

Turkey and the Middle East in the 'New Era'

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ABSTRACT

Barack Obama's inauguration as America's new president has been welcomed as opening a 'new era' in Turkey's relations with the United States. May 2009 also saw the appointment of a new foreign minister in Ankara, in the person of Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu. This article examines how these new directions are playing out in the Middle East, one of the world's most turbulent regions which also has crucial economic and strategic importance for Turkey. It focuses on Turkey's relations with four regional states – Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Syria and Iran. The article closes by assessing whether Turkey has been able to achieve the government's ambition of 'zero problems' with its neighbors, and the degree to which it has been able to develop a new role as conciliator and go-between in addressing the region's bitter conflicts.

In March 2009, Turkey's then foreign minister, Ali Babacan, told the Turkish TV audience that the installation of Barack Obama as America's new president had opened a 'new era' in relations between the two countries.¹ The president expressed the same hope one month later, on April 6, with an official visit to Turkey — his first to a Muslim country — which included a speech to the Grand National Assembly in Ankara. In this speech, he alluded to the serious tensions in the Turkish-American relationship caused by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and urged that the two countries must now come together.² He drew particular attention to the Middle East as a region in which the United States needed to stake out new policies, re-awakening a longstanding debate as to whether Turkey should uncouple its regional policies from its relations with its most important ally.

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Speculation continued in May 2009 when Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu, previously chief foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan, became Turkey's new foreign minister. In a book published in 2000, Davutoğlu had argued that Turkey, thanks to its geographical position, possessed a strategic depth which it had hitherto failed to exploit and that Turkey should develop an active engagement in the regional political systems in the Middle East, Asia, the Balkans and Transcaucasia.³ Later, he gave further clues to his thinking by suggesting that rather than acting as a mere "bridge" between the West and the Muslim world, a previously repeated mantra of Turkish foreign policy spokesmen, Turkey should act as a "central country", breaking away from a "static and single-parameter policy", and becoming a "problem solver" by contributing to "global and regional peace".⁴ After his appointment, he stressed that Turkey needed to play a more effective role as an "order-instituting country" in its regional environment, the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus, while accepting that "the European Union and NATO are the most important pillars of the policy of setting a balance between security and freedom".⁵ Admittedly, Professor Davutoğlu had been a powerful voice behind the scenes for several years previously, but his appointment as foreign minister strengthened the impression that a new page had been turned in the direction of Turkish foreign policy, as had Obama's election victory in that of the USA.

In the Arab Middle East, Davutoğlu's appointment appears to have provoked a generally extensive positive reaction.⁶ This could be seen as significant, since the region is arguably the most crucial theater in which Turkish foreign policy is engaged, a zone of conflict at both the inter-state and, in some cases, intra-state levels. As the world's largest source of hydrocarbon fuels, the Middle East is vital for both the global and Turkish economies. For the US, moreover, Turkey's actual or potential role in the region is probably the main reason for continuing the "strategic partnership" with Ankara. In the economic sphere, the Middle East and North Africa's share in Turkey's total merchandise trade has grown impressively, from 11.4 percent in 2002 to 16.2 percent in 2008: unusually, it shows a positive trade balance for Turkey, with exports ahead of imports in the ratio of around 3:2.⁷ Middle Eastern investors, especially from the oil-exporting countries of the Gulf, are also showing increased interest in Turkey, as their share of the total stock of foreign direct investment increased from a miniscule 2.0 percent in 2002, to 8.0 percent of a vastly increased total by 2007.⁸

Since the collapse of the Baghdad Pact following the Iraqi revolution of 1958, Turkish governments have not sought to construct an over-arching regional strategy, but have instead concentrated on building up bilateral relations on a country-

by-country basis, concentrating on those states of most importance to Turkey, either political or economic. Thanks to the deep divisions within the region, this was probably the only practical policy. The failure of the Arab leaders to realize the dream of Arab unity was an advantage

