

## Turkish Foreign Policy in 2009: A Year of Pro-activity

UFUK ULUTAŞ\*

### ABSTRACT

*Since the early 2000s, Turkish foreign policy has experienced a fundamental transformation. Turkey's regional and global position, its relations with the countries in surrounding regions, and its long-lasting disputes with its neighbors were reshaped through the adoption of the "zero-problem-with-neighbors" policy. In line with this policy, Turkey has taken a pro-active stance and followed a multi-dimensional foreign policy approach to establish itself, first, as a conciliatory partner for peace with its neighbors, and second, as an agent of mediation between its clashing neighboring countries. 2009 was a year of foreign policy initiatives towards Syria, Armenia, and Iraq, including the Kurdish Regional Government. And it marked the beginning of more positive and constructive relations between Turkey and the United States. Turkey gained substantial ground in becoming a regional hub for energy by undersigning two critical energy deals. Yet, two major issues remain as challenges for Turkish foreign policy: a) the EU accession process, and b) the Cyprus dispute.*

Since the early 2000s Turkish foreign policy has been experiencing a fundamental transformation. Turkey's regional and global position, its relations with the countries in surrounding regions, and its long-lasting disputes with its neighbors have been reshaped through the adoption of the "zero-problem-with-neighbors" policy. Turkey's zero-problem-with-neighbors policy is aimed at maximizing cooperation with its neighbors while minimizing problems in its surrounding regions. Turkey achieved remarkable progress in pursuing this policy during 2009. In line with this policy, Turkey has taken a pro-active stance and followed a multi-dimensional foreign policy approach to establish itself first, as a conciliatory partner for peace with its neighbors, and second, as an agent of mediation between its clashing neighboring countries.

Turkey's busy diplomatic traffic during 2009 alone is an excellent indication of the

\* Coordinator of the Middle East Program, SETA Washington, DC; Melton Center for Jewish Studies at Ohio State University, [ulutas@setadc.org](mailto:ulutas@setadc.org)

Turkey's zero-problem-with-neighbors policy is aimed at maximizing cooperation with its neighbors while minimizing problems in its surrounding regions

pro-active and multi-dimensional character of Turkey's new foreign policy. The number of countries that Turkish officials visited in 2009 gives a good idea of Turkey's intensive diplomatic activity. In 2009, Turkish President Abdullah Gül visited twenty-nine countries, and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's state visits totaled twenty-three. Ali Babacan, who served as Turkey's Foreign Minister during the first half of 2009, and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was appointed to the post on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, paid ninety-three official visits in one year.<sup>1</sup> The regional distribution of these trips also provides clues on the major areas of interest and concerns that preoccupied Turkish foreign policy makers last year. Out of these ninety-three visits by the Foreign Minister, forty-seven were to Europe, fifteen to Asia, twenty-three to the Middle East, and nine to the United States.

One should note that Turkey borders regions where interstate and intrastate conflicts are prevalent. The immediate neighboring regions, the Caucasus, the Balkans, the Middle East, and also Afghanistan, are some of the major conflict zones in the world. Faced with such unstable and fragile regions, Turkey's goal is to create a peaceful, stable and secure regional neighborhood. In order to accomplish this goal, Turkey has formulated a multi-dimensional foreign policy vision and is taking a pro-active role in conflict resolution in the region. Turkey's non-permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council has also presented Turkey with the opportunity to continue to play a facilitating role in regional issues and work on the dialogue between civilizations and cultures under the framework of the United Nations.

### **Domestic Developments, Public Opinion and Turkish Foreign Policy**

Domestic factors provided one of the major sources of motivation for Turkey's foreign policy initiatives and actions in 2009. The Turkish public has become increasingly more cognizant of and more reactive towards foreign policy issues. The mass demonstrations and rallies that were organized across the country in protest of the Israeli attack on Gaza and the spectacular welcome-home ceremony that the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan received after he walked off the stage after an angry exchange with Israeli President Shimon Peres during a panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland were two significant examples of the Turkish public's increasing interest and influence on Turkey's foreign policy. One could argue that demonstrations and rallies of this kind, together with other

manifestations of public opinion, have been instrumental in influencing Turkish foreign policy makers. For instance, strong public opinion against the Israeli attack on Gaza played a role in shaping Turkey's Israel policy in 2009, transforming the Arab-Israeli conflict into one of the top issues in Turkey's foreign policy agenda.

