Turkey's 'double gravity' predicament: the foreign policy of a newly activist power

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A double gravity state is one that 'feels the contrasting gravitational pull of the norms of behaviour of at least two regions, but finds it difficult to reconcile these sets of claims'.[1]

It is a little less than a decade ago that governance in Turkey was transformed, and with it that country's foreign policy. The previous era of weak and incoherent governments was swept away with the defeat in 2002 of the government led by Bülent Ecevit. In the place of this three-party coalition, straddling the centre right and nationalist left, emerged a dual novelty: a political system based on a dominant single party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP),[2] which rejected the old ideological order of Kemalism; and a political value system based on Sunni Islam that has come to replace the repudiated old order. The combination was a neat piece of electoral calculation. With all of the mainstream Kemalist parties discredited, and the votes of the Sunni Muslims, roughly 80 per cent of the country's population, up for grabs, the AKP saw its chance. It has not looked back, winning its third successive election in June 2011, with a fraction under 50 per cent of the national vote.

Since its original breakthrough, the AKP[3]—increasingly dominated by its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan[4]—has developed a theory of power designed to maintain its pre-eminent position, but without seriously jeopardizing its democratic credentials. The main components of this formula have been a booming economy, delivering prosperity all round, notably to the new business elites of the Anatolian 'tiger' economies;[5] political consolidation at home, at the expense of

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1 For more on the notion of 'double gravity' states, see Philip Robins, 'The 2005 BRISMES lecture. A double gravity state: Turkish foreign policy reconsidered', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 33: 2, Nov. 2006, pp. 199–211.

2 For a discussion of this and related matters, see Ali Çarkoğlu, 'Turkey's 2011 general elections: towards a dominant party system?', *Insight Turkey* 13: 3, 2011, pp. 43–62.

3 It should be remembered that Erdoğan was initially banned from politics when the AKP won its first electoral victory, under the temporary leadership of Abdullah Gül. Once the ban had been lifted and Erdoğan had joined parliament in a by-election, he resumed the leadership of the party and became prime minister. Gül became foreign minister, a position he would hold until elected president of Turkey in July 2007.

4 For a barbed evaluation of Erdoğan in power, see Gideon Rachman, 'Don't be blind to Erdogan's flaws', *Financial Times*, 11 Oct. 2011.

5 If the AKP is the political wing of the Anatolian counter-elite, which came to power a decade ago, the businessmen of the Turkish interior are their commercial counterparts. The 'tiger' economies refer to such cities as Kayseri and Gaziantep that have driven forward economic growth in Turkey, expecially since the turn of the century.

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the so-called 'bureaucratic–military tutelage', more often referred to by its political–ideological epithet as the 'Kemalist' elite;[6] and strong, increasingly populist leadership, especially in the realm of foreign affairs, with the goal of rebuilding the self-esteem of the Turkish people and defusing potential foreign policy pitfalls through the development of a 'zero problems with neighbours' approach. This was a strategy that worked extremely well, at least until spring 2011.

This article will argue that, in spite of the AKP's attempts to project itself as a 'central' country in a new international subsystem broadly occupying space in the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has neither the power nor the strength to sustain a core role. Turkey therefore remains a 'double gravity state': a plausible yet volatile actor on the edge of the subsystems of continental Europe and the Middle East. A misconceived policy towards Syria is but the starkest manifestation of this policy instability in practice.

Trying to be a good Euro-Muslim government

Turkey wants to be a member of the EU. It wanted to join in 2002, and it still wants to in 2013, admittedly with less zeal and greater calculation than before. However, its ambition is not a reflection either of liberal values or of a decisive choice to embrace a European identity over a Middle Eastern one. For the AKP the aim was primarily instrumental and self-serving, an opportunity to harness the EU's capacity and apply it to its own ends.

The AKP government initially wanted to gain entry because anchoring Turkey to the EU promised to circumscribe the latent domestic political threat from the career military,[7] which brought down four governments between 1960 and 1997, and which was at its most threatening for the AKP government between 2003 and 2004. After all, this was a period of some domestic political ferment, as indicated by the codename 'Sledgehammer' given to alleged coup attempts in Turkey based on political activities among state personnel in 2003, when Kemalist officers, senior bureaucrats and intellectuals were alleged to have come closest to launching a *coup d'état* against the Erdoğan government.[8] Hence the inclusion in the EU–Turkey harmonization packages of such provisions as the de-fanging of the National Security Council, through its removal from military control.

Over time, however, this motivation became less pressing. By July 2007 the career military had decisively lost this latest round in the struggle with the AKP

[6] The ideology of 'Kemalism' is a body of ideas based on those values most closely associated with the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Its two central tenets are secularism (or, more accurately, laicism), according to which religion in general must be controlled by the state and therefore not be independent from it; and nationalism rooted in an overarching Turkish identity based upon subjective inclusivity rather than blood lineage. Atatürk having died in 1938, Kemalist ideology has become at least as much what his adherents have made of it as his preferences in action.

[7] Though Turkey has an army of some 500,000 men, the second largest in terms of manpower within NATO, the vast majority of these are conscripts. It is only the officer and NCO contingents that represent the career military, numbering perhaps some 90,000 at most.

[8] Speculation about the existence of 'stirrings' within the lower echelons of the Turkish officer corps at the indulgence being shown towards the AKP by the Turkish state had already come the way of the British embassy as early as May 2003 (author's unattributable interview, 14 May 2005).

for the future of Turkey's political soul. This helps to explain why Erdoğan was so blasé about the deterioration in relations with Europe during and after this period.