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for Ankara, since it helped to preserve a balance of power between Turkey and its Arab neighbors. On the other hand, this lack of unity obliged Turkey to follow cautious policies, avoiding involvement in bitter regional disputes between Arab governments, as well as between the Arab and non-Arab states. Where possible, Turkish diplomats also had to avoid regional policies that could conflict with Turkey's global alliance with the Western powers, or could create clashes with other neighbors, notably with Russia. This is not to suggest that regional policies had to be totally subordinated to the interests of the alliance. As a medium-rank power, Turkey had some leeway, even in its relations with the US, and in an extreme case (as in that of the invasion of Iraq in 2003) it could risk a head-on clash with Washington if the cause were serious enough. It is also striking that although Turkey's bid to gain eventual membership of the European Union is stated as the governing Justice and Development Party's (AKP) main foreign policy priority, this has had very little effect on its policies towards the Middle East. The fact that the EU itself has no concerted policy towards the region – being, for instance, split down the middle over the US-led invasion of Iraq – almost certainly explains this. It is argued that, in preferring a 'soft power' to a 'hard power' approach to Middle Eastern problems, Turkey is closer to the EU than to the US. However, this is not entirely convincing, due to divisions within the European camp. Thus, for instance, in Britain, Tony Blair's government gave full support to a 'hard power' policy towards Saddam Hussein, while this was clearly rejected by France and Germany.

To illustrate how these determinants worked themselves out in the 'new era' (if such it was) of 2009, the remainder of this article looks at Turkish policy in towards the four states with which it was most closely engaged – that is, Iraq, Israel, Syria and Iran.

Relations with Iraq

Of the four states, Iraq probably has the most critical importance for Turkey, partly because events in northern Iraq could be expected to have serious effects on Turkey's internal Kurdish problem, and partly because of the substantial interdependence of the Turkish and Iraqi economies. In the broad sense, Turkey needs

to do what it could to help the establishment of a strong and effective government in Iraq, so as to preserve the regional power balance between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, as the best guarantor of peace in the region. Economically, Iraq is one of Turkey's most important export markets, worth almost US\$4 billion in 2008, and substantial expansion could be expected if political stability could be assured and oil-led economic growth resumed. Equally, Iraq depends on the oil pipeline from its northern oilfields in Kirkuk to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Yumurtalık, near İskenderun, for a substantial proportion of its oil exports. In the longer run, Iraq could also become an important supplier of natural gas for the proposed Nabucco pipeline project, which could help Europe reduce its dependence on uncertain supplies from Russia and will offer important transit revenues as well as an enhanced role for Turkey. However, all this depends on the re-establishment of political stability and more effective central government in Iraq. The major oil companies are unlikely to invest the huge sums of money needed unless and until the Iraqi government can secure a better degree of internal law and order, and can settle its disputes with the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) over this issue.⁹

Politically, the interconnection with Turkey's own Kurdish problem is the most important aspect of Turkey's relationship with Iraq. After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), formerly based in Syria, had seized the opportunity to re-establish itself in northern Iraq, from which it could launch assaults into Turkey, including terrorist attacks on civilian targets. The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP) led by Massoud Barzani, through the KRG, was in nominal control of the territory, but in fact did nothing to obstruct or suppress the PKK. After 2003, the KRG created further conflict, both with Turkey and the other parties in Iraq, by demanding that Kirkuk, with its rich oil resources but a mixed population of Kurds, Arabs and Turcomans, should be incorporated into its territory. Although the US government officially accepted that the PKK was a terrorist organization, the US forces in Iraq consistently failed to take action against it since the territory assigned to the KRG was one of the few areas of Iraq with a reasonable degree of law and order. This set up a long-running tension between Turkey and the US authorities in Iraq, culminating in March-April 2007, when the Turkish Commander of Land Forces General İlker Başbuğ and the Chief of the General Staff General Yaşar Büyükanıt both suggested that Turkey should take unilateral military action against the PKK in northern Iraq, although this was opposed by Prime Minister Erdoğan as well as the US government.¹⁰ With government support, on October 17, 2007 the Turkish parliament passed a resolution allowing military operations in Iraq. This appears

to have been a successful use of coercive diplomacy. When Tayyip Erdoğan visited Washington on November 5, 2007, President Bush announced a dramatic change in US policy, by undertaking that the US would supply the Turkish armed forces with 'real time' intelligence on PKK bases

and movements in Iraq. There would be a tripartite (that is, US-Turkish-Iraqi) coordination mechanism against the PKK, which Bush described as the common enemy of the three countries. In effect, the US would not agree to take military action against the PKK by itself, but would give a green light to the Turkish forces to do so.¹¹

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The November 5 agreement resulted in a series of cross-border operations by the Turkish air and ground forces between December 2007 and February 2008.¹² For the Turks, the satisfactory aspects of the story were, first, that they had apparently been able to inflict serious damage on the PKK while avoiding clashes with the *peshmerga* militias of the KRG, and second, that they had re-cemented their relations with the US. This welcome shift was reinforced by Barack Obama's election victory, since the new president had never endorsed the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and thus had no resentment against Turkey for having failed to support it. Furthermore, in his address to the Grand National Assembly he confirmed that the US would continue to support Turkey "against the terrorist activities of the PKK".¹³ The cooperation between the Turkish and US military authorities could thus be expected to continue.