For Turkey, 2009 started with peace efforts in the Middle East, aimed at ensuring a ceasefire in Gaza, and continued as a year of tension between Turkey and Israel, mainly due to the ongoing siege of Gaza and the Palestinian civilian casualties during the Gaza attack. The attack, launched at a time when Turkey was working on bringing Israel and Syria to the negotiation table, strained the relations, which are yet to be mended. Therefore, 2009 became one of the worst, if not the worst, periods for bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey. A series of debacles, including the Davos incident, the exclusion of Israel from an air-drill planned to take place over Turkish air space, and the diplomatic tension due to the anti-Israel TV series aired in Turkey, deepened and aggravated the crisis.

It would also be correct to argue that some of the diplomatic openings necessitated domestic reforms and initiatives. As such, Turkish foreign policy vision was pivotal in creating domestic reform projects. For example, one can see a strong link between Turkey's Kurdish initiative and the improvement in its relations with the Kurdish authorities in Iraq or between the Alevi opening and Turkey's EU accession process. On many occasions, domestic and diplomatic initiatives complemented each other in important ways. For example, Turkey's expanding economy and dynamic human capital compelled Turkey, in the era of a global economic crisis, to increase its economic cooperation with neighboring states, most of which are not integrated into the world markets. Furthermore, the improvement in relations and the increase in cooperation with neighboring states have provided new opportunities for Turkish entrepreneurs and businesses.

### **A Year of Openings: Syria, Iraq, Armenia**

One could observe a remarkable increase in economic, political and military cooperation with Syria and Iraq during 2009, which was a critical component of Turkey's vision of the new Middle East. The first ministerial meeting of the Turkey-Iraq High Level Strategic Cooperation Council was held in İstanbul on September 17-18, 2009. The Council's first meeting at the Prime Ministers' level was held in Baghdad on October 15, 2009. During the meeting, a total of 48 memoranda of understanding were signed and aimed at improving relations in the areas of trade, interior affairs, welfare and housing, health, transport, water sources, energy, and agriculture.<sup>2</sup>

The bigger picture of the improved relations between Turkey and Syria suggests a strategic partnership between the two countries on economic and political levels to strengthen security in the region and a movement towards economic integration

An important aspect of Turkey's "opening" to Iraq is the historic rapprochement between Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Davutoglu's visit to Erbil on October 30, 2009 with Trade Minister Zafer Caglayan and a delegation of around 70 officials and businessmen marked a big step toward normalization of Turkey's relations with the KRG. The normalization has, in turn, enabled Turkey to enjoy a constructive relationship with all actors in

Iraq, while offering a number of direct and indirect benefits for Turkey, including curtailing the PKK's activities, enjoying a privileged economic position in the KRG, and increasing KRG's reliance on Turkey and, therefore, bolstering Iraq's territorial integrity in line with Turkey's vision.

Turkey has remarkably improved its relations and increased the level of cooperation with Syria. The first ministerial meeting of the Turkey-Syria High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council convened in Aleppo on October 13, 2009, and another session was held on December 23, 2009. Turkey and Syria signed a protocol to reciprocally lift visa requirements and agreed on increasing the cooperation in the areas of shipping, aviation, energy, transport, finance, tourism, education, communication, electricity, agriculture, health, industry and other sectors. The bigger picture of the improved relations between Turkey and Syria suggests a strategic partnership between the two countries on economic and political levels to strengthen security in the region and a movement towards economic integration.

Another opening in the foreign policy arena was towards Armenia. The twin protocols on the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia signed by Foreign Minister Davutoglu and his Armenian counterpart Eduard Nalbandian in Zurich on October 10, 2009 were recorded as another step toward Turkey's zero-problem-with-neighbors policy. Aimed at establishing diplomatic ties between the two countries after a century-long enmity, this protocol and the ultimate normalization of relations with Armenia will have numerous implications for Turkey. The opening of the borders would boost economic ties between two countries, and both would benefit from increasing levels of trade. While helping to eliminate a cyclical crisis between Turkey and the United States on the passage of a resolution in the U.S. Congress on the Armenian killings during the First World War, the protocols could also help Turkey in its bid for membership to the

European Union, as it has repeatedly stressed the importance of Turkey's friendly relations with its neighbors.

