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Introduction

Over the course of the last decade, Turkey has emerged as a major actor in the Middle East. It has embarked on a variety of mediating missions and has been vocal on issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iranian nuclear program. The popularity of its prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, surpasses that of all other regional leaders. This new presence in the Middle East has been variously characterized as neo-Ottoman or an abandonment of the West in favor of the East. Others have interpreted it as the resulting from disillusionment with a stalled European Union accession process or a desire to strike an “independent” foreign policy from the United States.

In fact, Turkey’s new activism in the Middle East and the world in general is driven by two important factors. The first is the deep structural change that has transformed the Turkish economy from an inward looking to a robust export-driven one that is engaged in a continuous search for new markets. Today it is the world’s 16th largest economy. The second is Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party, AKP, leadership’s ambitions to transform Turkey into a global actor. Other developments, ranging from the 2003 invasion of Iraq to the declining influence of the military, have helped the AKP to successfully pivot Turkish foreign policy away from its previous obsessions with the Kurdish question and Islam.

Some of the changes in foreign policy were in the making before the 2002 rise of the AKP. Nevertheless, it is the AKP who provided Turkish foreign policy with a semblance of coherence and a sense of self-confidence. In the ensuing years, the AKP articulated what came to be known a “zero-problems with the neighbors” policy which heralded a opening up of relations with countries that had hitherto been seen as rivals if not outright

hostile to Turkey. Relations improved with Syria, Iran and a slew of other Middle Eastern countries. In Iraq, by 2008, the Turkish government executed a 180-degree change in policy to establish relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG. It engaged in mediation efforts between Israelis and Syrians as well as among Palestinian factions.

Paradoxically, Turkey emerged from its foreign policy transformation as a status quo power, deeply entrenched in the structure of the Middle East. This is despite the difficulties it experienced with Israel. The Arab Spring has, however, served as a reminder that the complexity of the Middle East can sometimes overwhelm the agenda of its primary actors. The costs of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings have been limited primarily because of the relatively small size of mutual economic relations. By contrast, the Libyan and Syrian uprisings have shocked the Turkish establishment; Libya was a critical economic partner while Syria was the new foreign policy's much touted "success" case. Both of these demonstrated, not surprisingly perhaps, the extent to which the new Turkish policy was vested in the authoritarian regimes of the region; in fact, this really was noting more than "a zero problems with the neighboring regimes" policy.

This article will explore the causes for the change in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East, its accomplishments and shortcomings and conclude with an analysis of its future directions.

The AKP and the New Foreign Policy

Phase I: 2002-2007

When the AKP won the 2002 elections with some 34 percent of the vote but with an overwhelming majority in parliament, Erdogan was careful to articulate a policy that would do much to allay the fears of the secular establishment at home and worried onlookers abroad. After all, Erdogan and the AKP were the inheritors of the hard line Islamist leader and father of the Turkish Islamic movement Necmettin Erbakan whose tenure as the head of a coalition government ended abruptly in 1997 following what Turks have called a post-modern coup. His 2002 victory speech was all about Turkey's European trajectory and a promise to speed up reforms to earn candidate status with the European Union.

Erdogan and soon to be foreign minister Abdullah Gül had been close collaborators of Erbakan who had envisioned the creation of an Islamic Common Market, an Islamic NATO and so forth. While obviously unsuccessful in these endeavors, Erbakan did manage to create an organization that was called the D-8 or the Developing 8, an agglomeration of eight large Muslim countries. The D-8 continues to exist today although its influence is very much limited.

With this background in mind, Erdogan and the AKP, under the very watchful eye of the Turkish military, embarked on a European-oriented policy. Within two years of the election victory, the EU opened accession negotiations with Turkey. This was a major accomplishment that had eluded previous Turkish governments. The AKP's interest in EU reforms had much to do with its desire to remove the military tutelage over Turkish politics that had served as an impediment to political parties such as theirs. The military-backed secular establishment had after all twice before banned AKP's predecessors.

