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# Can the U.S. Government Accept an Independent Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East?

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*ABSTRACT* The end of the Cold War marked the end of adversary patterns of alignment in the Middle East, and the ebbing dichotomy between the U.S. and USSR led to vast uncertainty. In response, then-President Turgut Özal stated, as early as 1991, that Turkey should seek an active foreign policy. It was not, until the AK Party came to power a decade later, however, that Ankara began to seriously question Turkey's acquiescence in Washington's strategic unipolarity. Ahmet Davutoğlu's appointment as Foreign Minister emphasized Turkey's independence and activism, causing unease in Washington. Nevertheless, the U.S. has been generally flexible toward a more independent Turkish foreign policy, under the condition that it does not threaten vital U.S. interests.

## After the Cold War

**T**he end of the Cold War marked the end of adversary patterns of alignment in the Middle East. It had been easier to interpret the geopolitics of the region when it was clear whether a particular government could be reliably classified as an ally of either the United States or the Soviet Union, and most of its specific foreign policy initiatives could be deduced from this fact alone. This overarching framework lasted for almost half a century, and its disappearance in the early 1990s created an atmosphere of uncertainty. In the Middle East, two broad endeavors emerged

to fill the void created by the absence of bipolarity: the first involved an emergent American unipolarity that exerted hegemonic control over the region as a whole, and reached a climax with the unified response to the 1990 Iraqi conquest and annexation of Kuwait. The second was more exploratory, involving a series of distinct moves by several states that realized that the new regional setting offered both risks and opportunities associated with the pursuit of more independent lines of action. As early as 1991, Turgut Özal voiced the opinion that Turkey "should leave former passive and hesitant policies and engage in an active foreign policy."<sup>1</sup>

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The fluidity of the global situation in the 1990s created strong United States and Israeli incentives to pursue strategic interests in the Middle East, by embarking on an ambitious program of regional restructuring within the stability of this presumed ‘unipolar moment.’ This was interpreted to mean, above all, ridding the region of regimes perceived to be hostile to the West and establishing permanent American military bases in the heart of the Middle East. Paramount goals of such a move included: ensuring that Gulf oil stayed in friendly hands, that Israel’s security was safeguarded

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against any future threat, and that no additional country in the region acquired nuclear weaponry. In a post-Cold War setting, these policies provoked further concerns as to whether Turkey should define its own view of the future of the Middle East and no longer defer to American grand strategy for the region.

Washington’s adoption of this post-Cold War approach became apparent in the aftermath of the First Gulf War in 1991 when a coalition of countries, acting on the basis of a UN mandate, used military force to prompt Iraq to

withdraw from Kuwait. As a result, Baghdad agreed to surrender in a manner that continued to punish the Iraqi people indefinitely through the imposition of harsh post-war sanctions as administered by the UN. Such a military intervention signaled a new era in the region in at least two respects. During the Cold War, Saddam Hussein’s regime would not have dared to attack Iraq without prior approval from Moscow, which would almost certainly not have been given due to prospects of retaliation raising dangerous escalation risks. If, despite this, the attack were to happen, Western response would have likely been cautious, limited, and even coordinated with Moscow. There would have been an overriding interest on both sides to avoid a confrontation with the Soviet Union without allowing Iraqi aggression to succeed in annexing Kuwait. In all likelihood, once Kuwait’s sovereignty was restored, so would be a willingness to normalize relations with Iraq.

