AKP’s New Turkey

By Ehud Toledano

The republic of Turkey has undergone a profound economic, social, and political transformation in the last decade, and the world has not failed to take note. Much of this change has been spearheaded in the political realm by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), a market-oriented party with ideological roots in the Turkish Islamist movement and a strong political following in Turkey’s religiously conservative and newly affluent middle class. In power since 2002, the AKP government has pursued sweeping domestic reforms, but outsiders have paid most attention to AKP’s new and assertive foreign agenda, which has led to an unprecedented warming of relations between Ankara and its majority-Muslim neighbors, especially Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as to a chilling of modern Turkey’s traditional alliances with Europe, Israel, and the United States. Many analysts in the West worry that Turkey’s new policies are ideologically motivated by political Islam or by a so-called “Neo-Ottoman” revival of once dormant imperial ambitions. By contrast, to some observers in the Middle East—including many Islamists in the region—AKP’s New Turkey represents a rising Islamic power and a model to all Muslim societies who strive for political and economic success.

Whether emulated or suspected of harboring hidden agendas, New Turkey’s rapid emergence has not primarily been due to Islamist ideology or, for that matter, to policies associated with the Islamic faith. Rather, Turkey’s rise as a power on the regional and even global scene is the consequence of the country’s blistering economic growth over the last fifteen years. In terms of GDP, the Turkish economy currently ranks sixteenth in the world, and its annual growth rate, which hovers at 11.4 percent, is second only to China and India.
To be sure, Turkey is still very much a developing country: the country’s per capita GDP is still relatively low by OECD standards, considerably lower than European Union rates, and about a third that of Israel, the leading industrial nation in the Middle East. Nevertheless, improvements in the standard of living experienced by vast segments of the population are visible to anyone visiting Turkey today, and the newly acquired wealth is more evenly distributed among the Turkish population than it is in many developing and even developed countries. For people in the region, this only enhances the legitimacy and appeal of the AKP model.

New Turkey’s economic growth has been driven largely by an accelerated process of urbanization. Today, approximately 75 percent of the country’s population lives in urban centers while the remainder resides in villages and small towns; only fifteen years ago, this urban-rural ratio was nearly the reverse. As this population has migrated to Turkey’s cities, it has changed not only its location but also its character: the drive toward urbanization has significantly raised the general population’s access to modern education, heightened its levels of participation in the national and global economies, and—not least significant—enhanced its political participation. While these former villagers have shed their rural way of life, their traditional culture and sensibilities have undeniably expressed themselves in the country’s political landscape.

This complex transformation of Turkish society—which is still unfolding and very much incomplete—is the main reason why the Justice and Development Party came to power in November 2002 with 34 percent of the vote and returned the party to a second term in 2007 with a landslide 47 percent popular victory. At the same time, political Islam, once actively suppressed by secular Kemalist elites, has thus been granted a new life in Turkish democracy, thanks to AKP’s rise. Yet, it is also easy to exaggerate the influence of Islamic currents within the party.

Today, AKP consists of a number of groups, some of them remnants of previously banned or defunct Islamist parties, with the religious-Islamic factions being one of the larger components but not the predominant one. Hardcore former members of the old Islamist parties (for example, the Milli Nizam Partisi, its successors Milli Selamet Partisi and the Refah Party, as well as the Fazilet Party) did not and still do not constitute a majority within AKP. In some ways in fact, AKP was the product of a split within the old Islamic movement: after the Fazilet Party was declared illegal, the more ideologically-inclined members of the movement followed former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, who was ousted in 1997, to form the Saadet Partisi, while the more moderate conservatives created AKP, which is in essence a center-right coalition. While ideological Islamists have found a home in AKP’s broad tent, they are, in fact, outnumbered by conservative, business-oriented groups and also outranked by party leaders like Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul, who might, based on their record so far, best be described as Islamists-turned-modern politicians or as ideologues-turned-pragmatists.
When AKP first appeared on the political scene, there were rumors the group harbored secretive Islamist sympathies, but few of Turkey’s elites saw the party as a threat to the Kemalist foundations of the Turkish republic. Instead, AKP was seen as a popular reformist party that promised to break the stranglehold of ageing Kemalist leaders over the country’s economic and political life, to clear out much of the corruption in state institutions, and to promote the nation-wide expansion of democracy by strengthening rights and freedoms of expression and limiting the military’s power over civil affairs.

In advancing this agenda, AKP Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan has played a particularly crucial role. Thanks to his personal talents, as well as to the collapse of the old, internally divided and corrupt Kemalist parties, Erdogan managed early on to win the support of Turkey’s western-oriented and liberal elites. Without the backing of this key constituency, AKP might never have had the money or support to succeed in breaking through the glass ceiling that has historically capped parties with a strong Islamic base with roughly a quarter of the electorate.

In AKP’s first term in office, Erdogan and his party lived up to many of these liberal expectations. Suspicions that AKP harbored a “hidden agenda” resurfaced in the lead-up to the 2007 elections, but a number of factors—the party’s indisputable record of economic growth, it’s relatively clean governance, the country’s overall apparent stability, and also the absence of a credible political opposition—all led significant portions of Turkey’s liberal and pro-Western voters to place their trust in AKP once again. Since AKP’s competitors on both the right and the left did not fare as well electorally—and since the Turkish electoral system bars parties that do not achieve at least ten percent of the vote from parliamentary representation—AKP stunningly managed to gain a two-thirds majority in the Turkish legislature. The party subsequently used this large majority to elect one of its top leaders, Abdullah Gul—a former prime minister and foreign minister with a long personal background in Islamic politics—as President of the Republic (Cumhurbaskan).

The AKP government thus began its second term in power with no need for coalition partners in parliament and while holding the offices and policy portfolios of the prime minister, the president, defense minister, and foreign minister. With such a commanding hold on power, AKP since 2007 has sought to resolve many long-standing sociopolitical conflicts and external disputes that have troubled the Turkish republic ever since its founding over eighty years ago. Domestically, AKP has pursued a much more ambitious policy agenda that has included emending the Constitution and restructuring existing relations between civilian authority and the military and between religion and politics. Externally, AKP’s foreign policy leaders have acted out of a deep-rooted desire to utilize the New Turkey’s rising economic and strategic power to actively re-shape the regional order of things. In response to AKP’s bold political moves, the public’s views of the party have changed dramatically since 2007, and the party now faces a new and reinvigorated...
opposition and risks losing the support of key constituencies in the lead-up to the upcoming 2011 elections.