The 2003 Iraq war proved the first test of the new government; new in power, it came under tremendous U.S. pressure to open up a northern front against Saddam Hussein by allowing the transit of American troops through Turkish territory. When Parliament on March 1, 2003 voted, as it turned out as a result of an "arithmetic" error, against the deployment of foreign troops, serendipity prevented the AKP government from committing what could have been a calamitous decision for its own future.

The AKP took advantage of the vacuum created by the Bush Administration's war in Iraq to dip its toes in Middle East diplomacy. Turkey, because it had long-standing relations with Israel, could boast that it was perhaps the only regional country that had cordial relations with everyone else. Both the Israelis and Syrians made use of Turkey's good offices to initiate a set of negotiations at a time when regional diplomacy seemed frozen. These talks made progress; this was despite the fact that all participants understood that any final deal would in the final analysis require the participation and approval of the United States.

The Israeli-Syrian talks were not the only example of the new Turkish approach. Turkey tried its hand in the Georgian-Russian conflict as well. Turks claimed credit for the 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, somewhat angering the French and Americans in the process. Elsewhere in the Middle East, it forayed into Israeli-Palestinian and intra-Palestinian negotiations. By volunteering to engage in so many mediation efforts, the AKP aimed to increase its stature and visibility in the world. This was in essence contrary to past Turkish practices whereby the Turkish foreign policy rarely ventured outside its comfort zones or what its practitioners perceived to be essential to the national interest. In another departure from previous governments, the AKP administration immediately set on winning seats and positions in international organizations, starting with the United Nations Security Council where it had not served since 1960. It won leadership positions in the Islamic Conference Organization, Erdogan with Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero assumed the co-chairmanship of the Alliance of Civilizations, and soon its efforts for a UN Security Council seat were also rewarded.

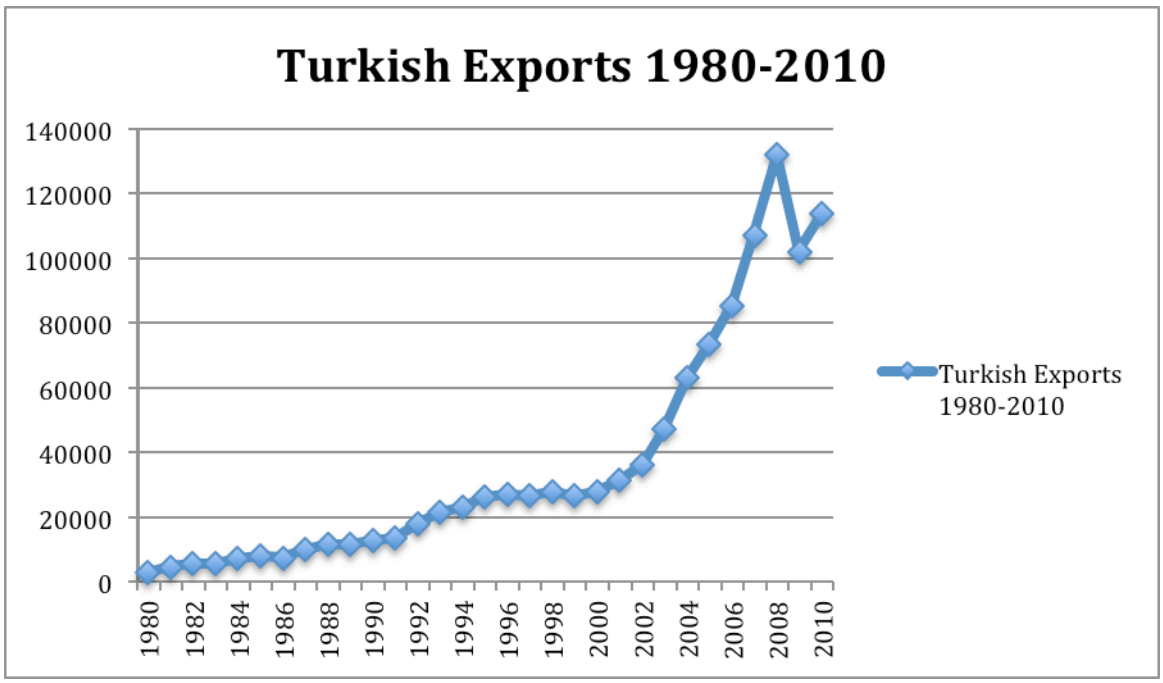
Turkey also began to open new embassies and consulates in countries it previously never had any presence. Concurrently, Turkish Airlines engaged in an aggressive and successful effort to expand its flight destinations in an effort to build Istanbul into an international hub.