During the Cold War – aside from the possible exception of the Cyprus intervention in 1974 – Turkey was perceived as an important and reliable ally, especially in the NATO context, and as a state that never seriously challenged measures set by Washington. Against this background, it is not surprising that Özal’s Turkey participated in the coalition that challenged Iraq in 1991, resulting in a rare moment of global and regional geopolitical unity with respect to a Middle East crisis. In the Security Council debate provoked by Iraq’s conquest of Kuwait, Russia (then still the fal-

tering Soviet Union) and even Syria supported the American-led call for 'a new world order' based on Charter principles of opposition to aggression and violations of international law. However, once UN intervention forced Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait and relinquish related claims, architects of American foreign policy became immediately eager to renounce a Charter-based approach to international conflict that might tie Washington's hands in the future. American policymakers made it clear that future crises would be approached pragmatically on a case-by-case basis from the perspective of hard power geopolitics. Turkey neither objected to the military operation based on the UN mandate nor American reluctance to endorse such a UN response to the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait as a precedent.

### **The AK Party Era Begins**

It was not until the AKP came to power in 2002 that Ankara began to seriously question Turkey's acquiescence in Washington's strategic unipolarity and partnership with Israel. Turkish leadership was initially cautious, given their precarious position against hostile opposition forces embedded in the government bureaucracy, as well as fears that a military coup could nullify their electoral mandate just as the 'soft coup' had done to the elected Erbakan coalition government in 1998.

The first break with this deferential past came in 2003, when the Turk-

ish Parliament opposed the US plan to launch its attack on Iraq partly from Turkish territory, much to the distress of the Pentagon. Paul Wolfowitz, then a high official in the U.S. Department of Defense, openly chided the AKP leadership for its inability to wield enough influence to override the Turkish legislative process and ignore domestic public opinion so as to accede to Washington's appeal. At the time, the Erdogan leadership expressed its willingness to grant Washington the permission it requested, and explained that failure to allow it was the result of a parliamentary decision that could not be swayed, despite an apparent effort to do so. The importance of this show of Turkish independence should not be exaggerated, as Turkey continued to make the İncirlik Air Base available for American use during the Iraq War and AK Party leaders never opposed the invasion and occupation itself, despite its dubious status under the UN Charter and its destabilizing impact on regional security.

### **Davutoğlu's Proactive Foreign Policy**

When Ahmet Davutoğlu was appointed Foreign Minister in May 2009, after several years as a highly influential principal advisor to the Turkish government, Turkish foreign policy independence and activism became more pronounced. Davutoğlu presided over negotiations involving Syria and Israel in 2007, with the main objective of resolving the issues by encouraging peace and



Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif at P5+1 negotiations in Geneva on October 15-16.

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maintaining sovereignty over the Golan Heights. This mediation effort seemed on the verge of success until Israel launched its major military operation against Gaza at the end of 2008, effectively ending the negotiations. Since the initiative involved active participation on the part of Israel, it also seemed statesmanlike from the perspective of the old order and was welcomed, at the time, by Washington.

When Davutoğlu tried to integrate Hamas in the political process – an effort strongly resisted by Washington and Tel Aviv, which alternatively insisted on several conditions that were unacceptable to Hamas – the Turkish approach began to raise concerns in the West. It was slowly becoming evident that independent Turkish foreign policy moves could diverge from US regional priorities.

Parallel to this, many journalists and Turkish think tank experts in America were secular fundamentalists who were deeply opposed to and threatened by the AK Party ascendancy. They took measures to warn the West about the ‘true’ nature of the political orientation of the AK Party, and to cast doubt as to whether Turkey still belonged in the Western camp. They used their influence and access to U.S. lawmakers and leaders to suggest that the new Turkish leadership had an undisclosed agenda to displace secularism with political Islam, and thus move in directions sharply opposed to American and Israeli interests in the region. The Hamas initiative was especially targeted as a justification for this view. Although Turkish foreign policy was critically observed, especially by the Bush presidency, it should be noted that there also existed some support for a countervailing

view based on an acceptance of this new show of Turkish independence. There were influential observers who perceived the Erdoğan government as moderate, efficient, market-oriented, and popular. This view created an op-

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portunity for Washington to demonstrate throughout the region, by way of Turkey, that the United States was willing and able to work constructively with an Islamically-inclined government in the post-9/11 setting, even if it pursued an independent strategy that diverged from its foreign policy positions on occasion.