**Rolling Back the Deep State**

**IN THE WAKE OF THE 2007 ELECTORAL VICTORY, AKP WAS REASSURED IN ITS MISSION,** and the party began its second term in power with a more ambitious and daring agenda for the New Turkey. This has entailed, among other things, a restructuring of the relationship between elected civilian authority and the nation’s military, which has traditionally served as the protector of the secular Kemalist order. In this latter capacity, Turkey’s military has played an active role in modern Turkish politics, and it has intervened on a number of occasions to overturn governments that have contravened Kemalist principles. The military has taken over the government directly in 1960, 1971, and 1980, and more recently, indirectly in 1997 in the so-called “Postmodern Coup.” In the latter case, army generals managed to topple the government of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Islamic party MSP, through behind-the-scenes manipulation, without dissolving parliament and with no use of force to assume direct rule.

Since AKP’s rise to power, the overall weakening of the military’s position in Turkish political life has been obvious. At the outset of its rule, AKP was still politically constrained, but the party gained a useful boost in its drive to weaken the military’s hold over politics both from its ability to maintain political stability over time and from the European Union, which, in the course of Turkey’s negotiations with Brussels over accession to the E.U., sought to pressure Ankara to limit the army’s abilities to stage coups d’état. This push has been accelerated by developments following AKP’s 2007 victory.

The military’s most recent attempt to intervene in national politics took place on April 4, 2007, when the General Staff (YAS, Yuksek Askeri Shura) sent an announcement to the press, which was then later posted on their website (it was dubbed the “E-Memo Warning” or “E-Muhtira”). The message stressed Turkey’s commitment to secular Kemalist values and warned the AKP-dominated parliament against electing AKP’s Abdullah Gul as President of the Republic. (Then YAS ChiefofStaff General Buyukanit accepted responsibility for issuing the warning two years later in a television interview.) The army’s resistance to Gul’s candidacy prompted AKP to dissolve parliament and declare early elections. AKP won in a political landslide, and Gul was duly and promptly elected president.

The general political calm following AKP’s electoral successes, and the stable and practically effective governments that it has managed to form, has helped sway opinion in Europe, the U.S.—and more importantly, in large portions of the Turkish public itself—to increasingly perceive the military’s intervention in national political life as
illegitimate. This sentiment has been further reinforced by the exposure more recently of two failed coup attempts known as the Balyoz and Ergenekon affairs, which led to severe indictments of senior military officers by the attorney general and are currently under review in Turkish high courts. Dozens of senior army officers have been detained to face charges in both of these cases, and this has sent unmistakably loud signals to the army and its commanders that their past role in Turkish politics is no longer legitimate or acceptable under contemporary rule.

It is impossible to fully appreciate the historical nature of this contraction of the Turkish military’s political influence without reference to the broader context of Turkish political culture. Indeed, ever since the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) coup against the Ottoman Sultan in 1908, myths surrounding the Young Turks and their fabled revolution have been part and parcel of the complex state-army-politics of modern Turkey. In contemporary Turkey, for example, there is a widely held popular belief in the existence of a sub-state structure known as the “Deep State” (Derin Devlet). This sub-state includes senior officers of the army and security services, the top echelon of the state bureaucracy, and leading members of the judiciary (mainly those on the Constitutional Court). The Deep State operates under a code of absolute loyalty to Kemalist principles and the republic as enshrined in a Secret Constitution (Gizli Anayasa). This tightly-networked shadow government allegedly re-emerges at times when the Kemalist state is faced with a crisis, at which point the Deep State overturns popularly elected-state institutions and rolls back political forces judged to have deviated from sacred Kemalist principles.

Turkish political culture is steeped in conspiracy theory, and for Turks of all social backgrounds and political persuasions much of this theorizing revolves around the idea of the Deep State. And as AKP’s power has increased, some commentators have begun to speculate that it too would be overturned by the Deep State. It is often too easy to discount this kind of speculation, which is seldom backed up with any substantial evidence and frequently driven by political agendas. Nonetheless, this does not automatically mean that the government’s conspiracy charges against the generals should not be properly and fairly investigated. Be this as it may, the Erdogan government has adroitly exploited the high-profile arrests and mounting public opinion against the army’s involvement in politics following the Balyoz and Ergenekon affairs to launch a wider offensive against the military and other Kemalist institutions. In the last year alone, the AKP government has detained more people, including journalists, on dubious charges of conspiracy, and it has adopted a strikingly more interventionist approach to internal army affairs than has any prior government.

The latest round in AKP’s power struggle with the General Staff took place in the first week of August 2010. Their disagreement revolved around the promotion of three generals, two of whom were allegedly involved in the Ergenekon coup attempt, while the
third was vetoed by President Gul because he had publicly insulted his wife. The symbolic insult took place several years ago, on September 19, 2007, when President Gul and his wife—her head covered with the traditional Islamic scarf—were on an official visit to an army base. As they welcomed the visiting leaders of the state, Deputy Chief of Staff General Aslan Guner noticed that the First Lady was wearing a headscarf and stepped out of the line to avoid shaking her hand. By so doing, he flagrantly signaled his unwillingness to grant official, Kemalist legitimacy to the public display of the veil, which Turks see as the ultimate religious symbol. Subsequently, in August 2010 the government rejected Guner’s promotion to Ground Forces Commander; it also halted the promotion of the Ergenekon generals. This triggered a protest from the YAS. Yet after a protracted and well-publicized standoff between top generals and government officials, which included both the president and the prime minister, the army finally relented. The General Staff submitted to all the civilian government’s demands, marking what has widely been seen as a fundamental change in the military’s standing vis-à-vis the politicians.6

With the military’s role in Turkish political life declining, the Erdogan government has itself already assumed the Kemalist Deep State as grist for the popular conspiracy theory mill. Today, many plainly assert that the AKP government controls the police (especially its surveillance units) and the MIT (Milli Istihbarat Teshkilati, akin to the CIA in the U.S.). This narrative depicts a police force that has been allegedly infiltrated by followers of Fethullah Gulen, the venerated head of a popular Sufi order who resides in the U.S. and presides over a complex international network of institutions and supporters. Gulen’s disciples, known as “Fethullahcis,” are loyal to him, but they also serve some of AKP’s broader political and strategic goals. Prime Minister Erdogan is widely rumored to be himself a devotee of Gulen. Moreover, the current director of MIT, Hakan Fidan, is considered an Erdogan lackey who fully shares the prime minister’s agenda and applies it with great zeal. This view is not entirely without reason: Fidan was promoted to the senior MIT job as an outsider, very much despite the protests of top MIT officers who considered him a purely political appointee rather than a professional one.

While popular fears concerning AKP’s hidden agenda do not yet match in scale and intensity those regarding the Deep State, AKP’s second term in office has given more momentum as well as credence to fears over the party’s real motivations. Many fear that AKP seeks to turn Turkey into an Islamic state and to sweep aside in the process the Kemalist legacy and its secular public sphere. These fears include the Islamization of the education system and the creeping imposition of a host of restrictions on public behavior, such as women’s dress, the mixing of men and women in entertainment areas, consumption of alcohol, and the loss of other freedoms associated with a modern, liberal, and Western way of life. Others worry about what appears to be the Erdogan government’s increasing authoritarianism over the past year and a half. The government’s recent assault on journalists who reported on the Ergenekon trials without necessarily
toeing AKP’s line, as well as the government’s harassment of journalists working for the independent Aydin Dogan media conglomerate, have only fueled suspicions of an AKP “deep plan” to install an Islamic dictatorship.