It is also during this earlier period of AKP rule that the new policy of zero problems with the neighbors was articulated. Turkey attempted to improve its relations with all regional countries, especially with its immediate neighbors such as Syria, Iraq, Iran and Russia. Still, AKP felt constrained by the Turkish establishment and especially its military. This was most evident in Iraq. The continuing presence of the Turkish insurgent group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK, in northern Iraq enabled the security establishment and the arch-secularist president Ahmet Necdet Sezer from improving relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government. Sezer, for instance, even blocked invitations to Iraqi president Jalal Talabani on account that Talabani was the head of one of the two northern Iraqi Kurdish parties.

With both Syria and Iran, countries previously identified as hostile to Turkey, the AKP invested much effort to change the tone in relations. It is with Syria that these relations improved the most. In 1998, the Turks had threatened President Hafez al-Assad with a military intervention if he continued to harbor the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, whom he had long sheltered in Syria. Although the deployment of Turkish troops to the Syrian border was more of a bluff, the Assad regime took no chances then and sent Öcalan packing. In 1999 the Turks and Syrians signed the Adana accord that laid the groundwork for increased cooperation. It is the AKP that transformed the relationship. Erdogan cultivated Bashar al-Assad, who had succeeded his father, and the two leaders formed close personal and political bonds. For Syria, which had been laboring under increasing international isolation following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri, the rapprochement with Turkey offered it a lifeline.

Underlying the Turkish opening to the Middle East and the rest of the world was the fundamental transformation of the Turkish economy. Starting in the 1980s under the leadership of Turgut Özal, Turkey began a painful makeover of its economic model: it abandoned the inward-looking import-substitution development strategy in favor of an export-oriented one. This change was long in bearing its fruits. But when it did, it also altered the socio-economic make up of Turkey.

The most important consequence of the Özal reforms was the emergence of a new class of entrepreneurs who did not owe their well being to state largesse and contracts. These were located away from the traditional business centers of Istanbul and Izmir, mostly in the Anatolian hinterland. These new enterprises, which came to be known as Anatolian Tigers, were export driven but also hailed from a conservative and pious background. It is this new business elite that has emerged as the backbone of the AKP's political coalition. The graph below demonstrates the dramatic increase in Turkish exports.



The search for new export markets has become vital for Turkish industry. Therefore, for the AKP, the most important task in keeping the support of this new economic grouping is not only to effectively manage the economy but to also help in this pursuit for new export markets. For Turkey, this has meant looking beyond traditional markets. Although an overwhelming percentage of Turkish exports end up in EU markets, these outlets had matured, were saturated and their growth had stalled. Correspondingly, EU's share in Turkish exports declined from 56 percent to 46 percent between 2006 and 2010. The chart demonstrates how exports declined in 2009 in response to the global economic crisis. Much of the decline occurred in these EU markets hit hard by the 2008 global crisis; exports to Germany and the United Kingdom, for instance, declined by as much as 26 and 27 percent, respectively. With much of the new demand shifting to the emerging economies, Turkey's accession status would not have affected the overall export picture. Turkish entrepreneurs drive to develop new markets would have naturally reduced the relative share of EU exports.