The passing value of a European anchor was not, however, the only basis for Turkish aspirations towards Europe. The AKP government wanted to deepen Turkey's relationship with the EU for two other reasons. One was a desire to enhance its chances of delivering economic prosperity at home, and hence of maintaining power through the ballot box. With roughly half of Turkish trade going to EU member countries prior to the 2008 credit crunch, and the majority of foreign direct investment (FDI) coming from Europe,[9] it made sound material sense for Turkey to stay close to the economic centre of gravity in the European landmass. The fact that the commercial maturity of the EU might be enlisted by the AKP in order to maximize the chances of its electoral success (i.e. European secularists guaranteeing Islamist government) must have struck the party's leadership as a delicious irony.

The other factor was less tangible but more strategic, as far as the AKP's long-term vision was concerned. If Turkey was to become increasingly attractive as a 'centre' country,[10] it needed to be able to point to an intimate relationship with the EU, the largest and most coherent bloc of states in its geopolitical vicinity. Seen through the lenses of 2025 vision, the view from the upper echelons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara was that EU + Turkey = world power;[11] nowhere was this view held so strongly as in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world, where Turkey under the AKP was viewed figuratively as having 'come home' to its spiritual roots.

But the strategic aspiration of the relationship cut both ways. The new Turkish government could see that one very good chance of making progress in its relations to the north lay in developing growing ties to the south. Ankara claimed to be able to understand and plausibly deliver a closer and more credible relationship with the Muslim world, to the potential benefit of the EU. Though the argument was never sufficient to silence the dissenters within the EU about the merits of Turkish accession, it certainly made the counter-elite of the AKP a more attractive partner than the old xenophobic Kemalist elites who had previously tended to dominate Turkish policy.

Turkey's attempt to present itself as a good Euro-Muslim actor was bolstered, though with minimal finesse and doubtful efficacy, by the Americans.[12] The United States was quicker than its European allies to see the potential for Turkey as a model of governance for the wider Muslim world. It strained to back what it regarded as the Turkish practice of Islam, which it contrasted with puritanical

[9] This even included Greece, before the massive contraction of its economy in the wake of the credit crunch. For example, the Bank of Greece bought a €3 billion (46 per cent) stake in Turkey's Finansbank in August 2006.

[10] It was so described by Ahmet Davutoğlu, speaking at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), London, on 10 June 2008.

[11] Author's unattributable interview with senior Turkish diplomat, Ankara, 27 July 2011.

[12] For the latest policy perspective, see 'US–Turkey relations: a new partnership' (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2012).

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Wahhabism and the destructive 'total war' of Al-Qaeda.[13] Turkish participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan ensured that the continuing instability there was not widely regarded as 'a re-run of the Crusades'. Cordial Israeli–Turkish relations, at the level of state institutions, was also a source of relief in apparently debunking Huntingtonian views of a clash of civilizations on religious lines.

American sponsorship of Turkey for membership of the European club even survived the Iraq War of 2003, although, in the words of one senior State Department official speaking on the residual impact on bilateral relations, 'it was just as well that it was a short war'. The US had assumed that Turkish assistance would be forthcoming in aiding the creation of a second, northern front in Iraq. Ankara prevaricated in order to bid up the price of the deal, something that irritated the United States, though it never seriously doubted ultimately getting what it wanted.

Then, in a vote on 1 March 2003, cock-up trumped conspiracy. The relevant motion failed to pass by three votes on a procedural technicality, with just about everyone, the AKP government included, in disarray. For the Muslim 'street', the Arab world and much further afield, the technicality was a technicality. All that mattered was that a Muslim country had spurned the world's remaining superpower and had prospered as a result. Overnight, Erdoğan had become a popular hero, and he would remain so—until 2011.

In the end, Turkish help was delivered to the United States, albeit after a short delay, and by sleight of hand. Bowing to the inevitable, Erdoğan and the AKP pragmatically agreed to aid the Americans indirectly in their forcible removal from power of the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein—on one condition: that Washington remained discreet in its public diplomacy about the assistance provided by Ankara.

2005: the great divide

Which came first: the vaulting disdain of the EU or the pompous outrage of Erdoğan?

Nearly a decade later, it is hard to disassociate them in one's mind. Erdoğan had initially hoped that Turkey's accession negotiations might get the go-ahead at the Copenhagen summit in December 2002. The timetable was hopelessly ambitious. Nevertheless, the energetic shuttle diplomacy of Erdoğan and his main ally in the AKP, Abdullah Gül, had succeeded in introducing Turkey's new generation of leaders to their European counterparts. By and large the personal engagement went well. Though Erdoğan was disappointed at the lack of a tangible early outcome, he was nevertheless persuaded that Turkey should try harder, both by embracing more of the *acquis communautaire*, notably on the death penalty, and by adopting a radical change to its policy on Cyprus.

[13] From which Turkey suffered directly and tragically, with the synagogue and bank bombs of 15 and 20 November 2003 respectively, showing that Al-Qaeda views even the Turkey of the AKP as a strategic enemy.

Cyprus

The AKP government did nothing less than overturn one of Turkey's unquestioned assumptions in completely revising policy towards Cyprus.[14] Rather than indulge northern Cyprus, the AKP leadership chose to sideline its leader, Rauf Denktaş, and place itself at the forefront of innovation in policy.[15] In one respect, this was easy. The AKP was largely free from the bundle of Kemalist vested interests over Cyprus. These included the prestige conferred by the July 1974 invasion on otherwise unpopular politicians associated with it, such as Bülent Ecevit; the permanent presence of a large Turkish military contingent on the island, believed to be 30,000 strong; the introduction of a colonial settler class from the Turkish peasant interior; and the institutional criminality associated most egregiously with the banking sector in the Turkish north. Unconstrained by any of these factors, the AKP regime simply endorsed the new thinking emerging from the UN on Cyprus, being able to adopt it as policy in 2003. There followed the Annan Plan,[16] which was eventually submitted to referendums on both sides of the Green Line in April 2004.