Nonetheless, it is also tempting to exaggerate AKP’s new power. Many wrongly interpreted the referendum held early in September 2010 on proposed changes to the constitution as a major victory for Erdogan’s party, simply because the party’s push for the changes was decisively carried. 58 percent voted for the changes, while 42 percent, led by the main opposition parties to AKP, voted against them. The inaccurate assessment of the results stemmed from the fact that, in addition to AKP, there was also considerable support for the constitutional changes among established Turkish elites who might otherwise support the opposition in the coming elections, as well as young pro-democracy voters. Among other things, the proposed changes included placing limits on the power of the military in politics, opening up judicial appointments to make them more socio-politically representative, and enacting other measures in line with E.U. demands. Moreover, in the lead-up to the 2011 elections, AKP’s own handling of Turkey’s domestic and foreign affairs helped to alienate key constituencies, just as it has helped to reinvigorate AKP’s political opposition at home.

The Rise of an Opposition

Over the last two years especially, AKP and its ambitious new policies have faced mounting criticism. This has come especially from the better-educated and more cosmopolitan segments of Turkish society, although key AKP constituencies have also begun to lose faith in the party. This reflects growing dissatisfaction with AKP’s conduct of domestic and foreign business and the overall direction in which it is leading the country. It also reflects a genuine distaste for Prime Minister Erdogan’s own gruff and erratic personality. To many, the AKP government is no longer seen as offering a reformist alternative and corrective to the old political order, whose corruption and bankruptcy helped to propel Erdogan and his party to power in 2002. Now, in the run-up to the 2011 elections, AKP faces an invigorated popular opposition that is headed by credible national politicians from the two main rival parties—the leftist Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP), currently led by Kemal Kilichdaroglu, and the nationalist Milyetchi Hareket Partisi (MHP), which is led by Devlet Bahcheli.

Much of the harshest and most pointed criticism has focused on the government’s policies with respect to the Kurds and other minorities and on what is increasingly seen as AKP’s efforts to roll back the Kemalist republic. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk’s original vision for the Turkish Republic was at its core a nation-building project based on a strong centralized state, a command economy, and a desire for Western-style modernization.
Kemalism’s stress on nation-building required the suppression of ethnic groups and minority national identities and, ultimately, their subjection to a national “melting pot” whose language, heritage, self-perception, and ambitions were entirely “Turkish.” In the Kemalist perspective, multiculturalism is regarded as divisive and potentially destructive of the republic, and large unassimilated minority populations—most prominently the Kurds, Alevis, Gypsies, and non-Muslims—were widely seen as threats to national cohesion and unity. It was the Kemalist state’s policy to coerce these minorities to abandon their native cultures and identities and integrate into a broader “Turkish Nation.” Although many individuals from minority ethnic and religious groups have successfully integrated into Turkish society, there has been a persistent underlying anger about real and perceived discrimination toward minorities, and this has produced long-standing frictions and frequent clashes within the republic.

Early on in AKP’s rule, inter-ethnic disputes only seemed to intensify, and this was especially the case between Turks and Kurds. To reduce violence and lower tensions, the AKP government began to look for a new way to reconcile the most disaffected groups with Turkish society at large and its political institutions. This led to the launch in 2007 of what has become known as the “Opening Policy,” which was inspired to some degree by the Infitah or “opening the door” reform agenda for enhancing democracy and liberalizing markets that had been pursued by Anwar Sadat in Egypt in the 1970s. Under the banner of “Democratic Opening” (Demokratik Açılım), AKP initially intended these moves to introduce substantial changes to the secular character of the Kemalist nation-state, and to allow for greater religious freedoms, specifically for Muslim movements. But soon this policy was extended to include new government efforts to seek reconciliation with disaffected minority groups. In pursuing this policy, AKP has shown greater willingness than previous Turkish governments to reach out to various minority ethnic groups on a variety of sensitive issues anathema to the Kemalist state, such as enhancing cultural autonomy for minorities and formal recognition of their separate identity within the Turkish Republic. It is possible that the AKP leaders’ motivations in pushing for these unprecedented reforms are rooted in their own personal experience. Many of AKP’s founding fathers, especially those from the various Islamic factions, had themselves been subject to systematic exclusion and discrimination from power by Kemalist ruling elites. The army and security forces either actively excluded Islamic parties from coalition governments or outlawed their existence altogether.

Another major motivation behind AKP’s Opening Policy was and remains the need to address the growing violence associated with the Kurdish PKK underground movement, as well as to shore-up support among its Kurdish constituencies. AKP has strongly committed itself to developing the Kurdish-populated south-eastern provinces, where the government has begun to invest heavily in large infrastructure projects. Indeed, in part as a consequence of this investment, the party duly scored impressive victories in
municipal elections held in those areas in March 2009. During AKP’s formation and early years, it successfully recruited many Kurds, including prominent members of the Arslan family, and these activists and supporters also help to explain the party’s electoral successes among Kurds.

Nonetheless, despite the ambitious goals of the Opening Policy, there is a growing perception that AKP has failed to make meaningful progress on Kurdish and minority issues; the policy’s modest yield thus far has been limited to parallel dialogue tracks between the AKP government and several targeted minority groups, seeking to address some of the latter’s basic grievances. The parties involved in the talks discussed possible compromise resolutions with delegations that represented the Kurds as well as Alevi, Roma gypsies, and the main non-Muslim communities. However, these talks have focused on advancing cultural autonomy and the promotion of ethnic identifications, while they have failed to identify new possibilities for full integration into the political system for those people who wished to retain their Kurdish identity—a traditional barrier to acceptance by the Turkish statist elite. In the case of the Kurds for example, a significant setback occurred towards the end of 2009, when the government declared the main Kurdish party (DTP) illegal, leading to renewed urban and rural operations by the PKK. The Turkish army then became bogged down in an enormously unpopular guerilla war of attrition on the country’s south-eastern front, and overflow of this conflict into urban centers was a source of enormous concern for the government. Observers believe that containing this threat of spillover more than any other consideration serves today as the main reason why AKP is still pursuing its Kurdish Opening Policy.