The opening to the Middle East, therefore, has to be seen in this context. Turkey initiated visa-free travel and signed scores of commercial agreements including some free trade ones with Middle Eastern countries. By 2010, Turkish exports to Middle Eastern countries represented some 21.5 percent of its total. The growth of Turkish exports to the Middle East has not necessarily come at the expense of other markets. These new markets have grown in parallel with the expansion of the Turkish economy, especially during the AKP years.

The evolution of Turkish-Syrian trade is indicative of this trend. Syrian trade is not extremely significant for Turkey, but as part of a strategy of incremental growth of overall trade volume they are indicative. In 2000 Turkey exported only some $184 million to Syria; by 2010 this number had mushroomed to $1.6 billion. The AKP has helped this process not just with its active support in the form of economic diplomacy but also with its own commitment for free-market ideas. Also of significance has been the growing dependence of Turkish firms in the provinces bordering Syria on the two-way trade and the increase in the number of tourists crossing in both directions. The picture in Iraq is even more dramatic: Turkish exports to Iraq have mushroomed from $829 million in 2003 to over $6 billion in 2010. The overthrow of Saddam has ironically been beneficial to Turkey.

Phase II: 2007-today

2007 has been a watershed year for Turkey. Erdogan and the AKP have since put forth a far more assertive foreign policy. In general, one can argue that this was the culmination of the consolidation of the AKP's rule in Turkey, its growing economic importance that would carry it into the G-20 and perhaps a sense of exaggerated self-confidence. The emerging foreign policy was based on five characteristics: 1/ An ardent desire by the AKP and its leadership to elevate Turkey to what they called a "central" state in the global hierarchy, simply translated, into a leading global role; 2/ Turkey's key strategic location to exert influence on the adjoining regions; 3/ Turkey's economic prowess as the 16th largest economy in the world; 4/ Specifically in relation to the Middle East, the existence of historical and cultural affinities to build linkages that had hitherto been ignored; and 5/ Domestic support from the Turkish public.

Two developments, however, contributed to the new self-confidence and assertiveness. These were the military's strategic miscalculation at home that helped the AKP score a decisive victory in the 2007 elections and the very public and bitter split with Israel.

In 2007, the term of the Turkish president Sezer had come to an end and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül became a candidate to replace him. The military, which had hoped that someone not as closely affiliated with the AKP hardcore and certainly someone's whose spouse did not wear a headscarf, would assume this high office, decided to block him. The Chief of Staff issued a clumsily written midnight memorandum on his institution's website warning of dire consequences. The officers also took part in the planning of countrywide demonstrations against the government. Not only did the AKP not back down but also decided to call the generals' bluff and seek early national elections. The results would prove to be a disaster for the military, which did all it could to rally AKP opponents. The AKP increased its share of the vote from 34 percent in 2002 to almost 47 percent. The public in effect had repudiated the military.

The new victory and the humiliation of the military and its allies at the polls freed the AKP government to begin to change policies it hitherto had not dared to. The most

important such case was Iraq where the AKP government implemented a complete 180-degree turn about in its relations with the KRG in northern Iraq. Commercial relations had been expanding between the KRG and Turkey despite the diplomatic freeze and acrimonious exchanges. Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq had decided that relations with Ankara, Turkey's own Kurdish problem notwithstanding offered them the best overall set of opportunities. Turkey, among the Iraqi Kurds' neighbors, is politically the most dynamic and economically most prosperous. In addition, geographically, Turkey, a EU candidate country, provides the most direct links to the West.

For the AKP government better relations with the KRG contained the tantalizing chance of improving its checkered relations with its own Kurdish minority; after all, the KRG leadership, widely respected by Turkish Kurds, exercised significant influence over them. Both Iraqi President Talabani and the KRG leadership have been counseling Turkish Kurds to abandon the armed struggle in favor of a negotiated deal with the AKP. They have argued that the current AKP leadership offers the best chance for a peaceful solution.