Turkey will probably have to face the drawbacks of the protocols in 2010 and onwards. It will first have to deal with the reluctance of the Turkish parliament to ratify the protocols due to the unresolved conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, and secondly, face the protocols' negative impact on Turkey-Azerbaijan relations. The protocols have so far created minor tensions between Turkey and Azerbaijan, however, they can potentially trigger bigger problems between the two countries if Turkey opens its border with Armenia before finding a solution for the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. The deadlock of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem has the potential to torpedo the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. Therefore, active involvement by the OSCE Minsk Group, which was established to provide an ongoing forum for negotiations towards a peaceful settlement of this problem, will be instrumental in the arbitration process towards a solution and in facilitating the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia.

### **Turkish-US Relations: The Obama Factor**

The year 2009 also marked the beginning of more positive and constructive relations between Turkey and the United States. The official visit by the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in March provoked attention, laying the ground for a much debated visit by the US President Barack Obama to Turkey. These were the early signs of improving relations. Choosing Turkey as the destination of his first overseas visit as president, Obama opened a new stage of bilateral relations between the two countries. The US announcement of withdrawal from Iraq and acknowledgement of Turkey's protocols with Armenia also helped the relations to stand on firmer ground. The subsequent visits by Prime Minister Erdogan to the United States in September for the UN General Assembly, the G-20 meetings, and the White House meeting in December gave the two leaders opportunity to discuss a wide array of issues, including the diversification of Turkish-American relations, the NATO presence in Afghanistan, the Iranian nuclear issue, and the Middle East peace process.

The phrase "model partnership" was utilized by Obama during his visit to Ankara. Using this term, Obama emphasized the importance of cooperation between Turkey, a Muslim nation that straddles two continents, and the United States, a Western nation with a Christian majority, to create a "modern international community that is secure and prosperous."<sup>3</sup> The common set of ideals and values that

Choosing Turkey as the destination of his first overseas visit as president, Obama opened a new stage of bilateral relations between the two countries

are shared by both nations are also the key components of the model partnership. However, Obama's short definition left the details and the framework of the model partnership rather ambiguous and open to individual interpretation. Nevertheless, even an ambiguous concept of model partnership between the

two countries that is based on universal principles constituted a major shift away from George W. Bush's perception of Turkish-US relationship.

### **Challenges of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Cyprus Issue and the EU**

One of the biggest challenges for Turkish foreign policy makers during 2009 was the EU accession process and the Cyprus issue; the latter still continues to slow the process of the former. The recent EU progress report on Turkey, published in October 2009, notes the lack of substantial progress on the Cyprus issue, except for the agreement on both sides to open a new border crossing in north-west Cyprus. The issue remained in deadlock when the Turkish Cypriots approved the Annan Plan for Cyprus, and the Greek Cypriots rejected it. The progress report left the December 2006 General Affairs Council (GAC) decision in force, thereby pointing out that "negotiations will not be opened on eight chapters relevant to Turkey's restrictions regarding the Republic of Cyprus and no chapter will be provisionally closed until the Commission confirms that Turkey has fully implemented the Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement."

Meanwhile the same report praises Turkish foreign policy by emphasizing Turkey's protocols with Armenia, improving relations with Syria and the Kurdish authorities in Iraq and with its own Kurdish minority, as well as Turkey's mediation efforts in the Middle East and contributions to stability in the Caucasus. The report noted that the Turkish government reiterated its commitment to EU-related reforms by appointing a full-time Chief Negotiator and approving the National Program for the adoption of the *acquis*.<sup>4</sup> However, the report underlines, "the lack of dialogue and spirit of compromise between political parties is detrimental to the pursuit of reforms, and Turkey still needs to bring its legislation on political parties in line with European standards."<sup>5</sup>

Cyprus constituted one of the most contentious issues in the GAC meeting, held on December 7-8, 2009. Despite the Greek Cypriots' threats of blocking the start of negotiations on five chapters, the GAC refused to freeze the negotiation



*The deadlock of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem has the potential to torpedo the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. Therefore, active involvement by the OSCE Minsk Group will be instrumental in the arbitration process towards a solution and in facilitating the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia.*

process and decided to maintain the measures adopted at the GAC meeting of December 11, 2006. The GAC conclusions of 8 December 2009 on Enlargement and the Stabilization and Association Process were later endorsed by the European Council. After the meetings, on December 21, 2009, Turkey opened a new chapter on environment. So far, eleven chapters have been opened out of thirty-five, but eight remain blocked due to Turkey's noncompliance with the Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement. Only one chapter (Science and Research) has been provisionally closed.