The further AKP pushes its Opening Policy forward, however, the more it risks fueling its political opponents, most notably the CHP and MHP, who have accused the party of seeking to dismantle the Kemalist state and replacing it with a loosely-knit, decentralized alliance of ethnic minorities that enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy under Turkish majority tutelage. The dynamic new CHP leader, Kemal Kilichdaroglu, was elected earlier in 2010 after a sex scandal caused the resignation of Deniz Bayikal, the party’s leader for the past 18 years. The new face of the CHP has helped to revivify a moribund party that was suffering from lack of new ideas and a lackluster leadership. Since his election, Kilichdaroglu has vehemently attacked AKP and its leaders, specifically Erdogan. His adamant opposition to the Opening Policy derives from a fear that the policy undermines the foundation of the Kemalist nation-state, which the CHP helped erect in the early days of the Republic, and that it is ushering in a new multiculturalism that is leading to the “break-up of Turkey.” The fact that Kilichdaroglu himself is of Alevi-Kurdish descent has not hurt and has likely also enhanced his stance on the minorities question, and his rise to political power provides clear evidence of how many minorities have successful integrated into the Turkish Republic.

Meanwhile, on the political right, the MHP also rejects the Opening Policy on the
grounds that it is leading to multiculturalism and the fragmentation of the Turkish Nation. The MHP leader, Devlet Bahcheli, employs nationalist rhetoric similar to CHP’s leaders, but his language is more blatant and aggressive. In April 2010, he delivered a speech asserting that the “so-called Opening Policy” was disastrous and that all considerations of the minorities’ demands must end where the potential for any harm to the integrity and unity of the nation presents itself. In his speech, which the press later dubbed “The So-Called Opening is a Disastrous Catastrophic Project,” Bahcheli further claimed that AKP’s policies are unconstitutional because they compromise national integrity and that the constitution provides that “the nation and the state are one whole that cannot be divided.” Meanwhile, Bahcheli has continued his outbursts against AKP. In June 2010, he provocatively connected AKP’s policies to domestic terrorism, claiming that “so long as the Opening Policy continues, it will be impossible to rescue our country from the pains of terror.”

With the 2011 elections approaching, AKP may seek to rescue its Opening Policy and drive it forward, although party leaders have appeared unwilling to make real, meaningful concessions that meet the basic demands of minority groups. Currently, the government’s approach shows no signs of significant change. A great deal clearly depends on how AKP fairs in public opinion polls as the mid-2011 elections approach. Should indications arise that AKP is losing many Kurdish and Alevi voters (the two most significant minorities), public opinion may compel Erdogan and the AKP leadership to improve their offers to minorities at the negotiating table.

A Bull in a China Shop

Thanks in part to AKP’s domestic economic reforms and opening policies, Turkish companies in the last ten years have dramatically enlarged their international business activities—and not only with nearby Europe, but especially with developing countries and emerging markets in Central Asia, Africa, Russia, Eastern Europe, Arab countries, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Turkey’s total international business rose in recent years from 750 million Euros in 2000 to 23.6 billion Euros in 2008. (Due to the global financial crisis, this number declined in 2009 to 20 billion Euros, although by 2010 it began rising again). In pursuing these new commercial ties, Turks have demonstrated an exceptional adaptability to local business cultures, as well as an impressive financial flexibility, with all the risks that this entails. Turkey’s booming business has brought with it financial and political clout on the world stage and has also propelled to the fore more expansive views within AKP about Turkey’s special role in shaping the Middle East’s future.

New Turkey’s foremost political face to the world is Prime Minister Erdogan—a charis-
matic, dynamic, gruff, and divisive politician who is hardly an expert on international relations. When he first came to power, Erdogan did not have well-defined ideas about foreign policy, and his understanding of world affairs today remains narrow and relatively unsophisticated. Raised in Istanbul’s Kasim Pasha District, a modest-means neighborhood of working people, Erdogan does not speak any foreign languages, is unfamiliar with foreign cultures, and lacks any significant living experience outside of Turkey. While this background has boosted Erdogan’s authenticity and popularity among some voters, it has also meant that the prime minister has depended on the experience and talents of his advisors to handle the many external challenges facing his country.

Erdogan has relied on two men in particular for foreign policy guidance. The first is President Abdullah Gul, who previously served as prime minister as well as foreign minister and who has deep personal roots in the Islamic movement. The second is Professor Ahmed Davutoglu, who now serves as Turkey’s Foreign Minister. The basis of Turkey’s new foreign policy is widely attributed to Davutoglu, who due to his academic background as professor of political science at Bilkent University in Ankara is well-acquainted with international relations theory and is a sophisticated exponent and defender of AKP’s international policies.

Davutoglu’s basic approach, commonly called the policy of “Zero Problems with Neighbors” (Komshularla Sifir Sorun Politikası), has been the subject of much recent analysis in various publications. Succinctly put, Davutoglu’s vision aims to enhance Turkey’s “strategic depth” by minimizing the potential points of conflict between Ankara and neighboring countries by reducing tensions and increasing cooperation and trade. This strategy involves improving relations with countries like Russia, Armenia, Cyprus and Bulgaria, as well as improving relations with majority-Muslim states with which the modern Turkish republic has often had bitter relations, such as Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran. By cultivating bilateral relations with the republic’s neighbors, the AKP architects of the Zero Problems policy have sought to create a new regional order that is not encumbered by historical rivalries and instead accrues to Turkey the maximal advantages that could derive from its central geostrategic location as a bridge between East and West, North and South.

In practice, the Erdogan-Davutoglu government has achieved little progress in bringing an end to long-lasting disputes with Armenia, Greece, and Cyprus, and its policies have actually damaged Turkey’s traditional influence in some areas—for example, the Caucasus—while advantaging other powers, notably Russia. Indeed, detractors both at home and abroad now regularly claim that “zero problems yields zero results” (Sifir sorun politikası sifir sonuch verdi), and politicians and pundits have begun to openly question whether AKP’s foreign policy is about to collapse entirely.

Because the Zero Problems policy has sought to dispense with presumably outdated regional rivalries and reconnect Turkey commercially and in other ways with the wider
Muslim Middle East, many observers have called this new Turkish foreign agenda “Neo-Ottomanism” (*Yeni Osmanlılık*). In some ways, this term may be apt. It is reasonable to assume, for instance, that Davutoğlu’s worldview is informed, to an extent, by Turkey’s Ottoman past, and this may explain why he regards the Middle East as an important (and also neglected) sphere of Turkish influence and as a realm for which Turkey has, in the foreign minister’s own words, a unique “historical responsibility.”

For his part, Davutoğlu has strongly denied ever using the term “Neo-Ottomanism” to describe his views, and he insists that he has no affinity for the term and that it misrepresents AKP’s and his policy stances. In response to a claim raised by the *Financial Times* in November 2009, Davutoğlu said, “I have never used this expression inside or outside Turkey.” Indeed, if there is a similarity between AKP’s Zero Problems policy and the actual history of the Ottoman Empire, it is only superficial or coincidental. The Ottoman court, after all, never saw itself as part of the Islamic world in any meaningful way, and the Ottoman diplomatic corps of the nineteenth century was, in fact, well-known for embracing a genuinely European set of traditions, concepts, and diplomatic strategy.

