Department of Defense official, wrote in one of the Jerusalem Issue Briefs series in May. "Their Islam is more in tune with the fanatically anti-Western principles of Saudi Wahhabi Islam." Articles in the United Kingdom's Daily Telegraph and Canada's Globe and Mail expressed similar concerns. The New York Times ran an article with the headline "Turkey Goes From Pliable Ally to Thorn for U.S.," and its columnist Thomas Friedman, describing a recent trip to Istanbul, found "Turkey's Islamist government seemingly focused not on joining the European Union but the Arab League -- no, scratch that, on joining the Hamas-Hezbollah-Iran resistance front against Israel. . . . I exaggerate, but not that much." A new round of the "Who Lost Turkey?" debate got under way between U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso: Gates blamed Brussels for discouraging Turkey in its negotiations over joining the EU; Barroso blamed Washington for turning Turkish public opinion against the West with the invasion of Iraq.

Throw enough mud and some will stick, a Turkish saying goes. Once more, Turkey seems to have become a whipping boy for all manner of interests, some of which have little to do with the realities of Turkey itself. Turkey's current leaders certainly have warmer ties with Muslim leaders in the Middle East than their predecessors did, and Ahmet Davutoglu, the foreign minister, displays an idealistic streak that can seem overly optimistic. But the ruling party's policies remain essentially nationalist, Turkey-centric, and commercially opportunistic; it is a misconception to think of them as Islamist, or even ideological. Whatever the country's problems, Turkey's principal relationships remain those with Europe and the United States. Meanwhile, the Turkish government has tried hard to break out of its long-standing disputes with Armenia and the Greek Cypriots, and it has overseen great improvements in Turkey's ties with non-Muslim states such as Russia and Serbia. And much of the blame it has received for taking a more active stand on issues in the Middle East is undeserved.

## OPEN SEASON ON TURKEY

The main target of the criticisms is the Justice and Development Party (better known as the AKP), which has been in power since 2002. The AKP's leaders have raised suspicions because their ideological roots are in Islamism and because they have sometimes used fiery rhetoric -- alternately pro-Islamic, anti-Israel, nationalist, and populist -- to gain support among conservative and religious constituents. But the AKP has never declared an Islamist agenda or, for example, tried to implement sharia law. In 2004, it did attempt to start punishing adultery by women more severely than adultery by men, but the effort quickly foundered in Turkey's pluralistic political culture. If anything, the AKP owes its political success to its decision to split with the country's explicitly religious and conservative faction in 2001 and to hold to a moderate course since.

Lucky circumstances helped the AKP from the get-go. The 1990s were miserable in Turkey, due to weak governments, three-digit inflation, open military interference in politics, and the vicious conflict between Turkey's armed forces and ethnic Kurdish insurgents. But at the end of the decade, the Turkish state, which has a long tradition of active intervention, turned the situation around with support from the EU, the United States, and the International Monetary Fund. The EU's decision in 1999 to make Turkey a candidate for membership catalyzed an era of revolutionary changes. Between 1999 and 2002, a broad left-right coalition government oversaw remarkable reforms: the rewriting of one-third of the Turkish constitution, the enactment of international human rights legislation, the end of capital punishment, the expansion of women's rights, measures to discourage torture and improve prison conditions, and new laws curtailing restrictions on freedom of expression, civil society, and the media. The Turkish military was persuaded to relinquish some of its long-standing preeminence, accept more transparent defense budgets and less power in the National Security Council, and curb its influence in the judicial system. In other words, when the AKP came to power in 2002, it was handed the reins to a country that was already heading in the right direction.

Progress with EU accession had also helped spark an economic boom. Buoyed by global economic dynamism after 2001, Turkey's economy averaged an annual growth rate of seven percent during the the AKP's first term, between 2002 and 2007. Exports increased from about \$36 billion in 2002 to \$132 billion in 2008. Inflation tumbled from about 45 percent in 2003 to 9.5 percent in 2009. Foreign investment, which had ranged from \$1 billion to \$2 billion a year for decades, soared to \$5.8 billion in 2005 and averaged about \$20 billion over the three years after that. An International Monetary Fund aid package to help Turkey with a banking crash in 2001 did not need to be replaced when it expired in 2008. And Turkey has been recovering relatively well from the recent global downturn, even though in 2009 its exports dropped by one-third, foreign investment into the country was slashed in half, and GDP fell by 5.6 percent.