The military establishment also found itself ensnared in a large multi-faceted conspiracy prosecution. Prosecutors alleged that this conspiracy (or conspiracies), subsumed under the overarching title Ergenekon, involved retired and active duty military officers as well as civilians from different walks of life who actively planned the overthrow of the constitutional order. With many officers arrested and remanded into custody, the military establishment was thus denuded from much of its ability to exercise influence on domestic or foreign policy matters. In effect, the military had been pushed back into the barracks and the AKP made use of its new freedom of action to chart its foreign policy priorities.

Having consolidated its position at home, the AKP jumped on the occasions provided by changing regional circumstances. The first of these was Israel's Gaza incursion in the waning days of 2008. Erdogan reacted very strongly to Israel's Operation Cast Lead for two reasons: first, he felt personally betrayed by the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, who had been visiting Ankara only days before the start of hostilities. The anger in the region to the Israeli operation also doomed the Israeli-Syrian negotiations just when the Turks thought they were on the verge of a breakthrough. As a result, Turkey's official discourse on Israel turned vehemently negative as Erdogan emerged as a champion of the Palestinians. The acrimony with Israel, starting with the Erdogan-Shimon Peres exchange at Davos, was both very popular at home in Turkey but was also carefully used in the region with great effect. In the process Erdogan managed to ascend a level of popularity in the proverbial Arab street rarely achieved by a non-Arab leader.

The second opportunity was presented by the increasing tensions over Iran's nuclear program. Turkey not only rhetorically backed the Iranian thesis that its nuclear program was peaceful but vigorously argued that the real problem was Israel's suspected nuclear stockpile. In 2010, Ankara went one-step further by collaborating with Brazil,

another member of the UN Security Council, to devise a compromise with Tehran, referred to as the Tehran Research reactor (TRR) agreement. This deal announced by the Iranians, Brazilians and Turks ran afoul of the Western efforts to further tighten sanctions that had been gathering momentum. Turkey and Brazil both voted against sanctions at the Security Council at a time when even the Russians and Chinese had chosen to go along with the United States and the Europeans.

Why did Ankara choose to sign on to the TRR deal? First, like many others in the region, the Turks feared the possible escalation of the crisis culminating down the road in possible military action. Such a development would destabilize the region, perhaps even more so than the 2003 Iraq war. The resulting chaos would have certainly undermined Turkish economic gains and domestic prosperity, which have been AKP's most important accomplishment and source of domestic support.

Second, the Turks believed – in part because of miscommunication with the White House – that the deal they had constructed with Brazil was exactly what the Western powers wanted in the first place. Still, in the run up to the final negotiations, they ignored American pleas not to go forward. The U.S. having laboriously worked to get the Chinese and Russians on board for a sanctions resolution was anxious not to jeopardize this rare instant of collaboration among the permanent five at the UN Security Council. This is precisely why the Iranians, in turn, were quite willing to sign on to a deal that could scuttle such a resolution.

Finally, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in particular seemed to believe that the deal would meet with sufficient international approval to dispel American objections. The theater surrounding the signing, the sight of Erdogan and Ahmedinejad clasping hands in celebration, betrayed an immense degree of Turkish self-confidence in its regional policy while rattling Western capitals.

However, the Turks had overestimated their influence and capabilities. This realization did not sink in until Erdogan and Davutoglu met with the American president on the margins of a Toronto G-20 summit. Obama made it clear then that the Iran nuclear ambitions were not a trivial matter and rapped the Turks for pursuing the deal. The sanctions resolution had already passed with China and Russia voting with the West and NATO ally Turkey voting against.