Since 2005, Turkey has established a generally expanding relationship with the emerging Iraqi government in Baghdad. This has paid useful dividends, since the Arab parties in Iraq, both Sunni and Shi'ite, are anxious to build up good relations with Ankara. In a visit to Istanbul in March 2009, Jلال Talabani, the president of Iraq and leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), confirmed that he opposed the idea of an independent Kurdish state, or the union of the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq and Iran.¹⁴ On March 23, Abdullah Gül became the first Turkish president to pay an official visit to Baghdad since the overthrow of Saddam. Here, he broke with precedent by having direct talks with Massoud Barzani. This move was crucial, since although the Baghdad government has long condemned the PKK, it has no effective power to oblige the KDP to suppress it, or to undertake the task itself. However, both Barzani and President Talabani suggested that Turkey should grant a general amnesty for the PKK members — an idea which the Turkish ministry of justice stressed was not on its agenda at the time.¹⁵

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More materially, the Kirkuk issue remained as another unsolved problem between the Iraqi Kurds, on the one side, and the government of Iraq, plus Turkey, on the other. Under Articles 140 and 149 of the Iraqi constitution, a census was to have been held in Kirkuk by the end of 2007 prior to a referendum to determine the future status of the city. In fact, nothing

has been done. In May 2009, a report by the United Nations suggested that the census should be postponed for up to five years, to allow a compromise to be worked out between the Arabs, Turcomans, and Kurds. This idea was welcomed by Ankara, but was predictably rejected by President Talabani. Massoud Barzani also expressed resentment that the Iraqi Kurds had not received more support from the US on this issue.¹⁶

In the longer run, Turkey needed to decide how it should adjust its policies in the light of the prospective American withdrawal from Iraq. With the Iraqi government's authority being gradually re-established, there seemed to be less chance that the worst-case scenario — that is, a lapse into chaos or civil war after the US troops pulled out — would actually come about. In the last analysis, the future would depend on how quickly and effectively the Iraqis themselves could restore effective government and the economy. Turkey could help with this, but could not ensure it. Even if the problem of the PKK bases in northern Iraq were overcome, the government would still have to tackle the essentially domestic roots of its Kurdish problem. In Iraq, much would also depend on how Barzani reacted to the departure of US combat troops, given that the Americans had been his main friends in the region. Hopefully, he would see the need to accommodate with the other parties in Iraq, as well as Turkey, by, for instance, quietly shelving the claim to Kirkuk, and allowing all oil and gas revenues to be distributed by the central government to all regions of Iraq in accordance with their population.

Relations with Israel

Turkey's relations with Israel and the Palestinians have been different in that they do not directly involve the Kurdish issue. On the other hand, unusually for a foreign policy question, they are quite deeply affected by a fairly sharp divide within domestic opinion. On the one side, a substantial part of the state establishment favors the continuation of a close relationship with Israel. For the military, the military training and cooperation agreement signed with Israel in 1996, and the

succeeding defense industry cooperation agreement, is a valuable asset as they are sources of advanced military hardware and training. For foreign policy makers, also, the support of the pro-Israel lobby in the US Congress, which depends on good relations between Turkey and Israel, is an important advantage in coping with opposition from the ethnic Armenian and Greek lobbies. Turkey's links with Israel can thus be seen as heavily influenced by its relations with the USA.

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Against this, a substantial part of the Turkish public and media is sympathetic to the Palestinians, especially when punitive actions by the Israeli forces in the West Bank and Gaza fill the press headlines and TV screens. This sympathy is not purely based on religion, since the centre-left and secularist leaders in Turkey have, in their time, been as critical of Israeli actions as those of the conservative right.¹⁷ In addition, Turkish policy is likely to vary according to the state of relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Ideally, Ankara would like to establish good relations with both sides, but this is obviously very difficult when the two are at loggerheads.