Helped by this new prosperity, its own reasonably good governance, the EU's opening of formal accession negotiations in 2005, and the public's rejection of a military attempt to derail Turkish democracy, the AKP easily won reelection in 2007. But the EU accession process, which did so much for Turkey earlier in the decade, has since slowed to a crawl. The leaders of France and Germany have turned against the prospect of Turkey's membership in the EU, allowing the unresolved dispute over Cyprus to become a major stumbling block in accession negotiations. The French and German governments switched their positions largely because of changes in their own countries. In the 1990s, opponents of Turkey's accession to the EU were mainly human rights activists who worried about the oppression of ethnic Kurds and political dissidents; by a few years into this century, hostility was coming from right-wingers who blamed Muslim immigrants for taking their jobs and for the rising profile of Muslim culture in Europe. Europeans had become worried that their home economies and the EU itself had

lost a sense of direction, and Turkey, a big Muslim country trying to join their club, was a natural target. As they were running for office in France and Germany, respectively, Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel opposed Turkey's accession, betraying decades of promises. They did so even though Turkey's relative poverty -- its per capita income is less than half the EU average -- meant that membership was one or two decades away in any case.

As a result, the AKP became hesitant to implement the difficult and expensive domestic reforms necessary to prepare Turkey to meet the EU's accession criteria. Meanwhile, the Turkish political consensus on EU membership was falling apart anyway. This was partly an emotional reaction to Europe's hostility and to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. But Turkish opposition parties were also accusing the AKP of using EU requirements about freedom of religion to pave the way for turning Turkey into a theocracy. The AKP responded with accusations that the opposition had militaristic tendencies. The upshot was deep polarization in the parliament, which dashed hopes of building a domestic consensus on further EU-mandated reform. (In September, the AKP secured 58 percent public support in a referendum on a constitutional reform package, which could give it a new chance to build that consensus.)

These problems are well illustrated by the fate of the AKP's efforts on Cyprus. In 2003, the party reversed traditional Turkish policy by agreeing to endorse a UN plan to reunify the island, which is roughly 80 percent ethnic Greek Cypriot and 20 percent Turkish Cypriot. But the Greek Cypriots voted against the plan (even though the Turkish Cypriots voted for it), and then the EU recognized the Greek Cypriot government as the whole island's official representative. Since joining the EU in 2004, Cyprus has pulled all available levers to block Turkey's own accession to the union, undermining prospects for a comprehensive settlement over the island's status. Turkey has been left at Europe's gate, its population alienated from the country's Western partners and its leaders understandably frustrated. This difficult position is not of the AKP's own making, yet the party's opponents have portrayed its venting as reflecting an inherently anti-Western worldview.

#### THE "ZERO-PROBLEM" PROBLEM

Turkey's effort to resolve the Cyprus dispute was the first major manifestation of the AKP's zero-problem foreign policy, a broad initiative to develop good relations with all of Turkey's neighbors and countries beyond. By cultivating its neutrality in recent years, the Turkish government has managed to turn itself into a facilitator in significant proximity talks between Israel and Syria, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, less successfully, the Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas.

As with economic matters, the AKP's move toward improving relations with Turkey's neighbors built on existing trends. One positive dynamic was the end of the Cold War, during which the U.S.-Soviet rivalry effectively cut off Turkey, a staunch NATO ally, from its neighbors to the north and alienated it from its neighbors to the east. Since 1991, Turkish commercial activities have been free to spread through the Black Sea region, Turkey's backyard. The AKP also benefited from the legacy of Ismail Cem, the Turkish foreign minister between 1997 and 2002, who paved the way for the normalization of Turkey's relations with Greece and Syria.

Since taking power, the AKP has pursued normalization much further. Davutoglu, the current foreign minister, has said that his goals are the "settlement of disputes" that "directly or indirectly concern Turkey" and balancing realism and idealism in the country's foreign policy. He promotes a doctrine of "strategic depth," invoking Turkey's long history and position at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Black Sea. Many aspects of Turkey's foreign policy

have benefited from these efforts: relations with Georgia and Greece have greatly improved, and Russia has become Turkey's leading trading partner and one of its top suppliers of tourists.