It was at this point that Turkish relations with the EU really began to sour. The northern Cypriots overwhelmingly endorsed the Annan Plan; their counterparts in the Greek south decisively voted it down. Instead of Greek Cyprus being sanctioned for such a missed opportunity, the de facto penalties were applied to the Turkish side. The Greek Cypriots, in the guise of the government of Cyprus, were still permitted to join the EU as full members in 2004, because of the linkage politics that would otherwise have resulted in Greece using its veto against the aspirant member states in eastern Europe.[17] Because the dispute was not resolved, the northern Cypriots lost aid that had been promised as an incentive for their cooperation. Most significantly, a row over Cypriot access to ports and airports in Turkey was used, ironically with Turkish connivance, to halt further progress on accession. Ankara would eventually see eight chapters of the accession agenda blocked because of its intransigence on this matter.

The end rather than the beginning

Once accession negotiations had begun, it became clear that certain EU member states had no intention of negotiating in good faith. The lead villain, from the Turkish perspective, was the recently elected president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy. It was not just that he was against the idea of Turkish membership. After all, it

[14] Author's unattributable interview with senior member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 11 June 2004.

[15] The US embassy in Ankara was extravagant in its praise for Erdoğan and his 'courageous initiative' over Cyprus (author's unattributable interview with senior US diplomat, Ankara, 13 May 2003).

[16] The Annan Plan was relaunched in New York on 13 Feb. 2004.

[17] Turkey was in a state of denial over the existence of such a situation at the time. Korkmaz Haktanır, the Turkish ambassador to the UK, former permanent under-secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a noted Cyprus hawk, was perceived to continue to believe until the end that if Turkey complained loud enough the accession of Cyprus would be derailed (author's unattributable interview with a diplomatic source, Ankara, 26 Sept. 2001).

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could be argued that Germany under Angela Merkel,[18] together with a mixed bag of other countries including Austria and Cyprus, were against the idea of its accession.[19] Sarkozy's opposition to Turkey's aspirations, however, was visceral and public. Under his leadership, France blocked movement on a further five chapters, including those, like agriculture, closely associated with full membership of the Union. Meanwhile, some of the European leaders with whom Erdoğan had got on best early in his premiership—Blair and Berlusconi; Papandreou and Schroeder—had fallen or would soon fall by the political wayside, leaving Erdoğan without encouragement or informed advice.

The opening of negotiations in October 2005 was supposed to have been a twin celebration of Europe's commitment to racial and religious tolerance, and Turkey's ability to reach the exacting target of European standards, whether in the realm of economics or that of good governance. In reality, it looked as if the worst of both worlds had been achieved: an exercise in European foot-dragging, and a Turkish assumption of entitlement. Accession negotiations soon proved to be a paper exercise with no political substance, as well as focusing Turkish frustrations towards Brussels. One senior Turkish diplomat added up the scorecard thus: in six years, out of 33 chapters (policy fields), 13 have been opened, one concluded (science and research) and 19 blocked for essentially political reasons.[20]

In contrast to his positive reaction to the Copenhagen summit in December 2002, Erdoğan's attitude towards the EU showed a marked cooling in the middle of the decade. Turkey slowed the pace of internal reform and Erdoğan became a much more infrequent visitor to the EU countries. It would not be long before he would start to mutter aloud about the return of the death penalty. In June 2005 Erdoğan gave the portfolio of EU chief negotiator to Ali Babacan, a man who was already overburdened by his main responsibilities as deputy premier with responsibility for the economy. It was clear that for Erdoğan, EU membership was now much more about economic growth than about the improvement of standards. True, he would subsequently appoint Egemen Bağiş as Turkey's chief negotiator, with cabinet rank; but Bağiş was an AKP activist much more familiar with the US than with Europe.

The Middle East: tending the other side of the garden

Though the AKP's relationship with the EU had gone into sharp decline, this was not reflected in its foreign policy in general. Erdoğan and Gül had established themselves as inveterate travellers, with a high and positive profile, and were not about to relinquish their frequent flyer air miles. Action in two areas would race ahead to fill the EU void. One was the Middle East; the other was the wider

[18] Germany favoured a 'privileged partnership' for the long-term relationship between the EU and Turkey, although one may look in vain for any policy paper detailing the parameters, let alone the contents, of such a vision.

[19] Although Angela Merkel also maintained that it was imperative to honour the commitments of the past, as she would do as part of Germany's current policy.

[20] Author's unattributable interview with senior member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 27 July 2011.

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context of global diplomacy. In both, part of Turkey's aim was to demonstrate to the EU that it was too strong and important a regional power to exclude. But Turkish foreign policy was by no means mortgaged exclusively to the European relationship. Turkey was drawn to the Middle East by the gravitational pull of hard and fast interests, especially with those states that lay adjacent to its territory.

Iraq

The overall importance of Turkey to Middle East dynamics had most recently been demonstrated in the run-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq.[21] The states of the old 'Northern Tier' feared that competition for influence in Iraq might break out among their number. This could easily have led to conflict and regional contagion. It could also have resulted in a bid by the Iraqi Kurds to establish their own state, with the centrifugal impact that this would have had on Turkey's own Kurds. To neutralize such dangers, Turkey convened an ad hoc meeting of all key regional actors in Istanbul in January 2003, an initiative that soon grew into a process that was sustained over a five-year period. This Iraq 'Neighbourhood Countries Process' was tremendously successful within its own frame of reference. It only came to an end once three things had become clear: that the Iraqi state would not fracture; that the other powers in the region were reassured regarding the motives of their fellow states towards Iraq; and that the group itself had overexpanded as a reflection of its growing prestige, but diminishing effectiveness. For Turkey, the danger from Iraq was for the moment over.