Moreover, the Erdoğan-Davutoğlu approach has tended to be ideologically-driven and confrontational. Indeed, Erdoğan himself once chided the Turkish Foreign Service for its traditionally pro-Western orientation by mockingly referring to Turkish diplomats with the French term “Mon chères.” That comment scandalized the diplomatic corps, and it led a group of retired senior diplomats to send a strongly-worded open letter to the prime minister, criticizing him for driving a wedge between Turkey and the West.

In a sharp break with the Euro-centrism of the Ottoman era, not to mention with the pro-Western policies of the modern Kemalist republic itself, the AKP government has presided over a thoroughgoing revamping of Turkey’s relations with the rest of the world that has entailed a general reorientation of the country eastward and away from the West.

Thus far, the Erdoğan government has dramatically improved relations between two of Turkey’s historical competitors, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria, although AKP’s leaders may be hard-pressed to explain how these achievements of the Zero Problems policy have actually benefited the republic. Frequent photo-ops with Iranian President Ahmadinejad have clearly elevated the prestige of Prime Minister Erdoğan in some quarters of the “Arab street,” especially with radical elements, and may have also boosted the prime minister’s popularity with some Turkish voters. But Ankara’s now cordial relations with these deeply distrusted pariah states have also become a source of deep concern and embarrassment to many Turks who helped bring AKP to power in the first place—including the liberal elites, who increasingly see AKP and its Zero Problems policy as distancing Turkey from its traditional Western allies.

Indeed, Turkey’s warm ties with these oppressive and terror-sponsoring regimes are
a direct cause of the rapid deterioration of Ankara’s relations with its traditional allies in the West, namely the U.S., the European Union, and Israel. A number of Ankara’s decisions—its vote against imposing sanctions on Iran at the United Nations Security Council, its defense of terrorist groups like Hamas—have all aroused further suspicions in the West over AKP’s true intentions. Some have begun to wonder openly whether Ankara might still be considered a reliable NATO ally.19

Likewise, improved relations with Syria have also come with major costs for Turkey, especially with respect to its relations with the West. At first, Ankara sought to portray opening the borders and tightening the economic and diplomatic relations with Damascus as a major success. AKP sought to claim to Western countries that improved ties with Syria meant that it was now in a position to play an influential role reining in the coalition that includes Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas and reducing regional conflicts. AKP’s foreign policy team thus boasted that the New Turkey was indispensable to the achievement of Western interests in the Middle East. However, neither the U.S., the European Union, nor Israel shared this view, and they instead regarded Turkish moves with legitimate concerns that Ankara was abetting the interests of (and even possibly joining with) the region’s Iran-led, anti-West bloc.

In addition to souring relations with the West, AKP’s new policies have also put it at odds with neighboring Muslim states. The Turkish prime minister’s courting of Iran has damaged Turkey’s standing in the eyes of pro-Western, moderate Arab states like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and (before the downfall of the Mubarak regime) Egypt. Moreover, while AKP’s foreign policy is designed to establish the Turkish republic on a secure footing as a dominant country in West Asia, the Erdogan-Davutoglu approach to regional affairs has actually created new problems for Turkey and imposed new limits on Ankara’s ability to maneuver effectively in the region.

For example, AKP cabinet’s political support for Islamist terror groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas has also worried Arab states, especially the Mubarak regime in Egypt before its downfall. Continuous high-level diplomatic contact between Turkish officials and these organizations, which are shunned by most Western governments, lends these terror groups the kind of legitimacy that they so desperately seek. Erdogan himself was the first to extend an invitation to Hamas’s leadership and host them in Turkey right after they won the Palestinian elections; he continued to support the organization even after they staged their coup against the PLA and took over Gaza. The Turkish Islamist organization IHH—which is widely considered to have strong ties with terror groups, and which organized the recent flotilla that sought to break Israel’s arms blockade of Hamas-ruled Gaza—enjoys at least the tacit backing of AKP officials.

Hamas is widely seen as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Mubarak regime, before its collapse, had perceived as a major threat to Egypt’s internal stability as well as a rival to the Palestinian Authority, which Egypt under Mubarak backed and
recognized as the only legitimate government in the Occupied Territories. Additionally, Lebanon’s Hezbollah, which the Mubarak government regarded as an agent of Iran (the post-Mubarak regime might be inclined to reconsider this view), stands accused of terror attacks in the Sinai Peninsula and beyond, and it continues to be yet another destabilizing force in the region and inside Egypt. Ankara’s new friendship with Assad’s Syria, one of the two foreign backers with Iran of the Lebanese organization, has hardly warmed hearts in Cairo.

Erdogan and Davutoglu continued to dismiss Egypt until Mubarak’s fall, viewing it as a declining power, inert, and laden with problems—a country that stands in sharp contrast to their view of New Turkey as a dynamic, rising power. On the surface, with Egypt now afflicted with massive internal unrest, systematic economic problems, and future uncertainty, this analysis may seem correct. But over the longer-run, the Erdogan-Davutoglu team may also pay a costly price for such working assumptions, given Egypt’s central place in the Arab world. Cairo remains the Arab world’s most populous, centrally located, leading political power, and cultural hub. Try, as the New Turkey may, to reshape the region, historically little has ever been achieved in the Middle East without major input from Egypt. Although weakened today by its economic vulnerability, Egypt is still a force to reckon with—especially when it acts in tandem with Saudi Arabia to pursue moderate agendas in the region. Although Egypt can be expected to be consumed with its internal affairs for a while, the country has certainly regained great prestige in the Arab Middle East and North Africa due to the courage and determination shown by its people in ousting Mubarak.

Before the revolution, Davutoglu and Erdogan continued to flaunt their newly acquired importance in the region and viewed the New Turkey as an alternative to, rather than ally of, Mubarak’s Egypt or any potential moderate bloc. An opportunity for Ankara to change course could emerge in the period ahead, as the political transition to a post-Mubarak Egypt takes place. Whether the Erdogan-Davutoglu cabinet will be adept and flexible enough to properly take measure of these realities and to make such a policy shift remains to be seen. There are strong indications that such a pragmatic change of course will be difficult for AKP’s leadership to achieve. It is of little wonder that President Gul was the first head of state to visit Cairo after Mubarak’s fall. But this brief sojourn bordered on embarrassing for Turkish leaders, as the Turkish President openly met with the leadership of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood—who, for now, has preferred to remain in the background.