However, not all of the AKP's zero-problem initiatives have worked out as planned. In addition to the continued problems with Cyprus, the AKP's effort to settle Turkey's disputes with Armenia has yielded mixed results. In October 2009, after years of secret contacts and negotiations, the Turkish and Armenian governments signed protocols for the eventual establishment of diplomatic relations and for the reopening of their shared border, which the Turkish government had closed in the early 1990s after Armenian forces overran the Armenian-majority enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh and other large swaths of Azerbaijan. They also agreed to establish an independent commission to study their disputed history, above all the massacre of Armenians by Turks during World War I, which many Armenians call a genocide.

The timing for the shift seemed right: over the past decade, academics, the media, and the public in Turkey had started to display unprecedented openness about "the Armenian question." And the benefits could be great. A warming of relations with Armenia might help lift one of the greatest shadows of modern Turkish history and at the same time remove a major irritant in U.S.-Turkish relations (the Armenian diaspora in the United States is very active). It might also help bring about a settlement of the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, one of the most destabilizing frozen conflicts in the Caucasus.

Unfortunately, Azerbaijan, a major energy supplier to and trading partner of Turkey, objected to the deal for fear that Armenia would then have no incentive to withdraw from the areas of Azerbaijan it occupies. And so the AKP backed away. The opposition in Armenia and the Armenian diaspora were also deeply uncomfortable about the prospect of the Armenian government's striking a compromise with Turkey or withdrawing troops from around Nagorno-Karabakh. The protocols thus remain stuck.

And yet, despite such setbacks, the AKP's zero-problem policy has been largely beneficial and has gone a long way toward defining a new international role for Turkey. It marks Turkey's move away from a reflexively defensive foreign policy, a decades-old holdover from the aftermath of the Ottoman collapse, and toward outreach and faith in win-win outcomes. Notably, it has helped the Turkish government improve both its own ties with nearby countries as varied as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Russia and relations between countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This, in turn, has brought about a generally positive reappraisal of Turkey among its Western allies. Perhaps most interesting, the AKP's zero-problem policy toward the Middle East has to some extent promoted stability in the region.

#### MIDDLEMAN IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East dimension of Turkey's new policy has attracted much debate and caused some concern in the West. This is partly because the AKP's leaders have sometimes presented Turkey's sudden engagement with the region in populist and religious terms and highlighted the warmth of their personal relations with fellow Muslim leaders. It is also because as Turkey's relations with Muslim countries have improved, its relations with Israel have seemed to deteriorate.

Turkey has long had good reasons to minimize its differences with Iran, Iraq, and Syria. These three countries have been sources of terrorist attacks, political subversion, and regional destabilization. Turkey has worried that if global fears about Iran's nuclear program lead to a new round of UN sanctions or military action against Iran, Turkey's economy could slow and the stability of the region on which it increasingly depends could be endangered. The Turkish government remains profoundly

opposed to nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, but it believes that proliferation is only likely to be prevented through persuasion, not threats. It also hopes that forging better relations with its difficult neighbors will give it more clout in the region and prestige throughout the world.

Although Ankara has framed its new Middle East strategy mostly in economic terms so far, the policy implies an ambition to move toward political convergence. Several Middle Eastern governments that have traditionally favored maintaining strong bilateral relationships with distant great powers, such as France, Russia, the United States, or the United Kingdom, are now opening up to Turkey. Even Iran, arguably the country in the region least interested in open multilateral cooperation, has voiced a theoretical interest in this practical-minded integration. The AKP's leaders sometimes compare this new outreach to the early days of the EU, soon after World War II, when Europe's leading states encouraged regional integration as a way to reduce the risk of renewed confrontation.

Turkey's first measure toward regional integration was to ease some travel restrictions. In late 2009, it lifted the last, largely nominal visa requirements for nationals of Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, and Syria. (Iranians could already get a visa on arrival.) As a result of such efforts, tourism to Turkey from Middle Eastern countries other than Israel rose by 16 percent in 2008 and another 22 percent in 2009. A new border crossing between Turkey and Syria was inaugurated in 2009, and there are plans to clear the minefields that were laid at the border during the Cold War. Turkey aims to merge its customs and passport formalities so as to create single posts at every crossing along the Turkish-Syrian border, replacing double posts with one building in each country. New flight routes between Turkish and Middle Eastern cities have been set up. The railway line between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq was upgraded and reopened last February. A fast-train service will soon be added between the trading hub of Gaziantep, in southeastern Turkey, and Aleppo, in northern Syria. New rail links were recently completed between Syria and Jordan, and more are planned between Jordan and Saudi Arabia along the path of the Ottoman Empire's old Hejaz Railway.