Davutoğlu's initiation of the 'zero conflicts and problems with neighbors' approach garnered a similar mixture of suspicion and acceptance. It was, at first, seen as a stabilizing move that did not threaten the overall U.S. grand strategy, centered on Israel's security, nonproliferation, and oil. There were, to be sure, qualms in conservative American strategic discussions about Turkish efforts toward regional and extra-regional peacemaking (including the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Caucasus). It was only Ankara's abrupt embrace of

Assad's Syria that raised questions as to the overall Turkish regional vision.

When Turkey's relationship with Israel took a turn for the worse, American concerns deepened. This became clear after 'the Davos moment' on January 30, 2009, in which Erdoğan angrily confronted the Israeli president, Shimon Peres, on the sensitive matter of Israel's behavior during the Gaza military operations launched in December 2008. A negative trend in bilateral relations culminated after the May 1, 2010 attack by Israeli naval gunships and commandos on a Turkish vessel, Mavi Marmara, in international waters. The ship was part of a global civil society flotilla carrying humanitarian aid workers and supplies to Gaza, thereby boldly challenging Israel's blockade. In the incident, nine Turkish nationals were killed – several of whom in execution style – suggesting an Israeli intention to warn Ankara that it would pay heavily if it continued, even indirectly via civil society activists, to challenge Israel's occupation policies on behalf of Palestinian rights. The Mavi Marmara incident led to a serious breakdown of relations between America's two most stalwart allies in the Middle East, posing a dilemma for Washington. The White House, however, displayed an unexpected willingness to balance its special relationship with Israel against the recognition that Turkey was too valuable an ally to alienate in any severe way.

This was reinforced on President Obama's visit to Israel in 2013, during which he tried to persuade Benja-

min Netanyahu to apologize for the deaths caused by the attack on the Mavi Marmara, and to offer compensation to the families of those killed. The apology was transmitted to Turkey by means of a phone call between the three leaders on March 22, while Obama was still in Israel. Erdogan responded positively to Netanyahu's effort, and announced a readiness to restore military cooperation and full diplomatic relations with Israel. Following the talk, concerns receded, although normalization has been gradual at best.

Obama's efforts on this occasion was expressive of the real perceptions held by his administration, as evidenced by the following statement: "The United States deeply values our close partnerships with both Turkey and Israel, and we attach great importance to the restoration of positive relations between them in order to advance regional peace and security," adding, "I am hopeful that today's exchange between the two leaders will enable them to engage in deeper cooperation on this and a range of other challenges and opportunities." As such, the Obama presidency made it clear that security in the region required the shared cooperation of both Israel and Turkey. This was the only alternative available to Washington other than siding with Israel, which would have been a risky repudiation of Turkey as well as signaled to the entire region that the continuation of diplomatic friendship with the United States was conditional on the approval of Israel. It should also be observed that Netanyahu on his

own initiative – though quite possibly at the back channel urging of Washington – was reported months earlier to have been ready to extend a peace offering to Turkey, but was inhibited by internal pressures from Netanyahu's domestic rival, the Israeli extreme right wing then headed by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. As such, Israel as well as the United States sought the restoration of a cooperative relationship with Turkey, and the phone call offered a convenient way to circumvent severe criticisms of any restoration of normal relations in both countries.

### **Washington's Misgivings and Turkish Diaspora Critics**

Although this process of mutual understanding has continued and helped to reduce tensions between the two governments, there has been reluctance from both sides to fully endorse a diplomacy of normalization. There were widespread feelings that the Israeli move was insufficient, given the gravity of the Mavi Marmara affront alongside Israel's refusal to moderate its approach to Gaza, which Turkey made clear was part of its overall concern. On the American side, pro-Israeli civil society elements remained hostile to the Turkish AK Party leadership, and clearly welcomed every sign of opposition and discord within the country, including the view that Washington should take account of the degree to which Turkey has been suffering from growing regional isolation over the last few years.