Perhaps the main reason for AKP’s inflexibility is not so much its ideological commitments (though these do matter, especially for some party elements) as it is the degree to which the party allows its handling of state affairs to be cast in the politics of national honor and shame. While this has compounded AKP’s external challenges, the crisis in Turkey’s relations with Israel perhaps most vividly illustrates this aspect of AKP’s
handling of foreign affairs. The pathway to the current crisis is now some years old. Already in March-April 2004, Prime Minister Erdogan excoriated Israel for the targeted killings of two top Hamas leaders—Shaykh Ahmad Yassin and Abd al-Aziz Rantisi—calling the assassinations acts “state terrorism” (devlet teroru). To appease Jerusalem’s counter-protests, Erdogan sent a delegation of his close associates in the Turkish Parliament to Israel that August. However, after a period of relative calm, the Israeli Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (Winter 2008-2009) threw everything into disarray, and Erdogan responded by calling Israeli soldiers “baby killers”\(^{20}\) and by lending full political support to Hamas. While many commentators understandably saw this as evidence of Erdogan’s and AKP’s Islamist sympathies, it is not so clear that these verbal assaults on Israel were motivated by ideology. Rather, Erdogan apparently felt deeply betrayed by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert not informing him in advance of Israel’s attack on Hamas in Gaza, which led to the humiliating failure of the Turkish prime minister’s mediation efforts between Syria and Israel. Subsequently, relations deteriorated further following the Davos incident during which the Turkish prime minister walked away from a panel with President Shimon Peres of Israel. The crisis then hit new lows after the Gaza Flotilla raid in May 2010, in which nine Turkish citizens were killed, scores wounded, and the main vessel, the *Mavi Marmara*, seized.

Save for a few tough statements by Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman, Israeli leaders have by and large refrained from responding in kind to the escalating anti-Israel rhetoric of the Turkish government. By contrast, as the crisis of relations with Israel developed, the AKP government has seemed interested only in exacting apologies from Jerusalem, giving the false impression that Turkey’s slighted national pride and sense of humiliation lie at the core of the troubled bilateral relationship. Although the novel strategic issues associated with New Turkey’s rise and Ankara’s concomitant disentanglement from existing regional security architectures have, in fact, been the root cause of the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations, AKP’s foreign policy team appears dead-set on casting the dispute with Jerusalem in terms of honor and shame.\(^{21}\) Most recently, the Turkish prime minister stated that if Israel attacks Gaza again, “Turkey will not sit idly this time.”

Likewise, rather than face U.S. and European criticism and possible alienation over trading an alliance with Israel for closer relations with Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah, in the case of the Marmara Flotilla, Erdogan and Davutoglu prefer to portray Turkey as the victim of unprovoked aggression and humiliation and thereby continue demanding apologies and reparations. The official Turkish position, which is constantly repeated by the prime minister and foreign minister, consists of strict and uncompromising demands for an Israeli apology and compensations to the victims’ families. Attempts by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu—against the better advice of some of his cabinet members—to offer a compromise (including a statement of regret and compensations) have
thus far yielded no results. The next flotilla is scheduled to be launched in mid-May, and the Turkish government has refused to act to prevent its departure from Turkish ports. At the same time, and totally unexpectedly, President Gul has recently invited President Peres to an official visit in Turkey, though it does seem unlikely that such a visit could take place under the current tensions between the two countries.

While their foreign policies have faced enormous criticism both at home and abroad, Turkey’s foreign minister and president have repeatedly emphasized that their efforts to re-position Turkey in the region are not meant to injure Turkey’s alliances with the U.S. or the European Union. AKP’s New Turkey, they stress, seeks good relations with everyone—albeit on the party’s own terms. Most fundamentally they desire and also demand recognition from allies, partners, and even rivals of the fact that Turkey is an important regional power that has a vibrant democracy, a booming economy, and a stable political system. They seek recognition that Turkey is a rising power on its way toward assuming an historic role in the twenty-first century.

Be this as it may, one thing has become abundantly clear: the New Turkey’s often clumsy and self-defeating maneuvers in the Middle East have thus far betrayed the AKP government’s limited knowledge and ability to cope with the region’s complexities and competing interests. This has exposed a major weakness in Turkey’s new foreign agenda: already disadvantaged by the fact that the Turkish Republic has not been engaged deeply in Middle Eastern affairs since the demise of the Ottoman Empire, AKP finds itself at the helm with grandiose ambitions for the New Turkey but lacking the finesse and savoir faire that is essential for any serious player in the Middle East.

Conclusion

AKP’S NEW TURKEY HAS REACHED AN IMPORTANT CROSSROADS. WITH THE 2011 elections looming, the overall impression is that AKP’s signature policies of Democratic Opening and Zero Problems have lost their momentum and require revamping. The sense of gridlock in Ankara is bringing enormous pressure to bear on AKP to reassess its top priorities, while it is already embroiled in an election campaign and attempting to fend off strong opposition on all fronts.

AKP faces a tough election campaign and beyond. On the domestic front, should the party’s leadership extend substantive concessions to Kurdish and Alevi demands concerning minority rights and enhanced autonomy, they will inevitably face an even heavier backlash from Kemalists and ultra-nationalists. Alternatively, if the leadership withdraws from talks with the minorities, they will probably lose crucial Kurdish and Alevi votes that they will need to retain their dominant hold on power.

Meanwhile, on the foreign front, if the AKP continues in the framework of its Zero
Problems policy to court such radical states as Iran and Syria, Ankara will risk further alienating the U.S. and the European Union—with potentially serious political and economic repercussions. This might consequently mean that the party will lose support of the very pro-Western, liberal, and business elites that have also been critical for past AKP electoral victories. In short, AKP’s policies have created for itself a host of unattractive options; in the coming weeks, the party’s leadership will need to calculate the risks lurking behind all of these paths forward and make bold decisions.

Currently, polls indicate declining support for AKP and rising support for opposition parties on the right (MHP) and on the left (CHP). While the CHP and MHP are both deeply opposed to the reforms proposed and promoted by AKP, their capacity to forge an alliance to challenge Erdogan’s party in the mid-2011 elections is now doubtful at best. Similarly, the splinter groups that exist in the margins of both the right and left appear incapable of merging into larger political blocs that could overcome the 10 percent threshold required for election. As such, it is improbable that the opposition will in itself prevent AKP from winning a third term (either by forming a single-party government or, alternatively, by putting together a stable coalition one). In the unlikely event that this occurs, when circumstances are ripe, AKP will probably move to replace Gul with Erdogan as president and will push ahead its policies with renewed vigor.

Nonetheless, if current trends do persist, it is most likely that AKP will lose a measure of its commanding hold on power. While it will probably remain the largest party in the parliament, it may be forced to form a coalition government with either CHP or MHP. Such a result would likely bring AKP’s current domestic and foreign agendas to a grinding standstill, for it is difficult to see how a cohabitation government might work to further such increasingly unpopular and divisive policies. Indeed, efforts to form a coalition government might even lead to the destabilization of the country’s politics yet again.