Improved regional transportation could facilitate energy transfers, potentially an important area for regional cooperation. The AKP has been normalizing relations with the Kurds of northern Iraq for the past few years, partly because it wants to gain access to the gas fields in Iraqi Kurdistan. This could help Turkey diversify its sources of energy, as well as feed the planned Nabucco pipeline, which will connect Turkey to central Europe. A low-capacity gas pipeline runs from Egypt, through Jordan, into Syria, and a new stretch to the Turkish border is expected to be completed soon. Turkey has already been supplying northern Iraq with power for years, and it has been supplying Syria since 2009. Plans for a seven-country, pan-Middle Eastern electrical grid are being discussed.

Small signs of progress are visible in almost all sectors. Friction over Turkey's damming of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in past decades is slowly giving way to talk about joint irrigation strategies. Turkey, long a recipient of development aid, is now a donor, and although its contributions are modest, Turkish nongovernmental organizations that fund schools around the region or work to break the Israeli blockade on Gaza are starting to make headlines. As Turkey continues to liberalize its economy, Turkish businesses, such as textile factories, are moving to Egypt and Syria. Turkish media and entertainment companies are also putting down roots in Middle Eastern markets; al Jazeera is opening a Turkish news channel.

Partly as a result, formal coordination between the Turkish government and Middle Eastern governments is also increasing. In 2009, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria formalized gatherings of senior cabinet ministers into "high-level strategic

cooperation councils." In June, these countries also agreed to start transforming their bilateral free-trade areas into a jointly managed free-trade zone, a significant move toward EU-style multilateral mechanisms. Turkey has invested a great deal of diplomatic capital in increasing its profile in multilateral institutions and platforms active in the Middle East. It has become an observer at the Arab League and has hosted foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council states in Istanbul. A Turk, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, won the first democratically contested election to lead the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference. In addition to providing civilian and military assistance to NATO's missions in the Balkans and Afghanistan, Turkey has contributed ships and 1,000 military personnel and engineers to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. Thanks to broad support from other countries, Turkey obtained one of the rotating seats on the UN Security Council for 2009-10, a position it had not held since the early 1960s.

Further progress may be an uphill battle. Some Arab leaders have been skeptical of Turkey's recent activism in the Middle East. They are privately resentful of its readiness to give voice to popular anger over Israel's actions -- a kind of airing out they are sometimes reluctant to indulge in for fear of losing U.S. support. EU-style integration scares some regimes, most of which are unelected; many have long lacked the desire to forge strong regional economic bonds because doing so might dilute their control over their domestic economies. Talks on a water-sharing agreement among Turkey, Iraq, and Syria have made little progress so far for this very reason.

Still, the situation today is considerably better than that in the 1980s and 1990s. Turkey's promotion of free trade, transfers of technology and expertise, and cross-border infrastructure projects are replacing the zero-sum calculations that used to prevail in the region. If more such initiatives succeed, Turkey's foreign policy could help change the region's established pattern of states doing little to encourage regional trade, jealously guarding their home markets, and worrying that infrastructural links might make them dependent on rivals. This could help build long-term peace and stability, a precondition for democracy.

## CHOOSING SIDES

Pursuing the zero-problem policy has been a brave move, especially as the approach continues to be tested, sometimes sorely. In addition to stalled talks over the status of Cyprus, accession to the EU, and the protocols with Armenia, new tensions between Turkey and the United States and between Turkey and other traditional allies have surfaced on two occasions this year: after the AKP refused to stop Turkish ships from joining an international flotilla challenging Israel's blockade of Gaza and after Turkey opposed additional UN sanctions against Iran and worked with Brazil to revive plans to let Iran swap its enriched uranium for fuel rods.

Some, not least in Israel, the state that feels most threatened by Iran's nuclear program, have claimed that the two incidents are evidence of Turkey's turning away from the West and toward Islamism. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in August that by brokering the agreement on enriched uranium, "Turkey thereby strengthened its identification and cooperation with Iran just days before the flotilla." From the Turkish government's perspective, however, the issues of Israel and Iran are distinct. There is no concrete evidence that policy changes in Ankara regarding either country represent an ideological shift, much less an Islamist impulse. In fact, the Turkish government had good reason to believe that the U.S. government would support its attempts to engage Iran. And in the case of the raid on the flotilla led by the Mavi Marmara, which challenged Israel's blockade of Gaza, the onus should be on Israel, not Turkey, to do some explaining, since it is the one that used lethal force by surprise in international waters.