The last point was all too obvious at the beginning of 2009 as Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip produced a hail of criticism from Turkey, as from other countries. Admittedly, Israel was entitled to protect itself from rocket attacks by Hamas militants based in Gaza, but its response seemed grossly disproportionate. Particular annoyance was caused by the fact that the attacks began only four days after Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had visited Ankara, which Prime Minister Erdoğan described as "an act of disrespect towards Turkey". Amidst widespread public protests at the Israeli action, Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ali Babacan engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity designed to bring an end to the fighting and a lifting of the Israeli blockade of Gaza.¹⁸ More dramatically, at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, on January 29, 2009, Tayyip Erdoğan walked out of a debate which included Israeli President Shimon Peres, accusing Israel of "barbarian" actions in Gaza, and attacking the session moderator for cutting him off in mid-flow.¹⁹

Fortunately, the row at Davos turned out to be the climax of the Turkish-Israeli tension over Gaza. Shortly afterwards, President Peres was reported to have telephoned Prime Minister Erdoğan to say that his remarks in Davos had not been intended as a personal criticism, and that he apologized for having raised

his voice.²⁰ By early March, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* was reporting that intensive efforts were being made by both sides to patch up the relationship, with a meeting in Brussels between Foreign Minister Babacan and his Israeli counterpart Tzipi Livni at which the two sides had stressed the strategic importance of their relationship and discussed what needed to be done to secure regional peace.²¹ It thus appeared that, as on previous occasions, Turkish-Israeli relations operated on two separate levels, with occasional public outbursts, counteracted by quiet diplomacy behind the scenes. On their side, the Israelis seemed to be anxious to maintain the relationship since, in spite of the peace treaties Israel had signed with Egypt and Jordan, its relationship with the Arab states was still extremely cool, and Turkey was its only regular and relatively friendly point of contact with the Muslim world — a relationship defined by Ofra Bengio as asymmetric Israeli dependence on Turkey.²²

The apparent restoration of relations with Israel raised the question as to whether Turkey could put Ahmet Davutoğlu's suggested role as an "order-instituting country" into practice by playing an active part as a peace-maker between Israelis and the Palestinians. On this score, Turkey had been prepared to step out of line with both the US and the main European states by urging that Hamas, as the effective rulers of Gaza, should be brought into the peace process as legitimate actors. Equally, Turkish diplomacy tried to bring the two Palestinian parties (that is, Fatah and Hamas) into a common front. In February 2006 there had been sharp criticisms from Israel when Khaled Mashal, the exiled leader of Hamas, paid what was described as an unofficial visit to Ankara for talks with Abdullah Gül, then the foreign minister. Israeli protests were met with the argument that Gül had tried to persuade Mashal to accept Israel's right to exist within its pre-1967 borders and reject the use of violence.²³ The fact that this attempt failed, however, did not persuade Turkish policy-makers to abandon it. Prior to becoming foreign minister, Davutoğlu had further conversations with Mashal in Syria, and in February 2009 George Mitchell, the US special envoy for the Middle East, arrived in Ankara for talks about Turkey's possible role in the Middle East peace process.²⁴ The difficulty for Turkey was that although it was keen to act as an intermediary, it had little leverage on its own over either Israel or the Palestinians. In effect, achieving peace in the Middle East depended on a more active engagement by the United States. On this score, earlier expectations were that while President Obama would be more engaged than his predecessor, his immediate priority would be to deal with the economic crisis, and other foreign policy issues such as Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Hence, he could be expected to bide his time before making any crucial moves.²⁵ These predictions turned out to be too cautious, however. In



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what was described as a “watershed moment”,²⁶ Obama’s speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009 came as a clear and dramatic attempt to reach out to the Muslim Middle East. It had been preceded by his meetings in Washington with the Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu and the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The problem remained that there was still a wide gap between what Netanyahu was offering and what Abbas was likely to accept. Moreover, Hamas was still being left out of the dialogue.

Relations with Syria: From Confrontation to Cooperation

The dramatic turnaround in Turkey’s relations with Syria since 1998, when the former Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad expelled the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from his country, had also given Turkey the opportunity to act as a go-between in indirect talks between Israel and Syria for a settlement of their dispute over the Golan Heights. This seemed less difficult to achieve, since there was only one party in each corner, in contrast to the split between Fatah and Hamas on the Palestinian side. Moreover, the Golan Heights did not have the emotional or religious significance of the West Bank (especially Jerusalem) and contained relatively few Jewish settlers, who would probably have to be evacuated if the territory were

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returned to Syrian sovereignty. Following Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's announcement in April 2008 that Israel had offered to withdraw from the Golan in return for a peace treaty with Syria, Turkey had mediated in four rounds of indirect talks between officials of the two

countries in Istanbul, with Turkish officials shuttling between them.²⁷ The Syrian side suspended the talks in December 2008, following the Israeli attacks on Gaza. Nonetheless, in March 2009, as Israel was in the throes of forming a new government, President al-Assad announced that Syria would be ready to resume them, regardless of the shape of the Israeli cabinet, while his foreign minister, Walid Muallim, asked Babacan to resume his efforts.²⁸