The TRR deal constituted the single most import point of divergence between Ankara and its Western allies and created serious reverberations especially in Washington. For many in Turkey and the Middle East, however, the Iran vote together with the break with Israel – further deepened by the May 2010 flotilla incident which resulted in the death of nine Turkish citizens – were interpreted as Turkey's emergence from the shadow of American foreign policy dominance. The more the Turks appeared to be at odds with the U.S. and its allies, the higher Erdogan's popularity rose in the region.

For all the appearance of conflict with the West, the fact of the matter is the AKP leadership was careful not to veer too far off from established consensus. There was never talk of abandoning any of the Western institutions Turkey belonged to. If anything, the Turks insisted on greater and more visible participation in these, especially NATO. Turkey's policy in effect was an "all azimuth" policy, that is, simultaneous engagement on all fronts. Even with Israel where the Turks found it expedient to demonize an increasingly isolated Israeli state, the acrimony between the two only marginally affected trade relations (some Israeli firms operating in Turkey were targeted, however).

Turkey, in sum, tried to keep all its options open in the region. Turkish policy is a dual tracked one. On the one hand, with its "soft power," commercial links and diplomatic engagement, Turkish policy in the aftermath of the Iraq war can be characterized as one seeking stability and the maintenance of the status quo, albeit with limited changes such as Palestinian statehood on the occupied territories. On the other hand, despite the desire for stability Turks are also part of a multi-faceted competitive game being played in the region. Turkey has been supportive of Iran on the nuclear question and, in exchange, it expects that Tehran will be more accommodating of its economic interests. In the past, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards unceremoniously dismissed Turkish companies from the management of the main airport in Tehran and generally Turkish companies have had a difficult time operating in Iran. On the other hand, the two countries have become fierce political competitors in Iraq. Each one has supported different sides after the 2010 elections and they have sparred for a share of the Iraqi economic pie. If Tehran scored politically with its preferred candidate Prime Minister Maliki remaining at the helm, the Turks, especially because of their close relations with the KRG, have made very significant inroads economically in Iraq.

The competition for influence extends beyond Iraq. Both Turkey and Iran have each attempted to assume a leadership role in the Middle East. But, especially after the onset of the Arab Spring, with discussions of the "Turkish model," the Turks have so far eclipsed the Iranians. At the root of this competition are economic, political, religious cleavages and also sheer nationalist ambitions. It would also be wrong to see this as a two-way competition because the Saudis as well have tried to contain Iran while viewing the new Turkish interest in the region with a great deal of suspicion. Paradoxically, Iranians and Turks do share the belief that the region is best left alone by the major powers, the U.S. in particular.

The Arab Spring and Turkish Middle East Policy

The revolts starting with Tunisia in early 2011 proved to be the most important challenge for Turkey's new Middle East policy. On the one hand, there was no question that many in Turkey sympathized with the Arab populations attempting to rid themselves of long-lasting dictatorships. On the other hand, these revolts undermined regimes with which Turkey had established excellent relations. Turkey and Tunisia have traditionally had warm ties, but the events in Tunis developed far too quickly for Ankara to come up

with a policy response. Egypt was different. Erdogan and Mubarak had never seen eye to eye on many issues, starting with Gaza. Moreover, the Egyptian regime perceived that the Turks were trying to muscle into regional politics specifically in areas long considered to be part of the traditional Egyptian sphere of influence.

Erdogan was among the early leaders to call on Mubarak to leave office (he made his announcement soon after a discussion with Obama who also days later called on the Egyptian leader to step down). What made the Egyptian case different than Tunisia was the relative importance of economic factors. Egypt in 2010 absorbed some 2 percent of Turkish exports compared with Tunisia's 0.6 percent. Nonetheless, Ankara could afford the temporary setback in economic relations with Egypt that a regime change would bring about. One could even argue that the sooner Mubarak exited from the scene the faster Egypt could rebound and, hence, the fall of a regime with which Ankara had little in common would not have any additional adverse consequences.