The AKP deserves more credit than it gets. Until Israel's 2008-9 assault on Gaza, the AKP government had been going out of its way to build good relations with Israel. The AKP's leaders visited Israel many times during their first term, and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself paid his respects at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. Companies close to the AKP did good business in Israel, and the AKP government signed more official agreements with Israel than any previous Turkish government had. Ankara had tried to facilitate proximity talks between Israel and Syria for years, and after the meetings intensified in 2008, the parties seemed to find unexpectedly detailed points of convergence. But then Israel launched its devastating offensive in Gaza, only days after Erdogan had spent five hours discussing peace plans with then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Like many Turks, Erdogan was shocked by Israel's killing of an estimated 1,430 Palestinians in the assault; days later, at the Davos summit, he burst out in anger at Israeli President Shimon Peres. And after a private Turkish television series aired a fictional drama of Israelis committing atrocities, Israel's deputy foreign minister insulted the Turkish ambassador, making sure that a camera crew would record the incident.

And then there was the Mavi Marmara incident, in which Israeli commandos launched a surprise night-time raid on the ship, the lead boat in a flotilla, while it was still in international waters. When they encountered resistance from passengers wielding improvised weapons such as knives, iron bars, and broomsticks, they shot dead eight Turkish citizens and a Turkish American. The Israeli government claims that one of its soldiers had been shot in the stomach first; the Turkish government claims that the Israelis opened fire well before boarding the Mavi Marmara and that the Turkish activists never used guns. Ankara also says that it had done its best to dissuade the flotilla from sailing directly to Gaza in the first place, had blocked Turkish parliamentarians and other Turkish officials from joining the activists, and had conducted comprehensive security checks on the goods and people boarding the ships in Turkey.

Turkey and Israel have agreed to cooperate with a UN panel that will evaluate the inquiries already being conducted in both countries. The hope is that some agreement over the facts will allow mediators to find a middle way between Turkey's insistence that Israel apologize and pay compensation to the victims and Israel's refusal to do either. It seems clear, however, that the breakdown in confidence between Turkey and Israel rules out any quick return to Turkey's acting as a trusted facilitator between Israel and other Middle Eastern states. And even though Turkey is clearly the injured party, the sense that it is a direct party to a dispute has dealt a blow to its zero-problem policy.

Faith in Turkey's new approach has also been undermined, especially in the eyes of Washington, by the crisis over Turkey's ties with Iran. AKP leaders raised many an eyebrow when they rushed to welcome the controversial reelection of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009. Critics associated this endorsement with the AKP's open-arms approach to other groups much decried in the West, such as Hamas and the governments of Sudan and Syria. Matters only got worse when Turkey objected to imposing additional sanctions against Tehran at the UN Security Council last June.

Once again, Ankara's actions are being widely misunderstood. Turkey's vote at the UN was not meant as a rebuke to the United States, which supported the sanctions; it was meant as a measure to build confidence with Tehran, which the Turkish government thought Washington supported. Nor was it an attempt on Turkey's part to form a Muslim bloc with Iran. The two countries have been sparring throughout history, even if they have managed to avoid war for more than three centuries. Their diverging Sunni and Shiite traditions make them clear rivals when it comes both to Iraq and to the Middle East at large. Turkey and Iran (as well as Egypt) have long competed for a leading role in the region -- one reason that both countries have

made not-so-subtle attempts to be seen as the principal partner of Syria and of the Palestinians. Turkey's engagement with Iran and other hard-line states is based on a wish to modify these states' behavior, not on a desire to ally with them. Neoconservative American and right-wing Israeli commentators who interpret Turkey's engagement as evidence of the AKP's anti-American Islamism are thus mistaking tactics for goals.