Turkey's break from Israel following the Gaza War was also accompanied by closer economic and diplomatic ties with Iran, then the arch-enemy of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Turkish foreign policy independence seemed especially apparent in 2010 when Turkey and Brazil jointly brokered an arrangement in Tehran involving the storage of Iranian enriched uranium, thereby seemingly defusing a dangerously brewing conflict that threatened to turn the Middle East into one large war zone. These moves collided with the U.S./Saudi/Israeli/European commitment to a more coercive diplomacy – which relied on mounting pressures by stiffening economic sanctions and reinforcing military threat – to keep Iran from becoming the second nuclear weapons state in the region. It was a confusing and controversial falling out. There are convincing indications that Washington had previously encouraged Turkey and Brazil to take precisely this initiative, evidently believing it would fail and thereby be useful to bolster the argument that diplomacy had been given every chance (yet failed). It would then follow that coercion and threat diplomacy would be the only way to prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Clearly, Turkey did not see the policy issues in this way, voting against the intensification of sanctions on Iran in the UN Security Council. As before, American advocates of the pre-AK Party political approach stridently insisted that Turkey's attempts to pursue an independent foreign policy should be strongly opposed in relation to Iran, an issue which was within the exclu-

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sive policy domain of the Western powers and Israel.

There is little doubt that current internal political troubles in Turkey, emerging from the Gezi Park demonstrations in the summer of 2013 and intensified by the corruption scandal and parallel government fight toward the end of last year, have emboldened American critics of Turkish leadership and foreign policy. The *Washington Post*, for example, published an editorial on January 1, 2014 that urged U.S. foreign policymakers to assume a more critical stance toward Turkey, emphasizing Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian style and the existence of human rights abuses, such as the jailing of more journalists than in any other country. The timing of such an editorial – in a publication whose ties to the CIA have been recently disclosed – suggests that the US administration may have decided to throw its weight on the side of anti-Erdogan forces as a reprisal for foreign policy activism in relation to Iran and Israel.

The claim is frequently made that the supposedly 'ideological' foreign policy in the Davutoğlu Era has been



Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu meets with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in Washington, DC.

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nationally and regionally discredited, and now compares unfavorably with Turkey's earlier, more 'pragmatic' and 'loyal' approach throughout the Cold War. However, support for Davutoğlu's approach – as a blend of 'principled' and 'pragmatic' rather than 'ideological' – may persevere. It should be noted that Davutoğlu has consistently made a special effort to preserve the basic continuity of Turkish foreign policy, which includes a more Western alignment particularly in relation to NATO and Washington, and proven it tangibly by such steps as supporting the controversial deployment of missile defense systems.

### Responding to the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring created a new set of dynamics in the Middle East that put the United States on the defensive, as it had been previously accepting of

authoritarian governments that became the targets of the popular uprisings. During the first half of 2011, Turkey's regional standing was never higher, and Erdogan was by far the most popular and respected leader in the region. Turkish foreign policy seemed more clearly than any other major state to be positioned on the right side of history.

As such, there was widespread speculation that the new political order in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia would look to Turkey for inspiration, although there was an unwillingness to subscribe to 'the Turkish model.' Despite this disavowal, the widespread aspiration was close to what the AK Party had achieved in Turkey: a robust economy based on a neoliberal ideology, a stable political environment, a governing process that was sympathetic to Islamic values, and constitutionalism centered

on periodic free elections. These developments were received with mixed reactions in the United States. On the one side, it was preferable that nations that seemed poised to control the Arab future were oriented toward Turkey, a major NATO member with an essentially Western-oriented political outlook, than with the more radical Iranian ideology or even China to finally sever any post-colonial links to the West. In this regard, Davutoğlu was a strong asset, as he was widely trusted and liked in the region during his tenure as Foreign Minister. However, American policy hawks – disproportionately represented in both think tanks and among academic Middle East specialists in American universities – were far less appreciative of Turkey’s foreign policy, perceiving Ankara as an obstacle in relation to the region’s post-Cold War design in which the United States was a dominant presence, a design strongly favored in Tel Aviv. Furthermore, criticisms of Turkish foreign policy indicated a deeper facet: strong distrust and dislike of Erdogan and his AK Party policy agenda.