### **Turkey as a Regional Hub for Energy**

During 2009, Turkey gained substantial ground in becoming a regional hub for energy by undersigning two critical deals, one with the European governments and the other with Russia. The Nabucco project, signed on July 13, 2009, proposes a long pipeline that will transport "Iraqi, Caspian and likely Iranian gas in the future depending on the changing situation and its relationship with the USA, and to a lesser extent Egyptian natural gas resources, via Turkey to Austria."<sup>6</sup> While

diversifying the current natural gas supplies to European markets, the Nabucco pipeline will likely enhance Turkey's standing as an energy corridor, and increase its leverage with the European countries, as well as create significant substantial economic benefits to Turkey.

On August 7, 2009, Turkey signed another deal with Russia to allow the South Stream gas pipeline to go through Turkey's exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea. The pipeline is designed to carry natural gas from the Russian coast through the Black Sea to Europe, and Turkey expects to strengthen its position as an energy transit country by giving permission to Russia to use Turkey's exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea. These two projects are essentially planned as rival projects as a result of the economic and political battle between Russia and some European countries. European states think that Russia wants to maintain and increase European dependency on Russian energy. Turkey, in contrast, maintains that the Nabucco and South Stream are not opposing projects. For Turkey, the Nabucco project has the top priority, in which it will take an active part, while for the South Stream Project, it will function only as a transit country.

In addition to the South Stream Project, Turkey's relations with Russia further improved and increased to the level of multi-dimensional partnership through three high-level official visits in 2009. Turkish President Abdullah Gul's and Erdogan's official visits to Russia and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's visit to Ankara deepened the bilateral relations and boosted cooperation in many areas, including energy, tourism, military, education and trade, despite the limits of Turkish-Russian partnership, such as Turkey's western orientation and Russia's assertive Eurasia policies.

2009 was also a year of improvement in Turkey's relations with Iran. Turkey's efforts to strengthen its economic and political relations with Iran remain motivated by *Realpolitik*. Turkey's increasing energy needs, as one of the fastest growing economies in the world over the past decade, make it imperative that Turkey have a secure and steady energy flow. Iran, as the second largest supplier of natural gas for Turkey, only after Russia, plays a critical role in providing Turkey's growing energy needs. In 2009, therefore, Iran and Turkey signed several agreements that will further enhance the level of energy ties between the two countries.

While improving its relations with Iran, Turkey has also worked on preventing an armed conflict in the region by using its unique position as a country which has friendly relations with both Iran and the West. Turkey has favored diplomacy on the Iran nuclear issue and has played a critical role in facilitating negotiations be-



tween Iran and P5+1 (Five Permanent Members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany), and welcomed the U.N. proposal to swap nuclear material between Iran and the West in Turkey.

### What is Next?

There are several reasons to call 2009 a successful year for Turkish diplomacy, although there is still more Turkey needs to accomplish. As summarized above, Turkey achieved remarkable progress in pursuing the zero-problem-with-neighbors policy in 2009, however, such issues as the sluggish EU accession process, the Cyprus problem, the ratification and implementation of the protocols signed with Armenia, the Iranian nuclear issue, as well as the Middle East peace process will require more work and remain at the top of the Turkish foreign policy agenda in 2010.

Turkish foreign policy is strongly intertwined with domestic developments, therefore, the two need to be better synchronized. Domestic reform will raise the self-confidence of foreign policy makers, and consequently make Turkey the center of stability in a region surrounded by volatility. Turkey's geostrategic location provides Turkey with both advantages and challenges. As long as Turkey stays strong at home and maintains its conciliatory role in surrounding regions, these challenges will turn into advantages.

### Endnotes

1. "Türk Dış Politikası 2009'da Son Derece Dinamik ve Aktif Bir Seyir Takip Etti," *Anatolian Agency*, December 31, 2009.
2. "Turkey Boost its Relations With Syria, Iraq," *TRT*, October 17, 2009 retrieved January 18, 2009, from <http://www.trtenglish.com/trtinternational/en/newsDetail.aspx?HaberKodu=051c7242-ed50-4517-9e99-6645e5deb92f&title=Turkey%20boosts%20relations%20with%20Iraq%20and%20Syria>
3. "Obama says U.S., Turkey can be model for world" *CNN International*, April 6, 2009 retrieved on January 23, 2010 from <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/06/obama.turkey/>
4. The total body of the EU law.
5. Commission of the European Communities, "Turkey 2009 Progress Report," October 14, 2009, p.9.
6. Bulent Aras and Emre Iseri, "The Nabucco Natural Gas Pipeline: From Opera to Reality", *SETA Policy Brief*, No. 34 (July 2009).