Still neither Egypt nor Tunisia matched the real and symbolic level of importance of the next two countries: Libya and Syria. It is in Libya and Syria that Ankara faced the most trouble. Although Syria and Libya accounted for 1.7 and 1.6 percent of Turkish exports (2010) respectively, in Libya Turkish businesses had tremendous investments in the construction sector and Turkey had to evacuate some 15 thousand of its nationals stranded in the fighting. Syria, by contrast, represented the perfect casebook example of the "zero problems with the neighbors."

In Libya, Erdogan initially resisted calls for UN Security Council resolutions against Tripoli's strongman, Qaddafi. He refused to countenance any NATO military operation against the regime there. It is only after finding itself isolated and surprised by anti-Turkish demonstrations in the rebel capital Benghazi that the Turkish leadership, in a series of quick policy shifts, pivoted away from previous policy positions. Erdogan called on Qaddafi to step down and agreed to participate in NATO operations provided that Turkish troops would not be asked to engage in direct military operations. When the regime crumbled with the fall of Tripoli, Davutoglu promised some $300 million in assistance to the Transitional National Council.

The dilemma for Erdogan and AKP in Libya and Syria is emblematic of the approach underlying the "zero problems policy." In order to open up these markets to Turkish businesses and reverse previous Turkish policies based on suspicion, the AKP leadership established close ties with these regimes that have absolute control over their territories and people. Only in December 2010, Erdogan received the Qaddafi International Prize a questionable award even before the advent of the rebellion.

Although Davutoglu has emphasized democracy together with integration at all levels as cardinal goals of the new Turkish foreign policy, the fact of the matter is that Ankara has never made democracy a priority in its relations – perhaps not surprising given the checkered past that many Western countries. Following the contested June 2009

elections and the violent suppression of the opposition in Iran, Turkey was among the first countries congratulating President Ahmedinejad for his victory.

It is in Syria that the “zero problems” policy has met its single most difficult test. In Syria, Erdogan established close even personal relations with Bashar Assad. Moreover, under the rubric of “two peoples, one state,” Turkish and Syrian cabinets held joint meetings as they labored to integrate their respective economies. For Turkey as the stronger of the two in every possible respect, it appeared to be very much in the driver’s seat. Therefore, the Syrian rapprochement represented the best-case model for its new policy.

For Erdogan the rebellion in Syria has come as a shock and amounts to a major personal setback. If the Erdogan government initially wanted Assad to quickly introduce reforms to prevent the events from gaining momentum, assaults by Syrian security forces in regions bordering Turkey proved to be a strategic mistake by the Ba’athi regime. In the absence of any reform efforts, the movement of some 12,000 refugees to Turkey made it impossible for Ankara to ignore the crisis. In fact, Erdogan claimed that the Syrian crisis was an “internal problem” for Turkey. Assad deepened Erdogan’s distrust for him by intensifying the level of violence against demonstrators during the month of Ramadan, a period of great religious and symbolic importance for the Turkish prime minister.

The implications of the Syrian developments are quite severe for Turkey. The refugee flow though abated nevertheless conjured the images of the early 1990s when Iraqi Kurds fleeing Saddam’s attacks converged on the Turkish and Iranian border regions. Not only are the Damascus regime and its putative leader Assad considerably weakened and perhaps fatally wounded, but the uprising also revealed the limits of Turkish influence. Erdogan in his private and public communications has urged Assad to introduce reforms and has sent his intelligence chief and more importantly foreign minister Davutoglu twice to Damascus to convince Assad of the need to compromise. However, all these pleas have fallen on death ears.