There were other ways in which Turkey's policy in the Middle East prospered during this time. An AKP foreign policy on Iraq differed from that of its Kemalist predecessors in desecuritizing policy towards the country as a whole, and the Kurdish north in particular. Instead of indexing relations exclusively to the Kurdish issue, as had perennially been the case in the early to mid-1990s, Ankara developed and expanded its political relationships throughout Iraq, to include even the most unlikely of partners, the impulsive, populist Shi'i Muqtada al-Sadr. Relations with the main Iraqi Kurdish parties in the north, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), were given a consciously commercial focus, rather than concentrating exclusively on security rivalry, as in the past. The emerging economic interdependencies between the KDP and Turkey were particularly lucrative for both sides and, nearly a decade later, continue to flourish.[22]

Israel and the Palestinians

While Iran, Iraq and Syria loomed large in Turkey's foreign and security priorities in the Middle East, its central focus during this time was on Israel, the Palestinian

[21] For a detailed discussion of Turkey's Iraq policy, as an illustration of wider policy, see Mesut Özcan, 'From distance to engagement: Turkish policy towards the Middle East', *Insight Turkey* 13: 2, 2011, pp. 71–92.

[22] By March 2012, an estimated 70% of FDI in Iraqi Kurdistan had been supplied by businesses and organizations operating in Turkey. The remaining 30% was spread among 20 other countries.

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question and the Levant in general. It was the passage of events in this arena that most strongly prompted accusations that the AKP government was taking on the complexion of an Islamist actor.

This phase began with Hamas's success in the Palestinian general election in January 2006—as much 'a surprise' in Turkey as anywhere else[23]—and continued with Turkey's protest at the 34-day conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon that summer. With respect to the first, the AKP government faced the same dilemma as the Europeans and the United States: respecting the legitimate Palestinian democratic voice while opposing the illegitimate use of political violence, in other words, 'terrorism'. Turkey resolved its dilemma more quickly and decisively than most. It believed that the imperative was to socialize and moderate Hamas. Consequently, it dispatched various delegations to meet and engage with the organization. Ankara also sent non-combatants to south Lebanon, symbolically to join its fellow Europeans, such as Germany, in trying to bolster the UN tripwire, UNIFIL.

Though Israel and Turkey proved capable of successfully negotiating their relationship through these two developments, subsequent events would imply that this had been achieved more by luck than judgement. Israel failed to appreciate that the Palestinian issue was one of real emotive concern for much of the Turkish population, one on which it has displayed real animation at different times in the past. Moreover, for the AKP elite, Erdoğan included, the issue of justice for the Palestinians is one that incorporates—to borrow the words of former British Foreign Minister Robin Cook—'an ethical dimension' to foreign policy.

Against such a backdrop, a clutch of unforeseen contingencies threatened to ruin Israeli–Turkish relations. A visit to Turkey during which Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert neglected to mention his impending invasion of Gaza in 2008–2009 exposed Turkey to potential accusations of complicity.[24] Then, at a meeting in Davos in 2009, Erdoğan stormed off a public platform with Israel's President Peres in protest at the moderator's unequal treatment of his guests. And in 2012 the AKP government protested vociferously at Israel's most recent attack on Gaza. But the gravest event from a Turkish angle came with the *Mavi Marmara* tragedy and the killing of nine unarmed Turks from an Islamist NGO by Israeli commandos in international waters in May 2010. Since then, diplomatic relations have been severed, pending the fulfilment of two conditions: the payment by Israel of compensation to the families of those killed, and the issuing of a public apology.[25]

Global diplomacy

Though Turkey's foreign policy agenda seemed to be lengthening by the day with respect to the Middle East, this was not happening to the exclusion of all else. Gül in particular had begun to use international forums far more effectively as a channel

[23] Author's unattributable interview, Ankara, 26 Sept. 2006.
[24] 'Israel's Olmert visits Turkey to discuss talks with Syria', *Today's Zaman*, 23 Dec. 2008.
[25] Other apparent conditions of the restoration of bilateral relations—such as the end of the Gaza blockade and the dispatch of Turkish warships to accompany future flotillas to Gaza—have been quietly dropped.

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through which to seek new friends in the international system. In taking this route, Gül and Turkey were making the most of the harmonization programmes they had introduced under the auspices of the EU earlier in the decade. This aided Turkey's aspiration to be elected as one of the UN's non-permanent Security Council members.

One forum favoured by Gül was the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC),[26] of which Turkey was formally a member, but in which its Kemalist elite had focused almost exclusively on the uncontroversial area of economic matters. Such was the new-found commitment of Turkey to the OIC, an interest warmly reciprocated, that a former Turkish academic, Professor Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, was chosen in October 2005 to be Turkey's first ever secretary general of the organization. He would subsequently serve two terms. The fact that İhsanoğlu was elected by secret ballot was presented by the Turkish government as part of its commitment to 'democratizing' the body.[27]

From there onwards, Turkish-led multilateral diplomacy in the direction of good governance went into overdrive. Simply consider a sample of its activism: Turkey was given the status of an observer nation at Arab League summits;[28] in July 2007 there was a less developed nations summit in Istanbul; in August 2008 a Turkish–African summit was convened in Istanbul; in Africa, Turkey opened 21 new diplomatic missions in 2010–2011. Nor was activism with the developing world entirely formal in its emphasis, as this list might imply. Turkey was one of the first countries to deploy serious medical aid to drought-afflicted Somalia.[29] With such widespread intensity of engagement, Turkey got its way, being elected as part of the 2009–2010 non-permanent intake to the Security Council, its first presence there since 1961. Turkey was voted in with a massive total of 151 votes out of a total membership of 192.