By mid-May 2009, the problem appeared to be on the Israeli side, as the new government under Benjamin Netanyahu was split between ultra-nationalist Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who resisted talking to Syria so long as it continued to support Hamas and the militant Shi'ite Lebanese movement Hizbullah, while the centre-left Defense Minister Ehud Barak favored the launch of full peace talks with both the Syrians and the Palestinians. Prime Minister Netanyahu simply said that Israel would not cede the Golan Heights for the sake of peace with Syria. As the Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman put it, "Turkey is always ready to play its role as a facilitator... but that will happen only if the two parties are ready to talk."²⁹ The Syrian president was also anxious to have direct US involvement in the talks, as the best way of ensuring Israel met its commitments.³⁰ In a visit to Damascus on May 7, a senior State Department official was reported to have told the Syrian government that President Obama had "a sincere commitment to pursue Arab-Israeli peace on all tracks, including the Syrian-Israeli track."³¹ To make this meaningful, however, the US would need to induce Prime Minister Netanyahu to reverse his stated position on the Golan Heights. In the meantime, the best Turkey could do would be to continue to offer its good offices, in the hope that conditions would change, and its efforts would be appreciated by the US as well as Syria.

While the Syrian-Israeli peace process, and Turkey's role in it, was thus left in limbo, other aspects of Syrian-Turkish relations flourished. These included an impressive increase in bilateral trade, encouraged by the signature of a free trade agreement in 2007. As a result, the trade volume between the two countries increased from US\$729 million in 2000 to US\$2,754 million in 2008.³² This is a relatively small proportion of Turkey's total trade with the region, but its political significance — given the past history of tense relations between the two coun-

tries — is substantial. As part of the rapprochement, Syria's claim to the province of Alexandretta (Hatay), which was annexed by Turkey in 1939, was effectively shelved, and apparently the two sides even made progress in settling their long-running dispute over the division of waters of the Euphrates, which flows from Turkey into Syria, and from there into Iraq.³³

Relations with Iran: Under the Shadow of Economic Dependence

Finally, Turkey had to consider what initiatives it might adopt in relations with its eastern neighbor, Iran. As has been frequently noticed, Turkish-Iranian relations since the Iranian revolution of 1979 have been far more cooperative than might be expected, given that the two countries are at opposite ideological poles, pitching radical Islamism against secularist democracy. After a period of clashes during the 1990s, in which PKK gangs apparently used Iranian territory for attacks on Turkey, provoking cross-border attacks by the Turkish air force in 1999, a cautious entente was established, which survived even the election of the 'neo-conservative' Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran in 2005. The two main points of convergence between Turkey and Iran were, first, their common economic interests, and second, an unexpected overlap in policies towards the Iraqi Kurds.

On the first score, Iran is one of Turkey's most important trading partners in the Middle East, with a total trade volume reaching over US\$10.2 billion in 2008, compared with just over US\$1 billion in 2000. Within this, however, there is a huge imbalance in Iran's favor, with Turkey's imports from Iran, which consist almost entirely of oil and natural gas, running at US\$8.2 billion in 2008, compared with exports of just over US\$2 billion.³⁴ For several years, Turkey has imported part of its gas needs from Iran, via a pipeline which began operating in December 2001. This pipeline accounted for about 17 percent of Turkey's gas imports in 2007,³⁵ although there had been several interruptions, due to disagreements over the price and technical problems on the Iranian side. In July 2007, however, Turkish and Iranian ministers signed a memorandum of understanding under which a new pipeline would be built, to carry 30 billion cubic meters of gas per year from Iran to Turkey and then to Europe. To help achieve this, the Turkish state petroleum corporation TPAO would develop Iran's South Pars gas field, which is planned to produce 20 billion cubic meters per year.³⁶ The main motive was to reduce Turkey's reliance on Russia for natural gas. It also aimed to act as a major conduit for non-Russian gas to central and eastern Europe, via the planned Nabucco pipeline project.³⁷ In this way, Turkey's approaches to Iran were tied in to its hopes of becoming an important energy corridor between the Caspian, the Middle East, and Europe.