It is important to stress again that today’s New Turkey is primarily the result of a chain of processes, interlinked and often emanating from one another. The migratory shift of a majority portion of Turkey’s population from the rural village to urban centers over the past decade and a half opened the way to both modernization and fundamental change in the nature of Turkish family life and society. Better education and greater political participation of that mobile group of formerly rural migrants has facilitated AKP’s accession to power—although the party has also required the tacit support of older elites and liberal and modernist elements.

AKP’s struggle to hold this broad-based political base together illuminates the profound extent to which the party today embodies the dynamism and complexities of the New Turkey at this historic juncture. On the one hand, there is the Kemalist tradition of the secular and homogeneous Turkish nation-state, while on the other hand there is the reality of modern Turkey’s diverse religious and ethnic groups that are struggling for greater political and cultural freedoms. There is the market-oriented democracy that
rests, both geographically and culturally, at the crossroads of East and West. Obviously these poles do not present strict either/or choices, and Turkish democracy, if it is to avoid greater polarization and future destabilization, clearly has before it a choice between several intermediate options that would require compromises on all sides. Fascinatingly, the bidding and sparring over the way forward is also taking place within AKP, a party that may be accurately described as conservative, Islamic-leaning, and control-seeking.

Is AKP courageous and flexible enough to opt for a liberal and truly open society, accepting and encouraging real equality? How will it deal with freedom of speech when it cannot, as but one example, tolerate the Aydin Dogan media group’s open criticism of the party’s policies and leaders? For the moment, these questions remain unanswered. Much will depend on AKP’s capacity to renew itself and offer progress on the domestic scene, while at the same time allaying the West’s legitimate fears that its long-time ally in a troubled region prefers the company of states and movements whose commitments are not to democracy or to any of the ideals and freedoms associated with it.

NOTES

1. Some of the more noteworthy papers are: Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints, Europe Report No. 203, International Crisis Group, April 7, 2010; and Ahmet Evin et al., Getting to ZERO: Turkey, Its Neighbors and the West, Transatlantic Academy, 2010. See also Gallia Lindenstrauss and Oded Eran, “Not Just a Bridge over Troubled Waters: Turkey in Regional and International Affairs,” in Strategic Survey for Israel 2009, eds. Shlomo Brom and Anat Kurz (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2009), 73-82; and Gallia Lindenstrauss, “Mediation and Engagement: a New Paradigm for Turkish Foreign Policy and its Implications for Israel,” Memorandum No. 104 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, June 2010).

2. The socio-economic data used in this examination is based on: Guven Sak, Turkey’s regional integration: Is it economic transformation or shift of axis? Lecture delivered by the Director of TEPA (Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey), May 6, 2010, Tel Aviv.


4. For the literature on this in both Turkish and English, see my recent review article of Feroz Ahmad, The Young Turks: The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics, 1908-1914 (reprinted edition), in Bustan, Vol. 1, No. 1 (in press).

5. A good example of this can be found at a website that is entirely dedicated to this conspiracy theory: http://www.derindevlet.org/

6. The picture was published in the Hurriyet newspaper (Gundem), August 9, 2010. The caption below the picture noted the general’s avoiding shaking the hand of president Gül’s wife (Aslan Guner, Hayrunnisa Hanimin elini sikmamishti).

7. For more on this, see Insight Turkey, Vol. 12, No. 2 (April-June 2010).
8. In the beginning of June 2010, for example, Kilichdaroglu visited the national monument commemorating the Turkish soldiers who had fallen during the Gallipoli campaign of World War One. His speech linked the legacy of the fallen heroes (then and now) to an unrelenting commitment to protect a unified Turkish nation. As he declared:

“If we live [today] in security, then the key to that [security] are those who fell in battle. We know this, and even exhibit the respect that we feel towards them. Yet [at the same time], we [strongly] condemn the Opening Policy, which is leading to a breakup of Turkey... The Opening is the odd [idea] of Recep Bey [addressing the PM in person]. Dear Recep Bey, launch an Opening [Policy] for the farmer, the senior citizen, the worker! See the [real] suffering of this nation!... Yesterday, Recep Bey scored an own goal... but if he had only scored an own goal we would be happy; however, you [Recep Bey] hurt [with your kick=your policy] the farmer, the senior citizen, the worker! Unemployment is sky-rocketing, but [instead of acting to remedy that], Recep Bey had something [truly] important to say: “No law determines that every university graduate must be able to find a job.” For God’s sake, if a PM in Germany, France, Japan were to express himself in such a way, he would be removed [from office] the next day..."

It is important to remember here that CHP is a moderate center-left party that claims to represent Turkey’s working and middle classes. Accordingly, in this speech, the party leader was sending a joint message to his two main constituencies: one, nationalist-Kemalist; the other, labor-oriented. Hurriyet, June 6, 2010 (Gundem).


11. Here, Turkey excels mainly in “old economy” sectors, namely labor-intensive, traditional industries, such as textiles, raw materials, agricultural products, and large-scale construction projects (airports, highways, bridges, and large public buildings); no major advances in science and technology have thus far contributed to its economic rise. On this topic, see an eye-opening summary recently published in the New York Times: Landon Thomas Jr., “Turning East, Turkey Asserts Economic Power,” NYT, July 5, 2010. And For additional data on these trends, see: “Tsva Habuldozerim shel Turkiya Bone Bekhol Ha’Olam” (Turkey’s army of bulldozers is building all around the world), YNET, July 14, 2010.

12. Despite his personal background, it is fascinating and indicative that at least two of Prime Minister Erdogan’s children, a son and a daughter, are studying in the US.

13. AKP’s opposition has increasingly focused on Prime Minister Erdogan himself. Mr. Erdogan is clearly charismatic and possessed of an impressive capacity for mobilizing the masses and rallying large crowds to his cause. However, these are not predicated upon intellectual skills or sophistication, but rather stem from his being a “man of the people,” or what might be called his “street smarts.” These personality traits have enabled him to survive tough times in his political career, including lengthy imprisonment (for violating the Constitution by publicly reciting a religious poem).

Erdogan has a keen political sense and is quick to adapt, and his abilities to learn lessons from the past failures of Islamic parties equipped him well to launch AKP, maneuver the party around rumors that it secretly harbored an Islamist agenda, and ultimately lead it to national power. The Erdogan of the 2002 and 2007 election campaigns showed himself to be adept enough to appeal to liberal modernists and Kemalists alike, and he also successfully avoided direct confrontation with the army as well as the Legal-Constitutional establishment.

However, since 2007 especially, the prime minister’s blunt and often downright offensive rhetoric towards political opponents at home and abroad has incurred the ire of many and pushed the political
discourse in Turkey to unnecessary extremes. The prime minister’s aggressive tone has on many occasions created the impression that Turkey is in a never-ending election campaign, with AKP incessantly engaged in courting its base and repelling counter attacks from opponents.