The 'Arab Spring': distance breeds wisdom

Prior to the beginning of the Arab Spring, Turkish foreign policy under Ahmet Davutoğlu[30] had most famously been based on the principle of 'zero problems with neighbours'[31] (interpreted as 'maximum cooperation with neighbours' or

[26] See Gül's speech to the OIC conference in Tehran, 28 May 2003, http://www.tccb.gov.tr/sayfa/konusma_aciklama_mesajlar/kitap/62.pdf, accessed 20 Feb. 2013.

[27] Author's telephone interview with Feridun Sinirlioğlu, Turkish ambassador to Tel Aviv, 3 Aug. 2004.

[28] In Erdoğan's engagement with Sudan one can begin to see the international politics of expediency creeping into national policy. By attending an Arab summit in Sudan, Erdoğan seemed to endorse the authoritarian politics of Khartoum. A subsequent visit to Darfur was suggestive of a casual attitude towards human rights abuses in that area.

[29] 'Turkish doctors in Somalia treat 15,000 people in a month', *Weekly Zaman*, 24 Sept. 2011.

[30] As chief adviser to the premier and ambassador at large from 2002, Davutoğlu was an academic who was rather cagey about the extent of his impact on Turkey's foreign affairs. His stock at the centre of decision-making grew in 2006, with the development of relations between Turkey and Hamas. His appointment as foreign minister in May 2009 brought a new clarity to his impact on policy.

[31] The other four planks of Davutoğlu's approach were: balancing democracy and security at home; close contacts with adjacent regions, the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus; a complementary policy with global actors such as the US and the EU; and a diplomatic approach that is active in international organizations and peace-building efforts.

'zero problems with regimes', depending on how charitable one might be). This was a strategy personally identified with Davutoğlu and aimed at navigating Turkey under the AKP away from an array of bad bilateral relations during the 1980s. This new approach had initially served Turkey well. Though Erdoğan has been indisputably the leader of Turkey over the last decade, Davutoğlu has been the key figure in Turkish foreign policy during that time.[32] However, the fact that he did not have responsibility for negotiating Turkey's European accession meant that his perspective on external affairs was always geographically and institutionally skewed, in spite of the jocularity of his relationship with Baroness Ashton, the EU's foreign affairs supremo. Once Erdoğan had decided that the EU was a big disappointment for his government, there was little by way of perspective brought to bear through intragovernmental checks and balances on the foreign policy emanating from Ankara.

Tunisia and Egypt

Initially, the AKP government had 'a good Arab Spring'. It responded to the outbreak of unrest in Tunisia and Egypt by falling back on the populist slogan of 'let the people decide'. The 'zero problems' concept was quickly sidelined. It was a brilliant piece of public diplomacy. In one fell swoop, Erdoğan had managed to convey sympathy for the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples, while implicitly drawing attention to its own assumed democratic practices, Turkey's Kurds notwithstanding. It was a relatively easy judgement to make, Turkey having negligible economic interests in either country, and having experienced a long-strained relationship with Mubarak, the sort of military man who had been trying to persecute their decidedly civilian government in Ankara.

Such a decisive response would later allow Erdoğan to claim that he had supported the Egyptian freedom movement from day one.[33] Such a position could only bolster Turkey's standing in the Arab world, at least over the short to medium term. Whether deliberately or not, Erdoğan found himself at the head of regional public opinion. When Ben Ali and Mubarak fell, following short, ineffectual periods of resistance, the AKP government's political intuition seemed vindicated.

The Turkish model

Almost as soon as the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes had been toppled, attention focused on what might come next. Much discussion in western circles centred on the desirability of the so-called 'Turkish model' of government. This approach borrowed heavily from European and US visions, under which Turkey, a Muslim country, would become an exemplar for the wider Muslim world. For those who

[32] Davutoğlu's formative intellectual history—notably his spell at the International Islamic University of Malaysia, where he established the Department of Political Science—demonstrated his special interest in the developing Muslim world, beyond the Arab world.

[33] A claim included, for example, in his speech to the Arab League in Cairo on 13 Sept. 2011.

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knew Turkey well, the dilemma was more complex and more perilous: which Turkish model should be advocated? Was it to be the Kemalist Turkish model of an authoritarian political system with a pseudo-democratic veneer, dominated by the national military, dating back to 1960? Or was it to be the one that the US and Brussels imagined, namely a fusion of liberal values, democratic practices, and inclusive, pluralist political practices in a majority Muslim-populated country?

Confusion was briefly replaced by embarrassment, which was followed by clarification. Ankara, wary of too high a profile and inflated expectations, emphasized that it would not be appropriate for Turkey to act as a model. Phrases like 'Turkish-inspired' began to be attached to references to Turkey and the impact it might yet have on governance in the region, in place of the portentous image of a 'model'.

Libya

But that was not the end of the Arab Spring. Indeed, the phenomenon looked as if it could still spread in any or every direction at any time. The next focal point was to be Libya, a country to which—to quote one third-country foreign envoy—Turkey had 'sucked up',[34] along with other countries, because of its oil wealth.[35] Unrest in the east of the country, exacerbated by the guileless eccentricity and casual brutality of the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, let in the political opportunists in London and Paris. For Turkey, Libya was a much more substantive issue. Turkey had US$15 billion worth of outstanding—mainly construction—contracts distributed among hundreds of its companies in Libya,[36] and around US$1.5 billion worth of equipment on the ground. Most controversially, there were an estimated 30,000 Turkish nationals working in Libya. It was on the safety of the latter that Davutoğlu's and Erdoğan's effectiveness was most likely to be judged.