There is little doubt among foreign officials in Ankara that Turkey is resolutely opposed to Iran's acquiring nuclear weapons. The question for Ankara is how to prevent that and what priority to give this objective among Turkey's other national goals. The Turkish government also believes that military action against Iran would only delay -- rather than stop -- Tehran's effort toward nuclearization while further convincing Iran that acquiring a nuclear deterrent is the only way to be secure. Likewise, the Turkish government believes that imposing more sanctions on Iran will only entrench the hard-line regime and hurt Iran's neighbors, including Turkey, by diminishing trade and heightening tensions in the region, much as happened as a result of the sanctions against Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Since Tehran's nuclear program enjoys broad support in Iran, the only sensible policy, Turkish officials argue, is to engage the Iranian government and persuade Iran as a whole that nuclear weapons are unnecessary for the country's security. Turkish officials point out that the U.S. government has been stuck in a standoff with Tehran for more than three decades. They suggest that allowing exchanges with Iran -- such as the visits by the one million Iranians who travel to Turkey every year -- might do more good than imposing more sanctions.

The Turkish government also has some grounds for claiming that the U.S. government had encouraged it to seek a deal with Tehran. U.S. President Barack Obama sent a letter to the governments of Turkey and Brazil in April setting out the conditions under which Washington might accept a nuclear fuel swap with Iran. After tough negotiations that nearly broke down, Turkey and Brazil extracted a written commitment from Tehran that met most of the conditions the U.S. government had set out. Some U.S. officials say they believe that the two governments were sincerely trying to find a new way to bring Iran to the negotiating table and that they had not foreseen that Iran would actually go along with them.

Nonetheless, U.S. officials bridled at the fact that the Turkish government presented the deal to Tehran as a way to spare it from more sanctions or from having to suspend its uranium-enrichment program. They were also irked when Turkey opposed a new round of UN sanctions, which it claimed to have done in order to preserve the diplomatic track it and Brazil had just forged. The objection did not prevent the sanctions from being adopted, and now Turkey is helping implement them (it is not, however, enforcing the more severe sanctions imposed by the United States and the EU; those could hurt Turkey's trade with Iran). Despite the messiness of the process and the fact that Brazil has since distanced itself from the matter somewhat, even U.S. officials acknowledge that the agreement that Turkey and Brazil struck with Tehran in the spring opened a door for more confidence-building steps in the future.

In other words, Turkey is not to blame for the blowup over Iran -- no more than it is for the crisis with Israel after the Mavi Marmara incident. Its policies were not intended to clash with the overall goals of the international community. And neither episode is evidence that the AKP's zero-problem policy is in any way Islamist.

ATTENDING TO TENSIONS

Another reason to be more sanguine about Turkey's foreign policy is that, despite recent strains with the United States and the EU, the fundamentals of Turkey's alliances with the West have not changed. EU states supply more than three-quarters of Turkey's foreign investment and buy more than half of its exports. The EU is home to some 2.7 million immigrants from Turkey and is the origin of more than half of all tourists traveling to Turkey. Although the Middle East offers good opportunities for Turkish businesses, Turkey remains engaged principally with the West. Less than one-quarter of Turkey's exports go to the Middle East. The region is home to just 110,000 Turks, and it supplies only about ten percent of Turkey's total tourists.

Turkey's closeness to the EU remains a powerful engine for the domestic reform process. The AKP's leaders might win an ephemeral vote of confidence with publics in the Middle East when they take a stand against Israel, but they must be careful not to sacrifice their alliances with Western partners in the process. Also, it is the ability of Turkey to be a respected partner of both the EU and the United States that truly distinguishes it from other states in the Middle East and underpins the prosperity and legitimacy that the rest of the region so envies. Turkey's continued collaboration with the U.S. government -- be it over intelligence sharing in Turkey's fight against ethnic Kurdish insurgents, ensuring the smooth withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, cooperating against al Qaeda factions, or helping reach a settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians -- remains essential.

Turkey is at most only partly to blame for the setbacks suffered by its zero-problem foreign policy. Even when it has erred -- because of haste, poor communication, or fiery rhetoric -- the Turkish government has not forsaken the goals of many of its Western partners, including relieving suffering in Gaza and finding a way to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The country's security and economic exposure to problems in the Middle East is far greater than the exposure of its Western partners, and so Ankara necessarily has different tactics. The West should understand this and come to see these differences as opportunities. It should encourage the Turkish government to play mediator in the Middle East again, much as Ankara did with Iran and in the proximity talks between Israel and Syria; for example, Turkey might again facilitate talks between Fatah and Hamas. The AKP's leaders, for their part, must find a way to restore a working relationship between Turkey and Israel. That would not only improve their ties with Turkey's Western allies but also revive their reputation as charismatic go-betweens able to speak with confidence to everyone in the Middle East.

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