In addition to his divisive personality, Erdogan is seen as the principal face of the increasingly unpopular Opening Policy toward ethnic minorities as well as of Davutoglu’s Zero Problems approach to eliminating conflicts with Turkey’s neighbors.

At the same time, however, the prime minister more than any other Turkish leader is identified with Turkey’s impressive economic achievements and the remarkable upgrading of its self-image. Even if his rhetoric occasionally provokes pro-Western Turkish modernists; until recent months even they acknowledged his success in effectively stabilizing Turkish politics and re-branding the “New Turkey.”

Yet, the events of the past year have hurt Erdogan and AKP because critical assessments of the real results and consequences—as distinguished from mere PR and rhetoric—have surfaced with a vengeance. This is of course natural in periods leading to general elections. Nonetheless, AKP has not been forced to deal with such high levels of voter criticism and disaffection before.
14. See, for examples, notes 1-2 above. For a more current version by the man himself, see: Ahmet Davutoglu, “Turkey’s Zero-Problems Foreign Policy,” Foreign Policy, July 10, 2010.
15. The two legislatures have yet to ratify the Turkish-Armenian accords, signed in 2009, and there seems to be no progress in moving forward an agreement that was almost physically forced upon the Erdogan government. The heart of the problem lies in Turkey’s demand that Armenia bring its dispute with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabach to a successful, negotiated resolution. Armenian troops still occupy the region, refusing to return it to Azeri control. On June 23, 2010, the Armenian news agency reported that Armenian President Serge Sarkisyan, at a Berlin conference, attacked the Turkish government for its desire “to impose agreements upon its neighbors, rather than coordinate positions with them and take their interests into account.” (Asbarez Armenian News (Asbarez.com), June 23, 2010.

Despite a conciliatory statement of intent regarding the dispute in Cyprus, AKP has taken no practical steps to advance talks. This stands in contrast to the newly elected President of Cyprus from the Communist Party, who declared his support for a territorial compromise with the north, which the Cypriots previously opposed. Relations between Greece and Turkey have been improving since 1999 (thanks especially to Turkey’s assistance to Greece during the earthquake that year), and the Erdogan cabinet demonstrated its commitment to better relations by visiting Athens for a working session with the Greek cabinet. Still, the real test for Ankara will be whether it can reach and implement a resolution of the Cyprus issue. Meanwhile, sovereignty disputes over islands in the Aegean Sea remain a major source of tension between Greece and Turkey, flaring up again in recent months. The Greek Foreign Minister attacked Turkey on July 20, 2010, claiming that Ankara was talking about acting on the Cyprus issues only for PR purposes. He also accused Turkey of adding flame to the tensions in the Aegean Sea and violating international law and Greece’s naval sovereignty (“Druchas: Turkiye Ege’de gerginlik yaratmak istiyor,” Hurriyet, July 19, 2010). Turkey’s lagging—and to Ankara, frustrating—E.U. membership talks have long been impeded by the inability of successive Turkish governments (including that of AKP) to overcome Greek and Cypriot opposition, due in turn to those simmering, unresolved issues discussed above.

Warming up to Russia is also part of AKP’s policy. However, Russia’s suspicions of Turkish intentions have slowed the opening of the border and stemmed the dramatic rise in trade, including strategic energy deals. Russia is keen to retain its strategic influence in the Caucasus and restore its hegemonic position in that region, a goal considerably advanced by Moscow’s military intervention
in Georgia. The Russians thus seized the golden opportunity handed to them by the inability of the Erdogan-Davutoglu cabinet to bring the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict to an acceptable resolution facilitating the ratification of their agreement with Yerevan. Acting as a go-between of sorts, Moscow played the various parties against each other and increased its role as a moderating power whose good services were required by all sides.

Growing criticism of Turkey in both Azerbaijan and Armenia led to greater reliance on Russian diplomacy and projected power in the Caucasus at Turkey’s expense. A recent Russian policy assessment of the Middle East determined that Turkey lost its position as an “honest broker” in regional conflicts, due to its re-positioning vis-à-vis the US and Europe, and the crisis in its relations with Jerusalem. The Russian analysts concluded that, in the near future, repairing the damage is beyond Ankara’s ability. (See Zvi Magen, “Russia: A New Look at the peace process,” INSS Insight, No. 235, December 20, 2010.)

16. For example, the owner of the blog Turktime (September 25, 2010): “Greece, Cyprus, and Armenia are calling on Ankara not to go back on its ‘zero problems with the neighbors’ policy—is this policy collapsing?”

17. Star Gazete, November 25, 2009. The original quote in Turkish runs as follows:

For a further note on this, see also the article by the AKP Vice-Chairman for Foreign Affairs: Suat Kiniklioglu, “‘Neo-Ottoman’ Turkey?,” in Project Syndicate, December 3, 2009: http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/kiniklioglu2.


19. On this, see also Idiz’s harsh criticism of the Davutoglu’s “Strategic Depth” policy, in “All for the sake of ‘strategic depth’,” Hurriyet Daily News, June 10, 2010.

20. One of the pro-Israel reactions came from the foreign editor of The Australian: “The Turkish government is expressing maximum outrage over the Gaza incident, although it has been vastly more brutal in suppressing Kurdish separatists and suspected terrorists than anything Israel has ever dreamed of. The Gaza incident has nonetheless allowed Erdogan to demonise Israel” (Greg Sheridan, “Does Gaza signal Turkey’s defection,” The Australian, June 3, 2010: http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/does-gaza-signal-turkeys-defection/story-e6frg6zo-1225874725184).

21. Another good example of just how quickly AKP’s handling of state affairs have become inextricably linked up with the politics of honor and shame is the “Low Armchair Crisis” (Alchak koltuk krizi), as the incident came to be known in Turkey. In January 2010, Turkey’s Ambassador to Israel Oguz Chelikkol was summoned by the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon to receive an Israeli protest over a new Turkish television series with strong anti-Israel scenes. Chelikkol, who had just arrived to replace Ambassador Namik Tan (who is considered a strong friend of Israel, and is now serving as Turkey’s Ambassador to the U.S.), was seated on a lower sofa than Ayalon, with only the Israeli flag on the table, and with photographers making sure the picture flashed throughout local and international media. The humiliation was obviously intended, reflecting Israeli impatience and anger at the repeated attacks by Turkey’s prime minister and his loyalists in the media. In virtually no time, the ambassador’s humiliation scandalized the Turkish media and government.

One of Istanbul’s leading newspapers, Hurriyet, belabored the issue of “honor,” using two
separate terms (onur=honor, and sayginlik=respect) to illustrate the grave national injury Turkey sustained. (Hurriyet, January 12, 2010.) At the time, Deputy Minister Ayalon’s action was condemned across the board in Israel, and President Abdullah Gul demanded an apology “within 24 hours,” which he duly received.