The most serious obstacle facing the enlarged Iran-Turkey gas pipeline project was opposition from the US. Under the Iran-Libya Sanctions act passed by the US Congress in 1996 (from which Libya was dropped in 2006) sanctions can be placed in the US on any company investing more than US\$20 million per year in Iran's energy sector. So far, no companies have had to endure such sanctions since the president can waive them on grounds of 'national security', but legislation enacted by Congress in September 2007 closed this loophole.³⁸ Moreover, under the Bush administration, a US government spokesman repeatedly criticized the Turkey-Iran deal.³⁹ Against this, Turkey can argue that the US can hardly oppose reducing Russia's present grip on gas supplies to several European countries, and that the Europeans are not necessarily opposed in principle to the idea of Iranian supplies to Nabucco.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein had also brought Turkish and Iranian policies towards Iraq into convergence. To put it negatively, the Turkish parliament's refusal to support the US-led invasion of Iraq removed what would almost certainly have been a serious cause of conflict between Turkey and Iran. Subsequently, both countries opposed any territorial break-up of Iraq that might lead to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in the north of the country. Iran was also challenged by Kurdish insurgents of the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PEJAK) operating from northern Iraq, which appeared to have close links with the PKK. During 2007-09, violent clashes between PEJAK and Iranian forces were reported, with serious casualties on the Iranian side.⁴⁰ Iran claimed that PEJAK was supported by the US, but this was hotly denied by US authorities, and the US government belatedly classified PEJAK as a terrorist organization in February 2009. Clearly, Turkey and Iran had a common interest in defeating PKK/PEJAK: in February 2008 they signed a memorandum on 'security cooperation', with the chief of the Turkish General Staff admitting that the two countries were sharing intelligence and coordinating military operations against the PKK.⁴¹ Given that the two countries had handled their relationship reasonably well, there was at least some prospect that they could continue this after US combat troops were withdrawn from Iraq. The critical danger that both countries had to avoid was that a civil war in Iraq could turn into a proxy war between its neighbors, as in the case of the Lebanese civil war of 1974-88.

In the meantime, the most serious problem in relations between Ankara and Tehran derives from real worries that Iran intends to develop its own nuclear weapons, whatever its protestations to the contrary. Moreover, in August 2004 Iran was reported to have tested a new version of its Shahab-3 missile, with a

range of 2,000 kilometers, putting both Turkey and Israel, as well as the rest of the Middle East, potentially within range of an Iranian nuclear strike.⁴² Faced with this danger, Turkey has been, as one Israeli observer puts it, “surprisingly nonchalant”,⁴³ and its reaction has provoked very little public attention, in Turkey or elsewhere. Turkish observers re-

mark that Turkey has no important bilateral disputes with Iran — in fact, the two countries have not fought a war against one another since the eighteenth century — so Iran would be most unlikely to attack Turkey unless Turkey was allowing its territory to be used by a third party to attack Iran (the US and Israel being the most obvious candidates for this). Hence, Turkey is very unlikely to allow bases on its soil to be used for an air strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities, assuming that either the US or Israel would need such bases. In facing up to the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran, the few Turkish strategic analysts who have addressed the issue point out that Turkey survived the long years of the Cold War as a neighbor of the USSR, but was protected by the NATO nuclear umbrella, and could do so again.⁴⁴ Turkey favors a completely de-nuclearised Middle East — by implication, covering Israel as well as Iran — and supports the efforts of the European ‘troika’ of Britain, France and Germany to persuade Iran to halt its nuclear program without resort to force. In response, Turkey is extremely unlikely to develop its own nuclear weapons, since this would cause an irreparable rupture with its Western allies and the EU. It has however, been investigating the possibility of acquiring its own anti-missile defense system. Hence, the Turkish air force was reported to be mulling the options of buying either a combination of the Patriot 2 and Patriot 3 missiles produced by the US firms Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, or the Russian-made S-400 system. If — paradoxically for a NATO member — it chose the Russian system, this would be a further bone of contention with the US.⁴⁵

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An important change resulting from the inauguration of the Obama administration was that the new president seemed anxious to engage with Iran as a means of resolving the nuclear dispute. This approach was bound to be welcomed by Turkey, which would naturally benefit from the de-escalation of a conflict between its most important ally and a powerful neighbor. In February 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan revealed that during the previous US administration the Iranian government had asked him to help resolve its long-running disputes with Washington, and that he would raise this issue with President Obama.⁴⁶ Some