### **Tilting West**

One turning point in Turkey’s foreign policy came after the anti-Qaddafi uprising in Libya, leading to the regime-changing intervention under NATO auspices in March 2011. Ankara was initially ambivalent, but later moved toward accepting the NATO undertaking and eventually seemed to welcome the outcome. By such re-positioning, Turkey’s region-

al role became more critically viewed by opponents of Western interventionism throughout the Middle East, while at the same time somewhat less worrisome to policymakers in Washington.

Turkey’s break with the Assad regime in early 2012 was welcomed by Washington as confirmation that Turkey was standing with the West in the second phase of the Arab Spring. The move did not receive widespread endorsement outside of official Washington sources, however, as there were suspicions expressed both by critics of non-intervention and by those who saw the anti-Assad uprising as a Turkish vehicle for bringing Sunni Islam into a position of control in Syria. Such a move would be allegedly dangerous for the substantial non-Sunni minorities in the country, and unwelcome in Israel. As the Syrian conflict worsened, observers feared that political Islam was spreading its influence in the region and that Turkey was entering into a sectarian war, this time on the side of Saudi Arabia. Overall, however, the close working relationship between Hilary Clinton and Davutoğlu, centered on building wide international support for the Syrian opposition, encouraged a perception of converging interests and an eagerness for strategic cooperation.

### **Acting on Principle**

The Egyptian military takeover on July 3, 2013 from the elected Mursi government produced a new split

with Washington. Ankara had made it clear that it did not view the overthrow of the democratically selected Egyptian president and the criminalization of his political base in the Muslim Brotherhood as either justified or legitimate. Tensions deepened when the temporary post-coup lead-

er tian coup, which had, at its inception at least, the full backing of the Egyptian people as expressed through massive demonstrations.

Implicitly, there were divergent views of whether the Egyptian coup was pro-democratic because it reflected the mobilized will of the people, or anti-democratic because it flagrantly violated the Egyptian Constitution, repudiated electoral results (which lie at the core of procedural democracy), and engaged in a pattern of atrocious state crime. Turkey certainly merits praise for taking a principled stand in the face of these outrages by the Egyptian coup leadership, while other political actors who have averted their gaze reinforce the most cynical views of international relations.

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ership in Cairo took drastic measures to end pro-Mursi demonstrations, killing more than one thousand unarmed demonstrators (according to conservative estimates), jailing leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, retaliating against any anti-regime activism, and closing TV channels that were critical of developments.

The United States followed a much more cautious line, more or less complying with what was happening in Egypt, although expressing some words of regret about the massacres. In this regard, the U.S. Government found itself, in contrast to the first phase of the Arab Spring, to be in essential agreement with the reactions of the governments of the region, and Turkey was the country that seemed out of step. Davutoğlu was again accused of being impractical in speaking out so strongly against the Egp-

## Conclusion

This overview offers a few conclusions about the acceptability of Turkish foreign policy during the years of AK Party leadership in the United States:

- 1) It is important to distinguish between *governmental* and *civil society* acceptance and response. Each situation has a certain originality, but generally speaking (except possibly the period of the Bush presidency from 2000-2008), the U.S. government has reacted pragmatically to Turkish policies on a case-by-case basis. The civil society domain, dominated by secularist think tanks, media, and experts, has tended to be more