The refugee flows are in many ways only the tip of the iceberg. Ankara is cognizant that a further deterioration of the situation in Syria could unleash a sectarian civil war with many more refugees potentially seeking shelter across the border in Turkey. More worrisome is the unpredictability of the Assad regime and its intentions. The potential for a regional conflagration if the regime in Syria (and its allies in Iran and Lebanon) were to ratchet up tensions and involve Israel is real. Erdogan’s personal dislike of Israel notwithstanding, he understands that such an outcome would undermine everything he has been trying to accomplish in the region. This is also where the Libyan and Syrian crises are quite distinct: Qaddafi was for the most part isolated and the repercussions of the upheaval in Libya are largely containable. Syria, because of its influence in Lebanon, confrontation with Israel, bonds with the likes of HAMAS and Hezbollah and above all its alliance with Iran, is a country with far more dangerous repercussions. On

the other hand, despite the criticisms levied in Tehran at Turkey's Syrian policy, Tehran is likely to manage carefully its bilateral relations with Ankara if only because it would not be in its interest to further deepen its current isolation.

While Erdogan has yet to call on Assad to step down as he has not wanted to give up on the Syrian strongman. Yet, Turkish entreaties have even sparked angry reactions from the regime. The Syrians are quite aware that losing Turkish support is unlike any other country turning against Damascus. NATO member Turkey had gone out of its way in the past to try to protect the Assad regime from international isolation.

At some point, the Turkish government will have to decide whether the costs of sitting on the fence outweigh a break with Damascus. In August 2011, Davutoglu was reported to have given he regime 10-15 days to stop military operations. The response among the Syrian opposition, reminiscent of the Benghazi episodes, was alarming to Turkish officials. The Washington Post and other news outlets reported that the opposition activists were criticizing Erdogan "for giving Bashar two weeks to liquidate the rebellion." The regime in Damascus, fighting for its very survival is unlikely to give up any time soon, Turkey will have to face up to the fact that Assad is now a far greater liability than an asset. Even if he were to regain control in Syria, his regime is much weakened, isolated and likely to turn even more inward looking. Turkey, therefore, will confront the unpleasant choice of having to abandon the regime in Damascus sooner than later. Paradoxically, the Arab rebellions have helped Turkey get closer to its traditional Western allies and the U.S. in particular. After an initial chill when Turkey was objecting to the emergence of an allied consensus on Libya, Obama and Erdogan have communicated often with each other trying to coordinate responses to both Libya and especially Syria. The U.S. recognizes that Turkey holds unique cards in Syria and is likely to be among those who will face the brunt of any descent into chaos. Turkey also understands that it will need international collaboration as the Syrian crisis evolves and all in the region and beyond digests its ripple effects.

Conclusion

Turkey's Middle East policy was based on an approach that privileged relations with existing power structures and maximized economic linkages. The Arab rebellions have upended Ankara's calculations. This is not to say that some of the fundamental drivers of the policy such as the search for influence and markets will change. Ankara will have to be more cautious in its approach to the region's domestic politics. It cannot rely on coddling the regimes, be they in the Sudan, Iran or whatever the future brings to Syria and Egypt. Turkey, precisely because it is more than ever ensconced in the region, will need to prepare itself for alternative contingencies.

The Arab rebellions will not end with the regime changes; regional markets are likely to contract and turn inward as the costs of the rebellions are tallied up and new institutions come into existence. It will be long before these countries recuperate from the

economic, social and political fallout of the rebellions. In the meantime, Ankara must be prepared to suffer the consequences of its intimate links with the ancient regimes. New leaders are likely to be wary of Ankara's role, though still needy for assistance. The $300 million promise to the new authorities in Libya is an attempt to remedy past policies. In an effort to bolster its reputation on the proverbial Arab street, Turkey is likely to continue its hard line stance on Israel – especially, if there is no resolution of the fateful May 2010 flotilla incident.

Ankara does have a great deal to contribute though. Some of the initiatives it had launched, such visa-free travel and trade agreements will help ease future bilateral relations. Finally, Turkey is a middle-income country with resources and a flexible entrepreneurial class able to undertake developmental projects and engage the new actors on the scene. Turkey can make a real and visible, though perhaps not decisive, difference in these changing societies.