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three weeks later, President Gül, in a visit to Tehran, told President Ahmadinejad and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei that Washington was sincere in its changed approach. Whether this would produce any change in the Iranian reaction remained doubtful, however, given that Ahmadinejad later said that there was no need for Turkish mediation between Iran and the US, while Khamanei opined that there was no sign that the new administration in Washington was trying to correct its predecessor's

"big mistakes" in the Middle East.⁴⁷ Serious uncertainty was also created by the outcome of Iran's presidential elections in June 2009. The establishment of a more democratic regime would be to the clear advantage of Turkey and the western powers in general, but was likely to be preceded by a prolonged period of turbulence. On the other hand, if Ahmadinejad survived as president, then the Obama administration would probably try to continue a dialogue with it, even if this proved fruitless. If the confrontation between Iran and the west continued, and Obama's 'engagement' with Iran proved fruitless, then Washington was likely to press for far stronger economic sanctions against Iran than had hitherto been applied. Given Turkey's substantial economic links with Iran, this was not likely to be welcomed by Ankara: the best Turkey could reasonably hope for that tougher sanctions would be vetoed by Russia in the UN Security Council.

Concluding Remarks

These developments prompt some observations about the balance sheet of successes and failures of Turkey's recent policies in the Middle East. Clearly, Ankara's attempt to achieve "zero problems" in its relations with its neighbors is hard to oppose in principle: it was obviously better to try to resolve problems than to continue with xenophobic attitudes which had assumed that Turkey was "surrounded by enemies". The blossoming relationship with Syria, and cooperative relationships with the new government of Iraq — even the beginning of a dialogue with Massoud Barzani — were clear signs of this. On the other hand, the "zero problems" goal was clearly very hard to achieve if the neighbors were in conflict with one another — the continuing clashes between Israel and the Palestinians, and the ongoing tension between Israel and Syria, being clear examples.⁴⁸ Turkey's at-

tempts to resolve these conflicts had to be applauded, but unfortunately, they were of limited effect, given that it had little leverage over the disputants. In the popular English saying, Turkey could lead the horses to water, if they were so minded, but it could not make them drink. Timing was also unfortunate, in that in 2008 the Israeli government collapsed just when it might have reached an accord with Syria over the Golan Heights. On most issues, moreover, Turkey could not easily uncouple its relations with the main Middle Eastern states from its alliance with the US. So long as America had a continuing military presence in the country, this was clearly the case in the relationship with Iraq, but its links with Washington also had an important effect on its relations with both Iran and Israel.

The most controversial part of Turkey's policy towards the region was probably the continuing contacts which it had with Hamas, and its fierce criticisms of Israel, typified by Tayyip Erdoğan's abrupt and angry departure from the meeting with Shimon Peres in Davos in January 2009. However, as the London newsweekly *The Economist* remarked soon afterwards, there were "diplomatic benefits of an undiplomatic outburst".⁴⁹ Rather than damaging Turkey's standing with the new administration in Washington, the plaudits that Erdoğan won from such fervently anti-American Muslim leaders as President Ahmedinejad gave Turkey a credibility in the rest of the Muslim world which it had previously lacked. The Obama administration could benefit from this, by developing the link with Turkey as an "outrider", who could make friendly contact with regimes with which the United States had hitherto had very tense relations, or none at all. In this way, Turkey's initiatives in the Middle East fitted in well with its global interests.

Endnotes

1. Ali Babacan, interview on NTV television (Istanbul) March 8, 2009: see NTV website (www.ntvmsnbc.com).

2. For the full text in English, see *Hürriyet Daily News*, internet edition, (www.hurriyet.com.tr/english) April 6, 2009.

3. Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2000) esp pp. 183-208. See also Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.42, No.6 (2006) pp. 945-55.

4. Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı," *Radikal*, February 26, 2002. See also his article "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: an Assessment of 2007," *Insight Turkey*, Vol.10, No.1 (2008) pp. 78-9.

5. Quoted, *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 4, 2009.

6. See the report by Cumali Önal, Cairo correspondent of *Zaman* newspaper, "Arap dünyası Davutoğlu'nu konuşuyor", *Zaman*, May 4, 2009.