Initially, Erdoğan equivocated. He refused to allow NATO to coordinate a military response to Gaddafi, notably in the shape of command and control operations,[37] thereby necessitating a fairly ad hoc approach, at least at the outset. Erdoğan resorted to telephone diplomacy in order to try to persuade Gaddafi to negotiate, and ultimately to stand down. Indeed, for some, he even went so far as to give the unfortunate impression that he was siding with Gaddafi.[38] There were anti-Turkish protests in Benghazi, the cradle of the revolt. It was here that the limits of Turkish diplomacy with the regimes in power in the Arab world, and hence the shortcomings of the 'zero problems' philosophy, were most graphically revealed. Gaddafi simply brushed Erdoğan aside. Faced with a simple choice

[34] For example, Erdoğan had received a human rights prize from Gaddafi less than a year before the outbreak of unrest in Libya.

[35] Libya was estimated to receive US$50 billion a year on oil exports of 1.8 million barrels per day.

[36] The veteran Turkish politician Mümtaz Soysal put the estimate at US$25 billion, though this is almost certainly a considerable exaggeration.

[37] Ellen Hallams and Benjamin Schreer, 'Towards a "post-American" alliance? NATO burden-sharing after Libya', *International Affairs* 88: 2, March 2012, pp. 313–27.

[38] Cumali Önal, 'Is Turkey running out of steam in the Middle East?', *Weekly Zaman*, 3 Dec. 2011.

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between falling into line with NATO or backing Gaddafi, Erdoğan chose the former, ultimately supporting the NATO air strikes which began in March 2011. It would not be the last time that Erdoğan would play it safe and scurry back to the collective safety of the West when regional politics began to unravel.

Otherwise, Turkey fell back on a checklist of trusted responses to international crises, honed mainly in the 1990s in the Balkans. Ankara concentrated on the evacuation of its nationals, a process it achieved more speedily than the British. Once Benghazi was secure, Davutoğlu visited, pledging Turkish support for the Libyan Interim Transitional Council (ITC). Turkey opened a US$200 million credit line, based on Libyan assets frozen in Turkey, and allocated US$100 million in bilateral aid to the administration in waiting. In July 2011 Davutoğlu declared the ITC to be the sole representative of the Libyan people. Turkey helped to draft a 'roadmap' for Libya, the centrepiece of which was the departure of Gaddafi. Turkey was an active member of the Libya Contact Group, and hosted four of its meetings in Istanbul.[39]

Erdoğan, Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy elbowed one another aside to celebrate regime change on the ground in North Africa, and to look for lucrative contracts. If the latter two—disparagingly referred to as 'the Sykes–Picot duo' after their respective compatriots who had concluded the First World War agreement to carve up the Arab world—visited first, there was no doubt who was the star turn. Arriving in mid-September, Erdoğan was acclaimed on his arrival at Cairo airport as 'a godsend' and as the 'saviour of Islam'. In a speech to Arab League foreign ministers, Erdoğan emphasized the need to support popular movements in the region, and to revitalize the Palestinian cause. When he left Egypt at the end of his short North African tour, Erdoğan was not quite so celebrated, having publicly praised secularism, a concept that appears to have been mistranslated to a predominantly Muslim Brotherhood audience as atheism. The fact that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood adopted 'Freedom and Justice' as the title of their political party, partly in emulation of Erdoğan's 'Justice and Development' party, nevertheless speaks volumes.

Recklessness towards Syria; conservatism towards Iran

So far, all of the Arab Spring unrest had taken place in countries distant from Turkish territory. Though the risks were far from negligible, they were not strategic in the way that sustained and serious unrest in Turkey's immediate Middle Eastern neighbours would have been. This would change with the outbreak of turmoil in Syria in March 2011. But the consequences of a bloody civil conflict were not the only risks posed for Turkey. For regional powers such as Turkey, events in Syria were much more about subsystemic attempts by each of the region's two main blocs—the US-led Sunni camp, incorporating the Arab Gulf, and the Iranian-led, predominantly Shi'i, so-called 'rejectionist' faction, supported by Iraq and

[39] Author's unattributable interview with senior member of Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 26 July 2011.

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Hezbollah—to improve its position at its rival's expense. This was certainly the force shaping views of the conflict both in the Arab Gulf and in the United States.

Ankara's policy pathways were clear as far as the genealogy of its republican foreign policy was concerned. One: adopt a posture of caution and do not act precipitately. Two: keep policy towards the West divorced from regional policy in the Middle East. Though such positions may have been tried and tested, particularly since the 1950s, they did not sit well with the new thinking of the AKP's foreign policy. After all, this was supposed to be a post-Kemalist regime. Turkish policy was now to be activist and assertive, including in relation to the Middle East. Besides, having invested so much in the popular will elsewhere in the Arab world, desertion of the majoritarian cause, especially those acting upon it peacefully, would have been difficult to sustain.

Iran

Since the Islamic Revolution, Turkey has proved adept at managing the various practical and symbolic threats emanating from Tehran.[40] These stretched from visiting dignitaries refusing to pay their respects at Atatürk's mausoleum, through the kidnapping of émigrés on Turkish soil, to spasmodic support for Turkey's Kurdish insurgency. Ironically, since the advent of the AKP government, relations between Turkey and Iran have been more problematic than was the case when Kemalist secularists governed in Ankara. This was partly due to individual issues of substance, notably the AKP's trenchant opposition to Assad's Syria, Iran's closest ally, from spring 2011 onwards on the grounds of democratic legitimacy, and partly a reflection of the sharpening of sectarian divisions in the Middle East, with particular significance for the sizeable presence of Alevis in Turkey.[41] Alevis, a significant grouping, are doctrinally closer to Shi'a than to Sunni Islam. They have suffered from periodic persecution in both imperial and contemporary Turkey, which is why they tend to be Kemalist and leftist in political orientation.