- dogmatic, especially in the aftermath of the souring of Turkish/Israeli relations. In this respect, political leaders have been more prepared to accept Turkish independent foreign policy initiatives than their civil society counterparts.
- 2) The turbulence of the region, its overlapping conflict patterns, and the changing perception of what is possible and desirable have produced a variance of outlooks on the Turkish side, inciting a certain skepticism about Turkey's broad foreign policy visions on the American side. In this respect, 'zero conflict and problems with neighbors' has become overshadowed by events with a greater need to be examined by their unique particularities. In this sense the Turkish outlook, as articulated by Davutoğlu and others, is that Turkish foreign policy is rooted in *values* and *principles*, which Americans and Turkish secular fundamentalists tend to criticize as *ideological* or *normative*, and urge instead an opportunism packaged as *realism* or *pragmatism*.
  - 3) The post-Cold War period deprived governments outside the region of a single unifying theme: supportive of or against Marxism at home and the Soviet Union internationally. The new regional setting created a wide political space for independent initiatives. Turkey took advantage of this opportunity in the early years of AK Party leadership to encourage conflict resolution throughout the region and beyond, in the Balkans and Caucuses. The breakdown of positive relations with Israel, however, highlighted a sharp divide between U.S. priorities in the region and those of Ankara. The Arab Spring then introduced waves of uprisings against entrenched authoritarian governments, raising difficult ideological choices between strategic interests and supposed commitments to democratic forms of governance. Turkey seemed to generally follow a principled line while the United States, with military bases and counter-insurgency operations throughout the region, was more inconsistent in voicing its interests, as in Bahrain and Yemen. Doubts were raised once again in civil society spheres as to whether Turkey was now refusing 'to stay in its lane' when it came to foreign policy in the Middle East, or put differently, whether Turkey was the sort of *real* ally that could be counted upon in the manner of Israel. This has once again suggested an *unconditional* commitment on the part of American leaders toward Israeli relations, in contrast to the Turkish alignment, which is at best a *conditional* alliance relationship. In this respect, there is a growing tide of criticism of the United States' somewhat exaggerated engagement with Israel, and a wish for a relationship that more closely resembles the U.S.-Turkey alliance.
  - 4) By and large, the U.S. approach to Turkey's *independent* foreign policy moves is generally flexi-

ble enough to agree to disagree in most instances. However, this flexibility disappears when it comes to issues deemed strategically vital to U.S. interests, including: cooperation within the NATO framework, counter-proliferation policy, and conflict with Israel. Turkish foreign policy has seemed to accept this set of constraints. For example, Turkey agreed to NATO's deployment of missile defense systems on its territory, although the move angered Russia and created potential targets on Turkish territory in the event of renewed Western-Russian hostilities. Further, Turkey agreed, at least formally, to repair relations with Israel at the urging of President Obama. Finally, after its seeming contribution to resolving the Iranian nuclear dispute was rejected, Turkey stepped back and allowed powers – led by the United States – handle the diplomacy of conflict resolution and eventual 2013 interim deal.

- 5) Assuming that the AK Party survives electoral challenges in the next two years and that nothing occurs to change the political landscape in the Middle East, it

seems likely that the Davutoğlu leadership will revive the zero problems approach. However, this revival would herald a more sophisticated and selective strategy that acknowledges that no blanket doctrine can adequately cover all variations of foreign policy challenges. Davutoğlu has already suggested a more nuanced understanding of Phase I, and has been quoted as saying: “it is possible to have zero problems if the other actors respect our values. It doesn't mean that we will be silent in order to have good relations with all parties.” Zero Problems, Phase II, is instead likely to be better understood as minimizing conflicts and seeking accommodation wherever possible with neighbors. As the Syrian shift in Ankara so clearly demonstrated, however, a zero problems approach becomes untenable once a government engages in massive and repeated atrocities against its own people. ■

## Endnote

1. Quoted by Alan Makovsky, “The New Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *SAIS Review*, (Winter/Spring, 1999), p. 1.