7. Foreign trade data from website of Turkish Statistical Institute, Ankara (www.tuik.gov.tr).
8. Date from website of Central Bank of Republic of Turkey (www.tcmb.gov.tr).
9. An example occurred in May 2009, when the Austrian company OMV and the Hungarian company MOL, together with Crescent Petroleum and Dana Gas, of the United Arab Emirates, announced they had formed a consortium to export gas from northern Iraq to feed into the proposed Nabucco pipeline, passing through Turkey, which was to be completed in 2014. Nabucco was expected to be an important source of supply to consumers in central and eastern Europe, reducing their dependence on Russia. It was originally expected to draw gas from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, but there were doubts about how much could be drawn from these sources, for both political and technical reasons. However, the Iraqi oil ministry promptly announced that it rejected deals signed by the KRG with Crescent and Dana in 2007, saying that it would supply Nabucco with gas from its own Akkas field. *Today's Zaman*, (www.todayszaman.com) May 18-19, 2009.
10. *Turkish Daily News* (www.turkishdailynews.com: since December 2008 published as *Hürriyet Daily News* – see note 2 above) March 14, April 14, 2007: website of CNNTurk television, Istanbul (www.cnnturk.com) June 12, 2007.
11. CNNTurk website, November 5, 2007.
12. *Hürriyet* (www.hurriyet.com.tr) December 16, 2007, February 22, 2008: BBC News website (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>) December 22-25, 2007, February 29, 2008: *Today's Zaman* January 16, 2008.
13. See note 2, above.
14. *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 16, 2009
15. *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 14, 2009.
16. *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 8, 2009: NTV website, May 2, 2009: *Today's Zaman*, May 15, 2009
17. For example, in April 2002 the then Prime Minister, Bülent Ecevit, described Israeli attacks on PLO positions in the West Bank as “genocide against the Palestinian people”, provoking protests from the US Congress (he later apologised): *Hürriyet*, April 17, 2002.
18. Bülent Aras, “Turkey and the Palestinian Question”, *Today's Zaman*, January 19, 2009.
19. *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 29, 2009.
20. NTV website, January 29, 2009.
21. NTV website, March 5, 2009.
22. Ofra Bengio, “Altercating Interests and Orientations between Israel and Turkey: a View from Israel”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol.11, No.2 (2009) pp. 43-55.
23. *Hürriyet*, and NTV website, February 17, 2006.
24. *Today's Zaman*, February 2, February 6, 2009.
25. “Israel and the Obama Presidency: a Roundtable Discussion”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol 12, No.4 (2008): contributions by Ambassador Danny Ayalon and Zvi Rafiah.
26. Mark Urban, (www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/markurban/2009/06).
27. *Today's Zaman*, April 25, May 22, 2008: BBC News website (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>) April 23, 2008: CNNTurk website, June 2 2008. For background, see Meliha Altunışık and Özlem Tur, “From Distant Neighbours to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations”, *Security Dialogue*, Vol.37, No.2 (2006).
28. NTV website, March 3, 2009: *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 10, 2009.
29. *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 13, 2009: *Today's Zaman*, May 15, 2009.

30. *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 10, 2009.
31. *Today's Zaman*, May 7, 2009.
32. Foreign trade data from website of Turkish Statistical Institute, Ankara (www.tuik.gov.tr).
33. In March 2008 the Turkish, Syrian and Iraqi governments agreed to establish a 'Water Institute' of experts from each country to work out schemes for reconciling their conflicting claims: *Today's Zaman*, March 12, 2008.
34. Foreign trade data from website of Turkish Statistical Institute, Ankara (www.tuik.gov.tr).
35. Data from Turkish Pipeline Corporation, BOTAŞ: (www.botas.gov.tr).
36. *Turkish Daily News*, July 16, 2007.
37. See above, note 9.
38. *Turkish Daily News*, September 27, October 1, 2007.
39. *Turkish Daily News*, September 22, 2007: *Today's Zaman*, September 24, 2007.
40. *Turkish Daily News*, 28 February, March 1, March 2, June 1, June 14, August 20, 2007: *Today's Zaman*, September 24 2007: CNNTurk website, March 13, 2008: *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 2, 2009.
41. *Today's Zaman*, May 12, 2009: *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 19, 2009.
42. BBC News website (<http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk>), October 5, 2004.
43. Efraim Inbar : quoted, Ian Lesser, "Turkey, Iran and Nuclear Risks", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Summer 2004, p.84.
44. Efraim Inbar : quoted, Ian Lesser, "Turkey, Iran and Nuclear Risks", p.84.
45. *Today's Zaman*, October 3, 2007.
46. *Hürriyet Daily News*, February 25, 2009.
47. *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 12, 2009.
48. While it lies outside the scope of this essay, the continuing dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabagh serves as another example.
49. "Repairing the Bridge: the Diplomatic Benefits of an Undiplomatic Outburst", *The Economist* (London, weekly) March 12, 2009.