Hard and fast interests forming complex interdependencies also drive bilateral relations between Iran and Turkey. They give the former greater economic leverage over the latter than is often appreciated, especially by Turkey's friends. Turkish trucks operating between Anatolia and Central Asia have to traverse Iranian soil, and are therefore vulnerable to obstruction. Turkey, which is an energy-poor country, is reliant upon Iranian hydrocarbon sources, notably in the form of the trade in gas and gas products. Switching away from Iranian energy imports would simply deepen Turkey's already considerable dependence on Russian gas. By July 2012, Ankara depended on Iranian products for as much as 40 per cent of its petroleum needs.

[40] See Mohammed Ayoob, 'Beyond the democratic wave in the Arab world: the Middle East's Turko-Persian future', *Insight Turkey* 13: 2, 2011, pp. 57–70. For a very recent published article on Iran–Turkey relations, see Henri Barkey, 'Turkish–Iranian competition after the Arab Spring', *Survival* 54: 6, Dec. 2012–Jan. 2013, pp. 139–62.

[41] Estimating the size of the Alevi population is difficult, partly because until recently it was a rural demographic and partly because of continuing fears of persecution. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether it exceeds 20% of the population, making it about 16 million in total.

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At times the accusation has been made that Turkey has sought to ease its relations with Iran by adopting international positions that appear over-generous towards Tehran. For example, Ankara muted its criticism of Iran following the aftermath of the June 2009 presidential election, which returned President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for a second term, when it was clear that there had been extensive electoral fraud. More controversial was the episode of the Iran–Brazil–Turkey nuclear deal of 17 May 2010, though the full story of the misunderstanding that followed has still to be told. This agreement fleetingly offered the possibility of an end to sanctions following a nuclear enrichment deal, though this subsequently broke down owing to US opposition.

As with Libya and the Arab Spring, Turkey found itself in the spotlight of an era-defining decision when facing the choice of whether to cooperate with the installation of a new ballistic missile defence, agreed at the NATO summit in Lisbon in 2010. Turkey was to be the site of advanced radar. Iran and Russia were the main critics of the programme, as they feared that they would be the eventual target of such installations. Iran in particular put pressure on Turkey not to comply; but eventually Ankara decided to concur, again choosing its global strategic relationship with the United States ahead of any region-based considerations.

Syria

Erdoğan engaged with the Syrian situation with typical self-confidence. This was further enhanced when he won a landslide parliamentary election victory in June 2011, confirming that his home support was secure. Syrian–Turkish relations had been improving since the 1998 Adana Agreement brought to an end border tensions over Damascus' support for Turkey's Kurdish insurgency, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Moreover, the two regimes had worked closely over the intervening period to build up sinews of interdependency. These included a visa-free travel regime; a massive increase in bilateral trade, Turkey emerging as Syria's largest trading partner, with the figure for trade between the two countries topping US$2.4 billion in 2010; and cross-border cultural and sporting activities. The two leaders had also developed close personal ties, and their families were said to be friends.

In part, this was an element of the problem. Erdoğan assumed that the younger, less experienced and more authoritarian Assad would defer to his greater authority, especially as the Turkish leader began to insist on political reform in Syria from the beginning of April onwards. Erdoğan even hinted that Assad might do well as a participant in the changing political process, at least initially, under such political reforms. By contrast, Assad believed that he had tamed Turkey on behalf of the Arab world, and was not going to be told what to do. A personal edge soon entered the dynamic.

With relations between Ankara and Damascus deteriorating steadily, Erdoğan had a choice. He could continue to ratchet up his responses, become ever more critical of Assad, seek regime reform and eventually call for the Syrian President's

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removal. Or he could adopt a more restrained style, mark time, rely more on declaratory diplomacy, offer his country as a mediator (as he had done for the Israelis and the Syrians in May 2008) and wait for the position of his closest allies, notably the United States, to catch up. Impetuous as ever, Erdoğan chose the former.

No doubt this was in part about being consistent and continuing the posture adopted earlier on in the year towards Tunisia and Egypt. In part, it could be interpreted as a piece of breathtaking opportunism. If others—like the French in Tunisia or the US in Egypt—were better placed to carve out a sphere of influence elsewhere in the Middle East, with the attendant benefits of contract awards and diplomatic support, then Syria, with its approximately 60–70 per cent Sunni population, would be Turkey's best chance. Besides, as Turkey believed and its allies were confirming, though erroneously, Assad's downfall was both inevitable and imminent.[42] So why prevaricate and display an excessively Kemalist-style caution at this key stage? With this miscalculation, Turkey condemned itself to a lead role of bluster and relative powerlessness against a Syria that would have the same leadership in place some 18 months later.

The key months in terms of Ankara's split with Damascus came in August and September 2011. Turkey issued Syria with a final set of demands, most importantly to stop the violence. Davutoğlu was sent to Damascus for one last attempt at implementation. President Obama's role, as in Libya, was summed up as 'leadership from behind'; this left Erdoğan, as the forward leader, flattered and regularly consulted by the American leadership, but also exposed and ineffectual. Soon after the deadline had elapsed, Erdoğan announced that he had ended all contact with the Syrian government. Turkey closed its airspace to military cargo flights headed for Syria. On 30 September, Turkey announced that it would impose sanctions on Syria. Shortly afterwards, the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) established an office in Istanbul. In early December, Turkey presented a detailed package of economic sanctions.

With the break between Syria and Turkey irreparable, and in the absence of a quick *dénouement*, there was little room for anything other than crude invective and gesture politics.[43] Turkey was virtually sidelined as far as the evolving conflict was concerned, highlighting its marginal impact on policy. Ankara's proposal for the establishment of buffer zones for Syrians fleeing the fighting, put forward in December 2011 and March 2012, never came close to achieving policy traction.[44] The AKP government had underestimated the complexities of such an operation, while the United States, which would be pivotal to achieving such an outcome, was only too conscious of them. By November 2011, Turkey was perceived as 'the foremost advocate of regime change in Syria'.[45] It was also regarded as 'a battering ram' in a situation where it was seen as 'not acting broadly'.[46]

[42] By 21 Sept. 2011 Turkey and the United States both judged the fall of Assad to be inevitable.

[43] For example, Turkey voted in the UN General Assembly resolution which condemned the Assad regime 137–12, with 17 abstentions.

[44] 'Turkey denies Syrian claims of infiltration from Turkish soil', *Weekly Zaman*, 10 Dec. 2011; Deputy Prime Minister Besir Atalay, cited in 'Turkey ponders buffer zone at Syria border', *Weekly Zaman*, 17 March 2012.

[45] To quote Emre Uslu, 'What is Turkey's post-Assad strategy?', *Weekly Zaman*, 26 Nov. 2011.

[46] Markar Esayan, 'Syria and R2P doctrine', *Weekly Zaman*, 10 March 2012.

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Meanwhile, there was a material deterioration in circumstances on the ground.[47] Arguably, the leading example was an upsurge in the number of Syrian refugees fleeing to Turkey, initially triggered by the fighting in Jisr al-Shuqur in June 2011.[48] The shooting down of a Syrian aircraft in June 2012 was another. Cross-border shelling for days on end in October 2012 was yet another instance, and the moment when the two sides have come closest to war. With concerns growing at the possible use of chemical weapons by Syria, Turkey again turned to NATO for help: as a result, the Dutch, Germans and Americans agreed to install several batteries of Patriot missiles on Turkish territory for defensive purposes.[49] Such dark experiences on the Syrian–Turkish border were clearly unpalatable to a decisive majority of the Turkish people, with opinion polls showing that between 60 per cent and 90 per cent of the Turkish population were dead set against war with Syria.

Bahrain

Turkey's position on Bahrain differed entirely from its policy on Syria, even though in many ways the experience on the ground was analogous: a majority people protesting peacefully against a repressive and economically self-serving minority. To be fair, Erdoğan's initial instincts did appear to be to side with the people, fleetingly at least. For example, he made one critical statement on Bahrain, when he referred to the unfolding situation on the island state as being 'like Kerbala', the scene of the massacre of Imam Hussein and his small band of followers by Sunnis at the dawn of Islam. Such a view was unmistakably sympathetic to Bahrain's Shi'is,[50] and came close to a sectarian view of internal conflicts that by and large was eschewed within the secular Turkish system. However, following a visit to Turkey by a top Saudi official, Erdoğan desisted from any further mention of the situation in Bahrain,[51] or in Yemen for that matter, viewed as another pressing security threat by the Saudis. It was finally clear that in issues that cut across Turkey's vital interests, Erdoğan was willing to act according to double standards. Turkey had finally arrived as a regional power.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, Turkish foreign policy has appeared to live a charmed life. It avoided getting embroiled in the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, but without significant, long-term, material costs to its relationship with Washington. It

[47] Towards the end of November 2011, in accusing Assad of cowardice for not having directed Syrian guns at the Israelis on the Golan Heights, Erdoğan used disrespectful and dismissive language in addressing the Syrian leader.

[48] In October 2011 there were some 10,000 registered Syrian refugees based in Turkey. By December 2012 the number had risen to 135,000.

[49] 'Anti-NATO protest marches in fear of turning Turkey into a battlefield', *The National*, 20 Dec. 2012.

[50] AFP, 'Erdogan to visit Sistani, Iraqi Kurd region', *Ahram Online*, 29 March 2011, which refers to Turkey having 'expressed fears about the Shiite–Sunni unrest in Bahrain', http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/8849/World/Region/Erdogan-to-visit-Sistani,-Iraqi-Kurd-region.aspx, accessed 20 Feb. 2013.

[51] 'Erdogan says Karbala remarks misconstrued', *Today's Zaman,* 18 March 2011.

developed a new strategy towards countries located in its vicinity under the rubric 'zero problems with neighbours'. It navigated the early experiments of the 'Arab Spring' with confidence and sure-footedness, or, at the very least, luck. It replaced the 'zero problems' mantra with the compass of popular legitimacy. As a result, its prestige in the Arab world soared, compensating to a significant degree for the souring of relations between Turkey and the EU from 2005 onwards. As the gravitational pull of the European region waned, so Turkey veered increasingly into the orbit of the Middle East.

This, at least, was the landscape until 2011, when Turkey faced challenges of a different magnitude. The unrest originating in North Africa spread to Syria, a major Arab country and the first focus of conflict located on the border of Turkey. Rather than delivering rapid revolutionary change, Syria descended into a nightmare of slaughter and brutality, which has now lasted for 23 months. Having expected to reap the benefits of a 'centre' country, based on a transformed and dependent Syria, Turkey has found itself with the worst of both worlds: pushed forward by its western allies to make the running, but without the support necessary to make such a posture in any way meaningful. The deployment of Patriot missiles by NATO has further emphasized the vulnerability of Turkey to attack from the south. The longer the Syrian imbroglio has continued, the less plausible has Turkish leadership appeared in the Middle East, let alone further afield.

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